

Cyrus Chee  
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Dr. Alyssa J. O'Brien

### Perspectives of Hope: A Comparison of Holocaust Images

In March of 1933, Nazi Germany launched an unprecedented genocide which by 1945 had killed over 6 000 000 Jews. This atrocity bears the name *Holocaust*, and has since been documented by countless visual images. Two such images, the film posters of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997), use a variety of rhetorical strategies to present visual arguments about the Holocaust. This rhetorical analysis examines these images from the standpoint of a viewer who sees the posters for the first time, knowing only that the films concern the Holocaust. From this perspective, we examine how images portraying the same event can present radically different messages.

Directed by Steven Spielberg, *Schindler's List* was released in 1993, although its poster (Figure 1) was released a year earlier. Even before the film's debut, *Schindler's List* garnered a great deal of public excitement: Spielberg had spent a decade working on the film, and news sources were predicting its widespread success. For a film of such gravitas, the poster is alarmingly simple. The poster is dominated by an adult hand clasping the gaunt hand of a child. The child's sleeve is red, which stands out to the viewer in an otherwise black and white image. Behind the hands is a faint list, stretching vertically through the image. The only legible text on the image reads Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*.

In the image, Spielberg tactfully uses rhetorical appeals to convey a visual argument. Spielberg's most obvious rhetorical appeal is his use of *pathos*. The red in the child's sleeve



Figure 1. *Schindler's List*.

In this film poster, Spielberg presents a simple depiction of an adult hand holding a child's hand. Despite the simple image, the message is profound.

immediately evokes images of blood often associated with the Holocaust. This symbolic use of the color red plays on emotions of anger and pity: anger towards the atrocities of the Holocaust, and pity towards the horrifying plight of so many Jewish people, in this case a child. Spielberg's use of red on the child's sleeve also signifies a perversion of innocence, which further plays on the viewer's emotions of anger and pity.

Spielberg also utilizes *ethos*, a rhetorical appeal defined by Gideon Burton as the persuasive appeal of one's character (Burton 1). At the top of the image is Spielberg's name. He carefully crafts the poster such that the movie title and his name were the only readable texts on the poster. In this way, a viewer is sure to notice STEVEN SPIELBERG at the top of the image – and all that comes with it. By placing his name over the simple image, Spielberg brings to light both his Jewish background and his impeccable reputation as a filmmaker.

Perhaps the strongest rhetorical appeal used in the poster is *logos*. In many ways, the image conveys a visual argument by appealing rationally to the viewer. Of course, Spielberg's appeals to rational thought are by nature very poignant, and may often cross over into the realm of *pathos*, or emotional appeal. Despite this, Spielberg uses *logos* in various ways to communicate a very logical argument. He stresses the magnitude of the Holocaust through his omission of faces in the image, along with his use of black and white: together, these represent the unknown masses whose faces we will never see. Spielberg also conveys a rational argument through his use of the red sleeve: by adding color to the child, he places importance on just one person, a person who otherwise may have been lost in the masses. By emphasizing the value of one soul, Spielberg offers a profound and moving rational argument on the carnage of the Holocaust. Lastly, the image of a child's hand clasping an adult's hand conveys a basic message of hope: despite the painful memories of concentration camp, the Jews maintained dignity and a hope for the future.

The poster of *Schindler's List* effectively uses rhetorical appeals to relate powerful visual arguments. These appeals of *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos* present arguments on the magnitude of the Holocaust, the significance of every soul, and a hope for the future. Ironically, Spielberg's messages are magnified by the simplicity of the image, as the meager clasping of hands communicates a magnificent message. In a passage on visual arguments,

Barnet and Bedau note that strong images often make an ethical appeal, calling out to our character as a good human being (Barnet & Bedau 97). Spielberg's image calls out to viewers to see the Holocaust under a new light, as a tragedy of priceless individuals instead of a tragedy of a faceless mass.

In stark comparison, Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997) presents an image of a completely different tone (Figure 2).

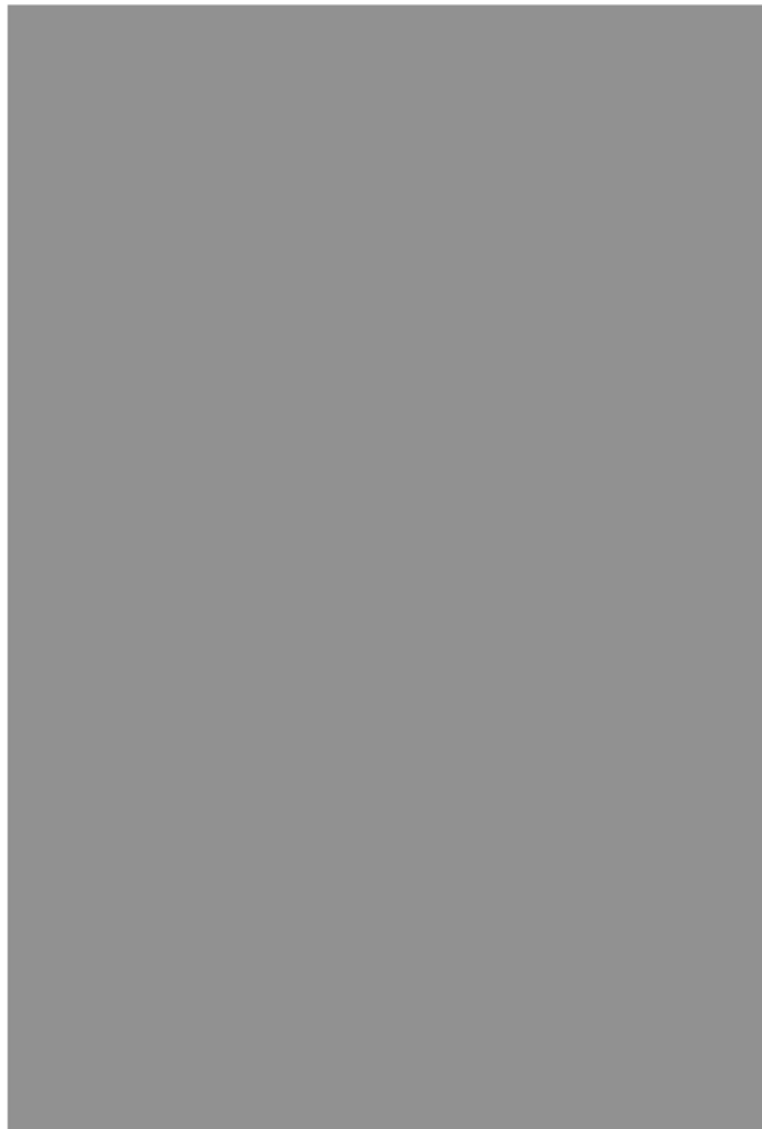


Figure 2. *Life is Beautiful*.

In this poster, Benigni shows a family embracing in a European Town. Through this image Benigni communicates the timelessness of a family bond through trial.

The poster shows a man (Benigni) kissing his wife over a bicycle on which their infant child sits. Their facial expressions are jubilant and sincere, and they are surrounded by tall buildings in a distinctly European scene. Like *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful* was widely publicized before its Italian release. (The film was subtitled in English) In fact, *Life is Beautiful* was released in Hollywood only because of its widespread success in Italy and Europe. The expectations cast upon Benigni were similar to those cast upon Spielberg. Unlike Spielberg, however, Benigni does not express the brutal realities of the Holocaust in his poster. Instead, the image presents a simple and light-hearted story of love.

Benigni uses the rhetorical appeal of *ethos* much like Spielberg does: by including his name and picture on the poster, Benigni uses his reputation as a cheerful actor/director to instill a similar tone in the image. His position as one of Italy's foremost directors also adds credibility to the visual argument, which can be seen in Benigni's use of *pathos* and *logos*.

The image's strongest rhetorical appeal is an appeal to emotion, or *pathos*. This can be clearly seen in the interaction between the husband and wife. The image evokes various emotions in the viewer: joy in seeing a care-free couple modestly enjoying themselves in the streets of a European town, and excitement in imagining oneself in such an idyllic state. However, despite the joyful tone, this image also harbors a chorus of negative emotions. It evokes bitterness in the knowledge that a concentration camp would soon test the bond between this elated, carefree family. It also evokes anger in the suffering that the family will inevitably have to endure in concentration camp life. Nevertheless, the image is predominantly one of optimism and love. It presents a strong visual argument concerning what can and cannot be taken away from people in the midst of crisis.

This argument can also be seen in Benigni's use of *logos*. The image challenges the viewer to rationally compare the sense of innocence and contentment seen in the poster with the bloodshed of the Holocaust. Such a juxtaposition is almost incomparable – yet this was the reality of Europe during the 1930s. Thus, the image conveys rational arguments of both the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, and the immortality of a family bond.

Like Spielberg, Benigni uses appeals of *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* to present a powerful message. While the image is busier than Spielberg's, the viewer's eye is drawn to a focal point of equal simplicity. Benigni's image of a family embracing bears a certain meekness and humility which intensifies its basic message of love. The image is used properly and effectively, what Lunsford explains as “drawing attention to a graphic scene and [clearly depicting] people or objects” (Lunsford 15). Gazing at the poignant image, one could almost exclaim the phrase, “Life is Beautiful” without even seeing the movie title!

Images of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* reveal two separate depictions of the same event. Through the tactful appeals of emotion, logic, and character, Spielberg and Benigni are able to create differing yet valid arguments in their poster images, demonstrating the importance of perspectives in visual rhetoric. Through a single image, Spielberg emphasizes the tragic enormity of the Holocaust and the individual suffering therein. Through another image, Benigni stresses the importance of love and family when everything else can be viciously taken away. These convincing arguments root from the strategic use of rhetorical strategies, as Spielberg and Benigni primarily focus on different appeals to convey their message. While Spielberg's image strongly appeals to rational thought, Benigni's image uses emotion as its main appeal. Both appeals are extremely effective, and both deliver separate, gripping arguments.

Many people view these posters merely as movie previews. They quickly glance at the poster images, wondering what ideas and arguments *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful* will raise when they watch the film. These people are mistaken. These two images are arguments in themselves: bold texts that use rhetorical appeals to communicate insightful and lasting viewpoints.

#### Works Cited

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