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The Live-Action Frame

Description

The opening titles appear over a black-and-white shot of the foyer of the Donizetti Theatre in Bergamo. The place is empty, except for a girl (Maria Luisa Giovannini) who is silently intent in cleaning. She enters the equally deserted parterre; she is later seen sweeping a carpet from a dais. A host (Maurizio Micheli) starts talking off-screen; while the girl keeps working, he glorifies the film that is about to begin, claiming its absolute originality and historic value in putting together animation and classical music. He is finally shown, sitting in a dais, in a suit with a flashy decorative pattern; when he realizes that he is being filmed, he stutters and turns toward the camera, looking into it. He stutters again as he forgets his lines and reads from some notes. When he announces that the film will be full of fantasy, with the Italian word “fantasia,” a telephone rings. He takes the call: someone from Hollywood protests that the film has already been done. The host feigns surprise and disbelief, reporting that the supposed author of the previous film was a “Frisney, Prisney, Grisney”; he dismisses the call as the act of a lunatic.

The film cuts to a new scene that seems actually quite lunatic itself. In a warehouse, a bunch of caged old ladies wave their hands and loudly ask for help. A brutish, huge, cigar-smoking man in his undershirt (Nestor Garay) is their keeper; he opens the cage and urges them to hurry, because “the film has already started.”¹ He loads them on a truck and implies that they had been taken care of, while imprisoned, for some purpose; they ask for their instruments, and the man says they are already on the way, with their stage clothes. The host is sitting on the truck: he looks in the camera and mischievously asks if “Pisney” has ever done something like that.

¹“Il film è già cominciato.”

The host's voice then goes on to celebrate the artist who will provide the film with animation, and his distinct freedom. However, the images, once again with dark irony, show the brutal keeper in the dungeons of the Donizetti Theatre, who unlocks yet another cage: the animator (Maurizio Nichetti) is detained there, half-unconscious, hanging from the ceiling. The keeper mentions that he had been in chains for five years. The animator awakens with puppet-like moves and stumbles around; so, the keeper lifts him and carries him upstage on his shoulder.

In the theater, the curtain goes up. The sound of an orchestra tuning is heard. The old ladies are the players, now dressed in vintage party clothes and sitting in four parallel rows at decreasing height. They casually chat about frivolous matters, while the animator is pushed onstage, and the host makes sure he does not leave. As the animator sets up his table and equipment, the host reprises his grand announcements about the film, looking into the camera; but the angle changes after a cut, so the animator prompts the host (with gestures only; he is a silent character) to turn toward the right direction. The host announces the conductor; an old lady blows into a postal horn (until she drops to the floor, out of breath), while the cleaning girl unrolls a ceremonial carpet. The brutal keeper makes his entrance as a rude and bossy maestro. He greets the old ladies and announces that they will play Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The host cornily magnifies the piece choice; he then makes excited comments on what the animator is about to draw with his pencil, while the latter is plainly in trouble and keeps crumpling his sketches. After a gag involving a falling pencil sharpener, borrowed from the Laurel and Hardy film *The Music Box*, the performance is ready to begin: the host pretends to cue the music with a cheeky count off "one, a-two, a-one, a-two, a-three, a-four," which has nothing to do with orchestral conducting and with the actual tempo of the *Prélude*.

After the animated short, the host is caught by the camera with a bored and uninterested expression; he starts clapping and praising the performance, nonetheless. The animator stands up to bow, but the conductor makes him sit down, angrily whispering that he was not amused. The cleaning girl, who is ironing nearby, casts a worried gaze to the animator. Then, she brings a bottle of champagne to the host, who is humming the main melody of the *Prélude*. He pops the bottle open and he purposely fires the cork at one of the old ladies, who falls down from her seat and literally breaks into pieces. The cleaning girl picks her remains up and carries her offstage on a cart, while the conductor mellifluously makes sure that the other ladies are fine, by starting an absurd reflex-testing routine that makes them sit and stand at increasing speed. However, one of the women is not following his directions and stays seated; so, the conductor goes with her offstage, behind a black tent. While screams and sounds of a wild beating are heard, the host compliantly says that it is hard to maintain a level of discipline in an orchestra. When the conductor comes back, he announces *the Slavonic*

Dance No. 7 by Dvořák and violently slaps the animator's back, reminding him that now the music is going to be funny, and so he needs to be. As the animator crawls back to his seat and the orchestra tunes, the conductor menacingly whistles toward him the main theme of the *Dance*, to prod his inspiration.

The *Slavonic Dance* delights the conductor, who bursts into laughter. The orchestra laughs too, but because of the chamber pot that appeared on the head of the conductor: it is as if it came from the animated drawings, where it was previously seen. Annoyed, the conductor calls a break. The cleaning lady brings in a cart and serves an unpleasing-looking soup to the noisy ladies, while the host and the conductor enjoy chicken and potatoes at an expensively laid-out table. They discuss the next piece, Ravel's *Boléro*: the host plainly does not know anything about the author, and yet keeps emphatically talking about him, inventing also a story about Ravel's Umbrian origins. Meanwhile, the girl serves the soup to the animator, and a silent understanding arises among them. However, the soup drops on the floor; so, the hungry animator resorts to his art to steal some food from the conductor. He draws Mr. Rossi and he sends him for the chicken; the conductor lights a cigar and inadvertently puts the burning match near to the character, who goes up in flames. The girl passes a Coca-Cola bottle to the animator to console him, but the conductor snatches it from him. He goes to the podium with it and he mistakenly brandish it in place of his baton, so the soda flows out and wets his arm. Furious, the conductor throws the bottle away. The animator, inspired, draws it and makes it land inside the next animation.

After the end of the first part of the film (and a remark from an old lady that breaks the fourth wall, by calling out the intermission), a big gorilla (Osvaldo Sappi) from the universe of the *Boléro* wreaks havoc on stage, while a contrabassoon plays the theme from Ravel's piece, followed by a restless percussion passage. The gorilla snaps the support of the animation table and a gush of animated water springs out of it. It triggers a snowfall inside the theater, commented by a dreamy melody played by a synthesizer, which soon changes in a Russian-like folk tune: it follows the movements of the animator and the gorilla that seem to be doing a Cossack social dance. They are cheered by the old ladies and encouraged to do a second dance, now a funny swing with piano and brass flourishes. The conductor and the host are angry and clueless; the cleaning lady keeps working; one of the ladies from the orchestra, instead, wildly joins the dance and leaves with the gorilla. The conductor then steps in front of the animator and the music slows down in synch with Nichetti's change of attitude. Back to his table, the animator learns that the next number will be the *Valse triste*. The smoke from the conductor's cigar becomes the mist at the beginning of the animated episode.

The whole orchestra weeps, after the sad story of the *Valse triste*. The conductor is displeased again by the somber mood; he confers with the host, and they decide to cheer up the animator by buying him a hooker, unaware of the budding romance between him and the cleaning lady. They stuff him inside the piano and invite the prostitute to join him there. As they keep the piano shut, the host mentions that Vivaldi's *Concerto* will come next. The keys of the instrument frenetically go up and down, with a dissonant synth sound; the piano is now stuck close, and the host makes excuses while looking in the camera, saying that old pianos sometimes have issues like that. A blow from the conductor's fist breaks the piano open; the animator is now urged to produce something really funny. The host waits for the beginning of the music, but he is once again startled by the position of the camera. He finally looks into it as usual and, with a fake smile, says "curtain."²

The final shout from the character in the animation overlaps with that of the conductor: he has just been stung by the same bee who starred in the Vivaldi episode, and who now flies around him in a mixed-technique moment. The bee, in color, returns to the animator's papers; the conductor notices it, and even though the animator is fast at crumpling the sheet with the character, he prepares to take his vengeance. A slapstick fight ensues, with the two taking turns in hurting the other, while the old ladies are cheering. When Nichetti makes Garay put his hand on his own head in a finger gun gesture, and then fire a cartoon shot, the conductor loses it and tries to throw the pianist at the animator. The host tries to dissimulate the incident with empty excuses and directly addresses the operator, asking to move the camera away from the riot. He starts to talk about the *Firebird*, the conclusive piece of the film, but the noises of the fight muffle his voice. Nichetti is saved by the intervention of the gorilla, who smashes the conductor through the floor of the stage. The host covers the resulting hole (in the shape of Garay's silhouette) with a carpet, angrily looks for the camera, and then goes on to attribute the *Firebird* to Fëdor Dostoevskij, while a man in the prompter's box prepares a gramophone. The last episode will be accompanied by a record, in a nod to the actual music production strategy Bozzetto used for the film.

As the *Firebird* ends, the animated snake from the short appears in color on the stage, scaring away the whole orchestra. Meanwhile, the animator and the cleaning girl court each other by using noises and squeaks from their respective tools of the trade. While the host desperately tries to give some kind of explanation to the out-of-control situation, the animator turns himself and the girl into a cartoon prince and princess; they fly away, finally free. Failing to flee with them, the host is left with the task

²"Sipario."

of finding a proper finale to the film. He then gives a phone call to the archive, seeking the help of Franceschini to search among a collection of stock conclusions.

The search for a finale is unsuccessful. Or is it? As the conductor reemerges from the stage, completely covered in bandages, the host conjures up with him a new feature: a retelling of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It turns out that this very moment is one of the finales perused by Franceschini, who at first seems to be delighted by it; however, the *Firebird* snake appears and bites his nose, just before a huge “happy end” sign falls on his head from above. The end titles roll on a circus fanfare that soon becomes a “ballroom” medley of themes from some of the *Allegro non troppo* program pieces.

Program Notes

The live-action frame of *Allegro non troppo* was the last part of the film conceived by Bozzetto, who initially wanted it to be a “serious” representation of an orchestral performance, with just a few creative extra touches in lighting and design, which would have drawn it nearer to the stylized appearance of the live-action interstitials of *Fantasia* (see Chapter 3). Notwithstanding its last-minute production, which took place in a mere four days, this “frame” went on to become the most important narrative tool of the work. It defines the onlook the spectator is supposed to have in respect to the whole picture: a laughable attempt at putting the daunting task of remaking *Fantasia* in the hand of some shady and ignorant Italian showmen.

The relationship between *Allegro* and *Fantasia* seems to be the ultimate reason of the virulent satirical stance of the live-action frame. Bozzetto did not originally want to assert a relationship between his feature and the Disney one; their parallel nature, however, proved unconcealable as the production progressed (see Chapter 2 and 3). When it became evident that the idea of hiring a real orchestra was too expensive and dangerously prone to make *Allegro* look like a passive imitation of the “concert feature,” Bozzetto accepted Manuli and Nichetti’s suggestion to avoid and subvert it altogether, by conjuring up an unlikely orchestra of old ladies. The goal of the live-action part thus became a blatant exhibition of the similarity between *Allegro* and *Fantasia*, while exasperating the distance between the solemn tone of the original and the fictional grotesque cheapness of the Italian production. The *Fantasia-Allegro* connection was turned into a running joke, founded on a familiar narrative of Italian popular culture: after having witnessed their power and efficiency at the end of the Second World War, Italians dreamt to be on par with Americans, but they could only steal their ideas and shamelessly make them into something cheap. In cinema, such a narrative was popularized, for example, by *Un americano a Roma* (An

American in Rome, Steno 1954),³ which staged the laughable effects of the postwar American dream on an Italian young guy, Nando Moriconi (Alberto Sordi), who uses pseudo-English expressions and gaudy imitations of the American lifestyle to assert his predestination to find success overseas.⁴ It could be argued that Bozzetto and Italian animators in general have always been especially familiar with this narrative, given their constant struggle with the audience preference for Disney films; the only way out of this was either a passive imitation or a sharp refusal of the model. In *Allegro non troppo*, Bozzetto opted for the second option, but he disguised his choice behind a mocking context story that instead feigned a full-scale and self-important plagiarism.

The exaggerated tone of the live-action frame averts also all the expectations the audience can have about a realistic visual rendering of a musical performance. A film/music analysis is here not needed, as the music has a decidedly secondary role in these interstitials. Unlike *Fantasia*, *Allegro* never shows anyone conducting or playing music (except for a few comical instances, like the lady blowing into a postal horn). The interactions between the actors make soon clear that the show is set in a slapstick universe, informed with a cartoon logic: people can break into pieces after taking a fall, or they can be smashed through a wooden stage leaving a silhouette-shaped hole, and then reemerging covered in bandages like a mummy. Some characters also embody stereotypes that hark back to the cartoon or fairy-tale heritage. The barefoot cleaning girl is a kind of Cinderella; her final transformation into a cartoon princess, with Nichetti waving his pencil as a magic wand, resonates of the scene from Disney's *Cinderella* (Wilfred Jackson and others, 1950) where the heroine is given a sumptuous dress by the Fairy Godmother. The conductor is the typical ogre-brute that antagonizes a smaller but smarter hero (Nichetti), as in the Peg Leg Pete-Mickey Mouse case. Moreover, cartoon characters (Mr. Rossi, the bee, and the snake) interact with the live-action performers. The audience is thus invited to suspend their disbelief and accept the impossible for the sake of laughs: there is no way that the flawless musical performances heard in the soundtrack could come from that conductor and that makeshift orchestra (whose musical instruments also look fake), but the comedy setting makes this an irrelevant issue. Moreover, Bozzetto even hints at the truth behind the music performance in the scene when the *Firebird* gets played from a record, as the orchestra is unavailable because of a riot. In other instances, we see the characters dancing to the "ballet" music by Franco Godi: the ensemble

³See David W. Ellwood, "Containing Modernity, Domesticating America in Italy," in *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 262.

⁴Bozzetto himself would have made fun again of the unfavorable comparison between Italian and foreign mores in his 1999 short *Europe & Italy*.

playing it is nowhere to be seen, but this does not hinder the scene in any way; similarly, the piano inside which Nichetti meets the hooker sounds like a synth. The black-and-white “expressionist” cinematography contributes to the suspension of disbelief. The heavy light and shadow contrasts create a parody of horror movies (with a potential model in Mel Brooks’s *Young Frankenstein*), mostly intended to ridiculously overstate the malevolent and abusive nature of the conductor and the tortures of his captives; at the same time, they make the whole live-action frame quite abstract in appearance, and as such more prone to depict surreal events, while creating a visual fault with the colorful animated sequences. The fast-paced editing, some overemphatic angles, and the frequent use of the handheld camera give to the whole live-action frame a frenetic pacing, well in tune with the slapstick comedy-cartoon heritage Bozzetto is drawing upon.

The whole set of characters and situations that populate the live-action frame could actually include another layer of satirical deprecation. As explained above, *Allegro* is presented as a lazy Italian-style spoof of an American original; the orchestra is so ridiculous that no one expects it to perform in a realistic way. The underlying theme seems to be *incompetence*, which is to say undertaking a task without being qualified to do it. The epitome of it is arguably the host: Micheli’s character is constantly forcing buoyancy and enthusiasm, while he is clearly not interested at all in classical music. In contrast with his role of master of ceremonies, he makes a lot of embarrassing mistakes, like forgetting his lines, reading from notes, and, most of all, failing to speak to the camera. The characterization of the host seems to hint that the incompetence Bozzetto wants to focus on is of a very specific kind. In fact, notwithstanding the constant playful diminution of *Allegro* in respect to *Fantasia*, the live-action frame never really advances that the film is a bad attempt at making animation. In the story, the animator’s talent is often applauded and praised; he is a positive, humble, and resilient hero,⁵ destined to meet a true happy ending with the cleaning girl, who is equally hard-working and dignified. The over-the-top harassment they receive from the conductor and the host is a quite evident metaphor. It refers to the questionable work and social conditions that Italy was still imposing to artists and women during the 1970s (see Chapter 2), and a general shout-out to the hardships that Italian animators had to face at the time. The metaphor inherent to the incompetent characters, instead, seems to be that of the main crew from a TV variety show: the host, the conductor, the orchestra. Such was the typical set of performers appearing

⁵Nichetti revealed to the author in a personal email (September 6, 2020) that his character in *Allegro* is intended to be an exaggerated self-portrait. At the time, the Studio was simultaneously working on this film, the three Mr. Rossi features, and several commercials. So, it was not unusual to work overnight, and even on weekends. Hence the idea of a chained and beaten animator.

in the most successful Italian variety show of the 1970s. It was a musical live event, based on the performance of pop songs, which took place in a theatrical stage (the Teatro delle Vittorie in Rome): “Canzonissima” (1956–75).⁶ Another pertinent example would be the broadcast of the most famous song competition in Italy, the annual San Remo Festival (since 1951). The TV reference seems mostly evoked by the attitude of the host: even though his presence could be justified by the necessity of an equivalent to Deems Taylor in *Fantasia*, his constant resorting to a script, his live reactions to unforeseen accidents, and, most of all, his mistakes in looking into the camera and his appeals to invisible cameramen allude to a live TV show much more than to the shooting of a film. With his usual critical stance against television and commercial broadcasts, Bozzetto implicitly takes a jab at the supposed fakeness and incompetence inherent to the musical TV entertainment of his country. It was not the first time that such a satirical content appeared in Italian animation: for example, in *The Magic Bird*, a Gamma Film production, Lola Falena (Lola Moth), a parody of the showgirl Lola Falana, conceals her repulsive appearance by wearing ridiculously heavy makeup, and then she playback sings by using a record player hidden inside her wig. Similarly, the orchestra and the conductor of *Allegro non troppo* mock the musical professionals of Italian TV, if the reference to “Canzonissima” and the like is correct. More than to specific musicians, though, Bozzetto’s satire could be addressing a more general cultural problem underlying those shows. In the 1970s, Italian TV was progressively losing its pedagogic role, previously founded on a solid offering of cultural and educational programs, in favor of a larger investment on entertainment.⁷ The music popularized by the TV shows was very far from the classic repertoire Bozzetto cared about; the audience had fewer and fewer chances to be introduced to it. It is not by coincidence, maybe, that the Donizetti Theatre where *Allegro non troppo* gets “performed” is desolately empty. In fact, the communication strategy of entertainment was increasingly verging on lowering the cultural quality of the content, in order to meet a “national-popular” average, accessible without effort by anyone. According to the semiologists Giancarlo Bettetini, Paolo Braga, and Armando Fumagalli, the champion of this “national-popular” trend, in TV variety shows, was the host. They argued that this figure was

⁶See Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana* (Milano: Garzanti, 2004), 235–6; also Damiano Garofalo, *Storia sociale della televisione in Italia, 1954–1969* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018); and Aldo Grasso, Luca Barra, and Cecilia Penati, eds., *Storia critica della televisione italiana* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2019).

⁷Fausto Colombo spoke of an educational “strategy of the cricket” (“strategia del grillo”), which he opposes to an entertainment-heavy “strategy of the crow” (“strategia del corvo”), that precisely included “variety TV shows from the origins to the Seventies” (“televisione cabarettistica dalle origini agli anni Settanta”). Fausto Colombo, *La cultura sottile. Media e industria culturale in Italia dall’ottocento agli anni novanta* (Milano: Bompiani, 1998), 19.

supposed to hold together the show as a whole, by “tying together parts otherwise disconnected, declaring their meanings. ... The interpretative key of the Italian variety show, especially in respect to its ‘national-popular’ trait, stays also in the ability of the host to foreground, according to his personality, the national community.”⁸ By staging an incompetent host, Bozzetto might have not only expressed his doubts about the quality of TV entertainment but also about the cultural trend of Italy as a national community in the 1970s. Doing so within a parody of *Fantasia* especially made sense, since the Disney feature attempted to bridge together high and low culture, with an educational and authoritative attitude. *Allegro non troppo* provided a bleak follow-up to this utopia, by totally surrendering its pristine goal; it acknowledged, instead, a dramatic gap between art and entertainment, embodied by brutish stand-ins of TV performers abusing a couple of dreamers. Notwithstanding the poetic flight of the two lovers and the humorous setting of the rest, Bozzetto’s pessimism about the Italian culture and entertainment industry (that, as a matter of fact, initially denied *Allegro non troppo* a theatrical distribution) lingers over the whole live-action frame.

⁸“Dovrebbe saper legare parti che risulterebbero altrimenti indipendenti tra loro, dichiarandone i significati. ... La chiave di lettura del genere del varietà italiano, soprattutto rispetto alla sua caratteristica di ‘nazional popolare’, sta anche nella capacità del conduttore di dare risalto, secondo la sua personalità, alla comunità nazionale.” Giancarlo Bettetini, Paolo Braga, and Armando Fumagalli, *Le logiche della televisione* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2004), 94.