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Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Description

The first animated short of *Allegro non troppo* takes place in a fictitious arcadian world, vaguely connected with the imagery and stories from ancient Greek myths. As the music by Debussy starts, a panoramic shot from left to right reveals a quiet woodland landscape: on a patch of grass, several nymphs are shown in amorous attitude with satyrs. The colors are bright and nuanced: there is no realism in them. The characters have even green or purple skins and hair. The synthetic but subtly restless line style, together with the bold color contrasts, could contain a reference to Henry Matisse and the fauve artists from the early twentieth century.

The camera movement ends on the revelation of a big birthday cake on a table, an item that, despite looking quite out of context, is actually of major narrative importance: the many candles on it, in fact, tell that the little onlooking satyr in front of it is very old. Secondly, this detail could also signify that the whole situation takes place after a birthday party. A close-up shot, moreover, reveals that the candles are sculpted in the shape of headless bodies of naked woman. This serves as a visual introduction to the sorrow that is consuming the satyr, a burning physical desire for women that cannot be appeased anymore, as the youthful charms of the old guy are gone forever.

What happens next elaborates on the frustration of his sexual obsession: the satyr is startled by the sight of a naked green nymph in a field of flowers. He sneakily approaches her with an expression of greedy anticipation on his face. He then stands on a rock and tries to show off with athletic poses and a handstand. While doing so, however, his body fat collapses on his shoulder and face. The nymph, who was initially courteously curious, now leaves disconcerted.

The sad satyr looks at his own reflection in a pond; he himself is surprised at how aged his face looks. He inanely tries to stretch it, probably to hide the wrinkles. Then, he sits under a tree and fantasizes about his young self that

materializes from a hazy cloud, initially working as a comic balloon on the character's head. The satyr in there looks strong, fit, and enjoys the company of beautiful girls. The memories soon dissipate in thin air; the satyr walks back toward the pond and now worries about his few and floppy hair. By looking again into his reflection, he tries to straighten and comb them, but they unrulily pop back in their previous state. However, a flock of birds suddenly approaches him: they each take a strand of hair in their beak and twist it around until the satyr's hairdo gets more elegant. Then, they apply paint on them and on his beard, and powder on his face; with this makeup, the satyr regains some of his confidence. A group of small wood "funny animals" watches him as he leaves behind the trees.

The satyr prowls around the shadows and the strange vegetation of the forest. His jerky and fast movements make him bump against a branch, disturbing a couple of funny-looking birds. The male one addresses to the satyr a typical Italian gesture, waving a hand with all the fingertips brought together, to mean a disapproving disbelief about someone else's actions. The satyr restarts his quest: he pops out of a giant flower, using its outstretched stamens as an observation post to look around from above; he slides on swirly ivy vines, he jumps on top of boulders, until he trips and curls up in a rolling ball shape.

When he stands again, he sees yet another naked nymph under a waterfall. She runs behind the curtain of falling water. The satyr approaches and, bewildered, sees female body parts surface from different points of the waterfall. There is a whole group of nymphs there. They start to dance in the water. The satyr chases one with blue hair. He emerges in front of her, striking a pose that makes him look like a cheap fountain decoration (he even holds a fish that gushes water from its mouth, in form of a heart). The nymph playfully splashes him; however, this makes the satyr's makeup melt down. The nymph, surprised, runs away; the satyr sadly washes his face, while the fish laughs at him.

Back in the woods, two "funny animals" point to somewhere off-screen. The satyr reacts joyfully; a reverse shot reveals a girl leaning down on her left side, eating an apple. He takes confidence and, with a mischievous face, grabs some leaves and powder from plants nearby; he looks now more colored and with a blonde mane. He refuses some sudden advances from a weird female horse, with a face ironically resembling that of the satyr himself. The protagonist then crawls near the nymph and proudly reveals himself; with a smile, the girl offers him her apple. He bites it and passes the apple back, but his false teeth remained stuck on the fruit. The face of the embarrassed satyr turns red, while the girl drops the apple and walks away. He puts the teeth back in place; two birds brush them with a string-like tree branch. While the nymph picks some more fruit, the satyr appears in between some plants that look just like his nose. He chases the girl, who unexplainably starts to grow taller and bigger. He tries to match her

transformation by holding the breath and inflating himself, to no avail; he finally jumps and holds onto her leg for a while. Then, the satyr falls to the ground, back to his pristine color. The giant nymph, scornful, flicks his fake hair off his head with a finger.

A strange, tapir-like animal on two legs approaches the weeping satyr, playing a violin made out of a tree leaf. A female tapir appears near the satyr, too; she caresses the satyr's head, but when she notices the violin player goes to kiss and seduce him. They leave together.

Now alone, the satyr starts to hallucinate. To his eyes, a tree with a woman trunk and female breasts as leaves gradually appears; near to it there is a bush of waving female legs. The "leaves" of the tree float away before the old guy can reach them; the bush reacts after being grabbed by one "branch" and rolls away in the distance. A third apparition reveals a composition of large female hands, gently swaying as leaves in a breeze. Once again, when the satyr comes close, they flee; they divide into three couples, flapping like bird wings. In the sky, a cloud with woman-like features passes past the demoralized satyr and dissipates.

Alone in a land that has now dusky colors, the satyr cries and picks from the ground his scarf and cane. As he renounces to keep concealing his age, he notices a hill with a nipple. The aspect of other areas of the landscape worries him. Nonetheless, he tiredly walks away. A combination of crossfades and a zoom out finally reveal that the whole world of the satyr was an enormous naked girl, resting on her back. She slowly turns to her side, apparently asleep, while the night falls and the moon and the stars appear above her.

Program Notes

The short film is based on one of Claude Debussy's most famous works: a symphonic piece he minutely composed over two years (1892–4), inspired by the poem *L'après-midi d'un faune* (*The Afternoon of a Faun*). The author was Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), a French poet and playwright whose work contributed a great deal to the aesthetics of Symbolism, a nineteenth-century art movement that aimed to reveal the hidden truth of the world with indirect allusions and hints: in Mallarmé's words, an artist should "paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces."¹ The first edition of the poem was illustrated by four wood engravings by Édouard Manet (1832–1883), printed in black and hand-tinted in pink. The work dealt with an ancient bucolic setting, perhaps the Sicily once chanted by the Greek poet

¹Stéphane Mallarmé in Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 48.

Theocritus, in the third century BCE.² Its story is about a satyr who wakes up in the afternoon and remembers that, in the morning, he came across two nymphs and tried to make love to both of them at once, to no avail. He then imagines embracing the goddess Venus, but he soon gets afraid of his own daring fantasy and decides to fall asleep again. According to the comparative literature scholar Steven F. Walker, the events in the poem could allude to a “comic deflation of the faun’s male ego,”³ being thus “pure sexual comedy.”⁴ The satyr seems to be “sexually inexperienced,”⁵ and as such quite young.

Debussy’s symphonic piece was apparently written with no intention to replicate the narrative plot of the poem in detail. In this regard, there are a few remarks by Debussy himself that sound quite telling: the first program notes to the piece, which Debussy apparently sanctioned,⁶ reported,

The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé’s beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.⁷

Moreover, in an oft-quoted letter to the critic Henri Gauthier-Villars, aka Willy, Debussy added,

The *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*? Dear sir, might it be what has remained of the dream at the tip of the faun’s flute? More precisely, it is the general impression of the poem, because in following it more closely, music would run out of breath as if a dray horse were competing for the Grand Prix with a thoroughbred. ... All the same, it follows the rising

²Steven F. Walker, “Mallarmé’s Symbolist Eclogue: The ‘Faune’ as Pastoral,” *PMLA* 93, no. 1 (January 1978): 106.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Marie Rolf, “Semantic and Structural Issues in Debussy’s Mallarmé Songs,” in *Debussy Studies*, ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.

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La musique de ce prélude est une illustration très libre du beau poème de Mallarmé; elle ne prétend pas en être une synthèse. Il s’agit plutôt de fonds successifs sur lesquels se meuvent les désirs et les rêves du faune dans la chaleur de cet après-midi. Enfin, las de poursuivre les nymphes et les naïades apeurées dans leur fuite, il s’abandonne à un sommeil enivrant, riche de songes enfin réalisés, de pleine possession dans l’universelle nature. (Quoted in Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy et son temps* [Paris: Albin Michel 1958], 181)

motion of the poem, and it is the décor that is described so marvelously in the text.⁸

However, David J. Code⁹ and Arthur Wenk argued that a precise connection exists between the structure of Debussy's *Prélude* and that of Mallarmé's work. It is anyway sure that Debussy conceived the *Prélude* just as an introductory piece to a longer score, as the name itself says: the poem was supposed to inspire two more movements, called *Interludes* and *Paraphrase finale*.¹⁰ As a stand-alone piece, the *Prélude* remained a tribute to the musicality and eroticism of Mallarmé's poetry, and a landmark in the history of modern music: the composer and conductor Pierre Boulez (1925–2016) stated that “modern music was awakened by *L'Après-midi d'un faune*.”¹¹

Bozzetto was aware of the backstory of Debussy's piece. In good accordance with the composer's reported intentions, he did not pursue a literal illustration of Mallarmé's text, though. He retained the setting, a vague elsewhere with features that suggest ancient Greek myths and arcadian traditions. A further reason for keeping this scenery was likely also to instate a parallel with a *Fantasia* number, namely the *Pastoral* sequence, which had a similar taste in playing with mythologic and bucolic visual formulas. The woodland context and the amorous theme probably come from the *Pastoral* segment with the centaurs and centaurettes. This is likely confirmed by the short gag that shows the satyr courted by an ugly female horse with a caricatural human face; also, the birds and creatures helping the satyr to “dress up” have a role similar to the cupids in that same segment from the Disney film. Apart from that, some more connections with Debussy and Mallarmé remained: for example, the humorous contrast between the faun's grand sexual fantasies and his ineptitude at seducing, paired with the ridiculing of the stereotypes on masculine sexual power. In a clever subversion of the original sources, comedy gets spurred on by the faun being no more too young, but too old. By doing so, Bozzetto had also a chance to ridicule Italian popular entertainment of the 1970s, and in particular the

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Le *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*? cher Monsieur, c'est peut-être ce qui est resté de rêve au fond de la flûte de faune? Plus précisément, c'est l'impression générale du poème, car à le suivre de plus près, la musique s'essoufflerait ainsi qu'un cheval de fiacre concourant pour le Grand prix avec un pur-sang. ... Maintenant cela suit tout de même le mouvement ascendant du poème, et c'est le décor merveilleusement décrit au texte. (Quoted in David J. Code, “Hearing Debussy Read Mallarmé,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 [2001]: 508).

⁹Code, “Hearing Debussy Read Mallarmé”; Arthur Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976).

¹⁰Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets*, 151.

¹¹Pierre Boulez, *Notes of an Apprenticeship* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 345.

promotion of the use of cosmetics to conceal one's age and align with the shallow beauty ideals seen on TV.

In *Allegro non troppo*, though, the satyr does not sleep or dream; he hallucinates, instead. A “dreamy” quality is however evident in the film, and this is mostly conveyed through the colors and the drawing style. Giuseppe Laganà was the main responsible for the design and animation (see Part One, Chapter 3); on Bozzetto's suggestion, he did an extensive airbrush job to create a nuanced atmosphere. This gets enhanced also by the use of semi-transparent layers in multiplane shots: it is sometimes possible to see through the scenery elements that pass over the characters. The phantasmagoric and warm color palette adds to the oneiric feeling of the episode: as mentioned in the description before, a French artistic movement of the age of Debussy and Mallarmé, the fauvism, could have been referenced by Laganà; on the other hand, there is no apparent connection with the artworks provided by Manet to the first edition of the poem, as they were monochromatic and much more synthetic in their style. The simple forms and bold, flat colors of Henri Matisse could instead be a good comparison in this respect. One of the most famous among Matisses's paintings, *La danse* (1910), might have been a direct source of inspiration, because of the unrealistic skin tones and the streamlined human figures. The *Prélude* in *Allegro non troppo*, in fact, uses also human characters: while the satyrs are cartoony (the protagonist, who loosely resembles Guido Manuli by coincidence, is the typical big-nosed “average man” by Bozzetto, like Mr. Rossi), the nymphs are drawn in a more naturalistic way. This is because they are actually rotoscoped: live footage of a model was traced, frame by frame, to create all the female characters. The nude modeling was done by a professional, chosen by Bozzetto and his collaborators from the catalogue of an agency; her straightforwardness at undressing and posing initially embarrassed the artists, as some of them (like the director) did not come from art academies and were not used to life drawing.¹² The contrast between the rotoscoped “realistic” movements of the nymphs and the caricatural clumsiness of the satyr creates a humorous disparity between the protagonist's fantasies and his actual appearance. Rotoscoping was in fact instrumental to Bozzetto's need for slower movements throughout the episode, to enhance its “dreamy” quality.¹³ On top of that, the fact that all the nymphs come from one rotoscoped model could also be targeting again the growing standardization of beauty ideals in the 1970s: the “dreams” of the average heterosexual Italian man (the satyr), even in his old age, were conditioned to obsess over a fictitious female archetype, embodied by objectified TV soubrettes and actresses who all looked the same, as if they were “traced” from a single model. It is maybe

¹²Bozzetto in the documentary “Ricordando *Allegro non troppo*.”

¹³Personal communication to the author via Skype, March 14, 2019.

not a mere coincidence that among the most successful TV showgirls of the time there was a couple of identical twin sisters: Alice and Ellen Kessler.

The audiovisual treatment of the *Prélude*, in accordance with its “dreamlike” stance, makes use of quite loose relationships between music and animation. The preferred function is in fact the *emotive* one, in the sense that the action connects mostly with the overall mood of the music, and not with single notes or chords. It does so both in a *macro-emotive* (the whole symphonic piece connects with the storyline and visual style of the animation) and *micro-emotive* fashion (the mood of a music episode reinforces that of a specific sequence). In this last respect, for example, a passage where a surge in the music dynamic and symphonic texture is followed by a diminuendo based on the doleful repetition of a melodic fragment is synchronized with the satyr showing off on a rock to the first nymph: during the crescendo he pulls off a few successful moves, but when the music goes “down” in emotional and aural intensity his body fat collapses and the nymph leaves. It is remarkable how the emotional articulation of Bozzetto’s animation divides the episode in narrative segments that perfectly coincide with the main musical structures within Debussy’s work, demonstrating how attentive and competent was the director’s listening. For example, Debussy’s *Prélude* can be subdivided into a first section, dominated by the opening flute theme, archaic and melodic; a second section, with a more agitated pace and a different set of themes; and finally, a conclusive section where the opening theme returns. Bozzetto’s animation first introduces the satyr and his frustrated quest for sexual gratification; then, together with Debussy’s “agitated” section, the satyr puts on a “youthful” makeup and hopes to fool the nymphs. The “reprise” section finds the protagonist back to his old self, now lost in a world of surreal sexual visions.

Even though they are few, there are also functions based on synchronizations between animations and musical events: *spatial* and *temporal perceptive functions*. An example of the first kind is the sudden “flourish” in the main flute melody, used together with the startled reaction of the satyr at seeing his own reflection in the water. In that way, the visual quality of the movement (a sudden jitter) connects with the “jittery” feeling evoked by the fast melodic detour; however, there are no punctual correspondences between notes and actions. Another instance of this function is in the third section; a diminuendo and ritardando repetition of a descending fragment by the flutes is conjoined with the image of the bush of legs rolling away in the distance. Several qualities of the music dote here at once on the spatial perception of the viewer: the diminuendo suggests something that is getting away, while the repeated fragment goes well with a cyclic movement like that of rolling.

The temporal perceptive functions usually get the most attention in music-based animation, because they create an illusory causal relationship between a visual event and a sound; it is the same function that allows lip-synch in

animation, making the spectator believe that a character is actually talking beyond the screen. Such functions create a sense of presence and immediacy, and as such they get through very efficiently, from a cognitive point of view; it is not by chance that the film that made Mickey Mouse a sensation of sound cartoons, *Steamboat Willie* (1928), was preeminently based on those functions; and this is also why they are sometimes called mickey-mousing by film sound scholars (see Part One, Chapter 2).

Maybe because of the “dreamy” atmosphere of the short film, the *Prélude* makes a very limited use of temporal perceptive functions. Sometimes, they are even staged in a way that makes them barely recognizable; for example, it is not uncommon for the satyr to walk in synch with the rhythm of a certain melody; however, the moderate tempo and the lack of emphasis in the animated steps renders the existence of this detail almost inconspicuous. It participates, anyway, in making the music and the film more mutually cohesive. This kind of “hidden” synchs have been identified by Sergio Miceli as “implicit synchronies.”¹⁴ It must be said that Debussy’s piece almost lacks any musical feature that would work as a spectacular point of synchronization, like a strong accent, a “stinger” chord, or the entrance of an instrument with an appealing and easily distinguishable sound (like a cymbal crash). There are only two instances of this in the *Prélude*. The first is the use of a solo violin; on screen, it gets synched with a little animal playing a weird leaf-violin, creating thus also a *realistic motivation* to the sound (we see a violin look-alike playing, which justifies the sound as situated in the narrative universe of the film). In truth, when the solo flute plays at the beginning of the piece, we see a satyr playing a Pan flute; however, the movements of his fingers are too fast for the music tempo, and also the panoramic camera movement leaves the character off-screen too soon to actually have a synchronic relevance. Instead, the second instance of an instrument sound used for the sake of perceptual synchrony is the delicate ringing of the so-called ancient cymbals in the finale. Bozzetto ignores their first presentation, but later he synchronizes their sound with a tear dropping from the eye of the satyr, and with the appearance of the stars in the sky. For the rest, Bozzetto and his crew made up temporal perceptive functions with subtler musical elements, like changes in the harmony or in the timbre. For example, the entrance of brasses is synchronized with the gesture of a group of small creatures that points toward a beautiful nymph off-screen, soon to be revealed by a reverse shot. Similarly, in a previous sequence, the satyr reacts to an off-screen nymph (the first one he courts) when a peculiar change in the harmony occurs.

¹⁴“Sincroni Impliciti.” Sergio Miceli, *Musica per film. Storia, Estetica, Analisi, Tipologie* (Milano: Ricordi LIM, 2009), 638–41.

There is also a special subset of temporal perceptive synchronizations, which does not make use of unexpected changes in the musical discourse, but rests on the junctions between its phrases and periods. Quite often, an editing cut happens together with such musical articulations, when a phrase ends and another one starts. This kind of attention reveals how true Bozzetto and his team stayed to the nature of Debussy's composition, by choosing to devise a pervasive synchronic strategy that did not have any kind of spectacular immediacy to the lay viewer but created nonetheless a strong and respectful entanglement between the animation and the score. Bozzetto ironically played with the expected reaction of the audience in the following live-action interstitial, when Maurizio Micheli is caught by the camera bored and distracted; however, the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is not dull in its exploration of the image–music relationship. Moreover, while demonstrating the level of detail reached by Bozzetto in the decoding of the music structure based on sole listening, the soft-spoken attitude of the short provided a good emotional prelude to the whole set of episodes, creating a much-needed starting point for an artistic crescendo destined to peak in the middle of the film with the *Boléro*.