Document Citation

Title	**Animation and imagination**
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Source	*Pacific Sun*
Date	1977 Nov 18
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Allegro non troppo, Bozzetto, Bruno, 1976

Film

Animation and imagination

By Irving R. Cohen

As any experienced film-goer will tell you, one of the best indications of a movie's worth can be read from the facial expressions of the audience coming out of the theater after the film showing. And, as any experienced film-goer knows who has used that guide, it is no better than an ad writer's blurbs, the maunderings of a critic or the Zenophiliacs of Governor Brown.

There I was in New York, afflicted by an awkward gap between the time the hotel security officer led me from my room and the moment when the locker at Grand Central would disgorge my belongings. Nearby, the Little Carnegie, one of New York's venerable movie houses (in that city, venerable is applied to anything not yet torn down), offered a film, "a feature-length animation," with little quotes: "dazzling," "imaginative," and "$4."

None of this seemed convincing, especially since the only movie still displayed was that of a Keane-eyed cat. Fortunately for me, a couple emerged as I stood there; one look at their faces was enough. I say fortunately because had I seen it, I would not have had the pleasure of seeing it for the first time this past week; and having seen it, I fully intend to see it again.

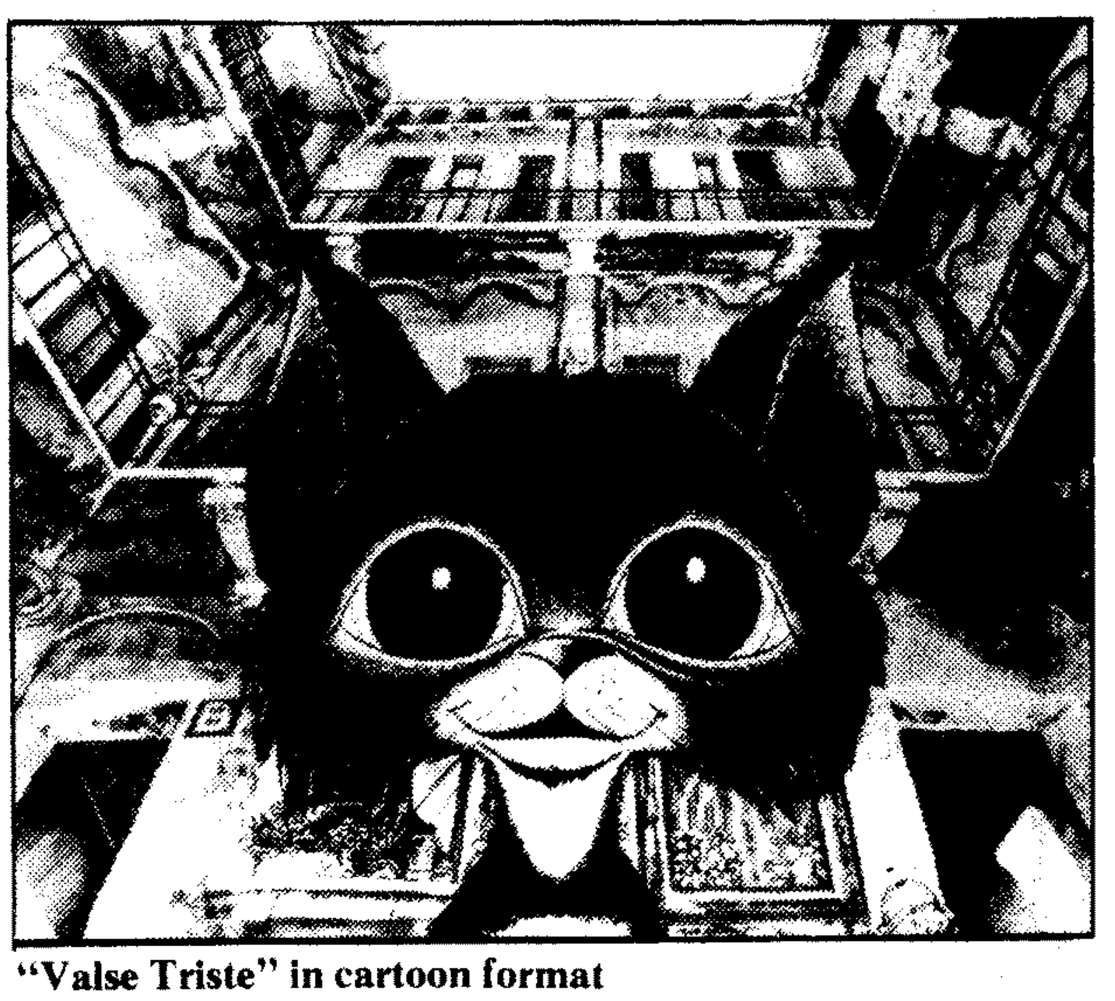
The film's name is *Allegro Non Troppo*, it is a conception of Bruno Bozzetto, it is largely an animated film indeed (but with both live and live-animated sequences), it offers visual accompaniments to the music of Debussy, Dvorak, Ravel, Vivaldi and Stravinsky, largely performed by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic.

Bozzetto has a complex and lively imagination, self-satirical at times, exuberant at others, all surrounding an essentially Apocalyptic view of civilization. The viewer and listener, therefore, can absorb as much as he or she wants at any given moment. The live sequences, used to introduce the film and to act as connecting links, are largely an engaging buffoonery, including the use of an orchestra made up of elderly women, an animator released from his chains to perform his drawings on the stage, a conductor with all the charm of Richard Helms, and an impresario who is undismayed by the news from Hollywood.

He is out to do, for the first time, animation to classical music, and remains undeterred by the information that some "California idiot named Grisney or Fisney" has already done it. His "Afternoon of a Faun" has as its subject a faun who is spending the evening of his life, pot belly and all, trying to seduce young women who will have none of him. Like the Dvorak which follows ("Slavonic Dance #7") it has a twist ending.

His "Valse Triste" (and Sibelius's) introduces a cat drawn with all the realism of posters for sale to tourists in greater downtown metropolitan Sausalito. The cat inhabits a house about to be wrecked, and dreams of its family, all of whom had apparently lived only in television commercials. But even here, Bozzetto puts the sentimental treatment in a setting of a city which has achieved a complete and chilling uniformity; then he criticizes his own work in the live sequence which follows.

There are also animated treatments of a Vivaldi concerto and portions of "The Firebird," but the glory of the film is the sequence devoted to Ravel's "Bolero." Bozzetto takes the irresistible forward momentum of the music and makes it into a metaphor for "Progress;" the visual accompaniment is a creation myth, using creatures which occupy a space between the real and the imaginary, leading to a despairing view of all that has happened since life emerged, in the film, from the bubbles in a Coca-Cola bottle. It is a stunning sequence, and I am tempted to tell you to go into the film about twenty minutes after it starts so you can see "Bolero" first and then sit through it again, but I won't.



"Valse Triste" in cartoon format

The art of animation is employed in a variety of its techniques, including cut-outs, clay figures and live-animated images. One small bit, beautifully done, has a figure drawn on a piece of paper which is dropped to the floor, and then is accidentally ignited by the animator. The drawing becomes an animated figure, terrified by the flames consuming the piece of paper. The audience sees the live action beyond, knows that this is mere animation, and yet the magic creates sympathy for something that has become more than lines drawn on a piece of paper.

And the ending is a joy: there are a series of quick visual codas, ringing changes on a number of themes. By all means, stay for the screen credits, even if the names mean nothing to you; behind them, Bozzetto employs a group of drunkenly earnest musicians re-playing the themes he has used, apparently on massed accordians. Lovely.

RECENTLY, THE SEQUOIA in Mill Valley has been running a group of excellent films, including Scola's *We All Loved Each Other So Very Much*, mentioned in last week's review. Perhaps after ***Allegro Non Troppo*** finishes its run at the Surf, we can be blessed with its presence in Mill Valley.