

EYEBLAZE # 7

HEAVY TRAFFIC



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Part 7 of our regular column in which we give short personal introductions to those unique gems of cinema that stand alone and are unlike anything else. Each week we focus on a film that has inspired and influenced our own work as filmmakers or has expanded our understanding of what cinema is and could be.

The film:

Heavy Traffic is the second film by Ralph Bakshi, a man who is mostly known as the irreverent animation director behind the first ever X rated animated feature, *Fritz the Cat*. *Fritz the Cat*, which he made in 1972, came out as a shocking and exciting reaction to the conservative films by the likes of Disney and Warner Bros productions that monopolised the animation market. *Fritz the Cat* was a box-office success despite its limited release and gave Ralph Bakshi the confidence and the freedom to make his second animation feature and take the medium to places it had never been before.

Heavy Traffic is a tale of street life set in a run-down Brooklyn neighbourhood. It follows 22-year-old Michael who lives with his Italian-American father Angie and his Jewish mother Ida. Life isn't easy on Michael, his parents live in a state of total war and resentment towards each other and can't understand why Michael prefers to spend his time drawing and making cartoons rather than chasing girls. Indeed Michael struggles to come of age, he's not sure how he can be free and he doesn't have a clue as to how he's going to get himself a girlfriend. Life in Bakshi's Brooklyn is risky, mean and exciting, littered with screwballs, schizos and crackpots – Bakshi's portrait of Brooklyn is rich, wild and alive!

One of the reasons *Heavy Traffic* stands out is its mix of live action and animation, certainly not the first film to do this but never before had it been used in such an expressive and exciting way. The cartoon animated characters populate streets and bars, sometimes the backgrounds are painted layers, sometimes photos or live action footage, this collage approach grew in part out of necessity due to budget limitation but at no point feels like a compromise, it gives a portrait not just of how 70's Brooklyn looked but how it felt to be there and loving it! The town and its environment are as much a character in the film as Michael and are rendered with a great deal of affection. The



soundtrack was put together from Bakshi's own record collection, he chose songs which had personal meanings for him and which he feels have something to add to the story, the songs would influence the storytelling and trigger ideas for scenes, he let it all seep in, his life and art mixed up together.

In *Fritz the Cat* Bakshi worked with a storytelling style that he develops further in *Heavy Traffic*, seemingly secondary characters will lead us away from the main scenes with the protagonist to some dark corner and before you know it you are swept off with another story or situation, almost forgetting the main line of narrative. One of the characters we follow in such a tangent is Snowflake, a transvestite who loves messing around with big boys who 'know a pretty girl when they see one'. The character's liveliness and looseness springs very much from real life, from the actor who voiced Snowflake. Bakshi would often record conversations in the street with friends or in bars, then use these audio recordings as the basis for scenes, often these tangent stories are based on such material. This adds to the richness of the film and gives it a life so far removed from the closed worlds of much other animation, Bakshi is to animation what Cassavetes is to drama.

Bakshi compares his free-flowing structure to jazz, he would write poetry to 'nail the mood of the film' before planning and filming had begun and the film would follow on and grow in a creative and improvised way from this. Some of the poems or ideas inspired by them would find their way into the finished film as little moments or montages that 'reinforce what the characters were trying to do, to reinforce what their history and past is'. He is not one to surrender to conventions, so each moment is presented as its own specific expression, using various animation styles and types of footage.

Who made it:

After several years learning his trade working for *Terrytoons*, the wild and independently minded Bakshi set out on his own and made *Fritz the Cat*, a landmark in experimental animations and a superb film in its own right. Famous mostly for being the first x-rated feature length cartoon it has so much more to offer than its sex and violence. After his second film *Heavy Traffic*, Bakshi made *Coonskin*, a film often grouped with the Blaxploitation films of the 70's. *Coonskin* is another film similar in tone to *Fritz the Cat* and *Heavy Traffic*.

Some of his fans will know and love him for his fantasy work, *Wizards*, *Lord of The Rings* and *Fire and Ice*, all really interesting films filled with many great moments and a few moments that couldn't have been made by anyone other than Bakshi, but they lack the raw youthful rebellion and 'up yours' to mainstream society that his first three films have.

In recent years, as is often the case with the world's great masters of cinema, he has struggled to find the money to make films, he seems to have practically retired from cinema and spends his time painting at his mountain top home in New Mexico. There has been a rumour recently that he is planning to make a new film but time will tell and we wait eagerly because what cinema needs now more than ever is someone like Bakshi to shake things up.

Why it's important to us:

When asked at an animation conference how he had changed the way he thought about how cartoons were made at a time when the studio system was falling apart in the fifties and sixties, a situation that the young animator who



is asking the question thinks is very similar to what is going on right now, Bakshi replied: '... you sit there crying about getting a job at Disney or that things are falling apart, the same thing the old animators were doing when I was a kid, saying "It's all crumbling!"... It's not crumbling! You're crumbling! You got these computers that can do this stuff for nothing! And what do you do with it? You try to get a job for the asshole studio. It's so dumb! Why can't six or eight animators get together, get a couple of machines and do a stupid picture? What's stopping you, what is it that's stopping you from writing, directing and animating something?' This attitude is at the heart of what makes Bakshi inspiring, he doesn't ask permission and he seeks out ways to do what he wants on his terms, always resulting in a truer and richer process and creating films that have more depth and life to them.

In each of his films he explores how to take animation to some place it has never been before and see what more he can do with the medium. His experiments with mixing different types of footage, the various layers of drawn animation and live-action, and the use of rotoscoping and tracing are some of the most exciting things we've seen done in animation, and especially because you can see it evolving from film to film. We have a personal taste for expressive films that mix formats, styles and mediums and Bakshi is one of those filmmakers that reminds us that there is always somewhere new to go, there is so much that can be done and anything is possible, he's a real inspiration to anyone experimenting with new ways of making films.

How to see it:

Heavy Traffic is available as a region 1 DVD on Amazon and Ebay, unfortunately without any bonus features.

Further viewing/reading:

We would definitely recommend all his other films, especially the more personal films such as *Fritz the Cat*, *Coonskin*, *Hey Good Lookin'* and *American Pop*. It is worth watching them in the order they were made to see how his ideas and techniques evolve. *Wizards*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Fire and Ice* are particularly interesting in light of his use of rotoscoping and manipulated layers of live action. All these films can be found on Amazon.

For more stories on how and why Bakshi made the films he made and developed the techniques he did, and also how he dealt with producers and studios during his filmmaking career, read *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. The book only really scratches the surface of Bakshi and gives an overview of his career but it's got a good number of anecdotes and features hundreds of great images from his films and working material. It's well worth owning for any fan of Bakshi or animation in general.

It's really interesting to hear what Bakshi has to say himself, and there are a good number of great interviews online. Here's two to get you started:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WApCUBcVMos>

<http://www.craveonline.com/film/articles/184621-the-gods-truth-an-interview-ralph-bakshi-part-1>

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