



Russell Smith: Bruce LaBruce and the power of the underground

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Canadian filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, the very definition of the word indie, a stalwart refuser of popular-entertainment values, a relentless nose-tweaker of the straight and the respectable, is about to have a retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He has also launched a line of jewellery and perfume called "Obscenity." He has become an example of the kind of success that well-connected, Canadian Film Centre-trained, CBC-supported writers and directors only dream of. In this he is evidence of the long-term effect of not trying to please the petrified, boardroom-bound managers of television networks.

The MoMA retrospective will run from April 23 to May 2 and feature screenings of his many films, beginning with his ramshackle 1991 feature, *No Skin Off My Ass*, the story of a love affair between a hairdresser and a skinhead. These early films were so cheaply made they are one step above puppet shows: There is not even sync sound, but instead an overlay of voices that approximate what the characters' dialogue might sound like. Television in Eastern Europe is still sometimes dubbed this way, with one actor's voice doing all the parts. It places some imaginative demand on viewers, but I don't think the technique was chosen to be avant-gardist, just cheap.

In his next film, *Super 8½*, LaBruce makes self-deprecating reference to these accidental artistries: His protagonist, a pornographic filmmaker, is praised for his innovative technique and demurs that he really just doesn't know what he's doing.

Even as LaBruce's films grew more technically polished – and his most recent, and most successful, *Gerontophilia*, had a budget of more than \$1-million and looks professional – they usually maintained a somewhat rambling style, a love of digressive vignettes. In *Hustler White* (1996), the film is mostly an excuse to collect and depict various fetishistic sexual acts demanded of Los Angeles male prostitutes. Some of them are quite extreme, and the viewer is not spared the close-ups.

In an interview in Toronto last week, where LaBruce is still based, he admitted that some of his style has depended on the limitations of his budgets. "Low budgets force a guerrilla style that's more spontaneous. The flaws make it more interesting."

LaBruce has always combined explicit sex in the style of cheap pornography with art film, and has even made three straightforward, hard-core flicks for commercial porn houses. He has also shot nudes for such non-art magazines as *Honcho*, *Inches* and *Playguy*. His films and art performances pushed, for years, against the hardest of taboos.

In *L.A. Zombie* (2010), LaBruce's second zombie porn film, an alien undead has graphic intercourse with corpses in order to bring them to life. The film was banned in Australia. At a gallery in Madrid, LaBruce used some well-known Spanish actors and artists for a performance about "the links between religious and sexual ecstasy"; some of them had holy wafers stuck over their nipples or genitals, and some locals grew upset. There were protesters outside, and the mayor tried to have the show closed. Then someone threw two explosive devices into the gallery. Luckily they didn't explode. "It's not the first time I've had my life threatened," LaBruce says.

Gerontophilia, shot in Montreal, is in one sense a move toward mainstream cinema, because it has no explicit sex scenes in it, although LaBruce says it is "the most shocking thing I could make now." It's about a young man with a fetish for senior citizens. He develops a loving relationship with an old man in a nursing home. Is the filmmaker selling out? He laughs: "It's funny, *Variety* has hated every one of my films, said they're too harsh and pornographic, and when this one came out they inevitably said I had gone limp."

The perfume and jewellery lines are also half art pieces, half self-promotion, and they contain a hefty dose of satire. Two rings, made by Hamburg-based jeweller Jonathan Johnson, saying "Saint" and "Revolutionary," had featured in *Gerontophilia*; this led to an official collaboration, and a meeting with Hamburg perfumer Kim Weisswange. She came up with a suitably dark and mysterious scent for the Obscenity label (it's mostly ambery). LaBruce says, "I was playing with ideas of aphrodisiac, also religious connotations." The essential oils in it are mostly "associated with licentiousness or saintly pursuits." There is magic healing water in it, certified from Lourdes, as well. LaBruce had fun with the perfume advertising campaign, in which he appears as a rather Mephistophelian figure. He calls the project art, but also "fame maintenance."

Even he admits that the MoMA retrospective is rather brave of that august museum. I think it's evidence of what happens when you do exactly the opposite of what is supposed to make you a successful writer or director in this country. Instead of conscientiously trying to work your way in by doing episodes of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* or by polishing your pitch for a new cooking-based reality show for a BlackBerry-distracted producer deep in the bowels of the MegaCorp building, you do exactly what you want to do, over and over, failing as many times as you like. Those rich yet timid producers are never going to have successes as international as these.