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11.28.08



Left: **Bruce LaBruce**, *Otto, or Up with Dead People*, 2008, still from a color film in 35 mm, 95 minutes. Right: **Bruce LaBruce**, *Otto, or Up with Dead People*, 2008, production still from a color film in 35 mm, 95 minutes. Fritz Fritze (Marcel Schlutt). Photo: Bruce LaBruce.

BEL AMI THIS IS NOT. Bruce LaBruce's latest, most adventurous skin flick, *Otto, or Up with Dead People* (2008), which tracks a fetching young melancholic zombie (played with turgid aplomb by first-time actor Jey Crisfar) on his journey of self-discovery, is not quite a "zombie porn," as I'd previously heard it billed—though a more suitable appellation eludes me. Despite his pornographic leanings, sex has never been LaBruce's forte; he seems willfully antipleasure, far too indulgent of an aimless intellectualism to visually, or viscerally, tantalize. The sex scenes, while gruesome and occasionally witty—featuring, for instance, a zombie eating a hole out of his boyfriend's stomach and then doggedly fucking the cavity—are sparse; the camera doesn't linger nearly long enough to delight. This might come as a relief to some viewers, but I was anticipating something a tad smuttier.

Otto's a piece of work, flush with innumerable digressions and dead ends. Much of the narrative tension revolves around whether or not Otto is in fact a zombie, an ambiguity that is never fully resolved. A genuinely bizarre film, it still has its precedents. George Romero's quiet masterpiece *Martin* (1977), which features a lonely young man who believes—against much evidence—that he's a vampire, is one. Gregg Araki's "Teenage Apocalypse Trilogy" (1993–97) comes to mind. In its blend of sexuality and hyperbolic agitprop, there's also a tinge of Dušan Makavejev's *Mysteries of the Organism* (1971). Mostly, however, LaBruce borrows from his own singular body of work, revisiting several familiar themes (skinhead fetishism abounds) and devices: a pretentious lesbian underground filmmaker named Medea Yarn (a play on Maya Deren) who is making an anticapitalist film about zombies called *Up with Dead People*, motivates much of the plot, harking back to LaBruce's use of the pretentious lesbian filmmaker Googie in *Super 8 1/2* (1995).

If Romero's undead are typically ciphers for the mindless subjects of consumer culture, LaBruce's are ambivalent, anomic, gay-bashed ephebes—untapped radicals who come across as more sympathetic than their living counterparts. This is LaBruce's most compelling, if not entirely novel, twist on the zombie genre, and it gives way to a few gems, such as a scene in which Otto, filmed rising fist-first from a grave, is exhorted by Yarn to "raise it in solidarity with the lonely and the weak and the dispossessed of the earth . . . !"

Hustler White (1996), which LaBruce made with photographer Rick Castro, remains the director's apogee, if only because it's such a perfect vehicle for Tony Ward's charismatic strutting. But *Otto's* winsome sound track and Crisfar's charmingly stilted performance manage to pull together a movie that otherwise might have collapsed under the weight of its many pretenses.

Otto, or Up with Dead People, opens Friday, November 28 at Laemmle's *Sunset 5* in Los Angeles and at Landmark's *Embarcadero Center Cinema* in San Francisco.

— David Velasco

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