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Volume 7, Number 1, June 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112931ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112931ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kramer, G. M. (2024). Bruce LaBruce on His Explicit Radical Cinema of Seduction, *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*, *L.A. Zombie*, and *The Visitor*. *Monstrum*, 7(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112931ar>

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## Bruce LaBruce on His Explicit Radical Cinema of Seduction, *Otto; or, Up with Dead People, L.A. Zombie, and The Visitor*

Gary M. Kramer

Canadian *enfant terrible* Bruce LaBruce's latest film, *The Visitor* (2024) premiered at this year's Berlin Film Festival, where it was seeking distribution. It opens with the title character (Bishop Black) emerging naked from a suitcase that has washed up on the shore in London, and a man (Adrian Bracken) sternly warning in voiceover about "dangerous aliens," illegal migration, and how, "We permit an unmarried visitor to immigrate for the purpose of destroying our families." It is a political statement that speaks to the topical issue of refugees.



Figure 1. Opening scene from *The Visitor* (2024)

The opening scene of *The Visitor*, reminiscent of LaBruce's own *L.A. Zombie* (2010), likely pays homage to Ray Danton's *Deathmaster* (1972), which also features a (vampire) "stranger" washing up on shore—in a coffin, no less—to wreak havoc on a hippie commune. Additionally, *The Visitor* lends itself to a *Dracula* (1897) reading, in that the title character "changes" people through an exchange of fluids that carries connotations of both sexual awakening and creeping foreignness. However, LaBruce has made clear that his intent with the film is to create a pornographic reimagining of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema*

(1968)—a cuckoo-in-the-nest story about a visitor seducing the members of a wealthy family (plus their maid) during his stay in their house.

LaBruce's film features radical and explicit sex as phrases such as "Anal Liberation Now" flash on screen in a strobing style, while the Maid (Luca Federici) is sodomized with a Jesus dildo. "Open Borders, Open Legs" and "Eat Out The Rich!" both appear over scenes of the Mother (Amy Kingsmill) receiving cunnilingus while in bondage. "Sex Has No Borders," and "Make (Revolutionary) Love Not (Colonist) War" flash during a threesome with the Visitor, the Father (Macklin Kowal), and the Daughter (Ray Filar). And the slogan "Incest Is Best," followed by "As Long As You Keep It in the Family," appear during an erotic threeway with the Father, the Son (Kurtis Lincoln), and the Visitor.

Although he adds to this provocative mix by featuring a 'footfucker' sequence during the Visitor's sex scene with the Father, LaBruce is not just out to shock. Rather, the Toronto-based filmmaker is continuing his decades-long effort to break down the walls of heteronormative patriarchy to allow space for queer pleasure. During the closing credits of *The Visitor*, his sex-positive film urges for "Sexual Democracy Now" asks viewers to "Join the New Sexual World Order," and insists on "A New Sexual Vision for the UK."

*The Visitor* uses its title character to examine sexual mores and introduces its buttoned-up characters to the sticky pleasures of the flesh. (All of the family sex scenes involve a very viscous goo coating the characters' bodies, which is either sexy or gross depending on the viewer.) After their encounters with the Visitor, each family member further explores their sexuality alone or with others in a series of erotic vignettes that express their newly discovered sexual liberation.

*The Visitor* echoes two of LaBruce's earlier films, the sex and zombie comedies, *Otto; or Up with Dead People* (2008) and *L.A. Zombie*, which use the undead as metaphors to provide pointed social commentary. Both *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* eschew typical horror and gay porn conventions to create a radical brand of extreme cinema that also investigates masculinity and sexuality in unusual and provocative ways. They are extreme, queer, pornographic, and quite radical, presenting ideas of sexual positivity.

In *Otto*, Medea Yarn (Katharina Klewinghaus) is making a film about the undead starring sexy Fritz (Marcel Schlutt) and her new discovery, Otto (Jey Crisfar), a gay zombie with an identity crisis. As Otto recalls his past relationships, he suffers gay bashing and munches on dead animals as well as the occasional gay trick. The title character represents how dead inside (i.e., alienated) today's youth have become as well as the difficulties gay teenagers

often face. In addition, the film addresses issues such as AIDS, xenophobia, queer bashing, and the social conformity of groupthink. Otto is an outsider and is bullied for looking and acting differently.

In *L.A. Zombie*, the naked title character (famed porn star François Sagat) rises out of the sea and reanimates the dead through sex with his elephantine penis. (An alternate, unedited hardcore version of the film features the actor's real penis for the lengthy and explicit sex scenes.) Here, LaBruce's antihero evokes homelessness, mental illness, and addiction as a way of examining imbalances of sex, violence, and power.

That these zombies “crave the flesh of man” has more of a sexual undertone than “flesh-eating” in a traditional zombie film sense as in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). However, given that both of these films are situated at the intersections of body horror, exploitation cinema, and gay porn—both, for example, feature “gut-fucks,” (e.g., erect penises being inserted into body cavities)—they are more inclined to disturb rather than titillate. The explicit gay sex may dissuade zombie-genre fans while the extreme gore will potentially turn off the gay porn crowd. In *L.A. Zombie*, some of the most sensual encounters involve beefy naked guys covered with blood. *Otto*'s last act features an orgy of the dead intercut with scenes of butchering. The zombie protagonists are meant to be empty vessels (“hollow men to project onto”) while the other zombies in the films suggest what one character in *Otto* calls the “somnambulistic conformist behavior” in society.

In July 2019, I spoke with LaBruce about his zombie features and his patented brand of socio-political porn.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a second interview was conducted in February 2024 to discuss *The Visitor*.

**Gary M. Kramer:** Let's start with some background. As a student, you studied and worked with Robin Wood. In what specific ways did Wood influence you?

**Bruce LaBruce:** Robin was my main film mentor, particularly in terms of appreciation, critique, history, and political posture—being a feminist, gay activist, and Marxist. I took two undergraduate courses with him: a genre course, a Japanese cinema course, and he was my MA thesis supervisor. I got my master's degree in film and social-political thought [at York University in Toronto]. I projected his graduate school screenings. He and some other professors and graduate students started a magazine called *CineACTION!*, a

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<sup>1</sup> The 2019 interview was originally intended as a chapter for a proposed book on Radical Cinema. That book failed to find a publisher. Some minor additions and edits for context have been made.

radical film critique, and I was on the editorial board.<sup>2</sup> He was amazing. I knew about and had read his monographs on Penn, Hitchcock, and Chabrol.<sup>3</sup> He was so glamorous. He was Truffaut's favorite critic. He was friends with Penn and Scorsese and visited the sets of *The King of Comedy* and *Little Big Man*. Then he came out, when his youngest kid was 15–16. He was part of the velvet rage [gay men angry at being belittled for being gay] and wrote this seminal article on the responsibility of the gay film critic—it was him throwing down the gauntlet that his writing would be political, Marxist/feminist, and gay. Among his notable ideas were homosexual subtexts in Hawks. He started out as a high school English teacher, so his style came from comparative literature and his comparison of films was extraordinary. He wrote an article on *Young Mr. Lincoln* and Arthur Penn's *The Chase*, contrasting Henry and Jane Fonda, deconstructing 1960s cinema and what that meant. He also wrote [co-edited] *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* about grindhouse auteurs—George Romero, Wes Craven, and Doris Wishman, and the theory of repression. He was a strict Freudian who believed in constitutional bisexuality. Horror films were an expression of sexual repression in a capitalist system and a homosexual panic. Surplus repressed desires come back in a monstrous form.

**GK:** You once told me you wanted to go against horror tropes based on homosexual panic or fear, and make horror that is atmospheric, melancholic, psychological, and thoughtful. Can you unpack that and why you decided to make a pair of erotic zombie horror films?

**LaBruce:** These films are rich in terms of metaphors, and there are obviously political allegories to be made with queer identity and queer politics and the militancy of the gay movement in terms of sexual extremes. But it was also a way for me to reach out to other audiences beyond the gay audience. Genre films are more populist. *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* were written about in the horror blogs, and they attracted a lot of people who otherwise would have never seen my work.

There is always this fear—horror is a disruption of the normal. And horror is about repression. All these psycho films in the 1970s and 1980s with teens getting murdered because of their sexual urges. Orgasmic instrumentation of

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<sup>2</sup> *CineAction* appeared in print form from 1985 to 2016 and now publishes free online at <https://cineaction.ca/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Arthur Penn* (1967, Studio Vista); *Hitchcock's Films [Revisited]* (1969, Castle Books [rev. 2002 Columbia University Press]); *Claude Chabrol* (1970, Littlehampton).

strong teenage hormonal sexuality. The knife is the phallus, its penetration is sexuality, and blood spurting is the orgasm. If you look at porn and horror films, they are structured the same way. Characters are brought together and one by one they are dispatched, so the narrative creates scenarios where each is murdered or fucked, and they end in an orgasmic frenzy—like the cum shot. Porn and horror are inextricably linked. Whatever is repressed comes back in a monstrous form, so when a homosexual idea is repressed, it erupts, and as Freud postulates, it's a neurosis or psychosis, so that's what horror interprets.

I made that connection very explicit in *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* with the penetrative sex and using the orifices in the body for penetration. With *L.A. Zombie*, we made it a gory porn film, [emphasizing] the explicit link between slasher and porn. But there were many other levels in *Otto* with the queer, the misfit, the outsider who has been ostracized by society and alienated from the rest of the world because of the treatment of homosexual violence, or the fear and stigma of AIDS, which marginalizes these characters. The alienation is outwardly manifested as rot—the rotting flesh of the zombie and the deadening effect that Wilhelm Reich talks about, or this kind of deadening of modern society and late capitalism and empty consumerism and shopping malls. George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* is the apotheosis of the zombie genre because it nails the capitalism and consumerism by setting it in the shopping mall.

The other level was the connection between cruising and zombies. *Cruising*, the [1980] movie, is a horror film with the penetrating knife and orgasm trope. But men cruising in dark rooms and saunas or at night—it's a world where body parts are interchangeable and disconnected. There is a post-corporeal sexuality; it becomes the disembodied experience of sex.

**GK:** By combining explicitness, satire, and the necromantic, *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* are exactly the films one might expect from Bruce La Bruce given your distinctive output. Can you discuss why you mix social issues with a radical cinematic style?

**LaBruce:** I think *Otto* is flawed in a lot of ways, and a criticism it got was that it was taking on too much and cramming all these metaphors and tropes in one film. But it's consistent with my hyper-referential style. I mix genres and cinematic references. It's an involuntary impulse that came from postmodernism and semiotics, which was all the rage when I was in university. I have never really been that intrigued by French post-structuralism. I read the

seminal texts, but I wasn't really that engaged with them. I thought it was very apolitical and nihilistic, and I tend to be more romantic and, in a weird way, optimistic.

**GK:** Can you talk more about your optimism, especially in our present era?

**LaBruce:** That's about making the point that fetish and extreme forms of sexual expression aren't disgusting or grotesque, but there's a reverence for the object of desire. There's a spiritual element to it. In terms of optimism, weirdly, punks tend to be optimistic despite being shrouded in dark, gothic imagery. There is a weird optimism because it's a free form of expression and style. I have a dim view of revolutions in my films. I appreciate revolutionary spirit and impetus because in general it's fighting against repression or the elite or fascist forces, so that has a romantic element to it. Even though revolutions are doomed to fail in my universe, it's fine. If you participate in a revolution, like [Jean] Genet says, at the first sign of the revolution being co-opted or assimilated, you abandon it and even turn against it. Once it's institutionalized, the oppressed become the oppressors.<sup>4</sup> That's a main theme in my films. The modern gays—the gays who were into hardcore politics are now the elite middle class they used to complain about. That's why I call myself a radical pragmatist.

**GK:** Let's discuss that. If gay culture has become more mainstream and assimilationist, should queers want to distance themselves from extreme elements? You deliberately push buttons, provoke, and are very in-your-face. I applaud that. It generates a reaction. Should we take it as a directive?

**LaBruce:** The thing is, in the late '70s/early '80s, gay men did live like porn stars and gay radicals. The engine of the revolution was sexual and militant and in-your-face and transgressing all sorts of taboos. That was the norm in the way for a lot of gays, even though it was a largely white, middle-class movement.

I don't expect anyone to do anything. With my work, I encourage people to question things, authority, and conventions. I present a kind of point of view that doesn't get expressed very much. The golden age of TV, the shows are well made and entertaining, but they are still very conventional in terms of their narratives and the way characters are drawn and they have fixed ideological

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<sup>4</sup> In Jean Genet, "Four Hours in Shatila," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring, 1983): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536147>.

notions about gender—with notable exceptions, of course. It's just that there isn't a lot of questioning of the basic model of consumption and the late capitalist kind of colonization of our brains with this addictive entertainment. I make cinema as a kind of counter-expression to that.

I'm not suggesting people think, "Everything's changed; I'll become a sexual radical." A lot of people do. It's a personal liberation where they become nonbinary, or experiment with gender, but ultimately, that's a personal struggle, and they still would be leading normal lives, going to work, and living like everyone else. They have a personal *jihad*.

Our brains have been rewired by social media. It's a virtual radicalism on Instagram or video games where you can express a sexually radical aspect of yourself in a public forum in a way that never existed in the 1970s or 1980s. It's a different consciousness that has evolved. It's not a group movement, or militant organized movements, but more about individuals expressing themselves.

**GK:** In *Otto*, Medea is making a political zombie movie. She's a strong female character at the center of Otto's story. What observations do you have about her and other radical women in your films?

**LaBruce:** Medea is an endearing character to me. She's so full of bluster and apocalyptic ideas but she's also a romantic and she's like the lead in her own movie, and so dramatic. That's why she sees her girlfriend as a silent movie trope. She's over the top. That's why I have female characters in a gay context, because it was anathema to think of gays and lesbians separately, or to look at queer history through a political lens that calls for the solidarity of lesbian, gay, and trans people. These characters, like Gundren in *The Raspberry Reich* [LaBruce 2004], are idealists, and they see a hope beyond the apocalypse and are not afraid to be intellectual. People are irritated when I steal things from other writers. That's my style and aesthetic—bricolage. Stealing quotes or pieces of film or found footage and incorporating it in a movie to make a broader point or making Hollywood films from a more queer, underground perspective.

These female characters are my points of identification. I'm fascinated by why people watch porn, so it's hard for me to do it with a straight face, and I was embarrassed and a bit shy because I'm not really an exhibitionist, sexually, by nature. I put all these distancing devices—black-and-white, and film-within-a-



film, and a filmmaker-within-a-film—and build in different levels of irony. These female characters are also the ones filming the sex in the movies, even though it is often gay sex. It's interesting to project yourself into a more feminine, political consciousness watching gay porn. *The Misandrists* [LaBruce 2017] has two women studying gay porn even though they hate men.

**GK:** Let's talk about your porn. How did you come up with the idea, character, and sexual scenarios for *L.A. Zombie*?

**LaBruce:** There was no script, just a 4–5-page outline. It was a mood piece. We found locations in Los Angeles and used François's body as a screen that everything is projected on. His body kept changing colors. That was part of the process. The special effects guy was on meth, so how he would approach the monster was different every day, which I loved. It was people projecting things onto this blank slate who arrived from outer space. The main characters in *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* could be homeless schizophrenics, and the films you are experiencing are these expressionist points of view from this lowest rung of society, and they are alienated. They are dead characters, impassive. One friend told me *Otto* was evolved in the Indian mystical sense—he's transcended the body and is emotionally detached.

**GK:** I want to ask about how you use the body in radical ways in these films. I appreciated how you objectify Sagat's naked, muscular body, his raw animalism, and his beefy physicality. In *Otto*, it's the orgy scene—the combination of limbs that seem disembodied. Can you talk about these bodies and body parts?

**LaBruce:** People talk about the idea of the post-human so maybe that's where it started. With the zombie movies, it was this idea of public cruising places—parks, saunas, or on the street in the 70s and 80s—it was disembodied body parts all the time. You'd be in a dark room, and different limbs and orifices, or sexual organs were appearing out of the dark, and had a *Night of the Living Dead*, or a somnambulistic quality—and not in a bad way. It's an interesting way of experiencing sexuality. The body in queer history is really interesting, and how body fascism, or body perfection, and musculature that is so common now on Instagram was regarded as tacky in the 1980s.

**GK:** You mix gore and sex in both films quite explicitly. I love that you echo the “stump fuck” in your 1996 film *Hustler White* with a “gut fuck” in *Otto*. I love that you have a literal “monster cock” in *L.A. Zombie* that spews an inky

black substance during orgasm. Can you describe your interest in making sex gory or making gory sex?

**LaBruce:** That's the one thing about zombies that people don't acknowledge. They are like vampires with sexual hunger. The whole cycle of 1970s horror and exploitation films with Romero and Tobe Hooper and Wes Craven and John Carpenter—they were making exploitation films that were underground films that substituted violence for sex. They have a lot of sexuality in them, but they were B-movies and made in the pre-digital-effects era, which made them more visceral. They used props and fake blood and limbs. There is an element of play which is very tactile and pleasurable. You can tell the filmmakers were having fun by using these analog effects. As opposed to digital, which is so cold. There is something unemotional about gore now. It's slick and a bit fascist. It's made by machines, there's not a sense of fun/play. The underground films were ludic, carnival-ish, *Grand-Guignol*. It was about the audience going for a cathartic experience and participating in the bloodletting, seeing the decapitated bodies and amputated limbs. I've done that in my work, where I do live performative events. I've had extremely violent scenarios played out with models—terrorist abductions, zombies, torture—things that you see on TV all the time, since the rise of ISIS. The audience would participate and be on the chair and have fake blood thrown on them, or pose with knives and guns, but it's not negative, it's a total atmosphere of play. It's a release for these people and that artistic tradition, like the Vienna Secessionists that allow the sexual and violent impulses.

Violence and sex are linked, and it blows my mind how naïve people are about sexuality—that it can be contained, or legislated, or policed. Sexuality is such a strong, primal drive, with a certain amount of violence built into it. The tendency to debase the love object is built into it. It's tied up with objectification—you turn the love object into something that is perhaps more impersonal or is conquered or overpowered. There are dynamics of submission and domination built into every sexuality. This idea that sexuality can be nurturing and domestic and tame and unthreatening is quite naïve about the whole history of human sexuality. It's preposterous really.

**GK:** Let's talk about flesh-eating. Zombies that “crave the flesh of man” in your films are far more likely to suck their victims off or eat ass than bite them. I like that you play with expectations—that in both films the zombies fuck dead

humans back to life. This counters, or reverses, the AIDS narratives of gay sex = death. Can you talk about “gay-ing” up the zombie genre?

**LaBruce:** That’s what I’m expressing in these movies—the explosion of gay militant sexuality. In *L.A. Zombie*, I was trying to reverse the idea of the pathology of gay sex—infection, disease, toxicity, death. In *L.A. Zombie*, he fucks people to reanimate them not as zombies but to bring them back to life as human beings. It’s a corrective of that sexuality. *L.A. Zombie* fulfilled my promise to make a hardcore zombie sex film with porno conventions. But it was also meant to be a redemption or recuperation of gay sexuality.

However, when it was banned in Australia, a friend of mine who is friends with Camille Paglia put me in touch with her. I told her I was defending it on this level of it being a kind of way of reversing these ideas of gay sex being a pathology. She laughed, and said I was insane to defend my film on any moral ground or in any directly political way. It’s still a gory movie, and a character fucks dead bodies. It is necrophilic, and so beyond the moral standards of anyone that you’d be a fool to defend it on moral grounds. She said that I should defend it as surrealism, or in the tradition where the boundaries of normalcy are challenged on all levels.

I made *L.A. Zombie* as a corrective to *Otto*. *Otto* was a failed experiment. It was meant to be more pornographic than it ended up being because the main actor wasn’t comfortable doing the explicit scenes. I have a more fluid approach to making movies where I am pragmatic and adapt to whatever scenario I’m confronted with. So, it’s cut between mainstream indie, porn, and horror. But in that film, even as a zombie, he disembowels the skinhead guy he picks up and there’s blood splattered all over his room. It comes out of the nation of the velvet rages and my generation, who experienced extreme sexual repression and was unable to express their sexuality until much later in their lives—not experiencing adolescent sexuality.

**GK:** The social themes in *L.A. Zombie* are quite prominent—homelessness, rape, drugs, corporate corruption/white-collar crime, (gang) violence, etc. But there is also this very strong theme of mental illness/schizophrenia—you previously told me that Sagat is an “alien in his own mind,” if not “a real alien.” Can you discuss these ideas and the radicalism of this kind of political porn?

**LaBruce:** For me *L.A. Zombie* is just like *Hustler White* in that it is almost a documentary. The homeless situation is an epidemic and getting worse in L.A. and in San Francisco. A friend said, “You actually made ‘poverty porn.’” For me, the underbelly is what makes Los Angeles and Hollywood so fascinating. The dream machine is on top and there’s this seedy underbelly. *The Day of the Locust* [John Schlesinger, 1975] showed it brilliantly. I chose this character [in *L.A. Zombie*] who comes from who knows where, and he is this outsider, this alien, who is observing all these horrible crimes—white collar, and BDSM, and how disposable humans can be in this late capitalist culture where people can die in the streets, or in concentration camps. It’s looking at it through the lens of this alien savior character who fucks them back to life. Which has never been done before. Because zombies turn humans into other zombies. There’s no actual redemption, but [Sagat’s character] resurrects them and for me that was an idea of reversing the pathology of gay sex in terms of HIV and AIDS and making it a regenerative, sexual thing.

**GK:** Do zombie films need to be metaphors? Do we need to ascribe meaning to zombies?

**LaBruce:** I think the problem is people *don’t* ascribe things to them. To me, zombies are not far from homeless people in terms of how they have schizophrenia or mental [illness]. People who are schizophrenic or on medication become zombielike, or they are viewed as “disposable” in society. Zombies can be dispatched—shot, burnt, or beheaded—without moral compunction. It’s not that far away from how homeless people are viewed and treated in the real world. There’s a visceral pleasure people get from watching these formerly-humans be dismembered and have knives plunged into their brains. There’s a strange cathartic pleasure people get out of that, but they don’t examine what pleasure centres that arouses. It would be hard to separate it from metaphorical or allegorical significance—just like vampires are obviously another metaphor for the outsider creature, this uncontrolled id that has been repressed [comes] back in a monstrous form, and the sucking of the blood is equivalent to *le petit mort*—that is, the orgasm is death—or the exploitation of virgins as sacrifice. It’s hard to separate that from the obvious real-life analogies.

The whole *doppelgänger* thing with vampires and zombies—they are in human form, and they are a reflection of the living. Something that is corrupt within everyone resides in these monsters—sexual excess, the unbridled id, and the triumph of the pleasure principle over the reality principle. Despite being

disaffected characters who have no emotions, they are remarkably voracious in their appetites—they are incredibly driven by hunger which also has an unavoidable sexual connotation.

**GK:** The main/zombie characters in *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* are “empty vessels” who allow the people they encounter to reflect themselves. Can you discuss how you created these characters—an “alien”-ated gay teenager, and an “alien”/sex god?

**LaBruce:** *Otto* is also meant to be for queer adolescents who feel that alienation and are threatened by the conventional world and its rules about sexual behaviour. Some people call him “emo,” or “goth,” but he was meant to appeal to that sensibility. In Santiago, Chile, where I screened the film recently, three people came to the screening dressed as Otto. Queer kids said that character nailed their feelings, frustration, and fears. It resonated with a lot of adolescents. That’s where that image came from. The whole appeal of Marilyn Manson and those performers is built into that as well.

With François Sagat’s zombie, it’s a critique of that hypermacho masculinity where it cannibalizes itself literally—the body fascism, and the hyperbolization of the male body, which is meant to be something both narcissistic and kind of primal and exaggerated that a lot of people find repugnant. I made that film in 2010. Since then, there has been an explosion of hypermasculine bodies and pumped-up macho guys are revered on Instagram. There is an army of them now. In the popular imagination, that has become a kind of ideal of masculinity. Not so much in queer circles where there are different body types—especially in queer porn. There’s an exploration of nonbinary and gender and body types, but this is a specific subculture. In the general popular imagination, there are hyper-feminine bodies too, exaggerations of enormous asses or breasts; they have become the ideal.

In *L.A. Zombie*, I was making fun of that with the four muscle guys getting brutally murdered. It becomes a corrupt orgy, not unlike the orgy in Medea’s film in *Otto*. The key to my work is that I both indulge in it sexually and critique it in a more political level, so I’m ambivalent. The left has problems with ambiguity; they want LGBT characters to have positive representations and spell out how you’re supposed to respond to these characters. But sexuality is a mass of contradictions and conflicting impulses. The sexual imagination can be dark and politically incorrect. I don’t know how people can police their own

desires. How can people align their political and ideological agenda with their sexual impulses? That's the fun or interesting thing about sexuality—that it can't be controlled or contained and that it brings up all sorts of impulses you have to struggle with and figure out how to accommodate or come to terms with.

**GK:** You mix a number of styles and genres. For the talky *Otto*, you conceive a film-within-a-film, shoot in black-and-white, use animation, split-screens, and project images to create layers in the story. In contrast, for *L.A. Zombie*, the film is almost entirely wordless, it is shot in vivid, garish color, with scenes of sped-up photography. You also edit out the pornographic content (from the hardcore version) to make a “film without a film” (thereby creating a desire to see the unedited version). Can you talk about these two approaches?

**LaBruce:** The fact that I did this—making hard- and soft-core versions of a lot of my films: *Skin Flick* [1999], *The Raspberry Reich*, *L.A. Zombie*—it's a challenge to the conventions of how you make a film. Two versions targeted to each audience is unique. I love Jack Smith and Andy Warhol and James Bidgood. They pour out all this stuff and it's all loosely connected. The narrative conventions are sketched in or ignored and are a challenge to aesthetic convention.

The *L.A. Zombie* theatrical version *is* a tease. You never see Sagat's own cock in that version— only the prosthetic with the scorpion stinger on the end that squirts black squid ink. Because I came from the era of semiotics and postmodernism, and because my punk aesthetics were about collage and bricolage, it was about hyper-referentiality and creating a spectacle and using shock value as a political provocation. Using porn in a political way. And me, as a queer punk, acting out against even radical groups like skinheads or left-wing radical revolutionaries. The style I developed drew attention to how the audience is perceiving or how they are [consuming] their sexual gaze. How they watch and perceive sexuality was an expression of my own ambivalence about making porn in many ways—not only in how it can exploit people, but also its banality, its fascist tendencies, and this corporate hegemony that controls porn. I've [addressed] that ambivalence through distancing techniques, like a film-within-a-film, or female filmmakers controlling the gaze or manipulating it. That was the strategy with *Otto*. I didn't use that trope in *L.A. Zombie*. It was meant to be more of an interior landscape of a schizophrenic homeless character. *L.A. Zombie* is a more directly pornographic film in the way it's structured: one character fucking a series of characters ending in climax and orgasm. It is more

within the conventions of porn without the distancing. It is more direct and purely pornographic without any mediation. Some people prefer a more visual experience.

Even though I rejected academia, I have never divested myself of my academic leaning and that's manifested in many ways in my films particularly by having characters in my films talk a lot of theory and be very politically motivated. Some people just want a pure narrative experience without agitprop intervention.

In *Otto*, the scene of Otto in bed with Fritz (Marcel Schlutt) is a lyrical, sensual scene. Otto almost becomes human because of that brief sensual, sexual, romantic scene. People who critique my work can't wrap their heads around me being an extreme romantic and having an idealism and showing extreme fetishes and extreme porn. People are very singular in the way they regard fetishes. To me, fetish is spiritual—you revel in the sexual object and elevate it. That's intrinsically romantic to me. But a lot of people treat it as degrading or debasing. Freud defined a fetish as any act that does not contribute directly to the procreative function of sex. By that definition, even a kiss is a fetish. So, everyone indulges in fetish. Foreplay is fetish.

**GK:** I'm curious what you think of other attempts in recent years to combine explicit sex and violent horror—for instance, the New French Extremism films.

**LaBruce:** Some of those films are great. I love *Inside (Womb Raider)* [2007] and *High Tension* [2003]. I haven't seen all of it. It depends on the film. I'm not a fan of *Martyrs* [2008]. You can use extreme sex and violence and make a good film or a bad film. It's just the framework you are using to express your ideas or theory. I'm not a fan of torture porn, or Eli Roth, and that bullshit. It's intensely negative and nihilistic, and wallows in that kind of vision of the world being predatory, and horribly nasty, and grotesque—where there's no redemption.

**GK:** I like some torture porn.<sup>5</sup> The 2013 remake of *The Evil Dead* [1987] was a great metaphor for withdrawal, and I think the *Saw* films have some moral and ethical dimensions to them, but I agree about Eli Roth, and I found *A Serbian Film* [2010] to be almost boring; it was shock for shock value's sake.

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<sup>5</sup> This term, like “New French Extremism,” has fallen under criticism in horror scholarship as isolating trends that are already endemic to horror throughout its history. For example, in Adam Lowenstein's 2011 essay “Spectacle Horror and Hostel: Why ‘Torture Porn’ Doesn't Exist” (*Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 [April]: 42–60).

**LaBruce:** I have nothing against shock value and John Waters extolled its virtues in his book with that name. That's what exploitation film is. It's meant to be shocking almost for its own sake. There's a lot going on subtextually that the filmmakers don't know. It's a broad, visceral, and primal set of fears and desires being expressed. It depends on the point of the film—an interesting cultural, political critique or wailing in the negative energy. I love the Romero zombie films. *Night of the Living Dead* is one of the most political films of the 1960s. The horrible irony of the Black male protagonist surviving the zombie apocalypse and then being shot by the racist cracker—it's such a perfect allegory!

**GK:** What can you say about putting political messages—for example, about refugees, in *The Visitor* specifically, but your work in general? You have a lot of political subtext in your work, although maybe it is not so subtextual.

**LaBruce:** The idea of [*The Visitor*] was to do a reimagining of *Teorema* with more contemporary queer aesthetics and politics and ideas of gender. I wanted to make it politically topical as well. *Teorema* was set in a very specific historical period. It was about the alienation of industrialization and how nature is being encroached by the industrialization of the world. And you have the father character exploiting his workers in the factory—which still happens—but I wanted to address issues that are more relevant now, like the refugee crises. So, to have the Visitor from the original as a Black refugee coming to Britain, which like Germany, has the extreme right on the rise and they are very xenophobic and anti-immigrant, which translates into overt racism. And of course, the film is a pornification of the original as well. I posit the Black refugee as this projection of the [family's] perverse fantasies of the “Other” that he brings out in them. There is this idea that the sexualized Other is this kind of sexual threat—the “lock up your daughters” attitude. [GK: Cue *Dracula* reading] As Trump said, “There are rapists coming in from Mexico.” There is a weird paranoia about the sexualized Other but obviously fetishizing them. Doing that in a porn context made sense to me—and that is a very political thing. And in the beginning of the film on the soundtrack, you hear the voice of an extreme right-wing commentator and [in] all that [dialogue] are real things the extreme rightists said about immigrants. We didn't make it up. It was the racist rhetoric the extreme right uses in Britain now to describe refugees. And the slogans in the film are actual [British] Labour Party slogans that I corrupted. One was “Open Borders,” and I changed it to “Open Borders, Open Legs,” while



another slogan they had was “For the many not the few,” and I changed it to “Fuck for the many not the few,” so it’s a little dig on Labour too.

**GK:** I wanted to ask about the radical slogans throughout *The Visitor*, often during the explicit sex scenes. What is your intention here? And are we supposed to be more receptive to a message that interrupts sex? We are supposed to be getting into the vibe and you disrupt that with this political message. Am I supposed to be politically turned on and sexually turned on?

**LaBruce:** It’s kind of like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. It’s difficult to do, but if you try hard enough, you can do it. I do that on purpose. I’ve always done that as the “reluctant pornographer,” as a memoir I wrote was called. I’ve always had a certain ambivalence toward pornography, and quite often I use distancing techniques to make people aware of their spectatorship and how they are consuming the porn, to make them aware of the spectator and the objectified love object. It is meant to be jarring, and, at the same time, I am surprised that more people don’t use pornography for political purposes and propaganda because it puts people in a receptive mode. It is the perfect time to slip in political content. There is a longer version of the film with more sex and less slogans, basically. This started out as an art project for A/POLITICAL in London.<sup>6</sup> I had an installation with the five sex scenes projected uninterrupted and it was a more immersive porn experience. We also had members of the public come one night while we were shooting the porn, and I had a wall of peepholes so people could watch us shooting the porn, and there was a live feed from the camera to the monitors, so it was an invitation to the public to watch live porn.

**GK:** What can you say about including scenes like the “footfuck” in *The Visitor*? Are you deliberately out to shock, or is your extreme porn—like the stump fuck in *Hustler White*—more designed to amuse? The foot did not look real!

**LaBruce:** That was also riffing on the brilliant shot in *Teorema* when the father is ill and in bed and Terence Stamp takes his legs and puts one foot on either side of [Stamp’s] ears. From the back you see the father’s feet and it looks like he’s fucking him. Pasolini did it very cleverly to “code” it as a gay sex scene, but it really wasn’t. I was riffing on that. That image from the Pasolini film is a lasting image of the foot fetish. There is the symbolism of stigmata that runs

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://a-political.org/>.

through *The Visitor*, and those foot fleshlights, you can just order on the internet. I was searching the internet for weird, perverted things I could put in the movie, like the Jesus dildo. I looked up foot fetish stuff, and I found this weird fleshlight where you can actually fuck a foot. That was relevant to what I was doing, so [I thought] let's throw those in!



Figure 2. Sex scene from *The Visitor* (2024)

**GK:** Likewise, you feature incest in *The Visitor* as well as your prior film, *Saint Narcisse* [2020]. Necrophilia is featured in *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie*. What is the goal in depicting these taboos?

**LaBruce:** The weird thing is that incest is the go-to taboo in porn. It's everywhere. People love incest in their porn. But in mainstream movies and in real life it's kind of hush-hush. You can't talk about it, or admit you have incest fantasies. It's a very big taboo. But obviously, everyone is thinking about it because it is so prevalent in porn. I think back to Freud's theory of "family romance," and the sexual tensions—Oedipal tensions within family—and there is a lot of repression to maintain the integrity of the family unit. But those sexual feelings are there. Girls do look for their daddy in their husband and men look for their mother. It's something everyone experiences, but it is still an enormous, shameful taboo. Porn is a way of working out those shameful

fantasies and being able to acknowledge them when they are played out as dramas and fiction.

**GK:** There are transgender cast members and sexually fluid characters in *The Visitor*. Can you talk about the emphasis on diversity and sex positivity and liberation in your films? It goes beyond the interracial and incestuous themes in the work.

**LaBruce:** *Teorema* is a very queer film, but I wanted to re-queer it using more contemporary queer aesthetics and identity politics. I purposely cast the daughter as trans masculine, and the Maid is played by Luca who is nonbinary and dresses as a woman in the film. One of the most puzzling things about Pasolini's original is why the daughter ends up in a coma. Everyone else has great sexual liberation. I wanted to give the daughter some liberation—she becomes pregnant by the Visitor, which plays into this paranoia about the other and the sexualized other who comes in and impregnates the women in your country and you are supposed to beware of them. She ends up giving birth to the Visitor [starting] a cycle of the next generation of immigrants who stay in the country. Because she has facial hair and gives birth, it is a contemporary idea of what it means to be a parent or a mother. It needed to reference sexual politics that are going on now. It was very different in the late '60s.

**GK:** While the characters are sexually fluid, what was the sticky stuff that coated their bodies? I found that fascinating and it made it more erotic.

**LaBruce:** The movie is kind of sci-fi, an alien along the lines of *L.A. Zombie*—this alien from another dimension comes to this world and seduces all the characters. There is a genre called goo porn. It's very playful, and sticky, and immersive, and it adds a new element to having sex. My art director worked really hard to find a recipe for that, and something that was nontoxic—so if it got into orifices actors wouldn't get toxic shock syndrome. That was challenging. I shot most of the sex in very tight closeup because we were shooting in this very small space in the basement of this art gallery. I would have people, or even myself, with pails of goo pouring it over the actors while they were having sex. It was almost like basting a turkey or something.

**GK:** How do these films expand or move forward your distinctive brand of radical cinema? Why do you feel the need to rebel and go to extremes?

**LaBruce:** It's a combination of my whole background. As a filmmaker, I came out and developed [films] at a time when I experienced the old school of homosexuality and repression. I experienced the gay liberation movement, and I was a punk in the 1980s and [was part of] that whole rejection of the dominant ideology and conventional society. I participated in anti-corporate and anti-capitalist subcultures.

I made film on film and then went through the whole digital transition, which also involved how films were made and accessed, and how porn is made, which is more democratic. I started out pre-Internet, so my work had to adapt to the whole notion and new reality of social media. I've gone through a series of revolutions on that level. I was from that generation of pre-liberation and liberation where sexuality was such an important part of making a queer statement. It just seemed inevitable and a natural means of expression. It wasn't even necessarily meant to be... it was designed to be shock for shock's sake, or provocation. But it's hard to put yourself back in that mind frame. Shooting *No Skin off My Ass* [1991], I showed myself having sex with my boyfriend and jerking off. I was really putting myself out there before social media and it just wasn't done. I experienced that stigma of being a pornographer. I experienced the good and the bad. It was "sensational," and I became a cult director, and my films were taken seriously at festivals—even straight festivals. The combination of being punk and a queer pornographer was potent. That's the kind of world that I emerged from. It's become part of my style and my dogma—in the Lars Von Trier sense. So, I keep making those same kinds of films. But it's the world that's regressing, particularly in terms of sexuality—and politically. I keep making the same kinds of films and provocations, and the world keeps shifting, and my films seem more radical in a way even though I keep doing the same things.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The text of this interview has been edited for consistency and clarity.

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- 2024 -

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