

This essay was written for a Cinema Lounge screening of *Super 8 1/2* on Nov. 7, 2013 at the Winnipeg Film Group Cinematheque.

A publication was planned for Arsenal Pulp Press' Queer Film Classic series devoted solely to Bruce LaBruce's *Super 8 1/2* – whose title refers simultaneously to Fellini's 1963 film "8 1/2", the minimum penis size necessary to enter the pearly gates of gay porn and the celluloid gauge width LaBruce used to shoot some of his scenes.

I was asked by that series' co-editor Tom Waugh to consider writing the book, but deferred, having already produced another book on LaBruce for Plug In Editions long ago. With the new book in mind I decided that rather than providing an in depth analysis of *Super 8 1/2* I would provide some bullet points and ruminations on the filmmaker Bruce LaBruce within the context of Canadian Cinema, as per the focus of this Cinematheque series. Subsequent to introducing the screening of *Super 8 1/2* I searched Arsenal Pulp Press' website for information about the upcoming publication and discovered that it's been cut from their lineup. LaBruce falls through the cracks again. I sigh and ask myself....

"What Shall We Do With Bruce LaBruce?"

- Originating from Ontario's Bruce Peninsula, majestically jutting into Lake Huron like a giant phallus, I contemplate Bruce LaBruce as the son of wealthy landowners. The topography of his birthplace looks like an X-Ray cross-section snapshot of anal sex rendered by David Wojnarowicz. Does geography explain the lordship-like title of his invented moniker? In reality Mr. and Mrs. Bruce were farmers, not land barons, harvesting crops upon the giant penis thrusting into the lake. We'll return to the aristocracy at the end - so bear with me.

- LaBruce is now and always has been a public homosexual. Defiant and punk rock – universal appeal is not the goal, and what's the point of that type of adoration anyway? He's the archetypal "alterna-fag" railing not only against the strictures of bourgeois heterosexuality, but even more so against assimilationist factions within the gay movement. (Do people still use terms like 'assimilationist' in this era? I do, even though it spell-checks as an error.)

- LaBruce offers us a political compass that swings between the libertarianism of John Waters/Paul Morrissey and the radical socialism of Jean-Luc Godard, signified by the use of radical bold text sloganeering in his Che Guevara copyright-infringing film *Raspberry Reich* (2004).

- His overall oeuvre comments upon the gore and horror of daily life in this our never-ending AIDS era. Films like *Otto, or Up With Dead People* (2008) and *LA Zombie* (2010) speak to the undead. He also looks at class division as it relates to gay and punk personae (*No Skin Off My Ass*, 1993); sex trade workers and the academics who thrive upon studying them (*Hustler White*, 1996); and running through all his work is a fetishism for fascism and the worship of skinheads, as typified by *Skin Gang* (1999).

- Although maintaining a home base in Toronto, Bruce's projects have been made possible through an assemblage of international distributors and producers, foremost amongst them the Berlin filmmaker Jurgen Brüning and Strand Releasing's Marcus Hu in Los Angeles.

- He's worked with recurring collaborators such as the performance artist Vaginal Crème Davis, punk singer/artist GB Jones and photographer Rick Castro, although not all these collaborations are active today.

- Since his first feature in the early '90s LaBruce has structured his projects with small advances from foreign distribution territories cobbled together to give him the resources for an ultra-low budget film whose technical polish he is not overly concerned with. As Bruce once said to me with a smirk and an eye roll: "the idea isn't to have 'good' acting".

- This prolific filmmaker's work premieres at top-drawer international film festivals. Aided by his work in other media, from journalism to photography, installation art and recently modern opera, LaBruce has a worldwide cult following. I would argue it's the largest such following of any Canadian filmmaker in either official language.

- His worldwide fan base of queer-core youth (who owe aspects of their identity to his *JD's* fanzines of the 1980's), art fags and other mismatched cineastes that defy easy demographic categorization all combine to insure that his work has shelf life. Used VHS copies of *Super 8 1/2* were sold on eBay for over a hundred dollars. This should be of note within sectors of the Canadian film industry that have complained that our titles can't be given away for free.

- LaBruce shoots films in London, Berlin, LA and perhaps in the near future Madrid – world media centres that any Toronto filmmaker would happily work in. LaBruce has not located a long-form film in his hometown since *Super 8 1/2*, over 15 years ago. He's just completed principal photography on his first Canadian-made feature since that time: *Gerontophilia*, filmed in Montreal.

- Bruce LaBruce is considered by film programmers alongside directors Guy Maddin and David Cronenberg as representing the best in contemporary Canadian cinema.

Witnessing Bruce's growing reputation after showing his work in Winnipeg in 1997 (an early career retrospective which begat the book *Ride, Queer, Ride!*) I began to wonder why LaBruce had never made under the umbrella of Canada's generous film funding structures, working with an established Canadian producer. Perhaps his latest work, *Gerontophilia*, will bring this period to a close – I have yet to see which industry entities will be thanked in the movie, the film is not yet completed. But why hadn't LaBruce long ago followed his aforementioned peers Maddin and Cronenberg into Canadian film's upper echelons?

Certainly "content" comes to mind as a possible culprit. That very word, content, implies that films without content are preferred. However when reviewing contemporary culture emerging from Canada over the past few decades I'm reminded of the New Romantic Vancouver painter Attila Richard Lukacs who's work found a place within Canada's institutional collections. A former Governor General was rumoured to have hung one of his canvases depicting erotic queer punk 'content' behind her desk. Is there a discrepancy between film and painting? Why are certain queer filmic representations permitted and not others? Can these questions be asked of a culture, and if so, who provides the answers? Xavier Dolan, scion of a new generation of filmmakers, has been celebrated by the industry – but what of the great contrarian queer master?

The question arises again: "What shall we do with Bruce LaBruce?"

Am I having false memory syndrome or was there a time when directors who achieved high-water marks such as A-list Festival premieres, world distribution, museum retrospectives and the commanding of a passionate audience could argue for the same support offered to those who didn't meet these standards of cultural excellence but were supported by a structure geared towards conventional narrative?

The producers and distribution companies who have the capability of investing in large budgets in Canada have yet to show an interest in LaBruce's future contribution to Classic Canadian Cinema, but I don't think the situation is irreversible. Until now these forces have been an unconscious filtration system keeping this contentious queer content outside gates of officialdom, but this situation can't continue indefinitely. Let's review a few milestones in Canadian Cinema with an eye towards the queer milestones... Canada's first English language feature invited to screen at the Cannes Film Festival was 1963's 'Winter Kept Us Warm', a very edgy gay-content film for its day. For many years (or so I was taught at Ryerson) the box office record for highest grossing English Canadian film was 1977's 'Outrageous!', a movie about a drag queen moving to New York City. Is there a little bit of industrial amnesia going on here?

LaBruce will continue to create, regardless of the level of Canadian film industry support he receives. However, support means filmmakers can actually live off of their craft. It also means securing talented collaborators and in the best-case scenario it translates to larger audiences for the unique voices that emerge from our cultural landscape.

In a far away place and a different era, there was a wealthy pharmaceutical heiress' aesthete son who turned to filmmaking in a politically charged moment, espousing a radically sexualized worldview. His name was Luchino Visconti. One of his obsessions was naked Nazis, not skinheads, but the iconic queer image making has similarities to LaBruce. Visconti found support from the Italian film industry who responded to his talent even with his propensity to scandal. With full financial resources at his disposal he transcended outrage to create films like "Death In Venice" in 1971. LaBruce channels Dirk Bogarde's Aschenbach in his performances in his own work, as an industry we should try to channel Italy in its prime.

As we ponder Canadian Cinema let us ask of those who are deciding whom to get behind in our cultural industry: "Which voices are you championing and why?" LaBruce's achievements should make it possible for him to rise to that rarified group of respected filmmakers who can access the private/public film financing partnerships that our national cinema is designed to support.

It will be a sad statement upon the maturity of our film culture if LaBruce isn't allowed, after decades on the periphery, to enter the mainstream, at least for one shining moment. The results would be fantastic.