



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2015

The Poetics and Politics of Antiquity in the Long
Nineteenth-Century / Exploiting Exploitation Cinema

The Haunted World of El Superbeasto (Rob Zombie, 2009): An Animated Exploitation of Exploitation Cinema

Pierre Floquet



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7918>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.7918

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference

Pierre Floquet, "*The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* (Rob Zombie, 2009): An Animated Exploitation of Exploitation Cinema", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2015, Online since 13 July 2016, connection on 03 February 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7918> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.7918>

This text was automatically generated on 3 February 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The Haunted World of El Superbeasto (Rob Zombie, 2009): An Animated Exploitation of Exploitation Cinema

Pierre Floquet

Introduction

“As cultural elites interrogating a popular medium, film critics frequently bring inordinate amounts of cultural capital to bear on extremely impoverished texts, carrying with them all of the confusion and even contempt of film’s ambivalent relationship to prevailing hierarchies of taste.” (Sconce, 2007, 281)

An academic working in film studies, Jeffrey Sconce, paradoxically, does not seem to consider himself as part of what he calls “cultural elites.” Or maybe he is drawing a line between film critics and film scholars, the latter being granted the privilege to cast a self-acclaimed fair opinion on such topics as horror or exploitation films. Academic irony notwithstanding, the term “elite” seems to bear a judgment value, which mirrors the confusion and contempt Sconce precisely deplores among the film critics he targets. Such a “segregationist” and, to my mind, dated point of view is self-defeating. As it is, I intend to go beyond the obsolete low culture vs. high culture dichotomy it entails.

Granted, it would be unfair to Sconce to associate him with a discourse he himself opposes. And yet, his position remains ambiguous to some extent, if one follows Alan Cholodenko’s comments in a recent issue of *Film-Philosophy*:

I find telling the quotation marks around “trashing” in the title of Sconce’s seminal article, “‘Trashing’ the Academy”, ironising the trash and trashing thereby. [...] So despite its “radical” rhetoric of “subverting and transgressing”, the “paracinematic community”, as Sconce terms it, does not want to bring down the academy, it wants

in to it, turning its oppositional, “counter-cultural”, “counter-aesthetic” rhetoric into so much hype. [...] It] will even trash trash to get in, all the more ironically so given trash culture in key regards was *never not* aligned, indeed inextricably complicated, with legitimate film culture, to say nothing of trash having long ago trashed itself in *hypertrash*. (104)

Cholodenko, here, highlights the very fine line Sconce walks. Just as much, he incidentally describes the awkward position Rob Zombie puts himself in, when the latter mirrors and plays with both the typical components of exploitation films and the specificities of American society in his own features. Indeed, I do believe in the relevance and the acute need for recognition of alternative points of view related to the aesthetics and reception of films today, what David Roche, following Laurent Jullier, sees as the necessity “to establish a clear set of criteria and to offer rigorous internal and external analyses” (8) when analyzing a specific body of films.

As it is, Rob Zombie’s first animation film followed three movies that somehow explored the horror and slasher subgenres (Roche, *passim*): *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003), *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005) and *Halloween* (2007). None of these films suffered from huge budget restrictions, so in this respect at least, Zombie’s features cannot be labeled exploitation films. And yet they all refer to exploitation cinema, particularly *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*. This article seeks to explore the film’s connections to exploitation cinema, notably how Zombie “exploits” the form and its related subgenres. The main two venues explored here consider a reading of the film in terms of the carnivalesque, together with an insight into the film as adaptation. I will focus on the ambivalent use of the medium of animation to deliver a reflexive discourse on subgenres like the wrestling, superhero, zombie and biker movies, as well as nazisploitation and sexploitation. I will eventually question the relevance of resorting to this medium in a film that is itself a mutant filmic object, a doomed, if not haunted, “exploitanimation.”

Cartoonesque and Carnavalesque

The R-rated animated feature made its worldwide premiere on-demand and on pay-per-view on September 7, 2009. It was released in theaters on the 12 and made available on DVD and Blu-ray ten days later. Success at the box office was inversely proportional to the short time between release on screens and on DVD. Heretofore, Rob Zombie had been known for his gothic horror universe, as represented in heavy metal (his band White Zombie, named after the 1932 film), live action films and later on graphic novels. Indeed, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* was first a comic book with sequels.¹ The film tells the story of El Superbeasto, a womanizing wrestler, who calls on his sister Suzy X to help him save his love of the moment, Velvet von Black, who has been captured by Otto, Doctor Satan’s servant creature. At the same time, Suzy X expects her brother to help her snatch Hitler’s severed head from a Nazi zombie squad. After seeking help from his Mexican brothers, El Superbeasto falls in a trap during his quest for Velvet. Doctor Satan, who is about to wed Velvet, throws a big party that El Superbeasto and Suzy X attend. The party turns into satanic chaos and ends in a furious female wrestling fight.

In an exclusive Amazon interview (Zombie, 2009), the artist delivers a fairly detailed synopsis of his film, which he concludes with: “Yeah, I guess that makes sense in its own way. But within that, it is just an excuse for one giant filthy sex monster comedy

...” This cynical and yet sincere assessment illustrates the discourse and the reflexive point of view displayed in the film. Incidentally, Zombie is no pioneer in this matter, and one may consider early animated porn—*Eveready Harton in Buried Treasure* (1929)—for example, or later trash films of the 1970s, such as Bakshi’s *Fritz the Cat* (1972) (Gabilliet, 2015) and *Tarzoon la honte de la Jungle* (Picha and Boris Szulzinger, 1975), leaving Japanese porn anime aside. Significantly, each of these films is a one-off; what brings them together is their common “explicit” content. Animation, as such, is not particularly typical of exploitation-related forms. Alongside mainstream major studios, which consider animated feature films as an industry as much as an art form, there exists a huge variety of what I would name “animated manifestos,” that is, the expression of very personal and alternative understandings of what animation may be. Most animators/authors/artists usually choose a short film format, rather than a feature, mainly for time and budget reasons. Few films benefit from a proper distribution network and the majority are only be screened at festivals and retrospectives or found online. So animation and exploitation might, though for different reasons, impact similarly “limited” or “elective” audiences. But I would argue that this is, all in all, the major point both forms share. Although Rob Zombie will probably never be one of the independent artists that produce the richest, most creative, imaginative and possibly subversive forms of animation, his contribution to the craft, is to display a fresh attempt at merging animation and exploitation cinema. *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* is a sort of *exercice de style* of implicit and explicit quotes, of pastiche, of winks and hints. Websites like imdb.com provide a list of some, as it does for every entry in their list, yet it is by no means exhaustive.² Rob Zombie is known for his appreciation of Hollywood classics, and for his repetitive homage to them in his songs and features. From this perspective, one can argue, after Greg Taylor, that Zombie in his animated feature is “cultist,” while celebrating other genres (as well as his own previous films) and abiding by “the prosperous new cultism, typified by the ascent of Quentin Tarantino” (Taylor, in Sconce, 264).

The perspective of this article is not to start from an encyclopedic catalogue of every quotation, but rather to consider the string of characters, under the disguise of former filmic individuals, as one long parade in some grotesque animated carnival. Instead of existing for their sole referential value, as for example “guest” animated actors do in Tex Avery’s *Hollywood Steps Out* (1941), characters in *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*, whether sidekicks, zombie Nazi bikers, female wrestlers, *luchadores*, mad scientists or else monsters, participate in a frantic and surrealistic extravaganza, as well as in the creation of an original universe. On a diegetic level, a parallel can be drawn between the masquerade and wrestling, so that Zombie’s film can be considered as participating in what Bakhtin called the carnivalesque.

In his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin notes that clowns and fools mix with the folk—their audience as well as the living setting of their performance—so that

carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

The entire film resembles one great carnivalesque event in a world let loose: each character is in disguise and yet “acting” for “real” within the diegesis. Here, the word “acting” nurtures and informs the ambiguous filmic status of animated creatures who,

essentially, belong to the imagination of animators-manipulators. At the same time, they are meant to lure the spectator, and make them believe in their verisimilitude within the diegesis; ultimately, their diegetic behavior may require them to perform an act within the diegesis. *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* claims strong links to *lucha libre*, or wrestling, which evolves round a fictional contract, known as the *kayfabe*, i.e., setup personalities, gimmicks, and events, on stage and beyond, that wrestlers are meant to abide by and keep true to. So as wrestlers, El Superbeasto and Suzy X intertwine their personal and “professional” appearances and behaviors. In doing so, they also keep true to the world of wrestling, where fights often go on beyond the ring and encroach onto the reality and space of everyday life. The film becomes a sort for *lucha libre*, when the characters fight in various locations (streets, homes, bars, a graveyard, etc.), until the final confrontation between Suzy X and Velvet von Black actually takes place outdoors, within the symbolical ring of the howling crowd around them. And yet the analogy between the two is ambiguous, since in wrestling the punches and blows are fake ones, whereas the animated characters (or “char-actors”) perform what is supposed to be a “true” fight with “real” stakes within the diegetic world.

Not only do the characters act violently, but they also express themselves very crudely. Language is, in effect, a key component of the carnivalesque: as “carnival familiarity,” “[i]t is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions” (Bakhtin, 16). So Zombie should not be only perceived as trivially provocative, but also as true to an ancient tradition. Moreover, setting and characters bear references to a world viewers can easily acknowledge (somewhere sometime in the southern USA) and still not identify as “theirs”. Thus, viewers are allowed to witness their “carnival,” while maintaining a reassuring distance from the transgressive show. If so, Zombie is true to Bakhtin’s words, as he provides us—at least in appearance—with a show that “celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (10). However, we remain safe from the dangers an anarchic carnival might entail and are left free to resume our politically correct existences.

The carnivalesque ritual precisely meets the wrestling universe when Doctor Satan (for most of the film) and El Superbeasto (from beginning to end), among others, wear masks. Masks are an important feature in the wrestling gear, a prop that, on both sides of the Mexican-American border, has become “the epitome of *lucha libre* nowadays.”³ Doctor Satan wears a dark (bloody) devil mask, so he is directly connoted as a bad guy in the wrestling world. El Superbeasto hides his face behind a blue cover which, together with his name, echoes El Santo, a “dominant cultural force in Mexico after his debut match in 1942. His career lasted over forty years. [...] El Santo wrestled evil in his silver cape and silver mask by starring on over 50 films and appearing on numerous TV shows” (Glenday, 37). The cartoon wrestler is a showman, who appears in talkshows and produces and directs X-rated movies in which he also acts! Apparently, like SuperBarrio, a contemporary *luchadore* who, “ironically, never entered a professional wrestling ring” (Glenday, 38), he no longer fights. In *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*, El Superbeasto hides behind his sister and surrogate fighter: Suzy X. She is the one who defeats the Nazi zombies, Doctor Satan, monsters, and wins over her opponent female wrestler Velvet von Black. She mirrors the achievements of El Santo in his films, when beating up vampires, a werewolf, a mummy and Cyclops (*ibid.*). With all his cowardice and boastfulness, El Superbeasto plays the good guy in the film, the one who, according

to the *kayfabe*, does not break the rules of the fight and is respectful of both opponents and public. Thus, Zombie's portrayal of his title character simultaneously keeps very close both to the set of popular values related to *lucha libre* and to the mass culture entertainment that wrestling still offers in the US today.

Doctor Satan and El Superbeasto are not the only *lucha libre*-inspired characters. Velvet von Black, Suzy X's direct opponent, is yet another. However, her name indicates that Zombie's inspiration both goes beyond the realm of wrestling and takes some liberties with the graphic novel the film is based on. Sure enough, her name would fit nicely in the wrestling catalogue. But the name "Velvet" links her to the Velvet Underground of the late 1960s and its trail of drug abuses, while "Von" is an explicit hint at nazisplotation films; indeed, the character, a jealous sexually-active dominating cabaret dancer, recalls the dark heroines of such 1970s soft porn features as *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975). Actually, her cartoonish overexaggerated shapes, vocabulary and behavior add a carnivalesque, humoristic dimension to the character. Nevertheless, the mean, if not sadistic, component prevails in her personality and is reinforced by her name: "Black." As it is, the film goes one step further than the graphic novel. Indeed, she may be dark-haired and wear black underwear / fighting suit / minimal stage costume in both book and film, but, unlike in the graphic novel, she is colored, talks with a thick ethnic accent, and ultimately appears as a mix of the original drawn character and of undead tramp Vampy Varla Vickers (4). The book presents her as a cliché young girl dreaming of completing her "pottery painting class" (37), who is compelled to (so suggestively) dance in a cabaret (6, 7). It is as if the graphic character were not excessive enough for the movie and required being adapted to the medium and mood of animation. Thus, the character would exemplify the general process of adapting the graphic novel into film.

Adapting exploitation to animation

For Linda Hutcheon, adaptation "is repetition without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty. As *adaptation*, it involves both memory and change, persistence and variation" (173). Incidentally, the concept of ritual widely embraces Zombie's artistic scope, whether in his 2007 remake of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) or more extensively through his systematically quoting, referring to or celebrating previous books and films. I propose to assess whether the "delight of surprise and novelty" operates in *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*.

In terms of content, Zombie starts from a series of various stories and transposes their characters into a rather original plot. The 2009 re-edition presents the "haunted" world of his heroes in three parts and a series of annexes: "El Superbeasto" (thirteen chapters), "Suzy X" (seven chapters) and "Simon Deadmarsh" (six chapters). This approach is nothing new. As comic artist Cameron Stewart explains, "A lot of comic books are being made to appeal to Hollywood studios—they are being written and illustrated as a film pitch" (quoted in Hutcheon 88). This seems to be common practice these days, even beyond the realm of Hollywood economics. In Rob Zombie's words,

Well, first let's do it as a comic, because it's always easier to sell something. Here is a comic, which you can use as a storyboard, and check out. So it just started as one storied and an anthology comic that seemed to be the most popular, and we did eleven issues of that, and from that I pitched it and that's how it became a movie.

It seems then inaccurate to speak of adaptation, as the graphic novel was written with the film in mind. Arguably, in terms of marketing and aesthetics, the graphic novel is more like a probe aimed at a potential public than a genuine artistic achievement.

Second, dealing with representation, one can note a shift from fairly realistic drawings (with conspicuous variations, depending on drawing artists involved in the different chapters)⁴ to a more cartoon-like appearance of setting and characters. Hutcheon's statement that "[t]he familiar move from telling to showing [...] is usually seen as the most fraught transposition" is especially true for animation. Think of Spielberg's *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011), for instance. In the case of *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*, adaptation does not reduce but expands, as the film actually develops and, in its own peculiar way, enriches the original graphic novel. It has absorbed the vitality of the drawings to a point that makes it the ultimate performance of the characters. Zombie claims that: "Now that it's a film, I can't see it as a comic anymore—it has taken on a different life of its own" (Wigler, 2009). When it comes to the shift from "telling to showing," Zombie gives his own definite opinion, which, to some extent, may contradict Hutcheon's opinion that moving from book to film would be tricky: "I think [the story] works great both ways, [but] the animated version is actually more ridiculous than the comic version. Easier to make big boobs bounce in a film than in a comic!" His point is, tellingly, made when comparing Pat Boutin's full frontal drawings of Suzy X ("Suzy X", Chapter 1, 126) to the somehow more decent, yet just as suggestive, animated appearance of the same character during the wet T-shirt contest [13:00] or else to the close-up of her breasts when shooting down the zombies [26:00].

As a matter of fact, Zombie seems to have a fairly limited knowledge of animation, if not obviously as a consumer, at least as an artist. Like other famous directors before him (Spielberg again), he seems to have jumped into the animation fashion-wagon, considering the craft as an alternative "tool" to broaden his artistic production, one he could eventually delegate to other artists. Besides, Rob Zombie and the other two producers of *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* (Andy Gould and Tom Klein) use a very typical Hollywood marketing strategy: constructing the director as an *auteur* in order to tap into the branding potential.⁵ Beyond the question of authorship, the point here is, rather, to question the impact of such creative behavior upon the finished product. Zombie confesses:

I never really had any animation experience on this level. I mean I had done a sequence, a while back, for *Beavis and Butt-head Do America* (1996), there is one hallucination sequence that I worked on, but that was pretty much it. But since I had done [*The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*] as a comic, I could see it as a film, and I then started meeting some people. So it is all just a matter of finding the right artists and get[ting] them to try and do, and let them run wild with it . . .

Actually, the very short *Beavis and Butt-head* sequence in question [49:50-51:20] is of much higher quality than what *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* offers, no doubt because of the artists Zombie worked with. The themes and iconographic representations of hallucinations are, however, similar.

In the conclusion to his interview, Zombie makes a strange comment that suggests his doubts about the quality of animation in his film: "The movie turned out better than I could have ever hoped basically because of the money thing. I mean, you know, as with anything else, the animation can only be as good as the money you have to make it good obviously." Sure enough, he then compares his budget to the \$200-million Pixar features he cannot compete with. Still, his argument is no excuse for those who

consider his film to be both poorly written and animated. Indeed, there is good quality animation, which has little to do with the money put into it and more to do with artistic mastery, inspiration and dedication to the medium. Some might argue that *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* is seriously lacking in this department.

The quality issue may also stem from the aesthetic choices Zombie made:

We never really tuned it back, we always tried to tune it up, to make it more filthy, but we always wanted to make it funny . . . I wanted it to not seem gratuitous, in the sense that we wanted the animation style to be kind of innocent-looking, not realistic, so we thought that if we kind of do with a sort of like an old-school Sponge Bob / Scooby Doo approach, then we'd get away with the wilder stuff, and it won't seem gratuitous. And so well, it's kind of cute in a way even though it's kind of disgusting at the same time.

The ambiguities of redneck politics

The point is that the added value given by animation enables a (distanced) ambivalent message about the repressive status of our societies. Indeed, as animators recreate their own perceptions of reality or fantasy through shapes, textures and movements, animation *per se* offers an aestheticized interpretation of a given mood, behavior and/or context. In Chapter 6 of *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan and Beyond*, Robin Wood compares various horror films and their discourses from a socio-political point of view, suggesting that some are “Art,” others “Exploitation.” He uses

the terms Art and Exploitation here not evaluatively, but to indicate two sets of signifiers that define the audience-film relationship in general terms. [...] Both permit the spectator a form of insulation from the work and its implications—Art by defining seriousness in aesthetic terms implying class superiority [...], Exploitation by denying seriousness altogether. (110-11)

This dichotomy resonates when discussing the reception of animation, which in this case is meant to be both provocative and humoristic. On that ground, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* is “subversive” exploitation insofar as it questions the “bourgeois” state of mind, that is: the accepted set of conventions, taken for granted as a social norm. Cartoon-like aesthetics, because of the childish associations they conjure up, become an ironical narrative device to distance from the material, and, consequently, foster a critical discourse underneath the harmless iconographic surface. In effect, resorting to animation makes it possible to develop yet another distance that is established between the animated film itself and former exploitation horror films: the format provides the distance the topic would not necessarily suggest. So Zombie goes one step beyond the Mexican directors interpreting horror classics of the 1930s, studied by Colin Gunckel: “Rather than lampooning these films, *El Signo* reproduces many of their conventions (lighting, narrative, mise-en-scène) without irony” (*Sleaze Artists*, 124). *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* is merely another horror nazisploitation sexploitation melting pot, the use of animation adding to the irony. Through this alternative medium, Zombie exploits a filmic pro-text, that is the inspirational bedrock he develops his own work from. The gap that lies between sub-culture and the mainstream is repeated between exploitation film and his animated feature.

The kids of yesterday, now post-teenagers, bask in adult content displayed in a universe which recalls their neo-infantile cartoon culture; indeed, such TV channels as Cartoon Network have thrived on this generation (Maier, 2015; Ristola, 2015). Rob Zombie, while developing transgressive issues in an ambivalent mix, relies on

scandalous material in order to “exploit” specific niche audiences, who keep a nostalgic fondness for the entertainment they consumed as children.

While reactionary discourses are still amply prevalent today, part of the political scope of horror films, as well as trash films, is to denounce such a set of codes. Chuck Kleinhans takes “it as axiomatic, that sleaze, as understood by both makers and audiences, depends on an understanding of existing conventions and also on a sense these conventions being worn out” (Sconce, 98). Zombie uses these relations to codes of respectability in his live action features. He plays with these codes reflexively, in what recalls Sconce’s “random moment of poetic perversity” (9), making the film a deviant mix of provocative discourse and counter-reactionary expression wrapped in an alternative (poetic?) iconographic representation.

The film’s reception is, no doubt, equally ambivalent, as some viewers claim they go to such shows to laugh at them, assuming a distanced attitude toward the sex and horror, among other things. Still, like other sleaze films, what *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* denounces, and relishes in doing so, is a set of reactionary conventions at the origin of the unconsciously accepted (repressed) frustrations of the very same socially formatted individuals who make up its audience. Robin Wood posits that “the release of sexuality in the horror film is always presented as perverted, monstrous and excessive, both the perversion and the excess being the logical outcome of repression” (82). Laughter may be partly understandable as a struggle to liberate oneself from these frustrations; sick jokes and cartoon-like images convey such phenomenon. In *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*, vulgarity, considered as an aesthetic category rather than as a value judgment, enhances the director’s will to deliver a discourse that would patently be common and overtly expressed via *drawn* pictures.

Although he claims sexual freedom from mainstream morality, what Zombie ultimately, and disappointingly, depicts is enshrined within a traditional sexist, male chauvinist heterosexual format. As such, it is difficult to claim *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* is heralding sexual liberation; rather, it remains very close to the filmic discourse of high school comedies of the 1990s (see Chapter 16 of Wood’s *From Vietnam to Reagan*). Wood argues that in those films (and the same issue has been leveled at underground comics or graphic novels), “the idea of ‘sexual liberation’ has degenerated into the pursuit of sex for the sake of sex, the thrill of the chase and conquest becoming a major preoccupation” (xxvi). Though one need not adhere to Wood’s conservative comment on “sex for the sake of sex,” still, in this respect, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* is not in tune with contemporary films or TV series like *The Lair* (E1, 2007-2009) or *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014, especially season 3), which portray, for instance, gay vampires. The animation film seems to be stuck in playing with a somewhat old-style redneck set of conventions, leading one to wonder whether it is not at least partly indulging in a nostalgic celebration of those very same values. El Superbeasto’s coming-out at the end of the story would, no doubt, have been more truly provocative, and could have appeared not in tune with this red-neck mentality Zombie ambiguously addresses.

As it is, the film remains bound to the logic of reactionary stereotypes. The main two female characters, whether the whore (Velvet von Black) or the superhero (Suzy X), are scantily dressed, and their figures are more than suggestive in the tradition of Barbie-type sexy objects of male phantasm. The monstrous daughters of Tex Avery girls and pin-up girls, the sisters of sexploitation and wrestling films starlets, Velvet inflates her

breasts and bottom to arouse men and/or subdue them [18:00], farts and swears. Suzy X is a sexy caricature, as only a drawn creature could be; her provocative attitudes, her suggestive moves and gestures are paired with her robot and his perpetually erect penis. Is this parody or celebration on the part of Zombie? Probably both. Indeed, the overtly sexy and sexist representation of bimbos is not balanced by an equal picturing of the male characters who have very little sex appeal. Their figures echo their personalities: cruel Dr. Satan is skinny and small; the men in the barrio wear mustaches; Otto is so clumsy, sturdy and thick that he resembles an ape (yet eventually and ironically turns out to get the dame in the end); the Nazi Zombies are caricatural; Superbeasto is as fat as he is self-satisfied, vainglorious and dumb. “I recognize this dude. He’s the Little Tramp!” he says when he sees Hitler’s head in a bowl, obviously mistaken for Charlie Chaplin’s parts in *The Gold Rush* (1925) and in *The Great Dictator* (1940) [27:00].

Had the film been more radical, one could have expected more contemporary counter-stereotypes questioning the social roles of male and female in society. Discussing TV series, Eric Macé writes: “counter-stereotypes act as if stereotypes did not exist, as if discriminations no longer existed, setting up a ‘postracist’ world.”⁶ His remark can also apply to gender discrimination in animation. However, it is not really the case in *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto*. Granted, Suzy X is the real hero in the story, embodying contemporary trends that promote power beyond genders through postfeminist female characters: “Activity, domination, and power are no longer equated with the male, but with the ‘masculine’” (Roche, 117). Suzy X fights with her fists and big guns, and thus boasts more power than her masked—and improbable—brother. And yet not only are female super heroes nothing new in American comics, but Suzy X ultimately functions as a foil to the inadequacy of her brother. Suzy X’s enjoying sex at the end of the film, after turning her robot into a sex toy, could have heralded a liberated female sexuality, had not her robot been modified into a merry go-round. Her suggested climax is mingled with fun fair music, paradoxically keeping her within the realm of childhood fantasy. Moreover, animation angle shots indulge in back and full-frontal views of her naked body, whereas we are only shown a mechanical would-be penis: the gaze remains resolutely “male.” Though Zombie aims at being scandalous by transgressing social and “bourgeois” norms, he never goes past the line, as he does not mean to subvert society nor shake it down from within.

Conclusion

The word “Haunted” in the film’s title refers, of course, to its content and evokes the film’s neo-gothic aesthetics. One may also read this title literally, as an unconscious comment on the existence of the filmic object. A pure fantasy in terms of content and representation, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* lingers in stylistic limbo, suspended in a no man’s land of cinematographic production, both present and yet unseen by the general audience. The stylistic and thematic connections Zombie nurtures with his audience arguably make do for the debatable political subtext (what David Roche identifies as “exploiting form”) and for the relative neglect of original animation (which may side with Roche’s “impoverished form”). In that perspective *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* truly echoes the form of the exploitation film under the guise of the animated format.

Hence, one may perceive the film as a self-ironical and self-reflexive questioning of the conformism into which exploitation cinema has fallen since the heydays of the 1970s and become gentrified in the process. In doing so, the film plays a small part in the highly controversial political performance of counter-culture by showing what Hollywood films have repressed: the unseen of culture. In this process, Zombie highlights the *mise en abyme* of films within exploitation films, as much as films in animation films. His animated feature would not have been possible without the filmic bedrock he plays with, and somehow mirrors and celebrates. And yet, as a carnivalesque and distanced rendering of horror/zombie/wrestling movies, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* occupies an original position in exploitation cinema. Indeed, “[l]ike a true sadomasochist, the trashophile enjoys both points of identification—transported one moment to a magical world of skeletons, dinosaurs, vampires, and spaceships, and in the next, laughing at the cheap chicanery that long ago, both culturally and personally, held the power to captivate” (Sconce, 291). The medium, or perhaps the arguable use of it, apparently prevents the viewer from being transported into a world of magic. Animation in itself, together with the tone of the discourse, also attract both attention and jeers—or maybe even sick laughter.

At the same time, one may wonder whether the film’s subtext is fortuitous or intentional, Zombie’s own comments remaining highly ambiguous. Beyond the nostalgia for dated films and shows, or cartoonish entertainment, if perceived as an awkward and distorting mirror of existing exploitation films, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* may seem to be a sterile meta-discourse made in bad taste and gratuitously and vainly “playing” with conventions. But, if as Cholodenko puts it, “bad is everywhere except in the bad” (101), and if provocation is Zombie’s first motivation, turning progressive concepts into an animated manifesto might well reach far beyond entertainment and perhaps even affect the socio-cultural references of (the pretty much reactionary part of) mainstream audiences, provided the film reach such an audience in the first place!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BAKTHIN, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana Press University, 1984 [1968].
- BARTHES, Roland, “The World of Wrestling”, *Mythologies*, London, Vintage, 1993, 15-25.
- CHOLONENKO, Alan, ‘The ABC’s Of B, Or: To Be And Not To Be B’, *Film-Philosophy* 14.2, 2010, <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/viewFile/102/271>, checked October 2nd, 2014.
- COOK, Pam, “The Pleasures and Perils of Exploitation Films,” *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, London & New York, Routledge, 2005, 52-64.
- GABILLIET, Jean-Paul, “Fritz the Cat (1972) : de Crumb à Bakshi, trahison de l’auteur et traduction de l’esprit du temps.” *Bande dessinée et adaptation (littérature, cinéma, tv)*, dir. Benoît Mitaine, David Roche et Isabelle Schmitt-Pitiot, Clermont-Ferrand, UPBP, 2015, 229-243.

GLENDAY, Dan, "Professional wrestling as culturally embedded spectacles in five core countries: the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and Japan", *Le catch et...*, revue de recherche en civilisation américaine, 4 (2013), <http://rrca.revues.org/514>, checked October 2nd 2014.

HUTCHEON, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York, Routledge, 2013.

MACÉ, Eric, "Des 'minorités visibles' aux néostéréotypes", *Journal des Anthropologues, Hors-série*, 2007, <http://jda.revues.org/2967?lang=en>, checked October 7th, 2014.

MAIER, Lauren, *The Adult Appeal of "Steven Universe"*, *Animationstudies 2.0*, <http://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=1325>, checked December 3rd, 2015.

ROCHE, David, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

RISTOLA, Jacqueline, *Maturing Animation on Cartoon network*, *Animationstudies 2.0*, <http://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=1318>, checked December 3rd, 2015.

SCONCE, Jeffrey, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style", *Screen*, v. 36, n. 4 (Winter), 1995, 371-393.

SCONCE, Jeffrey, ed., *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, Durham, NC and London, Duke UP, 2007.

WIGLER, Josh, "Discovering 'The Haunted World of El Superbeasto' With Rob Zombie," Thu, October 29th, 2009, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=23501>, checked December 3rd, 2015.

ZOMBIE, Rob, (interview), http://www.amazon.com/gp/mpd/permalink/m2ZB3XF62I0RS1/ref=ent_fb_link. 2009, checked October 1st, 2014.

NOTES

1. Previously published as magazines in the late 1990s as *Spook Show International* by MVCreations, they were re-edited and published by Image Comics, Berkeley, CA, in 2009.
2. See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0419724/movieconnections?ref_=tttrv_sa_5. Accessed on October 1, 2014.
3. Notes taken from Christophe CHAMBOST, Carolina ABELLO, "El Santo's Legacy : Looking for the revival of Lucha Libre in Colombian Soap Operas", *Le catch et...*, CLIMAS international conference, Bordeaux Montaigne University, 2013.
4. For example, one can compare the rather brisk and sketchy drawings of Kieran Dwyer ("El Superbeasto", Chapters 1 to 6), to the smoother, rounder, more realistic images of Jed Su (Chapters 7 to 11), until the same artist adopts a more manga-related style in the twelfth chapter of Part One.
5. This recalls what Roche says about *Halloween* (2007): "The producers clearly sought out Rob Zombie to write and direct in order to bank on the latter's status as rock star and up-and-coming horror auteur" (11).
6. Original text: "Le contre-stéréotype fait comme si les stéréotypes n'existaient pas, comme si les discriminations n'existaient plus, mettant en scène un monde « postraciste »" (Macé, 16).

ABSTRACTS

It could be argued that, like any exploitation movie, Rob Zombie's 2009 animation film, while dealing with transgressive issues, relies on scandalous material in order to "exploit" specific niche audiences. Yet the question remains as to whether the movie also means to play a controversial political role in showing what Hollywood films (both direct and animated) have repressed—the unseen of culture—or whether it is merely a distanced animated one-off in the directing career of a multi-skilled artist. This animation film is not just an adaptation of the eponymous graphic novel, but, rather, an exploitation of the tricks and clichés of exploitation cinema in the form of animated cinema. Beyond wrestling, it slashes through several sub-genres, including Nazisploitation, bikerfilms, sexploitation and more, making it a carnivalesque ride. Because the medium of animation highlights and intensifies any original code of representation, the film ultimately questions the *mise en abyme* of cinema within exploitation films, as much as films within animation films. By crossing and blurring the boundaries between these various cinematic forms, Rob Zombie incidentally raises the issue of defining animation within cinema at large, all the while promoting a somewhat ambiguous, reactionary discourse in spite of his own politics.

Le film de Rob Zombie, sorti en 2009 dans la lignée des films d'exploitation, non seulement se veut transgressif, mais aussi s'appuie sur des sujets scabreux, sinon provocants, afin de viser des publics niches. Son intention est-elle d'exprimer un point de vue politique qui susciterait la controverse en mettant en images la face cachée d'une culture qu'Hollywood étale dans ses films, d'animation ou directs ? Ou bien demeure-t-il une simple expérience distanciée et animée, sans suite dans la carrière de réalisateur d'un artiste multi-formes ? Plutôt que de considérer le film comme une simple adaptation du roman graphique éponyme, il s'agit d'appréhender comment Zombie exploite les clés et clichés du cinéma d'exploitation dans une esthétique d'animation. Autour et au-delà du catch, il s'en prend aux sous-genres, des films de motards à ceux sur les Nazis, en passant par le cinéma érotique et autres ; il entraîne ainsi son récit dans une ronde carnivalesque dessinée. L'essence de l'animation, en tant que médium, lui permet de mettre en avant et d'exagérer tout code de représentation. Ce faisant, Zombie joue sur la mise en abyme de films dans le cinéma d'exploitation, tout autant que celle de films dans le cinéma d'animation. Tout en franchissant et en estompant les barrières entre ces formes de cinéma, Zombie interroge accessoirement la place de l'animation dans l'univers cinématographique. On peut aussi avancer qu'il promeut de façon ambiguë un discours qui demeurerait, bien malgré lui, réactionnaire.

INDEX

Mots-clés: cinéma d'exploitation, film d'animation, adaptation, sous-genre, carnivalesque, esthétique, réactionnaire

Keywords: exploitation cinema, animation film, adaptation, subgenre, carnivalesque, aesthetics, reactionary

AUTHOR

PIERRE FLOQUET

Bordeaux INP