Interview with Quentin Dupieux

Can you tell us how you got started on this film ?

Between *Steak* and *Rubber*, I worked for almost a year on a script for a film called *Reality*. It's a difficult project to put together so my producer and I decided we could do a "quickie" in between, on a low budget. *Reality*'s main character is a film director who is trying to make a SF movie about an invasion of transparent cubes. I asked myself, why not make that film ourselves? After a few trials with computer-generated images, I realized that filming the void and then adding elements in postproduction was not really my thing. I like to shoot something concrete, silliness you can touch. I often begin with a vision, some purely visual manifestation. From the start, I had in mind the possibility to create tension with a tire rolling slowly away and coming forward again.

Slowness does add to the feeling of angst, a little like Japanese ghost movies…

You could envision a version of *Rubber* with the tire going full speed. Then instead of vibrating and causing things to blow up it could just run into them. But the choice in directing, with strong photography and this slowness, were ways to avoid getting into some Z movie genre that I'm not interested in at all.

How did you work?

The very first step was a discussion about production. I'm fairly impatient and I don't like to put too much thought into a project before getting into action. I'm very pleased with *Steak* but the shooting per se was much too slow and, for me, very boring. The script for *Rubber* was written a year ago, in the span of a month. Everything went very fast. It's a lot like the way I do music: when I do a piece I think is good, it takes me a an hour max. The film was shot in 14 days, so all we did was shoot, with a minimal crew. Being behind that digital camera, I felt a lot like I did when I was shooting film as a teenager.

Is that why you chose to shoot with a digital camera, to feel more

directly connected with to the fabrication?

The 35mm movie camera is a dead thing. As soon as you want to change a lens, you have to call someone. It was sort of magic: while I was preparing the film, a friend told me about this digital camera with a very high quality video feature. It's not an expensive camera so I bought it. I did some trials in Corsica, with a tire rolling into the sunset, and the result was quite striking.

Do you think your experience with music was useful ?

No doubt about it. I've been taking advantage of new technologies in music for 15 years. I used to work with analog equipment, which is the equivalent of 35mm in movies: very delicate machinery with very stringent rules. The emergence of digital technologies in music gave musicians much greater freedom and autonomy. That's the same experience I had on *Rubber*.

How did you do the effects ? Are they manual or digital?

All the tire effects are entirely manual. The tire is remote-controlled, but in some shots it was just handled manually from the edge of the frame. For the animals, we blew up stuffed toys with balloons, like in the old days. We did the same for people but it was not as convincing so we had to touch them up digitally in postproduction, but we still kept the basic physical manipulation. I watched a lot of films with exploding heads before shooting, from *Meliès* to *Cronenberg*. I realized that when the effects are too well done, as in *Planet Terror* for instance, where the computer generated effects are pretty stunning, it's so perfect I don't believe it anymore. I find that I like the old shot by shot effect much more satisfying. But the real problem was to make the tire come alive in the eye of the viewer, which had to happen within the first 15 minutes.

How did you accomplish that ?

The challenge was to give life to the deadest object you can think of. I love *Wall-E*, but it's a robot, with an anthropomorphic presence, with eyes and a mouth. I wanted something more primitive. My tire is a remote cousin of Flat Eric, in a sense. Same puppets, same codes, same autistic expression, but even more difficult in that our creature has no face, or arms. I didn't want a

computer-generated tire. It would have been the opposite of my intent. I wanted to stay physical, not end up with something like a Michelin ad. By focusing on the studs for instance, with the rest of the image blurred, we can really feel the concreteness of the tire, which is totally irrelevant with computer-generated images.

Making us witness the birth of the tire as he discovers his power is a clever narrative approach. It helps establish the viewer's belief.

Yes, establishing the scene was crucial. I understood right away that before telling the story proper, we had to show he was alive, make the viewer accept the fact. The danger was to end up with people wondering constantly about what trick we had used to make him move. We had to create a specific language based on choices of framing, shooting script, directing. Determining a language means determining a logical pattern for the shooting script so the spectator doesn't know where he's going. We are used to seeing amazing effects in films. Just a hand moving the tire from the edge of the frame wouldn't have worked. People are not dumb, they see the trick right away. So we had to show the tire several times moving on its own at the center of the frame, waving slightly left, slightly right, stopping and starting again. That's how we make its autonomy credible.

There is a scene with a mirror that's quite beautiful too and gives him an identity

It was primordial that we give the tire a personality, emotions, memories. The scene with the mirror was originally just a moment when he discovered his physical appearance. When I came to that scene at the editing stage, there was something obvious about this recollecting of his past, this winding back the course of his life.

All the more since it comes just after the drowning, one ambiguous scene among others.

I like that ambiguity a lot. I don't know if it's noticeable, but the only character who sees the tire alive in the film is the kid. I love to suggestion that what we say may not exist.

Precisely, so what was appealing to you in this film-within-film structure?

I wanted to create a kind of whirlwind. I like the aberrant notion of an aggressive tire, moving about and killing people but, intellectually, there was something lacking. So I tried so set up an absurd situation where what is developing before our eyes is not really happening. I love that kind of confrontation, with the "non real" casting doubt on reality. The presence of spectators within the film goes in that direction. Since the idea for the film originally sprung from a production challenge and from my desire to crack accepted film methods, the film is also a metaphor for that. Or I would just have made another genre movie.

But with the arrival of the tire, there is something reminiscent of genre movies, like *The Blob*: a purely gratuitous, impulsive element, with no psychological motivation.

That's right. I used to watch that kind of film a lot, but I do less and less. I believe a true B movie must have a naïve, genuine outlook. B movies today are often cynical, they just pretend. If I made a B movie, I'd be afraid to fall into that same trap. It's not so much the film-within-the-film device that attracted me than the notion that films are usually conceived for a passive viewer. Everything is clearly written and explained. That's why we find David Lynch films so odd, when in truth Lynch just has a spirit of his own and makes films as he pleases. Personally, I like it when I don't understand. So I find the idea that the spectators in the film end up watching something they can only see at the cost of enormous efforts quite amusing. Putting the spectators at the core of the film is what prompted me to write the scene where the cop explains to the others that what they think they are experiencing actually does not exist.

The actors are not well known yet some of them are amazing. I'm thinking about the actor on the wheelchair, or Stephen Spinella, who plays the cop.

They've done a remarkable job, in spite of the absurdity of the script and the

emptiness around the film. That's what's great in the States: we may want to shoot big American cars or the lights of L.A. or fantastic landscapes, but they mostly have these amazing actors. You might think any barman or cab driver there would make a great actor, when in fact they're just willing to work hard. Stephen Spinella, who says the monologue at the beginning of the film, had tried different options and watched himself in front of a mirror.

What's beautiful is that there is no hint of tongue-in-cheek either in the text or in the delivery. Everyone is very serious, very literal.

In general, everyone understood that opening monologue as ironic. I noticed it with the interpretation of the actors during the casting. Stephen Spinella found this thing that's hard to express once you get away from the written word, a cold, clinical sort of humor. He found that tone that keeps him in check so we never think it's a joke. I don't much like actors who think they're funny.

With the exploding heads, we don't know whether we're supposed to laugh or be horrified. You never give us the keys to the film.

I'm not interested in using comedy or horror film codes and creating some magma out of them. When I make a film, I try to forget the movies I've seen, even if some inevitably transpire at times. You can't avoid thinking about Cronenberg's *Scanners* when you're filming exploding heads. That was one of the shocks from my teen years. When I see it again today, I still really like the scenes where the men stare at each other face to face and tense up until one of them explodes. They're almost porn scenes. Ideally, I don't want to depend on other films. It may sound pretentious but it's actually a pretty humble posture. I start from scratch, I see myself as a prehistoric man inventing things, even if I obviously can't deny my references. When I create a shot or a scene, I feel like I'm inventing it.

Do you think in terms of emotions or not at all?

In *Rubber*, the only emotional concern is what will let us to identify with the tire. That's why he looks at himself in the mirror. I didn't ponder the matter of emotions from the humans. When I see a character get annoyed on screen, I find it embarrassing.

How about the direction of the actors? Do you suggest intentions?

Some intentions are rather abstract. They go along with the film's purpose rather than with some human code. These characters exist for the duration of the shot. There is no notion at all that that existed before or will continue to exist outside the frame. That's what generates this slightly odd feeling. A good conductor can embark people into playing music even if it's dissonant. You make them un-tune their violins and get out of what they're used to and in the end everybody is happy to play a dissonant tune.

Why did you add a community to the original tire at the end of the film?

A few days before the end of the shoot, I didn't have an ending, just the shootout and the reincarnation, but that was not enough. Since I'm not telling about the accomplishment of a character in the context of a given action, it looks like a bit of a puzzle. And then sometimes there's no need to look for the logic of things. The best Bunuel movie ends with a shot of an ostrich. It's wonderful. The idea is that by turning into a tricycle he's become even more powerful. It's as if we were announcing *Rubber 2*. He federates an army. I like that.

Was Bunuel a strong influence?

Very. I've watched his films a lot. But I also love some Blake Edwards movies like *Ten* or *SOB*. Or early Bertrand Blier movies, like *Cold Cuts* for instance. In general, I have a particular fondness for artists who function from some level of the unconscious.

Propos recueillis par Jean-Sébastien Chauvin