**Vision, Mystery, and Release in the Reverse Field:**

**Bruno Dumont’s *L’il Quinquin***

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Dumont the brutal purveyor of extreme images and sensations, Dumont the stern ascetic and secular mystic, Dumont the lofty philosopher and arrogant *auteur*: the clichés and labels roll out effortlessly as critics struggle to make sense of Bruno Dumont’s unique body of work. Since his debut feature nearly two decades ago, *The Life of Jesus* (*La Vie de Jésus*, 1997), his frank and graphic depictions of sex, human violence, and local horror have raised uncomfortable ethical issues for those unable to decide whether his uncompromising cinema, founded on the core idea that evil is a fundamental fact of daily life, should be classified as spiritual rapture or aesthetic ridicule.

 Such opinions of Dumont’s ascetic practice may appear rather peremptory and in need of substantial revision, however, in light of his latest film, *L’il Quinquin* (*P’tit Quinquin*, 2014), an extraordinary 200-minute opus set (like most of his films) in the economically depressed landscape of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of northern France (*le Nord profond*) and featuring a typical cast of nonprofessional actors. Its epic length is due to its origin as a four-part mini-series made for the French television channel Arte. In it, Dumont once again offers another pitiless examination of the nature of evil in an incestuous village where cruelty, suffering, hatred, entrenched racism, xenophobia, and horror naturally breed.[[1]](#endnote-1) This is a cinema resolutely grounded in the mud and dirt of the visible world, and once again Dumont, superbly aided by the widescreen compositions of cinematographer Guillaume Deffontaines, coolly depicts it in all its raw and often rank materiality. *L’il Quinquin* takes the viewer into familiar Dumont territory, during the dog days of summer, and is structured around the same kind of bungled crime investigation as his most celebrated film, *Humanity* (*L’humanité*, 1999). The visual style is typically stark and elliptical, with slow, meditative long takes shot in natural light. However, the film unfolds in a completely different register from all his previous work, namely comedy.

In one fell swoop Dumont would seem to be exploding his own auteurist status and puncturing his occasionally pompous posturings toward the metaphysical and divine, so much so that some critics have hailed *L’il Quinquin* as an example of the high priest of miserabilism letting loose his inner clown in a popular format. In France, where it exists solely as a mini-series (the international film version, which premiered during the Directors’ Fortnight at Cannes in 2014, was denied a license for domestic theatrical release), the workhas been remarkably well-received across the critical spectrum. It even topped *Cahiers du cinéma*’s annual top ten for 2014, the first time for a television series.[[2]](#endnote-2) This achievement is all the more impressive in a country where it is still relatively rare to find *auteurs* venturing into television, with Olivier Assayas a notable recent exception (\**Carlos*, 2010).

While working around a basic plot-line of betrayal, *L’il Quinquin* references the codes and clichés both of comedy and television crime series by using the serial format to convey the work of a serial killer, and fully exploiting the possibilities for expanding characterization and reduplicating key actions and motifs. The particular pacing and rhythm created by the original mini-series, with its obligatory breaks and ellipses and carefully crafted cliffhangers at the end of each episode, are maintained in the film version, which leaves nothing out and retains the four-part structure via intertitles. While Dumont refrains from outright gore, he supplies the requisite blood and dead bodies of the crime series format and ensures that all the prime suspects are eventually murdered. Such accumulation and excess push the form of the whodunit into comic overload.

Comedy has always been present in Dumont’s work, of course, but only in small doses and only implicitly. If in *Humanity* the absurdity and burlesque effects were often just plain odd, in *L’il Quinquin* the laughter is frontal and explicit, at times even bellyful and slapstick. It ranges from brutal black humor and caricature to social parody and satire of the police, the Church, science, and the media (long-standing themes in Dumont), and from physical gags and carnivalesque farce to vaudeville grotesquerie: the throwing of crockery by grandparents across a table, full-frames of a cow’s anus, hanging carcasses \*oozing blood. Moreover, *L’il Quinquin* swings constantly between the genres of light comedy, murder mystery, social drama, and the study of rural life. Its formal ambiguity and incongruity is embodied in the film’s central character, the indecipherable figure of disillusioned and crotchety detective captain Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost). Part-Columbo, part-Clouseau, part-Tati with his extreme physical tics and jerky mannerisms, he gives his very body to the investigation. Yet doubts remain: is he an incompetent or a genius, a kind of divine *idiot savant*?

Captain Van der Weyden and his mild-mannered lieutenant Carpentier (**Philippe Jore)** initially discover a dismembered woman (minus head) in the stomach of a dead cow that is itself **stashed** in a decaying WWII bunker, and they continue to **stumble upon yet more dead cows stuffed with human remains, while in turn finding themselves tracked by a farmer’s son, the eponymous L’il** Quinquin (Alane Delhaye), and his mischievous band of buddies from the local village. Dumont gleefully shakes to its core the tired format of French film comedy with its predictable plot-lines, bloated big stars, and familiar clichés. Indeed, the uneasy, hybrid composition of *L’il Quinquin* stands out dramatically from the field of feel-good, mainstream French comedies of 2014 that swelled audiences there (films like Éric Lartigau’s *La Famille Bélier* and Christian Clavier’s *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon Dieu* (Serial [Bad] Weddings)).

It is certainly the case that comedy, however troubling, prevents Dumont from veering too far to his naturally serious and often zealously philosophical side. But what does it mean exactly to say that Dumont “lightens up” and that *L’il Quinquin*, as Michael Sicinski suggests, represents one of his most thematically open efforts?[[3]](#endnote-3) More is at stake here than Dumont’s claim to the “tragi-comic,” the process whereby the somber, if not treated as such, becomes comic; *L’il Quinquin* also presents a fascinating case study of a filmmaker attempting a major reinvention of his signature style and method. Indeed, it retroactively throws into question the very foundations of Dumont’s cinematic practice by opening up his austere formal and conceptual approach to framing and montage in new and profound ways that allow for a wholly new kind of viewing experience and “release.”

**Facing Off: Mind Games in the Reverse Field**

The formal template of Dumont’s cinema was immediately established in *The Life of Jesus* when an opening image of a backward-tracking shot captures the protagonist Freddy (David Douche) riding his moped fast on a country lane. It is succeeded by a forward-tracking shot of the same action, a reverse-field shot that translates as a subjective shot from his point of view. Later, when not copulating at home or in the natural landscape (perfunctory scenes of penetration filmed in close-up with grim, almost clinical exactitude), Freddy and his girlfriend Marie (Marjorie Cottreel) simply look away and stare blankly out of frame, as if into the void. Yet their apparent lack of any real rapport with physical space is countered by a number of point-of-view shots. During an episode in an automatic chair-lift moving high over the Flemish landscape, the panoramic vista is conveyed as a subjective shot from Freddy and Marie’s joint perspective. In a rare moment of relative contentment, Marie even remarks explicitly how “pretty” it is. This statement represents the projection of the characters’ own feelings onto nature: the external landscape is reflecting and rendering visible an internal psychological landscape.

In fact, natural space is never left alone as space in Dumont’s portentous world but immediately aligned by human vision. A potential shot of, or toward, the exterior world may indicate a dispersal of the self’s structural integrity, yet it will eventually be revealed as a reverse-field subjective shot and rationalized as the exterior projection of a character’s private thoughts and mood. The same applies in reverse, since an off-screen gaze is often followed by a subjective point-of-view shot of the landscape.

At one unexpected moment in *The Life of Jesus* the camera suddenly tilts down from a shot of the trees against the sky and, in a continuous *plan-séquence*, proceeds to track backward slowly through the window of a hospital room, exposing Freddy covered with electronic nodes, part of his treatment for epilepsy. The landscape here is literally being sucked into the frame of human drama. In the process the natural landscape risks becoming purely a matter of abstract shapes and immaterial forms, for it resonates *only* because of the self and, in turn, it is the self that makes the mute landscape “speak.” The clear implication is not simply that representational landscapes in Dumont can reveal interior states that would otherwise remain invisible, but also that landscapes themselves are *always* interior states. Indeed, Dumont has little to say about the landscape as such because it is always on its way to being “completed” by his characters and “framed,” in all senses of the word. As he put it recently in one of the many grand declarations that form a dense paratext to his cinema: “no landscape in film is ‘real’! It’s all metaphor.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

 The permanent subject of Dumont’s cinema is therefore the gaze on the object, for it is always gesturing through the human figure to an *ailleurs* off-frame that leads, paradoxically, to a private, interior, and “fictional” space. The more externality and exteriority there is, the more possibility there exists for interiorization. This formal double-bind—subjectivizing the immanent world in order to objectivize humans and so hammer home the carnality of human life—seems to enchain not only the characters observing the landscape but also the landscape itself, which is always subordinated to the human gaze and made to express human interiority. It leads one to ask whether his cinema can ever produce a positive “looking with” the world.

 Precisely because the character’s gaze communes so directly with that of the camera, Dumont’s character-driven cinema also foregrounds the viewer’s own status and function. In the final scene of *The Life of Jesus*, Freddy, after murdering his rival in love, Kader, immerses himself in the warm bosom of nature and tears suddenly begin to roll down his cheeks. The viewer is drawn directly into his experience of self-release through subjective point-of-view. This intersubjective process raises issues not merely of interpretation (tears as the sign of a possible conscience and means to redemption), but also of spectatorial release. Dumont asserts: “It’s no longer a landscape because it [has been] transcended. And in being transcended it enters into the mind of the viewer to become something else.”[[5]](#endnote-5) But what exactly? Dumont conceives of his entire practice in terms of sensation and sensibility over sense, and his films demand a gut response to a complex range of emotions and sensations, from empathy and revulsion to awe and confusion. His concerted wish is to make the viewer *feel* something. Indeed, Dumont believes that receiving inoculations of unfiltered sensation and being exposed cathartically to maximal violence and danger, even barbarity, is the only remedy for being a simple consumer of films in a spiritually moribund society. Such a purportedly idealistic concern for the fate of the spectator bespeaks an extreme—and for the more skeptical critic, desperate—authorial wish on Dumont’s part for total proximity with his audience. Indeed, in Dumont’s world, “Cinema + audience = One.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

**Variations on a Hallowed Theme**

Virtually all of Dumont’s subsequent films correspond to the rigorous formal pattern established by *The Life of Jesus*. Flush with reverse-field and POV shots, they intercut visual fields to colonize natural space and anchor spectatorial projection. In film after film, one waits with bated breath to see how long, if at all, the external world can resist being formally configured before the image is fatally cut and the trap snaps back tight on the visual field. A brief review of these earlier works is necessary to grasp the full scale and significance of Dumont’s breakthrough in method and approach in *L’il Quinquin*.

 In *Humanity*, almost every scene becomes a site of subjective gazing, whether through traumatized viewing or noncommittal contemplation. With his bug-eyed demeanor, the male protagonist Pharaon (Emmanuel Schotté) simply gawks for a minute and a half at Domino (Séverine Caneele) and Joseph (Philippe Tullier) enjoying rough sex in a scene bordering on consensual rape and during which the viewer is made directly complicit with Pharaon’s voyeurism.

 The process is contagious, for the landscape is continually mined by the human gaze and seems only ever to be performing an expressive or figurative role. It culminates in the astonishing scene of Pharaon’s physical levitation in his community garden where he remains suspended in mid-air for a few protracted seconds, leaning to one side with his eyes closed as if weighed down by his feelings of impotence and responsibility for the guilt of those around him. In this digitally enhanced sequence composed of a series of objective and subjective POV shots delivered through reverse-field maneuvers, the viewer is projected first forward, then upward, before being locked into a precise formal hold.

 An equivalent fate befalls the landscape, for both the garden in the foreground and the countryside in the background are cast in the fixed supporting role of stage-setter and sanctuary. Pharaon is finding in nature an already existing representation of his own mental state. Hence, rather than offer a morality of the reverse shot and the potential for a progressive symbiosis between nature and humankind, the defining structure of Dumont’s cinema corresponds more to the specularity of narcissism, with nature reduced to serving merely as a mirror to reflect one man’s internal malaise.

*Hadewijch* (2009) is shot unusually in Aspect Ratio and represents a further refinement of Dumont’s technique. Its extravagant narrative of a young woman Céline vel Hadewijch (Julie Sokolowski) who, expelled as a novice from a convent on account of her over-ecstatic love for God, ends up helping to commit an act of Muslim fundamentalist terrorism, constitutes only the pretext for a far more unexpected intersecting of human trajectories. A secondary story running silently in parallel allows Dumont to secure the transformation and resurrection of another character, David (the late David Dewaele), an ex-convict employed as an odd-job man at the convent.

In a final enthralling sequence that unfolds like a dream, Hadewijch runs into a classically composed frame of woodland that is immediately reversed into a still-frame view of her running down a hill toward the river. As Caplet’s *Le Miroir de Jésus* mounts in volume on the soundtrack, she stands on the edge of the river looking in, a virtual emulation of Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967). Entering the water, she places herself entirely at God’s will. Yet Dumont’s style of mystico-naturalism proves very different from that of Bresson. Suddenly an arm appears in close-up, followed by a long-shot of David hoisting Hadewijch out of the water into his arms. He stares blankly out over her shoulder and, in the last seconds, looks off-frame to the right and up toward the sky. This final sequence is a classic Dumont moment of human bonding through a reverse-field construction that locks two faces together by uniting two separate visual fields. Such a miraculous embrace, a benevolent deed sealed in montage, is not only a folding together of different fields (frontal and reverse), but also the moment when the “horizontality” of space and “verticality” of time are finally fused together. This point of spatio-temporal resolution is where all Dumont’s cinema is ultimately heading, yet is only achieved during rare and fleeting instances of human exaltation such as this sublime cinematic equation: Time over Space equals Being.

Dumont’s *Hors Satan* (literally “Outside Satan,” 2011) follows the strange relationship between a troubled adolescent girl Elle (Alexandra Lemâtre) and an anonymous drifter Lui (Dewaele) who acts as her guardian angel and occasional exterminating angel. Set on the desolate Côte d’Opale and directly referencing the crepuscular and early-morning light of French realist painting, the film unfolds as a ritualized repetition of actions according to a strict choreography of the gaze. Dumont may play with the order of subjective and objective point-of-view shots in reverse-field constructions, yet on no occasion is the integrity of subjective motivation of shot seriously threatened. Moreover, the obsessive shallow focus on the human figure, part of Dumont’s extremely stylized play with foreground and background, reduces natural space within the frame to merely an object of human manipulation and control. Lui’s sudden dare to Elle—a spectacular Dumont wager to walk along a thin stone bridge dividing a large artificial pool of water so that a raging wildfire might cease—produces immediate results. She completes the task, the fire stops. A human miracle.

In *Camille Claudel 1915* (2013), the story of one year in the sculptor Camille Claudel’s long stay at the Montdevergues mental asylum, Dumont decamps to Provence and enters the wholly new (for him) generic territory of film biography and star vehicle, without deviating from his formal strategies of subjective point-of-view and reverse field. It begins with Juliette Binoche shot from behind in the center of the frame, a position from which she rarely strays, and concludes with her again center-frame, staring out directly toward the viewer in a tremulous long take. Only Binoche (Dumont’s current partner) enjoys the power of subjective point of view; almost every shot of her looking is followed by another that supplies, as if mechanically, the object of her magnetic gaze. The camera moves ever closer to her subtly expressive face to capture the faintest flickers of subdued emotion. It is precisely due to such extreme focalization that the film can’t really go anywhere aesthetically and, like Camille herself, appears blocked, retreating into well-worn truisms about female madness.

The only film by Dumont that does not correspond to this overdetermined rhetorical pattern is also his most controversial, *Twentynine Palms* (2003), which takes place in the desert surrounding Joshua Tree National Park in California. It has been dismissed by many as simply an “aberration” on account of its descent into gore, specifically a scene of random, brutal, male rape, immediately followed by the victim’s frenzied knife attack *Psycho*-style on his girlfriend who witnessed his humiliation. Yet *Twentynine Palms* also marks Dumont’s first serious attempt to engage with the natural environment on its own terms, for the film pursues a seemingly documentary mode that lies outside Dumont’s standard visual grid and promotes a nonhierarchical and nonappropriative gaze. In a kind of continuous, “subjectless” gaze, the visible world drifts by freely in and out of the frame of a moving car. No longer simply a setting or refuge, the landscape becomes an autonomous, free-floating space for open appreciation in excess of its narrative function.

The stunning final shot of *Twentynine Palms*, however—a high-angle, two-minute long take of the desert capturing David’s apparently dead, naked body lying prone in the foreground, his bottom in full view and dwarfed by his Hummer—reveals that it, too, has succumbed to the immensity of the landscape engulfing its male protagonist, as if the external world had now taken its revenge. This is not quite tantamount to saying that open space *per se* is evil in Dumont, but within his warped, life-or-death poetics of vision, any unqualified and anonymous space provides the perfect grounds for human catastrophe.

***L’il Quinquin*: Space Released and Redeemed**

How, then, can one create a more lasting and complete engagement with the lived world that avoids the multiple spatial and formal double-binds of Dumont’s work to date? This is the central challenge of *L’il Quinquin*, a film no less experimental than *Twentynine Palms* but which engineers a subtle and decisive shift in Dumont’s normal practice of reverse field and subjective point-of-view.

 *L’il Quinquin*’s first image is a wide-angle view of the landscape with a cluster of farms nestling in the middle. The next shot is of a young boy (Quinquin) pictured from behind as he looks out into the distance toward a road where Ève (Lucy Caron), a young girl, is practicing a trumpet while her older sister Aurélie (Lisa Hartmann) sings aloud. The fixed gaze of the boy is clearly not tied to the first shot: instead of immediately motivating the first shot by interiorizing it, in his customary fashion, Dumont allows it to function as a conventional establishing shot. The third shot, however, offers his characteristic reverse field of the gaze: a medium shot of the same boy looking out toward the camera with a fixed stare that accentuates his misshapen mouth disfigured by a scar. Shot four is a close-up of the young girl behind the gate, possibly from his point of view. Shot five presents the boy in close-up, matched in shot six by a close-up of the girl. This linking of reverse fields through shot/countershot is repeated with a further close-up of the boy grimacing, followed by a close-up of the girl smiling through the iron bars of the gate. Again, the viewer is presented with the open possibility that these may all be subjective POV shots. Shot nine, however, is a clearly objective shot of Quinquin from behind that evolves into a long take tracking his slow walk back toward a farmhouse which now rears into view.

With this series of nine crisply edited shots, Dumont loosens the grip of the reverse field and framing through a proliferation of shots that crucially combine to leave the landscape intact, rich in its own material potential and expanse. Different visual fields, along with distinct characters and habitats, are now linked together in parallel in a shared cinematic space without being marshalled into reverse-field constructions of interiorization and the fatal nexus of landscape as human setting. Simultaneously, the matter of subjectivity is kept to a level at once light and touching, both formally and emotionally, in the manner of the girl’s gentle half-smile. Hence, Dumont is immediately involving the viewer in a far more nuanced, varied, and noncontrolling manner than in his previous films, one that encourages a more alert and supple spectatorial gaze attuned to the play of difference, both formal and thematic. The fact that the entire sequence, including the initial neutral image, is enveloped by continuous direct sound suggests that the soundtrack will enjoy a more flexible and inclusive role, not defined entirely by the visual frame and made all the more salient by the presence of a hearing aid in Quinquin’s left ear.

 Dumont’s refusal to activate the reverse field continues in the fluid shots that follow. Indeed, on a purely mathematical count there are far more tracking shots and other camera movements in *L’il Quinquin* than is usual in Dumont’s work, the result of his deliberately limiting the more contemplative shots that he considered less effective on the small screen. In one instance the viewer is moving forward in space behind Quinquin and another boy as they ride their bikes on the open road. The point of view is that of the captain and his lieutenant who are following behind in their car. In the next shot, the same boys are tracked objectively from the side in medium close-up. Finally, the camera adopts the boys’ own, joint subjective point of view of the scene. There is something refreshingly egalitarian about this nimble rotation of the gaze and circular relay of looking that offers access to more than one character at a time.

 In shot after shot, in fact, *L’il Quinquin* cuts loose from the tightly controlled formal system of techniques and devices by which the director articulates subjectivity and spectatorship, but which can make a Dumont film appear formulaic, even plodding, in its straightjacket of geometric lines and patterns. He “lightens up” precisely by denying himself the easy option, i.e., the formal lure of total reverse-field interiorization, and keeping as much as possible objective and external. The image is being pushed out of sorts formally, even when the framing appears most assured and poised.

 A minor but emblematic moment of such purposeful deframing occurs when a shot/countershot setup is neatly established between the captain Van der Weyden and a visiting prosecutor as they sit down in a quiet restaurant overlooking the sea, only to be suddenly disturbed by the loud crashing of objects in the back of the frame. The commotion is caused by the involuntary spasms of a mentally challenged young man seated at another table with his British parents. This transitory moment is presented for what it is and not subsumed into a narrative of directed physical violence, as is so often the case in Dumont. Such uncontrolled action is echoed by a sporadic setting off of firecrackers by Quinquin and further extended by the captain’s lopsided movements and nervous twitchings, as well as the uncoordinated bodily gestures of Quinquin’s disturbed uncle, Dany (Jason Cirot). In one long hand-held take that has Dany stomp through the undergrowth at night before crashing onto the ground in paroxysms, the shot’s own looseness (it can’t be attributed to any one character) underlines his haphazard, erratic movements. It exemplifies the film’s free-flowing, nomadic structure that is always threatening to fly off the wheels—literally so, when the lieutenant suddenly tilts his car on its side, driving on just two wheels.

 The concerted unhinging of the reverse field in *L’il Quinquin* has, in fact, a direct impact on the status of major events, for acts of killing and murder are never shown being committed. Before Dumont placed great store on demonstrating the enormity of physical violence (murder, copulation, terrorism, slaughter) in order to expose his audience to raw emotion, but here he is constrained precisely by the rules governing the depiction of graphic sexuality and violence on television. There is no sex to goggle at, only the odd instants of halfhearted horseplay between two detectives in a game of power relations spiced at times with sexual phobia, as when Carpentier briefly puts his arm around his pal after another chilling discovery and Van der Weyden retorts: “No intimacy, gendarme!”

 Because time is a less urgent and determining factor in the format of the television series, any action, violent or otherwise, risks being dedramatized. Dumont is moving here beyond a purist loyalty to the verticality of the event and allowing himself space and time simply to record human activity in specific contexts. The combined effect of serial repetition and surplus duration is to make the murders seem merely incidental: life carries on without drama or histrionics.

**The World Revealed**

The comprehensive opening up of the visual field in *L’il Quinquin* initiates a whole new set of rhythms, textures, and tonalities in Dumont’s work, conveying an impression of things being turned upside down, shifting relentlessly between different codes and registers, and governed by the forces of surprise and unpredictability. Dumont’s regulated world has suddenly become more mobile and instinctive, more temperamental and eccentric, even skittish and infantile. The macabre discovery that the bovine carriers have mad cow disease (BSE), and that the killer chopped up his/her victims and fed them to the now deranged animals, turns the poetic term “*la bête humaine*” (directly invoked by the captain in reference to Zola’s 1870 novel) inside out, thereby lending it a grisly, literal meaning. Virtually all the action, including the running gag of a mysterious masked figure in black leather on a motorbike, takes place in the full light of day, even in overexposed sunlight, which only adds to the perpetually unsettling, preternatural atmosphere where all appears inverted and yet also interconnected (family inbreeding, congenital illness, tribal enmities).

 This newfound mobility in form and style inspires in Dumont a more humble, horizontal engagement with the physical world at ground level. Usually in his cinema, the materiality of natural objects is formally transumed in the interests of anthropocentrism and ultimately the mystical. Here, however, the viewer is allowed to appreciate the contours and sphericity of the landscape in all its mystery and obscure promise. Indeed, there is a generous sensitivity to the natural elements and the changes of pressure in the particles of atmosphere that the camera is content simply to record. “*Le brouillard*” (“mist”) is the nickname given by colleagues to the opaque and eternally baffled captain whose eyebrows do not cease rolling as if in sympathy with the volatility of a rotting and deforming society that he seems to intuit in the very sinews of his being.

By continually moving beyond the abstract notion of the frame, Dumont is able to focus now more directly on what lies within it: notably, the human face. Every face in *L’il Quinquin* is distinctive and particular, like Quinquin’s angelic, silently mutating rictus and M. Lebleu’s (Stéphane Boutillier) wizened, rubbery visage. Each face is fully lived-in, often scarred or damaged, and each tells a story.

The creation of new, previously untapped cinematic space also allows room in the Dumont frame for other living beings usually relegated to the margins. Animals, for instance, are no longer merely incarcerated for human pleasure like Freddy’s caged pet chaffinch or indiscriminately massacred like the horses on the battlefield in *Flanders* (*Flandres*, 2006). At one point the captain touches the white marble coat of an unbridled Boulonnais horse, remarking: “It’s the most beautiful thing in the world.” The radiant whiteness of the beast in close-up is set off by the captain’s pink hands, and here as elsewhere in the film the frame is temporarily absorbed by a display of pure matter. Such subtle attention to color is also visible when the children paint around their eyes in a blaze of different shades and styles, revealing that Dumont is a natural colorist.

The captain’s name Van der Weyden conjures up, of course, Rogier van der Weyden, the early fifteenth-century Flemish artist who painted religious tableaux and triptychs, most famously *The Last Judgment*, with a medievalizing focus on the thick outlines of the material world. The arresting images in *L’il Quinquin* of strung-up carcasses of dead cows directly recall Rembrandt’s *Carcass of Beef* (1667), yet in a way that avoids the sometimes dry, academic approach Dumont has previously adopted toward art history, such as *Humanity*’s explicit incorporation of the real nineteenth-century artist Pharaon Abdon Léon de Winter.[[7]](#endnote-7)

There are other important formal gains, too, for there is a greater accessibility of the gaze across character that goes hand in hand with a new distribution of sound. In the sequence of the funeral service for Mme Lebleu, the first victim, the bungling priests forget the lines of the service and fall about laughing uncontrollably. Their loopy craziness (or “*bordel*,” to cite Van der Weyden’s favorite word) is exacerbated by the sexton dangling the microphone like a limp phallus in a pantomime directly juxtaposed with the pained and distraught faces of M. Lebleu and other members of the congregation in a continual back and forth between two discrete visual fields. The composite effect is both a send-up of the clergy and a celebration of shared human emotion. Aurélie devotes herself to the hackneyed Pop Idol–style English-language song “Cause I knew” (an original composition by the actress), which she sings a cappella in its entirety. This is the same song she was rehearsing at the film’s start and that, in another of its running gags, is heard on at least five separate occasions in different forms, including even at her own funeral when the self-absorbed church organist (Didier Hennuyer) invents his own version.

Dumont’s powerful interest in sound also highlights the materiality of language. *L’il Quinquin* revels in the harsh, twisted, vernacular sounds of the *ch’ti* dialect and patois of the Picardy region that give rise to idioms and occasional *jeu de mots*. At other times, the accent, larded with regional slang, makes some words unrecognizable. The simple *ch’ti* children’s lullaby “Dors, mon p’tit quinquin” (Sleep, my little child), an unofficial anthem of [Lille](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lille), is heard throughout, including during the commemorative band parade.

The song is not incidental, for it is with the children, astonished and cowed by the spell of evil unfolding around them, that Dumont finally is most concerned in *L’il Quinquin*, above all, Mohamed (Baptiste Anquez). Along with his unnamed fellow North African friend (Yacine Kellal), the boy is hounded by Quinquin’s gang after they run off with a wartime grenade discovered by Quinquin on the beach. Yet it is the way Aurélie chooses not to lift a finger to support him when her friend Jennifer taunts and humiliates him with racist insults like “*nègre*” and “*macaque*” (“monkey”) that pushes Mohamed over the edge. He shoots down on the police while shouting “Allah Akbar!” from the top window of his home, draped with a French flag. The scene is portrayed appropriately as serious drama and conveyed in respectful long shot, for the violence here is fundamentally different in kind from the previous “mad cow” horrors. Mohamed eventually turns the gun on himself, an act conveyed simply by the off-screen sound of gunfire. The captain, who had just opined with casual racism that suicidal behavior is typical of Arab psychology, now brings down Mohamed’s dead body on his shoulders: part human sacrifice, part animal carcass, part *pietà*.

The tragedy is thrown into full and ghastly relief by the surrounding comedy. The fact that Aurélie is herself later killed, eaten alive by pigs presumably because she dared to be friends (or more) with an immigrant Muslim boy, shows that racial prejudice and bigotry is endemic in this provincial world. There is a gruesome logic to her death since Mohamed’s father, M. Bhiri, worked at the local abattoir overseeing Halal procedures for animal slaughter before he himself was murdered for his affair with a white woman (Mme Lebleu). The last image of Aurélie is one of her kneeling silently on the ground at her family’s farm, surrounded by pigs snorting loudly around her, still dazed by the news of Mohamed’s death. On the soundtrack, the haunting sounds of a lamentation arise, from the first movement of Bach’s cantata *Behold and see, if there be any sorrow.*

**The Bearable Lightness of Cinematic Being**

Nothing ever progresses in the crime investigation, of course. Instead, Dumont offers up a remarkable final sequence that caps, with exquisite refinement, his dismantling of reverse-field locking. The captain, upon seeing his assistant caught in a physical arm-lock by Dany in the middle of the farmyard, declares: “Hell is here, Carpentier! You’re in the hands of the devil.” The viewer is caught in a concatenation of stares, as Dany’s searing blue eyes meet head-on the captain’s quivering eyebrows. Carpentier finally wrests himself from Dany’s hold. As he and the captain scurry through the frame toward the front gate, the latter immediately deflates the notion that any one source is responsible for all the evil perpetrated by muttering: “I’m joking!” Yet the camera’s focus remains on Dany with a frontal close-up of his tortured face in the center of the frame, looking up toward the sky as if possessed. The film thus insists to the end on the mysterious and inexplicable.

The concluding image is a medium close-up of Quinquin standing by the farmhouse with his arms wrapped around Ève. As he stares out toward the camera, and beyond to the road, she peers down toward the ground on the right. The film ends therefore as it began, deadpan, with the ambiguous face of Quinquin. Nothing is formally sealed: the preceding shot of an open gate leading to an empty field is impossible to anchor retrospectively as a reverse-field shot from Quinquin’s point of view. Indeed, the shot’s deliberate lack of compositional framing ensures that the landscape remains unbound and indefinable.

As such, the final sequence makes for a defiantly noncommittal ending, This refusal of both narrative and formal closure might easily be construed as a cop-out and evasion on Dumont’s part, not only because the whodunit is never solved (as if leaving open the eminent possibility of a sequel), but also because there is no moral resolution to the horror encountered. Far from falling short, however, the understated final montage of shots represents, on its own terms, a pivotal advance in Dumont’s method and practice: the moment when the purely aesthetic is turned literally inside out and revealed as the ethical.

The flagrant anticlimax and nonclosure generate, in fact, a new form of spectatorial release: no longer obliged to read the visible world metaphorically, the viewer is relieved of the burden of metaphysical interpretation. Moreover, the commonality of the shared gaze created by the new expansion of the reverse field and dispersal of point of view allows for a more equal and adventurous play of cinematic relations between film, character, and viewer, in the image of Quinquin and Ève holding each other in human solidarity.

*L’il Quinquin* is an exhilarating cinematic experience for those who come to Dumont for the first time. Yet for those who have exhaustingly negotiated the formal chains and mind games of his previous work, it feels momentous, like cinema set free. Indeed, by curbing Dumont’s lust for formal transcendence and by liberating him from his self-imposed formal constraints with its own requirements, television injects new energy and unexpected depth into his cinema. Arte is co-funding Dumont’s next feature, a period comedy set in the same region entitled *Ma Loute* (My lady). There is a strong possibility, too, that he will film more episodes of *L’il Quinquin*. Where this turn to television will ultimately take Dumont, and how television will itself transform as a primary platform for cinematic experimentation and the cross-pollination of different artistic forms, is cause for genuine speculation, appreciation, and wonder.

**Notes**

1. The four discrete episodes are entitled: “L’bêt’humaine” (The human beast); “Au cœur du mal” (In the heart of evil); “L’diable in perchonne” (The devil in person); “Allah Akbar!” (Allah is greatest). Each one lasted 52 minutes and was broadcast to a record audience across two days in September 2014, at one point attracting 1.4 million viewers. Dumont has explained that he shot *L’il Quinquin* in 2.40 aspect ratio, although he insisted on viewing, editing, and mixing all the material on a digital television screen in 2.0. See “La puissance de feu du comique”: interview with Stéphane Delorme and Jean-Philippe Tessé, *Cahiers du cinéma* 703 (2014): 14–22.

The series can be viewed via the Arte website (http://cinema.arte.tv/fr/dossier/ptit-quinquin) and is also available in France on DVD through Blaq Out. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The *Cahiers du cinéma* editorial of September 2014 (vol. 704) proclaimed the work “explosive,” not simply on account of its incendiary style of comedy but also because of its radical authorial “gesture.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Michael Sicinski, “Dead Meat: Bruno Dumont’s *P’tit Quinquin*,” *Cinema Scope* 61 (2014), http://cinema-scope.com/features/dead-meat-bruno-dumonts-ptit-quinquin-michael-sicinski. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Transcription by Karin Badt of Dumont Masterclass at the 2013 Marrakesh Film Festival, www.huffingtonpost.com/karin-badt/director-bruno-dumont lec\_b\_4385201.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “Un monolithe”: interview with Jean-Sébastien Chauvin and Jean-Philippe Tessé, *Cahiers du cinéma* 671 (2011): 30–34, on 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Valérie Jouve, Sébastien Ors and Philippe Tancelin, *Bruno Dumont* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2001), trans. J. Ames Hodges, Paul Buck and Catherine Petit, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. I argue elsewhere that, in *Humanity,* Dumont also pursues an implied critique of the painted image due to its very stasis. See *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 56–63.

Editor’s Note: *L’il Quinquin* is available in the United States on Blu-ray and DVD from Kino Lorber, effective June 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)