

## **Bruno Dumont's comic look: *Le P'tit Quinquin* (2014) as a social and ethical intervention**

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**Abstract** For most viewers it came as a big surprise when Bruno Dumont ventured into TV comedy with the four part series *P'tit Quinquin* (2014). This article examines why Dumont was attracted to comedy. Drawing on texts by Henri Bergson and Wolfgang Iser, the article first attempts to define the specificity of what shall be called Dumont's comic look. Next, it analyses what it means to take a comic look at socio-political problems such as religious and racial conflicts. The article argues that Dumont refrains from trying to move beyond these problems, but also that *P'tit Quinquin* places the spectators in a non-tragic relation to the problems raised. The series therefore looks at the social world in a very different way than many of Dumont's previous, more tragic feature films. Ultimately, this not only allows an auteurist reading of *P'tit Quinquin* (the series is gently laughing at Dumont's earlier films), but also supports the more general point that comedy can be particularly well-suited to negotiate contemporary social challenges.

**Keywords** Bruno Dumont; French comedy; affect; film and ethics; social crisis

'No, surely it's not possible that a filmmaker as serious as Bruno Dumont has directed the funniest film in years [...]. It's not possible that the best comic actor of all time is an unknown by the name of Bernard Pruvost' (Delorme 2014, 5). Such hyperbolic exclamations of surprise and admiration were typical when Bruno Dumont's TV series *P'tit Quinquin* aired on the French-German TV-station Arte in September 2014. The accolades came primarily from more specialised media like *Variety* and *Cahiers du Cinéma* (who voted *P'tit Quinquin* film of the year in December 2014).<sup>1</sup> But even if *P'tit Quinquin* was far from matching the popular success of a comedy like *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Sticks* (Dany Boon, 2008), Dumont's series still went on to beat the ratings of Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* to become the most popular TV series ever shown on Arte.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside one of the obvious questions one might put to Dumont – why TV? – this article focuses on another: why comedy?

*P'tit Quinquin* is a contemporary crime story set in a small village on the Northern French Coast, in the region where most of Dumont's films are shot. It begins with a dead cow being discovered in a World War II bunker. This cow contains the body parts of a

local woman, minus her head. Two very odd policemen from the neighbouring town of Boulogne-sur-Mer are brought in to investigate the case; four ‘just about’ teenagers are snooping around on their bikes, not having much else to do because it is summer and school is off. In the group of four are P’tit Quinquin (‘little kid’, in the regional language Ch’ti, or Picard) and his girlfriend Ève. In each episode at least one further victim is found, and as the body count rises, the policemen seem increasingly to be in over their heads. At the end of the series the spectators have some idea about what happened but no one is arrested and the plot remains unresolved. While it would be inaccurate to state that the plot does not matter, it seems fair to say that Dumont’s main interests lie elsewhere: to a large extent, *P’tit Quinquin* is an exploration of what comedy can do, how it can be used to intervene in the contemporary socio-political situation.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on texts by Henri Bergson and Wolfgang Iser, the first part of this article will therefore seek to describe what characterises Dumont’s comic look, before the second and third part examine the nature of his intervention.

### **Dumont’s comic look: Bergson and Iser**

Much of Dumont’s comedy centres on the two policemen who are investigating the murders: Inspector Van der Weyden and his assistant Carpentier. As is generally the case in Dumont’s films, none of the actors in *P’tit Quinquin* are professional. For the casting of this project Dumont worked with an organisation that recruited unemployed workers for gardening tasks and seasonal jobs such as cleaning up the dunes on the Northern French coast (La Côte Opale). The two men he took for the roles of the policemen were therefore both unemployed gardeners.

Bernard Pruvost, who plays the central role of Van der Weyden, was initially uncomfortable with the acting job. His discomfort expressed itself in a series of impressive facial tics and stiff body movements (especially his walk). Dumont and Pruvost decided they could work with this to comic effect, simply by exaggerating and schematising what was already there. Pruvost’s nervousness and his lack of acting experience also meant that he tended to forget the lines, and had difficulties remembering where to stand and how to move. He therefore had to play with a radio transmitter in his ear: the crew would feed him the lines that he would then repeat after a short delay. He also occasionally looks to the ground, searching for cue marks. As a result, Van der Weyden becomes a perfect example of Henri Bergson’s well-known definition of the comic: ‘du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant’ (Bergson 2011) [‘Something mechanical encrusted on the living’ (Bergson 1911,

37)]. He ends up as a radio controlled body constantly on the verge of falling apart in body spasms, while delivering his lines in a curiously constipated way.

Bergson's famous essay uses this definition ('Something mechanical encrusted on the living') in a very broad sense. *Le Rire* considers not only mechanical bodies – dolls, marionettes, Punch and Judy-shows – but also how certain schematisations distort the natural to produce a comic effect. One may for instance think of caricatures, impersonations and the work of cartoonists.<sup>4</sup> Even more generally, Bergson considers characters that are reduced to – and sometimes reduce themselves to – a social function, to being a *type*. All this is relevant for *P'tit Quinquin*, and for Van der Weyden in particular. He struggles with various forms of social constrictions, with expectations about how to behave as a policeman. The dialogue – which often ceases to be a meaningful exchange of viewpoints, and instead becomes a series of sentence fragments that bounce off each other – highlights Van der Weyden's desperate attempts at fulfilling his social function: 'Police, for God's sake!' Other dialogue fragments are of a very abstract, metaphysical kind ('we're in the heart of evil', 'the devil is on the prowl here'), yet others appear to be stock phrases from TV psychologists (more about that in a moment). Many critics – and Dumont himself – have spoken about these various bodily and linguistic schematisations. Sometimes the influences of Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati have been noted, and there are good reasons for bringing up these names. Compared, however, to the elegantly choreographed movements found in the works of these two director-actors, those of Pruvost and Dumont are deliberately much more sturdy and hard-edged.

A key dimension of Bergson's essay concerns the social function of laughter. Bergson argues that when we laugh at something, we cannot at the same time be feeling for that something. For him laughter is essentially a form of social judgment. As he explains in one of his summary statements: 'The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct' (Bergson 1911, 130). This means that there is a close link between laughter and the disclosure of what Hegel called *Sitten*: the social norms that form us, the manners we live by. When laughing we are basically saying: You are acting like a machine, come back to life (as we think it should be). It may be inaccurate to suggest that Bergson always equates laughter with a cynical social sanction, but he does give laughter a normalising – and occasionally, punitive – function rather than a liberating or cathartic function. In the famous last paragraph of his essay, he therefore writes that

when we consider the origins and function of laughter it often leaves a bitter taste (we shall return to this link between social norms and laughter below).

But even if Van der Weyden is a perfect example of the mechanical encrusted upon the living, and even if *P'tit Quinquin* seeks to explore social judgments, Dumont's series cannot fully be understood within the framework provided by Bergson's essay on laughter. It is not just that some viewers have thought *P'tit Quinquin* was an unfunny comedy, it is also that even positive viewers have been uncertain about the generic status of the series: to what extent is *P'tit Quinquin* aiming to be a comedy? In many scenes, laughter seems to be called forth only to be interrupted. To understand how this interruption works, and what its consequences are, it is helpful to turn to a different conceptualisation of comedy, which can be found in the literary critic Wolfgang Iser's 1981 essay 'The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theater'.

Iser introduces the idea of a stifled laugh to describe the spectator's experience of watching Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and *Endgame* (1957). He begins with the general observation that most comedies result from a confrontation between conflicting perspectives. Comedies work with dichotomies – for instance: the south v. the north in *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*; the white Catholics v. the second-generation immigrants in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon Dieu ?/Serial (Bad) Weddings* (Philippe de Chauveron, 2014). At first one might expect such dichotomies to produce stability, and to some extent they do. However, in comedies 'the collapse of one position does not necessarily lead to the victory of another, but, on the contrary, will frequently draw it into a chain reaction of continual upsets' (Iser 1989, 155). As a result, the 'comic event' puts the spectator's cognitive and emotive faculties under pressure, and we respond, defensively, with laughter: 'The laugh [...] indicates not mastery of a situation but a moment of crisis [...] by laughing we free ourselves from entanglement in a situation that otherwise we could not cope with' (156-57). Logically, Iser therefore also refers to Nietzsche's idea of laughter as the banishment of anxiety (156).

But with Beckett's confrontations – and Dumont's, we shall see – the defence mechanism (laughter) no longer works, anxiety cannot be banished. This is not because Beckett invalidates the logic of comedy as described by Iser, but rather because he pushes it to its extreme. The 'disorientation' (156) becomes so pervasive, that we cannot disentangle ourselves from the situation via laughter: 'We can no longer escape [...] and, instead, laughter dies on our lips' (157).

In part Beckett's destabilisations depend on the narrative structure of his plays. Iser explains that in *Waiting for Godot* the conventional background/foreground structure breaks down. For instance, we can read the play as an existential, post-war 'story' about two men waiting for meaning, perhaps even God. In many passages Beckett invites such a reading and critics have duly obliged. At the same time, however, it is also possible to consider what seemed to be the central plotline (the story of waiting) as a simple background on which scenes of verbal and physical comedy are played out. In this way the basic hermeneutic distinction between background and foreground gets knocked over. Beckett first invites us to make sense of the play, and then works to destabilise (and ultimately, unmask) the structures of sense-making that we rely upon. Beckett's plays thereby laugh at our laughter; this is one of the ways in which they stifle our laugh.

More generally it is clear that according to Iser's analysis Beckett's brand of comedy turns towards the spectator: the expectations we bring to the comedy, the frameworks through which we engage with the conflicts, are being interrogated. Iser describes this process as a 'clawing into the spectator' by which we are 'forced to realise the deficiencies of our own interpretations' (170). In Bergson's theory laughter was collective; it was the manifestation of a social norm. In Iser's text laughter is broken, the spectator's faith in the common epistemological frameworks is challenged, and with that interruption the collective is shattered. Beckett's plays thereby produce a very confused, isolated and self-reflexive spectator. We are stuck in a situation where we cannot avoid interpreting, and yet our hermeneutical desire cannot be satisfied: 'The more the spectator struggles to free himself from the quicksands of his projections, the deeper he will sink into them' (190). In this form of drama (which I have elsewhere characterised as feel-bad comedy), 'laughter [...] has no cathartic effect' (165), instead tragedy and comedy begin to mesh.<sup>5</sup>

These reflections on Beckett have immediate relevance for an engagement with Dumont's form of comedy. *P'tit Quinquin* also works on our laughter, and again this happens via a very direct confrontation of the spectator. Like Beckett's plays, Dumont's TV series appeals to our hermeneutical desire, and then prompts us to think about the frameworks we use when we seek to understand. In Dumont's series there is also an unusual relation between what Iser calls themes and plotline; we have a crime plot (that plays with the clichés of American TV dramas), but this plot disintegrates as the series increasingly seems to mock our desire for a solution to the whodunit. Visually, Dumont communicates this mocking of plot progression by giving up on linearity and instead

prioritising various forms of circular movement: at the beginning of the series a helicopter lifts the dead cow out of a round bunker; we see the gang of P'tit Quinquin going in circles on their bikes in the middle of a road; next, lieutenant Carpentier reproduces this circular movement, foolishly driving the police car around in a circle before leaving a courtyard (a gesture to be repeated on several occasions); and throughout the series we will also be reminded of these circular movements in scenes where the mentally disabled uncle of P'tit Quinquin – at this point almost embodying the series as a whole – happily spins around, sometimes until he collapses.

However, when it comes to Dumont's series two aspects of Iser's text are potentially misleading. Firstly, it can be argued that Iser goes too far in the direction of the tragic when he insists on the effects of challenging our laughter: even if comedy and tragedy combine, Dumont still makes us laugh. Secondly, although Iser mentions *both* the 'cognitive and emotive' crisis that the comedy produces, he soon moves towards an almost exclusive insistence on Beckett's attempt at challenging our *hermeneutical* frameworks. As will become clear in the next sections of this article, a rigorous focus on hermeneutics would tend to de-radicalise the challenge Dumont's comedy presents to the viewer. *P'tit Quinquin* does not limit itself to questions of understanding, it also raises the concomitant problem of how to be together without necessarily understanding one another. This means that Dumont is willing to go further into the complex circuits of human affectivity than Iser does in his text on Beckett; Dumont is keen to go all the way into what he calls the bizarre workings of our sensibility (Dumont in Delorme and Tessé 2014, 21). This is particularly evident in the scenes dealing with ethnic and religious conflicts.

### **The bizarre workings of our sensibility**

The most dramatic scene in the series takes place at the beginning of the fourth episode. It centres on Mohamed, one of the two black Muslim boys in the small town. In the second episode, the policemen discover that Mohamed's father has been murdered, presumably because he had been having an affair with the white woman found inside the cow in the first episode. In a number of subsequent scenes the two black boys have run-ins with the three white boys in P'tit Quinquin's group. The white boys do not like that Mohamed is attracted to Ève's older sister, nor do they like that she is far from being uninterested.

Dumont embeds these racial tensions in a specifically national context. The confrontations are played out during a period where the town is preparing to celebrate the 14 July. At the beginning of the third episode the festivities take place, including a parade

of war veterans, the inauguration of a monument to commemorate their achievements (to the tune of the Marseillaise), and a very comical reception for these ‘anciens combattants’ [war veterans]’ (during which the mayor expresses his desire that there should be ‘des nouveaux anciens combattants’ [‘fresh war veterans’]). When the fourth episode begins, the religious and ethnic conflicts have spiralled out of control and Mohamed has retreated to the top floor of his house. A French flag is hanging from his window, and he is shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’, ‘Honte à la France’ [‘Shame on France’] and ‘Honte aux Français’ [‘Shame on the French’] while shooting at the crowd gathered in the street. In come Van der Weyden and Carpentier.

The scene begins as comedy. The police have taken refuge outside the wall surrounding Mohamed’s house. There is a gate in the wall, on the right side of the opening stands a tall, local police officer who seems to be in charge of the operation, on the left (but still outside the garden) are Van der Weyden and lieutenant Carpentier. Van der Weyden quickly decides to go into the house, he shouts to Mohamed that he is carrying no weapon and then goes through the gate like a fearless John McClane. Mohamed replies with a series of shots that Van der Weyden narrowly escapes as he runs back to hide behind the wall. In order to discuss the situation with the local police officer, Van der Weyden then ventures to the other side of the open gate. When crossing the opening, he dodges the bullets by throwing himself to the ground, rolling over. However, Van der Weyden’s version of this typical action hero gesture is so slow that he only increases the risk of getting shot. Furthermore, there was no reason to move across the opening as the two policemen were separated only by a few metres and could easily have talked from their respective hiding places. After a brief exchange with the younger officer Van der Weyden moves back to Carpentier, again crossing the opening in the wall. This time he stays on his feet, but rather than quickly seeking shelter he inexplicably pirouettes as he moves across. He thereby resembles one of those fairground attractions in which you have to shoot at spiralling objects. With these gestures he not only exposes himself unnecessarily, he also demonstrates Bergson’s point about how bodies become comical when mechanised. Clearly, the inspector is caught in the clichés of how to be a policeman, stuck in schemas generated by American action films and TV shows.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1: Honte aux Français [Shame on the French] (©2014 Blaq Out/ ARTE France Développement).

A related form of schematisation can be found at the level of dialogue. First lieutenant Carpentier very sensibly suggests that maybe Mohamed's shooting can be linked to the murder of his father. Van der Weyden disagrees, and Carpentier immediately pulls back his explanation. Then Van der Weyden gives his 'psychological profile' of Mohammed. Again, it is a schematisation that has trickled down from the media – from the well-meaning specialists speaking on radio and television – until it here finds some form of expression in Van der Weyden's staccato-like sentences:

It's his country... France... that's what he can't stand... because... well, er, people didn't accept him. He went loopy. And then on top of that he got into religion, into Islam and all that... which is... well, er... well, er, that's a lot to handle, er, for kids like that. They go loopy... So, er... they end up doing this stuff... Judging by what he's doing now, that's all there is to it, that's it! Loopy.

Clearly the point of the scene is not whether Carpentier's more psychological explanation is better than Van der Weyden's fragments of a socio-political explanation, nor is it a question of how these two might work together; rather, Dumont is introducing the frameworks we use to make sense of the world, playing them out against each other, highlighting the difficulties we all have as Van der Weyden's 'analysis' collapses into the one-word diagnosis 'timbré' ['loopy']. But Dumont leaves little time for characters and spectators to ponder these issues because suddenly a gunshot from within the house is heard.

The spectators now find themselves in tragedy. Van der Weyden immediately understands the situation 'putain !' ['oh fuck!'], he runs into the house, and soon re-emerges with the bloody corpse of Mohamed in his arms. It is clear that even if Van der Weyden is laughable, he is also brave and compassionate. This compassion is highlighted by the way in which the scene can be seen as a variation on a *Pietà* (see Figure 2). There is nothing funny about the suicide, and Dumont gives us nothing to take the edge off the tragedy. Instead, the clash between the comic and the tragic leaves things unresolved. The next two and a half minutes are dominated by largely static shots of the protagonists; there is no dialogue at all, apart from a voice on the police radio confirming the death of Mohamed when his body is driven away.

## INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. *Pietà* (©2014 Blaq Out/ ARTE France Développement).

As mentioned, comedy often brings oppositions into relation. Here, the confrontations occur not only between the French and the Arabs or between two kinds of policemen but also at the level of genre, between comedy and tragedy. Because of this genre confusion the scene is far from setting in motion a ‘chain reaction of continual upsets’ (Iser 1989, 155). Instead, the chain breaks and we find ourselves stuck in the collision between comedy and tragedy. This collision works on the spectator’s body, producing a moment of intense discomfort. The *mise-en-scène* emphasises the confrontational dimension: during most of the scene the camera stays close to the policemen and the other white citizens gathered in the street; Mohamed is reduced to a voice or a distant figure at the top floor of the tower-like house in which he lives. Twice Dumont films over Mohamed’s shoulder as he looks down on the far-away crowd: the distance appears insurmountable.

For Dumont’s brand of comedy, it is essential that there is no resolution. In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* he explained:

The unfunny has its roots in the funny. We have to reach that point of intersection. I really believe that comedy needs its opposite [...]. It’s a difficult concept to grasp because we’re used to having one or the other. Here, they coexist. At the exact same moment as the chief is doing commando rolls, there’s a kid who is about to die. And as the chief is carrying the body in his arms, when we were laughing with him barely a minute ago... it gets into parts of the heart via the back door... we’re in the process of discovering the workings of our sensibility and it’s clear that there’s some pretty weird circuitry in there. I think that’s brilliant, and I can’t control it [...]. Comedy goes there, it has the potential to get into areas where opposites coexist, into places where we don’t normally go, or even have the right to venture. (Dumont in Delorme and Tessé 2014, 21).

The coexistence of opposites that Dumont insists on here can be found at many different levels in the series. Take the group of P’tit Quinquin. There are redeeming factors about these children, not least the warmth and tenderness between P’tit Quinquin and Ève. These two treat each other with affection and respect, they call each other ‘darling’ and ask ‘hold

me' and 'kiss me'; it is a tender and non-sexualised relationship that seems more in tune with conventional depictions of old married couples than with characters in their early teens. But this tender love takes nothing away from how unsympathetic the white boys also are. P'tit Quinquin and his group are rascals who harass the local minister and play their part in provoking the suicide of Mohamed. Typically, when P'tit Quinquin sees Mohamed shooting from the top of his house, he responds with a gross, racist cliché: 'it's that scum again, firing left, right and centre'. Despite the tender, adult love that emanates from the more angelic presence of Ève there is little doubt that this racist boy will grow up to become a racist adult.

Bringing Bergson, Iser and Dumont together it now becomes possible to further develop the analysis of what has been described as a form of interruption. As previously mentioned Iser argued that the interruption of laughter was the sign of a hermeneutical crisis: the interruption produced particularly self-reflexive spectators who were brought to consider the interpretative frameworks they use to make sense of the world. Iser was keen to stay with this idea of a hermeneutical crisis, and perhaps also too keen to find a level where the inconsistencies would disappear. Nevertheless, his analysis of a hermeneutical crisis remains relevant to Dumont's series. When Mohamed is shooting at the French police, and when Van der Weyden and Carpentier discuss why it has come to this, we are confronted with some of the different ways in which we seek to make sense of racial and religious conflicts, none of which are satisfactory.

Bergson insisted that empathy and laughter are necessarily out of sync. In his 1927 article, 'Humour', Sigmund Freud argues along similar lines when he writes that 'the essence of humour is that one spares oneself of the affect to which the situation would naturally give rise' (Freud 1961, 162); affect and humour work like oil and water. We can therefore suggest that when the laughter is interrupted, affect resurfaces. Following Lauren Berlant's suggestion that traditional literary and filmic genres are systems for the channelling of affects (Berlant 2011), we can understand Mohamed's tragic suicide as a systemic collapse – a genre breakdown – that reveals an affective environment for which no generic form has yet been found. This was what Iser described as a 'clawing into the spectator' (Iser 1989, 170), and it is precisely what Dumont suggested when he noted how the coexistence of the comic and the tragic can take us where we do not usually go, allowing the exploration of 'the workings of our sensibility' (Dumont in Delorme and Tessé 2014, 21).

Finally, and still in Bergson, we found the idea of laughter as social judgment. The interruption therefore destabilises the social system that we act out performatively (and thereby consolidate) every time we laugh; it opens towards a more general questioning of the norms that sustain our judgments. As Dumont said in the interview, the confrontation of comedy and tragedy take us where we usually are not *allowed* to go; it takes us beyond the social.

It is then necessary to understand this idea of interruption in three related ways: it challenges our structures of understanding, it produces a caesura that allows the resurfacing of affectivity, and it destabilises the social frameworks (or *Sitten*) that we act out (and consolidate) when judging with our laughter. The relation between these three dimensions of the interruption speaks not only to the bizarre workings of our sensibility, but also, more generally, to the intricate interactions between cognitive, affective and socio-political norms and patterns.

At this point it also becomes possible to answer the question of why Dumont was attracted to comedy. It is obvious that Dumont's comedy must be seen as a particularly heterogeneous art form that can accommodate, and make coexist, the tragic and the comic. When judgment and laughter are interrupted (the two are largely coextensive here), we remain in a situation in which there is no clarity. The 'clawing into the spectator' leaves an open mess, and it is this mess – this heterogeneity – that Dumont is interested in. It is therefore entirely appropriate that throughout the series, Dumont shows several images of open animal carcasses, as if to lay bare, in a very literal way, this 'weird circuitry' of our sensibility (Dumont in Delorme and Tessé 2014, 21)..

This view of the comic corresponds with the one that can be found in John Bruns's book *Loopholes: Reading Comically* (2014). Bruns argues that comedy should be associated with a view of the world as open, non-final. He builds on well-known sources (not least Mikhail Bakhtin and Georges Bataille) to present comedy as a particularly non-totalising, non-dialectical approach to the world. Dumont's scene illustrates this. It pulls the spectators back to the stage before the affects become judgments, before social norms regulate what can and cannot coexist, before we attempt to respond to what is shown with actions and solutions. Here the comic, as Dumont explains, includes the tragic, and it does so without seeking mediation or resolution. But why does Dumont stay with the lack of resolution? Why this preference for the heterogeneous?

### **Interruption as intervention**

Dumont gives an answer to the first of these questions in the interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*. Immediately after the sentences quoted above, he argues that engaging with these confrontations between the comic and the tragic is ‘cathartic’. This article has followed Iser’s suggestion that when laughter is interrupted there is no catharsis, and it is therefore necessary to make clear that Dumont uses the word in a slightly different way than Iser. Dumont’s catharsis has nothing to do with the TV series offering a solution to the problems it brings up; in many interviews he has argued against the belief that films should attempt to solve the problems they address. The cathartic dimension he has in mind is associated solely with the idea of ‘bringing up’. It is the mere fact of clawing into the spectator that is cathartic, no matter how unpleasant this might be for the spectator. He thereby uses ‘cathartic’ in the same sense that Michael Haneke does in ‘Film als Katarsis’, a short programmatic text from the beginning of his film-making career that argues that cinema should strive to bring up conflicts, force debate.

But it is not only a question of staying with the lack of resolution; it is also a question of exploring *how* we respond in a situation that has no visible solution. At this point it is pertinent to reintroduce the distinction between tragedy and comedy. Drawing on Stanley Cavell, Bruns suggests that in tragedy, the hero wants to *understand* and to be *understood*, seeking clarity and mastery. The hero’s unwillingness to give up on this desire will often bring about the kind of ‘resolution’ we call death, destruction or self-sacrifice. For the comic hero, on the other hand, it is not about understanding and mastering the world, but rather about *acceptance*; with this comes a greater willingness to acknowledge the inconsistencies of the world. Therefore the comic hero survives where the tragic hero dies:

Unlike the tragic hero who blindly, fatally strives to master the world, lay it bare, and bring it under conceptual control, the comic hero survives because he chooses instead to accept the world for what it is. His desire is not to master the world, but to inhabit it. (Bruns 2014, 80)

To some readers this insistence on acceptance may sound conformist, as if the comic hero has given up. The point, however, is not that one should accept injustice but that comic heroes do not try to transcend all inconsistencies because they have realised that coherence, resolution and complete understanding were never possibilities in the first place. The tragic

heroes' desire for transparency and resolution, on the other hand, ends up perpetuating precisely those logics of violence that they set out to counter.

This difference between the tragic and the comic can help us understand the singularity of *P'tit Quinquin*'s position within Dumont's filmography. Most of Dumont's films can be placed within the tragic sphere. These films are full of tensions; they offer no simple solutions and mostly leave the spectators unsettled. Nevertheless, at the level of plot construction many of Dumont's tragic films seek to transcend the contradictions they have brought up. This is why they end with tragic deaths, self-sacrifices or miraculous events. Consider, for example, perhaps Dumont's best-known film, *L'Humanité/Humanity* (1999), a film that he, by his own account, looks back upon in *P'tit Quinquin*. Already in *L'Humanité* the central figure is a very peculiar local policeman, Pharaon, who works in the north-western corner of France. The narrative revolves around the rape and murder of a seven-year-old girl. The film follows Pharaon as he tries to solve the crime; it shows that he is in love with a woman called Domino, and that she is in love with Joseph. At the end of the film, Pharaon discovers that Joseph is the killer, but he now sacrifices himself for the woman he loves by taking the place of the killer. In the last shot he sits in the police station, handcuffed, looking towards the sky, light falling upon his face; the *mise-en-scène* invites us to see this scene as a form of absolution. Ethically, this ending raises many questions – does Pharaon become a saint-like figure by sacrificing his freedom for that of someone who has raped a seven-year-old girl? – but at a narrative level the film *transcends* (rather than *solves*) the various conflicts it has brought up; when the credits appear there are no unresolved plotlines, and the spectators are left squarely within the realm of the tragic.

The ending of *P'tit Quinquin* very consciously plays with *L'Humanité*, as it also plays with Dumont's first feature, *La Vie de Jésus/The Life of Jesus* (1997).<sup>6</sup> The final scene presents many of the characteristics that could be found in *L'Humanité*: again we are at the end of a police enquiry, in a situation where the spectator desires a solution. Again the ending combines long shots of Northern French landscapes, close-ups of faces, and impenetrable gazes, and again, there is almost no dialogue. The protagonists have come back from the funeral of Ève's sister, and Dumont now offers an ending that leaves the spectator completely flummoxed. First, Van der Weyden swiftly solves the crime plot by asking Carpentier to handcuff Petit Quinquin's mentally disabled uncle. This uncle has been confusing policemen and spectators from the moment he appeared, but the suggestion that he should be the murderer is nevertheless so abrupt that it takes both Carpentier and

the spectator by surprise. Before Carpentier has had a chance to understand the logic behind the arrest order, Van der Weyden backs down: 'I'm joking, I'm joking'. We have a series of inscrutable gazes that alternate with shots of the landscapes, thereby diminishing the distance between faces and landscapes. All is set to beautiful music by Bach (which, in a previous scene, was overlaid by the sounds of grunting pigs). It is impossible to conclude anything on this basis: was the arrest order a very awkward joke, or did Van der Weyden, like Pharaon before him, just decide to let a suspect go?

It is important to emphasise that this shift from *L'Humanité's* attempt at transcending the conflicts to a situation where nothing is transcended or solved has political implications. Dumont's films have generated considerable debate, not least because of the relations they establish between the physical, the metaphysical and the socio-political worlds. It is impossible to do justice to these debates here, but many critics have taken issue with what they see as Dumont's tendency to dissolve the socio-political problems into diffuse forms of spirituality. An intelligent and stimulating version of this critique can be found in Martin O'Shaughnessy's *The New Face of Political Cinema* (2007). O'Shaughnessy argues that even if Dumont's first two films (*La Vie de Jésus* and *L'Humanité*) engage with political themes such as unemployment, xenophobic violence and the socio-economic effects of globalisation on a small industrial city in Northern France, the films end up betraying this political dimension by framing their characters in such a manner that they become passive, suffering human beings who can only hope for a spiritual absolution. The spiritual endings not only move us away from the socio-political and towards the sacred, they in fact participate in the process of objectification: through various gestures of salvation and self-sacrifice, the characters are forever reduced to a form of passive suffering and brute animality.

Whether one agrees with this criticism of Dumont's early cinema as politically conservative or not, it is worth emphasising that the ending to *P'tit Quinquin* deviates from the earlier films in at least two important aspects. First, it effectively forecloses the possibility of objectifying the central character. As mentioned, Van der Weyden's suggestion that P'tit Quinquin's uncle should be the killer is held just long enough to confuse Carpentier and the spectator, and the subsequent withdrawal of the arrest order ('I'm joking, I'm joking') only means that Van der Weyden further escapes us: we do not get the joke, and indeed we may wonder if it was a joke at all. Via this form of interruption our hermeneutical apparatus becomes inoperative, and (as Iser's analysis suggested) the result is a confusion that provokes self-doubt in the spectator. From this position of

insecurity and confusion it is difficult to objectify the characters. Second, because the ending to *P'tit Quinquin* refuses to solve or transcend the problems, it stays on the ground, literally also: whereas many earlier scenes include low angle shots, and occasionally high angle shots, in order to offer a stylisation that supports the (Bergsonian) desire to schematise, the camera now films straight-on giving the scene a resolutely horizontal feel. It is true that there is music by Bach, that there are shots that juxtapose landscapes and faces. Nonetheless, the ending communicates not a move from the physical to the metaphysical, or from the political to the spiritual, but rather the coexistence of various incongruous elements in a constellation at once awkward and gentle.

So even if the ending should not be reduced to an intertextual play, we can understand why Dumont would suggest that *P'tit Quinquin* takes a comic look at his previous films. This 'comic' look is not ironic, nor is it a version of the punitive comedy theorised by Bergson. Irony is often judgmental, and works with unequal power-relations. But here irony is dissolved, and the ending offers the spectator a form of messy coexistence with the social problems it brings up, all the while partly bypassing our understanding. In *P'tit Quinquin* there is no final sacrifice, no miracle that attempts a move beyond heterogeneity. This is a new phenomenon in Dumont's work: comedy allows him to resist transcendence, inviting us instead to live with the incongruities.

Because we often think of comedy as more pleasant than tragedy, it is worth underlining that Dumont's (feel-bad) comedy is no less provocative than his earlier films. As demonstrated by Mohamed's suicide scene, there is an interventionist dimension in *P'tit Quinquin*: Dumont has chosen to bring in a plotline that centres on France's current difficulties in negotiating its relation to the Republican values celebrated on the 14 July. He wants the series to be read along political lines also, he wants to provoke the spectators, he wants us to laugh, to stop laughing, to worry, to hesitate, to consider the ways in which we usually move from stimulus to response. More specifically, he wants to provoke those spectators who (desperately) seek to address these political issues by bringing them under 'conceptual control' (Bruns 2014, 80), offering a homogenous discourse that relies on a conception of human subjectivity that denies the 'bizarre workings of our sensibility' (Dumont in Delorme and Tessé 2014, 21).<sup>7</sup> As an antidote to this impossible dream of a coherent discourse, Dumont offers an anarchic narrative featuring a headless body, a character spinning on himself till he collapses, and a landscape of open animal carcasses. Obviously, this is not a solution to anything; it is an interruption that allows us to register the workings of our sensibility before we judge. By opening up this space between emotion

and action, Dumont thereby reminds us that when we eventually do judge, we should do so in the acknowledgement that our judgments will rest on an incomplete understanding of the situation – and that this incomplete understanding is what we all share.<sup>8</sup>

### Notes on contributor

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### Filmography

*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, 2008, Dany Boon, France.

*L'Humanité*, 1999, Bruno Dumont, France.

*P'tit Quinquin*, 2014, Bruno Dumont, France.

*Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon dieu*, 2014, Philippe de Chauveron, France.

*Trash Humpers*, 2009, Harmony Korine, USA.

*La Vie de Jésus*, 1997, Bruno Dumont, France.

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<sup>1</sup> The series premiered four months earlier in a widescreen format at the Cannes festival, all of the four 52-minute episodes put together.

<sup>2</sup> Dumont's series is set in the same region as Dany Boon's film, both films feature the Picard-song 'P'tit Quinquin', and it is possible to consider Dumont's work as a deliberate *non sequitur* to Boon's film.

<sup>3</sup> I am reluctant to write that the plot is unimportant. I believe it matters that it is a *whodunit* that crumbles away before our eyes. I believe *P'tit Quinquin* needs its spectators to play the whodunit game so that it can mock our desire for knowledge and clarity. Dumont, however, is more straightforward: 'Personally, I couldn't care less about the story. What interests me, for example, is that the policeman is standing in front of his horse with his arms outstretched' (Dumont in Delorme and Tessé 2014, 15).

<sup>4</sup> The opening and closing credits to each episode clearly announce this desire to schematise: we see the principal characters in a series of animated (largely black and white) contour drawings. It is as if the series has yet to be fleshed out.

<sup>5</sup> I use the expression 'feel-bad comedy' for the analysis of Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (2009), another contemporary film that can be associated with Beckett's plays (in Lübecker 2015).

<sup>6</sup> In *La vie de Jésus* we follow Freddy, a young, unemployed man who lives in Bailleul where nothing much happens. Occasionally, his routines are interrupted by violence: Freddy and his friends rape a local girl, his girlfriend leaves him, and Freddy then kills a young man of North African origin that his girlfriend has started to date. Freddy is arrested, but at the end of the film, he escapes, drives into the landscapes and ends up in a field looking at the sky. What follows is an interplay between darkness and light as a cloud moves across the sun; Dumont alternates between high angle shots of Freddy in the green field, extreme close-ups on his body, and POV-shots of the sky; as the light returns Freddy breaks into tears, sits up in the field, and looks towards the horizon. Dumont suggests a moment of absolution (like he would soon do in *L'Humanité*): he indicates a harmony between man and nature that helps Freddy to face the consequences of his own actions.

<sup>7</sup> This being said, the 204 minutes of *P'tit Quinquin* are not (only) about race relations and the French Republican values celebrated on the 14 July. To watch the series solely along such nationalistic and socio-political lines is to reinstate the background/foreground structure that Dumont so joyfully explodes. Although the series speaks to the

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contemporary political conflicts, it is also characterised by the energetic refusal to fully come together around topical themes and problems: this is part of Dumont's provocation.

<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to Tina Kendal for very valuable feedback on an earlier version of this article.