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THE FINALE IN THE FILMS OF BRUNO DUMONT

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ABSTRACT

The thesis's focus will be on the endings in the films of the French filmmaker Bruno Dumont. Dumont's films throughout the years have had mixed reactions by audiences. This is in part due to the fact that in some ways his films tend to go against common expectations of narrative cinema. While discussing his thoughts on the relationship between his films and the audience, as well as the role of the spectator, Dumont stated that he does "not finish his own films". Drawing from that statement the aim of this thesis is to explore how and why his films often end with an unresolved plot, unanswered questions or without an obvious dramatic resolution. Firstly by discussing classical theories of dramatic storytelling and how endings function within a dramatic structure. From there it will move on to compare the way in which Dumont follows classical conventions of storytelling to the way he breaks away from those conventions, a way in which this thesis will argue lies mainly in the finales of his films. It will analyse reappearing elements in the endings of Dumont's films, elements that substitute a more traditional resolution and can serve as a key for an interpretation of his films.

Tato práce se zabývá závěry ve filmech francouzského režiséra Bruna Dumonta. Dumontovy snímky vyvolaly v průběhu let smíšené i kontroverzní reakce. Důvodem je z části fakt, že jeho filmy obvykle narušují očekávání spojená s narativní kinematografií. Dumont v rozhovoru o vztahu mezi svými filmy a diváky prohlásil, že „své filmy nedokončuje". Na základě tohoto výroku diplomová práce dále zkoumá, jak a proč jeho snímky často končí nevyjasněnou zápletkou, nezodpovězenými otázkami nebo bez zřejmého dramatického rozřešení. Nejprve se zabývá klasickými teoriemi dramatického vyprávění a funkcí konce v dramatické struktuře. Dále porovnává, kdy se Dumont klasickou vyprávěcí strukturou řídí a kdy se od těchto pravidel odpoutává, přičemž tato práce zastává názor, že se tak stává zejména v závěrech jeho filmů. Práce analyzuje opakující se prvky v závěrech Dumontových snímků, které nahrazují tradičnější rozřešení a mohou sloužit jako klíč k interpretaci těchto filmů.

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I. INTRODUCTION

What I want is for the viewer to rethink liberally the reality which he faces.[1]

Narrative cinema, like any other narrative art form, follows certain principles and conventions of storytelling, dating at least back to Aristotle's *Poetics*[2] which was written around 335 BC. It remains the cornerstone of dramatic structure even though the definitions of dramatic storytelling have somewhat evolved. That being said, not unlike every other art form cinema has deviations from the rooted principles and conventions.

Bruno Dumont, born in the town of Bailleul in the North of France in 1958, did not go through film school but studied and later taught philosophy before turning to filmmaking. He premiered his debut film *La vie de Jésus*[3] in 1997 in Festival de Cannes and two years later his second feature film *L'humanité*[4] won the Grand Prix at the same prestigious festival. With his first films he gained considerable attention and the films caused quite some controversies among audience and critics alike, in part due to the fact that in some ways his films tend to go against common expectations of narrative cinema.[5] Dumont has made elleven feature films along with two miniseries premiering on French television.

The focus of this thesis will be on the endings in the films of Bruno Dumont. Taking examples of some of Dumont's most famous films it will discuss how they fit within the conventions of dramatic storytelling and in which way they depart from those same principles and conventions. Are the endings in the films of Dumont unique in some ways or do they lean more towards the traditions and conventions of narrative resolutions?

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[1] Bruno Dumont in M. Peranson and A. Picard. "A Humanist Philosophy: Interview(s) with Bruno Dumont", *CineAction*, vol. 51, feb. 2000, p. 70.
[2] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
[3] *La vie de Jésus*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 1997.
[4] *L'humanité*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 1999.
[5] Sharrett, Christopher. "Cinema as Spiritual Affair: Interview w. Bruno Dumont", *Cinéaste,* vol. 38, no. 4, Fall 2013, p. 29.

The thesis will begin by discussing the foundations of dramatic storytelling and structure, it's historical context and how its definitions have changed and evolved through the ages. It will move on to examine endings and narrative closures and take a look at the difference between classical resolutions in traditional narrative cinema and the so-called open endings which have become a common custom within art cinema. It will then look at a certain tendency which Dumont has been associated with, a certain noticeable movement away from the reign of narrative.

In the third chapter the cinema of Bruno Dumont will be discussed and put into context. The transgressive yet spiritual themes that are ever present in his films, the rigorous aesthetics and meticulous style and finally his storytelling and way of narration. With examples of plots and storylines it will reveal the questions that the endings pose for a further discussion.

The final chapter will dig into said endings. First it will address the role of the spectator and Dumont's thoughts on the relationship between the audience and film. It will attempt to analyze the endings of a few of his films by posing the questions which way they seem to follow the classical conventions of storytelling and in which way they deviate from those conventions and the principles. In comparison with notable influences, such as Carl Theodor Dreyer and Pier Paolo Pasolini, certain recurring elements in the finales of Dumonts will be analyzed. One of them being the long gaze of the main character or characters. The other is the lengthy embrace between two of the main characters.

The thesis will argue that these two decisive moments, the gaze and the embrace, can serve as a key for understanding and interpreting Dumont's films and either assist or substitute a more traditional resolution in their endings.

II. NARRATIVE CINEMA AND DRAMATIC STORYTELLING

E. M. Forster famously wrote that stories have only one merit: "...making the audience want to know what happens next."[6] When studying and analyzing narrative cinema it is important to take a close look at the *kinds of stories* being told and in *what manner*. But first it is elemental to take a look at the core elements that unite all stories and that govern them. Jan Fleischer, a screenwriting mentor at FAMU in Prague and former head of screenwriting department of The National Film and Television School in the UK, simplified the definition of a storytelling into that *somebody* is talking about *something* in a *certain way*.[7] Another way to put it would be like Ivo Trajkov, filmmaker and the head of the editing department at FAMU in Prague, who defines a story in his seminar as a *development* of *characters* and *plot* in *space* and *time* with an optional *storyteller*.[8]

There is no one way to tell a story. Stories can be told in all different kinds of manner and stories can have different kinds of dramatic structure. Still there are certain principles to all storytelling that can not be overlooked. It is not a strict formula that demands to be followed, it is rather "a convention established through thousands of years of dramatic storytelling. You can work against it, you can play with the expectations of the audience, but you cannot ignore it. It is our culture".[9] In his book *Into the Woods* John Yorke reflects on how stories work and why we tell them: "Every form of artistic composition, like any language, has a grammar, and that grammar, that structure, is not just a construct - it's the most beautiful and intricate expression of the workings of the human mind".[10]

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[6] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, New York: Harvest Books, 1927, p. 27.
[7] J. Fleischer, *Of Scripts and Life*, Athens: Mediterranean Film Institute, 2010, p. 25.
[8] The author is a student of Ivo Trajkov and has sat his seminars and workshops at FAMU.
[9] Fleischer, 2010, p. 98.
[10] J. Yorke, *Into the Woods*, London: Penguin, 2013, p. XVI.

But like every other art form, narrative cinema has its deviations from tradition, the exceptions from the rules and even a certain noticeable movement away from the classical tradition of storytelling. In order to discuss these exceptions and movement away from tradition, one must first take a closer look at the foundations of dramatic structure, it's history and its definitions through the ages.

A. THE FOUNDATION OF DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

Aristotle's *Poetics* is known to be the first theoretical work written on literary theory and the function of drama in the western world. Written more than two thousand years ago *Poetics*[11] focuses on tragedy, and in the simplest terms Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation of a *complete and whole action*, a *whole* being something that has a beginning, a middle and an end.[12] Something starts, then evolves and finishes. Aristotle's writing on tragedy is still considered the foundation of dramatic theory. Since then many theorists have made definitions of dramatic structure and broken it down into units all based on Aristotle's original thesis.

At the end of the first century BC the Roman poet Horace articulated the shape of dramatic structure in his *Ars Poetica*. He claimed that a play should neither be shorter or longer than five acts.[13] At its core these five acts that Horace describes do not differ much from Aristotle's *whole*. Aristotle's three acts - *beginning*, *middle* and *end* - function the same. The difference is merely that Horace broke down the middle into three parts.[14] Aristotle's and Horace's writing has had a profound influence on the future of drama from Seneca the Younger, through Shakespeare, the Elizabethan theatre and to present days.

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[11] Aristotle, 2013, p. 26.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] Yorke, 2013, p. 32.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

In 1863 the German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag introduced a model for storytelling known as the *Freytag's pyramid* where he claims, similarly to Horace, that tragedies consist of five parts or stages. The underlying shape according to Freytag is: *Exposition, Complications, Climax*, *Falling Action* and *Catastrophe*.[15] Jan Fleischer similarly breaks down dramatic storytelling into five parts and adds: "leave one out and the whole dramatic arch collapses."[16] He writes:

> First the audience is told what they need to know in order to understand the rest. That is called Exposition. Usually it introduces the world of the story and points out whose story it is, or what of. Then the conflict is revealed, i.e. what is the problem of the character(s), relationship, time, place etc. is made clear. Roughly speaking the audience is told what is at stake. Sometimes it is called Collision. What follows is called Crisis, which is the part where the conflict develops; the problem is being dealt with. It is usually the bulk of the story. The story gains momentum. The conflict reaches its Climax [or Catastrophe in terminology of ancient tragedy]. What the story was really about becomes obvious. Out of which springs Catharsis: emotional response to the story, appreciation of why the story was told.[17]

Others have divided dramatic structure into different units. The American film theorist and film historian David Bordwell wrote about prototypes of narrative structure in his book *Narration in the Fiction Film* first published 1985.[18] He notes that there is a consensus about the most common template structure that he calls a "canonical" story format. He divides it into six parts: *introduction of setting and characters*, followed by an *explanation of state of affairs*. Then a *complicating action,* followed by *ensuing events*. They then result in an *outcom*e that finally leads to an *ending*. But Bordwell also says this can easily be merged into five stages as well: *Setting plus Characters, Goal, Attempts, Outcome* and *Resolution*.[19]

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[15] Yorke, 2013, p. 36-37.
[16] Fleischer, 2010, p. 94.
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] D. Bordwell, *Narration in Fiction Film*, New York: Routledge, 2014.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

In modern film theory and texts on dramatic screenwriting the best known and noticeable paradigm is the so-called *three-act structure*. Syd Field in his renowned book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* breaks down the dramatic structure into three acts; a *setup*, followed by a *confrontation* which will end in a *resolution*, adding two *plot points* in between these three acts.[20] Another modern method for screenwriting is credited to František Daniel and is called the sequence approach and divides screenplays into eight sequences.[21] This method became very widespread and had even more practical value since a sequence, sometimes called a one-reeler, fitted exactly the length of one film reel.[22] All these different yet similar definitions can be helpful for screenwriters to approach and organize their writings. And they can also be useful for analysis. But when it comes down to it they all originate from the same bedrock.

Countless manuals have been written in the last decades on screenwriting. Most of them seem to preach the three-act structure in one way or another. Some screenwriters denounce them for being bad for aspiring screenwriters to follow in their artistic endeavour. Some even speak of them with certain contempt.[23] The reason is partially that they tend to be presented as scientific formulas or taken as some kind of magic solutions. In some ways this denouncement is understandable, because artistry or creativity does not spring out of definitions like these. That being said, it still does not mean that the principles of storytelling should be dismissed. In the end the nature of narrative in cinema is the same as in every other form of narrative.

All roads lead back to Aristotle and the number three or as John Yorke proclaims the archetype that governs modern screenwriting consists of the

[20] S. Field, *Screenplay*. New York: Random House, 2005, p. 21.
[21] P.J. Gulino, *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. XIII-XIIV.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[23] Yorke, 2013, p. XV-XVI.

number three.[24] "Three-act structure is the cornerstone of drama primarily because it embodies not just the simplest units of Aristotelian (and indeed all) structure; it follows the irrefutable laws of physics. Everything must have a beginning, middle and end."[25] We are born, we live and we die. He goes on to argue that this is not just some arbitrary invention or construct, but connected to the way in which we learn and based on this human need to give order to the things around us. "The dialectic pattern - thesis/antithesis/synthesis - is at the heart of the way we perceive the world."[26] And this is an important point, because dramatic structure is not a prescription of how a story should be told, it is "a description of how the story is perceived." [27]

All these different patterns, prototypes and paradigms of storytelling still share the same shape or form in one way or another. And that is what is called structure. It is perhaps a proof that Aristotle's thesis still rings true and why it is still the cornerstone of dramatic theory today. "Structure is like gravity: It is the glue that holds the story in place; It is the base, the foundation, the spine, the skeleton of the story."[28]

B. ENDINGS AND RESOLUTIONS

As mentioned above according to Aristotle both the beginning and the ending are two of the three components of drama. Noted author Syd Field says that endings and beginnings are very much related: "In physics, it's a natural law that endings and beginnings are related - cause and effect, like in Newton's Third Law of Motion in physics: For every action there's an equal and opposite reaction."[29] Something is laid out in the beginning that will evolve and be resolved at the

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.
[27] Fleischer, 2010, p. 94.
[28] Field, 2005, p. 21.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

end. It functions as a conclusion to what has come before or a solution to what was set out with, in the beginning. This echoes Aristotle's principle that a beginning does not follow anything, but other things follow the beginning in natural causality. Contrary to the beginning an ending follows what has come before, but nothing naturally continues after it. Therefore a good plot cannot begin or end in a random or arbitrary way.[30]

Denouement, a term often used for the final part of a story, refers to the part of the story where matters are explained and the threads of the story are weaved together. The word denouement derives from the French word *dénouer* which literally means 'to untie' and John Yorke explains how that is exactly the function of the denouement in a story, but adds: "the knots of plot are undone and complications are unraveled. But it is also a tying up of loose ends - in a classically structured work there must be a pay-off for every set-up, no strand left unattended and forgotten".[31] When the knots are undone or the loose ends are tied up, the expectation is that the audience gets some kind of pay-off; a satisfaction, fulfillment or an emotional catharsis.

In the book *Film Art: An Introduction* by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson it is argued that "narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world".[32] The audience therefore has an inherent expectation to make sense of the narrative. The principle of causality, the pattern of cause and effect, is an important factor in how the audience perceives and makes sense of a story. At the end it is naturally expected that problems or conflicts will be sorted out or a new light will be shed on them. Endings can fulfill the expectations but can also cheat them.[33] It is not a law of nature that a strong closure should have all things wrapped up clearly and no questions left

[30] Aristotle, 2013, p. 26.
[31] Yorke, 2013, p. 18-19.
[32] D. Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 10th edition), New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2012, p. 72.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 72 - 73

unanswered.[34] There are films that seem to be intentionally anticlimactic.[35] They deny the audience clear answers after having created an expectation for a causal resolution. Instead of resolving things definitely or tying up loose ends, they ask us to "ponder possible outcomes".[36] This is generally described as an open ending.

> When the filmmaker has chosen to let the ending remain open, the plot leaves us uncertain about the final consequences of the story events. The absence of a clear-cut climax and resolution may encourage us to imagine what might happen next or to reflect on other ways in which our expectations might have been fulfilled.[37]

Ambiguity of story events and open endings have become a norm and a convention in the so-called *art cinema*: "First, the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events. These linkages become looser, more tenuous in the art film."[38] By this deviation art cinema is in dialogue with other forms of art that started to oppose classical conventions and surely borrows concepts from modernism in literature and other movements from the same period.[39]In the past decades audiences have become more aware and gotten more used to open endings in cinema. And open endings can be quite engaging and even make the audience more active in some way in filling in the gaps of how the story actually ends, interpret the finale and find a meaning in the narrative choice of an open ending. As Bordewell says: "A banal remark of the 1960's, that such films make you leave the theater thinking, is not far from the mark: the ambiguity, the play of thematic interpretation, must not be halted at the film's close."[40] He goes on to say that the open ending also underlines the view of the filmmaker that life is

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 99
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 86
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 86.
[38] D. Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2008 , p. 152.
[39] Bordwell, 2014, p. 229.
[40] Bordwell, 2008, p. 157.

more complex than art can even try to be and that the only way to show "respect to this complexity is to leave causes dangling, questions unanswered."[41] In some way the art film turns the idea of the importance of causality and clarity upside down and makes ambiguity and open endings the principle of coherence and clearness. The art film asks the audience to watch in which way the story is told rather than just the story itself because "life lacks the neatness of art and *this art knows it."*[42]

C. THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM NARRATIVE

Films that don't build up according to classical conventions of dramatic storytelling at first sight seem to play with expectations, even create distance instead of emotional involvement and require more from the viewer in filling in the narrative gaps. In 1971 the screenwriter and director Paul Schrader published a book called *Transcendental Style in Film* where he tried to define both the tendency in style and the dramatic language which he felt was deviating from mainstream cinema and contradicting classical filmmaking.[43] This tendency he later described as part of a *movement away from narrative*. In a new introduction to the 2018 publication of the book he reflets: "I sought to understand how the distancing devices used by these directors could create an alternate film reality - a transcendent one."[44] Schrader was seeking to understand films that in his mind aim to strive for a more spiritual impact and *transcendence*, films that seem to be more related to the spirit as opposed to matter, that created disunity between humans and their environment which he saw as "...a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality."[45] Typically through their usage of time and duration these films allow the viewer to build his

[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[45] *Ibid.*

own associations and give him a chance to think, experience and make his own individual interpretations. These films oppose the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction and instead make the opportunity for opposite phenomena to co-exist within the cinematic world.[46]

Time and *duration* are keywords for Schrader. The filmmaker creates introspection through duration. "Our minds are wired to complete an on-screen image. We create patterns from chaos, just like our forefathers did when they imagined stars in the form of mythic beasts. We complete the action."[47] According to Schrader this gives the filmmaker freedom to step away from the reign of narrative and evoke poetry and memory, fantasy and dreams.[48] Schrader states that cinema itself is a narrative, or at least it used to be. Something begins, progresses and ends. The core of cinema is made up of "photographed reality through time"[49]. So time serves storytelling. But when transcendental style evolved, the relationship between time and story inverted. Time became the story, or at least it became the story's main component.[50]

One of the key elements or main techniques of the transcendental style according to Schrader is the long take. The long take makes a demand on the viewer's imagination and his involvement; it calls for an active viewer. It can evoke an emotional, intellectual or spiritual effect. Pier Paolo Pasolini described the long take as "a search for relations among discontinuous meaning."[51] But Schrader warns the reader not to slip into jargon when analyzing stories and the usage of time in these kinds of films. He says that when duration is used as a technique to activate the viewer it simply is done by withholding the expected or making something take a longer time than the viewer is conditioned to expect.[52]

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 3-6.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[51] P.P. Pasolini, "Observations on the Long Take", trans. Norman MacAfee and Craig Owens, *October*, vol. 13, summer 1980, p. 6.
[52] Schrader, 2018, p. 9-11.

It goes against what the viewer is used to. Along with the long take, other techniques of transcendental style manipulate the viewer's perception of time. Wide angles, limited dialogue, minimal coverage, offset editing, repeated compositions and non-action are examples of techniques Schrader connects to the transcendental style. In some way the choice of replacing action with stillness, is a passive aggression. It creates some kind of distance, which is the opposite of what many consider movies used to do best which is empathetic engagement.[53] It distances the spectator from what happens on the screen and can cut the string of an emotional involvement. The filmmakers that use these distancing devices therefore seem to be after something else than what the audience expects. But at the same time these distancing devices give the audience a new access into the film, a new portal into the cinematic reality. They create a different kind of empathy or involvement. Schrader writes:

> These techniques manipulate the viewer's perception of time. Motion pictures have two essential qualities: pictures and motion. Photographed reality through time. Empathy and action. A photograph creates empathy (or identification, if "empathy" is too strong a word) - that sandwich looks delicious, or the sea creature is frightening, for example. A moving photograph creates empathy over time. Two intercutted moving photographs create narrative.[54]

The base of this so-called movement away from narrative, *the transcendental style*, is a broad spectrum in Schrader's mind and should not be confused entirely with new terms like *slow cinema*, *durational cinema*, *contemplative cinema* or other definitions and branches of modern art cinema. Transcendental style is more of an umbrella term in Schrader's mind; something that can be seen in films from the period of neorealism of the twentieth century as well as in today's more experimental and avant-garde films that seem to be almost stripped of stories. Schrader says: "When cinema broke free from the iron

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[54] *Ibid.*

nucleus of narrative, when time became an end rather than a means, when Aristotle's formulations yielded to Deleuze's, it headed one of three directions."[55] He names these three directions *the surveillance camera*, *the art gallery* and *the mandala*. He made a diagram to be more understandable, with the notice or warning that this diagram is purely subjective on his behalf. The narrative "nucleus" lies at the centre of the diagram, the electrons of *the surveillance camera*, *the art gallery* and *the mandala* run around it and somewhere in middle lies *The Tarkovsky ring*, separating theatrical cinema from film festival- and art museum films on their journey towards a pure conceptual work of film art[56]:

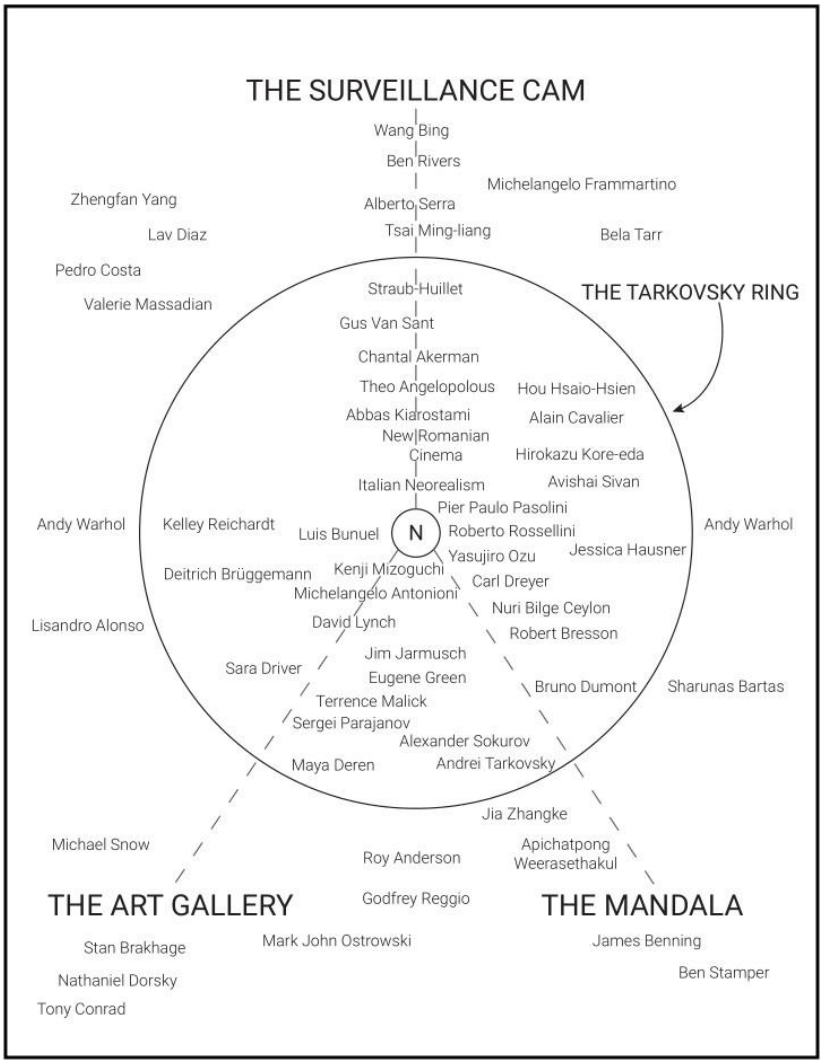

IMAGE 1: Paul Schrader's diagram of *transcendental style*. [57]

[55] *Ibid.* p. 25.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

These three directions of the movement away from narrative represent three main tendencies; *the surveillance camera* heads towards a day-to-day reality, *the art gallery* towards pure imagery and *the mandala* towards meditation.[58]

In some ways this so-called movement away from narrative that Schrader describes does depend on different stylistic and formal techniques than the classical narrative film, but also aims for a different outcome and a different relationship with the viewer. And it does that through time, duration, in-action and dead time. But still in films that use transcendental style there are stories being told. Bruno Dumont is placed on the diagram within the so-called *Tarkovsky Ring*. Somewhere on the line with Carl Theodor Dreyer and Robert Bresson and not so far from Pier Paolo Pasolini and other forerunners of transcendental style. These are all filmmakers that tell stories. The mode of their storytelling might differ, some introspection and distance might be employed at times by going against the expectations of the audience. However these films, and certainly the films of Bruno Dumont, are narrative films that tell stories even though the stories themselves might not be the only significant feature or noteworthy aspect of their cinema.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 25-30.

III. THE CINEMA OF BRUNO DUMONT

Bruno Dumont's earlier films were infamous for showing brutal violence and explicit sexual acts. They were often compared with other French films and filmmakers from around the turn of the century, labeled by critics and scholars as part of the *Cinéma du corps*, *The New French Extremity*, *Cinema of Sensation* and *Cinema of Transgression* to mention commonly used terms and phrases.[59] Dumont in his early works was associated with filmmakers such as François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat and certain films of Claire Denis, Bertrand Bonello, Virginie Despentes and others. Although there are several reasons behind the grouping of said filmmakers, what ranks highest is their somewhat transgressive and controversial films, which are as Raymond Watkins put it, full of "intentionally unpleasant or unwatchable moments".[60] As mentioned earlier Dumont's films have gotten mixed reviews and have divided both audiences and critics, leading to mass walk-outs and rejection in the media.[61] Certain journalists criticized Dumont for taking part in the hunt for shock reactions with his particular depiction of sex and violence.[62] Jonathan Romney even used the word pretentiousness about *L'humanité*, one of Dumont's most hailed films.[63] But others like the critic Mark Cousins praised it for being audacious and bold in the same article.[64] But to discuss Dumont's films only in the context of the somewhat provocative and notably polarising French cinema of the early 21st century is a rather limited perspective. There is a noticeable change in Dumont's filmography

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[59] R. Watkins, "Robert Bresson's Heirs: Bruno Dumont, Philippe Grandrieux, and French Cinema of Sensation", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 33, no. 8, 2016, p. 761.
[60] *Ibid.*
[61] T. Palmer, "Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body", *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 58, no. 3, Fall 2006, p. 27.
[62] J. Quandt, "Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in recent French Cinema", *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001, p. 18.
[63] M. Cousins and J. Romney. "L'Humanité: Rapture… or ridicule?", *Sight and Sound,* no. 10.9, sept. 2000, p. 24.
[64] *Ibid.*

at a certain point with the miniseries *P'tit Quinquin*[65] where he turned towards comedy and more absurdity as can be seen in later films like *Ma Loute*[66] and his two films about Jeanne d'Arc.[67] Those films still bear most of the auteur's fingerprints, but certainly differentiate themselves from the earlier films such as *La vie de Jésus*, *Flandres*[68] and *Hadewijch*[69]. Although violence, bleakness and transgressiveness are surely up front in his whole oeuvre, there are other aspects of his films that are worth to get acquainted with, and deserve a look from different perspective than in the comparison with his contemporaries, the reason being that his films aspire to the spiritual as much as the corporeal.

Many canonical filmmakers of the past come to mind and have been frequently mentioned in connection with Dumont, such as Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Dumont's biblical references and religious themes are an obvious connection to all three of them. Dumont has made films about Jeanne d'Arc just like Dreyer and Bresson did half a century before[70] and Pasolini made the film *Il vangelo secondo Matteo*[71] about the life of Jesus while Dumont named his aforementioned debut film *The Life of Jesus*. The themes and approaches of Bresson, Dreyer and Pasolini have all influenced Bruno Dumont's films in one way or another, but also their style and some of their techniques, even though Dumont sometimes tries to deny this.[72] These undeniable influences and similarities will be discussed further on in this thesis.

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[65] *P'tit Quinquin*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 2014.
[66] *Ma Loute*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 2016.
[67] Referring to *Jeannette, l'enfance de Jeanne d'Arc*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: Taos Films, 2017 and *Jeanne*, dir. Bruno Dumont, 3B Productions, 2019.
[68] *Flandres*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 2006.
[69] *Hadewijch*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 2009.
[70] Referring to *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer, France: Société Générale des Films, 1928 and *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, dir Robert Bresson, France: Agnes Delahaie Productions, 1962.
[71] *Il vangelo secondo Matteo*, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy: Arco Film, 1964.
[72] R. Bergan, "Humanity goes to Hollywood", *The Independent*, 22nd sept. 2011.

A. SPIRITUAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSCENDENCE

Bruno Dumont's films tend to focus on the mysteries of the everyday experience. They often revolve around sexuality, violence and human dignity. They address the relation between man and nature, body and spirit, good and evil. They also pose questions on religion and art, loneliness and poisonous masculinity. But at the heart of all his films are the inner struggles of people in search for meaning and revelation in the midst of the mysteries of existence. And Bruno Dumont has a specific perspective:

> There is a desire expressed through cinema and its methods to search and to find what's inside of others. I would like to express my own views on the mysteries of life.[73]

Dumont is openly atheist although there is, or perhaps because of his atheism, a visible interest in Christianity in his films.[74] The Christ-like figures that take the sins of mankind upon their shoulders like in *L'humanité*, the exorcism and resurrection in *Hors Satan*[75] and religious devotion and loss of faith in *Hadewijch* are strong examples of Dumont's fascination with Christianity. Nonetheless Dumont himself and his films have been described as humanist. It might seem hard to integrate humanism and this religious output at first sight, but Dumont seems to find some sort of humanism in Christianity.[76] He has stated that he believes in spirituality and the sacred. And in his opinion atheism does not exclude mystery or the belief in the mystique, no more than it excludes poetry or love.[77] "Cinema is my religion"[78] he said to Karin Badt when asked about his view on religion. He goes on to say that cinema has the impact of making people more sensitive, triggering emotions and experiencing empathy

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[73] Dumont in Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 69.
[74] K. Badt, "French Director Bruno Dumont on Outside Satan: "No God but Cinema"", *Huffpost*, 21st sept 2011.
[75] *Hors Satan*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 2011.
[76] Cousins and Romney, 2000, p. 23.
[77] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p 70.
[78] Dumont in Badt, 2011.

towards others. And when people are emotionally engaged in Dumont's mind they are more likely to act ethically in the humanist sense.[79]

When Dumont speaks about triggering emotions and experiencing empathy it seems to be in contradiction to the aforementioned distancing devices that Schrader connects to the transcendental style in cinema. But is it possible to detach and create empathy at the same time? To distantiate the audience while evoking immediate involvement simultaneously? Susan Sontag wrote an essay on the spiritual style in Robert Bresson's films where she states that some art appeals to the feelings directly and "some art appeals to the feelings through the route of the intelligence."[80] She goes on:

> Great reflective art is not frigid. It can exalt the spectator, it can present images that appall, it can make him weep. But its emotional power is mediated. The pull toward emotional involvement is counterbalanced by elements in the work that promote distance, disinterestedness, impartiality. Emotional involvement is always, to a greater or lesser degree postponed.[81]

So even by using style and devices that could seem to be only distancing at first sight, it can, according to Sontag, be the path to empathy and emotional response.

"Art is, of course, a spiritual affair [...] Art is most certainly the natural path to transcendence."[82] Dumont answered when asked about human fascination with the fantastic. In his view cinema and all art is made up of the spiritual mystery of the world.[83] Most of his films include fantastic or supernatural events and some films even miracles, although the settings of these films are usually quite realistic. For example in *Hors Satan*, which pays an obvious homage to Dreyer's *Ordet*[84], a woman is resurrected and comes back to life. This

[79] *Ibid.*
[80] S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Penguin Classics, 2009, p. 177.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
[82] Dumont in Sharrett, 2013, p. 30-31.
[83] Sharrett, 2013, p. 30.
[84] *Ordet*, dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer, Denmark: A/S Palladium, 1955.

miraculous moment can distanciate the spectator and pull him out of the emotional involvement of the rather realistic frame of the story. But at the same time it is such a powerful and decisive moment, such an unexpected event, that it can actually lead to an emotional response and as Schrader would put it: "an acceptance of parallel reality - transcendence".[85] Whether a moment like this appeals to the emotions through the route of intelligence is hard to say, but one thing is clear; it demands a certain leap of faith from the audience, just like the characters in both *Ordet* and *Hors Satan* are struggling with. The supernatural and the spiritual seem to be able to coexist with the real and the material within the cinematic world.

B. RIGOROUS AESTHETICS AND STYLE

Even though some things have evolved and changed in Dumont's stylistic approach throughout his career there are certain things that clearly identify his innovative audio-visual style and aesthetics. Mark Peranson and Andréa Picard described Dumont's aesthetics as being intellectually rigorous and aspire to a purity of expression.[86] His films tend to be very precise and consistent in style and there is a certain clarity or even simplicity to the whole mise-en-scène and every image. The consistency can be seen in how he films the picturesque and painting-like Flemish landscape that is very present in most of his films. It is also recognizable in the still compositions, long shots and wide angle tableaus in cinemascope, the slow pace of the long take and his offset editing.

This consistency can also be seen in another stylistic common denominator of Dumont's films which is how he frames his photogenic characters; their faces, bodies and movements, which gives them a very unique presence. The faces of Dumont's films are of ordinary people, but his camera transforms them in a way

[85] Schrader, 2018, p. 3.
[86] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 69.

that the famous face of Falconetti in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) comes to mind. With a few exceptions Dumont works almost exclusively with non-actors from the Hauts-de-France region where most of his films take place. The exceptions from that are to be seen in some of his later films where he casted professional actors as the bourgeoisie and aristocrats almost as a statement, letting them almost "over-act" their characters with the purpose of separating them from the ordinary common people he usually casts. By using non-actors Dumont follows in the footsteps of Robert Bresson who worked almost exclusively with non-actors which he referred to as *models*.[87] The characters in the films of Dumont do not really act, nor do they talk very much. Dialogue in his films is very sparse. Dumont even has said that words don't interest him.[88] He never uses voice-over or post-synchronization like for example Bresson, but instead his films are known for the heightened use of direct sound; diegetic contact sound and few isolated sources recorded in mono.[89]

There is also another important aspect of Dumont's style which is time; how he uses duration. The art of the temporal. He said: "The art of mise-en-scène is organizing time".[90] The duration of the shots, the length of each take, the movement of the camera and the movement of the characters within the frame, "everything is time".[91] And here we come back to Schrader. Many of the aforementioned stylistic devices can be seen in connection with transcendental style. The tableau wide angles where the "frame doesn't direct the viewer's gaze; it frees it to wander"[92], heightened sound effects which emphasize the "banal moment-by-moment reality of any situation"[93], repeated compositions of landscapes and characters within that landscape, images

[87] R. Bresson, *Notes on The Cinematograph*, trans. Jonathan Griffin, New York: NYRB, 2017, p. 6.
[88] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 70.
[89] Badt, 2011.
[90] Dumont in Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 70.
[91] *Ibid.*
[92] Schrader, 2018, p. 12.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

preferred over dialogue which is used very sparingly, postponed edits which are offset in time and the long take which is withheld longer than expected and gives power to time. But first and foremost it's the ambiguity of story events, the narrational gaps and the open endings which will be discussed later on. These stylistic devices of the transcendental style might be used intentionally for introspection, contemplation, meditation or interpretation, they might be aimed at the intellect or at the emotional. But certainly they make a demand on the audience. In the end it's all up to them what to make out of the films.

C. THE STORIES

The plots of Dumont's films are usually fairly straightforward. One might even say simple. Dumont himself has stated that he looks for the most ordinary things and that his stories are usually inspired by things he reads in the newspapers.[94] The stories themselves are however not very important to him he claims. He continues by saying: "I am always searching for simple ways of expressing myself effectively to evoke questions which are profound."[95] The stories themselves in many ways follow classical principles of dramatic structure. They are told almost exclusively chronologically and there is a clear causality in space and time. That being said they also fit with Bordwell and Thompson's definition of an art film in that they tend to have their deviations from classical principles; for example leaving permanent narration gaps, reducing dramatic plot points and containing a fair amount of ambiguity, especially in their endings.

There is a noticeable change in Dumont's filmography with the 2014 miniseries *P'tit Quinquin* where he starts to turn towards comedy and more absurdity. The films prior to *P'tit Quinquin* were more realistic drama films which were not known for bringing many smiles to the viewers faces. But with the two

[94] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 71.
[95] Dumont in *Ibid*.

Quinquin miniseries[96] and the film *Ma Loute* there is a nod towards slapstick comedy, bringing forth the French surrogates of Laurel and Hardy along with the usual exaggerated physicality. Continuing his play with the absurd are the two films about Jeanne d'Arc, which both went even further away from the realistic drama towards absurdity. But Dumont has always flirted with film genres. The frame of *L'humanité* is a murder mystery or what the French call a policier, *Flandres* borrows elements from the war drama, *Twentynine Palms*[97] is to a great extent a road-movie and just like *P'tit Quinquin* and *Ma Loute* play with motifs from the slap-stick comedy, *Jeannette, l'enfance de Jeanne d'Arc* is a clearcut musical. But along with not only flirting but relying on genre conventions, the films also play with the expectations of those same conventions. That applies both to the conventions of storytelling within the genre in general, but primarily the narrative closure, the resolution, the finale in the films.

1. L'HUMANITÉ AND THE EARLIER FILMS

L'humanité from 1999 is a murder mystery. The film tells the story of the simple inspector Pharaon de Winter, who is not in good touch with his own emotions nor to the people around him. He investigates a brutal rape and murder of a young girl just outside the small town of Bailleul. His only real relationship is with Domino, a girl next door who sympathises with Pharaon, and Joseph her rather repelling boyfriend. While Pharaon's investigation is leading nowhere he seems to be relating more to the people around him in the process of the search for the killer. The investigation arrives at a dead-end and is given over to the police department in the city of Lille. After Pharaon has been back on the street as a regular policeman, he is informed that the Lille police has arrested Joseph, Domino's boyfriend, for the horrible murder. Pharaon arrives at the police station

[96] Both the aforementioned *P'tit Quinquin* from 2014 and *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: ARTE, 2018.
[97] *Twentynine Palms*, dir. Bruno Dumont, France: 3B Productions, 2003.

to meet Joseph who's been arrested. He quite unexpectedly admits to the crime in private to Pharaon. His reaction is to take the crying Joseph into his arms, embrace him and kiss him. After that he goes to the cemetery and puts flowers on the grave of his dead wife and daughter before going to Domino embracing her as well. Then at the end we see the unexpected image of Pharaon where he sits in the police station with handcuffs on his hand and stairs out of the window.

This final image is inarguably an unexpected image in the context of the story. The story itself deviates considerably from classical storytelling; the investigation of the murder is not in foreground and neither is the personal backstory of the main character. Suddenly and out of the blue the police have captured the murderer. The search of the murderer is not in focus even though according to the genre it would be expected. There are no explanations given and there is no *detective dénoument*, which is common to detective stories, a segment where the clues are gathered, the motive of the killer is revealed and a conclusion is laid out.[98] There is a closure to the investigation and the murder seems to be solved but only in the most banal and distanciating way. Without any explanation. And then at the end we see Pharaon sitting in the police station with handcuffs on himself. One might ask, is he guilty? And guilty of what then? Or is he sacrificing himself, pleading guilty for a crime he did not commit? And why is that and for what cause?

Flandres from 2006 is a war drama. The story follows André and Barbe, young farmer's kids and villagers in the North of France. André and Barbe have a sexual relationship, but are not a couple. When they are sitting in a bar one night Barbe meets a handsome young man named Blondel who is about to join the same legion in the army as André and his other fellows. Barbe and Blondel seem to hit it off as André tries to hide his jealousy. André, Blondel and a couple of

[98] Bordwell and Thompson, 2012, p. 78-79.

others are sent to war in an unspecified territory of the Middle East. They witness and take part in all the horrors of war. Ambushes, murder, rape, betrayal. The worst trades of mankind lead them to commit the worst of crimes. While the war rages on we get to know that Barbe has become pregnant by Blondel, but she decides to lie to him in a letter and not have the child. The war continues on and horrible events lead up to André being the only one left of his group to return home. Barbe, who has become mentally unstable in the absence of her two lovers, seems to sense that something went wrong leading to André being the only one to return alive and safely home. André has a hard time opening up about what happened in the war to frustrated Barbe who looks for the answers in every corner, gazing at the sky and asking the universe to reply. Finally André opens up to her, admitting to her that he left Blondel to die as they embrace and confess their love to each other.

Flandres is considerably more conventional in it's storytelling than *L'humanité*, it follows more the principle of cause and effect and the filmmaker reveals somewhat more information than he did in his previous films. But there are the same unexplained things of mystique and spiritual matters as in other films of Dumont. Throughout the film Barbe has been staring into the sky, looking for answers from the universe or the divine perhaps. But in the end when she confronts André about what happened in the war, she tells him that she was there, that she saw everything and she tells him in detail what happened, what has already been shown on the screen. For the audience it is not completely clear why André left Blondel to die; if it was selfishness, cowardice, hatred or jealousy, even though there is a hint towards the last mentioned. Nor is the audience given any explanation of the aftermath of the otherwise open ending. There are also other unexplained matters of a more spiritual kind, especially how did Barbe know everything that happened among the soldiers abroad? Did she get

answered when she seemed to be lifted up from the ground, staring up at the sky and asking the universe for answers earlier in the film?

Hors Satan from 2011 tells a mystical story. The protagonist, only referred to as the Guy, is a lonely drifter, a wanderer, who earns his living by being a sort of a spiritual healer and an exorcist in a small village of Northern France. Nature is his church and he sleeps outdoors in a camp by the seashore. He is befriended by a local girl, simply referred to as the Girl, a lonely goth who opens up to him about the abuse from the hands of her stepfather. While the mysterious and mystical Guy roams around and upholds some sort of justice by murdering the stepfather and adopting his dog, performing exorcism on a young girl and giving a backpacker a sublime orgasm, the Girl starts to gain feelings for him. It’s when she finds the Guy sleeping by his campfire, that she returns into the woods only to be found raped and murdered the day after. Later in the story the Guy sees the rapist and murderer being led to a police car before he goes to the wake of the Girl, takes her away into nature and resurrects her. As the Girl runs home to the village and into her mother’s arms the Guy wanders off from the village with the dog of the supposed murderer.

2. P’TIT QUINQUIN AND THE LATER FILMS

The miniseries *P’tit Quinquin* from 2014 tells a story of a place. It’s a black comedy, an absurd murder mystery, where supernatural things happen all around. The story follows li'l Quinquin and his friends endlessly roaming around on their bicycles in the same setting of Northern France as in Dumont’s previous films. The story starts where a headless female body has been found stuffed inside the stomach of a dead cow. An investigation starts and somehow Quinquin and his friends are always hovering around and irritating the investigators enormously, the constantly twitching inspector commandant Van Der Weyden

and his sidekick Carpentier. As the investigation continues the murders increase and even stranger and mysterious things start to occur. The investigators search high and low for clues around the area. Meanwhile Quinquin only wants to protect his girlfriend from the horrors around, but instead gets into endless troubles at home, being blamed for whatever his disabled cousin Dany is responsible for. It all leads to an almost grandiose spaghetti western ending where the investigators try to get into the bottom of the evil that is taking place in the area. They stare into the eyes of cousin Dany, who seems to play the role of the holy fool in the story, trying to figure out what is behind his intense yet empty stare. And they find nothing. The quest continues, the mystery is left unresolved and the audience is left with the image of gazing Dany and Quinquin, who stare at the landscape outside the gates of the farm. Evil still lurks around.

Ma Loute is a period comedy. Another comic pair of detectives investigate the disappearance of rich tourists at the beaches of the Hauts-de-France region. The disappearance creates a sense of discomfort among the aristocracy, especially the van Peteghem family who spends its summer vacation there in the otherwise calm rural beach area populated by poor peasants. An attraction between Billy, the offspring of the incest van Peteghem family, and Ma Loute, a peasant's son from the area, starts to evolve. Meanwhile the two investigators, Machin and Malfoy, are trying to get to the bottom of the mysterious disappearances. The decadence of the van Peteghem family grows at the same time as the frustration among the peasants towards them piles up and one by one the members of the Peteghem family start to disappear. We learn that the peasants are not only responsible for the disappearance of the rich tourists; they also cook them for dinner. And at the moment that Ma Loute finds out that Billy of the van Peteghem family is possibly not a girl as the appearance implies, Billy ends up at the peasants farm held captive among some of his/her family

members. Incredible things start to happen; Isabelle van Peteghem takes wings and flies off the cliffs while André, her husband, shouts "miracle, miracle" and inspector Machin starts to lift up in the air like a balloon. Ma Loute later in a moral dilemma decides to let the captured van Peteghem's go and leaves them knocked out at the beach only to be found by the investigators who are hailed as heroes by the van Peteghems for transforming their existence by being humane. Because what else can they make out of all what has happened? The same question certainly applies to the audience. The absurd story of *Ma Loute* can be seen as just a farce and undoubtedly enjoyed as such. But it still raises all the same questions as the other films discussed.

When looking at the synopsis one might say that Dumont uses storytelling in a relatively conventional way considering that he, despite his genre flirtations, is located within the art film cinema. And one might wonder how these seemingly conventional stories evoke such dramatic responses from audiences and critics alike. The answer I will argue lies in Dumont's employment of the ending. In the end it's about the ending.

IV. "FIN" - THE ENDINGS OF DUMONT'S FILMS

> The ending has the task of satisfying or cheating the expectations prompted by the film as a whole.[99]

As mentioned in the chapter on dramatic storytelling the art film has with time built up different expectations from the viewer than classical narrative cinema. It is more keen on using ambiguity as a device in it's storytelling and the open ending is in some way more of a common custom. There is even a certain noticeable tendency within the art film, a certain movement away from narrative towards a more transcendent style. The classical principles of storytelling are not in the foreground in those films; they rely more on the spectator to fill in the narrative gaps and interpret the films themselves. But like Bordwell and Thompson say in their chapter on narrative form that in the end it all comes down to the question of how much information the filmmaker wants to reveal and when to reveal it.[100] And in the end there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. This chapter will focus on the endings of Dumont's films; in which way he reveals and withholds information, how he sees the role and relationship with his audience, which stylistic devices he uses and narrative choices he makes in the endings of the films.

A. THE ROLE OF THE SPECTATOR

> One should not be concerned with or attempt to please or displease viewers, wherever they may be, since they already lie at the center of cinema itself, that is, at the heart of the filmmaking process.[101]

Bruno Dumont has made it clear that he does not make films for people in search of light entertainment and he certainly does not bring the audience a satisfying resolution on a silver platter. The films themselves are demanding and their

[99] Bordwell and Thompson, 2012, p. 72-73.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 87.
[101] Dumont in Sharrett, 2013, p. 30.

endings somewhat force the spectator to confront the ideas and themes presented in the films. The characters and their actions are arguably quite mysterious, Dumont withholds information and does not fulfill the expectations of answering the unavoidable questions that arise at the end of his films. Robert Bresson wrote in his *Notes on the Cinematograph*: "Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden."[102] But Bruno Dumont tends to take that sentiment even further. In an interview with *CineAction* Dumont declares that he does not complete his films: "The viewer has a very important role to play in the films that I make. That's why I don't complete them: the viewer has a determining role in the reception of the film."[103] In the same interview he hints that the reason is that he takes his audience so seriously that he provides them with the opportunity to create their own opinion, their own reading, their own understanding. The story is just a frame.

> In general, there are a lot of filmmakers who give us overcooked hamburgers, if you know what I mean. What I hope for the most is that the film enriches the viewer. That a modification of one's being occurs, whether one or two or three days later. That's what matters.[104]

Closure of that kind can obviously be seen from the perspective of the conventions of classical storytelling as incomplete.[105] Bordwell and Thompson mention that the audience actively tries to link events by the means of cause and effect.[106] But later they argue that a "restricted narration tends to create greater curiosity and surprise for the viewer."[107] In another place Bordwell has even said that complaining about suppression of a story's resolution is equal to renouncing one of the standard conventions of the art film. In the art film "the story is

[102] Bresson, p. 25.
[103] Dumont in Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 70.
[104] *Ibid.*
[105] Bordwell and Thompson, 2012, p. 79.
[106] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[107] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

abandoned when it has served the director's purpose but before it has satisfied the spectator's requirements."[108]

The critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote in the Chicago Reader about what he calls overrated solutions.[109] He makes an example of Franz Kafka who he says has never been denigrated for leaving his novels unfinished. He claims that his novels might not even be valued as much today if he had imposed conclusions onto them.[110] Rosenbaum thinks that the endless demand on resolutions in films is "an artistic double standard"[111] and truly believes that some films would be "more honest and artistically and philosophically better if they'd been left unfinished."[112] That fits well to Dumont's beliefs about his films; that they are very demanding for the viewers, but perhaps at the same time more respectful of them.[113]

B. TWO DECISIVE MOMENTS

When taking a closer look at the endings in the films of Bruno Dumont a certain pattern begins to emerge. There are specific moments that usually always occur in the final act of his films. One of them is a long gaze of the main character or characters of the films. The close-up of a gazing face is one of cinema's most powerful tools and is used by Dumont in a unique way throughout his films. As Cousins mentions it is neither the objectifying gaze nor "the invisible narrative look" - subjects which have become fairly common in modern film studies - that appear in the case of Dumont.[114] In his films the gaze comes from another place. It is a shot/countershot. Opposite of the character looking straight ahead is the countershot of a landscape, a countryside, instead of a more expected face of

[108] Bordwell, 2014, p. 209.
[109] Rosenbaum, 2000.
[110] *Ibid.*
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] *Ibid.*
[113] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 72.
[114] Cousins and Romney, 2000, p. 22.

another human being.[115] On the surface level the gaze seems to be fixed on something insignificant, a still tableau of the dull surroundings. However with time, the length of the take and the stillness of the shot, it starts to feel like nature, the landscape, is looking back at the character. The heightened soundscape makes it even sound like the landscape is breathing. The other decisive moment mentioned is a long embrace between the main characters of the film. Sometimes this embrace is quite unexpected in the story, but in other cases it seems more motivated and logical according to the story.

1. THE GAZE

In *L'humanité* Pharaon stands in a cemetery at the grave of his dead wife and daughter after having met with Joseph, the killer in the case he had been investigating. Pharaon's gaze is fixed for an unsettling amount of time on the landscape in front of him. Mark Cousins describes this stare, this gaze of Pharaon, as a "CinemaScope Pasolini, an unblinking Bresson."[116]


IMAGE 2 & 3: Pharaon's gaze at the landscape (*L'humanité*, min. 2.14.25).

But this scene, this moment, this gaze, is left unexplained. It does not bear an obvious meaning in the context of the scene before or the one that follows. The principle of cause and effect is not at play. The gaze is intense yet insignificant, powerful yet modest, inviting yet distancing. It seems to be almost the opposite of a climax or an *obligatory scene* like Jan Fleischer talks about; a scene where

[115] P. Cartelli, "Notes on Bruno Dumont's *P'tit Quinquin*, or Something is Rotten in the North of France", *Senses of Cinema*, Issue no. 75, June 2015.
[116] Cousins and Romney, 2000, p. 22.

the peak of the dramatic conflict of the character is reached and it is made obvious what the film is really about.[117] It is more in line with Bresson's aforementioned note that the most important should be the most hidden.[118] However simultaneously it is in some way consistent and in harmony with the way the story has been told up to that point.

The same gaze occurs in other films, and they are shown in a similar manner; characters full of questions stare towards the land, the nature, the universe, in search for answers. Barbe in *Flandres* stares at the sky through the leaves above her when she waits for some answers about what went down in the war. The Guy in *Hors Satan* stares down the road towards the horizon, contemplating as a fire burns far away, 'outside satan'. Evil is still lurking around the countryside village.


IMAGE 4 & 5: Barbe stares towards the sky through the trees (*Flandres*, min. 1.18.00).


IMAGE 6 & 7: The Guy's gaze towards the horizon (*Hors Satan*, min. 1.19.25).

The gaze always brings up questions of what lies under reality's material surface and what is happening behind the eyes of the look, inside the mind of the looker.[119] One wonders if it is the moment where the character sees something in

[117] Fleischer, 2010, p. 190.
[118] Bresson, 2017, p. 25
[119] M. Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 103.

a clear light and finally understands something important; some sort of an enlightenment or an epiphany. Is it the lowest point in the character's arc or *journey*? Is it perhaps the moment of no return where the character has to make his most difficult decision in the story? Is the character just contemplating or reflecting on his own situation? Or is the character full of questions, just like the audience, staring at nature, creation itself, which stares back at him with utter indifference? Nothing is obvious, everything is left in ambiguity. The same ambiguity which can be seen in the faces of Dany, the cousin of Quinquin in *P'tit Quinquin* and van Peteghem and the detectives Machin and Malfoy in *Ma Loute* while they stare ahead over the still but mysterious landscape.


IMAGE 8 & 9:Dany's gaze through the farm's gate (*P'tit Quinquin*, ep. 4, min. 48.55).


IMAGE 10 & 11: Van Peteghem and the detectives (*Ma Loute*, min 1.34.40).

The films of Pier Paolo Pasolini are one of the more apparent influences on Bruno Dumont as has been mentioned. And the gazes in the endings of Dumont's films are interesting to take a look at in comparison with the final scene of Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*[120], the gaze of Anna Magnani's character at the end of the film. Mamma Roma is surrounded by people who are trying to stop her from

[120] *Mamma Roma*, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy: Arco Film, 1962.

jumping out of the window after her son's death. She thrust the window open, but then she suddenly stops and stares ahead. She sees something outside that window. She stares at the suburban landscape of Rome with the dome of the Basilica in the center of the frame, surrounded by newly built apartment blocks. The timeless, the divine looking back at her possibly? The gaze becomes more intense. It's the final images of *Mamma Roma*:


IMAGE 12 & 13: Mamma Roma looking at the dome of the Basilica in the middle of the suburban landscape of Rome (*Mamma Roma*, min 1.46.12).

Like Pasolini, Dumont stays on the shots for an unusual amount of time. And yet it never produces any answers to the questions that the audience might have in mind. There is no obvious connection between the one who stares and what he stares at. Still there is a "terrific power to those moments, a basic, brutally elemental longing for the world to explain itself"[121] like Kent Jones wrote in his review of *L'humanité* in *Film Comment*. But the world doesn't explain itself. It doesn't answer back with words. With the duration of the takes and those staggering images, whether perceived as significant or insignificant, the spectators are forced to start wondering what is behind them, to look for a meaning. It is their turn.

[121] J. Kent, "Review: L'humanité", *Film Comment*, vol. 36, no. 3, May/June 2000, p. 73.

2. THE EMBRACE

Another recurring decisive moment at the end of Dumont's films is a long embrace between characters in the films. They throw their arms and wrap themselves around each other in the final scenes of every film. Normally in most films there can be quite a rational reason for an embrace in a final scene, for example an embrace between two united loved ones or a reconciliation of some sort. But in the films of Dumont they can be totally unexpected and unmotivated at first sight. They seem to stand for some closure or a release of emotions in the minds of the characters, catharsis if you will. But catharsis for what?

In *L'humanité* Pharaon embraces Joseph, he takes him into his arms and fuses with him. First Pharaon arrives at the police station to guard Joseph in the office of the sheriff. He asks Joseph if he is guilty and to his surprise Joseph admits to be guilty of the horrible crimes he is accused of. Pharaon then gently caresses him for a moment and then suddenly starts to embrace him and then kiss him. This is an unexpected act from the protagonist Pharaon and one wonders what this seemingly unrealistic overreaction is supposed to mean. And Dumont only explains Pharaon's actions in vague and open terms: "He takes others in his arms, he fuses with them, he embraces them. That's humanity. It's the capacity to feel others so much that we fuse with them."[122]


IMAGE 14 & 15: Pharaon embraces the killer Joseph (*L'humanité*, min. 2.13.10).

[122] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 71.

Although some embraces at the end of Dumont's films may seem unmotivated, there are others which may feel more logical within the narrative. There is a stronger link between cause and effect that the audience can hold on to.

In the finale of *Flandres* the traumatized André is embraced by Barbe while confessing to her what Barbe wanted him to admit. In *Hors Satan* the Girl and her mother embrace in shock after the Girl has been miraculously resurrected by the mysterious Guy who wanders along with the dog at the end.


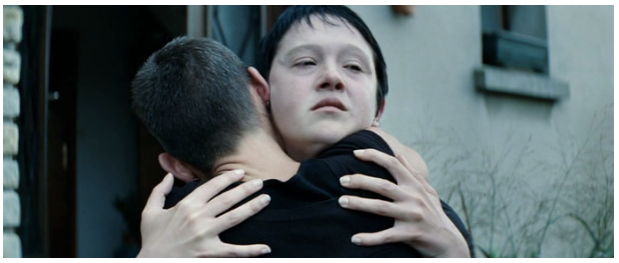

IMAGE 16: André and Barbe (*Flandres*, min. 1.27.50)
IMAGE 17: The Girl and her mother (*Hors Satan*, min. 1.42.45)

Quinquin hugs his girlfriend in the all-around unresolved mystery in *P'tit Quinquin* and monsieur van Peteghem and inspector Machin embrace each other after the inspector has been shot down like a balloon at the end of *Ma Lout*. These embraces are genuine and authentic. They seem to be more in causality with what has happened before in the story.


IMAGE 18: Quinquin and his girlfriend (*P'tit Quinquin*, episode 4, min. 49.10)
IMAGE 19: Inspector Machin and André van Peteghem (*Ma Lout*, min. 01.57.53)

Similar to the comparison of the gazes of Dumont's characters and the gaze of Anna Magnani at the end of Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, there is certain

resemblance or influence to be found in the embraces of Dumont and the famous embrace in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* from 1955. The final images of *Ordet* are of a long embrace between Mikkel, the oldest son at the Borgensgård farm, and Ingrid, his newly resurrected wife. It is the miracle that Dumont's *Hors Satan* pays it's homage to. Mikkel says "Now life begins for us" and embraces Ingrid. They fuse and become one for quite a long time before Ingrid replies with just one word: "livet" (e. life).


IMAGE 20 & 21: The embrace between Mikkel and Ingrid (*Ordet,* min. 2.03.25 & 2.04.40)

A miracle at the end of a realistic drama film. What does it mean? And how can it happen that a woman is suddenly resurrected from the dead and the audience is supposed to believe it and connect emotionally to this moment?

The examples of the two decisive moments that occur in Dumont's endings, gaze and the embrace, can be seen as Schrader would put it; an image or an act that assists the viewer's resolution of the story. Strong, unexpected moments that either cause or aim at some sort of spiritual effect or transcendence, rather than an emotional engagement or catharsis. And these moments can result in a question mark in the audience's mind or they can be a key for interpretation or reflection.[123]

[123] Schrader, 2018, p. 3.

C. THE QUESTION MARK

When Bruno Dumont proclaims that he doesn't complete his films, the viewers are left with the task of completing them. There is a question hanging in the air which they have to answer for themselves. That can make people feel "a species of dissatisfaction that is the antithesis of the impression of a closure."[124] As said before, in classical dramatic storytelling a resolution should tie the knots of the plot together, it should answer the questions posed in the story, according to Aristotle nothing should naturally follow after an ending. But then it might also be argued that a question mark is the starting point for every observation but an observation ends with a question mark too, like Brecht used to preach to his actors.[125] And there is an already established convention in art films to conclude a narrative with an open ending; a question pointed towards the audience.

Dumont knows how to make his open endings momentous and memorable. His films often end with an occurrence of a fantastic element, a spiritual or transcendental moment, where something unexplained happens. In the very ending of *L'humanité* the question arises why Pharaon is sitting in the police station with handcuffs on, looking through the window up into the sky? Is he taking the sins of mankind upon himself like Christ on the cross? How could Barbe in *Flandres* have known and seen what happened to André and Blondel in the war in a foreign country while she was back in France? This is never explained or even hinted at, but we are supposed to believe it? How are we also supposed to believe in the miracle at the end of *Hors Satan*, the resurrection of the Girl? Is this biblical tale just an allegory, a big metaphor for something even bigger? But for what then? Does that same apply for *Ma Loute* where suddenly two of the main characters take wings and fly to the same astonishment of the audience of the film as to the characters themselves? The question mark is even

[124] Carrol, 2007, p. 7.
[125] P. Thomson, "Brecht and actor training: On whose behalf do we act?", *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 104-105.

more direct and spelled out at the ending of *P'tit Quinquin* when the face of every character looks like a question mark in the last scene of the miniseries, not even knowing where to start asking about the strange and mysterious events that have happened previously in the story.

The questions that arise might cause a sort of "intellectual discomfort" as Philip Carrol puts it.[126] But these unavoidable narrative related questions that the spectator asks himself at the end of Dumont's films hint towards bigger and more profound questions. They pose questions about the sacred and the spiritual in the universe. And in Dumont's view cinema is all about mystery. "Most of all a spiritual mystery. That's the most secretive, enigmatic, and foreign."[127] So the normal rules don't apply, these questions cannot be answered in a conventional manner. One should rather ask how to conclude a film like *L'humanité*, *Hors Satan* or *Ma Loute* in a conventional way? Is that even possible?

One might argue that the intellectual discomfort of the question mark or the open ending that Carroll talks of is precisely the reason why Aristotle's theory of three is still the prevailing way in which we tell stories. That when you rob the viewer of the beginning - middle - end, it results in irritation because something has been left out. "Why? Because certain bits of information [...] which were implicitly promised were not delivered."[128] But for Bruno Dumont it seems necessary to put all of this into question, to go against the expectations and aim for a different result in the minds of the audience: "I'm not a complacent artist or a commercial artist who mocks the viewer. This means I like to struggle with the viewer; I'm not afraid of the viewer. I really like confrontation. That's war."[129]

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[126] N. Carrol, "Narrative Closure", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 135, no. 1, Aug. 2007, p. 6.
[127] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 70.
[128] Carrol, 2007, p. 6.
[129] Peranson and Picard, 2000, p. 72.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to examine the endings in the films of Bruno Dumont. By outlining the principles of dramatic storytelling and classical conventions in narrative cinema it went on to discuss the deviations and exceptions from those same conventions. Ambiguity of story events, narration gaps and the so-called open ending have become a common trade of art films in past decades and Bruno Dumont's films are no exception. They have even been described as a part of a movement away from narrative; films that go against the expectations of classical cinema and use certain devices to aim for a different effect in the minds of the audience.

The thesis attempted to pinpoint the main trademarks of Dumont's films by taking a closer look at recurring themes, unifying aesthetics and stylistic choices as well as his way of storytelling. It went on to examine why his films tend to end with an unresolved plot or without an obvious solution. It sought to answer the question if the endings are in some ways unique or if they tend to lean more towards the tradition and conventions of narrative resolution. Furthermore it discussed how that comes together with Dumont's ideas on narrative endings, the relationship with the audience and the larger question of the purpose of cinema itself.

By comparing examples of storylines in Dumont's films with classical conventions of narration in cinema it may be argued that the endings are in some ways conventional in comparison with the open ending in the so-called art cinema. But at the same time they are unique in the way they are constructed. The thesis demonstrated a certain pattern of recurring elements in the finales of Dumont's films. One being a long gaze of the main character or characters. The other a lengthy embrace between two of the main characters. It was argued that

these two decisive moments at the end of the films can create both a question mark in the minds of the audience and assist their resolution of the story. They can be a key for interpretation or a reflection, by providing the audience with the opportunity to create their own opinion, their own reading, their own understanding.

Aristotle's theory of three and the classical merits of narrative structure are still the foundation of dramatic storytelling, because they are inherent in the way people think. But there are films that seek to capture the audience with something other than just the story. They aim for a different effect, even by cheating the expectation and curiosity of what will happen next. The narrative is almost as an excuse or secondary byproduct for bigger and more profound questions. Bruno Dumont's films aim to evoke thoughts and emotions, introspection and interpretation, contemplation or even transcendence . And then it's left to the audience if they can accept it or not. If they are open to the spiritual and the unknown and ready to take the leap of faith that things can be left unexplained and unresolved questions can exist within the cinematic world.

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