

apropos

[Perspektiven auf die Romania]

Sprache/Literatur/Kultur/Geschichte/Ideen/Politik/Gesellschaft

Four recent film books on Bruno Dumont

A collective review

Jan Rhein

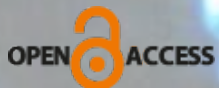
apropos [Perspektiven auf die Romania]

hosted by Hamburg University Press

2024, 12

pp. 96-103

ISSN: 2627-3446

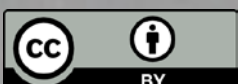


Zitierweise

Rhein, Jan. 2024. „Four recent film books on Bruno Dumont
A collective review.“ *apropos [Perspektiven auf die Romania]* 12, 96-103.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.15460/apropos.12.2275>

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Four recent film books on Bruno Dumont

A collective review

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- MEJAN, Jean-Max (ed.). 2020. *Bruno Dumont. Un funambule de génie*. La-Neuville-aux-Joûtes: Jacques Flament.
- THOMAS, Benjamin (ed.). 2021. *Le cinéma de Bruno Dumont en fragments alphabétiques*. Laval: Warm.
- BROSSAT, Alain & Joachim Daniel Dupuis (ed.). 2021. *Bruno Dumont ou le cinéma des Z'humains*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- VANCHERI, Luc. 2022. *Bruno Dumont. Cinema mysticum*. Paris: Classiques Garnier.

Keywords

French cinema – Bruno Dumont – film book

“Peu nombreux sont les livres consacrés au cinéma de Bruno Dumont”, the observation that one can find on the book cover of *Bruno Dumont. Un funambule de génie* (Méjean 2020a), may sound strange to a reader from Germany, where few books on arthouse filmmakers are published. From this point of view, France is still an Eldorado for film (and film book) lovers; and in regard to French director Bruno Dumont, no less than four books dedicated to his work have been published during the last four years (Méjean 2020a, Thomas 2021, Brossat & Dupuis 2021, Vancheri 2022).¹

In France, where he is much better known than abroad, Dumont still enjoys the reputation as an outsider and *enfant terrible*. But the growing academic interest in his work indicates that he is one of the most innovative filmmakers of our time. His

¹ Some works were also published earlier (cf. Tancelin & Jouve 2001; Alligier 2012). Here we limit ourselves to recently published books.

rich and varied oeuvre includes twelve feature films² and two television series. He moves between social realism, mysticism, existential questions and grotesque exaggerations, shoots with film stars (such as Juliette Binoche and Valeria Bruno Tedeschi) and non-professional actors, films in provinces of Hauts-de-France (esp. Pas-de-Calais) and in the American expanses, and switches playfully between genres: *thriller* and *horror*, *historical film* and *musical* (cf. Méjean 2020b, 19). His oeuvre is therefore difficult to grasp, which makes it all the more fascinating and particularly suited to academic analysis because it questions what cinema is, and what it can be.³ The four recent publications that are discussed in this review do not always provide the answers at once, but allow for further reflection.

The anthology *Bruno Dumont. Un funambule de genie* is probably the best introduction to his work. All of Dumont's films released to date are discussed in ten articles, each of them focusing on one aspect of his work. In his two introductory articles, Méjean (2020b, 2020c) addresses all the key aspects of Dumont's work, which are then explored in more detail in further contributions.

Méjean focusses in particular on the influences of painting and philosophy on Dumont's films. Indeed, this is one of the aspects that makes the director stand out: His cinematography sometimes alludes to well-known paintings, especially Flemish old masters (cf. Rachet 2020). This 'pictorial' effect is even more enhanced by a very strict framing which exposes the world that is being represented. This *mise-en-scène* is one reason why Dumont's films carry a specific 'realism', but they are far from being documentaries (cf. Dumont & Fiant 2021, 218: "[L]e réel n'est pas mis en fiction, car il est déjà là"). Another reason is the position he ascribes to his actors (who are in parts completely new to filmmaking). In the terminology of Robert Bresson, they could be described as *modèles* rather than *acteurs*: Their physical appearance and their acting tells us something about their inner life, while *acteurs* tend to reflect the world that surrounds them ("Modèles: Mouvement du dehors vers le dedans. Acteurs : mouvement du dedans vers le dehors", Bresson as cit. in Rachet 2020, 46). In that sense, Dumont's choice of actors can also be seen as a critical commentary on the (mass) media and mainstream cinema: "Plus un acteur ou une actrice brille d'une lumière vive (devient une star), plus il-elle éblouit son public – c'est-à-dire l'aveugle. [...] Plus s'accroît la notoriété d'une star, plus celle-ci tend à devenir *une chose* plutôt qu'un sujet humain, un fétiche, une marchandise" (Brossat 2021, 57).

The levels of artistic representation are also the subject of another article in Méjean (2020): Breteau-Skira's quite essayistic article (2020) focuses on the film *Camille Claudel 1915*, perhaps the filmmaker's most atypical movie (among all his atypical movies). In this minimalistic film about the painter, her mental illness and her

² Dumont's long feature film *France* has recently been released in Germany, his latest film *L'empire* premiered in February 2024 in competition at the Berlin Film Festival. These films have not yet been taken into account in the four books.

³ "La question : 'qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?' est une vraie question métaphysique [...]. Je pense qu'il n'y a aucune réponse à cette question, donc il y a simplement une recherche." (Dumont & Fiant 2021, 234)

suffering, you do not need to see the paintings of Claudel—the film itself is the painting, and this tells us something about the inner world of the protagonist.

Dumont's depictions of space pursue a similar goal. The way he shows deserted small-town streets and the landscape, especially the dunes, the beaches and the North Sea, serves to represent a state of mind rather than an external reality: "Au cinéma le paysage [...] c'est le climat intérieur du personnage. [...] Je ne filme pas les Flandres, je filme l'intériorité du personnage", Dumont says (Lajus 2020, 83). In this sense, the locations are narrative spaces that have "une fonction narrative autant qu'évocatoire" (Lajus 2020, 85). The juxtaposition of a visible world and a subjective state of being between "evidence" and "mystère" (Lajus 2020, 85) creates a cinema between the naturalistic and the metaphysical (cf. Lajus 2020, 92).

Prédal (2020) focusses on the two musical films *Jeannette, l'enfance de Jeanne d'Arc* (2017) and *Jeanne* (2019). His adaptations are based on the theatre piece *Jeanne d'Arc* (1897) by Charles Péguy (cf. Prédal 2020, 103, Montcharmont 2021). For Prédal, it seems significant that the director takes his cue from this literary outsider. But here, too, Dumont is more concerned with the form and the media than with the subject matter itself. It was his intention to make a musical film that led him to the Joan of Arc topos (cf. Prédal 2020). He then opted for an anti-naturalistic approach, both in his choice of rock and electronic music (by Christophe, cf. Durafour 2021a, and Igorrr, cf. Durafour 2021b), and in his choice of the young actress Lise Leplat Prudhomme. Between the ages of eight and ten, Prudhomme played Joan of Arc as an eight-year-old girl (in the first film) and as the seventeen-year-old heroine (in the second film) (cf. Prédal 2020, 115).

The theme of Joan of Arc links Dumont to Robert Bresson, who also dedicated a film to this national myth (*Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1962). With Bresson, but also with Maurice Pialat and Jean Epstein (cf. Manzanera 2020), Dumont shares the search for "moins la représentation que la présence" (Gavard-Perret 2020, 10). This sets him apart from realist directors such as the Frères Dardenne—even if he shares their depiction of a certain misery in the north of France (cf. Méjan 2020b, 16)—or Ken Loach (cf. Brossat & Dupuis 2021, 11).

Other recurring themes in Dumont's work are migration and racism—the figure of the 'strange other', often embodied in the 'Arab' (cf. Carrée 2020), appears in many of Dumont's films. According to Carrée, Dumont is not concerned with a political agenda, as he does not seek to make socially engaged cinema. In fact, he takes a philosophical approach to issues such as integrating, belonging and foreignness (cf. Carrée 2020, 160). In the series *Coincoin et les Z'inhumains*, racism is not only directed at migrants, but also at extraterrestrial *aliens*. In this grotesquely exaggerated crime and science fiction series, two detectives are confronted with clandestine migration in northern France. They investigate a refugee camp and repeatedly show themselves to be racist, xenophobic and islamophobic (cf. Carrée 2020, 162-163). On a meta level, this fear of the other is exposed as such:

[D]ans une scène du quatrième épisode, [le commissaire] Van der Weyden, qui ne parvient pas à prononcer correctement le mot 'clone' pour qualifier son double extra-terrestre et qui emploie à la place le mot 'clown', interpelle les migrants en les traitant de 'clowns' dans le

sens véritable du terme : tout le monde est ainsi clown, de la même façon que tout le monde est blanc, ou noir. (Carrée 2020, 164)

In other places, too, the language ultimately exposes racism as a kind of helplessness, without being didactic: “Hey, hey les gars, vous pouvez pas parler français ? Nan, nan, ici on est en France...” (Carrée 2020, 166).

Apart from all of these inspiring approaches to the understanding of Dumont’s work, one point of criticism can be found in the formal deficiencies of the publication. The citation style is inconsistent and the page numbers of the cited sources are sometimes missing, which complicates academic work with the volume.

The first part of the anthology *Bruno Dumont ou le cinéma des Z’humains* (Brossat & Dupuis 2021) is devoted to the most important aspects of Dumont’s work—in this respect, the focus of the book is similar to that of Méjean’s. It deals with the aspect of mysticism and the transcendental (cf. Vancheri 2021a), the work with non-professional actors (cf. Brossat 2021), and the staging of rural settings (cf. Dupuis 2021). The second part focuses on specific films and on the two television series (cf. Urrutia 2021, and an experimental essay by artist and comedian Marco Candore, cf. Candore 2021). In doing so, the anthology only covers a small section of Dumont’s work. It is therefore less suitable as an introduction than Méjean’s book, but provides more detail in some places. For example, two articles are devoted to Dumont’s third feature film *Twentynine Palms* (cf. Lübecker 2021, Auacheria 2021), which is barely mentioned in Méjean’s book.

Spanish and English-speaking authors are also represented in Brossat’s & Dupuis’ volume; all of them “spécialistes de Bruno Dumont, qui ont en commun de penser que son cinéma nous rend meilleurs en nous donnant à sentir et penser” (cf. book cover). This choice underlines the editors’ intention to offer new perspectives on Bruno Dumont, “des approches plus diversifiées et plus décentrées de l’approche phénoménologique” (Brossat & Dupuis 2021, 10). The volume, thus, does not follow the tendency of many French scholars to focus on the question of the cinematic representation of the *réel*, as is the case with Méjean’s book. This is a winning approach: Because even if Dumont does not make the typical kind of social-realist cinema, he is primarily interested in characters on the fringes of society (cf. Brossat & Dupuis 2021, 10). In this sense, he makes “un cinéma *dans les marges*” (cf. Penjean & Jiménez 2021). In their article, Penjean and Jiménez detect an ethic perspective in the spatial dimension of Dumont’s cinematic topographies. Using Bill Nicols’ terminology, they write:

[L]a notion d’*axiographie* (qui littéralement veut dire *écriture de valeurs*) peut s’avérer utile pour définir [...] la distribution spatiale des éléments scéniques, ainsi que le schéma régulier de position spatiale des ensembles dramatiques, ce qui implique déjà un système de codification de valeurs[...] (Penjean & Jiménez 2021, 33)

At the end of the volume, one can find a long interview with the director (Dumont & Fiant 2021), which provides a particularly interesting insight into his working methods. These differ in many ways from conventional filmmaking: Dumont writes literary texts rather than classic screenplays (some of which are also published as

novels); actors don't get to read the text before shooting. His actors do not improvise either, but follow the director's instructions, who is the only one who knows the script:

Il y a souvent un émerveillement qui va avoir lieu, parce que l'acteur va faire autre chose, va faire autrement, mais il accomplit finalement ce qui est écrit. A la fois, il y a de la providence, de la liberté et de l'impro, il y a tout ce que vous voulez, c'est assez contradictoire, difficile à expliquer parce que ce n'est pas logique et c'est une magie en fait. (Dumont & Fiant 2021, 219)

These insights into the working process of the director complement two long interviews, already published in 2001 in a volume the publisher Dis Voir dedicated to the director after his second feature film (Dumont & Tancelin 2001, Dumont & Jouve 2001). These interviews are still worth reading as well. In the talks with the director, it becomes clear that the supposed simplicity of Dumont's work is the result of a long process of reflection and, above all, abstraction: "Je pense que la simplicité est au bout de la complexité. [Les] plus grands films de cinéma sont d'une simplicité absolument étonnante tellement c'est simple" (Dumont & Fiant 2021, 236).

Among the four books presented here, *Le Cinéma de Bruno Dumont en fragments alphabétiques* (Thomas 2021a) chooses the most interesting format to approach the director in his formal and thematic ambiguities. The volume contains 67 articles by 24 authors, focusing on the director's films, on predictable ("Bresson, Robert", "Espace", "Violence") as well as more unexpected ("Alchemy", "Avances", "Oiseaux") thematic aspects. The editors have deliberately refrained from creating cross-references between entries in order to preserve the fragmented character of the book: "Ce serait là contraindre déjà le lecteur à un cheminement, quand l'on souhaite qu'il avance dans ces textes comme il l'entendra" (Thomas 2021b, 12). The book is, therefore, less a compendium than a mosaic or a kaleidoscope, an encyclopaedia that does not really want to be an encyclopaedia. This concept highlights more marginal or offbeat aspects of Dumont's work. It also reveals interesting cross-references between the films (i.e. similarities in the last frame of almost every Dumont film, cf. Valmary 2021, 108-112). The fact that there is no entry on Bruno Dumont himself or his biography may seem surprising, but it is a deliberate choice: "'Bruno Dumont' est avant tout ici le nom d'une proposition de cinéma éminemment importante" (Thomas 2021b, 13)—this decidedly non-biographical approach is shared with the other three books reviewed here. The volume has a very careful layout and editing as well as a thorough filmography in the appendix.

Finally, the monograph *Cinema mysticum* (Vancheri 2022) is devoted to the mystical dimension in Dumont's filmography. The author begins by exploring the contradiction between naturalism and mysticism. After reading the other books, it can only be partly confirmed that a naturalistic interpretation conceals the mystical aspects of Dumont's work. For it is precisely this mystical dimension that these books also consider—and Vancheri himself has already dealt with this topic in an article in Brossat and Dupuis (Vancheri 2021a) and in several entries in Tomas (Vancheri 2021b, Vancheri 2021c). Nevertheless, the volume is worth reading, as

Vancheri's approach is well grounded in both history and theory. Vancheri examines Dumont's films in the context of Christian mythology, but also with reference to Henri Bergson and Charles Péguy—he detects a “dialogue philosophique” (Vancheri 2022, 24) between Dumont and these two authors. The contrast between naturalism and mysticism, already mentioned several times with regard to Dumont, is thought together with a stage in literary history in a particularly profitable way: Vancherie refers to the discussion of naturalism (vs. symbolism) in the 19th century and to two of its prominent representatives, Émile Zola and Joris-Karl Huysmans (Vancheri 2022, 18-25), which is fully convincing.

Placing the Joan of Arc films in the context of a whole series of other, mainly cinematic, adaptations of the myth (Joan of Arc is described as “cœur mystique de la France”, cf. Vancheri 2022, 119-148) shows how Dumont inscribes himself in cultural history, commenting on it and sometimes even deconstructing it. As Méjean also notes, Dumont films present “le sacré et la mystique en se disant athée” (Méjean 2020c, 30-31). But Vancheri goes further in his analysis. He understands Dumont's cinema as “une technique expérimentale qui, au même titre que la prière, le jeûne ou les exercices spirituels, se déclare compétente pour exposer la part mystérieuse du monde” (Vancheri 2022, 152). The consideration of Dumont's films as metaphysical experiences also explains why his films are so violent⁴: “[S]a mystique serait impensable sans l'élément qui rend possible sa révélation. Le tissu du monde ne se déchire pas sans un accident qui y fait effraction” (Vancheri 2022, 152). The violent events that eruptively break through reality in Dumont's films “placent ses personnages dans des conditions qui les exposent brutalement à une perception élargie du monde” (Vancheri 2022, 152)—and so the viewers also gain this expanded perception the world.

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⁴ Dumont's early cinema in particular (from *La Vie de Jésus*, 1997, to *Twentynine Palms*, 2003, cf. Prédal 2020, 99) can occasionally appear harsh in its depiction of sex and violence. However there are always moments of peace, tranquility, tenderness and *reconnaissance* (cf. Méjean 2020c, 24). These scenes show us that it is about existential questions, not about violence as an end in itself.

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