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**(Dis)locations, relocations: representations of Northern France  
in contemporary French cinema.**

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Geographical, social and cultural mappings of norths remain insistently relative and consistently subjective, revealing that ‘...everyone has a different north, their own private map of the emotional - indeed the moral - geography of north and south’ (Peter Davidson *The Idea of North* (2005)). Yet these ‘private maps’ are of course charted, navigated and overwritten by dominant and shifting socio-cultural discourses, which both reflect and create representations and constructions of norths. Within contemporary European culture, norths often evoke physical landscapes of harsh remoteness, austere beauty and meditative emptiness, providing a new and more politically comfortable discourse of the exotic (landscape, design, language) that is not located in the global south. Within some national contexts however, including that of France, the north is associated primarily with constructions of national space and socio-economic place that are characterized by post-industrial economic hardship and a profile more removed from the centres of power than the geographical distance between them could suggest.

In addressing the representation of Northern France in contemporary French cinema, this chapter will outline the ways in which, in addition to the subjective and relative nature of constructions of the north, representations of the same broad geographic north are subject to a range of vectors and discourses of aesthetic, cultural and economic capital and thus remain inherently plural, dynamic and relational. This chapter will not attempt a cataloguing of films which feature northern France but rather selective moments in contemporary French film in which the North is represented and implicated in a vector of different discourses. A focus will emerge on shifting discourses of authenticity and/as capital and dislocation in relation to the North of France as defined largely within the regional boundaries of Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Wider discussion will also address the north as a more fluid area constructed via oppositional dynamics and through generic and metonymic representation.<sup>1</sup> It will discuss the dominant presence of the North of France as location for the films of the

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of this article precludes discussion of representation of Northern France outside of French cinema – representations largely concerned with sites of contested occupation and war.

French ‘new realism’ (mid-1990s to early 2000s) and their relationship both with the dominant sites of the generic tendencies that preceded them and the correlations of realism and socio-political discourse. I will then address the very distinctive cinematic and broader cultural capital operating in and around ideas of an authentic north in the stark films of Bruno Dumont. The chapter will end with a consideration of the convergence of different capital gains around the box-office hit *Welcome to the sticks* (*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*) (Dany Boon, 2008) which has arguably become the dominant, popular contemporary representation of northern France.

### **Locating new realism**

The North of France, particularly the town of Boulogne sur mer and surrounding region, appear with striking frequency in the new realism of 1990s French cinema. These regions bore the brunt of post-industrial decline with rates of unemployment (particularly youth unemployment) and of households living in poverty higher than the national average throughout the economic recession of the 1990s and beyond. The representation of Northern France in 1990s French cinema should be seen in the context of the wider critical discourse which identified a new generation of filmmakers whose work was received as signalling both a return to filmic codes of realism and an extra-filmic engagement with the socio-political realities of a contemporary France in which economic insecurity, political alienation and social dislocation were prevalent. This diverse group of directors, who claimed no shared identity, nor stated political and aesthetic communalities, has been subject to an overwhelming critical categorisation as the ‘young French cinema’ (*le jeune cinéma français*)<sup>2</sup> or, in a more explicit comparison with the French New Wave of the late 1950s, as ‘the new new wave’ (*la nouvelle nouvelle vague*).<sup>3</sup> Such labels rely on the foregrounding of several parallel traits, including the return to broad conventions of realism and a narrative focus on young protagonists whose personal lives and

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<sup>2</sup> Claude Trémois, (1997), *Les enfants de la liberté*, (Paris: Seuil), Michel, Marie, (1998), *Le jeune cinéma français*, (Paris: Nathan), René Prédal, (2002), *Le jeune cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan), Christophe Chauville, (2000) *Dictionnaire du jeune cinéma français: les réalisateurs* (Paris: Scope).

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Grassin, and Gilles Medioni, (2005), ‘Spécial Cannes: la nouvelle nouvelle vague’ *L’Express* 2228 (May), 5-7.

identities are heavily inflected by situations of social marginalisation and economic exclusion. A further strikingly common characteristic amongst these films resides in the choice of setting of the North of France. While this must be seen partly as a representational recognition of the specific economic and social challenges of a region that faced an acute crisis of youth unemployment and social deprivation caused by the historical collapse of traditional industry, there are other factors to consider in the North's function as the dominant site of new realism.

In addition to its representational role as the location in which a marked shortfall in economic capital was rendered most visible through the physical landscapes of de-industrialisation, the North of France also functions in this context in terms of cultural capital. The critical capital and commercial exploitation allied with the identification of a 'new wave' or new generation of filmmakers, and concomitant mode of filmmaking, requires a perceived break with the immediate past, a counterpoint through which critical discourse is able to crystallise a diverse production into an emerging tendency. One of the defining features attributed by critics to the 'young cinema' is its provision of an oppositional content and style to the aesthetic and production practices of both the *cinéma du look* and of heritage cinema, which had dominated French cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s respectively. Whilst some later productions of the heritage genre do counter nostalgic discourse through greater dialogue with contemporary events<sup>4</sup> much French heritage film, in parallel with its English counterparts, adapts narratives of classic literature which serve, in the face of contemporary anxieties, as reassuringly conservative projections of shared heritage, common values and clear social structures. Heritage cinema's combination of national literary classics, iconic landscapes and French stars was an important factor in the French gaining 'cultural exception' for cinema in the 1995 GATT trade agreement.<sup>5</sup>

The parallels drawn by critical discourse with the New Wave support, in turn, the

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<sup>4</sup> See Ginette Vincendeau, (ed), *The Encyclopaedia of European Cinema* (London: Cornell and BFI, 1995), 30

<sup>5</sup> The pinnacle of such associations identified *Germinal* (Claude Berri 1993), as a government-promoted icon of national cultural production, which was distributed to all state schools and sent into box-office battle against *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) For detailed discussion of the development of these policies see Toby Miller 'The Crime of Monsieur Lang: GATT, the screen and the new international division of cultural labour' in Albert Moran, ed., *Film Policy: International, National and Regional* (Routledge 2005), pp. 71-84.

renewed construction of directors as auteurs, asserting directors as independent creative artists with individual and persistent aesthetic agendas rather than technical collaborators or practitioners seeking funding for the manufacture of cultural products. As auteurism ‘dominates the aesthetic consciousness of the middle classes’<sup>6</sup> and critical discourse, so it masks the socio-cultural power dynamics of economic and cultural capitals, ensuring that cinema retains a status within a Bourdieusian ‘legitimate’ culture rather than being restricted to ‘entertainment’ or popular culture and, as such, remains a central element in France’s presentation of its national film industry as cultural exception.<sup>7</sup> Occupying a set of positions which both provided stark aesthetic difference from the glossy ‘cinéma du look’<sup>8</sup> of the 1980s and from the high production values of star-laden heritage cinema, the new realism could thus be positioned critically as a new counterpoint tendency echoing that of the New Wave’s rejection of the ‘*tradition de qualité*’ whilst reflecting ‘wider cultural strategies that accompany generational shifts in cultural production and serve ultimately to protect investments in new articulations of cultural and economic capital.’<sup>9</sup> The South, constituted as sun-kissed landscape of adventure, fecundity and pastoral spectacle performed a central role in the heritage genre’s constructions of national identity.<sup>10</sup> The heritage genre’s combination of literary heritage and star casts, create a convergence of classic and contemporary cultural capital further reinforced by their predominant setting of the South of France, representing the landscapes of ‘deepest France’ (‘la France profonde’) as the ultimate location of a ‘patrimoine’ or shared national heritage.<sup>11</sup> The North thus functioned as the ideal space in which to site the symbolic spaces of new realism as contrapuntal discourse in which a return to socio-political and a projected construction of authenticity could be rendered most visible via an apparently seamless fit between socio-economic context, codes of realism and

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<sup>6</sup> John Blewitt, ‘Film, Ideology and Bourdieu’s critique of Public taste’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33 (4) (1993), 367-77, 368.

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of reformulations of the auteur figure in relation to Bourdieu’s cultural capital and other discourses see Julia Dobson *Negotiating the Auteur* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012)

<sup>8</sup> Key directors of this movement include Luc Besson, Jean-Jacques Bénéix and Leos Carax. Critical typographies neglect potential socio-political readings of these films also.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Dobson *Negotiating the Auteur*, 5

<sup>10</sup> Although Berri’s epic adaptation of Zola’s *Germinal* is set in a period of strikes in a northern mining community, its ‘memorialising tone’ prevents potential connections with contemporary political events. See Alison Murray ‘Film as national icon: Claude Berri’s ‘Germinal’ *The French Review* 76 (5) (2003), pp 906-916, 907

<sup>11</sup> Prominent examples of this include, *My Father’s Glory* (*Le Gloire de mon père*) (Yves Robert, 1990) *Horseman on the roof* (*Le Hussard sur le toit*, (Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 1995).

the regenerated figure of the director as auteur.

Yet the northern settings of new realist films of the mid to late 1990s should not be reduced to core functions as geographical and symbolic signposts pointing away from a heritage South and its complex functions. Indeed the emerging opposition is perhaps best located not between a realist, gritty North and a nostalgic, heritage-infused South, but rather between the periphery and the perceived centre – the narrative territories of bourgeois, urban Paris. Thus the assertion of the representationally peripheral in terms of marginalised protagonists can be seen to find its complement in the setting of the northern regions, performing and ‘reworking the symbolic geography of the nation’.<sup>12</sup> Such a relocation of narrative reveals itself as founded therefore not on the physical distance between any two spaces (North / South, Paris / regions) but rather on the contrast between personal, socio-economic landscapes for which the visual presence of a broadly designated North became a shorthand.<sup>13</sup> Marion Vernoux, asked about the setting of *Empty Days* (*Rien à faire*, 1999) in the northern port of Boulogne sur mer, asserted: ‘Deleuze said that being on the left means looking beyond where you live – this story could take place in Garges. 7 kilometres from Paris may seem like nothing but it is a long way.’<sup>14</sup> Yet this more nuanced strategy of location is not reflected in the films themselves and thus the over-determined location of a crisis of de-industrialisation and socio-economic exclusion predominantly in Northern France provides a siting (and perhaps an artificial containment) of a more widespread socio-economic struggle that was present throughout France but remained a symbolic ‘elsewhere’ marked largely by its onscreen absence.<sup>15</sup>

O’Shaughnessy has identified the ways in which, in the context of globalising capital and the disappearance of universalising discourses of an ‘epic dramaturgy of struggle’

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<sup>12</sup> Martin O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema. Commitment in French Film since 1995*, (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 161

<sup>13</sup> I would include here the perceived siting of the Belgian francophone production of the Dardennes brothers.

<sup>14</sup> Michaël Melinard, (1999) ‘Avec Marion Vernoux, les chômeurs passent à la caisse’, <http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999-12-02-300482>

<sup>15</sup> A parallel to this over-determined location of political and economic tensions can be seen in filmic and other representation of discourses of crises of ethnic and national identity and of disaffected youth, which are concentrated in the Parisian *banlieues* or outer cities. A rare example of the exploration of race, marginalization and rural space can be found in the greatly underrated *Western* (Manuel Poirier, 1997).

<sup>16</sup>( political cinema can but signal the remains of a tradition through their representation of temporality, spatiality and protagonists. The key films of this tendency combine realism and discourses of broad social engagement with striking generic inflections – *Empty Days (Rien à faire)* (Marion Vernoux, 1999) uses romance, *Time Out (Mode d'emploi)* (Laurent Cantet, 2001) the suspense thriller, *The Dream Life of Angels (La Vie rêvée des anges)* (Erick Zonca, 1998) melodrama. This can be seen as a countering strategy which permits the rooting of the narrative in a specific spatial and temporal frame, whilst exploiting the universalised narrative spaces of the generic forms to mediate between these and wider spectatorial expectations and identifications. The narratives share a common concern with the impact of socio-economic crisis on the personal wellbeing of the protagonists, constructing an ‘interior realism’<sup>17</sup> which reveals the underlying common precariousness and evident inseparability of (their) personal and socio-economic identities. Criticism, notably from Rancière, has been levelled at these films and the wider production of this period for not triggering political engagement through formal innovation to create explicit disruptions of spectatorial narrative expectations and frames of representation.<sup>18</sup> This shift should not be seen as evacuating acknowledgement of a systemic political in order to focus on an apolitical individualism, but rather asserting the belief that the personal is always political as a two-way dynamic. In the absence of shared discourses of class struggle or political resistance, the narrative resolutions, rooted primarily within the narrative and filmic realms of the intimate, remain ambiguous. Yet all suggest the need for a shift from individualised, internalised and embodied struggle to renewed recognition of the value of social solidarity which signals the end of the genre-inflected narrative and the beginning of a space in which personal rootedness and political agency can co-exist.

Yet we should consider to what extent this ‘rootedness’ is located in the geographical specificities of the films’ projected surroundings. The North in these films is not

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<sup>16</sup> Martin O’Shaughnessy, ‘French cinema and the political’ *Studies in French Cinema* 10/1 (2010), 39-56, 42

<sup>17</sup> René Prédal, *Le jeune cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan, 2002), 73

<sup>18</sup> Rancière attacks 1990s French film’s lack of formal innovation, critiquing it as failing through its duplication of the real of fiction (*réel de la fiction*). His preferred mode, ‘political fictions of the real (*fictions politiques du réel*) would disrupt representational norms through multi-layered narrative and fragmented documentary aesthetic. Rancière, Jacques, ‘Il est arrivé quelque chose au réel’ *Cahiers du cinéma* 545 (2000), 62-4.

contrasted with a more affluent elsewhere, nor is there engagement with localised and specific de-industrialisation or relative levels of unemployment. In marked contrast to the films discussed later in this chapter, most films set in the North of France in the 1990s do not signal their protagonists' specific geographical location through explicit intra-diegetic reference, use of notable landmarks or regional accent. The shared concentration on the characters' internalised struggle and alienation is communicated through a dominant use of close-up, close framing and static camera, which create a sense of intimacy and claustrophobia but suggest little connection between central characters and the specific natural or built environments in which they live. The rare wide shots assert an unprivileged and non-picturesque milieu, featuring bleak grey horizons, anonymous industrial estates and motorway service stations. The dilapidated and anonymous spaces, which serve as fragmented supporting backdrops to the discourse of decline, are not construed in terms of possible social place. Whilst we catch brief glimpses of a fading industrial skyline, the characters' primary interpellations as failing consumers, economic outsiders or alienated social beings are asserted through the choice of immediate environments in which they are filmed as supermarkets, job centres, sweatshops, cars (asserting the absence of travel, adventure or escape) and alienating corporate spaces dominate their personal landscapes and foreground the impact of economic marginalisation on their personal identities.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst there is a clear correlation, as discussed above, between the film language employed to reveal the political through the personal and the lack of an engagement with identifiable landscapes and geographical specificities, they are perhaps also shared symptoms of a further malaise – that of the difficulty of representing globalised late capitalism and of locating it in any one place. O'Shaughnessy perceives this difficulty as present in the films' dislocation between foregrounded drama and wider setting and a resort to the mute signals of traumatic spatial reworkings embedded in the landscape.<sup>20</sup> A striking, albeit fragmentary, exception to this muted specificity can be found in the early films of Laetitia Masson in which the

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<sup>19</sup> The temptation to read these spaces as purely indicative of late capitalist, Augeian 'non-places' must be challenged by the narratives' insistence that the protagonists are not homogenised by the overwhelming functionality of these spaces, but rather are differentiated by their severely restricted capacity to act as customers, workers or clients. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Martin O'Shaughnessy, 'French cinema and the political' *Studies in French Cinema* 10/1 (2010), 45.

real, in the form of locations and local populations, disrupts the generic use of the Northern setting as shorthand for an economic and social decline. Masson's *To Have it (or not)* (*En avoir (ou pas)*) (1995) begins with a startling documentary-style sequence in which we see a series of women being interviewed. The sequence frames the following narrative within the absurd gap between the excluding corporate language of the (male) interviewer and the unskilled, low-paid work on offer, yet Masson's use of local non-professional actors for these scenes, a presence signalled partially through their accents, lends them a visual and political impact which serves to ground the film in a more tangible and specific north. Her later film *Love me* (2000), in which parallels are drawn between the pernicious impact of discourses of Romance and rampant consumerism, posits the shabby bars of Le Havre as the uncanny kitsch negative of an imagined Memphis. Yet this film also includes an unannounced documentary-style sequence in which the alienated, nomadic Lynchian central figure encounters the real. A lengthy sequence, filmed in a community centre, again foregrounds the dialect of the non-professional actors as the camera pans across the handmade posters advertising the meagre support networks that address the complex interrelated needs created by long-term unemployment, addiction and chronic ill health. Thus, although Masson's films include little visual presence of the North as landscape nor as narrative specificity, its presence persists through minor casting, formally disruptive episodes and a striking defamiliarisation of the genre setting.<sup>21</sup>

### **Regional capital**

The choice of location, for directors associated with new realism, may therefore be seen as a combination of broadly shared intent in representing narratives and situations (rather than spaces) largely invisible in the national cinematic landscape of the preceding decade and the accumulated currency, in terms of cultural capital, of the North as a marker of coherence of an emerging tendency, group, canon. A focus on cultural capital should not, however, mask questions of economic capital, as an

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<sup>21</sup> For detailed discussion of Masson's work see Dobson *Negotiating the auteur: Cabrera, Masson, Lvovsky and Vernoux*, (Manchester University Press, 2012).

important landscape directly implicated in the location of many of the films of this period, was that of the growing structures and scope of regional film funding. Thus the attraction of filming (in) the north of France is not simply aesthetic or political, but inflected by the relative costs and provision of regional film funding. The sense of an emerging generation of practitioners in the 1990s was bolstered by the fact that access to funding supported a high proportion of debut features (over 40% of French film production in 1992 was first films).<sup>22</sup> Shifts in the European media landscape provided further impetus and the increased profile of private television channels (mainly *Canal plus* and *Arte*) in film commissioning sanctioned an accelerated commercial investment in the identification of new *auteurs*.<sup>23</sup> Whilst emerging directors had relatively little difficulty accessing centralised funding in the form of subsidy recuperated through box office (*avance sur recettes*) for their first films, access to funding for second films remains more challenging. Complex co-productions became the norm and often included funding from regional bodies. Since 1985, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, with regional public funding under the umbrella of CRRAV (Centre Régional de Ressources audiovisuelles) has supported training, production and distribution with the aim of fostering a regional, audiovisual industry and profile. CCRAV, now the third largest regional funder in this area (after Paris and Rhone Alpes), has co-produced over 650 projects (including features, documentary and television programmes).<sup>24</sup>

### **Dislocating the North**

Discussion will now shift to two directors, Bruno Dumont and Dany Boon, whose work has received funding from CCRAV, and also incorporates the accumulation of different capitals in relation to apparently more specific engagements with the North as site of narrative and specific visual representation. These directors share personal connections to the North of France, which they present as an integral part of their respective creative identities and extremely divergent productions. Bruno Dumont has

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<sup>22</sup> Alain Brassart (2006), *‘Qu’est-ce que l’auteurisme 30 après la Nouvelle Vague? Un exemple: Arnaud Desplechin’* (Juillet-Août) [www.cadrage.net/dossier/desplechin.html](http://www.cadrage.net/dossier/desplechin.html)

<sup>23</sup> Such companies were funding 80% of French film co-productions by the mid-1990s see Brassart, (*‘Qu’est-ce que l’auteurisme 30 après la Nouvelle Vague ? Un exemple: Arnaud Desplechin’* (Juillet-Août) [www.cadrage.net/dossier/desplechin.html](http://www.cadrage.net/dossier/desplechin.html)

<sup>24</sup> It recently merged with Lille’s ‘Pôle Images’ to form ‘Pictanovo’ and currently controls a budget of €7 million.

emerged as a key filmmaker associated (alongside Claire Denis, Philippe Grandrieux and Nicolas Klotz) with what has been described as a cinema of sensation (Beugnet), new extremism (Horeck and Kendall) or a cinema of brutal intimacy (Palmer).<sup>25</sup> The neo-Bressonian aesthetic, brutal naturalism and explicit representation of both sex and violence in Dumont's oeuvre, which interrogates natural and corporeal landscapes equally, has garnered much critical acclaim.<sup>26</sup>

The visual presence of the rural landscapes of Northern France is a key feature in the construction of Dumont's auteur identity and this extends beyond their striking visual presence in his films to a personal assertion of affinity with these spaces. Two of his films - *The Life of Jesus* (*La Vie de Jésus*, 1996) and *Humanity* (*L'Humanité*, 1999) are set in and around his native town of Bailleul, which is 15 miles north of Lille. Scenes in *Flanders* (*Flandres* 2006) switch between the Northern French coast and an unspecified, war-torn Middle East. In interview Dumont commonly asserts a primal bond with his place of birth, specified as Flanders rather than the north, such as 'I am bound to it with all my being, my blood flows through it'.<sup>27</sup> These suggestions of an almost spiritual belonging create a mode of authenticity that is a key part of Dumont's auteur identity when combined with his stated belief in the power of cinema to return us to what he describes as the 'essential truths' of body and heart.<sup>28</sup> Whilst Dumont is careful to construct his authorial identity through cinephilic references to a particular European auteur lineage (Robert Bresson, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Roberto Rossellini), the visual predominance of northern landscapes in his work is framed by his assertions of a heritage of pictorial rather than cinematic images of the North, including seventeenth century Flemish painting, the late landscapes of Georges Braque and contemporary painter Jeffrey Blones.<sup>29</sup> Indeed the central character of

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<sup>25</sup> Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), Tanya Horeck, and Tina Kendall, eds, *The New Extremism in Cinema from France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Dumont's films *Humanity* and *Flanders* won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes in 1999 and 2006 respectively.

<sup>27</sup> D. Smith, 'Bruno Dumont, Hors Satan' [www.filmmakermagazine.com/62955-bruno-dumont-hors-satan/](http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/62955-bruno-dumont-hors-satan/)

<sup>28</sup> See for example the interview in the booklet accompanying the Masters of Cinema dvd release of *The Life of Jesus*

<sup>29</sup> Indeed the booklet for the dvd Masters of Cinema release of *The Life of Jesus* contains detailed and melodramatic accounts of the impact of his encounters with these paintings

*Humanity* is presented as the fictional descendant of Pharaon de Winter (1849-1924), a Flemish painter associated with Bailleul. Such heightened attention to composition and abstraction remains in clear contrast to the close framing of the films of new realism described above. His use of cinemascope and frequent, static long shots of the rural landscape allows Dumont to further emphasise the flat horizons, ploughed fields, sparse trees and narrow roads amongst which his characters frequently fail to impose their visual presence. There is not room here to discuss these films in detail but examples will be drawn from *The Life of Jesus*, whose narrative centres on a jobless twenty-year old, Freddy, whose socio-economic vulnerability is further constrained by emotional inarticulacy and epilepsy.<sup>30</sup> The first two thirds of the film chart his cyclical routines between epileptic episodes, visits to a clinic, moped rides with gang of friends out into the countryside and explicitly-filmed, emotionless sex with his girlfriend, Marie. A growing sense of threat and violence culminates in Freddy's murder of the son of a migrant family, Kader, who had initiated a relationship with Marie.

The specificity and authenticity of the northern town of Bailleul is unevenly represented. Whilst Dumont insisted on a lengthy process of casting local, non-professional actors for the key roles (a presence sustained through their accented delivery), this seems to be motivated by a desire to avoid actorly performance, in line with the Bressonian concept and practice of actor-models, rather than one of regional authenticity. Whilst the film is shot entirely in the streets and immediate surroundings of Bailleul, the environment was controlled during filming so that the town's streets remained artificially empty, thus creating both a spatial anticipation of conflict and a heightened sense of alienation common in the Western. Whilst the film includes oblique socio-political comment (the death of a friend from Aids-related illness, the lack of cohesive social structures and hostility to outsiders) Dumont rejects a realist framework, stating enigmatically that that 'reality does not interest me. What interests

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<sup>30</sup> Freddie's epilepsy seems to constitute him as nihilistic version of Dostoevsky's Myshkin in *The Idiot*.

me is its unveiling',<sup>31</sup> and claims not to be interested in filming Bailleul but rather the human condition itself.<sup>32</sup>



(fig.1) Lost in the landscape: *The Life of Jésus*

The landscapes of the north, whilst recognisable in their geographical specificity, do not act as the source for any connection between protagonist and place. As indicated in the film's title, which references Ernest Renan's nineteenth century treatise for a humanised Jesus and a relative assertion of a spiritual faith in humanity without religion,<sup>33</sup> the film does not provide any meaningful contextualisation of its narrative events in relation to a specific geographical or socio-economic framing of the North. Editing and camera position are exploited so as to frame landscape in retrospective relation to the look of human protagonists.<sup>34</sup> Yet the dispassionate look of the beholder, as complex layering of protagonist, film maker and intertextual artistic heritage, imposes not serial affinities but rather a sense of disconnection which hampers spectatorial identification as landscape and figure seem to look blankly at each other (fig.1). Thus, despite Dumont's extra-textual foregrounding of the specificity of northern France to his auteur project, their principal function in his films remains as an externalisation of the central characters' internal states of solitude and

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<sup>31</sup> dvd booklet, 36

<sup>32</sup> 'Enquêtes sur le reel, interview with Philippe Tancelin' in *Bruno Dumont*, (Paris: Editions Dis Voir 2001). 75.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Renan 'Life of Jesus' (*Vie de Jésus*) (1863) Renan's work remains highly problematic in its anti-Semitic discourse and other essentialisms related to race.

<sup>34</sup> James Williams, *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 59

nihilism.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Freddy's ambiguous redemption is signalled at the end of the film, not through a re-connection with local community, place or land but through an emphatic gaze to the skies and thus a suggested universalised transcendence.<sup>36</sup> In his compelling, wider study of space in Dumont's films, James Williams states that landscape '...risks becoming immaterial, a matter of abstract shapes and forms'.<sup>37</sup> This argument can be extended further to suggest that the at once heightened and flattened spaces of cinemascope combine with the narrative projection of landscape as a 'topography of being' (Williams, 31) to project the North as a universalised landscape associated with nihilism, alienation and ambiguous redemption.<sup>38</sup>

### **Relocating the North?**

In a move strongly out of character with his film production, Dumont created a television mini-series *Le P'tit Quinquin* (Arte 2014), a blackly comic tale of uncanny children and inept police investigation which, whilst sharing his dominant thematic concerns and use of film language, appears as auto-parody of his own dominant representations of the north.<sup>39</sup> This unexpected comic re-framing of Dumont's representation of northern France is surpassed in its impact, however, by the final example examined here and most striking representation of northern France in popular French cinema - that of the mainstream comic hit *Welcome to the Sticks* (*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*) (Boon 2008).

Whilst Dumont mobilises the cultural capital of a film and fine art heritage that bolsters a sense of an authentic, aesthetic heritage of the North, the most well-known recent film set in the North is defined by capital of another kind through huge

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<sup>35</sup> 'All of the décor is the expression of the internal state of the character' Dumont quoted in interview 'Enquêtes sur le reel, interview with Philippe Tancelin' in *Bruno Dumont*, (Paris: Editions Dis Voir 2001), 75 (my translation)

<sup>36</sup> See John Caruana 'Dumont's cinema: Nihilism and the disintegration of the Christian imaginary' in Costica Bradata and Camil Ungureanu (eds) *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema: The Post-secular constellation* (Routledge 2014) 110-125.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed Dumont's hugely controversial *Twentynine Palms* (2003) is set in the spectacular and inhospitable landscapes of the Californian desert.

<sup>38</sup> In a study of Belgian rural cinema, Catherine Fowler identifies a tendency to represent rural space as universal in Catherine Fowler and Gillian Hedfield (eds) *Representing the Rural: space, place and identity in films about the land* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Douhaire, 'Interview with Dumont (2014) <http://www.telerama.fr/series-tv/bruno-dumont-roi-du-tragique-comique-dans-p-tit-quinquin,116913.php>

audience figures and massive box office success.<sup>40</sup> *Welcome to the Sticks* was envisaged by actor and director Dany Boon as a response to what he saw as the stereotyping of his region in miserabilist film. Indeed one of the central protagonists of Boon's comedy is given the surname Bailleul, thus providing an imbedded ironic reference to Dumont's oeuvre. Boon's film is set in the small town of Bergues, 9 km from Dunkirk. The comic narrative is centred on a postmaster who, as punishment for feigning disability in order to get relocated to the Cote d'Azur, is sent from his home in the South to work in the Northern town of Bergues. After a traumatic displacement to the North he finds his absurdly exaggerated fears happily confounded, yet continues to paint a miserable picture of his life there as this seems to be strengthening his marriage. After farcical attempts to deceive his wife of his situation on her visit to Bergues, the truth is revealed and his family relocate. After a happy (but largely unseen) two years, they leave again for the deferred Cote d'Azur posting.<sup>41</sup> The episodic plot centres on alternating scenes between North and South and the comic set-pieces are linked to the developing relationship between the postmaster, Philippe (Merad) and his local employee Antoine (Boon) whilst his 'falling in love' with the town and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region is paralleled with a romantic sub-plot between two of his new colleagues.

The film's narrative is rooted in the standard comic construction of an exaggerated oppositional clash of cultures and expectations and serial miscommunications delivered via fast-paced, physical set pieces.<sup>42</sup> The southern residents' hyperbolic presentation of a North of arctic conditions, devoid of culture or good food and in which people die young and unhappy is presented as indicative of their ignorance, yet is not countered by northerners' caricature of the South (although the visual framing and establishing sequence of Philippe's hometown resembles a parody of a tourist promotional film). The natural local landscape of Nord Pas de Calais, whilst present in tourism-targeting brief long shots of kitesurfing, a moonlit cobbled street and the

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<sup>40</sup> 9 million spectators saw the film in the first 10 days in France and entries reached 20.36 million making it the most popular French film since 1945. See CNC 'Bilan 2008 / dossier du CNC' 318 (May 2009)

<sup>41</sup> In a clear example of the national specificities of norths the Italian remake, *Benvenuti al sud* (Miniero, 2010) sees the northern manager banished to southern Italy.

<sup>42</sup> Boon's next film as director *Nothing to declare (Rien à déclarer)* (2010) posits a similar clash as French and Belgian police officers attempt collaboration on policing the newly downgraded border between their countries. This film had a radically different profile however – going straight to dvd in France.

view from the traditional bell tower, is not foregrounded. The construction of the North as regional specificity is presented largely through food and language. However the regional specialities, such as chicory rather than coffee at breakfast, a fried lunch from the van in the square rather than a discreet bistro terrace have their difference framed as grotesquely comic rather than seductively exotic (fig.2). Once they have been revealed as acceptable (rather than equivalent in quality), the presentation of difference functions in the same mode as the presentation of 'patrimoine' in the heritage film genre discussed earlier, which does not ultimately assert regional specificity but rather subsumes as part of the cultural richness of what is projected as a largely harmonious national identity.

The scene of Philippe's arrival in Bergues foregrounds an anticipation of the North through confused anxieties of othernesses – that presents ch'ti reductively as a foreigner's language - suggesting lack of intelligence in the speaker, unwanted sexual advances (from another man) and uncomfortable confrontation with strange foodstuffs. The reductive approach to (cultural) difference laid out so simplistically in this opening sequence persists throughout the film and is matched by reductive operations which overcome them - Philippe learns to parrot the dialect (largely by shouting), and achieves homosocial bonding via local football matches and persistent drinking (even at work). Mary Harrod reads the film's comic foregrounding of linguistic difference as representing ontological sameness – as an assertion of wider discourses of cultural assimilation and national identity.<sup>43</sup> Indeed the film's much trumpeted foregrounding of local dialect is problematic as ch'ti itself seems to have been simplified and stereotyped within the film.<sup>44</sup> The narrative's alternating episodes between North and South projects the message that the characters are united by shared human emotions and needs that transcend geographical location and regional identity. Some critics have seen the film's sanitised, comic exploration of cultural difference as demonstrating the affirmation of a reductive and politically suspect unified national identity. Indeed Noudelmann compares it to *Amélie (Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie*

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Harrod, 'Linguistic difference as ontological sameness in 'Bienvenue chez les chtis'' *Studies in French Cinema* 12/1 (2012), 75-86

<sup>44</sup> Alain Dawson (2008) 'Bienvenue chez les Chtis': la langue opaque'. *Langue et cités* 12, 4.

*Poulain*) (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) in its ‘nostalgic desire for wholeness, contested by France’s actual heterogeneity.’<sup>45</sup>



(fig.2) Comic gastronomic heritage *Welcome to the sticks*

In the film’s pivotal sequence, Philippe attempts to trick his wife into believing that a nearby deserted mining village is Bergues and fills it with an explicitly theatrical troupe of drunks, delinquents and dysfunctional, noticeably ‘white trash’ families. This sequence affords maximum opportunity for physical farce, and may be intended to present a *mise en abyme* of the miserabilist stereotype of northern France that Boon wished to counter or perhaps that the region has ‘moved on’ from industrial collapse and post-industrial decline. However, this performance of a stereotyped northness is uncanny in its occupation of a site of real socio-economic decline, the vestiges of post-industrial hardship serving as a platform for a pantomime performance of class-based otherness. The deserted mining village which serves explicitly as a set for this central performance can thus be read as the mute presence of historical and socio-economic context and recalls O’Shaughnessy’s description of the role of (absent) landscape as signalling a ‘causality moved out of story space and time’,<sup>46</sup> one which is marked by the vectors of a globalised capitalism.

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<sup>45</sup> François Noudelmann ‘A Turn to the right: genealogy in France since the 1980s’ *Yale French studies* 116/ 117 (2009), 7-19, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Martin O’Shaughnessy ‘Eloquent fragments: French fiction film and globalisation’ *French Politics, Culture and Society* 23/3 (2005), 78.

The film's commercial success brought a substantial increase in the region's economic capital as, benefitting directly from its 'placement' in the film, Bergues' visitor numbers rose over 250% between 2007 and 2008 as organised tours, hotels and products all adopted the film as branding.<sup>47</sup> The specially scheduled high speed train which sped 300 celebrities north for the launch, provides a strong echo of the similar arrangements made for the launch of key heritage film *Germinal*.<sup>48</sup>

Northern France thus has a marked presence on the landscapes of contemporary French cinema both in its association with the new realism of the 1990s and across both auteurist profiles and popular blockbusters, which continue to support the complex topographies of different capitals central to constructions of French national cinema. The specific geographical locations have been shown, however, to provide complex sites for other universalising discourses – that of a return to the real or the political via the personal in 1990s films and of projections of universalised human suffering and redemption (Dumont) and of a use of regional specificity to assert national unity (Boon). The North, thus whilst present on screen, remains subject to projections that exceed directional vectors and geographical mappings.

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<sup>47</sup> See Corinne Bernea, and Benoît Meyronin, 'Le placement du territoire au cinéma', *Economia della cultura* 3 (2012), 327-341.

<sup>48</sup> For detailed discussion of the film's role see Russell Cousins 'The Heritage Film and Cultural Politics in Phil Powrie, ed., *French Cinema in the 1990s: continuity and difference* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), 25-35.

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