

Creating Creatures: Dumont and the Metaphysics of Evil

Introduction

We aim to explore with Dumont's work how cinema can manifest a fundamental question of freedom. What brings Friedrich Schelling into proximity with Dumont is that Schelling's *Treatise* was considered to inaugurate a new understanding of Being, as a "metaphysics of evil." It is "evil" in its actuality that is the central concern for Schelling. It is evil in the mundanity of an everyday that haunts the cinema of Dumont. Dumont, as is well known, was himself an academic philosopher, who has indicated in interviews that his teaching extended to the Classics, Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics, and German Idealism, particularly Kant and Hegel. I note this reply by Dumont to a question concerning his philosophy teaching and his reason for moving on: "That's very easy to answer. Philosophy is an intellectual discipline. Its tools are concepts, whereas film is about movement, it's about capturing "being" onscreen. I find that when I'm shooting a stream in a field, for example, then I'm filming a being. It is far easier to understand, less complicated, less intellectual." Dumont completed his fifth film at the end of 2009, with his sixth film currently in post-production. He has been spectacularly 'successful' with this relatively small body of work, receiving two Cannes Grand Jury Prizes for *Flanders* and *L'Humanité*, as well as many other awards at festivals internationally. Prior to his 'auteur' cinema, Dumont learnt his 'trade' making industry films: "I filmed candies, tractors, ham, bricks, coal ... It is how I learnt cinema."⁵

I will say something briefly about each of the three films I want to mention by way of introduction to our concern. They are *L'Humanité* (1999), *Twenty Nine Palms* (2003) and *Flanders* (2006). Each of the films is discussed in Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation* (2007), within her broader discussion of films she compellingly describes as "sensate cinema." Thus she suggests: "There is something particularly engaging in finding this kind of cinematic practice, with its emphasis on the corporeality of film ... It goes against the tradition of scenario and/or dialogue based cinema that dominates French production." Beugnet engages in a sustained discussion on a range of filmmakers over the past fifteen years whose work veers towards 'sensation' rather than 'sense', to 'corporeality' rather than 'idea'. She quotes Dumont on this: "I am interested in sensation, not sense." She further quotes Matthieu Darras from an interview with Dumont on *Flanders*: "There is this sentence that Bruno Dumont keeps repeating in his interviews, as if he were brandishing a banner: 'Cinema is for bodies, cinema is for emotions'. ... Dumont's cinema is a cinema that shocks—a visceral cinema." At times she emphasizes the qualification of the cinematic with Dumont's camera technique. On this she cites Kent Jones discussing *L'Humanité*: "Dumont does the typical shot/counter-shot move, but he stays on the object seen for an uncomfortable interval, and it never yields anything: unlike 99% of the movies you see, there's no mental or poetic correlative between the looker and the looked at. There's a terrific power to these moments, a basic, brutally elemental longing for the world to explain itself."

With each film, in the transgressive and sensual dimensions of its unfolding, there is the haunt of evil. *L'Humanité*'s unconscionable evil is the rape and murder of an eleven-year-old girl. It has already happened at the opening of the film. The film's

“detective,” traumatized by this event, ineptly pursues the case. The film shows the encounter of his ‘world’, what opens or shows itself in the way that he is: his without words, how seeing and the seen find themselves with him, his being-with-others as a tactile longing, his seeming without-will. His ‘world’ is a provincial rural township; his locale brings near a neighbour and her lover. The film concerns how these three each comes to a self in the milieu of an infinite separation of being a self. That milieu opens a question as to how the actuality of being, the act of being, in its becoming itself is a question of a freedom for good and for evil. The act of sex as a creature’s living creative act constitutes the essential terrain of this milieu: the detective’s capability to be incapable, his neighbour’s unspeaking and mechanical couplings with her lover, her without-will, releasement to what is; the lover’s will for himself alone, his not-being-with as a being-with.

Twenty Nine Palms, though located in California and not rural France, though having a couple, man and woman, lovers on a location-scouting trip in the desert, constitutes the same essential terrain. Dumont refers to it as a ‘classic’ horror movie bloodbath, triggered by the rape-bashing of the man while his lover is forced to look on. This film plays a similar economy of silences, beings coming to themselves, the act of sex as the actuality of being-with, which also may mean missing being-with. Again, there is a strong concern with how seeing and the seen find themselves in a belonging, or cannot find that belonging. *Flanders* returns Dumont to a rural locale in northern France. We recognize across the three films how ‘nature’ is not savage and cruel. The farmlands and the desert are domesticated, worked over, occupied and adjusted. They don’t walk the desert terrain. They drive an air-conditioned Hummer. The fields are ploughed using a towering tractor. We occupy the insides of these adjusting and accommodating spaces as we occupy a film. With *Flanders*, there is again the act of sex as actuality for created creatures. The young men from the locale are conscripted to fight in what looks like Afghanistan. In this interlude, this desert setting of combat there occurs the rape of a woman soldier by the small squad of men from this northern French locale. The mood of the film, as with the other two, concerns more the silent opening to language than speaking itself, a longing opening to willing than an understanding of what one intends, a looking that searches not for something but for how seeing and the seen can possibly find their be-longing, their longing to be. These primordial concerns that open to something fundamental in a question of freedom, action, willing and becoming, become our concerns as well: we too are faced with a question of how our seeing and what we see find their belonging, with what opens our language, with what essentially is the temporality of our becoming a self, how we exist with evil. [SHOW CLIPS]

Philosophy and Cinema

In finding an identity of Dumont and Schelling are we wanting to relate the ‘content’ of Dumont’s films to the ‘content’ of Schelling’s treatise; are we wanting to relate the forms, formalisms or morphology of Dumont’s films to the system-building of German Idealism’s philosophy of nature? What would we ‘interpret’ in each work if not one or other or both of these? But do we encounter a treatise or a film the way we encounter a table or door? In one sense we do. They are all things we run into, encounter. We hold a book with the same hand we use to open a door. We sit at a table, adjusting

our self, as we would settle into a cinema seat. But we need to read a book and ‘see’ a film. Each has a temporality essential to it. Each is ‘in time’ in a way a door or table are differently in time. I do not mean duration or ‘clock’ time, when we can snatch a moment to indulge in a bit of reading. In what way are films and books essentially in time?

Equally, we say both films and books *use* language. To be sure, a film has a ‘visual’ language, and an aural complexity for which the voice is one component. Dumont’s films are subtitled. Hence I “read” his dialogue in translation. I also read Schelling in translation. As ‘translations’ they share something about language in as much as it is translatable. But do films and books essentially ‘use’ language? What is the ‘word’ such that it happens in a philosophical treatise and in a contemporary film? *We have focused on a question of ‘temporality’ and a question of ‘language’.* One more consideration: both the treatise and the film are ‘creations’ by ‘creatures’. Are creations made using languages and temporality? Given time, we all could possibly do most things. But we don’t. The finitude of temporality and the finitude of language are not the instruments at our disposal in order to create. Rather, creations, in their creating, in their essential be-coming to existence, disclose temporality and the word in their finitude. Essentially, the relation of the existent, the creature, to its becoming opens something essential to an understanding of the temporality of the work and its ‘image’. It happens that this singular philosophical treatise by Schelling and this singular body of works by Dumont each essentially concerns itself with this existence of a creating creature, a temporality and ‘image’. *Each does so by posing the actuality of evil as the essence of human freedom.*

Becoming evil

It was not the case that no one thought of evil prior to Schelling. All philosophy, from Plato’s *agathon*, “highest good,” to Kant’s moral imperative thought of the “good” as existing, or with Plato, beyond Being.⁹ In Christian metaphysics, the highest Being, the *summum ens*, God, whether transcendent or immanent to beings, as the unconditioned cause of all beings, and ‘Himself’ perfection, necessitated that ‘evil’ was *not* a being. Rather, ‘evil’ was the possibility of a distance from God, from the good. Only the ‘good’ existed. Evil did not exist. It was not actual, living. The sheer radicality of Schelling is that he proposed that evil is a being, an existent, along with the good. Moreover, and this is radical, he demanded that the existence of evil is *necessary* for human freedom, which means evil is necessary for the giving that is God’s love. The difficulty that thwarted earlier philosophers was precisely the question as to how God could cause evil. How could eternal perfection be the cause of evil? Schelling’s thinking required something extremely original in maintaining God as perfection, yet allowing his creation to include evil as an existent.

Human beings in their becoming, which is to say, in their coming to self-hood, to the in-itself of itself as identity and, thereby, as freedom, are the becoming will of an existent, a will-to-what-is-willed. This coming to itself of a subject is a movement from a primordial willing that, as yet, had no name for what it wills. Schelling calls this ‘longing’. Again, the radicality of Schelling is that longing is the Nature of the Ground in God. Heidegger suggests: “eternal longing is striving which itself, however, never admits of a stable formation because it always wants to remain longing. As a striving

without understanding, it has nothing which has been understood and is brought to stand and stability, nothing which could call something definite, unified. It is 'nameless'; it does not know any name; it is unable to name what it is striving for. It is lacking the *possibility of words*." I am suggesting that the profound attunement of Dumont's cinema is longing in this sense of a striving that has yet, in its primordiality, to come to the word. Longing is an opening to willing that has yet to find the *word*, a silent opening to language as the naming of things. The finality of becoming happens in the *understanding* of the existent as existing, as known to itself, 'understanding' that is the unity of will and what is willed, a self identity as free.

Where does freedom come into it? Freedom is 'freedom for' the existent, an openness to what is. For Schelling, the greatest freedom is openness to the universal will, to God, the greatest good, to what is most opposed to an in-itself for-itself. In the movement from primordial longing, to the bestowal of the word to understanding, human beings are open not to the possibility of degrees of the good but to the actuality of evil, of closing off universal will for the sake of an exclusive maintenance of an in-itself for-itself, of being closed off to the being-with of what is different as the in-itself of another. Love is the jointure of an in-itself to what is opposed to it as an other. Human beings, in their freedom, are free to do good *and* to do evil. Both are not only possible but, necessarily, actual. God's love is precisely the higher unity of the unbridgeable separation of the in-itself of good and the in-itself of evil, that 'good' *is* and that 'evil' *is*. Schelling's ontology is a theology. We encounter an onto-theology within a Christian tradition of metaphysics. What is radical, though, is that he approaches the question of the human from something other than an essential humanism. Human being is disclosed as that being who is most open to the question of being, the question of an opening to the word and an opening to temporality. Human freedom is not something innate and essential to the human, but rather something essential to being in its showing. How does being disclose?

Violence and Metaphysics

These human creatures are capable of the most terrible things, the worst of possible things, the least explainable, and the most savage and incomprehensible things. Schelling admits that human freedom is incomprehensible. Kant does as well. Heidegger suggests that no animal is capable of evil. To sink below animal being is reserved for human evil. In a comment that might epitomize Dumont's cinema as distinctly different from a cinema that aims at picturing a world, Heidegger suggests: "Man is not an object of observation placed before us which we then drape with little everyday feelings. Rather, man is experienced in the insight into the abysses and heights of Being, in regard to the terrible element of the godhead, the lifedread of all creatures, the sadness of all created creatures, the malice of evil and the will of love." Cinema is no stranger to tragic drama, to the depiction of violence, to disgust, to moral enigma, to un-resolvable paradox, to strangulating double binds. Cinema shows these things, represents them as objectively present for a viewing 'subject' such that we can remember or forget them, confuse scenes or recount correctly what happened, appraise aesthetically or ethically concerning the film, film-maker, audience, industry and so on. There is so much culture building to do, and so much cinema, now DVD, now direct-internet download, in a public place, at home, on one of my many television sets, wide-screen, blue-ray, home-theatre surround-sound and so on. Is

'being' disclosed in this way, on blue-ray surround sound? What is our guiding question for Dumont's cinema? It too shows more than enough violence. Shall we describe some to get a taste for it or to set the scene, to pick out the thematic and point to evidence of evil, no doubt 'acted' but actual nonetheless? Is this disclosing 'being'? What else is 'cinema' than a representing-represented of or for an 'I' 'think' 'I will'? Let us consider the Dumont films in a number of ways. Dumont is a creating creature whose *finitude* means in actuality that his existence is not eternally in harmony with his becoming in-itself. He is not God. The temporality of his becoming is the unconcealing of his essential freedom to be in the letting be of beings that are or in a willing standing over and against. This temporality is the unconcealing of his being as freedom. He creates from a primordial longing-for, prior to its formation, prior to its saying or openness to language, to an understanding of himself in the image of his creation, in the identity of what he willed-to-be and his willing. He made films. But he made films for ... for what: *for some ones surely?* But more so, for the showing not of this character's love or violence, going here or there, living or dying, having this beginning or that ending, but rather for the showing of this very becoming existent creature of a self-creating in the actuality of committing good and evil and the absolute necessity of both as the necessity of freedom. The fundamental moods and understanding of his work are attunements to longing and rage, to silence as an opening to saying, to the moment of looking as an opening to touching, to the indifference of a polarized in-itself of sexed differences to the absolute malice of violent inhumanity, within each of the films *L'humanité*, *Twenty Nine Palms* and *Flanders*, encountered as violent rape: of a child, of a man, of a woman. There is no cinematic 'successful', 'idealized' or 'normal' sexual relations in Dumont's films. Sex is life's primordial longing, will's coming to existence, its birth to presence. Sex is in search of the word, Spirit, love, a higher unity of the good. Dumont's films traverse in their becoming film, becoming existent, the becoming existent of sexed being for which language is not an already 'there' wellspring of joyous sentiment or *bon mots*. Language, that the existent may come to itself in its image, is the most vicious, difficult, abyssal and dangerous emergence. No idle talk. No loud speakers: immense failures and small, almost non-consequential disclosures; terrible things, the worst of worlds, with a small, very small, humanity that shines or shows itself. Yet it is this, the actuality of evil, the becoming indifference of an in-itself foregoing the genuine harmony of its coming to be that shows the implacability of the essence of freedom. That it is.