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# Alas, the Indignity: Murder Victims Entombed in Cows

'Li'l Quinquin,' a New Mystery by Bruno Dumont

By STEPHEN HOLDEN JAN. 1, 2015

The French filmmaker Bruno Dumont has described his mesmerizing 197-minute murder mystery, “Li'l Quinquin,” as a comedy. The term fits that definition only if you understand that he means the human comedy in all its grotesque and happy-sad variations. As in most of his films, Mr. Dumont assumes the aesthetic and moral stance of a semidetached, some would say pitiless, observer of the human condition. “Li'l Quinquin” is a quasi-epic farce that mostly wears a poker face as it elaborates his continuing obsession with the collision of humankind’s bestial and spiritual impulses.

Set in a farm community in extreme northwestern France, where the rolling countryside meets the sea, this exquisitely photographed four-part film, made for French television and featuring local actors, has an Inspector Clouseau-like police captain, Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost), who, with his assistant, Carpentier (Philippe Jore), investigates a series of murders. In each case, a victim’s chopped-up body parts are discovered inside the stomach of a dead farm animal, usually a cow. The first cow is discovered in a nearby World War II-era bunker and flown to the village by helicopter.

Van der Weyden, who trundles around the countryside in his police vehicle, is a classic bumbling cop with bushy eyebrows and a bundle of facial tics. Carpentier, with his string-bean body and gapped-toothed, grinning-idiot smile,

suggests a Gallic answer to Don Knotts. He, too, has a quirk: When driving the police car by himself, he pilots it like a stunt driver.

The title character is a pubescent towheaded farm boy with a Humpty Dumpty face who roams the area on his bicycle with a group of friends. They amuse themselves by throwing firecrackers and taunting strangers with racist and homophobic epithets. The chief objects of their scorn are North African laborers working in the area. Late in the movie, one worker, subjected to vicious verbal taunts, climbs to the top of a building with a gun and fires at those below.

Quinquin, like many of the other characters, has conspicuous physical deformities that are never explained or even mentioned. The way his mouth twists up on one side gives him a permanently surly expression.

By far the most disturbing character is his uncle, Dany (Jason Cirot), who returns from a mental hospital in the care of Quinquin's ominously stoic father, Lebleu (Stéphane Boutillier). A scary lunatic who stumbles around in circles and responds to questions with a demented, homicidal glare, Dany is something out of a horror movie set in an insane asylum. What back story there is suggests that the Lebleu family has an ugly, conflicted history revolving around the distribution of an inheritance.

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For all his reflexive name-calling, Quinquin has a softer side. Almost everywhere he goes, he is accompanied by his girlfriend, Eve (Lucy Caron), and the two, who exchange long, sloppy kisses, treat each other with the solemn tenderness of adolescents playing Joseph and Mary in a Christmas pageant.

This rustic setting is similar to the village in Mr. Dumont's much-decorated breakthrough film, "Humanité," whose portrait of rural villagers suggested that the biggest difference between the farmers and the animals they tend is the farmers' primitive awareness of good and evil and their attempts at faith. The movie's four chapters have titles like "The Heart of Evil" and "The Devil Incarnate" that can be taken as jokes. Or not.

Mr. Dumont refuses to romanticize his characters or to ask us to identify with them emotionally, except as fellow creatures in the species under

examination. Sex, even between lovers, is little more than rutting copulation. And marriage, to quote Nietzsche, is the meeting of “two beasts.”

“Li'l Quinquin” mocks the rituals through which people express their humanity. There is a funeral whose participants, including the priest, can barely suppress their laughter as they dutifully go through the motions of a hick charade that involves an incompetent church organist and an aspiring pop singer who can barely carry a tune. An extended sequence observes a Bastille Day parade with a pathetic marching band and a troop of clumsy majorettes.

I would like to believe that Mr. Dumont is not a nihilistic know-it-all thumbing his nose and crowing, “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” The physical beauty of “Li'l Quinquin” tells me that beneath what could be interpreted as contemptuous misanthropy is a bedrock of stern compassion.

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