12 From migration to drift

Forging queer migrant spaces and transborder relations in contemporary French cinema

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Why is it that contemporary French queer cinema, when engaging with racially and ethnically different migrants, often ends up projecting and framing them rhetorically in oppositional binary terms as the abject ‘other’ of French society? This ticklish question is prompted by a number of recent films by French gay directors that have attempted to address the migrant condition, notably Robin Campillo’s acclaimed feature *Eastern Boys* (2013, France), which narrates the path to French naturalisation of a young queer migrant from Eastern Europe. Since this film has already been analysed in extensive detail in Chapter 8, I will not rehearse here the narrative intricacies wherein a middle-aged, middle-class, white Frenchman (Daniel) hatches a plot with his young, Ukrainian hustler-cum-lover (Rouslan) so that the latter may escape the hold of his Eastern European gang of *sans-papiers* and then be officially adopted through the French legal system. What concerns me most is the film’s final stage when the couple are in court pleading their case through lawyers: are they lying to the authorities to get what they want (i.e., a sexual relation under cover of adoption), or is their relationship now de-eroticised and chaste? Either way, in the concluding shot following their essentially favourable court hearing, as the camera moves slowly forward within the justice building towards the window and records them walking off outside – a shot emphasising the fixed boundary between inclusion and exclusion – they are presented almost prosaically as a closeted male couple. For this to have been possible, and for the border between ‘enlightened’ West and ‘backward’ East to remain firmly intact, the film’s carnal core of homoerotic male desire and sexiness – Rouslan’s menacing and devilishly handsome gang leader ‘Boss’, the bad Father complete with chiselled pecs and tattooed back who danced so dirtily during the stripping bare of Daniel’s apartment – has had to be expunged from the narrative, that is, abjected and effectively sublimated.

Eastern Boys ultimately reveals the sexual stakes of recuperation by the state, for it enacts a desexualising of the queer (and with it ultimately a *dequeering* of the sexual) in order for the French republican ideal of assimilation and ‘normalisation’ to be upheld. The new, clean, respectable, republican couple of Daniel and Rouslan is not too far removed in this respect

from the utopian, republican ‘family’ created by the young, mixed-race and HIV-positive Félix in *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (2000, France, co-dir. Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau) as he crosses the length of France. Félix remains the ‘good citizen’ precisely by not displaying overt signs of ethnic or sexual difference. Indeed, the various people he meets dissuade him from looking for his real Arab father so that he may establish new, ‘safe’, family-type connections with his French compatriots. The queer sexual cannot – and must not – be shown here. In one notable scene, Félix’s sexual passion for his new ‘cousin’ in the Ardèche is spectacularly withheld and cut (we see them go into the bushes and, in the blink of an edit, promptly return with a used condom). As Denis Provencher has argued, Félix is ultimately repositioned as part of a larger French family and national space based on the traditional republican values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* that refuse to highlight – and indeed wilfully ignore – individual differences related to gender, class, ethnic origin or sexual orientation (Provencher 2007: 48).

The problems of objectifying the migrant figure in exclusionary, republican terms are also apparent in Vincent Dieutre’s celebrated biographical documentary *Jaurès* (2012, France), which, like *Eastern Boys*, draws an equation – here more implicit – between the abjectly sexual and the undocumented migrant as undifferentiated and unassimilated other.¹ In a mixing studio, Dieutre shows his friend Éva Truffaut the material he recorded during his three-year love affair with Simon conducted in secret in the latter’s apartment facing the Jaurès metro station in Paris. The footage (the subject of a running commentary by Dieutre prompted by Truffaut’s questions) documents also the movements of a group of clandestine Afghan migrants below on the quayside of the Canal Saint-Martin, filmed by Dieutre from the window as they endure a bleak, destitute existence. The period covered by the film coincides exactly with the migrants’ initial arrival and eventual forced removal by the authorities (the final credits reproduce the communiqué in July 2010 by Éric Besson, then French Minister for Immigration, justifying the need to relocate forcibly the 200 Afghan migrants to shelters). Although Simon works in the field of charity aid, the closest the couple get to any direct contact with the migrants is when they drop blankets down from the bridge during the winter cold (an action not recorded). Apparently unaware that they are a continual object of fascination for Dieutre’s secret camera, the Afghans’ all-too-visible massed bodies outside appear to compensate for the unseen, intimate bodies of the two lovers inside who have chosen not to film themselves. Seen but never heard, the migrants remain anonymous and indiscriminate, referred to at one point by Simon as ‘his little theatre’ and by Vincent as ‘petits Afghans’ (literally, ‘little Afghans’). In fact, the unidentified illegal Afghans appear as if phantoms – a blank canvas or screen for the Western gay subject freely to project on and fantasise, as when Vincent remarks that he finds it ‘touching’ they have been forced to address ‘their place’ in society, and that due to this the world has somehow been transformed (*‘tout a un peu bougé’*) (*‘everything has changed a little’*).

Such projection takes an erotic form when Vincent later states that with the arrival of Spring the migrants are adopting the seductive swagger of Parisians. Objectified and now sexualised, they are the marginalised abject other against which the couple define themselves as French citizens enjoying the security of republican subjecthood.

Towards the end of *Jaurès*, Dieutre writes over his pre-recorded images with digitally animated patches of artificial colour that cover and blank out forms and details in *bande dessinée* fashion. As pigeons and cars are digitally morphed, so, too, the bodies of some of the Afghans suddenly disappear from the screen. These digital manoeuvres proliferate to the point that they invade even the zone of the mixing studio occupied by Dieutre and Truffaut. Tom Cuthbertson suggests that such techniques of augmentation confront the viewer with the fundamentally constructed and edited nature of Dieutre's entire film (Cuthbertson 2017: 280). As such, they would extend an earlier moment when footage of young refugees dancing on the canal bank was gradually slowed down, and when a news item heard on the radio about Marine Le Pen's extremist stance on immigration was carefully edited and juxtaposed with other news about Nazi war criminals and the banning of minarets on mosques in Switzerland. Yet in a film where the undifferentiated migrants, at constant risk of being deported, are denied agency and have no say at all in Dieutre's set-up (in all senses of the word), such self-consciously manipulative artwork serves less to create new lines and patterns of thinking than to reinforce the migrants' alien, abject status, crossing them out in their very materiality and difference.² Put differently, *Jaurès* requires the total evacuation of the migrant body to be both narratologically and formally complete.

To nuance my opening question: how can French cinema, queer or straight, move beyond writing over and abjectifying the migrant as indistinguishable, alien (sexual) other, or, as in *Eastern Boys*, submitting chosen refugees to a universalising and sanitising French narrative of assimilation? That is, how might French cinematic spaces be forged aesthetically that foreground instead the migrant's embodied presence and point of view – spaces that could also harness the potential of the migrant body powerfully to resist normalising agencies and the protocols of republican identity, and thereby encourage new, more subtle, progressive, and genuinely empathetic ways of understanding and presenting migration?

Queering the republican pitch

Taking fully on board Nacira Guénif's compelling argument (discussed in Chapter 1) for viewing migrant mobility as a form of 'queer' strangeness that can stimulate a queer spatio-historical imagination resistant to the vertical history of the Nation while also exposing the fiction of European universalism (see Guénif 2014), I wish in what follows to move precisely beyond standard political issues of representation and identity. That is, I want to explore how the objectifying spatial and affective distance observed

in French migration cinema by the citizen subject and first-person narrator towards the migrant other – let us call this a form of republican ‘discretion’ for lack of a better term – might be contested and *queered* in aesthetic terms by both a subversion of point of view and the concrete embracing of mobility as material flow – a movement potentially capable of destabilising and denarrativising fixed notions of gender and identity. My contention is that more radically *queer* modes of migration may be glimpsed in French cinema when it breaks loose of its conventional formal and narrative settings. Such modes may be encountered in places where one might least expect them, including even, I will attempt to argue, in the fiercely heterosexual, auteurist territories of Bruno Dumont. I am referring here not to Dumont’s early brutal, unsparing, neo-Bressonian dramas set largely in the impoverished, post-industrial hinterlands of Northern France (films such as *La Vie de Jésus/The Life of Jesus* (1997) and *Flandres/Flanders* (2006, France)), but rather to his more recent work for television, specifically *Coincoin et les z’inhumains/Coincoin and the Extra-humans* (2018, France), a four-part comedy made for ARTE written and directed by Dumont – for this is not only where Dumont drifts off from his sternly philosophical path, but also where French cinema migrates into fresh, uncharted, queer realms.³

Coincoin et les z’inhumains (which I shall refer to henceforth as a film since it was critically received as such in France) begins where his previous comic miniseries for ARTE, *P’tit Quinquin* (2014, France), left off: with evil and dread hanging heavy in the air of an incestuous village on the Côte d’Opale where entrenched racism and xenophobia breed. There, the source was a serial killer whose bloody murders included dismembered human bodies inserted grotesquely into the stomachs of dead cows. Here, the threat comes literally from sticky, blue-black, dung-like gunk falling from the sky, targeting in particular the racist elements in the area, notably the local nationalist group Le Bloc (whose members reside largely in an all-white camping village), but also characters reappearing from the first series: the hapless, tetchy, ever-twitching, detective captain Roger Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost) with his sidekick lieutenant Rudy Carpentier (Philippe Jore), and the mischievous boy Quinquin, now an unsure teenager renamed Coincoin (Alane Delhaye) with a new girlfriend, Jenny (Alexia Depret), daughter to the secretary of Le Bloc. With the lieutenant forever doing wheelies in his police car while the shit literally keeps falling down, the tendency towards bellyful slapstick is taken to a new level: in the flashes of light produced at night by the extra-terrestrial goo that enters human bodies, characters give noisy birth to clones of themselves through their buttocks. In this deliciously obscene twilight zone, these ‘clones’ (repeatedly mispronounced by the caption as ‘clowns’), false doubles because lacking human emotion, raise obvious questions of identity – questions which, with their premise of knowledge and certainty, are left deliberately suspended and unanswered. For if the police are fixated by such queer goings-on, the viewer’s attention is caught instead by another, more potent mystery: the random, floating presence across the screen of migrants.

Appearing on ten occasions yet never formally identified or named as such, the migrants are never actually heard speaking (they occasionally chant in an African tongue and will sing at the end in English). Moreover, they are not personalised or differentiated in terms of name or character, and thus remain permanently 'other' to the viewer. Each passing group of largely male migrants is of shifting number, race, and ethnicity (African, Middle Eastern). Such a vague, aleatory portrayal would seem to conform exactly to the dubious template of the apparitional, visible-yet-invisible, undifferentiated migrant other common in European cinema. Yet there is no authorial voice-over or dubbed sound to impose here a Western viewpoint. Instead, conveyed respectfully in the diegetic present, the migrants enjoy agency in that they determine their own path and turn up in the frame as and when and how they choose. With each new appearance, Dumont dares us to emplot and fix them in some kind of narrative (social, political, ideological).⁴ But with no discourse to elaborate and nothing to 'prove', the endlessly mobile and intractable migrants seem everywhere present. Above all, they appear integrated into the landscape: this is also their land freely to roam.

Even more crucially, the migrants are immediately aligned with another form of other equally unheralded in Dumont's cinema, the out-queer, here in the shape of two young lesbian lovers Ève (Lucy Caron) (Coincoin's former girlfriend in the first series) and Corinne (Priscilla Benoist), an androgynous-looking farm-girl.⁵ This is how the two different groups are introduced early in the opening episode called 'Noir ch'est noir' (the 'ch' denoting the inhabitants' thick, Picard, *ch'ti* accent). Four young African men walking slowly along the road into frame gently observe a passing police car carrying Van der Weyden and Carpentier. One in the group even cordially hails the police. Although not invited formally into their subjective point of view, the viewer shares the migrants' same general angle and field of vision, looking with them at ground level as the car heads off into the distance. The captain stares out of the side-window back at them, as if mystified by the sight of four relaxed black men freely passing by. A little later, at the farm, the captain mistakes Corinne for a man; she corrects him immediately: 'Mademoiselle'. Discomfited, he harps on obsessively about her gender with the similarly shocked Carpentier, attributing it to the modern generation. By contrast, Ève and Corinne are entirely straightforward and confident about who they are, and they express their affection naturally and tenderly without drama (Ève of Corinne: 'C'est la femme que j'aime' ('She's the woman I love')). It is only when Coincoin, for example, makes an issue of their relationship in derogatory terms (in his case out of sour jealousy) that they stage a spectacle of kissing to silence him.

In both scenes, we witness on the part of the police a mistrust and marginalisation of the unknown other. Misapprehended by straight white men in authority, migrants and queers are both identified as alien and classified as suspect. Later in the same episode another group of migrants is brought together tangentially with Ève and Corinne. While attempting to hitch a lift, the couple are stopped by the police and obliged reluctantly to be driven

home. Both captain and lieutenant declare themselves concerned for their safety, pointing out the unwelcome attention the two will attract with their clothing which exposes their legs. Yet such unwelcome paternalism is steeped in homophobia. Van der Weyden refers to the couple mischievously as Coincoin's 'two girlfriends' and 'notre petit couple' ('our little couple'), adding in typical binary terms: 'Les chiens font pas des chats' (literally, dogs don't make cats), an expression about hereditary resemblance suggesting that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. This has a clear homophobic undertone here, since it suggests that the two women are narcissistically the same (i.e., two dogs), and thus doubly other and base. At the same time, the term '*chat*' carries a crude whiff of '*(la) chatte*' ('pussy'). Just as we are left trying to process such abusive terms, Van der Weyden proceeds to another pet issue of difference, this time racial. Looking out of the windscreen towards what will promptly be revealed as a group of passing migrants (here two African, one Middle Eastern), whom he perceives immediately as potential sexual predators, he blurts out: 'Quand on parle du loup, là' ('Talking of the wolf, here it comes'). The animalistic discourses of homophobia and racism are thus wholly entangled. Glimpsed in silence for a few quick seconds from the back-seat by Ève and Corinne, the migrants simultaneously peer in turn into the car and hazard a friendly, inquisitive smile (there is no subjective POV shot in either case).

This brief, silent, accidental, mutual (non-)encounter between migrants and queers is over before it has even begun, yet Corinne is moved to give

Figure 12.1 Returning the look: the police car transporting Ève and Corinne skirts another group of migrants in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and Blaq Out (2018).

the finger to the police sitting in the front before defiantly stroking the hand of Ève. The police drop the women off and continue blithely with their toxic talk: 'les homosexuelles-là . . . faut savoir faire la balance' ('with those homosexuals . . . you have to know how to achieve a balance'), which the captain defines as the fine line between protecting vulnerable women and observing police protocol of never giving a lift to hitchhikers. Seconds later, their car is sprayed with gunk.

How far can we take such a missed encounter, since there is no further contact (indirect or otherwise) in the film between the lesbian couple and migrants, and thus no narrative progression or development? There is certainly nothing here approximating the warm relationship that forms naturally in Éliane de Latour's picaresque feature *Après l'océan/Birds of Heaven* (2006, France/UK/Côte d'Ivoire) between straight Ivorian migrant Shad and the young French bisexual woman Tango, his free-spirited 'little white sister', whom he meets by chance in London and who, to help him out with a marriage of convenience, takes him to Paris where she falls passionately in love with an African woman called Olga (a relationship Shad treats with due respect). Dumont is, of course, not interested in purveying positive images, and if the film refuses to present the migrant as victim, it also mobilises against any type of simple *bien pensant* approach towards minorities.⁶ Yet the seeds of a possible new intersectional convergence have arguably been sown here, for even an oblique encounter of this kind constitutes a relational movement. During the transverse *skirting* of these two different groups on the roadside, there is a silent, undeclared, yet palpable bond of understanding and affinity between them based on a shared experience of being othered and discriminated against by the oppressive, patrolling, white male agents of republican authority who view both communities as deviant. Might such an intermittent presentation and open framing of the continually proximate migrant engender a new cinematic sensitivity towards migration, while serving in the process to queer the invariably straight sub-genre of the Calais migrant film?⁷ More generally, might it also, in its very narrative intangibility, serve to undermine and subvert the prevailing universalising paradigms of French republican identity, masculinity, and nationhood inscribed in *Eastern Boys* and *Jaurès*? I want to explore these far-reaching possibilities by focusing on the second episode of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* entitled 'Les z'inhumains', taking first a short scene that deploys a key spatial motif of European cinema's encounter with migrants: the Descent to the Abyss.

From abyss to tunnel: tilting the vertical

The sequence begins with the captain and lieutenant, still in hopeless search of the source of the foreign gunk, standing on a hill overlooking a make-shift migrant camp on the Calais outskirts. Beholding the migrants below in a high-angle POV shot, Van der Weyden grandly proclaims that the term 'Jungle' must be understood not just metaphorically but also literally, that

is, as a truly alien ‘planet’ of non-humans.⁸ In this paranoid binary, ‘they’ are simply inferior foreigners and impostors, not legitimate citizens worthy of differentiation like ‘us’. He then indulges in truisms such as ‘(il) faut appeler un chat un chat’ (literally, ‘one must call a cat a cat’), meaning ‘tell it like it is’ (or more appropriately in view of the manifestly racist context, ‘call a spade a spade’). The use of ‘*chat*’ recalls his earlier insult to Ève and Corinne, but here it carries a racialised charge, since the distinction between ‘cats’ and ‘dogs’ echoes the lines of demarcation and segregation between the ‘superior’ and ‘lower’ races in colonial French North Africa, where Arabs were referred to derogatively by *pièdes-noirs* as subhuman rats and ‘*bicots*’ (literally, kid goats).⁹ With his clumsily aloof, vertical posture intended to demonstrate his hard-boiled attitude towards ‘*les malheureux*’ (‘the destitute’), Van der Weyden exposes both the essentialising nature of the nationalist rhetoric of exclusion and his own consistent and impulsive phobia.¹⁰ Yet his lofty stance is soon dislocated and flattened out visually by the cinematic framing which insists instead on mutuality and empathy, for the camera is as if drawn forward towards the field of the migrants when he callously pushes Carpentier down a small slope for perceived insolence (Carpentier had questioned the captain’s persistent ‘abstruseness’). A group of migrants come automatically to Carpentier’s aid and help him up off the ground, holding him aloft almost like a male group *pietà*. This shot is not matched by a reverse-field shot of Van der Weyden looking at the action from their subjective point of view since there is no strict eye-line match, although Dumont plays a little with the possibility (see Figure 12.2).¹¹ We

Figure 12.2 A group of migrants helping up Carpentier (Philippe Jore) as Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost) brandishes his gun in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and Blaq Out (2018).

see the captain respond in knee-jerk fashion by flashing his gun, a gesture that instantly scatters the migrants. 'They're helping me', Carpentier protests, to which the captain responds in bewilderment: 'The world's upside down' ('C'est le monde à l'envers').

And indeed it is, for the seeds have now been sown for the gradual erosion of the vertical in favour of the horizontal. By this, I mean that the sequence establishes in concrete terms a wider cinematic field whereby the French police, as they saunter through the camp, find themselves literally out of their depth in long shot, and where the white male subject does not enjoy privileged cinematic access to subjective point of view. What results in this increasing dispersal of point of view is a commonality of the gaze and a shared sense of human vulnerability and affect. We see this beautifully first in the migrants' instinctive offering of a hand to another in need, then in the way that the proliferating strangeness and softness of the everyday sounds and smells of the migrants cooking, playing and conversing convivially with each other, despite the expressly hostile intrusion of the police, disconcerts and undoes – in a word *queers* – the aggressive, polarising, straight, white, French male subject engaged in histrionic displays of power. Dumont is presenting here a graphic deflation of warped white masculinity and nationalist narcissism that greets a collective gesture of human sensitivity and kindness only with ugly intimidation. Crucially, unlike the captain's glaringly racist dismissal of the migrants who can't understand his heavy Northern *patois* (although he claims the universal purity of standard French: 'Yet I speak good French, no?') and his desperate attempt to link them with the invading gunk, the film itself assiduously avoids employing the viscous blue-black gunge as a simple metaphor for non-white foreigners. In fact, the mixed black and brown, African and Middle Eastern migrants have nothing to do with the undifferentiated molten magma that so vexes the police, although they are fully alert, as we are, to its comic effects. Moreover, if migrant figures are visible in the film only in relation to the local white residents, it is also the case that when the two communities vaguely commingle, as here, the viewer is invariably transported into the field of the migrants – not within their subjective line of vision as such, but within their material space and orbit.

Such refusal to position the migrant as the negative reverse-field other of the autochthonous subject allows for a more inclusive, *horizontal* glimpse of homosociality and *mixité* transcending the vertical, nationalist lines of race and identity. Indeed, it decisively tilts and dismantles standard objectifying positions and point of view towards the migrant other by presenting migrancy at an explicitly aesthetic rather than representational level. New openings in cinematic form that loosen the screws of point of view and shot/counter-shot create here a new mobility in the relational field that in turn frees up potential new forms of kinship and contiguity, or what we might call provisionally a new cinematic queer commons.

There are other moments later in the same episode that extend this more capacious, lateral, queer expansion of the visual field – minor, unguarded moments that glide past and might seem inconsequential, yet which are equally unique. They radiate out intersectionally to reveal how casual, informal encounters and passing contact between strangers may create potential new, unforeseen forms of relation and affectivity beyond bloodlines, gender hierarchies, and ethnic absolutes. One such occurs just after the police, in hot pursuit of Coincoin and his best mate Kevin (aka ‘l’Gros’, or Fatso) (Julien Bodart) on their motorbike, find their car splatted on once again. As the runaway gunked car appears to lose control, screeching to an abrupt halt on the roadside, another act of human solidarity performed by migrants (now six) for those in potential danger is witnessed. We are placed once more on the same level with the migrants as they encircle the car. Looking at Van der Weyden, Carpentier declares in astonishment ‘Vous êtes tout noir!’ (‘You’re all black!’), yet what might be construed as a personal insult (i.e., an attack on his superior’s status and integrity as an indigenous white Frenchman) is celebrated collectively as a term of endearment in a joyful recognition of the other as same. For ‘black’ serves here not as a term of racial othering (the captain is not being interpellated violently as inferior because non-white) but as a relative concept, that is, as a signifier of colour rather than race. Nonplussed, Van der Weyden is again thrown off-balance and disarmed by this sudden set of circumstances whereby he becomes a passive object of the

Figure 12.3 ‘Have you seen your face? You’re all black, look!’: Carpentier to Van der Weyden while surrounded by migrants in *Coincoin et les z’inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z’inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and Blaq Out (2018).

foreign male gaze, but soon transfigured by the spirited African chanting that spontaneously starts up around him to Carpentier's gentle amusement. This reshuffling of the standard European gaze towards the non-white migrant other is highlighted and extended by the flagrant lack of continuity editing: first three migrants move around the car towards Carpentier's side, then, in the next shot, there are four, including one wearing a jacket with a bright floral strip that sets off the captain's newly acquired 'black face'. It is as if an erratic act of montage were operating here in accordance with the migrants who invest creatively every space they enter without seeking to own it.

Another brief example of formal queering through an aesthetic rendition of sameness is the moment shortly after when five adolescent white boys linked to Le Bloc, including Coincoin and Kevin, roll their way threateningly through another highly determined migrant space, that of the tunnel, inhabited here by migrants in small tents. Coincoin's attention is captured by a little black girl on his right who causes him to drift gently away from the pack. Together the two are framed moving forwards through the bowels of the tunnel as the camera tracks backwards, each aware of the other's presence and mutually distracted. They are then pictured separately, with two objective POV shots running in parallel. Yet the two figures are soon brought together again in an inclusive wide-angle shot that both reverses their earlier positions relative to each other (she is now on his left) and encompasses other migrant figures. This lolling formation defuses the portentous threat of white aggression on the march and instals a mutuality of the gaze: a curious, unspoken

Figure 12.4 Coincoin (Alane Delhaye) walking in tandem with a young migrant girl in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and Blaq Out (2018).

attraction and complicit sharing of smiles over the borders of the frame that cuts across age, race, and culture. The last shot of the sequence occurs from within the girl's general field of vision (again, not her point of view) as she looks out of the tunnel with bemused pleasure at Coincoin being teased in laddish horseplay by the other boys for his idle distraction by a new 'girlfriend'. There is nothing objectifying or fetishising at all about this sequence: the two figures enjoy equally objective visual status, and the enticing softness of their casual propinquity and availability, which momentarily dissolves social, cultural, and racial lines, invites from the viewer intuitive understanding and empathy.

From migrancy to drift

Taken together, these affectively and aesthetically queer, migrant sequences initiate us into the aesthetic processes of relational difference while posing the question how exactly to take such terms as 'black' and 'homosexual' if divested of their meaning as cultural assignations and indicators of identity. In the case of the captain's realisation of his own 'black face', we might be tempted in such a highly racialised setting to read skin colour in the Fanonian sense of masks, i.e., the projected black other of white colonial society wearing the trappings of whiteness, including the master's language, without ever being allowed to be part of it.¹² Yet the viewer is stripped here of the need to conceptualise the migrant other in racial terms, since that would constitute merely a form of limited 'tunnel vision'. Indeed, the migrants' very lack of discourse, which punctures and silences Van der Weyden's gabbling racist logorrhoea, together with their perpetual 'erring', even in the interstices of montage, allow them to elude positionality and the fixed social and cultural parameters of movement mapped out ideologically by conventional representation and framing. The value of the migrants' wanderings lies precisely in their narrative and ideological unreadability, making them an aesthetic relational subject attuned to the open beauty of human gesture rather than an oppositional, ideological other within French society often based, as we saw earlier, on the assumption – entirely avoided by Dumont – that the migrant figure is necessarily straight. Put differently, the migrants' ever-virtual status rests in a permanent state of receptivity and desire (never fulfilled) for the other – that is, the pleasure of encountering and welcoming contact, however minimal, with other human beings in a spirit of mutual curiosity and mystery. Like the film's queer figures who have defiantly taken off the masks of compulsory heterosexuality and shame, the migrants simply 'are'.

What we are witnessing in this pre-narrative and post-conceptual *drift* is both the creation of new kinds of relationality that resist fixed and rapacious binaries of 'us' and 'them', and the instantiation of a queer 'migrancy' of vision – that is, a continuous evacuation and dispersal of the patriarchal, republican gaze into something more objectively shared, open and non-hierarchising. This resonates strongly with Patrick Chamoiseau's vital 2017

essay, *Frères migrants*, a purposively poetic intervention in French public discourse on the migrant crisis inspired by Édouard Glissant's 'poetics of Relation' and errantry, and which makes a stirring plea for open borders by invoking the transformative nature of a relational imaginary. For Chamoiseau, 'we' are all 'congenital migrants' in a 'multi-transcultural' ecosystem of Relation ('Un vivre-ensemble multi-trans-culturel' (Chamoiseau 2017: 91; original emphasis)), and relational, global thinking is preeminently 'horizontal' – to be understood, as with the loose, lateral formations of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, as fundamentally post-national (a nation is always a 'nation-relation', Chamoiseau asserts). A crucial point of difference, however, is that Chamoiseau always speaks in the name of a universal absolute, namely 'l'humain' (the human), where, as in the conventional republican script, gender rarely features.

The queer migratory 'surplus' of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, that is, the opening up of multiple gaps and new relational spaces outside the regularised zones of cinematic grammar and knowledge, draws the viewer into a sensory apprehension of migrant movement akin to that felt in Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* (2015, Italy/France), which, as Sudeep Dasgupta has persuasively argued, deploys an 'aesthetics of indirection' whereby unelaborated migrant presences appear intermittently through elliptical forms of sound/image and time/space relations and are deliberately kept out of narrative integration (Dasgupta 2017: 49–50). The sensory works here 'as a counterfoil to the cognitive and the thinking of scattered subalternity is blocked and transferred to the sensory register' (Dasgupta 2017: 47), thus entailing a reconsideration of the relationality established cinematically between the marginalised migrant and the privileged, vacationing, legal resident (Dasgupta 2017: 44). As in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, the production of a disjunctive sensorial experience is political precisely because it disrupts the normative understanding of humanity.

The sensorial, relational, non-representational aesthetic processes of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* – in flux, adrift, *queer* – culminate in the finale of the last episode ('L'apocalypse'), where a brass-band pageant at Coincoin's family farm brings together one by one all the characters including those from the original series such as Aurélie, eaten alive by pigs for befriending a young Arab boy (Mohamed) but raised now from the dead like a gothic spook, evoking perhaps parodically the common cultural alignment in Western society of the migrant and queer as a form of zombie between life and death, both human and inhuman (see Fojas 2017). The cheesy English tune she sang in *P'tit Quinquin* at the funeral of one of the victims, 'Cause I knew that it's you', is now taken up by all of the characters in unison, led in a new American spiritual version by yet another itinerant group of African figures (greeted predictably by the police drawing their guns), and who this time seem older and more disparate than in previous sightings – the very notion of 'the migrant' continues in the film to migrate and mutate. The motley procession circling and recircling the farmyard becomes a rousing chorus

of togetherness and reconciliation sweeping everyone up in the warmth of human song. Such an impromptu celebration of human emotion and oneness through mutual difference (social, racial, cultural, sexual) is arguably for Dumont the only really valid form of identity. The vortex of human movement gradually starts to empty itself out at the end, directly resisting expectations of narrative closure and political recuperation – an impression sealed by the final, random shot (confected by CGI) of a seagull smashing directly into the camera with a desublimating splat. Hence, fixed notions and preconceptions, not just of migrancy and non-normative sexuality but also of nationhood and Frenchness, are thrown into the air and temporarily shattered in the alienated territory of the Pas-de-Calais, revealed now in the summer light as a transcultural, carnivalesque, queer space *beyond* identity.¹³

Figure 12.5 Coming together in song in the final, all-encompassing procession of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and Blaq Out (2018).

Of course, such a transformative aesthetic approach – an aesthetic doubling of the Real that escapes the ideological discourse of the Other and the narrative bounds of identity to open up new affective and relational fields – still does not accord the exemplarily drifting migrants the possibility for full expression and the right to speak and be heard. Indeed, it could justly be argued that once again the migrant is abstracted in favour of the fully fleshed-out, white, European subject. Yet in a film where the most explicit sexual manifestation is ‘French’ kissing (Ève with Corinne, Coincoin with Jenny), the migrants’ free and unpredictable movements as they gently comb and haphazardly intersect the landscape figure the very movement of desire.

Indeed, the ever-shifting patterns and rhythms of their multiple fleeting presences, together with their attention to sartorial difference through subtle combinations of dress and colour – a feather boa here, a bright multicolour fedora there, plus odd sprinklings of coloured sequins, sashays, and glitter that complement the more elaborately costumed, local (white) revellers seen heading to a distant summer carnival (never glimpsed) carrying large grotesque *papier-mâché* faces – not only contribute to the film's celebration of detail and variation, but also generate an ethico-erotics of surprise. Such unbounded migrancy, such lightness of being, such queer, erotic drift on the fringes, evades and destabilises the fixed, universalising, straight, white, male, patriarchal gaze by hinting at vague, unqualifiable affinities and allegiances with other kinds of contingent other through chance proximities and non-aggressive smilings and touchings. Rather than forming queer 'identities' as such, these ad hoc configurations of race, culture, gender and class (specifically here the rural, Northern French working class), whereby migrants are linked relationally to a concrete instance of out-queer desire, point suggestively to new, inchoate, queer forms as embodied relations – all the more potent, I would argue, for *not* being articulated or defined.

To return finally to the question with which we began, *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* uncompromisingly de-frames and deflates fixed and objectifying notions of the migrant figure as abject (sexual) other of the Republic. In the very queerness of its cinematic drift which denaturalises and desublimates some of the central tropes and topoi of migration and posits original – and necessarily provisional – intersectional and post-ideological relational fields, the film forges propitious new, queer, aesthetic and erotic migrant spaces. In so doing, it helps to reconceive and reimagine the very nature of sociality and kinship beyond fixed republican values and the absolutes of legitimacy and universality advanced in works such as *Eastern Boys* and *Jaurès*. The possibility of discovering further unique queer/migrant subjectivities and desires in French cinema outside the conceptual confines of identity constitutes an exciting theoretical prospect and challenge.

Notes

- 1 Marc Siegel argues that *Jaurès*, like Roy Dib's *Mondial 2010* (2013, Lebanon/Palestine), enacts a radical queer vision that looks beyond itself by shifting attention away from immediately proximate and narrow concerns (around gender and sexuality) towards the larger contexts of sociopolitical hierarchies and inequalities within which those concerns exist. See Siegel (2015).
- 2 Cuthbertson concedes that the Afghans are 'used merely as the passive mnemonic décor for the telling of someone else's story' (Cuthbertson 2017: 275), yet sees this 'potential act of ethical provocation' in ultimately affirmative terms, arguing that it prevents the migrants from falling 'into absence or invisibility' (Cuthbertson 2017: 276). For the reasons given, such justification that the film grants the Afghans a representational visibility denied to Dieutre himself appears rather hollow.

- 3 The title *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* plays on the French expression 'faire coin-coin' ('shout like a duck'). The first sounds heard in the film are those of hens.
- 4 Dumont does not credit the migrants in the final credits or in the Locarno Festival Press Book, or indeed in any official list of the cast which is kept brief and limited, although acknowledgement of particular migrant shelters in the Calais area is made at the end of the film. Since the public disclosure of their identity and status would raise serious implications if they were *sans-papiers*, I have chosen not to make the production of the film an issue in my discussion which also moves deliberately away from strict questions of identity and representation.
- 5 In fact, Dumont had attempted to portray a queer figure in his previous film *Ma Loute/Slack Bay* (2016, France), a period comedy, but gender is not specified in the relationship between 'Ma Loute' and the androgynous-looking Billie, a gender-queer teen who may be a trans boy, or trans girl, or intersex. Billie's gender ambiguity, moving between male and female costume, is played more for laughs here, although the character is subjected to brutal traumatic violence in the film.
- 6 See Dumont (2018b) where Dumont states provocatively that the film stands against 'the nazis of right-mindedness', adding that, as in Shakespeare, it exposes evil (i.e., the simultaneously good and bad character of Van der Weyden) in order to induce goodness.
- 7 Such films include *Welcome* (2009, France, dir. Philippe Lioret), *Happy End* (2017, France/Austria/Germany, dir. Michael Haneke), and *Une Saison en France/A Season in France* (2017, France, dir. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun). To this list may be added Marc Isaacs's documentary *Calais: The Last Border* (2003, UK), which revolves around the former Sangatte refugee camp and draws lines of connection and disconnection between evicted refugees from the South, immigrants from the UK, and British day-visitors, and Sylvain George's *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (des figures de guerres 1)/May They Rest in Revolt (Figures in Wars 1)* (France, 2010), a highly stylised, experimental, black-and-white study of undocumented refugees that mixes raw documentary (including footage of migrants burning their hands as a way of evading Eurodar) and consciously poetic techniques such as slow motion and fades to black. For a positive account of the film within the context of art created in the Calais Jungle, see Sanyal (2017). See also George (2011), where George talks about his methods and aims in making the film.
- 8 The series of Calais refugee encampments originally set up in 2002, and which sheltered close to 10,000 people before it was demolished in 2016, was referred to as the 'Jungle' by the migrants themselves in ironic reference to the squalid conditions (the word 'jungle' is thought to derive from the Pashto word 'dzjan-gal', meaning forest or wood).
- 9 I am grateful to Azzedine Haddour for suggesting this link. Dogs have never been viewed positively as pets by the Arab population of North Africa due to their uncertain status in the Koran.
- 10 Later in episode two of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, Van der Weyden will warn two male priests who are taking hands-on care of a group of young choir boys about the example of the Pope and paedophilia. Already in *P'tit Quinquin* Van der Weyden retorted 'No intimacy, gendarme!' when Carpentier tried at one point to comfort him physically.
- 11 I have explored such opening of the reverse field initiated by *P'tit Quinquin*, and how more generally the television format and serial repetition have liberated Dumont's style, in Williams (2015).
- 12 Fanon writes acutely about the subservience of the indigenous population in the racialised, Manichean economy of the French colonies in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952). See Fanon (1968).

- 13 Dumont talks about the carnival motif as part of Northern France's particular folklore (incorporating also the Flemish art of Breughel and Bosch) in terms that echo the Fanonian concept of masks: 'the carnival is an inversion of values: it's a transgression. A fiesta that becomes a general reconciliation. . . . The series [*Coincoin et les z'inhumains*] proposes that we take off our masks' (Dumont 2018a).