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The nation on and beyond the screen: A history of film and nation-building in

Flanders

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Abstract

Most research on the relationship between film and nation-building focuses on the content of films (the nation on the screen). Much less common is research on the structural organisation of the film sector (the nation beyond the screen). This article argues for a combined focus in order to gain deeper insight into the relationship between film and nation-building. This is illustrated by a case study focusing on Flanders. The Flemish case shows that the relationship between film and nation-building is dynamic and multiple. There is a clear evolution from a Belgian, French-speaking film sector to a separate Flemish film sector. This process was stimulated by the coming of sound film in the early 1930s and by political developments towards more Flemish autonomy. But while Flemish nation-building keeps growing to this day, the concept of ‘Belgian cinema’ has gained renewed relevance since the 2000s.

Keywords

cinema | film | Flanders | nationalism | nation-building

1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of media to the creation of national communities is broadly acknowledged within the field of nationalism studies. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]) emphasises the relevance of ‘print capitalism’ in the process through which modern nations emerge. The increasing spread of newspapers, journals, books and other printed media has promoted the standardisation of language, the development of a collective awareness and the shaping of an imagined community. Many authors have extended Anderson's argument to address the manner in which various forms of mass media contribute to a collective symbolic system and how they can facilitate a sense of ‘national belonging’.

In this context, the 20th century saw a proliferation of audiovisual mass media, most notably film, radio and television that have been used for a variety of nation-building projects, ranging from explicit nationalist propaganda to subtle forms of banal and everyday nation-

building. This article focuses on the medium of film, which, as Andrew Higson (2011: 1) argues, can be seen as ‘one of the means by which national communities are maintained, the people of a nation are reminded of their ties with each other and with their nation's history and traditions, and those people are invited to recognise themselves as national subjects, distinct from people of other nations’. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that the community-building potential of films and other media is not restricted to nationalised cultures. Indeed, they can also create imagined communities that transcend national boundaries. Since the 1990s, many studies have rightfully drawn attention to the transnational dimensions in the production, distribution, reception and representational strategies of films. In these debates, it is generally agreed upon that the national and the transnational are mostly not mutually exclusive (Higbee & Lim, 2010). That will also be clear in this article, in which, while focusing on the nation, the transnational will regularly emerge.

The majority of research on the relationship between film and nation-building has focused on ‘the nation on the screen’, addressing the ways in which nations, national identities and symbols are imagined and represented in films. Within this context, film is less a mirror that directly reflects a nation than it is a medium that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by a nation. Indeed, as Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (2000: 3–4) state, films ‘do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage and history’. In this respect, cinematic representations of nations are dynamic constructions that differ from film to film and change over time.

A less common line of research addresses ‘the nation beyond the screen’, namely, the ways in which the production, distribution and reception of films are related to nation-building. The limited attention that has been paid to such questions within the discipline of film studies is remarkable, given the strong emphasis that is placed on the structural organisation of the media and media usage within the context of nationalism research. Ernest Gellner (1983: 127) even proposes that the messages of the media bear little or no influence on the nation-building process. For nationalism, the most important message is generated by the medium itself: those who receive and understand the message belong to the community. The others are excluded from the community. Gellner's argument implies that media that are targeted towards Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, would necessarily contribute to Flemish nation-building, even if they disseminate messages with an anti-Flemish nationalist character. However, one could question whether Gellner's model might not be valid primarily for nation-states that are devoid of internal national competition. If a medium that is aimed at Flanders systematically represents the Belgian nation, it is doubtful whether that medium contributes (only) to Flemish nation-building (Willems & De Wever, 2020: 11). Gellner's emphasis on the structural organisation and reach of the media thus requires some qualification. The messages of media are indeed important as well.

In this article, we argue that a combined focus on the representations that films offer and on the structural organisation of the film sector—a focus on the nation on and beyond the screen—provides the most fertile approach for arriving at deeper insight into the relationship between film and nation-building. We illustrate our argument by applying such a combined focus to Flanders.¹

Flanders provides an interesting case, given its complex, multinational situation (see Deprez & Vos, 1998). Following the establishment of the Belgian state in 1830, the dominance of French in public life quickly gave rise to a Flemish movement, which fought for recognition

of the Dutch language. Throughout the 19th century, the Flemish movement was not seen as incompatible with Belgian nationalism. Anti-Belgian Flemish-nationalism would only emerge during the First World War, in the context of the collaboration of a part of the Flemish movement with the German occupier. During the interbellum, the anti-Belgian and ultimately anti-democratic segment of the Flemish movement continued to grow. Again, this led some to collaborate with the German occupying forces during the Second World War. To this day, a segment of the Flemish movement continues to struggle with the heritage of that collaboration. The Flemish movement nevertheless expanded to become a mass movement, and the political struggle broadened to reach beyond linguistic rights to advocate greater administrative sovereignty for Flanders. From the 1960s on, the growing spread of a Flemish identity has been translated politically into the transformation of a Belgian unitary state into a federal state. In 1962, the Dutch–French language border was fixed, and separate departments for Dutch and French culture were created within the national Ministry of Culture. From that moment on, cultural film policy was a Flemish responsibility. From 1970 on, a series of state reforms enabled the Flemish nation to acquire the institutional form of a Community, with autonomy that has continued to increase up to the present day. Throughout the 20th century, the Flemish nation-building process gradually became more dominant than that of Belgian nation-building (De Wever, Verdoodt, & Vrints, 2019). A similar evolution can be observed in the historical relationship between film and nation-building in Flanders. The dynamic character of this relationship is also clear in the fact that ‘Flemish cinema’ as a concept does not have a fixed meaning and, at the start of film, history did not even exist.

2 EARLIEST DEVELOPMENTS AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Lumière brothers demonstrated their cinematograph in Brussels in November 1895 and organised their first commercial screenings there in March 1896. In May 1897, the Frenchman Alexandre Promio, an employee of the Lumière company, shot the first moving images of Brussels and Antwerp. Between 1898 and 1908, the Belgian film world consisted of approximately 10 film operators. Their films were screened in music halls, fairs and variety shows (Convents, 1994). Beginning in 1905, the travelling film screenings would be gradually replaced by permanent film theatres.

At that time, there was no such thing as a separate Flemish film sector. The embryonic film sector had a largely Belgian structure, as evidenced by the names of early professional organisations, including *Syndicat des Cinémas Permanents Belges* (1907) and *Syndicat Belge des Loueurs de Films et Exploitants de Cinématographe* (1909). The nomenclature also reflects the francophone character of the Belgian film sector. At film screenings in Flanders, announcements, intertitles and the interpretations of narrators (who provided running descriptions during silent films) could be in both languages or, in some cases, completely in Dutch. In general, however, French was the standard language.

The titles of most early Belgian films include the name of a village, city or other local reference point (Thys, 1999). In addition to purchased foreign films, a substantial number of operators also screened their own films, which they had shot on location. Images of sights, events and inhabitants of the village or city where the operator had touched down proved particularly attractive. Alongside this local aspect, the film world in Belgium was characterised by a strong transnational dimension from its very beginnings. The greatest

share of films and equipment were from other countries—particularly France—as were quite a few operators.

Since 1908, when films were becoming increasingly longer and more complex and the film theatre sector continued to expand, the French company *Pathé Frères*, through the affiliate *La Belge Cinéma*, held a firm grip on the Belgian (and Dutch) market for the distribution and screening of films. From 1913 on, Pathé would lose ground to American and Italian competitors, as well as to other French companies. As the world leader at the time, Pathé also pursued an expansive policy with regard to film production. In Belgium, this resulted around 1909 in the production of actuality films and images of picturesque sites. The French company recognised the importance of strong local anchoring in the various countries in which they were active. As a result, in 1912, Pathé established the company *Belge Cinéma Film*, which produced 20 films between 1912 and 1914 (Fowler, 2001). The company was directed by the French Alfred Machin, who produced the oldest preserved Belgian fiction film (*Le moulin maudit [The Mill]*, 1909).

The limited Flemish presence in Belgian cinema would change during the First World War. In occupied Belgium, the German occupying forces pursued a pro-Flemish policy. This *Flamenpolitik* led to a situation in which established movie theatres in Flanders were urged to address their audiences in Dutch as well (Convents, 1995: 174). The German occupying forces had no interest in stimulating the production of Belgian or Flemish films. It was only in the final year of the war, that consideration was given to the production of Flemish propaganda films. This intention was nevertheless not realised (Convents, 1995: 174–7).

3 INTERBELLUM

After the First World War, a series of Belgian-patriotic feature films on the war emerged, glorifying the country and its king (Engelen, 2014). Producer Hippolyte De Kempeneer focused on this genre, with such poignant titles as *La Belgique martyre [The Martyrdom of Belgium]* (1919) and *La jeune Belgique [Young Belgium]* (1922). In the 1930s, Flemish film initiatives gradually began to emerge. This was related to the advent of sound films in the late 1920s to early 1930s. Language would now play a more prominent role in both the production and the reception of films. Bilingual intertitles alone were no longer sufficient. A few experimental attempts to record films in both Dutch and French were not very successful. These efforts quickly shifted to monolingual film productions. Although various collaborations continued to exist, and although quite a few filmmakers were active in both languages, this resulted in an unmistakable division within the Belgian film industry. For this reason, Philip Mosley (2001: 45–6) describes the Belgian cinema from 1930 on as a ‘split screen’, with the Flemish and francophone Belgian film sectors increasingly going their separate ways.

3.1 Flemish popular films

A milestone in Flemish film history is indisputably *De Witte [Whitey]* (1934), an adaptation of Ernest Claes' popular picaresque novel (Biltreyst & Van Bauwel, 2004). *Whitey* was an initiative of Jan Vanderheyden, a Flemish film distributor with a keen business sense. Vanderheyden saw that the transition from silent films to sound films offered opportunities

for Flemish cinema. Vanderheyden made a public event of the production of *Whitey*, thereby presenting himself in the media as the initiative taker, producer and director. Behind the scenes, however, a role of at least equal importance was played by Edith Kiel, who had written—and, actually, directed—the scenario. As an unwed mother, Vanderheyden's mistress and German citizen, Kiel was not able to play any public role. Through her, however, Vanderheyden was able to rely on an experienced German technical crew.

The unparalleled success of *Whitey* paved the way for a series of successors (Vande Winkel & Van Engeland, 2014). In less than 6 years, Kiel and Vanderheyden produced nine new feature films. The films were financed completely with private funds. This was a risky enterprise, in which a new film was being set up while the previous production had hardly been completed and had yet to prove its viability. On the other hand, in the pre-television era, films had a long lifespan, and they were able to circulate throughout Flanders for years. Moreover, Kiel and Vanderheyden had no competition: no one else succeeded in producing Dutch-language feature films in Belgium. 'Jan Vanderheyden films' had become a household word.

Kiel and Vanderheyden took no chances in obtaining and anchoring this position. They chose to produce popular films aimed at the broadest possible audience. Simple story lines spiced with accessible humour and chaste romance were presented within recognisable Flemish settings. Politics, violence, sexuality and any other topics that could provoke controversy were taboo. The films had little or no artistic ambitions. Critics pointed to such aspects as the shabby sets, the complete lack of actor direction and the simple scenarios. The broader public, however, was not bothered at all. The films had such loyal audiences that Kiel and Vanderheyden could build their own studio in Antwerp in 1939. Vanderheyden was respected within the film industry, by virtue of the fact that he was the only Flemish person who had succeeded in setting up an economically viable film production.

Kiel and Vanderheyden exploited their unique selling proposition—the 'Flemishness' of their product—to the fullest, particularly in their first five films. *Whitey* opened with a prologue of several minutes in length, in which the song that had been composed especially for the film—*Mijn land is Vlaanderen* [*My Country is Flanders*—provided the accompaniment for images of the North Sea and the historic city centres of Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels and Ghent, as well as for images evoking the traditional life in the countryside. The message was clear: this was finally a sound film that had been produced by and for the Flemish people. Kiel and Vanderheyden ensured that their films contained sufficient references to Flanders. In the wake of *Whitey*, they often selected stereotypical rural settings, and the story was comical by definition, centring on the teacher, the doctor, the brass band, the bar owner or other archetypal characters.

Critics repeatedly protested against this. Opinions were divided concerning the possible alternatives. Given that Vanderheyden and Kiel were essentially the only ones who were creating Flemish feature films during this period, they were necessarily at the centre of debates concerning what Flemish films should (not) be. For example, the renowned film priest (a Dominican) Felix Morlion advocated drawing attention to leading figures from the Flemish past. In this quest, Morlion would remain unsatisfied. The only films that were dedicated to Flemish icons (e.g., the composer Peter Benoit or the author Hendrik Conscience) in the 1930s were documentaries. They were not the work of a professionally trained filmmaker, but of a motivated self-taught individual: Clemens De Landtsheers, the

driving force behind the one-person company Flandria Film (Vande Winkel & Biltreyst, 2012).

3.2 Flemish propaganda films

Clemens De Landtsheer, a supporter of the Flemish movement and a former soldier of the First World War, was the secretary of the *IJzerbedevaartcomité* [Committee for the Pilgrimage of the Yser]. After the First World War, this committee contributed to what the historian Bruno De Wever (1995: 31) referred to as the ‘foundational myth’ of Flemish nationalism. This myth purported to explain the emergence and development of the Flemish nationalist movement by framing the social inequities experienced by Flemish soldiers on the Yser Front as the birth of the idealistic Flanders, which separated itself from the anti-Flemish Belgian state. Throughout the Flemish territory De Landtsheer organised recruitment events, in which audiences were presented with lectures illustrated by slides, demonstrating the extent of suffering endured by the Flemish soldiers on the Yser Front. Such stories were used as a stepping stone to a recruitment campaign for the Committee, which collected money, sold paraphernalia and called on everyone to participate in the next Pilgrimage.

With film images purchased from military archives, De Landtsheer created two films based on the slide series: *De bedevaartfilm* [*The Pilgrimage Film*] (1928) and *Met onze jongens aan den IJzer* [*With our Boys on the Yser*] (1928). In addition to prompting him to create nearly 20 shorter films for the Committee, the success of the films led him to establish his own business. Throughout the 1930s, Flandria Film released a series of short documentary productions bearing De Landtsheer's propagandistic, Flemish-nationalist signature. The series, entitled *Vlaamsche gebeurtenissen* [*Flemish Events*] attempted to provide an answer to the film journals available in Belgium, many of which had been created abroad, devoting little or no attention to Flemish topics. De Landtsheer was committed to immortalising ‘Flemish faces’ (people whom he regarded as having contributed to the exaltation or emancipation of Flanders), and he created images of manifestations that could be linked to them. In addition to his interest in ‘high culture’, De Landtsheer invested time and film stock in folk culture and topics that would now be labelled as ‘cultural heritage’. He produced films on such folkloric events as the Procession of the Holy Blood in Bruges and the Carnival of Aalst, in addition to filming local folk customs.

De Landtsheer was able to reach an audience that attended film nights in people's houses, parish halls and similar locations. Access to the regular movie theatre circuit, and thus to the general Flemish audience, was only achieved with his cycling films. These reports on sporting competitions had a less pronounced political–ideological tone, but in a more banal nationalist manner still contributed to the myth of the ‘Flandrien’: the strong, heroic Flemish racing cyclist, who linked will power to courage and perseverance. It was a myth that grew into a metaphor for Flemish political, social and cultural aspirations, as well as for the vitality of an entire community.

3.3 Film culture

During the interbellum, the budding Flemish film industry was forced to compete against an avalanche of foreign material, as the Belgian film market was flooded by massive imports of films from the United States, France, Germany and other countries. This was partly due to the liberal Belgian film policy, which assigned high priority to free trade and which imposed few,

if any restrictions on film distribution and exploitation. In 1920, in contrast to most other countries, Belgium introduced only a voluntary control system and imposed no restrictive import quota to stimulate the local film industry—quite the contrary. Local subsidiaries of American and French film companies were free to import their films and control a sizeable share of the distribution sector. Moreover, companies like Warner, MGM and Pathé held substantial shares in several of the most profitable film theatres or had signed exclusive contracts with other film theatres. According to business reports on the Belgian film market, between 60% and 70% of the films screened in Belgium were American. The position of Hollywood was and is particularly strong in Flanders, with an estimated market share exceeding 80% (Biltreyst, 2007). This means that film reception in Flanders has always had a very strong transnational character.

Film was extremely popular during the interbellum. Even according to international standards, Belgium had an exceptionally large number of film venues. In addition to regular commercial film theatres, films were screened in socialist people's houses, Catholic parish halls and other facilities, alongside a flourishing network of film clubs. This was definitely the case in Flanders where, in the 1920s, an ideological struggle broke out with regard to the cinema, with Father Morlion's *Katholieke Filmactie* [Catholic Film Action] (KFA) as the driving force. Unlike most Catholic clerics in Flanders, Morlion was not opposed to film. On the contrary, he was convinced that the medium could be a propaganda resource, and even a powerful weapon against the immoral excesses of modernity.

Around the KFA, the charismatic Morlion organised a solid network of halls, a private film-rating system, a propaganda and information service and a small group of sympathisers (*Katholieke Filmliga*[Catholic Film League]) that was capable of taking action against morally objectionable films. In some cases, Morlion's tactics were subtle, as when he managed to steer the development of Flemish film productions like *Whitey* in a morally acceptable direction. In other cases, Morlion acted as a boisterous agitator. In the 1930s, Morlion's favourite target was the French vaudeville film, which was not afraid of addressing controversial topics or bombarding audiences with offensive images or even female nudity (Biltreyst, 2006). A milestone in the struggle against the godless French films was *La kermesse héroïque* [*Carnival in Flanders*], produced in 1935 by the francophone Belgian director Jacques Feyder (Mihail, 2002). Morlion condemned this large-scale French–German historical film comedy about the Spanish occupation of Flanders in the 17th century, which painted an unlovely picture of inglorious Flemish men and willing Flemish women. Together with other film critics, Morlion stirred a polemic, which would result in fierce protests, a rarely seen boycott and even heated diplomatic riots.

4 SECOND WORLD WAR

The German film policy in occupied Belgium during the Second World War showed parallels with the policy operated during the First World War, but it was not identical (Vande Winkel, 2017). In the summer of 1940, films from Great Britain, American productions and a wide range of other films (e.g., those with Jewish actors or directors) were prohibited. Once again, the gap was not filled with Belgian films, let alone with the stimulation of a Belgian or Flemish film industry, but with films from Germany and, to a lesser extent, from friendly states. During the occupation, Jan Vanderheyden became the nominal leader of the Belgian film world. This largely meant aiding the implementation and operation of German film politics. In the early years of the occupation, Vanderheyden and Kiel were the only ones in

Belgium who were still allowed to make feature films. From 1943 on, they could only produce short films.

As had been the case during the First World War, Germany operated a *Flamenpolitik*, although it was hardly noticeable with regard to films. The filmed news, which was controlled by the occupying forces, would be available in both Dutch and French versions, but contained the same topics and usually steered clear of any sensitive Belgian community issues (Vande Winkel & Biltreyst, 2012). In 1941, the German firm Tobis made two short documentaries (in the jargon of the occupying forces, *Kulturfilme*) about Flanders. To the dissatisfaction of many, however, the films did not have a Flemish director. It was the German Alfred Ehrhardt who filmed *Flanderns germanisches Gesicht* [*The German Face of Flanders*] (1941) and *Leinen aus Kortrijk* [*Linen from Kortrijk*] (1941). The first film argued that Flanders was clearly Germanic, but it made no statements about the political future of Flanders (Vande Winkel, 2003).

In the summer of 1942, the German film producer Terra sent a crew to occupied Belgium for a film adaptation of *De vlaschaard* [*Flaxfield*], a pastoral novel by the famous Flemish author Stijn Streuvels. *Wenn die Sonne wieder scheint* [*When the Sun Shines Again*] (1943) was filmed in Flemish fields with Flemish extras in the background. All significant roles, however, were played by German actors. The German–Flemish tension on which *When the Sun Shines Again* was situated led to an upheaval. Streuvels had stipulated that the film would also be screened in Flanders in a Flemish spoken version, but taking the Dutch market into consideration, the dubbing was done in a standardised form of Dutch from which the dialect elements had been largely removed. This was in no way consistent with the tastes of the journal *De SS-Man*, which bashed the pro-Flemish critic Jeanne de Bruyn, who had dared to publish a positive reaction in the VNV newspaper *Volk en Staat* (Vande Winkel & Van Linthout, 2007). Although both of these groups regarded the film medium as an instrument of nation-building, they did not agree on the image of Flanders (and, with regard to the SS, the Germanic character of Flanders) that should be disseminated by the films.

The disagreement is exemplary of a broader discussion that would continue to recur regularly in the debate concerning Flemish cinema: should films in the tradition of Kiel and Vanderheyden try to relate to Flemish audiences by emphasising a folk character (e.g., through the use of dialect) or should the films be devoted to the cultural emancipation of the Flemish people (e.g., through the use of Standard Dutch)? Whichever option was chosen, it may be clear that a strong community-forming potential was ascribed to film.

In April 1943, it was announced that a limited number of measures would be taken to stimulate the production of Belgian short films or cultural films. Kiel and Vanderheyden started to work on *Vlaanderen* [*Flanders*], an ambitious project according to their standards, about the Flemish past. It would nevertheless not be completed before the end of the German occupation. Kiel and Vanderheyden were not the only ones who thought that the time was ripe for a pro-Flemish film production. With the support of their director, a few students of the Narafi film school made *Vlaanderen te weer* [*Flanders, Take a Stand*] (1944), a short film that is considered lost to date. *Flanders, Take a Stand* was a national-socialist, Flemish propaganda film, to which the collaboration association *DeVlag* had contributed financially, but that proved to be of insufficient quality and was screened only a few times (Vande Winkel, 2008).

5 THE POST-WAR PERIOD

After the Second World War, Jan Vanderheyden was convicted of economic collaboration (Vande Winkel & Van Engeland, 2014: 129–58). Upon his release in 1951, Antwerp entrepreneurs encouraged him and Kiel to resume the production of Flemish popular films under the flag of the new firm *Antwerpse Filmonderneming* [Antwerp Film Company] (AFO). The fact that Vanderheyden had been stripped of his civil rights provided Kiel with the opportunity to take the reins and be recognised as a film director. The first offspring of AFO, *Uit hetzelfde nest* [*Nestmates*] (1952), corresponded effortlessly to the older productions of Kiel and Vanderheyden, proving that there was still a market for popular comedies.

Although AFO would remain active until Vanderheyden's death (1961), the company's films increasingly focused on Antwerp and gradually encountered competition from copycats. On the one hand, their pupil Jef Bruyninckx was lured away to create popular comedies that rivalled those of his teachers. On the other hand, the newly emerged (in 1953) Flemish public television broadcasted programmes that were heavily indebted to Kiel and Vanderheyden due to their folkloristic character. The pre-war criticism of the meagre artistic merits was repeated, and initiatives were taken to raise the bar, as was the case for *Meeuwen sterven in de haven* [*Seagulls Die in the Harbour*] (1955), which was selected for the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. This ambitious collaboration between film critic Roland Verhavert, author Ivo Michiels and filmmaker Rik Kuypers aspired to treat film as an autonomous art form. Creative choices were not primarily intended to serve political, ideological or commercial ends, they served aesthetic considerations. This was not the first Flemish film to attempt this (see, e.g., *Het kwade oog* [*The Evil Eye*], 1937), but it was the first to be regarded by the press and the public as having a successful artistic result. It was in this regard that various critics hailed *Seagulls Die in the Harbour* as the 'first Flemish film', which again shows the contested nature of 'Flemish cinema' and how its meaning is not fixed. This reception also shows that the emancipation of film as a means of artistic expression did not necessarily imply that the medium no longer had anything to do with Flemish nation-building. Whereas the Flemish cinema had previously served purely as popular entertainment, film could now be a part of Flemish high culture, providing evidence of the artistic development of a Flanders that could be a source of pride in cultural and intellectual circles as well.

At the other end of the Flemish film spectrum were films that were completely devoted to explicit forms of Flemish nation-building. After the Second World War, Clemens De Landtsheer was succeeded by several Flemish-nationalist amateur filmmakers. For example, from the 1950s through the 1980s, Frans Lauriks filmed dozens of pro-Flemish manifestations, song festivals and other events. These films, which were often used as part of an illustrated lecture, were shown throughout Flanders as recruitment campaigns. Another filmmaker who made short documentaries on topics relating to the Flemish movement was Hein Beniest, who was also involved with feature films. He was the founder of the *ABN-Centrale*, which was committed to the dissemination of Standard Dutch. He regarded feature films as the ideal tool for this purpose. Between 1956 and 1962, the *ABN-Centrale* distributed one medium-length film and five feature films (primarily) through educational screenings in schools and associations. Whereas early films featured characters who were explicitly committed to the use of Standard Dutch, later films promoted the language more implicitly. The language-promotion efforts were always linked to a Catholic morality, and some films

incorporated familiar characters and themes from the Flemish movement (e.g., Till Eulenspiegel or Walloon–Flemish contrasts). The ABN films, which were aimed primarily at young audiences, clearly fit within the vision of film as a tool of cultural education for the Flemish people. An educational element, albeit less pronounced and paternalistic, was also present in the governmental film production policy that started to develop after the Second World War.

6 THE 1960S–1990S

6.1 Film policy

As elsewhere in Europe, more and more voices called for government support for the Belgian film production industry in the post-war years. In 1952, systematic support was arranged for the Belgian film industry as a whole in the ‘de-taxation’. This policy provided producers with partial reimbursement of the ‘entertainment tax’ on cinema tickets for Belgian films. To be eligible for such support, a film was required to be recognised as ‘Belgian’, which forced the film industry into a national framework. From that time on, films officially acquired a nationality: the Belgian one.

The de-taxation system favoured the most commercially successful films, which for the Flemish film production meant the popular comedies from Antwerp. In the meantime, there was a growing desire to encourage films with greater artistic ambitions. Initially, the new form of cultural film support was designed within a Belgian policy framework: between 1963 and 1964, the groundwork was being laid for a *Belgisch Filminstituut* [Belgian Film Institute]. The Flemish representatives at the negotiating table, however, resisted a unitary organisation of the institute and emphasised the principle of cultural autonomy. As a result, the (Catholic) Minister of Dutch Culture, Renaat van Elslande introduced a separate system with the 1964 Royal Decree ‘for the promotion of Dutch-language film culture’. From that time on, a film commission would advise the minister on the distribution of film production subsidies. Since then, more than three quarters of all Flemish feature films have utilised production grants, thus illustrating the immense importance of the film policy to the shaping of Flemish cinema (Willems, 2017a).

The start of a separate Flemish film policy in 1964 was part of the linguistic division of the Belgian film sector, which accelerated rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the Catholic Film League was split, and Dutch-speaking and French-speaking subdivisions were established within the Belgian professional associations. Today, some structural elements, including the Royal Belgian Film Archive (CINEMATEK), the film-rating system and the Tax Shelter (a fiscal scheme for audiovisual productions), remain situated at the Belgian level, but the film sector in Belgium is organised primarily at the regional level. The film policy was not only part of but also a strong stimulator for this division. For example, it required film productions to ‘out’ themselves as Flemish in order to receive support. Before, there had been no difference between ‘Flemish cinema’ and ‘Belgian cinema’ from the perspective of the government. Moreover, the films that received support were explicitly promoted as ‘Flemish films’, both domestically and abroad. In other words, the film policy was aimed at creating the concept of a Flemish cinema. These efforts were largely successful in Flanders and Belgium. The continued dominance of the notion of a Belgian cinema in

other countries is less due to the Flemish efforts to change this perception than it is to the dominant international tendency towards the categorisation of films according to states.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Flemish film policy was largely devoted to the cultural edification of the film audience. Flemish cinema needed to have a different appearance from the Antwerp popular films of the 1950s, but it also needed to avoid the culturally pedantic character that was typical of the ABN films. Films like *Seagulls Die in the Harbour* served as a reference point. The desire was for Flemish cinema to be more a part of high culture than of popular culture. The film policy assigned considerable importance to the quality, recognisability and 'Flemish character' of the films. For example, this Flemish character could be cultivated by incorporating topics from Flemish culture, history or current events. Policy actors also saw the use of Dutch (preferably in its standard form) as essential to the Flemish cultural identity of the films. Deviations from the strict language policy were nevertheless allowed in order to enhance the credibility and artistic vision of the films.

Until the early 1980s, cultural–ideological factors would play an important role in the policy concerning co-productions with other regions and countries. Collaborations with the Netherlands—for example *De vijanden* [*The Enemies*] (1967), *Monsieur Hawarden* (1968) and *Mira* (1971)—fit within a Greater-Netherlands cultural idealism. In contrast, co-productions with the French Community of Belgium were complicated by a cultural–autonomy reflex. There was a fear that such collaborations would lead to the perception of a 'Belgian cinema' instead of the desired 'Flemish cinema'. The Flemish policy actors nevertheless expressed great appreciation for André Delvaux, who had been regarded as the embodiment of the Belgian cinema for years. The bilingual Delvaux enjoyed international recognition as a filmmaker of magic realism, often with a Flemish setting, as was the case in *De man die zijn haar kort liet knippen* [*The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*] (1965), *Un soir, un train* [*One evening on a Train*] (1968) and *Benvenuta* (1983).

In 1981, after years of Christian–Democratic control, the Ministry of Culture fell into the hands of the Liberals. Partly under the influence of general market-economic tendencies in the European audiovisual sector, audience figures and attraction of private and foreign investments became more important. Cultural–ideological motives decreased in importance with regard to co-productions. The Netherlands and the French Community had now both become privileged partners, due to their geographic proximity and their respective common linguistic and state contexts. Partly encouraged by an increasingly important European film policy, the number of co-productions increased: beginning in the mid-1980s, the share of co-productions came to exceed that of completely Flemish productions.

The process of internationalisation, however, was accompanied by concerns about the cultural identity of Flemish cinema. The 1990s saw a renewed emphasis on films with a clear Flemish character by means of the use of Dutch, the topics or the adaptation of Flemish literary works. The promotion of Flemish culture and identity was now embedded within a stronger market-economic discourse. In addition to the legitimation of a cultural identity, concerns about the recognisability and Flemish character of the films became more strongly linked to a desire to reach the largest possible Flemish audience, thereby creating a commercially successful Flemish cinema. There was also a desire to deploy Flemish cinema within a strategy for the international profiling of Flanders as a strong brand, with an eye to favourable economic repercussions. A part of the motivation for the emphasis on the Flemish character of the films thus shifted from a cultural–educational ideal of nation-building to a more market-oriented vision. The ultimate policy objective of a cinema with a strong Flemish

identity (even though it always remained somewhat vague what this exactly meant) nevertheless remained largely the same.

6.2 Historical films

Historical films occupy a special place within the relationship between film and nation-building, given that they often construct 'national histories'. Famous international examples include the British 'heritage' films and the German 'Heimat' films. The Flemish variant of these genres had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, with such films as *Mira*, *De loteling* [*The Conscript*] (1973), *Pallieter* (1975), *De vlaschaard* [*Flaxfield*] (1983) and *Het gezin Van Paemel* [*The Van Paemel Family*] (1986). These historical countryside films were amongst the most popular and prestigious Flemish films. In these films, the image of the Flemish past consisted of a nostalgic portrayal of a rural community, with hard-working, often oppressed people, along with the contrast between countryside and city, and between tradition and modernity. The films were based on literary works by famous authors (e.g., Stijn Streuvels, Felix Timmermans and Hendrik Conscience), such that they preserved the Flemish literary patrimony alongside constructing a Flemish history (Willems, 2015).

In the 1960s and 1970s, historical films accounted for one third of the output from the entire Flemish film industry. In the 1980s, the share had decreased to one fourth and, in the 1990s, historical films comprised only one fifth of all Flemish films produced. The evolution towards more films with contemporary settings could be interpreted as reflecting a changing Flemish identity. During the second half of the 20th century, Flanders experienced political, economic and cultural growth. This led to evolution in the Flemish nation-building process as well. The earlier longing for the past was replaced by a stronger Flemish self-confidence. The increasing number of films on contemporary Flemish society could be seen as an expression of this change. At the same time, however, and in contrast to previously, several films on heroic figures and events from Flemish history were produced in the 1990s: *Daens* (1992) on the social and political struggles of a priest in the late 19th century; *Gaston's War* (1997), about a Flemish resistance fighter in World War Two; and *Molokai* (1999), a film that was aimed at the international market but that ultimately flopped, about Father Damien's work for people with leprosy.

The emergence of these specific historical films could be explained in terms of the developing process of Flemish nation-building as well. The fourth state reform, which occurred in the early 1990s, officially made Belgium a federal state, with directly elected regional parliaments. The growing autonomy of Flanders translated into a period of acceleration in the process of Flemish nation-building. To perpetuate and expand popular support for the new Flemish substate, Flanders needed a new, more modern mythology to replace the medieval mystique, which was regarded as outdated. From this perspective, a film like *Daens*, which caused a hype around the priest Adolf Daens (1839–1907), came at precisely the right moment (Willems, 2018). Although praised for its historical value, the film also contributed to the 'Daens myth'. Through strategies of individualisation and heroization, which ignored Daens' many doubts and inglorious final years of life, the film portrayed him as a self-assured hero who fought with the Flemish people against the predominantly francophone oppressors. In the film, it was legitimate to take matters into one's own hands, which corresponded with the contemporary political developments leading towards a federal Belgium and a more independent Flanders.

6.3 The Flemish movement as a film theme

Daens is a relatively rare example of a feature film from the period after 1962 (when the last ABN film by Hein Beniest was released) whose story and themes strongly corresponded to the Flemish movement. Aside from *Daens*, the only films that truly centred on topics that were important to the Flemish movement were *Een vrouw tussen hond en wolf* [*Woman in a Twilight Garden*] (1979) and *De leeuw van Vlaanderen* [*The Lion of Flanders*] (1984). The first film is about a woman who, during and after the Second World War, is torn between her love for her husband—a Flemish-nationalist collaborator—and a francophone resistance fighter (Mosley, 2002). *The Lion of Flanders* is an adaptation of Hendrik Conscience's historical epic of the same name about the Battle of the Golden Spurs, a novel published in 1838, which had since evolved into a sort of Flemish national bible. Whereas in *Woman in a Twilight Garden*, director André Delvaux and screenwriter Ivo Michiels sketch a balanced image of a dark page in the history of Flemish nationalism, the nuance is hard to find in *The Lion of Flanders* (Willems, 2014). The romantic-nationalist film provides a selective, ahistorical representation of the past that glorifies the victory of the 'good Flemish people' over the 'bad French people'.

It is remarkable that the famous writer Hugo Claus acted as the director and screenwriter for *The Lion of Flanders*, while he was known for his critical position with regard to Flemish nationalism. With the exception of a few critical-ironic elements, the film remains remarkably close to Conscience's romantic-nationalist novel. The explanation can largely be found in the film's funders—the Flemish public broadcaster and the Ministry of Culture—who wished to pay tribute to Conscience, who had died 100 years earlier. They established special supervisory bodies to restrict Claus' artistic liberty and to ensure that the film would remain as faithful as possible to Conscience's novel. But this had to be done without a proper budget for creating an adequate and credible portrayal of the book's colourful descriptions of battle scenes. Combined with the negative press criticism, this led Claus to distance himself from the film shortly after its premiere. The audience stayed away as well, thus ultimately rendering the large-scale spectacular production into one of the biggest prestige flops in the history of Flemish cinema.

The Lion of Flanders is not the only example in which a critical treatment of the Flemish movement was thwarted by official entities. In the late 1960s, Frans Buyens wanted to make a satire on Flemish–Walloon relations, entitled *Top-Hit Girl* (Willems, 2017b). Despite a positive recommendation from the film commission, the Catholic Minister of Culture, Frans van Mechelen, refused to fund the project for Flemish-ideological reasons. The minister would not support a film that would ridicule the 'community question'. Van Mechelen was aware of the controversial character of this decision. He attempted to give it as little visibility as possible by quickly allowing Buyens to make another film, preferably a literature adaptation. Buyens let go of his politically critical project, instead realising *Het dwaallicht* [*Will-O'-the-Wisp*] (1973), based on Willem Elsschot's novel of the same name. The cover-up was successful: Buyens, who liked to profile himself as an independent and critical voice, was particularly sparing in his comments about the entire affair.

7 FLEMISH CINEMA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2002, the 1964 film support system was replaced by an autonomous fund, the *Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds* [Flanders Audiovisual Fund] (VAF). With a substantially larger budget, the VAF was authorised to outline a policy that was intended to result in the professionalisation of a stronger sector. Since the establishment of the VAF, the general atmosphere surrounding Flemish cinema has undergone substantial change. More films have been produced, and more films are able to reach a relatively large audience on the home market. The massive popular success of *Loft* (2008) constitutes a milestone in this regard. The thriller by Erik Van Looy attracted nearly 1.2 million domestic moviegoers and was remade in the Netherlands and in the United States. The growing international prestige of Flemish cinema is clear from achievements such as the *Caméra d'or* [Golden Camera] at the Cannes Film Festival for *Girl* (2018) and the Oscar nominations for *Rundskop* [*Bullhead*] (2011) and *The Broken Circle Breakdown* (2012). Furthermore, various Flemish filmmakers and actors are having successful careers abroad. Additional evidence of the more positive climate surrounding Flemish cinema can also be found in the results of a large-scale audience study on the film preferences of young people. According to this study, teenagers were considerably more positive about Flemish films in 2015 than they had been in 2001 (Veenstra, 2017). In addition to the talents of the filmmakers and the efforts by the VAF, these new dynamics are the result of the federal 'Tax Shelter', a fiscal measure intended to encourage companies to invest in audiovisual productions (Engelen & Vande Winkel, 2010). In 2012, Screen Flanders emerged as well, an economically oriented support measure implemented by the Flemish government.

The rules and conditions for receiving financial resources from the government are established in a management agreement between the VAF and the Flemish Community. This has considerably limited the direct political impact on the distribution of film support. Flemish-ideologically inspired political *démarches* appear to be out of the question today. This is not to say, however, that the encouragement of a Flemish identity no longer plays any role in the film policy. On the contrary, one of the main pillars of the VAF's vision document for 2018–2021 is 'the anchoring, securing and dissemination of our Flemish identity' (VAF, 2018: 3). In addition, a memorandum to the new Flemish government in 2019 prominently features the 'safeguarding' of 'Flanders' own identity (VAF, 2019: 5). While the idea of what such a Flemish identity stands for may have changed over time, it is clear that contemporary film policy is also intended to contribute to Flemish nation-building.

With regard to production, the contemporary Flemish film landscape continues to be characterised by many cross-border collaborations, enhancing the transnational character of Flemish cinema. The film policies of Europe (with such programmes as Eurimages and Creative Europe MEDIA), Belgium (Tax Shelter) and Flanders constitute the driving forces behind the internationalisation of the film industry. The Netherlands and the French Community continue to be the preferred co-production regions for Flemish film producers. This is encouraged by the VAF, which engages in structural collaboration with the Netherlands Film Fund (NFF), as well as with the French Community's *Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel* [Cinema and Audiovisual Centre] (CCA).

The agreement with the NFF dates back to the 1960s, and it appears to have become nearly self-evident. The collaboration between the VAF and the CCA (which is less extensive and is not captured in any formal text) did not begin until 2009. It represents a new step in the shifting attitude of the Flemish film policy with regard to the French Community, from aversion to active cooperation. Although the creation of a successful 'Flemish cinema' remains the most important goal, the earlier spectre of a 'Belgian cinema' has apparently

ceased to exist. One significant point in this regard is that the ‘Flemish film’ hallmark has remained somewhat in the background: for strategic-promotional reasons, the VAF has been abandoning this hallmark for some time, opting instead for the internationally more prestigious (primarily due to the success of francophone Belgian films) ‘Belgian cinema’ label, albeit supplemented with ‘from Flanders’.

The evolution at the level of policy is also manifest in a larger group of Flemish films with francophone characters. This ranges from an uncomplicated mixture of Dutch and French in *Patrick* (2019) to a completely francophone film like *Unspoken* (2008). Other films feature stereotypical representations of francophone Belgians as a ‘national other’ in *Bullhead* or a warping of such a stereotype into a message of Belgian solidarity, as in *Hasta la vista [Come as You Are]* (2011). Some films reflect more of a Belgian identity than a Flemish identity. Examples include the nonproblematic bilingualism in *Girl*, as well as films with an explicit story about the Belgian community question, like *Brabançonne [Belgian Rhapsody]* (2014)—a musical comedy about the struggle and ultimate fraternisation between a Flemish and a Walloon brass band—or *King of the Belgians* (2016), a satirical road movie about a Belgian king who attempts to return to his country when Wallonia declares its independence.

Nevertheless, most Flemish films continue to be situated primarily within a Flemish context, attempting to draw a connection to the home market by deploying a large measure of Flemish recognisability. Flemish settings, culture, linguistic variants and history continue to play an important role, and they often continue to be interpreted in a relatively white and traditional manner. Recently, however, a gradually strengthening intercultural tendency has emerged within Flemish cinema. Kadir Balci's *Turquaze* (2010) was the first professional Flemish feature film by a director of immigrant background. In both *Turquaze* and Balci's second film, *Trouw met mij [Marry Me]* (2014), issues of migration and integration are given a prominent place. The films underscore that, despite an accumulation of conflicts, a harmonious intercultural society is possible in Flanders. Films appearing since then include *Zagros* (2017) by Sahim Omar Kalifa from Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Moroccan–Belgian directors Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah produced three successful films within the crime-story genre: *Image* (2014), *Black* (2015) and *Patser [Gangsta]* (2018). Each of these cases thematically reflects the migrant background of the directors and helps broadening up the notion of ‘Flemish’ in Flemish cinema, increasing the level of cultural diversity.

The intercultural tendency in Flemish films extends further than the migration aspect. It also entails the growing body of (predominantly art-house) films revolving around topics that are explicitly related to cultures other than Flemish. Gust Van den Berghe's *Blue Bird* (2011) and *Lucifer* (2014) still depart from the literary canon of the Low Countries (the work of Maurice Maeterlinck and Joost van den Vondel) but have Togolese and Mexican cast and settings. Other films, like Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth's *Khadak* (2006) and *Beyond the Steppes* (2010), and Bülent Öztürk's *Blue Silence* (2017), which are respectively set in Mongolia, in Poland and Siberia, and in Turkey, lack any narrative link to Flanders. These films are examples of how Flanders can serve as a creative hub for stories in which a ‘Flemish identity’ is hardly addressed, if at all. Yet, notwithstanding their strong transnational dimensions, these films can also play a role in the Flemish nation-building process. In addition to being framed as ‘Flemish films’, as they were largely initiated and financed in Flanders, several of these films have also achieved success at festivals and helped making ‘Flemish cinema is doing great’ into a commonly heard catchphrase.

8 CONCLUSION

The Flemish case provides a fine illustration of how the relationship between film and nation-building is dynamic, multifaceted and often ambivalent. A clear evolution can be observed from a Belgian and strongly francophone-oriented film industry towards an increasingly separate Flemish film sector. This process was accelerated by the advent of the sound film in the early 1930s, and it was further stimulated by political developments towards greater Flemish autonomy. But while the Flemish nation-building process continues into the present, it is interesting to note that, beginning in the early 2000s, the Flemish film world sought to move closer to the French Community, and the concept of a Belgian cinema was once again embraced—something that is also expressed in the films themselves. That is not necessarily a paradox. Precisely the emergence of a separate professionalised Flemish film sector makes it possible to make such autonomous choices. After all, Flanders no longer needs to be ‘proven’.

With regard to film exploitation, the supply and consumption of films has always been heavily influenced by a major foreign domination: first from France and soon thereafter, from the United States. The current market share of Flemish films in the total figures for cinema attendance is estimated at around 15%. This corresponds to the situation in quite a few other European film markets, and it is primarily related to the Hollywood hegemony. For this reason, the greatest share of film consumption is part of an international film experience, which reduces the nation-building potential of the film medium in Flanders, compared to several other forms of mass media. Yet, studies have indicated that audiences engage with ‘their own’ media in a different manner. For deeper insight into the relationship between film and nation in Flanders, it thus remains crucial to examine the representations those Flemish films offer, as films help to build discourses on Flanders and Flemish identities.

Throughout Flemish film history, explicit Flemish nationalist messages appear primarily in non-fiction and amateur film productions. The heyday for this type of films occurred in the late 1920s, and its importance decreased along with the importance of the extra-parliamentary Flemish movement. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, Flemish fiction films engaged very little with ‘hot nationalism’. However, also nonexplicitly nationalist films play an important role in the Flemish nation-building project, through the ‘banal’ film-world construction of a Flemish nation (Billig, 1995). Parallel to the evolution towards a stronger Flemish substate, we can observe a shift from an often nostalgic view of a certain Flemish past to a more contemporary image of Flanders involving more cultural diversity. At the same time, however, essentialist and homogenising representations continue to be present in the cinematic portrayal of Flanders.

While focusing on the role of the nation (al), it has been clear throughout the article that strong transnational dimensions have also always marked the history of film in Flanders. This is obviously true for the cinema attendance in Flanders, but also for the production and distribution of many Flemish films, as well as for the representations they offer. This transnational community-building potential of film (deserving an extensive study on its own) complicates but does not contradict with the finding of this article that the film medium is indeed deeply intertwined with Flemish nation-building. It has been shown that films have often been (and continue to be) consciously deployed as tools of nation-building. This article also indicates that nation-building is often a subtle process, the expression of which in films and the film sector is not always so easy to distinguish. As part of its multiple community-

building capacities, film can serve an important nation-building function by naturalising the nation and proposing the idea of a 'world of nations' as being self-evident. The call within the field of nationalism studies to devote greater attention to banal nationalism and everyday nationhood (see, e.g., Fox, 2017; Skey & Antonsich, 2017) thus appears to be especially relevant to the relationship between film and nation-building. The Flemish case also demonstrates that the representation of a nation on the screen is strongly intertwined with that nation's presence beyond the screen. In other words, for a deeper understanding of the relationship between nation-building and the representations offered by films, it is necessary to consider the relationship between nation-building and the structural organisation of a film sector as well, and vice versa.

ENDNOTE

1 This article is indebted to Guido Convents' (1998) publication on the relationship between film and the Flemish movement and complements it in two ways: by synthesising the many studies that have since been conducted, and by focusing on the broader process of Flemish nation-building instead of only the Flemish movement. This article also builds on the research efforts for a Dutch-language book chapter on the subject (Willems, Biltreyst, & Vande Winkel, 2020).

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