Entering the Walloon Gothic: nationalist border crossing and othering in contemporary Flemish cinema

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Belgium's Dutch-speaking region of Flanders has been marked by a nationalist impulse. This is most clearly visible in the discourses and electoral success of nationalist parties, which call for a greater degree of Flemish independence from the Belgian state and its southern, French-speaking region of Wallonia. This article analyzes how a certain strand within contemporary Flemish cinema relates to such Flemish nationalist discourses. This is done by investigating the representation of Wallonia and its citizens as a national other in four mainstream films: *Bullhead* (2011), *Cub* (2014), *The Ardennes* (2015) and *Blind Spot* (2017). Through structuring their narratives around the border crossing of a Flemish protagonist into Walloon territory, these films activate a series of nationalist stereotypes and antagonistic discourses that help heighten the Belgian community conflict. The Walloons are framed as national others that either pose a threat or signify a burden to the Flemish protagonist. Moreover, Wallonia itself becomes a hostile space that is imbued with transgressive qualities, capable of corrupting the cohesion of the Flemish self. This representational regime is aesthetically and thematically underlined by evoking a type of 'Walloon Gothic', in which association with the Walloon soil becomes synonymous with a sense of spiritual degradation.

Introduction

Nationalist discourse is strongly present in contemporary Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. This is most clearly visible in the political performance and electoral success of two Flemish-nationalist political parties: the right-wing liberal conservative N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, New Flemish Alliance) and the extreme right VB (Vlaams Belang, Flemish Interest). Both parties, which together received 43% of the Flemish vote in the 2019 elections, call for an independent Flemish state. While the N-VA and VB discourses are explicitly and often militantly Flemish nationalist, seemingly self-evident references to a Flemish community, nation and identity are also common practice for the other Flemish political parties. However, these parties see the future of Flanders in line with its current situation as a 'sub-state' with a high degree of political autonomy within the federal state of Belgium.

Nation-building consists of much more than nationalist discourses of political actors alone (Wodak et al., 2009). At least as important are the many other – often more subtle and implicitly nationalist – stories about and representations of the nation that circulate in society. As has been underlined by several classic nationalism studies (e.g. Anderson, 1991; Deutsch, 1966), media play an important role in this context. The current Flemish government, a coalition led by N-VA and involving the Christian Democratic and Liberal parties, has proven itself well aware of the media's nation-building potential. This is clear from the Flemish government's policy statement for 2019-2024, which explicitly aims at 'making Flanders a strong and self-assured nation' (Vlaamse Regering, 2019: 170). For this purpose, the government stipulates that the Flemish public broadcaster, the Flemish Literature Fund and the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) should 'focus more than ever on strengthening the Flemish identity' (Vlaamse Regering, 2019: 187). Likewise, the VAF's vision for 2018-2021 states that: 'The discussion is no longer about making more or less Flemish films, documentaries, or series, but about showing who we are and what we stand for. About cementing, safeguarding and carrying out our Flemish identity' (VAF, 2018: 3).

While political actors and policy institutions may be highly important for Flemish cinema, they do not make films. Thus, the question of how Flemish films precisely relate to Flemish nationalist discourses remains. In addressing this question, this article specifically focuses on how contemporary mainstream films construct a Flemish national identity through the representation of a national 'other' and the demarcation of different national spaces within Belgian geography. Belonging to the wide array of nationalist discursive strategies, the

construction of a national other and its contrasting relation to a national self ('us' versus 'them') often takes centre stage.

The most important other for Flemish nationalism is the French-speaking part of Belgium, and especially the southern region of Wallonia (which also includes a small number of German-speaking inhabitants but is commonly referred to as a French-speaking region). In Flemish nationalist discourse, Walloon politicians and citizens are commonly othered and framed as a burden to Flemish well-being (Sinardet, 2008). In our analysis, we unravel how a multifaceted process of 'othering' the Walloons and Wallonia as a space forms a recurring pattern in the cinematic construction of a Flemish identity. By accommodating nationalist discourses in generic frameworks such as the crime or horror film, it is common among contemporary Flemish mainstream films to represent the Walloon region and its subjects as enveloped in an aura of mystery, hostility and abject impurity, which we call the Walloon Gothic. Rather than considering these representations the result of filmmakers' overt nationalist ambitions, they can be seen as an adaptation of the themes, tropes, and aesthetics of the American Southern Gothic to the socio-political setting of contemporary Belgium. While the filmmakers probably have no nationalist agenda in mind, these representations are important because their prominence in popular Flemish culture may contribute to the construction of powerful imaginaries that reproduce Flemish nationalism.

After offering a theoretical clarification of Flemish nationalism in relation to otherness and popular cinema, a set of discursive and aesthetic principles informing Walloon representation are identified by analysing four contemporary Flemish mainstream films: *Bullhead* (*Rundskop*, Roskam, 2011), *Cub* (*Welp*, Govaerts, 2014), *The Ardennes* (*D'Ardennen*, Pront, 2015) and *Blind Spot* (*Dode Hoek*, Ben Yadir, 2017). In order to craft a conceptual lens with which to look at how cinematic practices of othering are entangled with Flemish nationalist stereotypes and the stylistic register of the Walloon Gothic, we first need to situate the Gothic tradition in the realm of popular cinema. Once its lineage is mapped out and its aesthetic, thematic, and ideological affordances delineated, we'll continue with exploring how its conventions might be adapted into the specific socio-political context of contemporary Flemish cinema.

Summoning the Gothic

First off, it's necessary to acknowledge that building on the Gothic as a conceptual tool brings in certain theoretical pitfalls and problems. Koven (2020: 15) notes that '[w]ork on Gothic film

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tends to suffer from a similar epistemological malady which attempts to keep the definition open until it becomes almost synonymous with the entire horror genre itself'. While initially used to refer to a specific brand of late-Victorian literature, years of literary and cinematic research has led to a diverse series of often disparate definitions. In an attempt to use the Gothic for processes of textual categorization, it has been branded a genre, a mode, a style, and a brand – each category bearing its own connotations and consequences. However, because of its fluid and opaque nature, taming the Gothic to stay in a specific box turns out to be a difficult exercise. On a surface level, the Gothic combines motifs of haunted houses, dark landscapes, otherworldly threats, mysterious pasts, and a flair of the grotesque with thematic baselines of traumatic pasts, bodily deformation and spiritual decay (Spooner, 2006). Yet, similar to the ghouls it often features, the Gothic doesn't stick to one particular generic iteration, such as Gothic horror cinema, but shapeshifts into different forms by projecting its stylistic and thematic identity onto a variety of contexts, both generic (e.g., crime thrillers, road movies) and cultural (e.g., the British Gothic, the Italian Gothic).

Rather than functioning as a category of films, the Gothic constitutes an aesthetic and thematic imaginary that contains a system of references that corresponds and interacts with other textual layers such as a film's genre, period, and setting. Proof of this can be found in how mercurially the Gothic can be adapted to different cinematic vernaculars (Davies, 2016; Argiro, 2016). What such studies help to point out is that the Gothic is not something that arises in itself, but rather signifies the result of a process in which specific settings and people become *Gothicized*. Greven (2016), for example, has noted that the Gothic has a legacy in pathologizing specific classes, ethnicities, and sexual orientations as being deformations that contrast the homogeneity of a healthy communal body. Such processes of stylistic dehumanization can be traced back to a lot of contexts and are particularly apparent in the Gothic's iteration of the American South — most commonly referred to as the Southern Gothic. Or as Goddu (1997: 3-4) states: 'Identified with doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'Other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to dissociate itself'.

As Street and Crow (2016) clarify, because of Hollywood's global hegemony, the Southern Gothic is probably the most widely proliferated and well-known cultural incarnation of the Gothic. Similarly, as both a literary genre and a representational regime the Southern Gothic has been an age-old guideline in telling stories about the American South. The moral dissociation of Southern States such as Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi, with the rest of the USA, is here constructed by representing these regions as backwards, perilous and often occult

places, boasting bizarre inhabitants with barbaric customs (Newland, 2014). The Southern Gothic has over time helped to serve ideological projects of community-building and exclusionary othering by providing a framework for national mythmaking. The enlightenment attitudes and sophisticated cultural codes of the American North are here contrasted with the irrational and barbaric tendencies of the South, making both regions neatly fall along the lines of the civilization/wilderness binary. Because of the Gothic's roots in traditions of folkloric ghost tales and mystery melodrama, Greven (2016) also notices that this divide is symbolically charged by moral codes of wholesome good and impure evil, which leads to hyperbolic variations.

In the last decades, the Southern Gothic has arguably become the most proliferated cultural incarnation of the Gothic. The critical or commercial success of films and television series such as *Deliverance* (1972), *Killer Joe* (2011) *True Blood* (2008-2015), *True Detective* (2014), and *Get Out* (2014), has globalized the Southern Gothic as a specific aesthetic and thematic register of its own that filmmakers of different national/cultural settings have sought to engage with. Scott and Biron (2010), for example, make a convincing case for how the Southern Gothic is evoked in Australian horror cinema and its representation of the Australian outback. Building on similar distinctions of civilization and wilderness, Australian filmmakers have looked at the Southern Gothic for inspiration as to how such distinctions could be aesthetically displayed and symbolically explored. In other words: The Southern Gothic is something that is summoned with specific aims in mind. By way of a set of codes, signifiers, and stylistic cues the Southern Gothic can be adapted to new cultural contexts or conflicts. A particular side-effect of this adaptation process is, however, that many of the Southern Gothic's ideological components travel along. To better understand how the Southern Gothic is locally adapted to the setting of Flemish cinema, it's important to first understand which social antagonisms are politically performed in Flanders today, as well as how these sentiments might find their way in film institutional and artistic practices. Particularly, we're interested in how banal nationalist outings of Flemish identity are articulated and which cultural others are produced within this context.

Flemish nationalism and its foes

Historically speaking, Flemish nationalism is a product of the Belgian state, which was established in 1830 (De Wever et al., 2019). In response to the dominance of French in public life, a Flemish movement arose, fighting for the recognition of the Dutch language in northern

Belgium. During the 19th century, Flemish nationalism remained part of a broader Belgian nationalism. It was only during the First World War that an anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism started to emerge. However, even then, a large part of the Flemish movement maintained the idea of Flanders' place within a Belgian state structure. Throughout the 20th century, the Flemish movement grew into a mass movement, boosting the political ambition of greater administrative sovereignty for Flanders (Vos, 1998). From the 1960s onwards, the growing sense of Flemish identity led politically to the transformation of Belgium from a unitary to a federal state. A series of state reforms installed a complex state structure with a federal level, three language-based 'communities' (the Dutch, French and German communities; the bilingual Belgian capital of Brussels is part of both the Dutch and the French communities) and three territory-based 'regions' (the Flemish, Brussels and Walloon regions), each with its own parliament and government. The Dutch community and the Flemish region are combined into a single entity, Flanders, with one parliament and government.

As Wallonia functions as the most important national other for Flemish nationalist discourses, Walloons are often stereotyped as lazy, stubborn, corrupt, incompetent and unwilling to compromise. This, in turn, is contrasted with an in-group perception of the Flemish as hard-working, honest and dignified (Sinardet, 2008). These stereotypical perceptions are part of a Flemish nationalist discursive tradition of interpreting Flanders' history in terms of a continuous struggle for freedom from francophone oppression. Such negative and stereotypical perceptions of the other are generally considered an important part of national identity construction (e.g. Billig, 1995; Gellner, 1983). As Anderson (1991: 48) revealed, the comradeship which nationalism seeks is 'inherently limited' and therefore often at the expense of a series of others (enemies, strangers, etc.) who are excluded from one's own community. Such perceptions of the national self and the outsider other can then become emotionally charged, with the most extreme cases spiralling into an antagonistic discourse expressing hate, fear and disgust. Flemish nationalist discourse constructs the francophone Belgians in general and the Walloons in particular as their constitutive other. Walloon stereotypes circulate widely and are often accompanied by a discursive frame that considers dialogue impossible, whether because of cultural/linguistic differences or the unwillingness of the Walloon other. More Flemish autonomy, in the form of an independent state or within the Belgian federal framework, is thus put forward as the only solution.

It is important to note that Flemish nationalism in the 21st century has engaged in considerable effort to depoliticize itself. Sinardet (2008: 111), for example, noted a shift towards a type of

'efficiency nationalism', in which the call for more Flemish autonomy is no longer justified on the basis of cultural differences, but rather on the supposed inefficiency of Belgium's state structure. Unsurprisingly, many of the old stereotypes can be easily reorganized and integrated within the neoliberal lens of efficiency nationalism. Wallonia's misgovernment, for example, is seen as a burden to Flemish prosperity. Misuse and squandering, so the new Flemish nationalist discourse goes, has turned the region into a pit of debt, for which Flanders unjustly has to share the costs. At the heart of this view lies a dichotomy between Flanders as economically strong and politically sensible, and Wallonia as a disintegrating infrastructure beyond saving.

Such Flemish nationalist discourses are not always as visible as they are presented here. Very often, they are more subtly present in the form of what Billig (1995) calls 'banal nationalism'. Billig argues that nationalism in contemporary Western societies should not be reduced to manifest and rather extreme expressions of nationalism (also called 'hot nationalism'). Banal nationalism refers to the ideological customs that ensure established nations are constantly reproduced. In Flanders, Flemish nationalism also has a ubiquitous but often barely noticed presence in symbols, common language use and, importantly, the media. In this context, films – by means of the representations and stories they offer – can make a significant contribution to the construction of Flemish identity and its national other(s).

Belgian cinema, from Flanders

Since the Flemish identity, like any national identity, is a historical, social, and discursive construction, the role of the media in the dynamic process of identity construction is highly relevant. It has been shown how the regionalization of media institutions in Belgium, such as the public broadcasters and film funding agencies, has served as a further catalyst for sub-state national identity formation (Van den Bulck, 2001; Willems, 2017). In fact, Flemish cultural emancipation and autonomy were at the heart of the introduction of a film subsidy system in Flanders in 1964. As a result, the 'Flemish character' of films was central to the funding allocations of the Minister of Culture and the advisory film commission. Over time, the motivation for an emphasis on the Flemish character of the films partly shifted from a cultural-educative nation-building ideal to a more economic perspective. 'Flemishness' was seen as an attractive marketing tool to appeal to domestic and international audiences.

This parallels the above-mentioned evolution in Flemish nationalist discourses towards greater emphasis on 'efficiency nationalism'. Today, a mixture of cultural and economic considerations still informs Flanders' film policy, but — as noted in the introduction — an explicit Flemish nation-building ideal remains highly present. This is actually quite remarkable given that film policy practices are now much more depoliticized than earlier, when the relevant minister assessed every subsidy application. When the old film support system was replaced in 2002 by an autonomous fund, the VAF, a management agreement between the VAF and the Flemish community stipulated the conditions for receiving financial resources. This has considerably limited the direct political impact on the distribution of film support. Nevertheless, the VAF's policy discourse encourages Flemish identity more prominently than ever before. As the controversy around the appointment and resignation of extreme-right Vlaams Belang member Jef Elbers in the VAF's board of directors in March 2021 demonstrates, Flemish film policy has increasingly become a site of cultural struggle that negotiates and politically performs the identity of a Flemish in-group. These phenomena are not exclusive to the case of Flanders. As authors such as Harvey (2018) and Archer (2020) state, the spectre of right-wing populism seems to haunt popular European cinema. A new type of commercially oriented genre film can be discerned on the European market that adopts Hollywood film conventions, yet ideologically turns its gaze increasingly inward to exclusionary notions of nationalism (Harrod, 2020).

As around 65% of majority Flemish feature films receives substantial VAF support, this policy position is highly relevant. However, this does not mean that VAF-supported films automatically incorporate a Flemish nationalist ideology. In fact, many filmmakers declare they do not want to make political statements with their work. Moreover, it has been noted that contemporary Flemish cinema, like most contemporary Western cinemas, contains very little explicit or 'hot' nationalist discourse (Willems et al., 2021). Similarly, we don't mean to imply that the VAF, or filmmakers, are deliberately stereotyping Walloon characters to support the Flemish nationalist cause. Much rather, our analysis departs from a cultural studies perspective, that considers the representational output of these films as arising from the intersection of generic conventions, narrative expectations, and banal nationalist impressions that influences filmmakers in making artistic or commercial decisions. However, whether intended or not, films in which Flemings and Flanders are represented do engage in processes of nation-building through the banal construction of a Flemish identity. Especially through the optic of Walloon othering, banal Flemish nationalist discourses graduate into nation-building discourses that

correspond remarkably well with the explicit nationalist discourses of political parties such as N-VA and Vlaams Belang.

Although an analysis of how a Flemish nation and identity are represented may take various approaches, we focus on the construction of national others and their habitats within these films through processes of generic adaptation. Hence, it is particularly relevant to look at the widespread dramatic strategy of enemy-making in mainstream fiction films. Several film theorists (Pomerance, 2004; Soberon, 2021) note the importance of screen villains in the tradition of mainstream genre cinema as tools to structure how viewers engage with narrative development and processes of meaning making. Villains also carry a more symbolic value, as they often function as a 'culturally accepted guideline for what is appropriate and what is not' (Heit, 2011: 8); for who can be included and who can be excluded. By aligning certain identities as an active threat to the cohesion of the self, popular cinema can engage in a process of othering. According to Shapiro (2008: 66), these mediated borders between the national self and enemy other contribute to establishing 'hostile ways of seeing'.

Such hostilities are not limited to human subjects but can also have implications for the perception of certain spaces. By priming viewers' emotional attachment to a specific space, films are capable of creating 'topophobic' structures (Tuan, 1977), in which fear and hostility become associated with this specific space. Such topophobic structures are in line with Hage's (1996) account of how spatial imaginaries serve nationalist projects. The same space can be cinematically represented as a source of national pride, or a desolate and hostile space from which the national body seeks to be distanced. The representations of space and people therein become entangled into a wider network of meaning making that establishes a hostile divide between geographically located communities of the self and other.

Belgian border crossing

Apart from a concern to make films about distinctively Flemish themes, Flemish cinema is equally defined by its desire to emulate Hollywood styles and genres (Cuelenaere et al., 2018). Most productions wear their generic influences on their sleave and filmmakers are often frank about their ambitions of providing the Flemish alternative to a staple of Hollywood cinema (Ceulemans, 2014). Similar to other European markets, components of contemporary Hollywood cinema travel to new cultural markets and are adapted to a specific regional setting. In the Flemish case this has led to the adaptation of the Southern Gothic into a set of

representational codes attuned to an imagined Flemish identity, mostly by way of othering Walloon characters and the Walloon region. We dub this representational regime the 'Walloon Gothic' and treat it as a set of nationalist discourses, aesthetic principles, and thematic consistencies that coherently align in the depiction of Wallonia and its subjects. The Walloon Gothic is essentially a Flemish take on the Southern Gothic stylistic tradition which features strongly in — yet is not limited to — Hollywood cinema. Boyd (2002: 311) considers the Southern Gothic imaginary to be 'characterized by grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or futility'.

While Boyd (2002: 311) believes these elements to be attributable to many Gothic films, he argues that in the context of the Southern Gothic these stylistic consistencies are localized and attuned to Southern stereotypes, resulting in the representation of the American South as 'an inbred lower class living in extreme isolation in closed communities, which are plagued by economic impoverishment, educational ignorance, religious fundamentalism, racial intolerance, genetic deformities, perverted sexuality, and unrequited violence'. As noted above, the Southern Gothic has become an increasingly globalized phenomenon as different nations adapt these Southern themed and set genres, in the process molding its spatial imagery and Gothic sensibilities to their own national context (Sudgen, 2016). Similarly to Campbell (2008), who states the American Western has rhizomatically spread out into new genres and cultural contexts, we believe Flemish cinema represents its own southern counterpart of Wallonia through the generic and aesthetic lens of the Southern Gothic. This adaptation process taps into the Southern Gothic's potential for stereotyping and dehumanization, in turn constructing a sub-state national other for its Flemish protagonists.

An essential topos that ties this representational regime together is that of the Flemish-Walloon border and acts of Flemish border crossing. Shimanski's (2006) reading of 'border poetics' provides a helpful tool to understand how territorial borders are utilized in literary and cinematic texts not only to demarcate space, but also to further guide narrative, thematic and stylistic aims. As Shimanski states, the representation of the border structurally signifies a dramaturgical development into the narrative and is tied with a certain symbolic charge. In film fiction, the act of border crossing often seems to trigger a series of changes, in which the narrative enters a different stage, or shifts genres and moods. In the classics Western, for example, the journey to the border signifies a transgression into spaces of risk (Fojas, 2009), hence shifting the narrative to moments of action and confrontation.

In contemporary Flemish cinema, the act of border crossing works towards similar ends, but is complemented by aesthetic and thematic transformations. Once the protagonists cross over to the South of the border, they enter an uncanny space rife with threat and decay. In short: something sinister seems to smuggle itself within these films upon the moment of passing. These travels do not simply signify an act of mobility but set in motion a series of stylistic conventions and ideological registers familiar to that of the Southern Gothic. We argue that within contemporary Flemish cinema, this evocation of the Southern Gothic results in coding Walloon others as a danger to Flemings and the wider harmony of the Flemish community. This self/other binary not only applies to the representation of Flemish/Walloon characters, but extends to the cinematic treatment of Wallonia as a space.

Reading the Walloon Gothic

To elucidate these claims, we conduct a close reading of four recent Flemish mainstream films: *Bullhead*, *Cub*, *The Ardennes* and *Blind Spot*. The relevance of these films to this inquiry is threefold. Firstly, all of the films have received VAF support and were commonly framed within domestic promotional and press discourses as Flemish rather than Belgian (even though *Blind Spot* has a francophone director from Brussels and from a financial-productional point of view is a majority French Community film, with Flanders as minority coproduction partner). It can thus be posited that these films help to articulate something about Flemish culture. Interestingly, apart from *The Ardennes*, all of the films received some degree of financial support from CCA (Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel), the VAF's francophone counterpart, and/or Wallimage, an economically driven fund of the Walloon government. This collaboration is in itself not strange, considering Flemish cinema's contemporary climate of co-funding and the opportunity it grants Wallonia to support its audiovisual industry (Van Beek and Willems, 2022). However, while it seems evident to assume that such regional interactions lead to a greater degree of Belgian cohesion, our analysis will show that co-productions do not guarantee Flemish-Walloon harmony in terms of representation. On the contrary, they can be utilized to opposite ends.

Secondly, all of these films use a template of mainstream genre cinema, in which narrative drama is expressed through the violent struggle between heroes and villains. The Academy Award nominated *Bullhead* is a Flemish take on the crime drama, which tackles the hormone trafficking underworld in a rural Flemish setting bordering Wallonia. During the mid-1990s,

the Flemish hormone mafia was at the centre of several political and juridical crises, most notably the murder of government livestock inspector Karel Van Noppen. The film takes this political event as the backdrop to its narrative about a hormone dealer wrestling with his traumatic past, thereby engaging with an event solidly imbedded in Flemish cultural memory. *Cub* was proudly launched as 'Flanders' first horror film' and plays out many of its genre conventions using the backdrop of a Flemish cub scout camp in the Walloon forests. Youth organizations such as the cub scouts serve as a recognizable context for the film's intended Flemish young adult audience. *The Ardennes* is a highly aestheticized take on the gangster film, set in the Flemish city of Antwerp and the titular Ardennes (a well-known Walloon forest region). In *Blind Spot*, the police thriller is tackled, with an action-packed narrative of an Antwerp police chief's last assignment to catch a drug dealer in the Walloon city of Charleroi before retiring from the police and entering the world of politics. The film is rife with references to Flemish nationalist political parties and touches on topical issues such as immigration and the 'war on drugs'.

All films deal with a narrative of transition in which a Flemish protagonist ventures into Wallonia. This integration of Flemish subjects into Walloon space establishes a Walloon imaginary that functions on different levels. The border crossing of the characters serves narrative and thematic purposes, with this journey heavily symbolized as a transgressive experience – which we will elaborate upon below. Moreover, the fish-out-of-water scenarios become an arena in which a cultural clash between the two sub-state regions is performed. Space, subject and the symbolic are entwined to offer a Walloon imaginary which makes the region and its population unreconcilable with the civilized codes and norms of Flanders.

Our argument builds on an analysis of 1) Wallonia as a space, 2) the Flemish and Walloon characters in the films, and 3) the underlying narrative and themes of these films. All these elements are part of a wider representational regime of the Walloon Gothic, in which Wallonia becomes thematically associated with the regression and corruption of the Flemish self. As with all films, the examples are sometimes ideologically ambiguous, and in some cases even explicitly criticize Flemish nationalism. Again, it would be erroneous to assume that the films are made with a Flemish nationalist intention. Nevertheless, despite these discursive ambivalences, their representation of Wallonia and Walloon citizens can be seen to reproduce different forms of Flemish nationalist discourse. *Blind Spot*, for example, is a film that openly criticizes the Flemish right-wing's take on migration and diaspora communities. Yet the socially inclusive objectives of this film are achieved at the expense of Walloon othering. While

the film's nuanced portrayal of a young Moroccan-Belgian cop caught in the crossfire of personal loyalties and right-wing collaboration is to be lauded, *Blind Spot* itself ends up reiterating Flemish nationalist discourses through its stereotypical evocation of Wallonia's urban environments and its visions of Walloon villainhood. This shows that the representations of these films are complex and multi-sided entities that can take an ambiguous portrayal to themes of banal nationalism and Flemish identity.

The Walloon wilderness

The border crossing that takes place in the four movies can firstly be read as an exercise of comparing Flanders and Wallonia as distinctive spaces. All protagonists venture from a homely Flanders into what is depicted as a treacherous, unpredictable and malfunctioning environment. The first shots of *Cub* show a young cub scout cycling through the cheerful suburban neighbourhood of Antwerp on his way to camp departure point. These scenes are represented with bright natural lighting and colour in order to invoke a warm feeling of domesticity. In *Bullhead*, the Flemish countryside is further aestheticized by shots of grass waving in slow motion during the sunset. Even in the more sombre scenes, it is clear that Flanders is a homely space of banal rituals, such as dinners, drinks and parties, in which the protagonists find friendship and comfort.

The stability of these scenes functions to set up a contrast when the protagonists exit this safe space and venture into Wallonia. Moreover, the motivation for travel often lies with Wallonia's potential for illegal activities. While the precise act of border crossing is not shown, the arrival at the Walloon destination is structurally tied to exposition shots that emphasize a sense of dread and doom. *The Ardennes*' top-down shots, scored to ominous synth music, provide an eerily disorientation effect that underscore a reluctant departure to a different world. In *Blind Spot*, for example, the narcotics unit pursues an Antwerp drug kingpin to Charleroi. While still in pursuit, the officers attempt to anticipate the direction the criminal might be going and amusingly voice the obvious likelihood of taking refuge in Wallonia, highlighting the lawlessness of Wallonia as a matter of fact. Similarly, *Bullhead* and *The Ardennes* foreground Wallonia as the perfect place to make things disappear, as both films cross the border to get rid of incriminating evidence, one tied to a mafia assassination, the other to a dead body in its entirety.

In the process of passing through, characters exchange stereotype-laden jokes about Walloons ('What's the difference between a Walloon and an addiction […] you can get rid of an

addiction'; *Blind Spot*), and upon arrival they complain about the hideousness of the landscape. One could consider these comments so blatant that they form a type of critique of anti-Walloon sentiments, but nowhere are these stereotypes countered or undermined. On the contrary, the sincerity of these prejudices is underlined by the films' formal treatment of the region. The Walloon imaginary exists out of two spatial entities that, while varying in form, play into the same set of nationalist discourses. On the one hand, the Walloon urban space depicts cities such as Charleroi and Liège as dark, deceptive and unruly. On the other, the Walloon rural space recodes the Walloon Ardennes forest as a dark entity hiding many dangers. Although different in terms of setting, both spaces make Wallonia an uncanny area where nothing is what it seems. The Flemish protagonists thus descend from Flemish civilization into Walloon wilderness. As such, Flemish nationalist discourses on the mismanagement of Wallonia are reiterated.

When the scout troops in *Cub* drive from the Flemish countryside through the non-existent ghost town of Casselroque, a series of exposition shots show a deserted, trash-littered street, abandoned industrial sites and clothing stuck in a barbed-wire fence. The perception of the Walloon cityscape is bleak. While Casselroque is not a real town, the ruins depicted in this sequence are those of the Hasard de Cheratte coal mine, located on the outskirts of Liège. By foregrounding the abandoned steel mills of the city, attention is drawn to the poverty and bad governance of Wallonia. *Cub*'s shots of urban decay are quickly followed by shots of the scout children looking shocked in response, depicting the confrontation between the focalized gaze of the Flemish self and the alien surroundings of the Walloon other. The rusted ruins of industrial plants and abandoned mining sites function as a symbol of the economic tragedy of Wallonia. The viewer is implored to see this environment through the eyes of the Flemish child – a typical locus of innocence – the viewer is implored to behold this environment and feel indignation for its wretched state of being.

Such representations are also present in *Blind Spot*, which depicts Charleroi like the Wild West, full of criminal outlaws and collapsing infrastructure. Drug dealers, heroin addicts, undocumented immigrants and homegrown terrorists all move freely without police interference. Similar to *Cub*, the car ride through Charleroi in *Blind Spot* helps to streamline the viewer's gaze into that of a bewildered tourist, or even as passenger of a poverty focused safari ride. The search by ex-cop Jan Verbeek (Peter Van Den Begin) for his son continues against a backdrop of images of social disintegration of Wallonia, such as graffiti-studded walls, narrow alleyways, abandoned houses and drug dens. When Jan observes these places, he systematically responds with disgust, supplying the preferred emotional response for the viewer. The feeling

of threat that surrounds the Walloon urban areas is completed by the film's soundscape, which blends distant shouts with ambulance sirens that smoothly dissolve into the film's oppressive non-diegetic soundtrack.

Dreadful as the urban spaces might be, rural Wallonia is depicted as the lowest step on the ladder from Flemish civilization into no-man's-land. When *Cub*'s boy scouts arrive at the Ardennes forest, horror film conventions help to communicate it as a supernatural space. Thick smoke emanates from some off-screen space, a dead animal is seen rotting by the roadside, and unfriendly locals warn them not to venture on. This threatening mood is further enhanced by shots from within the woods mimicking the point of view of an unseen enemy, or by a tilting camera movement showing the desolateness of the Walloon forest. As is common in the horror film genre, themes of hidden and lurking dangers feature heavily in this treatment of space. A serial killer and his feral henchman navigate unnoticeably through an intricate network of industrial tunnels and underground rail tracks, which are accessed from a car cemetery and other unsuspecting spaces.

While these visual and thematic motifs could be seen as standard fare in the horror film genre, these conventions also seep into other genres. *The Ardennes* relies on a similar aesthetic when its two protagonist brothers travel to the Walloon woods. Shots of thick dark forests and abandoned warehouses are accompanied by menacing synth music, depicting a journey into the heart of darkness. When they enter a Walloon bar in the countryside, the camera lingers on dead animals strung up on hooks and the scowling gazes of onlookers. Later on, the uncanny and somewhat surrealist atmosphere is further heightened when the brothers are attacked by wild ostriches that have escaped from a nearby farm.

In *Blind Spot*, notions of threat and surveillance even extend onto interior spaces. During a Flemish police raid on a presumed drug lab, no clues of illegal activities are initially found. However, it is then revealed that the house has fake walls that shut off a hidden room filled with undocumented immigrants. Similarly, the hideout of a Walloon drug kingpin is depicted as being hidden in plain sight, again indicating that in Wallonia even ordinary spaces are a potential of threat. As such, the Walloon other seamlessly blends into the environment to form a type of ubiquitous absence (Pötzsch, 2011). The threat of the Walloon other originates from no location in particular but surrounds the Flemish protagonists in dark corners and unseen angles. Space and people blend into an abstract force that is always on the prowl, relentlessly putting pressure on the Flemish visitors.

The Walloon abject

While the Walloon other is often represented as an abstract entity, the Flemish protagonists of the films also engage with individual inhabitants of these urban and rural wastelands. These encounters are often antagonistic, which makes them into a type of cross-cultural confrontations. In line with the threatening representation of Wallonia as a space, the Walloon subject is commonly placed in the role of the barbaric other to the civilized Flemish self. The representation of Walloons seldom extends beyond the roles of criminal, heroin addict, pimp, terrorist or hostile hick. *Blind Spot* depicts a complex network of Walloon drug dealers festering within the city, while *Cub* revolves around a Walloon serial killer hunting down Flemish cub scouts in the forest. The portrayal of the Walloon as villain helps to integrate many Flemish nationalist stereotypes. The Walloons are presented as uncivilized, unintelligent, treacherous and lazy. *Blind Spot*'s drug lord is even too lethargic to open the door to his informant and demands that he comes back on another day.

In *Bullhead*, the stupidity of two criminal car mechanics engaged in endless bickering and bumbling over how to dispose of murder evidence serves as comic relief. The confusion and panic of both sheepish characters is played out for laughs as the solutions they come up with consistently prove ineffective and lead to new problems. *Cub* even extends the ridicule to Walloon authorities by portraying the cop character as a simple-minded eccentric and overweight man who rides around on a small moped, amazed by the modern technology of his mobile phone and lacking authority over the locals. This depiction neatly aligns with discourses about Wallonia as a backward region with failing institutions, where the incompetence of law enforcement and corrupt city officials has led to an increase in crime. In two of the four films, the Flemish protagonist is killed by Walloon police officers, thereby reinforcing the distrust of Walloon law enforcement.

The interaction with Walloon locals further provides a consistent source of frustration because they are either unwilling or unable to speak with the Flemish protagonists. While Flemish characters consistently speak fluent French and attempt to lead the conversation, none of the Walloons in the four films is shown speaking proficient Dutch. When in *Cub* two local drunken hoodlums are racing around on a quadbike on the campgrounds of the Flemish scouts, the scout leaders attempt to address them in French. However, the youngsters are not interested in the conversation and rev up the quad's motor so they cannot hear the scout leader. When the motor is finally turned off, the youngsters respond aggressively to the scout leaders by pushing them around and using sexist slurs ('Ferme ta gueule, grosse pute'; Shut your mouth, big slut).

Walloon ignorance of the Dutch language is also relied on for comic relief. In *Bullhead*, the car mechanics' poor language skills leads to several humorous antics when they confuse the word 'bullet hole' for asshole (in French both 'trou de balle'), consistently mispronounce the name of the political party Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) as 'Vlaams Gezang' (Flemish Singing), or rely on awkward, childlike phrases such as 'Ikke niets gezien, Ikke niets gedaan' (Me didn't see anything, Me didn't do anything) That Walloons are unable to speak Dutch is also referenced as a well-known fact by some characters. The Flemish gangsters in *Bullhead* make no attempt to be discrete because they know their Walloon onlookers 'Can't understand them anyway'. Similarly, in *Blind Spot*, a Walloon informer refuses to speak at all during police interrogations and remains mute for the majority of the film. These representations of the Walloon as an irrational or ignorant other, incapable of communicating, could be read as micro-metaphors for what Flemish nationalists perceive as tiresome political negotiations between Flemings and Walloons. The Flemish self is firmly placed in the role of peaceful moderator, who repeatedly has to plead for the Walloon counterpart to compromise. The failure of these negotiations is then framed as a given, since the Walloons are disinterested in dialogue from the very beginning.

While the binary opposition between the two groups in these films is grafted onto the variables of class and language, the divide is further intensified on an ethnic-cultural level. The Walloons are perceived as a homogenous unit sharing cultural habits, intrinsic character traits and moral codes. In essence, the Walloon subjects are defined by a type of abject whiteness in which a tainted, debased form of white masculinity (Dyer, 1988) is contrasted with the normative and civilized identity of the Flemish. Walloon subjects are represented as prone to atavist urges, sexual depravities and bodily transgressions that shock the standards of the Flemish community. Almost all of the female Walloon characters are identified as sex workers and objectified as mysterious, sensual creatures. While the raw sexual energy of these women at first attracts the gaze of the Flemish protagonists, these desires are quickly dubbed perversions and punished. A series of flashback sequences in *Bullhead* shows how the protagonist Jacky (Matthias Schoenaerts) becomes obsessed with the sight of the brothels across the Walloon border. When he falls in love with a young girl who is sold for sexual services, her pimp brother and his gang of thugs punish him by crushing his genitals between two stones.

Blind Spot takes a similar approach when cop Jan visits the flat of his former Walloon lover. Because of her heroin addiction, she has become a sex worker and Jan is confronted with the sordid state of her life when entering the glum bedroom, equipped with a cabinet display of

extravagant sex toys. *The Ardennes* chooses a villain-coded queering of heteronormative gender norms, with one of the chief antagonists being a transwoman lover of a Flemish expat gangster living in Wallonia. While such gender fluidity could be read as a testament to the open-minded attitude in Walloon society, the film uses these non-binary gender norms to elicit disgust. The combination of the character's large masculine physique with distorted signifiers of femininity, such as a fur coat and badly applied make-up, attempts to make the character appear grotesque. Moreover, her seductive attempts are framed as forms of sexual intimidation by combining these advances with moments of emotional discomfort or the eruption of violence.

A final way in which the Walloon is othered as an abject identity is through ableist discourses on physical and psychological well-being. While the Flemish body is healthy and sane, Walloon characters are repeatedly shown as having some kind of mental disability. The most hyperbolic of these vilifications can be found in *Cub*, where the Walloon killer grows ever more physically grotesque as the film progresses. When cub scout Sam (Maurice Luijten) confronts the killer his face is revealed as greatly disfigured by fire. This physical transformation is rivalled by a moral otherness, as the killer shows no scruples in performing acts of unspeakable evil, such as driving over a tent with children inside it. Throughout the film, the killer is depicted as imbued with extreme strength and an almost superhuman resistance to pain. When stabbed in the shoulder, he effortlessly removes the knife and continues his assault, or rises from the fiery ashes of an exploding truck. These unearthly aspects are never explained or rationalized, but are meant to appear as self-evident – whatever lurks in the depths of the Walloon wilds is simply bestowed with such dark powers and abject qualities.

While such representations may fit the conventions of the horror genre, similar representations can also be found in the other films. In *Blind Spot*, Walloon characters are catatonic, substance addicted, twitch nervously or ramble on in a rage. When Jan picks up the friendly social worker Manu (Gaël Maleux) to help look for his son, even this seemingly 'sane' acquaintance starts to talk to himself incoherently ('You don't know who I am. Manu is a maniac'). As is common in genre cinema's treatment of disability, the deviation from the norm is combined with a departure from certain moral norms (Norden, 1994). *Bullhead*'s teenage pimp shows signs of Down Syndrome and is depicted as a cruel little tyrant who takes satisfaction from the misery of others. That he suddenly enters a fit of rage and mutilates the Flemish protagonist Jacky is testament to an understanding of Walloons as a dormant force of destruction, present in all of the films. Akin to Walloon spaces, Walloon subjects are defined by their volatile nature. They

pose a constant threat to the well-being of the Flemish outsider, and every encounter is accompanied by an uneasy tension that suggests to the viewer that events will turn sour.

The Walloon regression

While the previous sections focused on how Walloon spaces and people are othered, this final section analyses how the films' narrative and formal organization helps to consolidate this representation. Underlying the literal depiction of Wallonia as a threatening region populated by abject entities, the border crossing to Wallonia by the Flemish characters is framed as acts of ultimate regression. The Walloon wilderness holds a type of primordial darkness which is capable of corrupting those who enter it, becoming the penultimate attack to the Flemish self. Thematically, narratively and aesthetically, the films evoke a sense of spiritual degradation in which the Flemish subject is regressed to a debased state of savagery.

This set of representational strategies offers a Belgian take on the Southern Gothic tradition that is strongly embedded in American popular culture. As Street and Crow (2016) clarify, here a moral chasm is drawn between the civilized, enlightened North and the backward South that boasts bizarre inhabitants with barbaric customs (Brasell, 2011). Within the Walloon Gothic, Wallonia similarly becomes a source of gothic doom and atavist darkness. In the process, the Flemish nation's other is similarly transformed into a reservoir of all that Flanders chose to dissociate itself from. The tragedy of the Walloon Gothic is that this dissociation cannot be absolute, with both regions remaining connected as the northern and southern parts of the same Belgian state. The films frame this national unity as something of equally tragic and threatening by transforming the Flemish-Walloon border into a transitionary space capable of corrupting Flemish bodies.

In all four films, Wallonia is a space of trauma and transgression in which the Flemish social mores and codes of conduct are rendered unstable. The traumatic backstories of *Bullhead* and *Blind Spot* lie in a youthful incident over the Walloon border that results in an episode of inner darkness. In both cases, this experience comes from a love affair between a Flemish man and a Walloon woman (both female sex workers). This romantic infatuation is seen to have disastrous consequences as it results in Jacky's genital mutilation (*Bullhead*) and Jan's illegitimate child plotting to murder him (*Blind Spot*). The crux of the narrative development subsequently lies in a return to these painful backstory wounds and their region of origin to repair the damage that has been done. Rather than restore something that has been lost, these acts of return set in motion an even larger series of cataclysms, which result in both protagonists' deaths.

In *Bullhead*, Jacky meets the Walloon girl he fell in love with a long time ago – now working as a perfume seller – and hides his identity in order to court her. Every one of his romantic outings requires him to make the crossing to Wallonia and results in acts of brutal violence, ultimately leading to him being shot by Walloon police. Similarly, in *Blind Spot*, Jan's realization that he has a son from a youthful encounter with a Walloon woman leads him back to Charleroi to confront the mother. However, he discovers that the mother has died, and his son has turned into a murderous psychopath. In a video testimony, Jan's son declares his plans to kill his father with a suicide bomb to avenge his abandoned mother and her subsequent heroin addiction. The son's abject nature is further emphasized by his incoherent speech, extravagant gestures and obscenities ('If I could, I would even eat your insides. Like a dog'). Coming closer to the camera, the son repeats ever louder, 'as long as he's alive, I'm growing insane', highlighting how he is long past the point of redemption. By presenting the son as the rotten fruit of some sort of unholy union, a general unease about the 'miscegenation' of Flemish-Walloon relationships is expressed. The encounter with the Walloon other, combined with the crossing into Walloon space, thus serves as a disruptive force to Flemish unity and its well-being.

That corrupting powers lay hidden deep within the Walloon space is further evident in the way these films treat the spiritual degradation of the Flemish characters. The Walloon Gothic prescribes that something of Walloon insanity or dark desires is transmitted to Flemish characters who spend too much time in the Walloon wilds. In *The Ardennes*, this is evident in the character of Stef (Jan Bijvoet), an ex-convict who has moved to Wallonia. Living in a car cemetery with his Walloon trans girlfriend, he is depicted as overly eccentric and criminally insane. After an ex-cell mate, Kenneth (Kevin Janssen), accidentally kills a former lover of his ex-girlfriend, he and his brother Dave (Jeroen Perceval) call on Stef to make the body disappear. During his first appearance in the film, he stands half naked in the winter cold, manically inviting his guests to eat pancakes and snort cocaine. To use Huhndorf's term (2001: 5), Stef is an example of the Flemish subject 'gone native' in the Walloon wilderness. Similar to the gunslingers of the classic Western, the Flemish subject is seen to navigate a fine line between civilization and wilderness after entering Wallonia. Characters such as Stef have ventured too far into the transgressive realm of the Walloon space and seem unable to return to Flemish normality. This dichotomy is further explored through the duality of the brothers Dave and Kenneth. While Dave retains his civilized composure throughout and is revolted by the transgressions taking place with Stef, Kenneth increasingly gives in to his animalistic urges by

stabbing a forest ranger and betraying his brother. Kenneth had already shown signs of aggression, but it is not until he enters Wallonia that his moral degradation is completed, and he descends into violent madness.

Wallonia's function as a gateway for characters to come into contact with their darkest desires is most manifest in *Cub*, where transgressions occur after the cub scouts have been camping in Wallonia for too long. Although already antipathic before entering the Walloon woods, scout leader Peter (Stef Aerts) grows increasingly hostile towards cub scout Sam because of his emotional disorder and social awkwardness. Near the film's third act, Peter eventually snaps and attempts to beat Sam to death. Sam meanwhile undergoes a moral transformation as the Ardennes forest increasingly alienates him from his fellow cub scouts. He forms an ambiguous friendship with Kai (Gil Eeckelaert), a folkloric feral child who wears a wooden mask, which is used by the Walloon serial killer to lure his victims into a trap. As the narrative progresses and Sam and Kai become closer, Sam further distances himself from his former identity and engages with his more primal urges, such as spying – from Kai's treetop lair – on a female scout leader who is showering. When Kai captures Peter's dog, he invites Sam to take revenge. While at first hesitant, Sam ultimately gives in to his anger by bludgeoning the dog to death, accelerating his moral transformation. Similar to Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, Kai functions as a guide to help Sam descend through the hellscape of the Walloon forest and the darkness of his own desires. This theme of transgression reaches its natural conclusion when Sam is chosen by the hick killer to be his new sidekick. Taking Kai's mask, Sam's transformation reaches the final stage as he kills the last surviving scout member and he is forever lost to the malicious seductions of the Walloon wilds.

Conclusion

This article offered an analysis of nationalist discourses in contemporary mainstream Flemish cinema. Departing from the Southern Gothic as an imaginary capable of villain-coding certain spaces and identities, a pattern of sub-state nationalism was discerned in Flemish cinema. By relying on the stylistic and narrative affordances of American genre films, a certain strand of Flemish films utilise Walloons as go-to antagonists and constitutive others to the Flemish self. Wallonia is represented as a space lost in time where societal and economic development has been frozen, and its inhabitants regressed to abject beings. The reproduction of stereotypes and spatial sentiments centring on Walloon corruption, inefficiency, and depravity is accommodated in these films within a wider representational regime, here dubbed the Walloon Gothic. This Walloon Gothic encompasses both the Walloon space and people in an aura of threat and mystery, thematizing Flemish-Walloon encounters as a process of dissociation and disintegration.

Evidently, this does not mean that the entirety of contemporary Flemish cinema is engaged in Flemish nationalist discourses. There are also Flemish films that celebrate a Belgian national identity, while others reflect a transnational identity, especially in art films (Willems et al., 2021). Nevertheless, when Walloons (as subjects) and Wallonia (as a space) are represented in a certain strand of mainstream films, this generally does not contribute to a stronger sense of Belgian identity. Not only are Walloons defined by savagery and debauchery, the geographical region is also exclusively defined by its spiritual impurity. The evil that the Flemish protagonists are subjected to inhabits the very soil of Wallonia, corrupting everything and everyone it comes into contact with. Rather than simply offering a rejection of the Walloon other, these films engage in a type of renunciation of Wallonia altogether. Similar to Flemish nationalist political discourse, Wallonia here functions as a hostile cancer posing a threat to the healthy organism of the Flemish nation within the increasingly decaying body of the Belgian state. The solution to this problem is to excise this alien entity before it spreads and destroys Flemish harmony. By spatially, ethnic-culturally and symbolically dissociating from Wallonia, a sub-state national other is constructed, which can only be resisted through detachment. Since this logic corresponds with the sub-state nationalist cry for more political autonomy, it's important to further investigate ways in which the spectre of Flemish nationalism inhabits contemporary cinema and popular culture.

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