

Flemish Film Beyond the Borders of Flanders?

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[ERIK MARTENS]

Back in the 1970s, thousands of young children in Flanders and the Netherlands used to watch the Japanese-Italian children's cartoon *Calimero*. The main character was a small black chicken with half an eggshell on his head that went on all the time in a fretful voice that everything was unfair, 'because she's big and I's small'.

Calimero's experiences were tailor-made for children, and even for the parents the frustration of the powerless in the face of the large-scale was absolutely recognisable. Later, the 'Calimero complex' became a concept in psychology in Belgium and the Netherlands. That concept can also be applied to countries and their populations, especially communities of limited size which, for whatever reason, feel they have had a bad deal.

In the geography of film-producing countries, that sensitivity is also acutely present. The European film industry has always felt weak compared to its powerful big brother from the United States. It is well known that the European market was flooded by American films after the Second World War. Local film production hardly played a significant role of any kind, for all Europeans were mad about American films.

The somewhat larger European film countries, headed by France, still had a handful of big names with an artistic reputation that could counter the lack of popularity. But small film countries, which did not boast any famous filmmakers or have a home audience to fall back on, inevitably had to struggle with a hefty Calimero complex.

Among the small film countries that found the going tough, Belgium was well to the fore. With its central position in Europe and its openness to both the Romance and the Germanic culture, Belgium had a very vibrant, varied film culture. All kinds of films could be seen in Flanders, except Flemish films, since they practically didn't exist. In addition, the market for national production was divided again between a French-speaking and a Dutch-speaking one. For an expensive technological medium that can only recover its costs when a large number of cinema-goers buy tickets, this was – and is – an unfavourable point of departure.

From the sixties onwards, the country was gradually divided up into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking community (and a small German-speaking one) each of which developed its own film policy. Both struggle with the lim-



Bullhead

A story of crime and punishment, friendship and lost innocence
in the environment of the Flemish hormone mafia

ited nature of their market, for although French-speaking Belgium has naturally linked up with France, and Dutch-speaking Belgium with the Netherlands, in practice their films scarcely cross the border, with the exception of the Dardenne brothers. The cultural border seems to be even tougher than the linguistic border.

One of the problems with which small film-producing entities such as Flanders struggle is that within a context of limited means it is difficult to produce a sufficient critical mass. After all, certain quantity is necessary to keep one's own production apparatus alive, and without a professional production apparatus there can be no qualitative production. Professional expertise and experience cannot develop in a vacuum.

Flemish film has had a number of moments when it seemed that it was approaching a growth phase. Time and again, the film titles concerned appeared from nowhere and gained a surprisingly large local audience. Not all of these films were good quality, but often in their wake they created increased interest in domestic film production for a time.



Loft

Five married men share a loft for their adulterous escapades. When a female body is discovered in the loft, the story changes from misspent decadence to a classical whodunit

A first significant occurrence of this kind was the popular filming of *De Witte* [Whitey] by Ernest Claes in 1934. The film-makers involved were Edith Kiel and Jan Vanderheyden, who were also able to maintain a modest level of film production in subsequent years. In the early 1970s, Fons Rademakers, Hugo Claus and Jan van Raemdonck dug up the Flemish author Stijn Streuvels (1871-1969) to produce a headstrong mix of naturalism and hippie-romanticism with *Mira*, their film version of his book *De Teleurgang van de Waterhoek*. Here, too, attendance figures were high, and in the years immediately afterwards a number of titles, making use of the same ingredients, attracted a curious Flemish audience.

Until recently the most successful films in Flanders were comedies featuring such popular comedians as Urbanus in the 1990s. Urbanus has the second and third position in the all-time box-office top ten of Flemish films: *Hector* (1987) and *Koko Flanel* (1990), with 933,000 and 1,082,000 viewers respectively.

The films were successful, not exactly because they were exceptional films, but because the comedian in question was successful. There are also a handful of other titles with a comparable effect, such as the historical film *Daens* by Stijn Coninx about the life of the famous socially engaged priest from Aalst (1992). Stijn Coninx, by the way, is the most successful film-maker in the history of Flemish film. He put his name not only to the prestigious *Daens* (848,000 viewers) but also the two Urbanus films, which led to him being able to claim for a long time (until *Loft* in 2008) to have produced all top three of the most successful Flemish films. Flemish film-makers often have a hybrid filmography.

The arrival of commercial television

Apart from these isolated successes, their native language and culture seldom seemed to be a decisive argument for the Flemish viewer to choose local products.

With the arrival of commercial television in the 1980s, this axiom was turned upside-down. In the Flemish TV-viewer there arose an appetite for Flemish fiction that had not existed previously. Since then, Flemish television fiction has experienced a steady advance, initially in the form of long-lasting soaps, in recent years more frequently in the form of clear-cut TV series with a fixed number of instalments. They have repeatedly commanded high viewing figures, and today there also seems to be international interest in Flemish television fiction.

The growth of the television sector over the past 25 years has had a considerable impact on the film sector. The local AV industry increased in size, became more effective and introduced a generation of experienced actors and technicians onto fiction sets.

At a modest Flemish level, local stars emerged: popular television actors who subsequently took their audience with them to the silver screen and who, in the production of television programmes and films, became an element to be taken into account.

Local commercial successes

The first signals of an approaching boom in Flemish film date from 2003. That year Flemish film, with the noir-thriller *De zaak Alzheimer* [The Memory of a Killer], scored its greatest success since the early 1990s: 750,000 people saw the film. Five years later, film director Eric Van Looy confirmed his talent for qualitative entertainment with the film *Loft* [The Loft]. The film was so popular in Belgian cinemas that it broke all previous records. With 1.2 million viewers it became the most popular Flemish film ever.

Since then the indicators have been trending upwards in every respect. In 2003, seven Flemish films were shot; in 2012, there were 30. In 2004, some 566,000 Flemish people went to watch Flemish films in the cinema; in 2012, this figure more than doubled, with 1,462,158. And the market share of Flemish film also doubled to 9.35% of all cinema tickets sold in 2012 – a percentage that has been stable for about the last five years. This trend break did not materialise out of thin air. There are a number of structural factors that have helped shape the new situation.

To begin with, money. Thanks to the federal tax break that celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2013, there are suddenly considerably more means available for the local film industry. The Flemish Audiovisual Fund (VAF), which has been the official public financier of Flemish film production since 2002, adroitly anticipated the dynamic and on several occasions managed to mobilise additional means for film production. Along with the film fund there also came a media fund for the support of TV fiction series, and most recently *Screen Flanders*, an economic fund that invests in productions that are active on Flemish soil.

A second factor that helps to explain the increasing commercial success of new Flemish film is that the new Flemish film-maker also thinks more *commercially* than previously. While the film-maker used to be central to the film concept, audience considerations now tip the scales more than before. Producers and film-makers are no longer averse to commercial concepts. A film-maker such as Jan Verheyen shows in all his films (*Het vonnis*, 2013 *Zot van A*, 2010; *Dossier K*, 2009, *Team Spirit 1 & 2*, 2000 & 2003 etc.) an unerring instinct for the taste of the average Flemish viewer.

It is also revealing that an ever-increasing number of films are being made without financial support from the state. A film business such as Studio 100 has been making profitable commercial productions for children without subsidies for years. The full-length films *Code 37* (Jakob Verbruggen, 2011, based on the TV series of the same name) and *Bingo* (Rudi Van den Bossche, 2013) were shot without support from the film fund. *Frits & Freddy* by Guy Goossens and Marc Punt (2010) got so many people to go the cinema (about 440,000) that it promptly gained a sequel (*Frits en Franky*, Marc Punt, 2013). Both were shot without state support.

Quite a large number of films, however, that have been made *with* support from the film fund are based on equally commercial concepts. Film-makers opt for the well-trying, well-known and easily recognisable and are less interested in the original. Concepts that have already proved successful are taken out and re-used again subsequently.

Recognisability is a two-edged sword. While it may produce a greater number of viewers within the local context, it has a tendency to make a film unrecognisable at an international level.

For the non-Fleming, the apparently accessible house, garden and kitchen nonsense of a comedy such as *Frits en Freddy* is, paradoxically enough, pretty... hermetic. Flemish films that are successful in Flanders are not automatically successful elsewhere in the world. They are tailor-made for Flanders and then only fit a Flemish head.

It is obvious that this prototype of new Flemish film occupies an important place in the statistics of the success of Flemish film. It partakes to a much lesser extent in the debate about the artistic quality of the new generation of Flemish film-makers.

International successes

It would be unjust to assume that Flemish films only enjoy success on the home front. According to the statistics, Flemish films in recent years have more frequently made their mark internationally: in 2012, Flemish films were selected

for international festivals on 1,220 occasions. There they won 226 international prizes or nominations.

The export value of the popular film that primarily aimed at the well-known local biotope is usually limited. For films with a broader, or an artistic relevance there is today a well-developed international festival network that is more alive than ever, and within which a great variety of films circulate from all corners of the world.

That festival circuit is not a new phenomenon. Most major festivals emerged in the period after the Second World War and fitted into the context of a reaction against the dominant power position of the American film industry.

Flemish films have been travelling to festivals for some time now. The classic *Meeuwen sterven in de Haven* [Seagulls Die in the Harbour] by Rik Kuypers, Roland Verhavert and the recently deceased Ivo Michiels was shown in the official selection of the 1956 Cannes Festival. In 1960, it was the turn of Emile Degelin with *Si le vent te fait peur* [If the Wind Frightens You], in 1971 Harry Kümel with his *Malpertuis* [The Legend of Doom House]. The international list of awards of the animation-filmmaker Raoul Servais is, quite simply, impressive.

Hasta la vista

Three handicapped youths escape from their over-protective environment and set off on holiday together to Spain, in search of sexual diversion





The Broken Circle Breakdown

Melodrama crammed with Country & Western music about the passionate love of Didier and Elise and their love-child Maybelle, who is going to die of cancer

Have things changed all that much? Well, yes, the scale of things has increased exponentially. On the one hand, the Flemish AV industry has become more highly competitive; on the other hand, the international network has increased enormously. *Flanders Image*, which is the international instrument for promoting Flemish film, has its hands full for, according to official statistics, the world today boasts over four thousand (!) film festivals.

The gigantic international film circuit generates a constantly greater demand for films, to the extent that it has grown into a genuine alternative screening circuit. With the difficult economic situation in which the classic art house circuit finds itself, the festival circuit has taken over part of the screening function.

For the Flemish art house film, which can only fall back on the cinema-loving public, the results at Flemish cinema box-office are, by definition, modest. A respectable number of them pass through smoothly to the international festival circuit with, in the best case, selections at prestigious fora – and, even better, prestigious prizes at these venues. The full-length films made by the duo Jessica Woodworth and Peter Brosens since 2006 (*Khadak*, 2006; *Altiplano*, 2009; and recently *The Fifth Season*, 2012) are the prototype of these. They only registered a few thousand (*Khadak*) to ten thousand cinema-goers (*Altiplano*) in their own region, but the festival trajectory of these films, on the other hand, is remarkable. Similar success was enjoyed by *The Invader* (2011), the first long-length

film by the AV artist Nicolas Provost as well as the films by the newcomer Gust Van Den Berghe, whose first film *Little Baby Jesus of Flanders* (2010) and second film *Blue Bird* (2011) were selected for the *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* in Cannes. The stylised *Noordzee Texas* (2011) by Bavo Defurne had hardly any viewers in Flanders, but in the specialized festivals abroad it was positively received. *Kid* (2013) by Fien Troch was praised in the press, but in the Belgian box-office it attracted only a few thousand film-goers.

Other more or less recent films did manage to combine a respectable local success with a prestigious festival career: *Aanrijding in Moscou* [Moscow, Belgium] by Christophe Van Rompaey was selected in 2008 in Cannes (*Semaine de la Critique*) where it won best screenplay award. It was the same story for *De he-laasheid der dingen* [The Misfortunates] by Felix Van Groeningen (2009): 454,336 viewers in Flanders and subsequently a prize in Cannes. His latest film, *The Broken Circle Breakdown* (2012), got 393,000 viewers and a number of international film festival awards, including an Oscar nomination in 2014. And both Hans Van Nuffel (*Adem* [Oxygen], 2010) and Nic Balthazar (*Ben X*) have won the Grand Prix des Amériques at the Montreal Festival (in 2010 and 2007, respectively).

It is not always equally easy to predict success. Take the film *Rundskop* (Bull-head, 2011), the debut film of Michael R. Roskam, which scored a surprising success in the Flemish cinemas (469,576 tickets sold). Surprising, because *Rundskop* is an atypical popular film. It is pretty gloomy, the rhythm is sluggish, the stylisation emphatic and the message sombre.

Rundskop met with broad international recognition in the festival circuit: it was shown at the Berlin festival and carried off an Oscar nomination. The festival effect promoted the actor Mathias Schoenaerts into an 'actor to be kept an eye on internationally', and Roskam was contacted for American projects. *Rundskop* led to Schoenaerts being offered a main role in the French film *De rouille et d'os* [Rust and Bone] by the top film director Jacques Audiard, and made his career accelerate at a speed seldom seen before among Flemish actors.

Careers abroad and commercial prospects

Artistic recognition abroad is fine, but does it also have a financial impact on the career of a film? Does it generate means that enable the film-maker to start new projects?

Just as with the statistics regarding festival selections, the figures for sales abroad follow an upward curve. Rather than provide a general overview of present-day trends, I wish to illustrate the present evolution by means of the career abroad of the film *Hasta la vista* by Geoffrey Enthoven, which, within this field, has followed a remarkable path.

In Flanders, *Hasta la vista* attracted about 250,000 viewers. It was selected for more than 30 international festivals, gained about twenty awards and was sold to about 20 European countries and a further handful outside Europe, including – somewhat surprisingly – Hong Kong and Iran. Often, such sales are mainly symbolical. As in the case of Lithuania, where so far the film has enticed only 196 viewers to the cinema. In other countries, the figures were considerably higher: in the Czech Republic, the film mustered 1,500 viewers, in Russia 2,300, in Poland 6,000, in Hungary 6,000, but in Germany 70,000 and in France

140,000. Including a number of smaller countries, the film quickly amassed more viewers abroad than in Flanders. In this instance, foreign exposure acquires a significance that is more than symbolical.

Art and commerce?

If we are to believe the available figures, Flemish Film is becoming more and more successful; previously, mainly inside its own region, but today increasingly in other countries. Recognition abroad does not, however, immediately lead to great riches for Flemish film producers – but it does create openings for new projects.

Does this success also mean that ever more *quality* and *artistically relevant* films are being made and that the region is slowly but surely acquiring its own place in the annals of film history?

If we consider the issue with the necessary pragmatism, I am inclined to answer moderately positively. The quality and the professionalism of the production apparatus in general has increased. More films are being made, so most probably also more films with artistic virtues. The increasing recognition from abroad points that way in all respects, although that foreign assessment sometimes takes a different direction than our own evaluation. Apart from that, we arrive at a number of hardly shocking conclusions: that Flemish film-makers are increasingly focussed on the commercial success of their work, and that only a limited number of them apply themselves to an artistic path. Flanders has some film-makers that do explore that path uncompromisingly and have produced interesting work, or at least interesting initiatives: I am thinking here of such film-makers as Roskam, Troch, Bal, Van Rompaey, Monsaert, Provost, Grimonprez, Woodworth & Brosens, and a few others. Objectively speaking, there is little that connects them: not even the language or the arena in which their films take place. Or must we see precisely that self-willedness, that urge to follow one's own path as being a connecting element?

There is also a whole group of film-makers who have a striking and obstinate affinity for grotesque distortion. Their films, often black comedies, display expressionistic characteristics, but this Flemish expressionism is only one particular variant.

What applies to all of them is that their trajectories are as yet too short for it to be possible to speak of genuine oeuvres. So for the time being it is a question of waiting for film-makers who make not just one or two interesting films but build up a consistent oeuvre, with a distinctive voice, a personal thematic focus and an international relevance - film-makers whose new films are eagerly awaited internationally, as at present is the case for new films by the Dardenne brothers.

At that level, the Flemish Calimero feeling is still appropriate: we admittedly have the local audience that the French-speaking cinema in Belgium does not have, but so far we do not have any convincing reply to the Dardenne brothers. ■

The Invader

The African refugee Amadoe is washed up on a European shore.
He tries to survive in the urban jungle of Brussels

