

22 From Film Policy to Creative Screen Policies

Media Convergence and Film Policy Trends in Flanders

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Since its establishment in the 1960s, selective, culturally motivated film support in Belgium has been a regionalised affair.¹ Originally, however, the initial cultural film support plans were designed within a unitary, Belgian framework. The negotiations for the establishment of a Belgian Film Institute at the beginning of the 1960s, however, failed, due to the growing Flemish emancipation and its striving for cultural autonomy within the Belgian political context.² This resulted in a regionalised organisation of cultural film support in Belgium. In Flanders, a Selection Commission for Cultural Films (*Selectiecommissie voor Culturele Films*) that advised the Minister of Culture on the allocation of support to the applying film projects was established in 1964. The introduction of the Flemish film support mechanism had a large and lasting impact on the production of films in Flanders. Due to the smallness of the Flemish home market, it is very difficult for a professionally made Flemish feature film to be profitable. This has always been a major obstacle for raising the necessary financial means to produce films in Flanders, which means that the role of public support has been crucial for the development of the Flemish film industry. Since 1964, more than three-quarters of all Flemish feature films have received a subsidy. On average, this support counted for more than half of the Flemish share in the total finance plan for the films.

Although the regional level is pre-eminent in Belgian film policy, it should be noted that since 1952, there had been an automatic, economic film support system on the national level. The 'detaxation system', which enabled producers of Belgian films to recover a part of the 'entertainment taxes' on cinema admission tickets, however, was regionalised in 1988. For fifteen years, film production policy on a Belgian level was inexistent. In 2003, the federal government introduced a tax shelter, a tax measure which makes it attractive for private companies to invest part of their profits in audiovisual productions. This has since been a very important indirect support measure for the audiovisual industry in Belgium, and thus also in Flanders. In terms of direct support and other film production policy, however, only the Flemish level is responsible.

When it was established in 1964, the Flemish support system provided production support and occasionally post-production support primarily for feature films and, to a lesser degree, animation and short films, with occasional support for documentaries. From the mid-1970s onwards, film-makers could also apply for screenwriting grants. During the 1980s, in the broader context of a liberalising European audiovisual market, the relevant Ministers of Culture broadened their view on the kind of films they wanted to support. Next to cultural considerations, commercial and economic motives grew more important in the evaluation of support applications (Willems 2016). From an institutional point of view, however, the Flemish film policy framework remained quite stable, with a clear focus on film production support.

This changed in the 1990s. Apart from pre- and post-production support measures that grew more important, the support for 'creative' documentaries became a structural policy element, and, importantly, production support for 'quality' television series was introduced. The 'creative' and 'quality' adjectives referred to certain artistic and/or intellectual ambitions that were expected from these documentaries and television series. These policy measures were introduced as a result of a growing belief in the need to support the culturally significant Flemish audiovisual industry as a whole. This expansion of the film policy scope was symbolised by the change of name of the relevant commission from Selection Commission for Cultural Films to Flemish Audiovisual Selection Commission (*Vlaamse Audiovisuele Selectiecommissie*) in 1994.

In the same vein, in 2002, the coordinating Flemish government service Fund Film in Flanders (*Fonds Film in Vlaanderen*) was replaced by the 'Flanders Audiovisual Fund' (*Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds* or VAF). Flemish film production policy was thus no longer part of the Flemish government's administration, but was instead entrusted to the autonomous film fund VAF, a change which the industry had been asking for since the early beginnings of Flemish film policy.³ Ever since, under the VAF umbrella, Flanders' film policy framework has become more encompassing and more complex. For the film component, separate regulations (grouped under the VAF/Film Fund) have been set up for fiction, animation, documentary and experimental films, each time with subdivisions for screenwriting, development, production and promotion support. This is complemented by other support schemes such as the 'low-budget bonus' (an extra reward for low-budget films, linked to their box-office takings), the 'impulse bonus' (an automatic support system depending on the domestic box office or foreign festival results of a previous project), the 'wildcard' (a subsidy for youngsters who made the most promising graduation films) and the economic support measure Screen Flanders (for productions that spend part of their budget within Flanders). Next to stimulating film projects, the VAF also supports professional training for film-makers, executes studies on the film and audiovisual industry

and supports various non-production-oriented cultural film initiatives in Flanders (e.g. film festivals, film education projects, film publications). With this considerable extension of its film policy component, the VAF has reacted on and actively stimulated the growth and professionalisation of the Flemish film industry. In the period 1964–2002, 167 Flemish feature films were released, whereas in the much shorter period 2003–2015, 155 Flemish feature films were released.

Although the VAF has regularly been praised for its film creation and promotion policy efforts, the institution has found it more difficult to respond to the changed film distribution context. Whereas this crucial aspect of the film industry has traditionally been the least developed policy domain, the distribution challenge has only become more urgent with the rise of digital distribution outlets such as DVD, VOD and the internet. At the same time, the VAF does try to respond to other aspects of the changing media context in which the film industry is embedded. More specifically, the VAF increasingly takes into account media convergence trends by developing policy strategies aimed at non-film media. In this sense, we can speak about a shift from film policy to creative screen policies.

These new, screen-focused policy initiatives are often directly or indirectly connected to the film medium. From its beginnings in the 1990s, the television component has focused on qualitative television series, a sector with close ties to the film industry. Under the VAF, the television support scheme (which has no direct links with Flanders' public broadcaster VRT and thus forms a separate television policy from the Flemish government) has diversified to fiction, documentary and animation television series. This television component has, since 2010, been organised under the VAF/Media Fund, which clearly aims at anticipating the changing media environment, marked by convergence trends. The VAF/Media Fund offers the possibility to apply for support for a cross-media component to television series, thereby focusing on interactive media such as games, websites, social media and applications for smartphones and tablets. The VAF has also expanded its field of action to domains whereby the connection with the film sector is less prominent. This is the case with the VAF/Game Fund, which aims at supporting the creation of applied games and entertainment games. When the ministers of Media and Education in 2012 agreed to set up this new game support programme, they decided not to incorporate it in the government administration, but to encapsulate it in the autonomous VAF. This choice was inspired by the VAF's expertise in project selection and the perceived affinities between the audiovisual and gaming worlds.

This expansion of the film policy scope to other media is in tune with digitalisation processes and media convergence trends that have changed the film industry significantly (De Vinck and Pauwels 2015). Scholars have indicated various changes in the aesthetics, production,

distribution, exhibition and reception of films, thereby pointing at new technological possibilities and challenges, an increasing participatory cinema culture, changes in the broader creative and economic strategies of film and media companies and an overall convergence between film and other media (see, e.g. Jenkins 2006; Aveyard 2009; Brereton 2012; Johnson 2012; Schauer 2012; Sørensen 2012; Finney 2014). In a European context, the role of governmental film policy is particularly relevant in this respect, as film policy forms a crucial cornerstone for the organisation of European film industries.

With this case study, we argue that contemporary film policy should be seen within the broader media environment and media policies, which are characterised by the growth of a conceptual and practical convergence between various (old and new) media, information and communication technologies and creative arts – the emergence of what Hartley (2005) calls the ‘creative industries’ (see also Cunningham 2002; Deuze 2007). This transition process is not new as such, but has remarkably intensified since the turn of the millennium (Tryon 2009). Indeed, the evolution from film policy to broader creative screen policies runs parallel with and is connected to a more general shift in public policy (in Flanders and elsewhere), from a ‘cultural’ to a ‘creative’ industries policy paradigm. The VAF also explicitly presents itself within this paradigm, for example by being part of the Flanders Creative Industries Platform (*Overleg Creatieve Industrieën*). It should be noted here that the notion of creative industries was introduced in 1998 in Britain by the Blair Labour government and that it has since been adopted – to different degrees and meanings – by various other policy actors in Europe and elsewhere (Galloway and Dunlop 2007). As Garnham (2005) argues, the shift from ‘cultural industries’ to ‘creative industries’ is not a mere neutral change of labels, but it involves both theoretical and policy stakes. In this respect, the entrance of the creative industries concept in media policy has most often been interpreted as an expression of neo-liberal ideology in the cultural sphere (Curran 2006; Freedman 2008; Hesmondhalgh 2013). The present case study is an explorative study on the Flemish situation, aimed at mapping the shift from film policy to creative screen policies. More in-depth research is needed to examine how this shift precisely relates to the creative industries concept. Furthermore, to come to a fuller comprehension of the contemporary film and media policy issue, it is most important to investigate how the described shift exactly interacts with concrete film and media production and distribution practices.

While this case study draws attention to the expansion of film policy to broader creative screen policies, we would like to end our argument by highlighting the continuing centrality of film in this context. Indeed, the fact that various new media programmes receive a place within an institution that has a film focus at its roots seems to suggest that film still

takes a crucial place within the broader creative screen policies. This is confirmed when we look at the concrete allocation of funds to the various support schemes managed by the VAF. Whereas the 2014 budget for the VAF/Film Fund was €15,387,000 (with €7,670,000 reserved for fiction film production support), this was €4,007,000 for the VAF/Media Fund and €750,000 for the VAF/Game Fund. The ratio of these budget allocations are also reflected in the VAF's public relations strategies, in which feature films take a leading place. In this light, we can only conclude that although there is a definite and irreversible expansion of film policy to broader creative screen policies, the film policy component, and more specifically the fiction film production policy component, retains its central place within the policy framework, around which new media policies are organised.

Notes

- 1 Following the political organisation of the Belgian federal state in three regions and three communities, we use the term 'regional' in the sense of 'subnational'.
- 2 Flanders is the northern, Dutch-language region of Belgium and has 6.2 million inhabitants. Since the second half of the twentieth century, Flanders has acquired regional autonomy on cultural, political and economic levels.
- 3 The VAF is autonomous in the sense that the fund receives an annual government grant. Within the framework of the management contract with the Flemish Government, the VAF decides without ministerial interference which projects receive support. With the establishment of the VAF, the Flemish government wanted to answer the critiques on the bureaucratic nature of the administrative support process, the political dependency and the lack of transparency, consultation and a clear vision.

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