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The role of film production policy in stimulating a Flemish identity (1964-2002)

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Abstract:

The role of the official film production policy in stimulating a Flemish identity forms the central research question of this study. This research project examines the period that starts in 1964, when a selective and culturally inspired support mechanism for feature films was introduced in Flanders. Subsequently, the support system ran until 2002, when it was structurally renewed. This study makes use of original archival research, policy documents analysis, expert interviews, qualitative press documents analysis, and a quantitative content and qualitative textual analysis of films. The research shows that throughout the course of the second half of the 20th century, there was an evolution in Flemish film policy towards more pluralistic and less essentialist and explicit national discourses, in which national elements, nevertheless, retained an important place.

Keywords:

Film policy; national identity; Flanders

1 Introduction

The highly contested concept of national identity has been declared dead many times. Judging by contemporary public and political debates, however, this concept remains strikingly relevant. In these debates, attention is very often drawn to the role of media and culture in the construction of national identities. This is also the case in Flanders (the northern, Dutch-language region in Belgium), where there is lively discussion of Flemish identity and nation-building. On international and academic levels, there exists a vast and still growing research tradition on nationalism and on the relationship

between national identity construction, media and culture. The study presented in this article is situated within this international research field, and provides an original contribution by focusing on the relationship between feature films, national identity and the government, by means of its film production policy. Due to its history, marked by growing regional autonomy at the cultural, political and economic levels, and a recent revival of nationalist discourse, Flanders forms a highly relevant case in this respect. This led to the following central research question:

[RQ] What was the role of the official film production policy in Flanders between 1964 and 2002 in stimulating a Flemish identity?

This research period is motivated by the fact that in 1964, a selective and culturally inspired support mechanism for feature films was introduced in Flanders. The mechanism was structurally renewed in 2002.

1.1 National identity and film policy

This study regards Flemish identity as a national identity, and joins the constructivist conception of nations and identities (see e.g., Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Smith, 1991). National identities are seen as contingent historical, social and discursive constructions that are permanently (re)produced by individuals and groups. Recent scholarly work in this field has drawn attention to the importance of how national discourses create nationalism, nations and national identities (see e.g., Calhoun, 2007; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). National discourses emphasize the ties between a shared territory and a homogenous group of people that distinguishes itself from other groups in a contrasting way. Other core elements within homogenizing national representation strategies are common language, common culture and a shared past, present and future. Because of the evolution towards a postmodern society and growing globalization, the importance of homogenizing national identities decreased in the course of the second half of the 20th century. Both supra- and subnational identities have grown more important, while other identities cause stronger cultural hybridity. At the same time, however, national identities remain important reference points, and are even reconfirmed in contemporary societies (Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2013; Young, Zuelow, & Sturm, 2007). In this context, Michael Billig's (1995) concept of "banal nationalism"

makes it clear that the presence of national discourses in contemporary Western societies is not always explicit, but often subtle and almost unnoticed.

Representations of the “self” and the “other” are central to the construction of national discourses and identities (Dyer, 2013; Hall, 1996). Therefore, without wanting to adopt a mediacentric approach, the role of the media, as continuous and omnipresent disseminators of representations and meanings, is highly relevant in this context (Mihelj, 2011; Schlesinger, 1991). Mass media contribute to the creation of a collective symbolic system and can facilitate a feeling of national belonging. As such, feature films provide some of the building blocks that can be used to construct and preserve national identities (Hayward, 2005; Higson, 2000; Street, 2009). Unlike most research on the relationship between film and national identity, this study does not focus solely on textual representations. Instead, it goes beyond the textual aspect and emphasizes the underlying struggles for meaning by investigating the mechanisms that construct the representations. Here, the role of film policy enters the discussion. Indeed, various governments are not only involved in the film production process via regulations, but also, particularly in a European context, in the financing and production of films via various support mechanisms (De Vinck, 2009; Finney, 2002; Moran, 1996). Despite the fact that various authors acknowledge and even emphasize the importance of government policy in the relationship between film and national identity, this aspect is rarely studied in depth. Therefore, this study critically scrutinizes the role of film policy in Flanders between 1964 and 2002 in stimulating a Flemish identity. Informed by the existing research on national identity construction in Western Europe and its relationship with media, this study tests the following hypothesis:

Throughout the course of the second half of the 20th century, there was an evolution in Flemish film policy towards more pluralistic and less essentialist and explicit national discourses, but in which national elements, nevertheless, retained an important place.

2 Method

In order to examine the role of film policy in stimulating a Flemish identity, the historical development of Flemish film policy is reconstructed and analyzed by means of various sources. The

evolution of the general, institutional film policy framework was mainly mapped out by analyzing the legislative and public policy documents (in)directly related to film. These included laws, decrees, orders, decisions of the Flemish Community, parliamentary documents and all relevant preparatory documents. These documents were collected via the Belgian official journal and the archives of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, the Belgian Senate and the Flemish Parliament. To examine the film production policy practices (i.e., the concrete film project support decisions), this study had unique access to the hitherto unavailable Flemish government's film department records, which form the primary source for this research. Apart from the comprehensive subsidy dossiers for the supported films, in particular, the meeting reports of the Selection Commission for Cultural Films, the policy body that advised the Minister of Culture in its film support decisions, proved to be very instructive. To advance the systematic and meticulous exploration of these sources, we built up four databases with both quantitative and qualitative data (Jensen, 2012). The budgets database, the subsidies database and the film projects database mainly contained budgetary film policy data and budgetary, production related and film textual data about supported and non-supported, realized and non-realized, majoritarian and minoritarian Flemish film projects. The commission reports database included all of the meeting reports of the film commission and was analyzed through the qualitative software program NVivo by applying a thematic textual analysis, with special attention to how the issue of national identity is articulated (Guest, Macqueen, & Namey, 2011). The large number of policy documents and archival documentation was further complemented by additional archival material (from the personal archives of key actors in the history of Flemish film policy, the records of the public broadcaster VRT and a few other archival institutions), a qualitative press documents analysis (the press materials on film policy were mainly collected via the Belgian Royal Film Archive), nineteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with former policy actors (film commission members, administrative personnel and the relevant ministers) and film-makers (directors and producers), which were analyzed through NVivo, a quantitative content analysis of all Flemish films and a qualitative textual analysis of a selection of films. The combination of original archival research, policy documents analysis, expert interviews and film analysis enabled us to meticulously

reconstruct and scrutinize the history of film production policy in Flanders between 1964 and 2002, thereby focusing on how the issue of national identity was interwoven.

3 Results

3.1 Film policy framework

When studying the relationship between film policy and Flemish identity, the first thing that attracts attention is the fact that the selective, culturally inspired film support mechanisms in Belgium immediately took off as a regionalized affair. This is very remarkable, because the initial cultural film production policy plans were seen within a unitary, Belgian framework, as had been the case when an automatic, economically directed support measure was introduced in Belgium in 1952 (the so-called “detaxation”). The negotiations on the establishment of a Belgian Film Institute at the beginning of the 1960s, however, failed, because of growing Flemish emancipation and its striving for cultural autonomy in the Belgian political context. In line with the evolutions within the Belgian public broadcaster, which was split up into a Dutch-language and a French-language broadcaster in 1960, this resulted in a regionalized organization of cultural film support in Belgium. In Flanders, the Royal Decree of November 10, 1964 installed a support system with a film commission (the Selection Commission for Cultural Films) that advised the Minister of Culture on the allocation of support to the applying film projects. Notwithstanding the persistent and severe criticism of the bureaucratic nature of the administrative support process, the political dependency and the lack of transparency, consultation and a clear vision, this support system would determine the Flemish film policy in the coming decades. There were, however, numerous attempts to renew the film policy system and to establish a film fund, but the political lack of interest and the many government crises, mostly in Belgian community difficulties, prevented a breakthrough. As such, the same Flemish striving for autonomy that, in 1964, established a promising start for Flemish film production support was, in the following years, indirectly responsible for the deadlock in which the development of Flemish film policy was stuck. Some alterations in 1993 meant only a partial improvement in the quintessentially unchanged support system. It was only with the inauguration of the Flemish Audiovisual Fund in

2002 that the autonomous film fund for which the industry was asking (for almost four decades) was finally established.

Through the introduction of the Royal Decree in 1964, “Flemish cinema”, which previously, from an official standpoint, did not differ from “Belgian cinema”, was for the first time defined on a government level. Film projects now had to out themselves as Flemish films to be able to enjoy the support. In other words, a Flemish label was top-down imposed on films. By doing so, Flemish film policy played an important role in the construction of the idea of a “national cinema”. Of course, there were other, already existing factors, such as the press and the film-makers themselves, that helped in naturalizing the process of attributing a Flemish label to films. Through the official defining and organizing of a Flemish cinema, however, Flemish film policy from the 1960s on (parallel with the political-institutional developments in Belgium) accelerated the structural division of the Belgian film culture into Flemish and francophone film industries. As such, Flemish film policy was significant in the creation of a common understanding of the “Flemishness” of a certain group of films.

The introduction of the Flemish film support mechanism had a big and persistent impact in terms of the concrete production of films in Flanders. Between 1964 and 2002, more than three-quarters of all Flemish feature films received a government subsidy. On average, this support counted for more than half of (the Flemish share in) the total finance plan for the supported films. Flemish film policy thus had considerable decision-making power over what kinds of films were (not) produced in Flanders. This makes the question of what exactly the concrete film production policy looked like highly relevant. Without wanting to denigrate the complexity and inherent ambiguity of the film policy process, some general tendencies can be determined, with an important turning point at the beginning of the 1980s.

3.2 Film policy practices

In line with the Flemish emancipatory context in which the support mechanism was introduced in 1964, Flemish film policy largely started with the intention of culturally uplifting the Flemish

audience. Just as the Flemish public broadcaster had (Dhoest, 2003; Van den Bulck, 2001), the cultural quality and the Flemish character of the films held a central place in the policy process of the 1960s and 1970s, which aimed at constructing a recognizable Flemish cinema. The policy actors wanted to stimulate art films in order to expand Flemish high culture. Also, films with a clear Flemish character because of their setting in the past or their references to topical issues in Flemish society were preferred. The Dutch language was seen as an essential component of the Flemish cultural identity, while films were seen as a means of promoting standard language. The policy actors also wanted to advance the Flemish character of the films by means of the Flemish background of the film workers. Co-productions were economically motivated; also cultural and ideological factors were of importance here. Co-operation with the Netherlands fit into a Greater Netherlands ideology and ensured the maintenance of the Dutch language. Co-operations with the French Community of Belgium, on the other hand, were more difficult because of a cultural autonomy reflex. Moreover, such co-operation could lead to the perception of a “Belgian cinema” instead of the desired “Flemish cinema”.

Notwithstanding these policy intentions, Flemish film support practices were, of course, always dependent on industrial input. Because of the circumstances surrounding Flemish production, historical and other expensive films were rarely made. Owing to a lack of initiatives from the film industry, policy actors were also restricted in their valorizing of a positive attitude towards children’s films and films that focused on existing forms of high culture. At the same time, the film policy itself was often nuanced in its emphasis on the Flemish character of the films. In the 1960s, the policy towards non-Dutch-language films was, for example, more open as part of the pursuit of believable and high-quality films. Also, deviations from the Dutch standard language were tolerated for the sake of realism and recognizability of the films. The biggest ambiguity can be found in the policy towards adaptations of Flemish literary classics with a historical setting (Willems, 2015). Contrary to common assumptions, the film commission was very critical towards the folkloristic and nostalgic aspects that often occurred in these films. Apart from pragmatic, commercial and cultural factors, the impact of

the relevant ministers, Flemish public television and certain producers should also be taken into consideration when examining why these films generally received the largest amounts of support.

Although they had always been present to a certain degree, commercial and economic motives grew significantly more important in Flemish film policy at the beginning of the 1980s. This evolution was advanced by the transition from an uninterrupted series of Christian-Democratic ministers of Culture to Liberal ministers of Culture in 1981. At the same time, the evolution was also part of broader tendencies within the European audio-visual sector, such as deregulation, privatization, internationalization and a generally growing economic perspective. This evolution had strong consequences for the concrete film policy practices. This was probably most evident in the growing support for certain forms of popular culture, such as films that had their roots in popular television comedy, and in stimulating the growing internationalization of films' financial and production structures. Connected to this, Flemish film policy became more open toward using other languages and adaptations of non-Flemish literary works, particularly in the second half of the 1980s. Also, the ideological objections towards co-operation with the French Community of Belgium largely disappeared. The new market-led economic perspective was thus reflected in the policy intentions, discourses and goals, which caused the cultural and Flemish nationally inspired motivation to decrease.

At the same time, however, various film policy actors were often displeased that support was given to increase popular culture (in comedies, entertainment films and children's films), the use of popular, non-standard language, and films that were only considered Flemish in terms of production and financial structure (and not in terms of recognizable textual marks). Cultural-educative and Flemish ideological motivations had certainly not disappeared. During the 1990s, national elements were even reconfirmed in the policy process. Indeed, precisely because of the internationalization and commercial tendencies (which were stimulated by the policy actors), the concern about the singularity of Flemish cinema grew. This caused a renewed emphasis on the Flemish character of the films by means of their historical or contemporary themes or by adapting a Flemish (classic) literary work.

Furthermore, there was continuing concern about the Flemish background of the film workers and (from the 1990s on) about the use of Dutch language in films.

The renewed concern about the recognizability and the Flemish character of the films, however, also arose from market-led considerations. In the domestic market, the policy actors saw the Flemish character of the films as a means to appeal to the Flemish audience, thus creating a commercially successful Flemish cinema. On an international level, they wanted to distinguish Flemish cinema by means of its Flemish character. Moreover, this was situated within a broader political-economic strategy to internationally profile Flanders as a strong brand. The motivation for the emphasis on the Flemish character of the films, thus, partly shifted from a cultural educative nation-building ideal to a more economic perspective, but the final goal of constructing a body of cinema with a clear Flemish identity remained largely unchanged.

4 Conclusion and discussion

It may be clear that film production policy in Flanders between 1964 and 2002 was, in the first place, an ambiguous process. This was not only caused by the tensions between the policy goals and the practical film industrial circumstances, but also by the internal film policy. There was a continuous tension between the minister's general preconceived lines of policy, the role of the administration, the advisory policy of the (frequently divided) film commission and the final ministerial decisions. Nevertheless, with respect to the Flemish film policy's goal of stimulating a Flemish identity, this study points at a general evolution from rather homogenous to more pluralistic and less essentialist and explicit national discourses. This finding confirms the suggestion by other authors (see e.g., Druick, 2007; Higson, 2011) that film policy is directed more and more at stimulating cultural diversity, instead of creating a unified homogenous national identity. Moreover, the growing market-economic perspective in film policy has led the cultural and national elements to decrease in importance. At the same time, corresponding with the hypothesis, a certain homogenizing national discourse remains present, and the creation of a feeling of national belonging is still an important element of recent Flemish film policy, just as was the case in territories as diverse as Denmark,

Australia and Russia (see Hjort, 2000; Parker & Parenta, 2008; Van Gorp, 2011). In this context, the presence of national elements in films and film policy is not always a conscious and intentional strategy by the policy makers. They can also be an expression of a common understanding in which national elements play an important role, and which makes their visibility more difficult. Furthermore, new or growing policy motivations, such as internationalization and market economic factors, have not replaced older cultural and nationalist arguments; rather, they have been added to them (described by Parker and Parenta [2008, p. 610] as the “layering” of policy paradigms) and hence, created a dynamic field of tension between these different policy motivations.

This study is, for a large part, based on official film policy documentation, implying that the official policy discourse comes mainly to the fore. We have tried to compensate for this by conducting interviews and consulting a variety of other sources. More attention to the unofficial policy actors, however, could further reveal the complexities of the policy process. Also, some other constraints in our research focus determined the presented image of the relationship between film policy and Flemish identity. This study focused on feature films, leaving other film policy domains open, which has also been true for the developments in Flemish film policy since 2002. Since the inauguration of the Flemish Audiovisual Fund, a new film policy and production dynamic has been combined with a previously unseen euphoria in the public discourse on Flemish cinema. The question arises as to how the relationship between films, policy and Flemish identity has evolved in this context. Furthermore, in-depth comparative research is strongly recommended in order to put the evolutions in Flemish film policy into a broader perspective. The databases built up for this study provide various possibilities for such systematic comparative research.

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