Cinema, the Government, and the Popular:

Popular and Commercial Aspects of Cultural Film Support in Flanders (Belgium)

BY
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Whether cultural state subsidies should (also) go to popular and profitable cultural products is a recurring question in art and culture debates. This is certainly the case when it comes to cinema, a cultural sector in which the industrial and commercial aspects are strongly pronounced. The cultural-commercial discussion takes on a particular character in small film industries such as that of Flanders, the Dutch-language, northern region of Belgium,¹ where approximately 80% of film production is supported by a cultural and selective state program. Making movies is an extremely costly affair, which in combination with the small Flemish market ensures that even the most popular

Abstract: This article examines the evolution of both the popular and the commercial aspects within the official film production support in Flanders between 1964 and 2002. The article sheds light on the policy motivations underlying the cultural-commercial tension, which was a continuous issue of conflict for the Flemish film policy actors.

Keywords: Belgian cinema, commercial cinema, film support, Flemish cinema, popular cinema

Flemish films are rarely profitable. Based on the rationale that the government should intervene where the market fails, government support for popular and commercially motivated films in Flanders is thus legitimate. From a cultural imperialist standpoint, it is argued that “our own” popular film culture should exist as an alternative to popular foreign (i.e., Hollywood) films. It is also

frequently argued that popular domestic commercially oriented films are needed as a “solid base” to lead audiences to other more artistically inspired domestic films. Nevertheless, it remains a difficult exercise in which quality criteria and the intrinsic value of the supported films continue to take an important place in the discussion. As is true elsewhere in Europe, finding the balance between a

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cultural and an economic approach to the film medium—the so-called “cultural-commercial tension”—is one of the most important themes in Flanders’ official film production policy. The time period examined in this study starts in 1964, when a selective film support system was introduced in Flanders: a film commission (the Selection Commission for Cultural Films) advising the minister of culture on the allocation of support to film projects was installed. This support took the form of interest-free loans that had to be repaid to the ministry. However, since most film productions were either not able, or only partially able, to repay these loans, the government support could be seen as a subsidy. In 2002, the support system was structurally renewed with the installation of the Flanders Audiovisual Fund, which marks the end of this study’s time period.

Cultural Film Policy

From the outset of the Flemish film support system, a cultural approach held a central role. In addition to rules on the Belgian nationality and the Dutch language of film projects, the support system stipulated that the supported films needed to be “cultural films.” As such, according to the policy actors, the “success” of a film was determined first by the film’s intrinsic textual qualities and its critical reception. Until the beginning of the 1980s, artistic and intellectual qualities were deemed more important than commercial aspects and large attendance figures. For example, in a policy document in 1966, the minister of culture’s cabinet asked the film commission to “subsidize only those film projects that are culturally the most responsible and that are most likely to become an artistic success” (Selection Commission for Cultural Films [hereafter SCF], 4 Apr. 1966).² In the same

vein, on the grounds that the available credit “would be better reserved for productions with higher cultural aspirations” (SCF, 6 Dec. 1968), the film commission gave a negative recommendation for supporting a film adaptation (*Tintin and the Temple of the Sun*, 1969) of a Tintin comic.

The strictly cultural imperative was the strongest during the early years of Flemish film policy. This should be framed within the efforts to gain credits for the newly installed state aid to films. Undoubtedly, this support was not yet as obvious as it was for other cultural expressions with a longer tradition. In the quest for recognition of the film medium, an artistic-cultural legitimation was paramount. The “Flemish cinema” that the policy actors wanted to construct had to have a different outlook than the Antwerp-based popular comedies that dominated Flemish film production in the 1950s (Fowler; Vande Winkel and Van Engeland). Films that focused primarily on entertainment were excluded from state support. Specifically, the film policy was directed toward placing Flemish cinema in the area of high culture rather than popular culture.

Until the beginning of the 1980s, the dominant cultural position did not mean that commercial and audience-oriented arguments were completely irrelevant in the policy process. Indeed, since the introduction of the support system in 1964 and until 1981, all of the ministers of culture were Christian Democratic politicians of the Christian People’s Party (*Christelijke Volkspartij* [CVP]). Within the vision of the CVP, the democratization of culture took an important place (De Pauw). In line with this, subsidized culture was expected to exercise a social function, particularly in terms of the permanent education of the Flemish people. Indeed, the CVP saw culture as an essential part of human self-realization. Although certain types of more elitist culture were highly appreciated, the democratic and social orientation of culture also meant that attracting the widest possible audience was extremely important. The minister’s film commission shared this political concern. From the very beginning, and particularly since the 1970s, the film commission held numerous discussions that moved

back and forth across the cultural-commercial divide.

This is illustrated by the commission’s policy toward *Pallierter* (1975), a rural film by Roland Verhavert, based on a famous novel by the Flemish writer Felix Timmermans. After a difficult subsidization process, the commission expressed its disappointment in the final film, which was deemed too folkloric (Willems, “Film Policy”). Consequently, the commission gave a negative recommendation for the international promotion of the film. Nonetheless, at the same time, the commission also pointed to the possibility of attracting a considerable audience: “Due to the idyllic nature of the film and the way the Flemish landscape is depicted, it is not impossible that the film may be welcomed by a wide audience” (SCF, 18 Nov. 1975). With more than 250,000 visitors in Belgium, *Pallierter* indeed proved to be a successful film by Belgian standards. Faced with the popularity of the film, the commission abandoned its objections to *Pallierter*, subsequently selecting it for various film festivals, and even recommended making an English post-synchronization to stimulate a wider international distribution (SCF, 13 Feb. 1976).

Nonetheless, the audience-oriented motivations were never unconditional. The film commission always demanded certain quality requirements for the films to be supported. In an ideal scenario, a film was, of course, both an artistic and a commercial success. The fact that this possibility even existed was proven by the Belgian-Dutch co-production *Mira* (1971). Adapted into a screenplay by Hugo Claus and made into a film by Fons Rademakers, *Mira* was based on a novel by the celebrated Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels. The film is set at the beginning of the twentieth century and deals with a Flemish village opposing the construction of a new bridge. With 642,000 cinema tickets sold, *Mira* was the biggest domestic hit ever in Belgium (until the end of the 1980s) and it was a commercial success in the Netherlands as well (Martens). In addition, the film was also selected for the official competition at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. As a result, the policy actors appreciated *Mira* tremendously. The

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film led to an increase in the subsidy budget for films and an intensification of the Belgian-Dutch coproduction policy. *Mira* also had an impact on the cultural-commercial tension in Flemish film policy. The film commission pushed *Mira* forward as a role model for the films to be supported, incorporating strong qualitative and commercial aspects (SCF, 13 Jan. 1972).

This did not mean, however, that the film commission was unambiguously in favor of projects in line with the “*Mira* formula” (a historical rural film based on a famous literary work). Confronted with a film project based upon another novel by Stijn Streuvels, the film commission stated that the success of *Mira* “may not be a reason to adapt Streuvels again” (SCF, 10 Jun. 1971). Although, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Jean Van Raemdonck (from the production company *Kunst en Kino*) managed to produce several other films in the same vein as *Mira*, the subsidization process for these films was always extremely difficult (Willems “The Producer”). While this was due primarily to the films’ folkloric character, the film commission was also opposed to another audience-pleasing aspect of these films: the visualization of nudity and sex. To some extent, this was accepted, as long as it was not “too much” or “too vulgar” and the commission considered the depicted sex as functional, such as for *Mira* or *Will-o’ the Wisp* (*Het Dwaallicht*, 1973). For *The Conscript* (*De loteling*, 1973), in which a rape scene and a scene with a prostitute (both including frontal

female nudity) were added to a prudish story by the nineteenth-century writer Hendrik Conscience, the graphic scenes were not considered to be justified. The film commission regretted that director Roland Verhavert yielded to “the fashionable aspect of sex films, showing sex for the reason of sex” (SCF, 21 Dec. 1973). Although subsidized cinema as a creative medium was allowed to be less prudish than public television, the policy actors had a moral reflex, which put them in a rather reserved and paternalist position toward this “fashionable” commercial phenomenon of sex on screen.

In addition, Fons Rademakers and Hugo Claus, the director and screenwriter, respectively, of *Mira*, attempted to continue the success of this film by proposing a film adaptation of Louis Couperus’ 1900 novel, *The Hidden Force* (*De Stille Kracht*). Again, the commission was not overly enthusi-

astic, but the applicants themselves soon abandoned the project anyway. This was done in favor of the explicitly commercially conceived *Because of the Cats* (*Niet voor de Poesen*, 1973; see Figure 1). Based on British crime writer Nicolas Freeling’s novel by the same name, the film told a story about derailing Amsterdam youth gangs and it was punctuated by scenes of violence and sex. Despite an overtly negative commission recommendation, largely on moral grounds, Minister of Culture Frans van Mechelen (CVP) decided to support the minority coproduction with the Netherlands for six million Belgian francs. Although this was partly due to the lobbying capacities of Rademakers, the ministerial decision was motivated primarily by *Mira*’s popular success. The confidence of the minister in the tandem Rademakers-Claus did indeed lead to a commercial success (mainly

Figure 1. Theatrical poster for *Because of the Cats* (1973, Dir. Fons Rademakers). Collection Ronnie Pede.

in the Netherlands and, with an English version, to some extent abroad as well), but unlike *Mira*, *Because of the Cats* attracted very little critical acclaim. Moreover, the film commission was extremely negative about the film, thereby denouncing the ministerial deviation of its recommendation. *Because of the Cats* thus illustrates how the cultural-commercial tension could be interwoven with the tensions between the various policy actors, making it sometimes difficult to draw conclusions about the cultural or commercial character of the film policy.

Growing Market Economic Vision

In 1978, the composition of the film commission was changed for the first time since its installment in 1964. Although the primacy of the cultural approach was continued, the commission's replacement was accompanied by a somewhat larger commercial concern. When the animation filmmaker Raoul Servais, shortly after winning the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival for his short film *Harpya* (1979), proposed the feature film project *Taxandria* (which was only completed in 1994), the film commission, for example, asked whether this project, "just like his previous short films, would not be too intellectual, i.e., will the film have success with a larger audience?" (SCF, 9 Nov. 1979). For the first film commission, the international artistic reputation of Servais was already sufficient to support him almost unconditionally. Ultimately, although this argument was also decisive for the second commission, it represented a greater level of concern regarding the audience appeal of the film projects. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the cultural approach was still dominant. For example, after watching the action-loaded film *The Beast* (*Het Beest*, 1982), the film commission expressed its reservations against the commercial nature of the film and noted a preference for "more alternative and culturally motivated productions, aimed at a more critical and specialized audience" (SCF, 23 Apr. 1982).

Explicitly excluding commercially motivated films, this particular formulation was also meant as a signal to the newly appointed Liberal Minister of Culture, Karel Poma (Party for Freedom

and Progress, *Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang* [PVV]), who held a much more commercial vision on the government's film policy. After years of Christian Democratic dominance, the Ministry of Culture was indeed handed over to the Liberals in 1981. Since Patrick Dewael (PVV) succeeded Karel Poma in 1985 as minister of culture, the department remained under Liberal rule until 1992. Just as in the wider cultural policy, some significant changes in the film policy accompanied the transition from Christian Democratic to Liberal ministers of culture, mainly with respect to the growing importance of a number of economic market principles. The financing of films and the government's share therein were both reviewed. Accompanied by an intensification of international coproductions, and thus of foreign investments in the Flemish film industry, under Minister Poma a much greater focus was put on attracting private funds for Flemish film productions.

Nonetheless, the new policy of the Liberal ministers was not immune to criticism. Several film projects received a subsidy, but were subsequently delayed or ultimately cancelled because they could not find the necessary private funds (Rosseels; Temmerman "Film-budget"). This was especially the case for projects with cultural rather than commercial aspirations. Films that were more successful in finding private funds frequently belonged to more popular film genres. This was exactly Minister Poma's intention, as he supported the idea that if a project "found one or more co-producers and a similar amount of sponsorship, the film would certainly satisfy the conditions to become a commercial success. Because that's the goal, a film has to be watched by an audience" (Poma, "Note on Film Policy").

While Minister Poma undoubtedly caused a break with the hitherto dominant cultural film-policy approach and put significantly more emphasis on the

Figure 2. Theatrical poster for *Cruel Horizon* (1989, Dir. Guy Lee Thys). Collection Ronnie Pede.

commercial success of the films, this new commercial approach led to many protests. The film industry was joined in its criticism by the film commission, which spoke about “the degradation policy of Minister Poma with regards to the creative film practice” in the newspaper *Vooruit* (Temmerman “Filmkommissie”). Guy Lee Thys’ film *Cruel Horizon* (finally realized in 1989; see Figure 2) is an excellent example of such a case. *Cruel Horizon* is about a female Vietnamese refugee who was kidnapped by pirates whose motive was to sell her as a sex slave. In its negative support recommendation for a screenplay subsidy, the film commission denounced the lure for sensation in this project, which contained, according to the commission, “all of the elements of an exploitation movie” and did not fit into the task of the Ministry of Culture (SCF, 3 Sep. 1982). Although this was another clear warning to Minister Poma, since Guy Lee Thys’ previous film was a considerable popular success, the minister decided to put aside the commission’s recommendation and allocate the grant.

The relationship between the minister and the film commission continued to deteriorate. In February 1983, the dispute escalated into a strike by the film commission. As a result, Minister Poma decided to fire the film commission and install a new commission that was more favorable to his film-policy vision. The ultimate power of the minister, and thus the relativity of the status of the film commission, thus became painfully clear. Despite the reputational damage, in the end, Poma (in an interview with the author) found that the dispute with the film commission had mainly positive effects: “If they strike, we abolish them. And we appoint a new commission that would take the new criteria into account. Another policy is introduced. From now on, one should also think commercially.” Poma succeeded in his aim, which is illustrated by a policy note from René Adams, the new president of the film commission, in which he stated: “The larger audience needs to put aside its prejudices against Flemish films. Films that are aimed at a large audience should be able to acquire support.”

The new policy soon led to results. At the very first meeting of the new film

commission, *Rough Diamonds* (*Zware Jongens*, 1984; see Figure 3), the first feature film with the comic duo Gaston and Leo in the lead, applied for support. The enormous popularity that Gaston and Leo had built up through their theatrical shows and television appearances was decisive for the film commission’s positive recommendation for this “popular and commercially conceived film project.” This was despite the fact that the commission’s judgement of the project’s quality was negative: “The screenplay does not excel in originality and visual film humor and does not meet professional standards” (SCF, 28 Jun. 1983). With such a quality judgment, a project would never have been able to receive positive support recommendations under the previous film commissions. However, the new policy took the expected public acclaim into consideration, an expectation that was fulfilled since *Rough Diamonds* attracted 365,000 visitors.

The success of *Rough Diamonds* caused a revival of popular comedies

that had disappeared from the Flemish film landscape since the early sixties. During that time, the rise of the television medium was partly responsible for this decline. In comparison, television in the 1980s contributed to the popularity of the comedies. In addition to the successors of the Gaston and Leo film *Rough Diamonds*, *Scaremonger Cops* (*De Paniekzaaiers*, 1986) and *Gaston and Leo in Hong Kong* (1988), there were also the hugely popular comedian Urbanus, *Hector* (1987) and *Koko Flanel* (1989), and the television series spinoff, *The Colleagues* (*De Kollega’s Maken de Brug*, 1988). The tradition of films built around a television comedian continued in the 1990s with *Seventh Heaven* (*De Zevende Hemel*, 1992) and the box office hits *Max* (1994) and *Oesje!* (1997).

Limits to the Commercialization

The Liberal ministers were the greatest supporters of these popular comedies.

Figure 3. Theatrical poster for *Rough Diamonds* (1984, Dir. Robbe De Hert). Collection Ronnie Pede.

Minister Poma, for example, increased the recommended grant of 5 million Belgian francs for *Rough Diamonds* to 6.5 million Belgian francs. After the flexible support process for *Rough Diamonds*, the film commission was more nuanced toward such projects. For the most part, the commission found the quality standards of the popular comedies insufficient and thus frequently tied quality assurances to positive support recommendations. *Scaremonger Cops*, for example, promised to incorporate the quality demands, but according to the film commission this was not visible in the end result, which they called a “failure,” despite selling 500,000 cinema tickets. “Because of this experience, the commission makes explicit reservations concerning cultural support for future similar productions” (SCF, 24 Jan. 1986). Therefore, although the cultural approach did not disappear, the “commercialization” of the Flemish film policy had its limits.

Because the film commission was aware of the economic importance of

such productions for the development of a Flemish film industry, the commission still gave positive support recommendations to subsequent popular comedy projects. Indeed, the different policy actors agreed on this aspect. Minister Dewael defended the support for the popular comedies by emphasizing that: “The government does not need to despise such films. They provide pleasure to a large part of the Flemish cinema audience, the graduates of our film schools get the chance to gain experience and the films boost the confidence of the private industry in Flemish cinema” (103, author’s translation). This quote illustrates a shift in the opinion of what kind of cultural products should be supported by the government. Hitherto, the intrinsic artistic and cultural value of the films took a central place, but now the entertainment value of the films, or the degree to which the audience enjoys a feeling of “pleasure” when watching a film, can be decisive. Next, we find a largely economic motivation in Dewael’s argument to support popular comedies.

By attracting more private funds, which due to its small domestic market has always been the main struggle for Belgian cinema, the goal was to achieve a certain type of commercial film production that would no longer need state subsidies. This strategy seemed to pay off when the second Urbanus film, *Koko Flanel*, was produced without applying for subsidies. With 1,082,000 cinema tickets sold, *Koko Flanel* broke the domestic box office record in Belgium and was a tremendous success, but it also turned out to be an isolated case. Thanks to some private sponsors, a low budget, and clever marketing by director/distributor Jan Verheyen, *Boys* (1992; see Figure 4) was also able to manage without government aid. However, the flop of the third Urbanus film, *Seventh Heaven*, brought nonsubsidized comedy film production to a halt in Flanders, at least until *Frits and Freddy* hit the screens in 2010.

Alongside the popular comedies, other film projects were labeled “commercial” as well. In this context, commercial referred not only to the trade and economic aspects of the films, but also to the content, which was directed toward attracting the widest possible audience without significant regard for quality and artistic standards. More specifically, these films were attractive to audiences due to their depictions of action, violence, and sex. Just as before the 1980s, the film commission took a very negative, moralistically inspired, stance toward these films. Nonetheless, when the commission found it justified, it was certainly not forbidden to show sex and violence. However, it might not be gratuitous, perverse, or too explicit, or have a sensationalist or a commercial motivation. Although, over the years, there was a shift in what was considered too explicit, the conviction always remained that sensationalist projects did not fit within the cultural mission of the film policy.

Indeed, the new film commission opinion on the previously mentioned project, *Cruel Horizon*, corresponded completely with that of the previous commission: “It is a purely commercial ‘exploitation movie’ without artistic value. The subject of the boat refugees is only a pretext for seasoning a sentimental story with sex, violence, and horror.

Figure 4. Theatrical poster for *Boys* (1991, Dir. Jan Verheyen). Collection Ronnie Pedé.

The commission believes that this project does not fit into the subsidizing task of the Ministry of Culture" (SCF, 28 Jun. 1983). After a reworking of the project, some commission members changed their opinion, not so much because of the content of the film, but rather because they hoped that this project "would contribute to Flemish film activities in an international coproduction context" (SCF, 30 Sep. 1983). *Cruel Horizon* was indeed conceived as an international coproduction with the United States and Manila, and thus fell within the policy priorities of the Liberal minister of culture. This illustrates the complexity of the policy developments in the 1980s. Although there was indeed a commercialization, in this case, the commercialization was stimulated by the increased focus on internationalization, instead of by a substantially changed attitude toward the content of the film.

A Two-Track Policy Approach?

From the 1980s on, economic and commercial motives came increasingly to the fore (see also Biltereyst); however, the previously dominant cultural approach remained a major concern for the policy actors. During the 1980s, a cultural-commercial two-track policy was consequently installed. In the 1990s, this two-track policy was continued, whereby the cultural and commercial aspects received a more or less equal place. This was additionally reflected in the establishment in 1993 of the so-called "fund Film in Flanders," in which the previously separated film funds from the Ministry of Culture and the film funds from the Ministry of Economy were merged. Due to the policy reforms, the Selection Commission for Cultural Films was renamed as the "Flemish Audiovisual Selection Commission." The disappearance of the word "cultural" from the naming of the film commission hereby refers to the broader vision of the film policy.

Nonetheless, when the Christian Democrat Hugo Weckx (CVP) was appointed as Minister of Culture in 1992, after eleven years of Liberal ministers of culture, he emphasized that he wanted to go against the commercialization trend. He argued that the cultural approach remained the core of the government's

task and that he wanted to prioritize those initiatives that were difficult to finance commercially (Weckx). However, for Minister Weckx, the size of the audience also continued to be an important criterion for measuring the success of the film policy. This was due partly to the context: the policy actors were faced with a changing audiovisual production landscape marked by increasingly market-oriented logic. In particular, the arrival of commercial television in 1989 played a significant role in this context (hitherto, PSB had a television monopoly in Flanders). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that several projects emerged that focused primarily on reaching a large audience through entertainment films that had few artistic or intellectual pretensions. Important figures in this respect were Jan Verheyen and Marc Punt, who founded Independent Films, a successful distribution company, in 1985. In the 1990s, they also started Independent Productions, which resulted in films such as *Boys* (1992), *Ad Fundum* (1993), and *She Good Fighter* (1995).

Although the film commission was not extremely pleased with these films from a cultural perspective, the commission was sensitive to the public appeal of such productions. Jan Verheyen's film debut, the youth comedy *Boys*, was unanimously rejected because of its low-quality standards. The commission found that "wanting to reach the widest possible audience at all costs, indifferent as to which means, is only the responsibility of the filmmaker and should not be done with public money" (Flemish Audiovisual Selection Commission [FAS], 30 Jan. 1991). The film commission initially held the same opinion toward the next film project of Independent Productions, *Ad Fundum*, about a student baptism that got out of control. However, after the commercial success of *Boys* (234,000 tickets sold), the majority of the commission members overcame their objections, because "this is a purely Flemish production that can reach a wide audience" (FAS, 10 Dec. 1992). Conversely, for Jan Verheyen's non-realized film project around the popular television series *F.C. The Champions* (*F.C. De Kampioenen*), the quality arguments for the film were

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decisive for the negative support recommendation (FAS, 22 Feb. 1994).

The frequently contradictory opinions on film as both a cultural and a commercial product provided Flemish film policy with an unclear and often confusing mandate. In this respect, the film policy domain moved from the Cultural Department to the Media Department, which was encapsulated within the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture. However, after the installment of a new government in 1995, the Media Department was put under the responsibility of the Christian Democrat Eric Van Rompuy (CVP), whose official title was then Minister of Economy, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Agriculture and Media. This frequently led to the interpretation that the film domain had moved from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Economy. However, this was not the case, since as Minister of Media, Van Rompuy was responsible for film policy; nonetheless, the film-policy domain was indeed fully withdrawn from the Ministry of Culture for the first time, which was felt in the policy discourse.

In his policy letter "Film in Flanders," Minister Van Rompuy emphasized that films "should be accessible for a large audience" (37). The minister further remarked that the public success of the commercial television broadcaster *Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij* (VTM) could serve as an example. The market-oriented film policy approach of Van Rompuy can be seen as part of a broader shift in the vision of film as a cultural sector toward film as part of the wider "creative industries," as was also the case in the Netherlands and the UK (Hemels; van de Kamp; Garnham; Hartley). Even though a study commissioned by the Flemish government on the economic impact of film in Flanders

concluded that the cultural imperative should serve a central role in the government's film policy (Peeters et al.), Van Rompuy's successor, Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD), also continued in the same manner. Significant criticism emerged on the predominantly commercial-economic film-policy approach. In an open letter in the newspaper *De Morgen*, a group of filmmakers (De Vlaamse auteurs) argued that: "It seems that the new audiovisual arts policy departs from an economic-mathematical logic ... Audio-visual auteur projects may not be seen in an economic framework."

The film commission joined the fierce criticism of the market-oriented approach that characterized Van Rompuy's policy letter (FAS, 18 Nov. 1998). At the same time, the commission was expected to translate the ministerial vision into the concrete film support policy, and certain audience-related concerns were present as well. This concern was again motivated by an underlying economic concern for stimulating the Flemish film industry. As an example, the far-reaching importance of the economic aspect of film production was proven by Jan Verheyen's *Team Spirit* (2000), a Flemish (same-language) remake of a Dutch film, *All Stars* (1997). The film commission was extremely negative about this project: "It's a meaningless story full of stereotypes, folkloric situations, and characters, without any depth or psychological evolution" (FAS, 22 Sep. 1998). Nonetheless, *Team Spirit* received a positive support recommendation because the commission saw this production as a merely economic project, "which mainly contributes to the employment and the continuity of the production company" (FAS, 24 Nov. 1998). Moreover, the commission also found that this film fit well with the market-oriented policy letter of Minister Van Rompuy. A similar argument, with an emphasis on the potential audience reach and the positive economic impact on the Flemish film industry, can be found for several other films that were supported around the turn of the century.

Despite, or perhaps because of, loud criticism of the primarily economically inspired approach to film policy, the relevant ministers frequently used terms such as "culture" and "Flemish iden-

tity" in their discourses to legitimize the film policy. For example, Minister Van Mechelen made a plea for effective development of the Flemish audiovisual sector "to promote the Flemish cultural identity and its international reputation" (Van Mechelen), a slogan that was also taken over in various policy documents by his successor, Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit, a Social Liberal party), in 2001. Although the same policy goals were present in the film policy discourse of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a change and a more economic interpretation of these objectives since the 1980s.

The concern about the "Flemish cultural identity" of the films was less motivated by the previous intention to create a strong Flemish identity in society. Through the Flemish character and recognizability of the films, the policy actors wanted to first connect to the reality of the Flemish audience, in order to, as Minister Anciaux put it in the newspaper *De Morgen* (Temmerman "'Minister van Cinema'"), "guide our own audience to the Flemish films," and thus create a commercially successful Flemish cinema. The objective of the international reputation of the Flemish cultural identity had a twofold economic motivation. On the one hand, the focus on foreign countries was seen as a strategy to solve the dilemma of the small domestic market and thus create a stronger film industry. On the other hand, the Flemish cinema was additionally seen to be at the service of the international reputation of Flanders, as a creative and prosperous region. Cinema, and more generally the audiovisual sector, was seen as a tool for nation-branding and to promote Flanders as a strong brand. The efforts of the Flemish film policy in this area were part of a broader strategy to stimulate the Flemish economy by generating an influx of foreign tourist and industrial activities.

Clearly, these developments did not reduce the film sector's criticism on the economic market approach of the film policy. In 2001, the government responded, at least in a symbolical way, to this criticism by retransferring the film-policy domain from the Department of Media to the Department of Culture. Although the strong economic approach was indeed somewhat lessened, this did not mean a complete turnover of Flem-

ish film policy. Many of the economic policy elements were retained and there was still a cultural-commercial two-track policy approach. While establishing a truly dual support policy—with a separate support mechanism for more commercially oriented films and for more artistic films, as was the case in Denmark—was sometimes suggested, such a system was never implemented (Willems "Filmbeleid"). Although on paper there was only one support mechanism for all films, in practice there were two types of policy processes, which frequently led to confusion and dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the cultural dimension, in the form of the intrinsic artistic and intellectual qualities of the films, initially dominated Flemish film-production policy, audience-related and commercial-economic motivations existed right from the start of the film-support mechanism in 1964. Two intertwined motivations were fundamental to this commercial line in Flemish film policy. From a cultural-educative standpoint, the policy actors wanted to confront the largest possible Flemish audience with quality films. From an economic perspective, the aim was to develop a strong Flemish film industry. In 1981, after years of Christian Democratic domination, the Ministry of Culture, and thus film policy, was taken over by the Liberals. After a dispute between the new minister and the old film commission, the latter was fired and replaced. This symbolized the fact that the beginning of the 1980s heralded a turning point in the development of Flemish film policy. Commercial and economic imperatives became more important, which was manifested in the support for popular comedies. Connected to this evolution, there was a broadening of the vision of what is culturally valuable and thus deserves government support. In addition to artistic and qualitative elements, the entertainment value of the films and the viewing pleasure of the audience were also taken into consideration, which weakened the earlier aversion to popular culture.

Nonetheless, the commercialization of film policy had its limits, especially in terms of films that used the depiction

of action, violence, or sex in a sensationalist manner. At this point, the film commission, frequently in conflict with the minister, also struggled with supporting entertainment films with lower-quality standards. Because of the growing economic-market logic within the Flemish audiovisual sector, to a certain degree the film commission was forced to make concessions. Notwithstanding the increasing importance of audience figures and attracting private and foreign investments, the cultural aspect also remained important, which led to a cultural-commercial two-track policy. It is striking that within the growing economic-market discourse, the stimulation of "Flemish culture" and "Flemish identity" was sometimes even more explicitly highlighted as a legitimizing policy objective than in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, these elements were interpreted differently and with a larger focus on market-oriented aspects. The concern about the recognizability and the Flemish character of Flemish cinema resulted less from the intention to create a Flemish identity, than from the desire to create a commercially strong audiovisual industry and to thus serve the wider economic interests of Flanders.

NOTES

1. Today, Flanders has 6.5 million inhabitants. As the northern region of the federal state of Belgium, Flanders has a large degree of political autonomy over cultural, economic, and other policy domains.
2. This and all of the following quotations from the archival material are translated from Dutch by the author.

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