

Why small European film industries remake each other's successes: The case of the Low Countries

Eduard Cuelenaere, Stijn Joye & Gertjan Willems

Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, film remakes arose simultaneously with the birth of the film medium itself. Usually, the praxis of remaking films — often perceived as the outcome of a solely money-driven, creatively bankrupt industry (Klein and Palmer, 2016) — is typically associated with Hollywood. Consequently, much of the groundwork in the field of film remakes is limited to how the Hollywood film industry remakes its own libraries as well as foreign films, and, conversely, how Hollywood films are being remade in foreign film industries. Yet, film remakes can actually be considered a European invention, with the first remakes being made by Louis Lumière in France (Forrest, 2002). Moreover, since 2000, European film industries have equally been breathing new life into this old form of recycled filmmaking, resulting in a significant rise of European film remakes (Cuelenaere, Willems and Joye, 2021).

Whereas bigger film industries (e.g., France, the UK, Germany or Spain) can benefit from 'economies of scale and larger businesses with access to more substantial funds for production, distribution and marketing' (Higson, 2018: 308), smaller film industries (such as the Dutch and Belgian) are not only more dependent on governmental support but also deal with small markets (Szczepanik, Zahrádka & Macek, 2020: 4). According to Hjort and Petrie, cinemas of small (European) nations all deal with issues of 'domination, the struggle for autonomy, spheres of influence, and a balance of power' (2007: 6). Consequently, their production companies have difficulties in competing with the production budgets of both Hollywood and the bigger European film industries. Meir¹ (2019: 133) has noted that, in the early 2000s, these powerful pan-European studios and big European film industries gradually followed Hollywood's lead by 'utilizing tried and tested generic models, (...) remaking older films (...) or readapting source material that has provided the basis for successful films'. Consequently, an increasing number of European film professionals are now re-exploring the strategy of remaking films (Meir, 2021). This trend is, however, not limited to the big companies and industries in Europe, but is also recognizable in Europe's smaller film industries. Despite the growing significance of film remakes, there exists little research that investigates why small European film industries are increasingly tapping into the possibilities of the remake practice. Therefore, this chapter aims at a critical investigation of the economic and cultural

incentives behind the burgeoning film remake practice in small European film industries. More specifically, it will employ the particular case of the monolingual remake phenomenon in the Low Countries to illustrate the broader economic and cultural dynamics that are at play in a European context.

The chapter draws on the findings of a four-year research project (2016-2020). By combining in-depth textual, production, distribution, and reception analyses, this project aimed to investigate the various dynamics and dimensions involved in the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon: since 2000, several Dutch films have received a remake in the neighboring region of Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), and vice versa. The present chapter argues that if we want to grasp the evolution and current status of European cinema in a globalized film market, we should seriously reckon with the growing popularity of European film remakes. Moreover, addressing the practice of remaking films in two small, European film industries at a time when recycle film cultures (including remakes, sequels, reboots, spin-offs, etc.) are gaining an increasingly central position in said industries (Meir, 2019), enables us to further deconstruct the faulty binary of Hollywood and commercialism versus Europe and artistic filmmaking. Finally, the chapter argues that one cannot fully grasp the (European) remake phenomenon by solely looking at the cultural dynamics that are at work in these film industries. As such, the chapter puts emphasis on the importance of what one could call the ‘industrial proximity’ between the industries that remake each other’s films.

The film industries of the Low Countries

The Netherlands and Flanders, taken together here as the Low Countries, are neighboring regions with a (partially) common history, culture, and language, i.e., Dutch – except for small differences in accent and vocabulary (De Caluwe, 2013). In line with most small European film industries, both the Flemish and Dutch film industry are highly dependent on governmental support (Willems, 2017). Since the 1960s, there exists a structural collaboration between the film policies of the Netherlands and Flanders, resulting in several co-productions every year. Filmic collaborations between Flanders and the Netherlands are stimulated by their geographical proximity, common language, and market size. While the connections between the film industries of the Netherlands and Flanders are quite strong, this is not translated into a shared (transnational) audience. Apart from a few exceptions, most Dutch and Flemish films do not find a significant audience in the other market. Indeed, there are many examples of highly

popular Dutch films that underperformed in Flanders: e.g., *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter/A Woman Goes to the Doctor: An Ode to Love* (2009) or, more recently, *De Beentjes van Sint Hildegard/The Marriage Escape* (2020). The same can be said of the opposite direction, where highly popular Flemish films were unsuccessful in the Netherlands: e.g., *De Zaak Alzheimer/The Memory of a Killer* (2003) or *De Buurtpolitie: De Tunnel/The Neighborhood Police: The Tunnel* (2018).

The indifference of Dutch audiences towards Flemish films and vice versa should be placed within the broader context of the growing alienation (or declining attraction) of Flanders towards the Netherlands since the end of the 1980s, on top of the fact that the Netherlands has never really directed its attention towards Flanders (Cuelenaere, 2020a). Moreover, though the Netherlands and Flanders may both share the ‘same’ Dutch language, in terms of intelligibility and language attitudes, both the Dutch and Flemings are significantly fonder of their own variants (Boets and de Schutter, 1977; Deprez and de Schutter, 1981; Impe, 2010). Additionally, De Caluwe (2013) claims that as almost all media markets in the Low Countries are parallel (that is, they operate mainly or only within their domestic markets), the actors who star in popular Dutch or Flemish films are unknown across the Dutch-Flemish border – acknowledging that these celebrities are, naturally, one of the crucial assets of the film’s popularity. Next, given that most of these popular films tap into the strategy of recreating banal local realities in order to make them feel recognizable, they suffer from ‘cultural discount’ (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988) when released across the border.

Even though both industries do not succeed in successfully releasing their domestic hits across the Dutch-Flemish border, there is ample evidence that since 2000, the market shares of domestic movies in both industries have significantly risen. Today, the Netherlands, with a total of 36 million admissions yearly has an average of 16% market share of domestic films (Jones, 2020), while Flanders, with about 10 million admissions yearly, has an average of 19% market share of Flemish films in the region of Flanders (Cuelenaere, 2020a). These market shares are highly reflective of most other European film industries, which average around 21% for domestic films (Jones, 2020). The Dutch and Flemish film industry both have a low market share of non-national European films (e.g., German films released in the Netherlands) as well as a very high market share of Hollywood films – again, reflecting the EU average of 65%. In other words, the two film industries under analysis deal with the well-known difficulties of the European film industry as a whole: an unsuccessful circulation of non-national European films

within the European market and an inability to successfully release a national film across one's national borders (Higson, 2018).²

Enter: the Dutch-Flemish film remake practice

In the year 2000, the Flemish director Jan Verheyen released *Team Spirit* (see Table 1). At first sight, it might not be clear what differentiates this film from the other 13 Flemish films that were released that year. While being a comedy, the film revolves around the difficulties of growing older, which comes with new responsibilities that might clash with old habits. Upon closer inspection, one realizes that the Flemish film *Team Spirit* is actually a remake of the Dutch film *All Stars* (Jean van de Velde), which was released three years earlier.

Following the big success of this remake, five years later, Verheyen would give it another try and released *Buitenspel* (2005), based on the Dutch film *In Oranje* (2004). Again, the film performed particularly well at the domestic box office – though a little less well than the previous remake. When in 2010 the first Dutch remake (*Loft*, 2010) of a Flemish film (also titled *Loft*, 2008) was released, the Dutch-Flemish film remake phenomenon was a fact. Eventually, starting in 2000, a total of 11 Dutch-Flemish film remakes have been released, consisting of seven Flemish remakes and four Dutch remakes.

Table 1: The total of Dutch-Flemish source films and subsequent remakes (between 1997 and 2017) with tickets sold domestically³

Source Film	Film Remake
<i>All Stars</i> (1997, Jean van de Velde, NL, 298.600)	<i>Team Spirit</i> (2000, Jan Verheyen, BE, 358.000)
<i>In Oranje</i> (<i>In Orange</i> , 2004, Joram Lürsen, NL, 192.900)	<i>Buitenspel</i> (<i>Gilles</i> , 2005, Jan Verheyen, BE, 230.000)
<i>Alles is Liefde</i> (<i>Love Is All</i> , 2007, Joram Lürsen, NL, 1.318.000)	<i>Zot van A.</i> (<i>Crazy About Ya</i> , 2010, Jan Verheyen, BE, 447.324)
<i>Loft</i> (2008, Erik Van Looy, BE, 1.194.434)	<i>Loft</i> (2010, Antoinette Beumer, NL, 445.000)
<i>Smoorverliefd</i> (<i>Madly in Love</i> , 2010, Hilde Van Mieghem, BE, 142.507)	<i>Smoorverliefd</i> (<i>Madly in Love</i> , 2013, Hilde Van Mieghem, NL, 204.422)
<i>Hasta La Vista</i> (<i>Come as You Are</i> , 2011, Geoffrey Enthoven, BE, 240.000)	<i>Adios Amigos</i> (2016, Albert Jan van Rees, NL, 16.054)

<i>Brasserie Romantiek</i> (<i>Brasserie Romantique</i>, 2012, Joël Vanhoebrouck, BE, 105.168)	<i>Brasserie Valentijn</i> (<i>Brasserie Valentine</i>, 2016, Sanne Vogel, NL, 95.000)
<i>Alles is Familie</i> (<i>Family Way</i>, 2012, Joram Lürsen, NL, 860.000)	<i>Allemaal Familie</i> (<i>The Family Way</i>, 2017, Dries Vos, BE, 60.851)
<i>Mannenharten</i>⁴ (<i>Men's Hearts</i>, 2013, Mark de Cloe, NL, 450.000)	<i>Wat Mannen Willen</i> (<i>What Men Want</i>, 2015, Filip Peeters, BE, 190.000)
<i>Homies</i> (2015, Jon Karthaus, NL, 205.246)	<i>Bad Trip</i> (2017, Dries Vos, BE, 50.176)
<i>Het Verlangen</i> (<i>The Longing</i>, 2017, Joram Lürsen, NL, 137.778)	<i>Verborgen Verlangen</i> (<i>Hidden Desire</i>, 2017, Maarten Moerkerke, BE, 15.501)

As mentioned, public funding bodies play an important role in the production of films in small European industries. However, when looking at the selective funds on a European level (MEDIA or Eurimages), only two remake projects received support. This should not strike us as odd, given that these projects are mainly, or even exclusively aimed at domestic audiences, while these European institutions want to strengthen the circulation of European films within Europe. On a regional level, the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) supported the first three Flemish remake projects, but quickly decided to quit supporting remake projects altogether. The Netherlands Film Fund (NFF), on the other hand, only selectively⁵ supported (for a small amount of money) one remake project, whereas it supported four remake projects with its automatic measure. When confronting both the Dutch and Flemish heads of the film funds with this ‘anti-remake policy’ (or ‘non-priority’, according to then NFF chief Doreen Boonekamp), it seems that this decision is both financially and culturally motivated. Indeed, both film fund bosses mainly refer to the lack of financial resources and a resulting preference for ‘original’ and ‘more authentic’ content. They also argue that film funds should equally pay attention to the ‘cultural’ or ‘artistic’ aspects of films. Knowing that most of the Dutch-Flemish film remakes did not receive selective subsidies, one might wonder how these still got produced given the high dependency on government support of Dutch and Flemish films in general (Cuelenaere, 2020a).

This brings us to the economic support or funds that exist in both regions. For instance, the Flemish economic fund (Screen Flanders) supported all Flemish remake projects that were produced since the fund’s inception in 2012. Moreover, the Belgian tax shelter⁶ is, from its

initiation (2002), well-solicited by the remake projects. What is more, it appears that many Dutch remake productions make use of the Belgian tax shelter. Furthermore, the Dutch cash rebate system⁷ (or Film Production Incentive) was employed in all Dutch remake projects that were produced since its inception (2014). On top of that, oftentimes, producers accumulate measures from both regions: Dutch producer Sjef Scholte, for example, stated that he could combine the Dutch support measures with the Belgian tax shelter easily – acquiring the remake rights of a Flemish film already counts as an investment in the Flemish film industry, granting the producer the right to enjoy the financial benefit of the Belgian tax shelter, according to Scholte. Hence, although the selective support measures of both the Dutch and Flemish film funds do not back the Dutch-Flemish remake practice, other more economically oriented support systems fill this gap.

Remaking to overcome structural and cultural limitations?

If we want to grasp the Dutch-Flemish film remake phenomenon, we should not only investigate the film remakes themselves, but also their surrounding production contexts as well as the audiences that watch these films. With the Low Countries film industries' cultural, economic, and policy context(s) in mind, we will now elaborate on the driving factors and motivations behind the remake phenomenon. First of all, our audience research (Cuelenaere, 2020b) shows that the spectators' evaluations of the practice of film remakes is, overall, quite negative. The biggest part of the audience seems to be convinced that film remakes are in any case less original than non-remakes, while finding them to be deeply commercially driven and less creative. Interestingly, when looking at the domestic admissions of Dutch-Flemish films, the audiences' critical attitude towards film remakes does not translate directly into unsuccessful releases. Hence, though people generally dislike the idea or practice of (Dutch-Flemish) film remakes, many still go and see them in the cinema. This may have to do with the fact that most people are unaware that, for instance, these Dutch-Flemish film remakes are actually remakes, because they are marketed as 'normal' local films. Moreover, due to the fact that Dutch audiences almost never see Flemish films (either because they are not released in the Netherlands or because they simply prefer to see other films), and vice versa, the Dutch and Flemish audiences have not seen the source films on which these remakes are based.

On top of this, audiences prefer the local variants of the shown film pairs because they can recognize more of themselves (identification) as well as their surroundings (recognition) in

them (Cuelenaere, 2020b). This recalls the concept of ‘cultural proximity’, first introduced by Straubhaar (1991) and defined as follows: ‘cultural proximity is the desire for cultural products as similar as possible to one’s own language, culture, history, and values’ (Straubhaar, LaRose and Davenport, 2013: 504). Buonanno (2008) argues that cultural proximity is not the only, but definitely ‘a primary factor in orienting cultural demand and consumption, according to the need for and pleasure derived from recognition, familiarity and identity’ (96). Indeed, the concept of cultural proximity incorporates an allusion to the feeling of belonging to an imagined community (Straubhaar, 2007). As such it is the local culture, which is indicative of the recognizable (linguistic) environment of the everyday, that structures the degree of perception of cultural proximity to a cultural product (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005).

In line with the above, Suna (2018) argues that when cultural products are released in other local contexts, ‘requiring local cultural adaptation, the actors involved in the production process aim to produce a connectivity (...) in the sense of a perceived local cultural proximity on the side of the audience’ (31). What is more, Smith (2016) found that there exists more of a tendency to localize borrowed plots in contexts where the source text is not known, which is the case in the Dutch-Flemish context. When analyzing the films themselves, our research (Cuelenaere, Joye and Willems, 2019) shows that a great deal of the Dutch-Flemish remake process can indeed be explained through the practice of localization. Many of the transformations made to the source films seem to point towards differences in (film) culture between the Netherlands and Flanders (or, between a Dutch and Flemish identity). However, rather than claiming that these differences indicate clear-cut cultural differences, we assert that these are the result of a process where filmmakers ‘manufacture’ a feeling of proximity through the recreation of banal (Billig, 1995) Flemish or Dutch realities. Therefore, we suggest that this process of localization is the result of the perceptions of cultural differences and stereotypes, held by filmmakers. In line with these findings, while most film pairs are characterized by a shared framework (mostly in terms of narrative, themes, characters, spaces, etc.), each version shows distinct interpretations of the same structures, turning these films into interchangeable banal Flemish or Dutch realities. Hence, and in line with the previous insight, even though these film remakes are clearly based on a ‘foreign’ film, they are ‘fully’ localized, which makes them ‘feel’ like domestic or national films. By remaking (and, therefore also localizing) Dutch or Flemish box office hits from across the border, filmmakers are able to circumvent the negative consequences of the process of ‘cultural discount’. In other words, whereas a Dutch source

film's 'value' is normally reduced when released in Flanders, a remake helps in retaining its value.

In terms of storytelling, aesthetics, and production values, the Dutch-Flemish film remakes often show much 'cultural familiarity with Hollywood' (Higson, 2018: 316), and could therefore be labelled 'like-Hollywood' films. As such, on the one hand, they 'cater to tastes shaped by global (read: Hollywood) cinema' (Mueller, 2019: 2), while on the other hand, they capitalize on the audiences' desire for cultural proximity by localizing cultural specific aspects that otherwise make it difficult for these films to travel outside of their national borders. The latter hints at a subversion of the common assumption that 'Hollywood is (...) the stronger industry that exploits smaller industries such as those of Europe, virtually mining it for raw materials' (Meir, 2021: 225) and suggests the opposite: big and small film industries in Europe are now employing Hollywood's own techniques to fight its dominance. As asserted by Mueller (2019: 2), this type of European genre cinema, however, equally fulfills 'the desire to retain cultural specificity as an important tool to express distinct collective and national experiences and identities'. Traditionally, the transnational remake practice is understood as the expression of omnipotent power of influential industries (read: Hollywood) vampirizing smaller ones. The corporate trend of the Dutch-Flemish remake practice is, therefore, not only a phenomenon reflective of changing global media trends, it equally gives insight into how, slowly but steadily, the global film market is being restructured, whilst questioning or challenging the dominant position of Hollywood therein.

Through interviews with the filmmakers (Cuelenaere, 2020c), we were able to determine their main motivations behind the decision to opt for a film remake project. The most common rationale had to do with the commercial nature of the practice: film remakes minimize the financial risk, are cheaper, can be made in a shorter amount of time, and typically prove to be successful. Data (Pestieau, Ginsburgh and Weyers, 2007) show that even though remakes are, in general, less financially successful (and less critically acclaimed) than their source films, they are still highly lucrative. Indeed, because of their pre-sold and low-risk nature, they have been popular throughout history. In addition to these mostly commercially motivated statements, many of the experts simultaneously mentioned several 'creatively' driven arguments for opting for a remake project. This nuances the findings in the literature that remakes are usually commercially driven (Verevis, 2006; Kelleter, 2012). As films are always both commercial and artistic artifacts, remakes are not necessarily that different from non-remakes in that sense. Indeed, most remake-filmmakers balance in between a love for the

medium or genuine engagement with creativity and cultural diversification and an understanding of the current precarious state of the film industry – with its particular challenges and market requirements in order to keep it alive.

This brings us to a crucial factor at play in the rise of the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon: it appears that the remake process is more affected by interpersonal connections between people from the Dutch and Flemish film industries or contingent transnational networks than being the outcome of structural industry strategies and policies (Cuelenaere, 2020c). Indeed, our research shows that the interpersonal networks are of significant importance to the remake practices in small film markets – in the case of the Low Countries, both within and across the Flemish and Dutch film industries. This finding points towards the existence of an ‘industrial proximity’ between the Dutch and Flemish film industries. Because of their similar markets and budget sizes, in combination with geographical proximity, a shared language, and policy measures that promote co-productions, Dutch and Flemish filmmakers are not only aware of each other’s film projects, but are also prompted to cooperate. Additionally, because of this industrial proximity (and the similar budgets of their film projects), it is easier to project both the possibility of production and the eventual box office success in the other (either Dutch or Flemish) context. In a similar vein, the costs for acquiring the remake rights are affordable, given the overall similar production budgets in both industries. When looking at the annual market shares for domestic films in the Low Countries, it appears that these shares are often dependent on one or two big successes that year (Cuelenaere, 2020a). Consequently, Dutch and Flemish production and distribution companies are always on the lookout for the next big domestic success. In other words, whereas the Dutch and Flemish audiences are not interested in content from across the border, the Dutch and Flemish filmmakers are definitely aware when a film becomes a domestic hit across the border – which they could then remake in their own national context. Thus, the existence of remakes notwithstanding, plus the fact that audiences are typically unfamiliar with the source material, all of which could indicate a significant distance between the neighbouring Dutch and Flemish communities, our analysis (and the data on which it rests) demonstrates that the films, nonetheless, express a proximity and creative/industrial community of sorts.

Conclusion

In order to answer the question why Dutch filmmakers remake Flemish films and vice versa, we analyzed the film remakes themselves, the audiences who watch them, and the production contexts in which they were conceived. In terms of the textual aspects of these films, we found that all of the Dutch-Flemish film remakes are popular genre films that, on the one hand, are very Hollywood-like, especially with regard to the types of storytelling, aesthetics, and production values. On the other hand, these films are made to feel very 'local'. In other words, filmmakers recreate or manufacture banal Flemish or Dutch local realities in these films to stimulate a feeling of cultural proximity, namely, identification and recognition. When looking at the audiences, the cultural proximity hypothesis is confirmed, as they seem to prefer local remakes to foreign source films. In fact, they are generally not aware of the fact that they are watching a film remake of a 'foreign' film. This should not strike us as odd, given that (1) the filmmakers hide this particular aspect of the film; and (2) Dutch audiences almost never watch Flemish films and vice versa. As a result, audiences perceive these Dutch-Flemish film remakes as 'original' local or national films. Considering these factors, the Dutch-Flemish film remake phenomenon is able to partially satisfy the (still very significant) audiences' appetite for qualitative national or local content.

However, our study also found that the concept of cultural proximity alone cannot fully explain the reason(s) behind the fact that Dutch filmmakers mainly remake Flemish films (and vice versa), and not, for instance, Japanese, French or Polish films. Indeed, given that the process of 'localization' enables filmmakers to make all sorts of foreign films feel local, one might wonder why the lion's share of film remakes made in the Low Countries are based on films from across the Dutch-Flemish border. This is where the concept of industrial proximity proves to be elucidatory. Because of the fact that the Dutch and Flemish film industries are geographically and linguistically proximate as well as highly similar in terms of market sizes, budgets, film policies, etc., filmmakers from across the border know each other and can easily project each other's film successes in the other film market. As a consequence, Dutch and Flemish filmmakers often co-produce films, while cooperating and exchanging each other's film scripts, almost always without recourse to extra, intermediary people (e.g., distributors). This transnational network in the film industries of the Low Countries is important for at least two reasons: first, such a close network can be seen as a means to merge resources in a shared battle against the dominance of Hollywood cinema. As such, the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon may, at first sight, be interpreted as a practice that mainly helps in reinforcing the national film industry, but, when considering this broader network, it could equally be seen as

a possible way to enforce the stability of more than one national film industry – or, indeed, when extrapolated more broadly, the broader context of European cinema. Second, this transnational network between the Dutch and Flemish film industry could be understood as a new form of distribution which enables the circulation of films (or, in this case, the film scripts) across national borders in Europe.

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Endnotes

¹ See also Meir's 'Corporate Consolidation, Artistic Conservatism and the Persistence of Hollywood' in this Companion.

² European art films, at least in comparison to mainstream films, generally perform 'better' (taking into account the more modest box office expectations) (Jones, 2020). This partially explains the relative 'popularity' of a handful of Flemish art films (e.g., *De Helaasheid der Dingen* in 2009, *Rundskop* in 2011, *The Broken Circle Breakdown* in 2012, and *Girl* in 2018), which perform pretty well in the arthouse circuit in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is currently less internationally recognized for their arthouse films, which clarifies why there is no similar trend of watching Dutch art films in the Flemish arthouse circuit.

³ These numbers were collected by consulting online reports of the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) and the Dutch Cinema Monitor ('de Bioscoopmonitor') of the independent research agency Film Research Netherlands. To give a general idea, in 2019, the Netherlands has a population number of 17,3 million, whereas Flanders has 6,6 million inhabitants.

⁴ This film is actually already a remake of a German source film titled *Männerherzen* (Verhoeven, 2009).

⁵ Selective funding '(...) is based on submitting the project proposal for a quality assessment, it is generally regarded as ensuring quality projects. This assessment can be based on different criteria, including national cultural value' (Sørensen & Redvall, 2020: 2). The allocation of automatic funding, however, '(...) is decided by a point system or a fixed set of conditions; if a producer or project meets the criteria for the inward investment scheme, funding is awarded. Automatic funding, then, has little or no quality assessment of the projects proposed, but rather a focus on local spend' (Sørensen & Redvall, 2020: 3).

⁶ By making use of the tax shelter, investors can receive an additional tax exemption as well as an extra financial return, which together account for a return of almost 10%. The measurement aims to make it easier for film producers to acquire private financing.

⁷ This is a financial measurement by the Netherlands Film Fund which enables film producers to refund 30% of their film spending in the Netherlands.