CHAPTER 13

From *Undercover* to *Ferry*: SVOD Franchise Development in Small European Audiovisual Markets

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As part of its strategy to invest substantially in European productions and provide its viewership with local 'originals,' Netflix announced in 2017 its first Belgian-Dutch co-produced television series: *Undercover* (Eén and Netflix 2019-). Produced by the Belgian production company De Mensen and mainly financed by VRT (the Flemish public service broadcaster) and Netflix, the series was first released on the Flemish public television channel Eén. A little later, the series (consisting of 10 episodes) was also made available on Netflix in the Netherlands and eventually became an international hit. Because of the success of the series, a second season (10 episodes) followed in 2020, with a third season (8 episodes) being released in November 2021. Only three years after the initial release, Netflix announced the releasing of an upcoming Belgian-Dutch co-produced Netflix original film, *Ferry* (Cecilia Verheyden 2021). The film is,

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unsurprisingly, a spin-off of (or more specifically a prequel to) *Undercover*, providing Dutch and Flemish audiences with an origin story of one of the most popular characters, Ferry Bouman, played by Dutch actor Frank Lammers. Following on the apparent success[1] of *Ferry*, in 2022 another extension to the *Undercover* universe was announced: a new series produced by De Mensen again, *Ferry: The Series / Ferry: De Serie* (Eén and Netflix) which would continue Ferry's origin story as a sequel to the film.

This chapter examines the practices of localisation within the context of transmedia/universe storytelling and recycled filmmaking in the age of SVOD platforms. It will argue that Netflix has a strong belief in locality, paying attention to the 'wants and needs' of their target audiences. Additionally, it will be shown that franchise development and cinematic worldbuilding has become increasingly central to Netflix's production strategies. The central case study of this chapter – which acts as a kind of 'blueprint' in the Low Countries – will, moreover, demonstrate how Netflix's focus on 'localisation' and on 'franchise development' are, in fact, intertwined. To do so, it builds on (1) a textual analysis of the series' three seasons and film; (2) interviews with members of the production teams: and finally (3) a brief analysis of the news discourse on the series and film in mainstream Flemish news media (N = 41) using the keywords 'Ferry', 'Undercover', and 'Netflix' in the GoPress/BelgaPress database.[2]

The Audiovisual Industries in the Low Countries

The European audiovisual market, known for its fragmented nature and subsidy dependency (EAO 2021), is made up of several small markets and a small amount of large markets (Afilipoaie et al. 2021). Both in terms of production and circulation, the European film and television industry is thus very nationally-oriented (Esser 2009; Jones 2020), which is related to a number of factors, including, the '(1) linguistic differences (as well as dialects, regiolects and local accents); (2) cultural differences; (3) national borders; (4) different industrial practices; and (5) so-called taste barriers' (Biltereyst and Cuelenaere 2021, 58). In this chapter, we focus on two small-to-medium European audiovisual industries, those being the Low Countries, here consisting of the Netherlands (17.7 million inhabitants) and Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium with 6.7 million inhabitants). Such small(er) nations or regions 'by definition have very limited domestic markets for all locally produced goods and services – including culture – and so have been forced by the neo-liberal economic and political pressures of globalisation into a greater dependency on external markets' (Hjort and Petrie 2007, 15).

Consequently, because of their lower populations, small(er) countries' or regions' media industries not only have to deal with a smaller sales market, limited profit margins, lower income levels for the production sector, and limited advertising revenues, but often also with lower governmental financial support. Specifically for the Low Countries, Raats and Iordache (2020) adduce several other characteristics: in addition to their dependency on external markets, the region's industries suffer from a 'limited potential for return on investment, limitations on export due to language and lack of scale, and a limited number of players' (4). In line with the overall European audiovisual industry, the Flemish and Dutch audiovisual sectors are dependent on both indirect support (e.g., tax relief) and direct support (public funding) (Raats and Evens 2021). On top of that, these markets are largely separated from each other in terms of cross-border traffic (De Caluwe 2013; Cuelenaere 2020). Despite strong industrial ties as well as a structural collaboration and regional alliance between their film policies (Willems 2017), one cannot speak of a unified market. However, it should be noted that the Low Countries' television markets are characterised by a vibrant production sector, which results in strong ratings and many opportunities for return on investment. The same goes for their film markets, as the market shares for popular domestic movies have risen in the past two to three decades (Cuelenaere 2020). Moreover, both Flanders and the Netherlands are remarkable for having a history of financially healthy public broadcasters (Van Keulen 2020).

In sum, the Dutch and Flemish audiovisual ecosystems roughly consist of (1) traditional broadcasters (i.e. both public broadcasters like VRT and NPO, as well as commercial broadcasters such as VTM and RTL), (2) domestic SVOD services (e.g., VRT MAX, Streamz, NPO Start, Videoland, and others) and (3) several multinational American SVOD services (e.g., Amazon Prime, Netflix, Disney+, …) of which Netflix is the most popular one in both regions (Idiz et al. 2021; Sevenhant et al. 2021), with roughly 1.7 million subscribers in Belgium and 2.85 million in the Netherlands as of Q4 2021 (Statista 2022).

Netflix in the Low Countries

In the last decade, Netflix became the global leader in 'curated video entertainment service' (Lotz 2022). In 2012, the platform entered the European market for the first time (Iordache 2021). One year later, the service became available in the Netherlands, while in 2014, it was also launched in Belgium. Netflix quickly realized that in order to successfully enter the European market, on top of offering its proprietary catalogue and licensed local premium content, it should also strategically invest in the local industries where it operates. In this regard, Afilipoaei et al. (2021) identified four kinds of investment strategies that Netflix employs in Europe. The company labels all of them as 'Netflix originals', though there are important differences. First, there are the so-called *licensed originals* which are already fully financed and produced before Netflix purchases the distribution rights for one or more territories. Secondly, there are the *continuation originals*, which the company started using in 2015: in this case, the platform again acquires distribution rights but also invests in the production budget after one season is already released. In some cases, Netflix takes over the whole production, for instance when the first season proved to be highly successful. Thirdly, since 2012, the company partakes in *co-production* or *co-financing originals* with European partners. Whereas in the former type of deal ownership rights are split up between the different producing partners, in the latter one, Netflix simply contributes financially in exchange for worldwide distribution rights. Finally, since 2016, Netflix started making what one could call *full Netflix originals*. These are fully produced and financed by the platform, which in turn holds its exclusive rights (ibid.). When looking at the overall evolution of Netflix's investment strategies in Europe, one can see a clear shift towards producing more full Netflix originals and, therefore, focusing on holding exclusive distribution rights as well as producing European content.

Netflix's different investment strategies – also in terms of the sheer quantity of local productions – mirror a market's attractiveness and are, therefore, largely determined by the market's size. Yet, even though the platform initially prioritised the big five European markets, 'over the years, Netflix has clearly diversified its choice of investment countries, also expanding to smaller European media markets' (Afilipoaie et al. 2021, 315) such as Belgium and the Netherlands. Additionally, one can clearly see that when the company enters a new (European) market, in order to limit the risk, it first makes use of the licensed and continuation deals. It is only in a next step that they will invest in the higher risk, higher reward strategy of spending money on full Netflix originals. Naturally, the spectre of the EU quota of 30% on on-demand audiovisual companies' catalogues being made up of European works also resulted in more investments by the SVOD platforms. As such, the company's 'strategies reconfirm its prioritisation of exclusive rights, as well as its aim to establish itself as a strong producer of European content' (Afilipoaie et al. 2021, 314).

In line with the idea of cultural proximity (Straubhaar 2007), Havens (2018) argues that it is still locality that mainly appeals to both local audiences as well as broader global audiences. In this regard, Lobato (2019) asserts that 'Netflix, despite its many powers, cannot easily overcome the locality of taste— it must localise itself if it wishes to compete on a global scale' (133). Aware of the fact that localisation (Chalaby 2006) and sticking to geo-linguistic markets have been key in sustaining profits for audiovisual companies throughout history, Netflix quickly decided to collaborate 'with local players, mainly by co-producing with local broadcasters and making distribution deals with major telecommunication and pay-TV providers' (Iordache 2021, 17). In the Low Countries, this resulted in, next to the central cases of this study, for example, the release of two Dutch full Netflix original series, *Ares* (Netflix 2020-) and *Dirty Lines* (Netflix 2022-), as well as one Dutch full Netflix original film, *Forever Rich* (Shady El-Hamus 2021). The company only released one Belgian full Netflix original series, *Into the Night* (Netflix 2020-) and no Belgian full original films as of the time of writing. Prior to these full Netflix originals, in the Belgian market, the company already made several licensing deals for series (e.g., *Tabula Rasa* [Eén and Netflix 2017-]) as well as for films (e.g. *Girl* [Lukas Dhont 2018]), which were released as Netflix originals in some markets outside of Belgium. In the Dutch market, on the other hand, the platform acquired deals of series like *Toon* (KPN Presenteert 2016-), or *ANNE+* (NPO3 2021) as well as several films such as *The Resistance Banker / Bankier van het verzet* (Joram Lürsen 2018) and *Fuck Love Too / F*ck de liefde 2* (Appie Boudellah and Aram van de Rest 2022), the latter of which is a sequel to an earlier non-original film.

'It's All About IP!' Netflix and Building Universes and Franchises

In 2017, Netflix started showing 'a desire to enter the blockbuster franchise space, with the announcement of a sequel to its $90-million-budgeted fantasy police film *Bright* […] as well as a television prequel to the Indian media franchise *Baahubali*' (Fleury et al. 2019, 10). What's more, in 2021, the company introduced new divisions that focus solely on building franchises such as *Resident Evil* (Netflix 2022-) or acquiring the rights to intellectual properties (henceforth, IP) such as Roald Dahl's works. One could even argue that Netflix has adopted a conservative approach since releasing original content in 2013: even though the company labels the content as 'original', they are far but, as '[e]ach of the four series that debuted that year […] was based on an established property' (Meikle 2019, 36) and were therefore adaptations. In sum, betting on franchises and cinematic universes is to a large extent a continuation of what Netflix has been doing for years, that is, creating serialized television content. The company understands that successful franchises can be positive as they reduce risk (by enhancing the predictability) and generate 'long-term value in the form of future instalments, merchandise, theme-park attractions, and apps' (Fleury et al. 2019, 6). For subscribers, on the other hand, it is often assumed that it deepens their relationship with the brand, strengthens the intertextual connections, and makes them come back.

In this context, Fritz claims that the current franchise era we live in entails a return to the old studio system with the difference being that the major companies do not control the most important talent, but instead 'the most important cinematic brands' (2018, 94) or universes. It, therefore seems that instead of wanting to be an alternative to the Hollywood standard, the company is trying to beat Hollywood at its own game. Indeed, because of the digital revolution and 'new entrants like FAANG continuing to seize the reigns of production, distribution, and exhibition, content is no longer the exclusive purview of traditional media companies' (Fleury et al. 2019, 2). Former Netflix CEO Reed Hastings himself has stated that legacy Hollywood studios are great at creating impressive franchises, and that even though Netflix is 'making great progress on that with *Stranger Things* and other properties, […] compared to *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*, we've got a long way to go' (Clark 2021). In this regard, the streaming platforms of legacy studios (e.g., Disney+ and Paramount+) are several steps ahead, as they have old franchise-able IP to build on. Netflix, however, had to start from scratch by acquiring the property rights and building new IP themselves. Despite the fact that Netflix has not yet bought a Hollywood legacy player, 'they have come to resemble traditional studios themselves' (Fleury et al. 2019, 17).

Interestingly, several authors argue that the adoption of franchises (and the focus on IP) crosses not only multiple media but also multiple regions (Johnson 2011; Herbert 2017), which clearly also applies to Netflix. Indeed, it appears that they are integrating their strategy of localisation with franchise or cinematic universe building. In this regard, a columnist in *The Atlantic* writes that whereas 'legacy studios frequently rely on sequels, remakes, or reboots—see the billion-dollar grosses currently being collected by theatrical releases such as *Top Gun: Maverick*—Netflix purports to be the place for newer, lesser-known franchises that are still aimed at a wide audience' (Sims 2022). Examples in Europe are original films such as the Italian *Under the Amalfi Sun / Sotto il sole di Amalfi* (Martina Pastori 2022, sequel), or the French *Lost Bullet II / Balle perdue 2* (Guillaume Pierret 2022, sequel). Two other notable examples are, on the one hand, the German spin-off documentary *Shiny_Flakes: The Teenage Druglord* (Eva Müller and Michael Schmitt 2021) that tells the true story of the main character of the German Netflix series *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)* (Netflix 2019-), and, on the other hand, the film *Buba* (Arne Feldhusen 2022) which is a prequel spin-off focusing on the main antagonist of the same series.

When looking at the context of the Low Countries specifically, the Dutch sequel *Fuck Love Too* (2022) mentioned in the previous section does not stand on its own. Netflix has also released several Dutch and Flemish series and films that build on previous successes, such as the Netflix original series *Misfit: The Series / Misfit: De Serie* (Netflix 2021-) which builds on the film trilogy, or the still in production *Ferry: The Series* (which is a sequel spin-off of the film). There are also several Netflix original films that are part of this same trend: such as *The Family Claus 3* (Ruben Vandenborre 2022), which is the third instalment of the film series that started in 2020, *Misfit 3: The Finale / Misfit 3: De Finale* (Erwin van den Eshof 2021), building on two earlier non-original films, and one of the central cases of this study, *Ferry*. By taking on these projects, Netflix fills in a gap as legacy players mainly focus on big-budget tentpole productions. In so doing, it expands its '*Stranger Things* treatment' and franchise/universe building strategy to smaller markets.

The Case of *Undercover*

Undercover's plot is based on real events in which Belgian and Dutch undercover agents attempt to infiltrate a kingpin's ecstasy business operation by posing as a couple at a campsite in Limburg (a small Dutch province that borders Belgium) where the drug lord spends his weekends. When asking showrunner and creator Nico Moolenaar to describe *Undercover*, he defined it in our interview as 'a black comedy thriller series that is inspired by a true case.'[3] Three elements characterise the show's unique identity and success, he claims. First, though it tells quite a standard undercover cop story, the location or arena where everything happens each season is highly distinct. This is in line with a well-established strategy of SVOD services which invest in crime drama to penetrate new European markets by localising globally recognisable genre plots, thereby focusing on 'multi-plotted narratives that centre on settings and places' (Iordache et al. 2022, 238). Second, the fact that the two undercover agents, Bob (Tom Waes) and Kim (Anna Drijver), coming from two different regions (Flanders and the Netherlands, respectively), have to act like they are a couple provides the series with a romantic subplot (Fig. 13.1).

Fig. 13.1 Characters played by Dutch star Anna Drijver and Belgian star Tom Waes were the initial narrative focus in series one of *Undercover*

Third, the idea that the story is based on true facts, that is, the criminal drug industry located in the Dutch province North Brabant, adjacent to the borders of Flemish provinces Antwerp and Limburg. Moolenaar says that *Ferry* the film follows more the genre of a gangster drama focusing on the Dutch drug lord Ferry but dwelling on the same universe created in the *Undercover* series. By doing so, the film provides the audience with a coming-of-age sort of backstory, portraying Ferry's early life before he turned into one of the largest ecstasy kingpins, explaining how his good and bad side developed throughout his younger life. To tell the film's story, the structure of a romantic comedy was used, where the romance between Ferry and his girlfriend (and future wife) Danielle (Elise Schaap) 'forms the narrative's backbone', according to Moolenaar

It was the production company De Mensen that first saw potential in the idea for *Undercover*. In the initial stages, 'the project was led by Jan Theys who worked for De Mensen,' claims Heidi Hermans, advisor content at VRT. Shortly after the idea was conceived by the producers, Moolenaar was asked to work on the idea and write the script. After he agreed, De Mensen looked for financing/co-producing partners and brought Tom Waes and his local popularity to the negotiation table as an extra argument to sell the project.[4] They first approached the Flemish public broadcaster VRT in 2015, who agreed on the writing of a primary pilot script. However, due to the many changes that have reshaped local television industries in Europe, it was de facto unimaginable for (both commercial and public) broadcasters to fully finance high-end series commissions in the Low Countries (EBU 2020). According to Navarro et al.: 'This obliges these broadcasters to search for extra funding in terms of public resources, international distributions, local second-windows or co-productions with other players, changing the PSM relationship within the wider industry' (2022, 12). On top of that, this context comes at another cost, as co-producing with several partners often results in less control over the distribution rights and a more fragmented brand ownership (EBU 2020). As a consequence, 'De Mensen, together with VRT, explored other financing routes', says Ivy Vanhaecke (executive producer at De Mensen). She continues that because of the competitive subsidy environment, they did not submit their project to the Flemish Audiovisual Fund (the Flemish subsidy agency that supports the audiovisual industry) – not only did they already have a project greenlit recently, the VAF submission procedure could also have potentially slowed down the production process of *Undercover*. Hence, they started seeking for viable alternatives. One of these is the Belgian tax relief, also called a tax shelter, already providing a big chunk (about 30%) of the budget (Moolenaar Creator and showrunner, Personal interview, 20 June 2022[5]). As such, indirectly, Netflix (cf. below) could actually benefit from a domestic tax break in Belgium because they co-produced with local producers.

As De Mensen and VRT had to find extra partners to finance the series, and given that the series' story is located in and around the border, the next logical step was to go to a Dutch public broadcaster – the latter was also a request of VRT, which prefers to work with other European broadcasters. None of them seemed interested in the story, says Vanhaecke, as 'the fear was too big or it was not deemed Dutch enough […] it wasn't a successful formula on paper, though in the end it did turn out well.' As a result, De Mensen approached the German public broadcaster ZDF (because of previous collaborations) who acquired the license for the German territory. The sales agent and distribution company Fédération Entertainment (a traditional partner of De Mensen) was also involved to provide advances on distribution rights. Dorien Laseure, head of international program sales at VRT, asserts that 'a small part of the financial puzzle was also filled by Proximus [a Belgian digital television provider] who funded SVOD rights for their pay-TV catalogue as there was a small window left between VRT and Netflix.'

It was only in a next step that De Mensen turned to Netflix. They had, in fact, collaborated earlier as they previously licensed *Hotel Beau Séjour* (Eén 2016-) to the platform, making De Mensen a trustworthy partner. At the time when the streaming company showed interest in the series, Netflix did not have strong relationships with local partners in the Low Countries. This explains why the Dutch distribution company Dutch FilmWorks (DFW) became involved in the first season of *Undercover*, as 'Netflix wanted them to function as an intermediate partner that would take care of the contracts' says Laseure.[6] DFW had some experience with Netflix when it came to negotiating right deals, which is why both partners knew each other's way of doing business. The three main partners (i.e., De Mensen, VRT, and Netflix) agreed upon the following release schedule: VRT would be the first to launch every episode in Belgium. Only one day after, Netflix released it in the Netherlands and the other territories for which they bought the licenses. Ten months after the first release on VRT, Netflix also made the series available for the Belgian audiences.

Ruth McElroy claims that specifically in small markets, such co-financing deals prove to be beneficiary for smaller media companies and the sustainability of the local creative industry in general (2016). In line with this finding, several articles in the Flemish press suggested that from the moment Netflix was involved in the production process of the series, the budget and the amount of shooting days was increased (De Ruyck 2019; Schrik 2019). Vanhaecke, however, contradicted this by stating that 'this is a common misconception in the sector.' Laseure and Hermans confirmed this, stating that the production budget was not changed when new players (i.e., Netflix) were involved. It might, though, occur that when one of the partners demands other formats, subtitling or dubbing, the budget increases a little bit. Vanhaecke confirmed that Netflix paid their part of the budget according to local standards and that even though the budget was not increased, the expectations were definitely heightened when Netflix is involved. This is reflected in several newspaper articles, where the uniqueness of 'a Flemish series being picked up by Netflix and becoming an international success' is heavily stressed (e.g. Roebben 2017; Vets 2022; PD 2022). The overall optimistic and perhaps even chauvinistic discourse surrounding a local Netflix investment is equally reflected in news coverage that positions Flanders as being the chosen one by a 'streaming-giant' (e.g. Dewo 2020).

Interestingly, though Netflix collaborates with several partners in the European market, *Undercover*, but also *Ferry*, is one of the very few European multi-country co-productions – or, more specifically, a geo-cultural (cf. Straubhaar 2007) co-production. Therefore, contrary to one of the most important strategies in the European audiovisual industries, Netflix co-produces much lesser content with two or more different European production partners. According to Iordache et al., 'Netflix's motivations for entering transnational collaborations are different from the ones previously identified in European practices [as they do] not necessarily co-produce in order to build scale, secure more funding, or profit from export opportunities […] but to enter European markets with a wider transnational offering, targeted directly at domestic audiences, or geo-cultural ones' (2022, 249). It, therefore, made a lot of sense to produce this series, as it would enable the service to enter the Flemish and Dutch market simultaneously. In fact, Vanhaecke stated that Netflix is definitely interested in discovering the next potential *Undercover* and, therefore, looks for other Dutch-Flemish stories. The so-called authenticity and 'organic Dutch and Flemish nature' of *Undercover* is put forward by Hermans, Vanhaecke, and Moolenaar alike as one of the main arguments for engaging in a multi-country co-production.

It is also argued that '[a]s Netflix Originals are challenging boundaries and crossing borders, they are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan in nature, starting off as productions targeting local audiences, and opening up to foreign consumption, thus reaching the "space between cultures"' (Iordache et al. 2022, 248). According to Laseure, this is the 'donut principle' that Netflix plies: their originals in Europe are generally in the first place targeted at local audiences. 'When the content proves to be highly successful in the local territory, the company provides subtitles and dubbings, releasing it more widely to global audiences'[7]. This is exactly what happened to *Undercover*: the series did well in Flanders and really well in the Netherlands, after which it received several subtitles and dubs (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish). In fact, the amount of 'completers' has only increased throughout the different seasons and, eventually, 'the series came in Netflix's top 10 in no less than 58 countries', says Vanhaecke.[7] Whereas VRT already agreed to co-produce a second season from the start, 'Netflix waited for the first reactions in the Netherlands', claims Hermans.[8] Following the popularity, however, Netflix quickly ramped up their investing role and started financing a bigger part of the second season – which meant that ZDF was no longer needed for financing the production. Again, contrary to some of the statements in Flemish newspapers, the budget of the second season did not increase significantly because of the higher involvement of Netflix.

What did change, however, was the main target audience of the series. Laseure tells that in the context of *Undercover* (but this also goes for other projects and other major streamers), Netflix was mostly interested in the Dutch audience because of a combination of its bigger market volume and the enormous popularity of the Dutch character of Ferry. Therefore, from the second season on, several decisions were taken because of this new direction. At first sight, one might think the exact opposite because in the second season (1) the setting is mainly located in Flanders; (2) one of the main Dutch characters, i.e. Kim (Anna Drijver), dies early on; and (3) the widely popular ecstasy kingpin Ferry is in prison and does not have a lot of screen time (Fig. 13.2).

The main explanation for this 'Flemish focus' has to do with the fact that the production and scriptwriting was already well advanced when Netflix got to read it. After the streaming giant indicated that the new season would not be sufficiently 'Dutch' and accordingly not fully capitalize on its initial success in the Netherlands, the screenwriters added several Dutch elements: 'the two Dutch characters, Ferry and Danielle, received a few extra scenes in order to "please" Dutch audiences and keep these characters alive', says Moolenaar. Another confirmation of this thesis is the

Fig. 13.2 By the time the second season of *Undercover* aired, characters played by Dutch stars Elise Schaap (left) and Frank Lammers (right) had become the most popular draws for the show, forcing the producers to alter the storylines for series 2

fact that when looking at how VRT and Netflix marketed the second season, clear differences can be found. Whereas VRT mainly put forward the West-Flemish arena and the two new Flemish characters played by popular actors, Netflix mainly focused on Ferry and Danielle. As a consequence, audience expectations were high and Dutch viewers were eventually disappointed to find out that their favourite characters were placed in a backstory. Remarkably, the dissatisfaction of Dutch audiences was anticipated by all parties involved, which is why Netflix (Lina Brouneus [director of film acquisitions]) asked De Mensen to expand the *Undercover* universe with a new instalment in the form of a prequel film, *Ferry*

Ferry and the Production of a Local Netflix Streaming Universe

Indeed, to meet audience demand, Netflix requested De Mensen to work out a story that would fill the gap left by season two and at the same time keep audience interest high until season three, in which Ferry would once again be a protagonist. For the creatives, this was an excellent opportunity to dive into the backstory of a popular character and extend the universe of *Undercover*. While there was certainly a commercial interest in producing a prequel about such a beloved character, Janey Van Ierland, acquisitions and co-production manager at Netflix Benelux, stressed that 'it was also about good storytelling and a sincere will to further explore and develop an exciting character'.[9] In accordance with their increased involvement in the series' second and third season, 'Netflix financed the biggest part of the film, next to money from the tax shelter, which accounts for approximately 30% of the production budget', according to Vanhaecke.[10] Additionally, VRT was also involved but played a very small part, and this time, the production also received support from Screen Flanders (€140.000), an economically-oriented supporting measure. Van Ierland and Moolenaar claimed that because of these changes, and mainly because of the bigger involvement of Netflix, the film was quickly financed and could be instantly produced. This situation was considered as unique in the generally financially-fragmented audiovisual industry of the Low Countries. Another difference from the series was the sequence of the release windows, where this time, Netflix would be first in line. Still, *Ferry* is in the strictest sense not a full Netflix original as it is co-produced. According to some of our respondents, this implies that they did not have to work with the 'Netflix original team', but with the 'Netflix co-production team.' According to Moolenaar, the former would 'monitor productions much closer', while the latter's 'business model dictates that the creative part of the production is in hands of the local partner' (be it the broadcaster or the production company) (Fig. 13.3).

Fig. 13.3 *Ferry* changes the focus of the franchise and centres on Lammers and Schaap, as the setting shifts to the Netherlands

The film was directed by Flemish director Cecilia Verheyden who also directed five episodes of the second season. In fact, in total, five different directors have been working on the series and film. This is in line with the idea that in cinematic universes and franchises, 'the role of the director is often less central than that of the producer—who, like a television series' "showrunner," retains creative oversight' (Fleury et al. 2019, 13). There are several ways to approach our case as a good example of a so-called universe, similar to the well-known Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), albeit on a much smaller scale and led or steered by a streaming platform. First, the different series and films all take place in the same story world and are intertextually linked by means of shared characters, locations and storylines that build upon each other. While initially the focus was on the character of Peter/Bob, played by Flemish actor Tom Waes, it became quickly clear that Dutch crime lord Ferry took the spotlight and is currently the driving force behind the universe. As stated above, the character's instant popularity following the first season eventually led to the production of the film, anticipating the audience's reaction towards the second season of *Undercover* in which Ferry only played a minor role. Likewise, the upcoming series about Ferry will up the ante in that regard by further exploring his past while a fourth season of *Undercover* is not planned. This shift in centrality of characters is accordingly met with a shift in partners' roles (Netflix taking the lead) and the target audience, as the narrative of the new series is almost exclusively aimed at a Dutch audience. In line with the overall evolution of the universe, Netflix will lead this production, though VRT is still, but much less, involved, only retaining public broadcast rights for Flanders.

Second, the interviewees often referred to the business side of building a universe and/or franchise. Vanhaecke adduces that *Undercover* is now seen as an industrial or productional template for other series in a way that it showed Netflix the way forward of 'cooperating with regional and local partners,' being (public) broadcasters and production companies. The overall success of *Undercover* has solidified this transnational approach in which not just the story but also the established partnerships cross several borders. In addition, Netflix stepped in at a moment in which the ground work had been done by the local partners and initially confined itself to a merely financial investment before gradually taking up a more central role and further fine tuning the production in its different stages. In other words, being a co-production instead of a full Netflix original, the initial risks for Netflix were fairly low in the beginning, allowing them to adopt a 'wait and see' strategy to fully assess a series' potential (global) success while remaining attached to the project. Having said that, we need to acknowledge that Van Ierland explicitly preferred to not talk about *Undercover* or *Ferry* as a 'franchise' due to its negative connotation as she associates it with 'milking original ideas, which is not the case.' Accordingly, the economic nature of building a universe and the conscious strategic decisions in this direction made by Netflix are seriously downplayed. Vanhaecke, on the other hand, thinks that 'franchise' is the correct term, taking into account the brand extensions such as a book series and other merchandising (a board game) that have been made based on the *Undercover* IP (Fig. 13.4).

What is more, Moolenaar is 'proud that it is considered a franchise, as this must mean that they created something good […] even though you should always stop at the peak.' Put differently, if audience interest drops or there are no good stories left to be told about the characters, the creative team and partners alike are willing to pull the plug on the *Undercover* or *Ferry* universe.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the case of *Undercover* demonstrates Netflix's (commercial) belief in locality. Their willingness to cooperate with local partners shows a firm amount of trust and respect towards said partners. During the interviews, local partners, producer and showrunner frequently mentioned the high level of trust and artistic autonomy experienced during the different stages of production. Netflix did give feedback and advice on storylines, script, edits and particularly promotional efforts but left the creative control to the local production team, which is in line with earlier research (e.g., Petruska and Woods 2019). Naturally, this makes Netflix a 'tempting partner for local talent and independent producers, bringing financial security to new projects' (Iordache 2021, 17). Van Ierland acknowledged this by stressing that Netflix's strategy is based on mutual trust and mainly lays in supporting the local team by giving input based on their experience with streaming content. In the case of *Ferry*, for example, they suggested to reduce the film's length in order to optimize the rhythm and thus better suit established viewing patterns of the streaming audience. The belief in locality is further seen in Netflix's strategy to find, support, and develop local stories which are firmly embedded in a local culture and feature authentic characters and locations. According to all interviewees, this unique local character is what made *Undercover* and *Ferry* into global successes.

Fig. 13.4 Netflix has looked for opportunities to sell merchandise based on the *Undercover* intellectual property, including these board games for sale in Belgium. (Photograph courtesy of the authors)

As a platform that operates not only in the Low Countries but worldwide, it appears to be Netflix's aim to also span the often seemingly uncrossable national borders. To do so, it pays attention to the 'wants and needs' of all regional audiences involved, subsequently articulating local cultures and identities in its content. Global audiences, on the other hand, see and experience the local as 'exotic' and now being used to dubbing or subtitles on the Netflix platform, they fully embrace the exotic locality of such stories. For Netflix, this combination of a local strategy and its global audience reach proves to be very valuable and beneficial. Indeed, taking both elements together, the overall *Undercover* universe, series and their cinematic spin-off are (narratively) balancing markers of local and national identities with supra-national objectives of reaching an international audience. A remarkable side effect of this strategy is that it generates a form of pride in the local market where the series was initially released. Going through the news coverage, the discourse clearly centred around the uniqueness of a Flemish series being picked up by 'the world's largest streaming platform' and subsequently becoming an international success (e.g. 'Flanders receives own Netflix series').

The development of the *Undercover* world demonstrates that franchise development and the building of cinematic universes has not only become central to Netflix's global strategy but equally so to its local or regional tactics in Europe. Even though *Ferry* might seem to be a crucial part of the overarching universe, it could be argued that the film mainly functions as a mere vehicle (or stepping stone) to further drive the series forward, simultaneously comforting (mainly Dutch) audiences that more is underway. In that sense, the *Ferry* film is clearly subordinate to the needs of a serial fiction. What is more, the *Undercover* case shows how Netflix was quick to jump on an idea supported and partly developed by the Flemish PSB, exploiting it, and eventually taking over with the turn to *Ferry* and *Ferry: The Series*. As such, not only is it mainly Netflix that wants to further expand the universe, the company is (by investing more) simultaneously cutting VRT out of the loop, and also focusing more on Dutch audiences.

In addition to these specific findings about *Ferry* and *Undercover* in the context of Flemish and Dutch cinema and television, we would like to conclude the chapter with a call for more fine-grained analyses of the local productions of global streamers. Our analysis of *Ferry* highlighted connections between serial fiction and films, the growing strategic importance of franchise-oriented production, local public service media and massive global platforms, among other important findings, but it is crucial to remember that this is just one case study. In order to understand how similar dynamics are playing out across the continent, we also need close analyses of important European franchises such as Spain's *Money Heist / La Casa de papel*, Germany's *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)*, or those which like *Undercover* come from smaller, more peripheral markets like

Norway (e.g. the *Battle* and *Troll* film franchises). The localisation of global platforms in Europe is having profound impacts on European producers and the traditional infrastructures of film and television production and we hope to have shown that examining the products created in the processes of localisation can be an effective way of understanding those impacts.

Appendix

Industry Professionals Interviewed for this Chapter

Interviewee	*Affiliation*	*Function*	*Interview date*
Heidi Hermans	VRT	Co-producer/advisor fiction	10 June, 2022
Dorien Laseure	VRT	Head of international program sales	10 June, 2022
Ivy Vanhaecke	De Mensen	Executive producer	14 June, 2022
Nico Moolenaar	De Mensen	Creator and showrunner	20 June, 2022
Janey Van Ierland	Netflix Benelux	Co-producer/acquisitions & co-production manager	6 July, 2022

Notes

1. According to the FlixPatrol database (2022), *Ferry* stayed for 22 days in the top 10 in Belgium and 32 days in the Netherlands. See https://flixpatrol.com/title/ferry/top10/
2. GoPress/BelgaPress is a Belgian press database with access to all Dutch- and French-speaking newspapers and magazines.
3. All quotes from the interviews were translated from Dutch to English by the authors.
4. This was necessary according to Moolenaar, as at the time, there was another Flemish undercover-themed series that was in the making for VTM, i.e. *De Infiltrant* (2018-).
5. Personal interview by authors. Date of interview can be found in the chapter's Appendix.
6. ibid.
7. ibid.
8. ibid.
9. ibid.
10. ibid.

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