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MONOLINGUAL FILM REMAKE

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13. A 'DOUBLE TAKE' ON THE NATION(AL) IN THE DUTCH-FLEMISH MONOLINGUAL FILM REMAKE

Eduard Cuelenaere

INTRODUCTION

Known for its fragmentation and diverse languages and cultures, the European film industry still experiences difficulties in competing with the dominance of Hollywood. While roughly 1.9 million cinema tickets are sold annually for American films – both studio and independent – in Europe, non-national European (NNE) films¹ only sell an average of 185,000. NNE films account for 12 per cent of total European cinema admissions, while national films (those made for a domestic audience) account for 21 per cent of admissions. This is in stark contrast to the figure for American films, which stands at 65 per cent (Jones 2020). What is clear from these figures is that, from an audience standpoint, Hollywood is still at the heart of European film culture, and European films still encounter major obstacles in crossing their national borders (Higson 2015: 138). When European audiences are drawn to NNE films, it is because they offer an alternative (in terms of narrative, genre, casting, etc.) to popular Hollywood cinema, not (necessarily) because of their (foreign) nationality or opportunity to encounter a different culture or place (Jones 2017: 479). In sum, European films are unlikely to travel in Europe unless they are:

- (a) a big-budget Hollywood-style action/adventure blockbuster or animation;
- (b) a medium-budget middlebrow quality drama based on a best-selling book and an Oscar-winning Hollywood star attached;
- or (c) a low-budget MEDIA-supported art-house film made by a Palme-d'Or-winning auteur. (Jones 2020)

Looking at recent developments, one could also add ‘or a remake of a popular, commercial European film’ to the above enumeration. In Europe, nationally produced films supply increasingly universal themes and subject matter for border-crossing (translation) purposes (Verevis 2017: 153). Because of these opportunities, several pan-European enterprises have been formed in the past two decades. These enterprises simultaneously distribute films in European and international areas, with remakes and re-adaptations ‘at the heart of [their] creative strategies’ (Meir 2018: 4). Looking at box-office revenues, such intra-European remakes generally turn out to be quite successful. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the practice might present a potential solution to the inability of popular European films to cross borders. Even European film industries that are part of the same geo-linguistic region (e.g. Scandinavia) are dealing with these barriers. It therefore seems that alongside strategies such as transnational co-production, remaking films might offer a new and viable way to circumvent the aforementioned issues.

The film industries of Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of northern Belgium) and the Netherlands – together forming the Low Countries – deal with the aforementioned issues. Indeed, both film industries have always experienced problems in releasing their films across their mutual border. Besides obvious commercial reasons – think of the shortcomings in distribution and promotional strategies – this lack of interest in their respective film culture and products is indicative of a bigger intercultural context between both regions. Cajot (2012: 53) argues that since the 1990s, the intercultural contact between the Netherlands and Flanders has sharply deteriorated, which is reflected in a reduction in the exchange of various cultural products – not only cinema but also newspapers, literature, radio and television. However, the new millennium marked an essential shift in the Low Countries when a new film practice was established: Instead of (unsuccessfully) releasing each other’s films, multiple Flemish filmmakers began to remake Dutch films domestically, and vice versa (Cuelenaere *et al.* 2016). In the context of European cinema (and even within a broader global context), the case of Dutch-Flemish film remakes is quite exceptional when one considers that the 23 million inhabitants of both regions essentially speak the same language (with some minor differences in accent and vocabulary), have a partly shared history, are neighbouring regions and could be considered culturally proximate. Paradoxically, it is also because of these elements that both film industries show a mutual interest in producing remakes of each other’s films. Dealing with the same issues – having a small domestic market and experiencing difficulties in finding broader audiences, while enjoying more substantial revenues for their domestically produced films – several filmmakers saw opportunities in remaking already existing and commercially viable films and scripts.

Considering the above, this chapter will explore the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon, which generated no less than eleven film remakes in a period of eighteen years (see Table 13.1), as a relatively new, yet highly significant

Table 13.1 Complete list of Dutch-Flemish source films and subsequent remakes

Source film	Film remake
<i>All Stars</i> (1997, van de Velde, NL)	<i>Team Spirit</i> (2000, Verheyen, BE)
<i>In Orange</i> (<i>In Oranje</i> , 2004, Lürsen, NL)	<i>Gilles</i> (<i>Buitenspel</i> , 2005, Verheyen, BE)
<i>Love Is All</i> (<i>Alles is Liefde</i> , 2007, Lürsen, NL)	<i>Crazy About Ya</i> (<i>Zot van A.</i> , 2010, Verheyen, BE)
<i>Loft</i> (2008, Van Looy, BE)	<i>Loft</i> (2010, Beumer, NL)
<i>Madly in Love</i> (<i>Smoorverliefd</i> , 2010, Van Mieghem, BE)	<i>Madly in Love</i> (<i>Smoorverliefd</i> , 2013, Van Mieghem, NL)
<i>Come as You Are</i> (<i>Hasta La Vista</i> , 2011, Enthoven, BE)	<i>Adios Amigos</i> (2016, van Rees, NL)
<i>Brasserie Romantique</i> (<i>Brasserie Romantiek</i> , 2012, Vanhoebrouck, BE)	<i>Brasserie Valentine</i> (<i>Brasserie Valentijn</i> , 2016, Vogel, NL)
<i>Family Way</i> (<i>Alles is Familie</i> , 2012, Lürsen, NL)	<i>The Family Way</i> (<i>Allemaal Familie</i> , 2017, Vos, BE)
<i>Men's Hearts</i> ^a (<i>Mannenhartten</i> , 2013, de Cloe, NL)	<i>What Men Want</i> (<i>Wat Mannen Willen</i> , 2015, Peeters, BE)
<i>Homies</i> (2015, Karthaus, NL)	<i>Bad Trip</i> (2017, Vos, BE)
<i>The Longing</i> (<i>Het Verlangen</i> , 2017, Lürsen, NL)	<i>Hidden Desire</i> (<i>Verborgen Verlangen</i> , 2018, Moerkerke, BE)

^a It should, however, be noted that this film is actually already a remake of a German source film entitled *Männerherzen* (Verhoeven 2009).

industrial practice in the Low Countries' film industries, and in a broader sense, those of Europe. Beginning with the particular nature of this unique remake phenomenon, the tensions between sameness and difference, universalism and particularity, and the transnational and national will be explored, as well as the strategies that filmmakers apply to bypass these tensions. This chapter

criticises the clear-cut demarcation between these tensions and argues for a more interactive and interwoven take on the film remake. Adopting both macro and micro perspectives, it will first consider the Dutch-Flemish film remake practice from a broader industrial perspective and will then address the textual properties of the films under consideration. In doing so, this chapter asserts that the remake cycle in the Low Countries is both a nationally and transnationally oriented phenomenon. Moreover, it provides new insights into the ways film and cinema are connected to or are part of – or rather, are made part of – a specific local, national or transnational context.

THE (TRANS)NATIONAL CINEMA DEBATE: ENTER THE FILM REMAKE

Notwithstanding the varying perspectives of scholars working in the fields of remake, adaptation, translation or intercultural studies, most seem to agree that the film remake is characterised by an inherently hybrid status. Whether or not one is convinced that every text is *in se* an intertext, it is clear that film remakes are directly linked to one or more preceding (film) texts – rendering their status inherently hybrid. This relationship complicates assumptions of originality, imitation, imperialism, ownership, high versus low culture, and identity. Indeed, the film remake, both as process and product, impedes fixed or essential notions of identity, not only on the level of on-screen identities (characters' ethnicities, genders, cultures, etc.), but also on the level of the film *an sich*. Connecting this to the concept of nation and national identity, one might think of Homi K. Bhabha, who coined the concept of hybrid nation, arguing that:

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out', remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference. (1994: 219, original emphasis)

Thus, the film remake's inherent hybridity mirrors the performative, negotiating and contingent nature of nations and their subsequent national identities. In the context of Hollywood remakes of French films in the 1980s, Lucy Mazdon states that the 'very act of moving a film across cultures calls into question its own identity as "national" product' (2000: 65). Here, she raises the critical question of whether these Hollywood remakes of French films are by definition less (or not) French when compared to their source texts. If yes, then what are the constitutive elements that make us believe they carry a (different) national label? By pointing out this ambiguity, Mazdon touches on debates in film studies, where the idea of national cinema, and more recently of transnational cinema, is challenged.

Keeping recent political events in mind – think of Brexit or the sustained wave of nationalist and protectionist movements throughout Europe – it seems that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the nation as an imagined community (cf. *infra*) has grown in significance. Symptomatic of this trend are the statistics of the Eurobarometer, which show that up to the present day, most Europeans still feel principally national and less European (Standard Eurobarometer 2018). In an era ‘of mounting tensions and increasing hostilities to difference, understanding the ways in which cultural artefacts and artistic texts respond will provide a vital perspective on the contemporary moment’ (Harvey 2018: 2). This growing antipathy to, or at least disinterest in, difference, the unknown, the foreign or the exotic could also be linked to the practice of Dutch-Flemish film remakes, which – coincidentally or not – also originated in the new millennium. Indeed, although possibly far-fetched, one could interpret the practice as a form of unwillingness to watch films of other cultures – even those that are very closely related, as in the case of Flanders and the Netherlands. In that sense, the remake phenomenon in the Low Countries reads as a confirmation of the prominence of nationalist sentiments. Explained by concepts such as cultural proximity (Straubhaar 2007), in the age of globalisation, audiences apparently continue to prefer cultural products that feel familiar or are at least as close as possible to their own cultural, local or national background. Looking specifically at the context of television in Europe, Milly Buonanno (2002) asserts that most European nations generate an increasing amount of domestically produced prime-time programmes (such as drama) whereby (national) cultural proximity appears to be a crucial factor. This should, however, also be nuanced. According to Buonanno, it is true that people are prone to watch their own national culture on television – and, as Jones’s statistics show, albeit to a lesser extent, at the cinema as well – but they are also highly familiarised with (and seem to heavily enjoy) cultural artefacts from the US.

If one wants to theorise the nation in film studies today, it seems necessary to adopt a dialectical approach, whereby both the notion of transnational cinema and the more traditional frame of national cinema are taken into account (Harvey 2018: 8). Although it is undoubtedly important to acknowledge that the transnational notion is essential to understand cinema’s history, current status, and future, one should not neglect the still-significant notion of the nation(al). In this context, Berry (2006) calls for a paradigm shift, wherein the various relationships between national and transnational concepts are studied. As a way of combining both the national and transnational lenses to study the remake phenomenon in the Low Countries, it might be elucidatory to approach the subject by employing Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie’s (2007) concept of ‘small nations’. They believe that an analysis of the relations between film and various national elements should be part of present and

future film studies, claiming that research on cinema can benefit from a consideration of small national cinemas and industries, provided that these are seen as small but permeable aspects of a transnational network. According to both authors, in the context of such interconnected networks, small nations often choose to emphasise the uniqueness of their national identity in order to sustain their existence. By examining the relations between cinema and the nation, one can understand 'the specificity of various contemporary and historical conjunctures' (Hjort and Petrie 2007: 13). Moreover, analysing small nations can uncover 'the emergence of regional networks and alliances that are providing transnational alternatives to the neo-liberal model of globalisation driving contemporary Hollywood' (Hjort and Petrie 2007: 17). The Dutch-Flemish remake practice could indeed be regarded as such: a commercially driven international collaboration, whereby scripts and films are shared for remake purposes, with the ultimate goal of countering Hollywood's dominance and bringing audiences back to domestic cinema. This adds an important nuance to the seemingly pure national status of the phenomenon, suggesting the involvement of a broader perspective that includes a transnational aspect.

UNDERSTANDING THE FILM REMAKE: TRANSNATIONAL LOCALISATION OR NATIONAL ECHO CHAMBER?

These allegedly – or indeed, false – oppositional stances between the national and transnational are illustrative of the paradox of film remakes. Although many of these films are inherently hybrid (both textually and contextually), their reason for existence is often the need for localisation and the staging of distinct national elements. Localisation is then used as a way to sidestep the aforementioned tension between the particular and the universal. When, for instance, European movies are remade in Hollywood, different formal, narrative, and cultural elements are localised – the 'different' can be transformed into the 'universally applicable' – and they then have to 'undergo considerable change as they cross the Atlantic – despite a seeming similarity of plot' (Vincendeau 1993: 23). When considering its production context, the practice of remaking films in the Low Countries could almost be perceived as a purely national affair. First, the directors of the remakes originate from the country of production in almost all cases, except for one.² This is also true for the main actors who have a part in the films. Then, on the level of promotion and distribution, it quickly becomes clear that these Dutch-Flemish film remakes only aim for their domestic markets and are, therefore, released exclusively in the country of production, again, except for one.³ Lastly, interestingly enough, it appears that almost all of the remakes are co-productions between Flanders and the Netherlands. Therefore, even though the practice of Dutch-Flemish remakes appears to be predominantly national at first sight, on a production

level, the phenomenon appears to transcend national borders. Moreover, both these Dutch and Flemish filmmakers constantly decide to remake Flemish and Dutch films, and not, for instance, Italian, Korean or Mexican films. Therefore, on a more structural level, there seems to be an incentive that motivates filmmakers from both sides of the border to remake each other's films – pointing again to the aforementioned paradox of the practice. In this context, Daniel Herbert argues the following:

for all that it is clear that 'transnational remakes' constitute an important aspect of transnational cinema, we need to attend always to the multiple ways in which any given remake, like any other film or collection of films, is 'transnational'. (2017: 221)

When applied to Dutch-Flemish remakes, a combination of what Hjort (2009) calls affinitive, milieu-building and opportunistic transnationalism seems most suitable. Affinitive transnationalism centres on the inclination of people (in this case, filmmakers) to connect with those who are similar to them, 'typically being understood in terms of ethnicity, partially overlapping or mutually intelligible languages, and a history of interaction giving rise to shared core values, common practices, and comparable institutions' (Hjort 2009: 17). Next to cultural affinity, this type of transnationalism can also 'arise in connection with shared problems or commitments in a punctual now, or with the discovery of features of other national contexts that are deemed to be potentially relevant to key problems experienced within a home context' (Hjort 2009: 17). Indeed, the decision to remake films from across the border in the Low Countries can be seen to be driven by a sort of transcultural affinity and shared problems that both industries are dealing with. Milieu-building transnationalism points to 'a model of transnational collaboration aimed at jointly developing solutions to particular problems that hamper the development of thriving film milieus' (Hjort 2009: 19). This form of transnationalism is closely related to the former, although its goal is partially different – and possibly more far-reaching and radical – namely, the development of a transnational model of cooperation that proposes a solution to the aforementioned obstacles that European productions have to deal with. Lastly, opportunistic transnationalism 'involves giving priority to economic issues to the point where monetary factors actually dictate the selection of partners beyond national borders' (Hjort 2009: 19). This type of transnationalism focuses on the often-commercial incentives behind transnationalism. Illustrative of the latter are production companies such as the Ghent-based Marmalade – which focuses mainly on producing commercial, mainstream films and uses the process of remaking films as one of their principal strategies – and the Amsterdam-based Fabiola – a venture of three independent production

companies based in Belgium that work together to sell their formats to the Dutch television market.

In light of commercially motivated transnationalism, one might also think of the production and distribution of television formats. Indeed, one of the crucial components of the European transnational television industry is the use of such television formats (Bondebjerg *et al.* 2017: 6), of which the aforementioned *Fabiola* is an exponent. This use is also relevant to the context of the Low Countries, where many television programmes are remade or formats exchanged. Even though such television formats offer novel ways of exchanging media products, it is claimed that the process of localisation in format trading in Europe (indirectly) complicates or impairs ‘real transnational encounters’ (Bondebjerg *et al.* 2017: 6). As film remakes generally localise the foreign, the same could be said of intra-European (and, thus, Dutch-Flemish) film remakes, which indirectly complicate the creation of a shared and strong pan-European (cinema) culture. In other words, remaking films in Europe could equally be regarded as a process that prevents mediated cultural encounters in a kind of national echo chamber. These encounters might result in a scenario wherein European audiences mainly perceive their culture as being national or local, ‘despite its obvious global and European dimensions’ (Bondebjerg *et al.* 2017: 4). However, one should be cautious in equating the process of remaking with localisation. Think, for example, of the Swedish film adaptation of the Millennium book trilogy by Stieg Larsson. Analysing the film trilogy, Mazdon writes:

In their mobilisation of elements of the action/crime thriller genres[,] the films are arguably far more ‘American’ than the slow-paced, broody dramas stereotypically associated with Scandinavian production by Anglophone audiences. The films were marketed in the English-speaking market so as to deliberately disguise their ‘foreign’ origins and position them as a Hollywood-style product. (2017: 22)

The first film of the trilogy, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev 2009), a Swedish/Danish co-production, wanted to circumvent the problems associated with cultural discount by disguising its ‘foreign’ status and opting for the opposite of localisation by delocalising its content. However, the film proved unpopular and ‘was faced with the usual resistance of the mainstream audience’ (Mazdon 2017: 24). This is probably in part related to the fact that the language of the film was not English. Two years later, in 2011, an English-spoken Hollywood remake, directed by David Fincher, was released. Wanting the film to be as authentic as possible, the American director found it of essential importance to work with a Swedish crew and included textual elements that are typical of Scandinavia and its Nordic Noir genre. Aware of its European embedment, Fincher did the exact opposite with his remake when he opted

to ‘foreignise’ the Hollywood-inspired source film. Thus, this example shows that a Hollywood remake of a European source text may be more ‘European’ than the preceding film that was produced in Europe. This, in turn, although being an American remake, may facilitate a mediated cultural encounter with European culture.

MAKING SENSE OF NATIONAL THEMES AND SENTIMENTS IN THE FILM REMAKE

Central to the above discussion is how the relationship between cinema and culture (or nation) should be understood. Although cinema is never a mirror of ‘an already fully formed and homogeneous national culture and identity’ (Higson 2002: 63), in most cases, it does privilege specific subject positions of the national subject. According to Higson, these subject positions are consequently reproduced, making it increasingly difficult to leave open the possibility of alternative positions. This idea is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) well-known concept of ‘imagined community’, which argues that the nation (and, therefore, also a supra-nation like Europe) only exists in the minds of people. Although the social construction of notions such as nation and national identity is agreed upon by many scholars, one should not underestimate the materialised outcomes of such imaginations. Like many other cultural artefacts, cinema can convey political or even nationalist messages, and ‘if we are to understand the relationship between cinema and nationalism, we must engage with its capacity both to represent and construct a people’ (Harvey 2018: 8).

In the context of the Low Countries, Jaap Verheul explores the growing success of Flemish cinema since the 2000s and articulates that ‘a certain notion of Flemishness should . . . be seen as a political barometer for the intensified assertion of Flemish sovereignty’ (2016: 327–8). He also expresses (implicitly) that the Flemish nationalist movement was an important matrix for the development of the Dutch-Flemish remake cycle, and it should, therefore, be considered when analysing the phenomenon. If these Flemish film remakes express a clear sentiment of Flemishness, it seems quite manageable to perceive these film remakes as national echo chambers (i.e. archetypical examples of quasi-all-encompassing localised products that previously emanated a certain amount of Dutchness). Consequently, such a stance presumes that their source films were clearly national or that the filmmakers of the remake added new nation-specific traits to the film. However, how can one make sense of or describe national cinemas and their defining content(s) in a textual manner? Hjort (2000: 95) argues that, in academic literature, national cinemas are often characterised as dealing with national theme(s) but little research has been done on what specifically establishes the themes of a nation. Building on Peter Lamarque and Stein H. Olsen’s (1994) theory, Hjort differentiates between topical themes on

one hand – namely, those that ‘involve only concepts that arise within, and remain relevant to, a highly specific historical or cultural formation’ (2000: 97), and perennial themes on the other hand – namely, those that ‘bring into focus subject matter that resonates across historical and cultural boundaries’ which is why they ‘are universal or quasi-universal in their thrust’ (2000: 97). A theme implies thematisation and can therefore only arise when, during the viewing of the film, the audience’s attention is drawn to the features that signify the theme(s) by flagging, foregrounding or focusing on specific elements. Hjort advances that naturally, thematic hybridity (e.g. combining perennial with topical themes) can also occur, and a topical theme may often function as a secondary background, providing ‘the necessary means of anchoring perennial themes within specific cultural formations’ (2002: 309).

Since the notion of nation indicates the particularity of a community and its cultural context, ‘the theme of nation is a likely candidate for topical theme par excellence’ (Hjort 2000: 98). Starting from such a rigid description of the theme of nation, Hjort (2002: 308) contends that not many filmmakers would agree that their films have the nation as a primary theme. However, many would concur that their films are about a specific reality in which they (and their audiences) find themselves (e.g. Flanders). To explain the latter, she puts forward the concept of ‘banal aboutness’, arguing that:

all films that make use, for example, of recognisably Danish locations, the Danish language, Danish actors and props that mirror the material culture of Danes, qualify as being about Denmark [and] that such elements can provide the basis for a given film’s national quality, but that they cannot, in and of themselves, constitute a theme. (Hjort 2000: 99).

Hjort’s concept is, of course, inspired by Michael Billig’s notion of ‘banal nationalism’ (1995), whereby it is illustrated that one should be wary of reducing nationalism to only obvious or explicit utterances, as in propagandist cinema. Billig’s notion of banal nationalism refers to those banal – but ideological – messages that ‘enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced’ (1995: 6). Applying this to cinema and the national cinema debate, Hjort argues that the most important characteristic that differentiates banal or habitual (in a Bourdieusian sense) instances of aboutness and ‘the kind of aboutness that is constitutive of full-blown themes of nation’ (2000: 101) is focal attention and the degree to which it is constitutive of (or of elementary importance to) the story.

BANAL ABOUTNESS IN DUTCH-FLEMISH FILM REMAKES

As the narratives of Dutch-Flemish film remakes and their source films are very similar, small, quasi-invisible, or often banal, textual changes are magnified

when compared; potentially added or changed themes also become more apparent. Indeed, when textually comparing a source text with its remake, a prism is conceived that aids us in pinpointing the perennial and topical themes of the two versions, or the transformations that occurred during the remake process. Moreover, the prism of the remake makes it easier to trace instances of banal aboutness, as such habitual elements are defamiliarised through the remake process and become highly legible when juxtaposing two similar texts (Cuelenaere *et al.* 2019a: 14). It is, however, important to note that such a textual analysis does not (and cannot) disclose the essential properties of a particular nation, nor does it wish to claim that national sentiment is the constitutional element of people's multi-layered identity – two known pitfalls of dogmatic essentialism and rigid constructivism.

Examining the entire sample of Dutch-Flemish film remakes and their source films (see Table 13.1), it becomes clear that they are all commercial genre films intended for mainstream domestic audiences. In total, fourteen out of the twenty-two films are romantic comedies; two are tragicomedies; two are family films; two are of the thriller genre; and one film couple switches during the remake process – *Brasserie Romantique* can be considered a drama (with comedy accents), while its remake, *Brasserie Valentine*, is more of a romantic comedy. The fact that the majority of films being remade in the Low Countries are comedies is indicative of the 'apparent inability of much comedy to transcend national boundaries [which] explain[s] the frequency of the comic remake' (Mazdon 2000: 92) – which is why they are in need of a remake. This confirms that, compared to other genres, comedy is generally defined more by its surrounding culture (i.e. its specific sense of humour).⁴ Here, the notion of banal aboutness seems elucidatory. Although the perennial comedic aspect is maintained in the different Flemish and Dutch versions, the specific humour (i.e. gags and jokes) is transformed in order to create a feeling of proximity, taking into account the different socio-cultural contexts (Cuelenaere *et al.* 2019b). In addition, the (often small) adjustments made to humorous aspects in both Dutch and Flemish versions certainly do not constitute the theme of a specific nation; at most, they could be perceived as banal re-enactments of real-life situations. Hence, although these changes made during the remake process tell us how these films wish to create a feeling of (national) familiarity, it is unlikely audiences perceive them in this way.

The exact same procedure (i.e. banal aboutness) can be found in many other elements of these twenty-two films. As argued in earlier work (Cuelenaere *et al.* 2018; 2019a; 2019b), the use of space (i.e. rural space versus urban landscape) was not generally transformed during the remake process, but the locations were (almost always) changed, which, again, adds a national quality to these films. Think also of the dialogue: the structure and purpose of the dialogue between the films' characters are generally not altered substantially. However,

the speech itself (i.e. jokes, tone and cultural references in the dialogue, as well as the actors' accents) is transformed in consideration of the different linguistic and cultural contexts. The same counts for the characters (and their role in the overarching narrative) in these films, as they are generally kept the same after being remade. Nevertheless, small adjustments are made to their personalities and names, and, of course, the actors playing them are also changed. In terms of representation, one can also find compelling differences in relation to the portrayal of, for instance, nudity, sexuality, gender and ethnicity. To a certain extent, these are all changed because of various differences in the socio-cultural contexts, or, more rightly, because of perceived differences in these contexts (Cuelenaere *et al.* 2018). Therefore, if one looks from a distance, patterns of universality versus locality keep returning in every pair (i.e. source film and remake), proving that there might be some kind of dialectic balancing mechanism between the universal and the particular – or between transnational aspects and banal national recognisability – at play in these films. Even though all of the remakes that came out of this practice seem to present themselves as unique and 'new' Dutch or Flemish films, they all share the same mechanisms and underlying frameworks – regardless of the small and banal changes made to them, aiming to recreate a Dutch or Flemish aboutness.

Looking at all of the Dutch-Flemish film remakes and their previous source films, none can be regarded as positing the nation as a primary theme. Indeed, the primary themes of these films are clearly perennial, including friendship, love, sexuality, adultery, growing up, death and murder. Given that the films under consideration are produced only for national domestic audiences, these themes show that there are indeed many shared dimensions and 'commonalities behind what often seem to be strong national, cultural identities' (Bondbjerg *et al.* 2017: 27). As mentioned above, Hjort contends that thematic hybridity might occur, giving the example of the Danish *Let's Get Lost* (Jonas Elmer 1997). According to Hjort, this is an apt example of a film that uses the theme of nation, albeit in a less foregrounded way (2002: 309). In this light, the following section will delve deeper into the dynamics between primary and secondary themes on the one hand, perennial and topical themes on the other, and how these relate to the nation(al), by building on an illuminating case study that came out of the Dutch-Flemish remake practice.

TEXTUALLY DISSECTING THE NATIONAL IN FILM REMAKES: A CASE STUDY

The case study that will be used to further elucidate the aforementioned theoretical statements is the Dutch source film *In Orange* and its Belgian remake *Gilles*. Both are about a young boy who wants to become a professional player in the national football teams of respectively the Netherlands (the Dutch Eleven)

and Belgium (the Belgian Red Devils). This case is particularly characteristic of most of the other films that are included in the sample because, on many different levels, it shares those features – inter alia, of domestically oriented and recognisable popular genre films directed by famous national directors including famous national actors – that almost all films in the Dutch-Flemish remake practice use. Another reason for focusing on this case is because, at first sight, *In Orange* and *Gilles* seem to clearly concentrate on the nation – for instance, by focusing on the national sport of football – which appears to be more explicitised than in the other films in the sample. This is obvious from the first sequence of both films, which is symptomatic of the rest of the films: When the young boy appears on screen for the first time, we can see that his room is filled with posters of the national football team and covered in the national colour (i.e. orange in the Dutch version and red in the Belgian version). This focus on the nation becomes even more apparent when the boy starts to sing the national anthem, with the music of the ‘Wilhelmus’ (in the Dutch version) and the ‘Brabançonne’ (in the Belgian version) playing in the background. Although of secondary importance to the story, this hyper-saturation of national elements appears to point towards the existence of the theme of nation in both films. The principal themes of both versions are, however, the difficulties that arise when having to say farewell to one’s childhood (closely related to coming-of-age narratives); the emotional suffering and mourning of the main character brought on by the death of his father; and the oftentimes harsh differences between people’s dreams, hopes, expectations and reality.

Another argument, which at first glance may speak in favour of the theme of nation in both versions, is that the young boy, Remco van Leeuwen (the main protagonist in the Dutch version), is clearly inspired by two Dutch football legends: Marco van Basten and Johan Cruyff. In the first sequence of the Dutch source film, the camera sweeps across Remco’s bed, which shows a leaky football at its head. Remco is such a fanatic that he prefers to sleep on a leaky ball instead of a soft pillow. However, this striking detail is not coincidental: It is actually a cultural reference to Marco Van Basten, who used a deflated ball as a cushion when he was a teenager. Moreover, Remco’s stubborn and wilful personality, which becomes apparent when he refuses to accept the doctor’s advice to rest (and stop playing football) after being tackled during a match, is also based on Van Basten, who is known to be a stickler and, similarly, did not listen to his doctor as a young boy. Moreover, in *In Orange*, the father of the twelve-year-old Remco is a greengrocer who owns a small grocery in town. Quite early in the film, he dies of a heart attack. Both these elements show striking similarities with the life of Johan Cruyff, whose father was also a greengrocer and died young because of cardiac arrest. One might contend that both these elements are only small details in a much bigger story. But looking at the press articles that circulated during the film’s release, many do mention

that the character of Remco, played by Yannick van de Velde, is based on the two Dutch football legends. This finding suggests that the use of van Basten and Crujff's biographies as a frame of reference plays a significant role in understanding and interpreting the film's main protagonist.

Conceptualising the theme of nation, Hjort argues that '[t]hematisations of nation, particularly in the case of hyper-saturation, have a tendency to promote opacity in international contexts, for local, topical[,] and nation-specific thematic elements are likely to be only partially comprehensible in other national contexts' (2000: 108). Linking this to the theory presented above, one should consider that film remakes are generally – though certainly not always, as argued above – characterised by their localisation of culturally or nationally specific elements. This localisation circumvents cultural opacity and maintains a socio-cultural verisimilitude for the targeted domestic audience. But, remarkably, the aforementioned culturally specific (and therefore topical) elements in the Dutch *In Orange* were neither omitted nor changed in the Belgian remake *Gilles*. Apparently, the filmmakers of the Belgian remake did not find these elements too closely entwined with the Dutch context, which would make them less comprehensible for a Belgian or Flemish audience. Interestingly, when looking at all of the articles regarding the film that were released in Flemish newspapers, only one small article (aptly titled 'The Original of Gilles') mentioned Marco van Basten and Johan Crujff. Furthermore, this article was released as a promotion for the Dutch source film, which played that week on Flemish television (Rvg 2006: 40). Hence, neither film critics nor journalists mentioned the link between the background of Gilles' character (the Belgian equivalent of Remco) and van Basten and Crujff. Indeed, although both names might be familiar to some Belgian people, they are clearly better known in the Dutch context. Consequently, it might be the case that when in the process of remaking *In Orange*, the Flemish filmmakers did not notice the cultural references in the main protagonist's background.

The fact that these at-first-sight 'topical elements' remained unchanged despite the different context (i.e. the remake process) suggests two things: They are perennial and, therefore, not firmly connected to a specific cultural or national context; or, as Hjort would say, they instead qualify as being 'about' the Netherlands. As the surrounding discourse found, the use of two famous Dutch football players in the Dutch source film *In Orange* is indeed highly culturally defined. Thus, it would be incorrect to assert that these elements are part of a perennial theme. Hence, it makes more sense to state that they provide the basis for the film's national quality and do not, 'in and of themselves, constitute a theme' (Hjort 2000: 99). The fact that the biographical background of the main protagonist in the Belgian remake *Gilles* was not changed, as well as the finding that Flemish news articles did not mention anything related to the underlying cultural references, indicate that these aspects cannot really be

defined as topical themes. These culturally defined features may be recognised and recalled by Dutch audiences and elicit national sentiments, but they do not, in and of themselves, form an indispensable, central theme of the film. This could, therefore, be seen as an archetypical example of thematic hybridity, whereby the perennial theme of ‘dream versus reality’ is locally anchored by covering it with national flavour. However, as shown above, it is quite challenging to claim that these nationally specific elements form a separate and self-contained theme.

This finding demonstrates that, when dealing with thematic hybridity, Hjort’s theory may be too rigid. Although it is quite reasonable to state that a film can be constituted of different themes, both topical and perennial, it becomes more challenging when the boundaries between topicality and perenniality, and thematisation and ‘aboutness’, become blurred. This is precisely where the comparative textual analysis of the film remake can be illuminating, given that the defining feature of the remake is its hybrid nature and blurred boundaries. Using the Dutch-Flemish remakes as a frame of reference, it shows that, at first sight, some topical themes were only local interpretations of perennial themes. Moreover, the transformations – or, indeed, the lack of them – in *In Orange/Gilles*, barely affected the general story or the themes of both films. This shows that what is being transformed can hardly be called a theme. Instead, these findings are the perfect example of Hjort’s banal aboutness. Consequently, these elements may appear to be inseparable from a specific cultural context, but they are actually quite redeemable and are mainly used to make the film recognisable for a domestic audience. Remco’s room, filled with props that refer to the Dutch national football team, the singing of the ‘Wilhelmus’, and his culturally inspired biographical background aim to create a feeling of familiarity for a Dutch audience. This clearly differs from the full-fledged theme of a particular nation.

CONCLUSION

Going back to the question of whether the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon can be considered a kind of national echo chamber, i.e. including cultural artefacts that are being presented as being inherently national – while actually being hybrid – it seems that there is no simple answer. In order to prove such a fundamentally complex statement (that, as shown, starts from many different assumptions), this chapter argues that, building on existing theories from both the (trans)national cinema debate and the field of remake studies, a similarly multi-faceted approach is mandatory. Therefore, this chapter first zoomed in on the cultural and production context in which these Dutch-Flemish film remakes were produced – acknowledging that many different actors function as intermediaries or gatekeepers standing in between the product and its context. Although these films are largely produced nationally and targeted at domestic

audiences in most cases, there are different transnational mechanisms operating simultaneously in the creation of these film remakes. Indeed, a combination of affinitive (because of the cultural affinity and comparable industry), opportunistic (because of the commercial incentives) and even milieu-building (because collaborating structurally may alleviate common obstacles) transnationalism appears to be in play when these film remakes were produced. Hence, on the level of production, the Dutch-Flemish remake practice is, in its core, transnationally defined, but on the surface nationally oriented.

Second, this chapter looked at how film remakes are textually linked with the concept of the nation and the national. More specifically, it considered how and why (Dutch-Flemish) film remakes are national, and emanate, or indeed echo, the nation, national specificity or national sentiments. Applying Hjort's framework to the sample of eleven Dutch-Flemish film remakes, it seemed that most film pairs are characterised by a shared or universal framework (narrative, themes, characters, spaces, etc.) with differing interpretations of these same structures that turn them into (banal) Flemish or Dutch realities. Contrary to the film remake as a national echo chamber thesis, one could assert that the employment of perennial themes in these films might result in mediated cultural encounters with universal norms and values, resulting in a type of banal cosmopolitanism. However, as argued above, these transnationally shared schemas were, at every turn, dipped in a national (Flemish or Dutch) sauce, which complicates these mediated universal encounters. Hence, from a textual standpoint, the films that came out of the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon wish to recreate familiar realities for mainstream audiences but also to build on perennial themes and universal values. Indeed, holding the example of *In Orange/Gilles* in mind, although at first glance it appeared that both films were clearly national, after the analysis, it proved difficult to claim that the films under analysis truly deal with themes of the nation.

As well as analysing the film texts and their surrounding contexts, it is, however, equally necessary to take into account the audiences that eventually watch and interpret these films – reminiscent of Anderson's claim that the nation (but also Europe) only exists in the people's minds. In the case of Dutch-Flemish remakes, one must note that all of these film remakes are actually perceived as 'originally' Flemish or Dutch films, because the audiences are generally unaware of the fact that they are watching a remake of a different source film embedded in a different socio-cultural context. Consequently, even though these films are balanced between the transnational and national, or the universal and the particular, audiences may perceive them to be mainly national and not something coming from a neighbouring nation. In other words, although some of the films' elements are, in fact, transtextually connected to foreign cultures, they may generally not be perceived as such. The comparative analysis shows that even if the Dutch and Flemish are clearly different in some (banal) aspects, they might not

be as different as these films want them to believe they are, again pointing to some sort of cosmopolitan potential. Yet from an (implied) audience perspective, one could draw the opposite conclusions, which speak in favour of the argument of the remake as a national echo chamber. Indeed, because of the dual hegemony between the dominant cultural proximity of the US, and the second dominant cultural proximity of the national context, alternative modes of conceivable proximity (linguistic, socio-cultural, or historical ties with other geographically close European nations) are being downplayed or, indeed, diminished. Hence, coincidental with Billig's thesis, what might appear to be banal or superficial on the surface, could, therefore, at its core, be highly ideological.

NOTES

1. These are films 'produced or primarily co-produced in one European country, but released in another' (e.g. a French film released in Germany) (Jones, 2020).
2. The Dutch remake of *Madly in Love* is actually directed by the same Flemish director (Hilde Van Mieghem) who directed the source film, also called *Madly in Love*, which makes it an auto-remake.
3. The Dutch and American remakes of the Flemish film *Loft* were both (limitedly) released in Flanders.
4. However, one should note that another reason for this is that the genre of romantic comedy has been very popular in the Low Countries in the past decennium. Many mainstream romantic comedies are produced for a domestic audience, especially in the Netherlands. As these films prove to be attractive and commercially viable, filmmakers from across the border want to reproduce these successes in their own market.

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