



Originality versus proximity: An explorative study of audience reactions to monolingual film remakes

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Abstract

Striving for a more holistic approach of the field that studies film remakes, this article analyses the reception context of the monolingual film remake practice in the Low Countries. Instead of assuming how audiences define, perceive, experience, and evaluate Dutch-Flemish film remakes, this article explores these aspects empirically by analysing data from four focus groups. Given the cultural proximity between the Netherlands and Flanders, the study equally inquires if (and why) Dutch and Flemish audiences prefer their local film versions. It is found that participants do not share a common definition of the artefact and understand the label differently from scholars or people working in the industry. Participants were highly critical of film remakes and generally preferred the local version. However, it appeared that the latter depended on whether they knew which version was the 'original'.

Keywords

cultural proximity, film remake, focus groups, Low Countries, reception research, remake studies

Though several ancillary study fields such as adaptation studies, audiovisual translation studies, or TV format studies have now slowly started to adopt audience research as part of their methodological toolbox, the field that studies film remakes lags behind (Cuelenaere, 2020). Analysing the data obtained by conducting focus groups, this article will address this crucial blind spot and demonstrate the relevance of such bottom-up

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research. Doing so, the objective is to not only assume why and how reception contexts may impact (and help us understand) the film remake as product and process, but actually to study these contexts by setting aside assumptions in order to reconstruct ‘the viewer’s horizon of expectation’ (Biltereyst and Meers, 2018: 31). This article, therefore, wishes to strengthen the plea for a more holistic approach to the study of film remakes, convinced that juxtaposing the analysis of textual aspects with an investigation into the extra-textual elements of the film remake is crucial for the field’s advancement. On top of its profoundly restricted methodological toolbox, the limited geographical frame of the field is also a point of concern. While remake studies have positively expanded their boundaries in the past decades, Hollywood film remakes are still the dominant objects of research (Smith and Verevis, 2017). Therefore, parallel to the aim of proving the possible benefits of integrating audience research in the field, I equally deviate from the ubiquitous geographical focus on Hollywood by looking into the context of Europe, more specifically the Low Countries – consisting of both the Netherlands and the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, Flanders.

The study I present in this article is part of a larger research project that takes a multi-methodological, cultural studies inspired approach on the highly peculiar film remake practice of the Low Countries (see e.g. Cuelenaere, 2020). Central to this study is the idea of cultural proximity and how local audiences experience and deal with highly similar, yet localized, versions of roughly the same film. As such, it is part of a broader body of research in cultural studies that deals with questions of why and how local contexts, references, and aspects are employed, represented (e.g. transformed or localized), and interpreted in different media (cf. Castelló, 2010; Mikos and Perrotta, 2012; van Keulen and Krijnen, 2014; Cuelenaere et al., 2019). After a short introduction to the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon, I will take inspiration from and build on findings of audience research from closely related fields to finally come up with three overarching research questions: (1) How do Dutch and Flemish audiences describe and evaluate film remakes? (2) How do Dutch and Flemish audiences experience, interpret, and explain differences and similarities between the Dutch-Flemish source films and their remakes? And (3) (why) do Dutch and Flemish audiences prefer the local version over the foreign version of a film?

The monolingual remake phenomenon in the Low Countries

This article’s object of research is located in the small geo-linguistic context of the Low Countries, where a total of 11 Dutch-Flemish film remakes were released in the period between 2000 and 2018 (see Table 1). Considering the modest size of both film industries in the Low Countries, the remarkably short time period between the release of the source films and their remakes, and the popularity of these films, the practice appears to be reasonably significant. The particular linguistic aspect underscores the uniqueness (even on a global scale) of this case even more: as the source films and remakes are both spoken in Dutch (naturally except for minor differences in terms of vocabulary and accent), these Dutch-Flemish film remakes are to be considered as monolingual (Cuelenaere et al., 2019). In sum, this phenomenon is exceptional, not in the least because

Table 1. The total of Dutch-Flemish source films and subsequent remakes (between 1997 and 2018) with the name of the director and number of tickets sold domestically.^a The films that were employed as examples in the focus groups (through the use of fragments or film teasers and trailers) are emphasized in bold.

Source film	Film remake
<i>All Stars</i> (1997, van de Velde, NL, 298,600)	<i>Team Spirit</i> (2000, Verheyen, BE, 358,000)
<i>In Orange</i> (<i>In Oranje</i> , 2004, Lürsen, NL, 192,900)	<i>Gilles</i> (<i>Buitenspel</i> , 2005, Verheyen, BE, 230,000)
<i>Love Is All</i> (<i>Alles is Liefde</i> , 2007, Lürsen, NL, 1,213,764)	<i>Crazy About Ya</i> (<i>Zot van A.</i> , 2010, Verheyen, BE, 447,324)
<i>Loft</i> (2008, Van Looy, BE, 1,194,434)	<i>Loft</i> (2010, Beumer, NL, 445,000)
<i>Madly in Love</i> (<i>Smoorverliefd</i> , 2010, Van Mieghem, BE, 142,507)	<i>Madly in Love</i> (<i>Smoorverliefd</i> , 2013, Van Mieghem, NL, 204,422)
<i>Come as You Are</i> (<i>Hasta La Vista</i> , 2011, Enthoven, BE, 240,000)	<i>Adios Amigos</i> (2016, van Rees, NL, 16,054)
<i>Brasserie Romantique</i> (<i>Brasserie Romantiek</i> , 2012, Vanhoebrouck, BE, 105,168)	<i>Brasserie Valentine</i> (<i>Brasserie Valentijn</i> , 2016, Vogel, NL, 95,000)
<i>Family Way</i> (<i>Alles is Familie</i> , 2012, Lürsen, NL, 860,000)	<i>The Family Way</i> (<i>Allemaal Familie</i> , 2017, Vos, BE, 60,851)
<i>Men's Hearts^b</i> (<i>Mannenharten</i> , 2013, de Cloe, NL, 450,000)	<i>What Men Want</i> (<i>Wat Mannen Willen</i> , 2015, Peeters, BE, 190,000)
<i>Homies</i> (2015, Karthaus, NL, 205,246)	<i>Bad Trip</i> (2017, Vos, BE, 50,176)
<i>The Longing</i> (<i>Het Verlangen</i> , 2017, Lürsen, NL, 137,778)	<i>Hidden Desire</i> (<i>Verborgen Verlangen</i> , 2018, Moerkerke, BE, 15,501)

Notes

^aThese numbers were collected by consulting online reports of the Flemish Audiovisual Fund (VAF) and the Dutch Cinema Monitor (*de Bioscoopmonitor*) of the independent research agency Film Research Netherlands. In 2019, the Netherlands has a population number of 17.28 million, whereas Flanders has 6.596 million inhabitants.

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

one of the crucial reasons of existence for transnational film remakes is the cultural proximity it wishes to (re-)establish with its target audience through the process of localization (in terms of, among others, linguistic and cultural aspects).

The Netherlands and Flanders not only share the same language, but also a great deal of their pasts, which makes them (arguably) even more culturally proximate. Next to their comparable size, both Dutch and Flemish film industries are also (akin to most other European film markets) vastly reliant on governmental subsidies as well as on tax incentives. Furthermore, both film industries are known for their tradition of co-producing each

other's films. Indeed, both regions suffer from the European impasse where local films are almost without exception incapable of having a successful release outside of their local borders (Higson, 2018). Aiming to bypass this seemingly hopeless situation, and fighting the hegemonic position of Hollywood, European film industries co-produce with other (mainly) European partners. In addition to the latter European situation, from the 1990s on, a growing mutual alienation, disinterest or indifference has defined the Dutch and Flemish cultures. This led to a situation where the two markets shared fewer and fewer cultural artefacts (Cajot, 2012). Indeed, based on a report of the period 2004 to 2012 on Dutch and Flemish newspapers, magazines, radio, literature, dance performances, (music) theatre productions, and television, it can be said that there is hardly any substantial cross-border traffic (Van Baelen, 2013; Raats and Donders, 2020). As well as some recent successes in co-productions of television programs and fiction, from the 1990s on, the Netherlands and Flanders have started to adapt each other's television formats (van Keulen, 2020) and remade each other's television fiction. In a similar vein, alongside the co-production strategy, the film industries in the Low Countries have started to invest in the remaking of each other's films, which became a novel, economically viable way to circumvent the aforementioned deadlock.

A previous textual analysis indicated that most of these film tandems are mainstream genre films (often romantic comedies) targeted at local audiences that 'simultaneously seem to draw from well-known and established Hollywood industrial practices and creative tropes' (Cuelenaere et al., 2019: 266). Moreover, it was shown that the process of localization was central to the adaptation process (i.e. changing textual elements to make the film remake more recognizable and identifiable for the target culture). Yet, instead of arguing that this idea of localization – and the differences it generates between the source films and remakes – directly reflects clear-cut cultural differences between both regions, it was found that they are rather 'the result of the perceptions of cultural differences and stereotypes held by filmmakers' (Cuelenaere et al., 2019: 278). Apart from these local(ized) elements, the Dutch-Flemish film remakes show many (quasi)universal aspects (displayed in similar characters, themes, spaces, or dialogic structures).

Integrating audience research in the field of remake studies

As a result of the absence of audience research in the field of remake studies, this article deliberately chooses to draw on research questions, methods, and findings of closely related fields and disciplines. Inspired by Kuipers and de Kloet (2009: 104), this study therefore builds on cultural studies 'theories on encoding and decoding, on parasocial interaction and identification [or recognition], and on cultural repertoires [which] provide different frameworks for the interpretation and explanation of national differences in media reception'. In short, the first refers to Hall's (1980) model, which argues that audiences are active and can interpret texts in dominant, negotiated, and oppositional manners. The second, which is grounded in media psychology (e.g. Livingstone, 1998), asserts that cultural differences are expected to influence processes of identification and parasocial interaction (e.g. individuals' mediated experiences with someone on screen).

The third, which in its turn sits in with the field of cultural sociology (e.g. Lamont and Thévenot, 2000), argues that audiences from different national contexts possess different ‘repertoires of evaluation’ which are employed to evaluate and judge, which can eventually result in dissimilar preferences.

In the context of film studies, Jones (2017) showed that audiences in different European countries demonstrated remarkable commonalities in how they respond to the same movies. Consequently, he found that specific films with a strong transnational attraction were understood in roughly the same ways, ‘regardless of national context’ (Jones, 2017: 480). The results from Bondebjerg et al. (2017), contrarily, tell us that audiences carry more powerful feelings about their particular national TV content, and, moreover, show more profound and spontaneous associations with stories from their own national surroundings. Their findings, therefore, indicate that ‘[t]here is a proximity that goes deep between stories where locations, characters and details of a recognizable reality are experienced and felt directly’ (Bondebjerg et al., 2017: 11). The authors add that, at times, audiences liked narratives conceived in European countries other than their own (or co-produced stories), yet, a feeling of otherness or distance appears to persist. Here, the concept of cultural proximity provides us with an explanatory framework. According to its founders, cultural proximity should be understood as ‘the desire for cultural products as similar as possible to one’s own language, culture, history, and values’ (Straubhaar et al., 2013: 504). In other words, as Buonanno (2008: 96) argues, 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. Among the symbolic material that competes for the public’s time and attention, people expect and are pleased to recognize themselves, their own social, individual and collective world, their customs and lifestyles, accents, faces, landscapes and everything else that they perceive as close and familiar.

In the realm of audiovisual translation studies, Desilla (2014), for instance, found that even though audiences did not understand all the cultural specifics of foreign film fragments, apparently, they did understand much of the latent or implied meanings of many of the references. Studying cultural bumps and how these are circumvented by adapting cultural artefacts is part of the broader study of localization. Even though the research of localization is also greatly in need of the perspective of the audience (Esser et al., 2016a), its small existing body of research provides us with some interesting research questions and findings.

Localization refers to the utilization and reworking of characters, plots, locations, and other textual forms from cultural imports for particular socio-historic contexts. Hence, when cultural products are remade in other local contexts, they generally ‘requir[e] local cultural adaptation, [so] 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’ (Suna, 2018: 31). In the realm of television studies, research by Turnbull (2015), for instance, showed that the 2014 US remake of *Broadchurch* (UK, 2013–17) was unsuccessful because it failed to establish a sense of cultural specificity, which made it less recognizable and identifiable for the target audience. Indeed, as Kuipers and de

Kloet (2009: 103) have argued '[g]reat cultural distance may make identification simply impossible', which might 'make meaningful or pleasurable decoding' difficult.

Additionally, Esser et al. (2016b) found that when people were invited to compare various versions of a television format, many of the comments and analyses they made were in terms of 'us' versus 'them' and were highly normative. On top of that, when these participants made interpretations after comparing the different versions, they noted differences, above all, and commonalities to a much lesser extent. Esser et al. (2016b) also discovered that many of the respondents in their study showed signs of a growing global awareness and relatedness. Conversely, and in line with Bondebjerg et al. (2017) their research, when addressing the differences between format adaptations, many participants held a myriad of stereotypes of their own and foreign national cultures. A final, yet highly interesting observation is that the groups of participants from two different national contexts 'defined what is special about their particular national versions in exactly the same way' (Esser et al., 2016b: 305), which brings us back to the aforementioned dialectical relationship between the local/national and the universal.

A last strand of research questions emerges from the understanding that scholars do not necessarily define film labels or categories (e.g. genres) in the same way as 'people outside the realm of film and media research' (Bondebjerg et al., 2017: 155–6). Related to the latter is the discrepancy that exists between today's scholarly tradition in adaptation (and remake) studies, which problematizes notions of hierarchy, originality, and fidelity – so-called 'originals' are often a priori preferred to (and, therefore, ranked higher than) their adaptations – while research shows that they are still prevalent in audience responses (Mee, 2017). Indeed, '[a]udiences and fans frequently frame their reactions to new versions, or even to rumours of mooted productions, within discussions of taste, respect for the original texts, and, especially, of value and quality' (Mee, 2017: 193). Connected to the latter finding of Bondebjerg et al. (2017) is Mee's (rather hypothetical) statement that the audiences' awareness of the remake label of a particular film directly affects their expectations, acceptance or rejection of the remake in question. What is more, in comparison to adaptations from book to film, where fidelity is generally ascribed value, a film remake's faithfulness toward its source film(s) is often seen as highly uncreative (Mee, 2017). In his study of the American remake of the Japanese horror *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), Hills (2005) argues that many of the knowing audiences (those who are aware of or have seen both the source film and its remake) preferred the 'original' because they like to present themselves as early adopters (in this case, cultists), claiming that they have seen the source film first – even before it achieved more widespread acclaim. Mee (2017: 200) adds that, in comparison to, for example, intra-national film remakes, transnational remakes are granted an extra reason for existence, because of the 'additional cross-cultural aspect to their appeal [that is] the lack of subtitles, recognizable actors, changes to familiar locations or customs and practices', which also guarantees them a new audience.

Method

Building on these insights, the research presented in this article is intended to serve as a preliminary glance at the audience perspective. I gathered the data for this study through

the organization of a total of four focus groups between February and July 2019, two of each held respectively in Flanders (Ghent) and the Netherlands (Rotterdam). The groups each consisted of four to seven participants, were organized in Dutch, lasted about 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. As asserted by Frith (1996: 4): '[p]art of the pleasure of popular culture is talking about it; part of its meaning is this talk, talk which is run th[r]ough with value judgments'. The latter connects with one of the crucial advantages of focus groups, namely the fact that these supply data specifically on 'the meanings that lie behind [. . .] group assessments [as well as] the uncertainties, ambiguities and group processes that lead to and underlie group assessments' and, finally, on 'the normative understandings that groups draw upon to reach their collective judgements' (Bloor et al., 2001: 4). Finally, the aim of this article is to further fuel a new strand of research in the field of remake studies, with its main goal being to 'understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make any statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation' (Krueger and Casey, 2015: 80).

Due to financial limitations, I recruited the participants through social media (mainly Facebook groups and Twitter), a newspaper ad, and offline flyers. With the aim of preventing foreknowledge that might affect value judgements of a film¹ (or, indeed, might prime participants), the call for participation did not mention anything related to the subject of film remakes, nor to Dutch or Flemish cinema. Moreover, though both locations (university rooms in Ghent and Rotterdam) are quite easily accessible, it is likely that these locations limited the study's reach of recruitment, given that mostly people living in these two cities responded to my invitation.

Finally, the people who were interested in participating (a total of 170) had to fill in a form where they had to answer a few general questions related to, on a general basis, (1) how many films they watch; (2) how many national films they watch; (3) how many Hollywood films they watch; and, last, (4) how many non-national and non-Hollywood films they watch. The form also required their date of birth, gender, nationality, ethnic background, current residence, and highest degree. These parameters – that were, in a next step, employed as selection criteria – were informed by the subject of this study and its accompanied hypotheses. As such, the reason for adopting film attendance as a selection parameter was mainly due to the hypothesis that the higher the participant's film attendance, the higher their chance of knowing that the film fragments and trailers the respondents were about to see were actually from films that are remakes of Dutch or Flemish films.

As one of the goals of the study was to look at whether the knowledge of the remake label could, in turn, affect value judgements, I ensured internal homogeneity on the levels of film attendance (and, therefore, probably film knowledge) and nationality.² Additionally, in order to reflect the typical audiences that go to see the films of our sample (being mainstream movies aimed at broad audiences), the aim was to target as wide a range of people as possible, therefore differing in age, gender, ethnic background, and education. As such, I equally established internal heterogeneity on these levels, except for nationality. While overall internal homogeneity is often seen as an essential condition when organizing focus groups, as this facilitates group discussion, I did not experience many issues in this regard. Even though this decision might be an explanation for the

many disagreements during the discussions, the breadth of (dissimilar) opinions was what this study aimed for. Based on these selection criteria, I made a selection and set up four focus groups: (1) a group of Flemish people with overall high(er) film attendance; (2) a group of Flemish people with overall low(er) film attendance; (3) a group of Dutch people with overall high(er) film attendance; and lastly (4) a group of Dutch people with overall low(er) film attendance.

A protocol consisting of a list of introductory and closing questions, different film fragments as well as trailers (each followed by a group of questions) informed the actual group discussions. The topics of groups were: (1) descriptions and definitions (of Dutch and Flemish/Belgian cinema as well as a film remake); (2) comparative assessments and normative judgements of the film fragments; (3) what constitute 'typical' Dutch/Flemish elements; (4) recognizability/identifiability. The first two fragments shown were (roughly) the first two minutes of the film pair *Love Is All* (Dutch source film, Lürsen, 2007) and *Crazy About Ya* (Flemish remake, Verheyen, 2010). I chose these two films (or the fragments) because, after a textual analysis, they both seemed very topical (i.e. locally anchored) at first sight, while in fact, they are highly perennial (i.e. their content is quasi-universal) – which becomes clear after seeing both versions and discovering that the differences between them are actually very small. The next pair of video fragments were the trailers of *Come as You Are* (Flemish source film, Enthoven, 2011) and *Adios Amigos* (Dutch remake, van Rees, 2016). These were chosen on the basis of their implicit cultural codes (e.g. representation of nudity, the use of humour), which means that both these video fragments do not carry highly explicit cultural markers. The last four fragments that I showed, contrarily, do have several explicit cultural codes (think of many Belgian/Dutch flags hanging in the background or the use of the national anthems in both versions).³ The latter four fragments (consisting of two trailers and two teasers) come from the films *In Orange* (Dutch source film, Lürsen, 2004) and *Gilles* (Flemish remake, Verheyen, 2005).

Results

Describing and evaluating the film remake

When asking the participants to describe the film remake, many spontaneously gave several examples. In line with Bondebjerg et al.'s (2017) findings, some of these diverged from the definitions of the distributors, filmmakers, or trade press: whereas *Mary Poppins Returns* (Marshall, 2018) is commonly categorized as a sequel, one of the respondents used it as an illustration of the film remake. Additionally, there was no consensus among the participants regarding the definition of the film remake, as they mentioned myriad (often contradictory) aspects. Nevertheless, most participants agreed that the film remake balances between repetition and novelty: in one way or another, a core element of the source film (often the narrative or 'concept') should be repeated in the new version, while other aspects should be altered (often the style or aesthetics, the geographical or temporal setting, the rendition [e.g. animated versus live-action], or the actors). An example of the latter is Flemish participant, Tom's⁴ statement: 'A film could even have exactly the same title and be roughly about the same, if it is not the same story it is not a

film remake to me.⁵ Symptomatic of the latter is that many of the participants suggested that film remakes are, for instance, new, (technologically) updated, modernized, reworked, or contemporary versions of other films. Additionally, across most of the sessions, participants mentioned the idea or process of localization – which was, moreover, (implicitly) connected to transnational remakes. The Dutch participant Ruben summarized it accurately:

I think it mainly has to do with a difference in cultures. Think of a Swedish film that is translated for an American audience such as *Let Me In*. Or *Love is All* that was translated for a Flemish audience in *Crazy About Ya*. The character of the prince in the Dutch version was changed to a tennis player in the Flemish version because, in Flanders, this is more recognizable [*herkenbaar*].⁶

However, the latter was contested in another group, where Axelle, one of the Flemish participants, stated that an American version of a Swedish, Danish or Norwegian film is not a remake, because, she states, ‘only the language changes’. Hence, many of the participants had their own, highly particular interpretation of what remakes are, as well as what they are definitely not. The findings of this study point towards the idea that the search for an overarching, common definition of the film remake is not only impossible (at least, when considering the extra-textual discourses), it is probably not particularly helpful if one wants to better understand the practice of remaking.

Describing what the participants thought was a film remake regularly came spontaneously with value judgements, more often in negative terms than in positive ones. This confirms that, independently of their overall popularity, film remakes elicit strong, often critical, and derogatory opinions. In line with Mee’s (2017) findings, the participants framed their descriptions of film remakes within discourses of taste, utilizing romantic notions of originality – that is, ‘films [. . .] are original creative conceptions and reflections of a “genius auteur or artist” [and] cannot, or should not, be remade’ (Cuelenaere et al., 2016: 2) – and determining which types of film remakes are worthy of existence. Most of the participants seemed to agree that film remakes are, by definition, less original than the films on which they were based. Only one participant in one of the Flemish focus groups reflected upon the latter, suggesting the following:

[*A Star Is Born* (Cooper, 2018)] is, I think, quite different from the original film, and because of that, I don’t know if a remake is by definition less original. I’m not entirely sure though, as that film tells a highly typical story of course. (Silke)

Additionally, it was often asserted that film remakes are highly commercially driven, less creative and authentic, demand less thinking, and are overall worse than non-remakes or the ‘original films’ – which is why, as many participants claim, the latter deserve more respect. While these rather negatively laden statements confirm Mee’s (2017) observations in terms of how audiences generally judge film remakes, some of the participants in this study also uttered more nuanced and at times even positive judgements of film remakes. Brecht (Flemish participant), for instance, said that he likes remakes because

comparing them with their source films is fun. In the same vein, Lotte (Dutch participant) asserted that:

the remake can often be a stepping stone towards the original. If you like a remake a lot, and you're aware of the fact that it's a remake, then there's a chance that you'd want to see the first version.

Tom suggested that remakes are fine, mainly because they offer contemporary audiences the opportunity to experience up-to-date renditions of older stories or films. A Dutch participant agreed with the latter, claiming that she really liked the latest version of *Aladdin*, mainly because the film is 'really readjusted to the times we live in'. Two other more positive readings of film remakes were that they do justice to the 'original' film, and that they are fine as long as they stay as close as possible to the preceding version. The latter finding touches upon the idea of fidelity, or, more specifically, it contests Mee's (2017) finding that, generally, in comparison to book adaptations, film remakes are seen as less valuable when they are faithful toward the source film.

Experiencing, interpreting, and explaining differences and similarities

After showing the participants two versions of a film pair, it was common in most groups that everyone automatically compared the two versions and framed their statements in terms of 'better' or 'worse'. These judgements, or indeed, hierarchical orders of two versions, were predominantly constituted through mentioning differences (thereby neglecting the obvious commonalities), confirming Esser et al.'s (2016b) findings. In terms of content, the participants' assessments were based on many different parameters, with the most frequent ones being actors or acting styles; aesthetics (mainly colours, editing, and camera-use) and soundtrack; image or sound quality; humour; language or dialect; authenticity or realism; use of clichés and stereotypes; drama; recognizability; identifiability; thematics (topicality, inclusiveness, representation of gender or ethnicity, etc.); and originality. An excerpt that illustrates the importance of actors (here linked to recognizability) is the comment by Dutch participant, Chantal:

I do like it when there are actors that I know. Not every single one of them has to be famous [. . .] For me it is less appealing when I do not recognize [*kennen*] anyone, though I don't know why that is the case.

It was, moreover, expected that the participants would also compare the remakes with their source films in terms of faithfulness, mainly because this appeared to be an important aspect in their descriptions and evaluations of the film remake. Yet, when actually confronted with the video fragments and when assessing them, the Dutch and Flemish participants hardly ever brought up the notion of fidelity. This is probably partly due to the fact that the audiences often did not know which of the versions was the 'original' – what is more, some of the participants in different sessions wanted to know which of the versions came first and asked the interviewer. Moreover, this may have to do with the fact that all of the films that are part of this phenomenon are mainstream genre films,

which are known for ‘carrying’ less symbolic or cultural value – plus the fact that, arguably, none of these films have garnered cult status – especially in comparison to so-called ‘art films’.

The fact that many participants were concerned with (or, at times, even suspicious of) knowing which version was the ‘first’ and which one was the ‘remake’ confirms their romantic attitude toward originality (i.e. being derivative is bad). Indicative of the latter was a moment after one of the Flemish focus groups where one of the participants asked whether *Come as You Are* was the ‘original’ film, and when this was confirmed by the interviewer, several participants cheered and felt relief. This suggests that they would feel ‘betrayed’ if the (often local) version that they saw was not the ‘first’ or, indeed, the ‘original’. In the Dutch focus group with low(er) film knowledge, the teaser and trailer of *Gilles* (Flemish remake) were shown before those of *In Orange* (Dutch source film). Because of the order of showing the remake first (without them knowing it was actually a remake), these participants spontaneously presumed that the fragments they saw first came from the ‘original’ film. This not only resulted in a clear preference for a non-local version, but also for the remake (i.e. *Gilles*). When the interviewer confronted them with the fact that the version they preferred could actually be the remake, one of the participants (Stan) responded:

That would be astonishing. Oh well, maybe not even. . . . If that is true, then they really wanted to try something different. If Belgium saw the Dutch version first and then made this version, than I’d say that they did very well and succeeded in adding a lot of realism to it.

In the latter case, the participant’s valuing of originality seems to be at odds with his preference for something that now appears to be clearly unoriginal. Because of this, he experiences some kind of cognitive dissonance, which he then tries to adjust by looking for other (external) explanations (i.e. referring to the filmmaker’s creative approach to the film remake) as to why he preferred an ‘unoriginal’ remake. This ‘clash’ between the romantic attitude of many of the participants and their actual preferences occurred in most of the other focus groups too. In an attempt to explain the process of ‘first viewing’, one of the Dutch participants, Annie, makes an analogy with music covers:

That is exactly the same as with music of course. Sometimes, my son sings old songs, and I wonder how he knows these. Then I realize that the song he was singing is actually a contemporary cover of an old song, which he himself doesn’t realize. Hence, if you only know the new film, then maybe you think it is not that bad. But if you’ve seen the older film, then you probably won’t like the new one.

This is reminiscent of Hills’ (2005) finding that some audience members (often fans) prefer ‘original’ versions to remakes because they want to be seen as early adopters. Annie’s statements might equally indicate an inclination toward films that one has ‘discovered’. As such, seeing a remake of that same film could be experienced as something that retroactively devalues that first cultural discovery. Similarly, Stan, another Dutch participant, talks about this retroactive devaluation, but links it to the remake label: ‘Well, the film is what it is, but knowing that it is a remake would definitely change my opinion of that film. I would look at it differently, I think.’

Understanding the audiences' preference for the local

In line with the idea of cultural proximity, most participants preferred their local variant, especially with regard to the actors and use of humour, language or dialect, as well as clichés and stereotypes. When participants were asked why they preferred the local adaptation, most of them referred to the aspects of recognition, identification, or, indeed, proximity: 'Being a Dutchman, I did not really like it [i.e., the Flemish version of *Love is All*]. Mainly because there is so little that appeals. I also don't know [*kennen*] the actors' (Stan). Indeed, most participants derived pleasure from the familiarity, recognition, and identification with elements of their local version. The few exceptions to this rule were found in the sessions of participants with high(er) levels of film knowledge. Ruben, for instance, one of the Dutch participants who introduced himself as a cinephile, was one of the few who also liked the Flemish version of the first film pair:

I thought [*Crazy About Ya*] was funny. I know [*ken*] the actors [. . .] I see these actors, you know, Kürt Rogiers or Barbara Sarafian. I've seen enough Flemish films to recognize [*herkennen*] them. To me, they are equally recognizable [*herkenbaar*] as Dutch actors.

Remarkably, the overall preference for the local version of a film pair, at times, clashed with the participants' favouring of originality. Lennert, one of the Flemish participants who generally preferred the Flemish versions of the film pairs, stated that, for him, localizing is unnecessary, while originality is more important. Furthermore, when participants sought to find explanations or interpretations of differences in, for example, humour, cultural clichés and stereotypes, or even acting styles, they usually referred to (essential) distinctions between cultural (or national) contexts – instead of, for example, explaining differences in terms of a distinct artist's vision. The following discussion in the Flemish session with participants who indicated to have less(er) film knowledge illustrates this:

- Silke:* I think that the things that are different in this version Flemish-ify the film. Though it is still not a typical Flemish film, the accents and things that are different are . . .
- Interviewer:* . . . Could you specify those things?
- Silke:* Yes, the fact that Flemish films are less loud or restless, are different in their images, and are better acted . . .
- Sanne:* . . . Yes, the fact that they are more cynical is typically Flemish. Flemish films are more dark, think of *Bullhead* [Roskam, 2011], *Don't Shoot* [Coninx, 2018], *Black* [El Arbi and Fallah, 2015] and others.

Additionally, as hypothesized, many participants perceived the fragments they saw as particularly or typically Flemish or Dutch. Even when the participants were confronted with the other version of the film pair, most of them still perceived both versions – which were often highly similar – as typical Flemish or Dutch films. Interestingly, some participants of the Dutch focus groups went as far to claim that the Flemish remake of *Love is All* still felt highly Dutch, or, indeed, un-Flemish, because the theme of Saint Nicholas

would be more culturally ingrained in the Netherlands than in Flanders. Most of the participants of the Flemish focus groups, however, did perceive *Crazy About Ya* as typically Flemish, and suggested that they found the film highly recognizable (among other things, because of the Saint Nicholas element). The most recurring elements (across the Dutch and Flemish groups) that made a film typically Flemish or Dutch were aspects such as language, humour, the representation of nudity, locations, acting style, colours, specific characters or themes, etc. Many of these could be related to the concept of banal aboutness, which points towards ‘banal reproductions of national identities in a film while not being explicitly national regarding its central themes’. Characteristic of elements that are indicative of the idea of banal aboutness is that they are highly interchangeable, while at first sight they appear to be highly topical. Yet, it appears that most of the participants do not perceive these elements as interchangeable.

Throughout the different group sessions, however, it became apparent that some of the participants, after comparing and assessing the different versions of the film pairs, finally came to realize that the at first sight highly local or national character of the film versions is actually quite ‘transposable’. This happened on different occasions, and was related to different aspects of the film texts which, according to our participants, give a local or national character to the film (version). In one of the Flemish groups, for instance, Tom announced after seeing the first fragment that, because he had already seen the Dutch source film of *Crazy About Ya*, the location of the fragment (being Antwerp, in Belgium) was actually interchangeable. The participant seemed to suggest that the location of the story is not inseparable from the story or film: ‘I have seen the Dutch version, and the location could be both the Netherlands or Antwerp, it doesn’t make a lot of difference, I think.’ This echoes the finding of Goldsmith et al. (2010: 207) in the context of Hollywood’s production strategy of using stand-in locations: ‘Locations often stand in for somewhere else not just because of common place elements, but because these elements are functioning iconographically to mark out, simultaneously, narrative meanings that are understood through genre.’ Another illustration of this comes from the other Flemish session, in which one of the participants, Luna, remarked that it is odd that the perception of what is typically Dutch or Flemish seems to be quite similar. During the discussion of the first fragment, most of the participants named several ‘Dutch clichés or stereotypes’ and suggested that the film is ‘typically Dutch’; after seeing the Flemish version, however, all of a sudden these elements that were first ‘typically Dutch’ now became ‘typically Flemish’:

- Brecht:* This was the typical Flemish cliché. The Dutch version felt a bit outdated, which fits better in that semi-nostalgic idea of . . .
- Luna:* I find it weird that you say ‘Flemish cliché’, while just now, it was a ‘Dutch cliché’. I think that, in itself, it is a cliché, but euh . . . I don’t know.

After seeing both versions of a film pair, another Flemish participant even suggested that: ‘You could actually just show the Dutch version, because both versions are practically the same. The new [Flemish] version is, therefore, not really necessary’ (Jan). During these discussions, some of the participants seemed to become aware of the

constructive, or indeed discursive nature of a film's national or local identity. Indeed, being confronted with two versions of the same film, the remake functioned as a prism (Cuelenaere et al., 2019) which made the often implicit or difficult-to-trace differences and similarities more explicit.

Conclusion

This research found that the audiences do not agree upon a single definition of the remake and do not always share the same understanding of the label with scholars or film professionals. Yet one of the aspects that most of our Dutch and Flemish participants seemed to allocate to the film remake is its balance between repetition and novelty: a film is, therefore, a remake if it reiterates a particular 'essence' of the source film, without copying the latter. Given the difficulty in finding a common understanding of the film remake, the article gives further weight to shifting attention to the identification, or indeed performance of (industrial) procedures, categories (types of remakes), and evaluations of film remakes, as well as the people who are in charge of this. Concerning the participants' evaluations of the film remake, apart from a few positive judgements, it turned out that many of them carried negative ones. Not only did most participants think that film remakes are by definition less original than non-remakes, they also found them to be deeply commercially driven, less creative or authentic, and worse.

Looking at the participants' experiences, interpretations, and explanations of differences and similarities of the different film versions shown, it emerged that mostly differences were mentioned, while the often obvious commonalities were generally overlooked. Apart from the more common differences (e.g. actors, aesthetics, humour, or language), and contrary to previous findings (Mee, 2017), during the comparative assessments, the audiences did not seem to care about the remakes' fidelity in relation to the source films. Yet this is probably related to the fact that the participants did not know which version was the source film or remake, and because the films shown carry less symbolic value. Whereas fidelity appeared to be of less importance, the romantic interpretation of originality and the (arguably intertwined) urge to know which version came first were all the more significant: many participants would feel deceived if the film they saw was actually a remake without them knowing. As such, most of them clearly preferred 'originals' over remakes, while our findings also suggest that many of the participants were affected by a 'first viewing' effect.

When the audiences were asked to explain or interpret the differences they mentioned in, for instance, the use of humour, this was usually done by framing it in terms of clear-cut differences between the Dutch or Flemish national identities or contexts. In line with the latter, the participants perceived the different film versions as typically Dutch or Flemish, referring to, among others, language, the representation of sexuality, and the use of locations. However, during the comparative assessments and discussions, some participants became aware of and detected the discursive nature of a film's national or local identity by recognizing the interchangeability of many of the seemingly locally anchored aspects. In some cases, this resulted in an explicit aversion toward the existence of the Dutch-Flemish remake phenomenon, as some of the participants remarked that, apart from some small differences in terms of language and minor cultural references,

these film versions are actually highly similar, and therefore superfluous. Finally, a central finding of the article focused on the relation between the Dutch-Flemish film remakes and cultural proximity. The study revealed that, in line with the latter concept, the lion's share of the participants preferred the local variants of the film tandems shown, which mainly had to do with the fact that they could recognize more of themselves (identification) as well as their surroundings (recognition) in these. However, this preference for the local version was in some cases contested because of the participants' overall desire for 'originality'. The results from my focus groups indeed indicate that the inclination toward the proximate is limited, and, in some cases, might diminish or even disappear in favour of a preference for the 'original'.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author received financial support for this research from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) (G045516N).

Notes

1. Cf. Mee's (2017) claims that state that an individual's awareness of the remake label might influence her/his opinion of the film in question.
2. As, for example, a Dutch participant might, during the discussion, recognize and signal that the film fragment of a Flemish remake that was shown is highly similar to a Dutch film she/he saw.
3. Here I build on Dhoest's (2004) work in the context of television studies. An example of an implicit reference could be the use of local songs, whereas an explicit reference could be a zoom on a national flag. In other words, explicit cultural references are those elements that clearly (from the analyst's perspective) refer to an extra-textual cultural reality, leaving nothing implied, whereas implicit cultural references are those elements that are implied but not manifestly or obviously uttered. These are mostly found in specific representations or portrayals of, for instance, sexuality, nudity, religion, sports, ethnicity, cultural habits or traditions, but also in humour, stereotypes, or clichés.
4. All the participants' real names were changed to fictitious ones.
5. All the quotes of the respondents were translated from Dutch to English by the author.
6. During the focus groups, it became clear that most participants interchangeably use *herkennen* (to recognize) or *herkenbaar* (recognizable), and *kennen* (to know). Yet, in Dutch, *herkennen* can also refer to the idea of identification. Because of these ambiguities, I decided to add the Dutch word used in brackets.

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