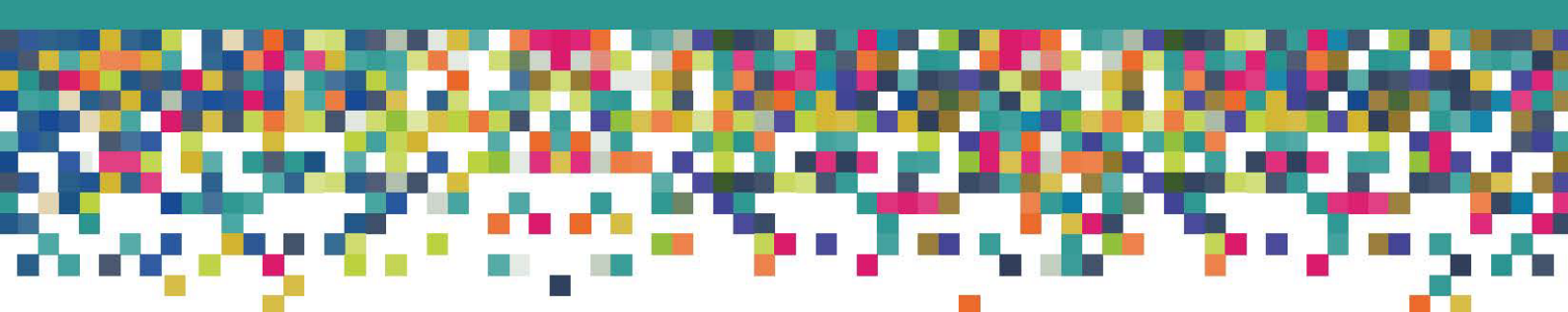




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## THE BELGIAN IDENTITY IN-BETWEEN A SPLIT SCREEN

A look from within the Belgian Film Industry

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## ABSTRACT

*It has generally been accepted that the Belgian film industry exists as a split screen, divided into a Flemish and a Francophone industry (Mosley, 2001). However, recent quantitative research has revealed an increase in intra-national coproductions between both industries, revealing a certain rapprochement (Van Beek & Willems, 2022; Van Beek, 2023). This rapprochement stands in contrast with the political estrangement between the Flemish and Francophone communities of Belgium over the past decades, attested by a strong Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang calling for Flemish independence. This combined with the general historical complexity of the Belgian identity prompts the question of why and how there appears to be this rapprochement between the two cinemas and whether it is indicative of a possible united Belgian national cinema and identity?*

*This qualitative thesis attempts to answer these questions by means of a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with stakeholders and professionals in the Belgian film industry. Through a bottom-up thematic analysis a great willingness from within the industry for the cinematic rapprochement between the Belgian Francophones and the Flemish was established, confirming the recent findings by Van Beek & Willems (2023). Conversely to Benedict Anderson's conceptualisation of the nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 2008) and Mosley's analysis of the Belgian split screen (Mosley, 2001), language and cultural diversity were not considered barriers for this rapprochement, but rather unique advantages of the Belgian identity and cinema. Nevertheless, the rapprochement appears fundamentally hindered by the complexity of the federal and regional funding systems and the lack of support from the Belgium government. In the end, I conclude that there is room within the split for a true Belgian film industry, representative of a contemporary 'Belgitude', that demonstrates the Belgian duality, artistic creativity and passion, absurdity, budget efficiency, and cosmopolitanism, but not without the necessary support from above.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Belgian duality, part French (Belgian Francophone), and part Dutch (Flemish) has been the topic of discussion at many political debates, in various research projects, and at my own family dinner table, ever since our Flemish family moved to the country's bilingual capital Brussels. After the recent national elections on June 9th in which the far-right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang, who wish to officially split up the country into Flanders and Wallonia, received the second most votes, the debate is far from over.

My personal input into these debates was never too focused on the political side, but I was more interested in the impact of the Belgian dichotomy on the performing arts and the audiovisual industry. Since the transition from silent movies to talkies, the Belgian film industry has been grosso modo divided into two separate industries due to the country's bilingualism, with on one side the Francophones, and on the other the Flemish. Philip Mosley famously dubbed Belgian cinema as a 'Split Screen' in his 2001 book on Belgian cinema and cultural identity, suggesting that the two sides cannot unite under the Belgian flag to produce Belgian films because of their linguistic and cultural differences, and the delicate balancing act between the ideals of art and the realities of the marketplace (Mosley, 2001: 209).

Nonetheless, recent quantitative research conducted by Belgian PhD-student Bram Van Beek and professor Gertjan Willems revealed that the two separate industries have been drifting towards each other in recent years, with an increase in coproductions between the Belgian Francophone and the Flemish industry, or as they called it an "intra-national rapprochement" (Van Beek & Willems, 2022). Van Beek subsequently delved deeper into this rapprochement through audiovisual research and found a modern Belgian identity, or "Belgitude", represented in Belgian cinema, that expresses the Belgian sense of duality and in-betweenness, suggesting that Belgian cinema does in fact go beyond the split screen (Van Beek, 2023).

Given the novelty of this research, and the general lack of research on Belgian cinema, I hope to further uncover the contemporary Belgian identity within its national cinema and explore the potential rapprochement between both sides of the country from within the Belgian film industry through qualitative in-depth interviews with stakeholders and professionals in the industry. As such, I hope to establish how people in the Belgian film industry view and utilize Belgium's split

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personality, whether they have felt a rapprochement in recent years, and what they believe has enabled and/or hindered audiovisual collaboration between Flemish and Francophone Belgium on a cultural, economic and political level. Overall, I am intrigued to discover how the Belgian national identity, if there exists one, is perceived and represented by the contemporary Belgian cinematic industry.

First, I will review the relevant literature related to national identities and cinemas, before delving deeper into the specifics of Belgium as a nation and a national cinema. This theoretical chapter will result in several key concepts and concerns, which will form the basis of this dissertation's conceptual framework, research objectives and the research questions. Next, a synopsis will be given of the research design and methodology I employed, divided into two sections, first the research strategy, and then the research methods and procedures, revealing why I chose in-depth interviewing, and how I developed this methodology in function of my research questions. Finally, the data obtained from the interviews will be interpreted through a thematic analysis and linked to the key concepts studied in the literature review, as well as new literature to support unexpected findings, supported with quotes from the respondents.

### THEORETICAL CHAPTER

In this theoretical chapter I will explore the relevant literature that informed the research executed in this dissertation. This literature review will lead to the articulation of the key concepts that eventually shaped the objectives of this research and the main research questions, that will be revealed in the final section of this theoretical chapter.

#### Literature Review

I start the review with an overview of the various theories and definitions around the concepts of nation and nationalism to provide a theoretical foundation before exploring national cinemas in particular. Next, I will take a closer look at Belgium as a nation, providing a brief history of the political, cultural, and linguistic divide between the Flemish and Francophones, and more specifically how this caused the split in the Belgian film industry. Finally, the review focusses on the recent quantitative research by professor Gertjan Willems and PhD-candidate Bram Van Beek, that served as the main source of inspiration for this dissertation because it revealed a potential reconciliation, or

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rapprochement, happening between the Flemish and Belgian Francophone cinematic industries. This consequently unlocks the possibility to re-evaluate the role of the Belgian national identity, or 'Belgitude', in contemporary Belgian cinema.

### Nations and Nationalism

The concept of nations and nationalism may seem simple at first appearance, but many theorists have dedicated their entire life trying to define what it means to belong to a nation, to be nationalist, and where the boundaries of both lie. The conceptualisation of nationalism and the nation was especially popular in second half of the twentieth century and broadly speaking the theorists of that time can be divided into primordialists or essentialists on the one hand and modernists on the other (Spencer & Wollman, 2002: 29-49; Willems, 2014: 20-22).

The former argue that the nation is a deeply rooted organic presence with at its essence people that share territory, ethnicity, biology, history, culture, and language. One of the most notable sociologists in the field was Antony D. Smith, known for his contributions to ethnosymbolism together with John Hutchinson. Smith claimed that nations have to some extent always existed, as they are built around ethnic groups, and in turn citizens of these nations are defined, sculpted, and guided by their birth nation, as they become bonded through this intense national membership (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994; Smith, 1979: 1-4).

Modernist, such as Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson, on the other hand believe that the notion of the nation is an artificially constructed idea through which people mutually agree that there exist borders and that everyone inside these borders represent a certain national identity, that separates them from 'others'. Ernest Gellner studied the notion of the nation within the historical evolution in the West from Agrarian to Industrial society. He showed how the construction of nations ineludibly leads to cultural homogeneity in the form of the political ideology of nationalism, that in its turn engenders the concept of an educationally introduced unified culture, the nation (Gellner, 1983, p. 55). Gellner's definition of nationalism as a unified political and national unit, was moreover supported by Eric Hobsbawm, who also strongly adhered to the idea that nationhood cannot not be based on fuzzy, and ambiguous singular criteria, such as language and ethnicity (Hobsbawm, 1992: 5-10). Benedict Anderson's (2008) then again introduced us to his theory of imagined communities, proposing the following definition of the nation:

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*It is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson, 2008: 283)*

As such, Anderson explores how it is that members of these imagined community share this deep-rooted love and bond stemming from something inherently imagined.

Anderson's conceptualisation of the nation has become one of the primary theories in the field, and his exploration on the drivers behind the bond between members of these imagined communities, has brought forward national cinemas as one of the media systems capable of shaping a nation (Higson, 2000: 58; Hjort & Mackenzie, 2000: 2).

### Cinema and Nation

Concretely, the deep-rooted bond and sense of belonging within the imagined community, i.e. the nation, is expressed, distributed, and even further enhanced through *products* of nationalism, with the various modes of media and communication, such as literature, art, poetry and in the context of this dissertation movies, as a prime example (Anderson, 2008: 287; Willems, 2014: 27; Willems *et al.*, 2021: 816-817).

Andrew Higson explains how films enable the identification of similarities between members of the same community and how they remind community members of their historical ties with the nation (Higson, 2011: 11). Simultaneously, in-group members are able to acknowledge the cultural elements that separate their national cinema from others, which further establishes a sense of coherence and self-contained identity within the imagined community (Higson, 1989: 38).

It is important however to note that the national cinema described here is not limited to a propaganda tool utilized by the elite to enforce their national ideology from above (Hobsbawm, 1992: 10-11; Willems, 2014: 22). Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism for instance shows how nations are reproduced on a daily basis through a complex of beliefs, assumptions, ideological habits, representations, and practices (Billig, 1995: 11), with the media, and, again in the context of this dissertation, films as one of the important mediators of these banal reproductions. Films are as such both shaped by the nation, as well being factors that shape the nation themselves (Willems, 2014: 24; Willems *et al.*, 2021: 817).

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Further, national cinema is now also being studied in its contemporary context, with many authors exploring its evolution in our increasingly globalised world. For instance, the rise of European cinema as a competitor of the global Hollywood force is an increasingly relevant topic in the literature (see Bergfelder, 2005; Kulyk, 2020; Parc, 2020; Sojcher, 2020). Further, despite these ‘new’ transnational flows within the film industry, the ‘national’ discourse still affects the categorisation, distribution, funding, and promotion of films, through national funding bodies, regional distribution companies, nationally regulated film policies, and international film festivals taking submissions based on nationality (Hill, 2016: 706-707). Therefore, the case of Belgian national cinema, or even the question of its existence, remains relevant today.

### The Belgian Case: A Split Nation on and off Screen?

The concept of national cinema has seldom been studied through a Belgian lens, mainly because the mere idea of Belgium as a *nation* is still one of the most polarising debates within Belgium, both on a political level, as well as on a cultural and linguistic one.

Although the concept of the Belgians has already existed for many decades, with Julius Caesar famously declaring that of all the Germans ‘*fortissimi sunt Belgae*’ [the Belgians are the bravest], in his *de Bello Gallico* around 50 years before Christ, Belgium didn’t become an independent country until 1830. The Belgians, both Dutch- and French-speaking, united against a common enemy: the Dutch king Willem the first, after having been part of countless dukedoms, empires, and kingdoms (Op De Beeck, 2015: 5). Nonetheless, 1830 can *grosso modo* be considered as the last time the Belgians could truly agree on something. Since then, Belgium has undergone a structural reform from a unitary to a federal state, substantiated by a growing political, social and economic divide between the Northern and Southern parts and the construction of two national identities (Scheltiens, 2017: 15).

In the North, the Flemish nationalist party NVA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie), and even more importantly the extreme right political party Vlaams Belang continue to gain popularity. The party members of the latter declare themselves as *Flemish nationalists*, rooting for a separate Flemish state, based on the principle that every people has the right to an own nation (Vlaams Belang, 2022). In contrast, the Southern part has for a very long time favoured the more left-winged parties such as the PS (Parti Socialiste) and Ecolo, with now also the extreme left-wing neo-Marxist political party PVDA/PTB seeing its supporters rise. However, it is worth noting that in the most recent national



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and regional elections of June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the central-right winged liberal party MR (Mouvement Réformateur) became the largest political party in Wallonia for the first time this century, suggesting a more general tendency towards the right across the entirety of Belgium, and for the first time a potential ‘political rapprochement’ between the North and the South.

The same separatist rationale can be found in the literature (Sojcher, 2020: 3), with most literature focussing on either the Belgian Francophone film industry (see Lanneau, 2007; Mélon, 2012; Steele, 2016), or the Flemish film industry (see Stynen, 2012; Van Bauwel & Biltereyst, 2005; Verheul, 2016; Willems, 2014; Willems *et al.*, 2021), rarely combining both. An important work here is that of Philip Mosley (2001), who described Belgian cinema as an ‘unusual historical phenomenon on account of its basis since the end of the silent era on a “split screen” between its Flemish (Dutch-language) and French-language components.’ (Mosley, 2001: 5).

Evidently, language is a natural first divider between the Flemish and Francophone cinema within Belgium.

In his work on imagined communities Anderson stretches the importance of language in the bonding process of people within imagined communities and his conviction that language holds the power to invite new people to the imagined community as he states that ‘the nation was conceived in language, not in blood’ (Anderson, 2008: 288).

Jaap Verheul explains exactly how language and cinema were essential factors in the creation of the Flemish community:

*Language was a key component in the formation of an imagined Flemish community, and the rediscovery and subsequent celebration of Flanders’ vast array of regional dialects of the Dutch language accompanied a linguistic turn in Flemish cinema, which, for the very first time, began to cultivate this southern-Dutch vernacular. (Verheul, 2016: 317).*

Here, Verheul bares the power of language, and consequently cinema as mediators of banal reproductions of the nation, that enhance the sense of belonging and comradeship between members of the imagined community, while also highlighting and reinforcing the cultural differences between both communities (Anderson, 2008; Billig, 1995; Higson 1989; Willems, 2014; Willems *et al.*, 2021). This essentially supports Mosley’s conceptualisation of Belgian cinema as a split screen, substantiated by the ethnolinguistic divide and bicultural nature of the country and the persistent political and

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educational rifts between the Flemish and Francophone communities (Mosley, 2001). Eventually, the idea of a joint Belgian national cinema that represents a certain Belgian identity became a myth of the past, that evaporated in the midst of political chaos and cultural division (Baudet, 2014; Mosley, 2001; Sojcher, 1999; Sojcher, 2020).

However, this separatist thinking, partially based on the linguistic dimension and on strictly defined boundaries, implying a closed textuality of national films, fails to acknowledge the process of visual communication in film reception and the importance of cultural diversity within an imagined community that move the national barriers beyond language (Bergfelder, 2005: 325; Hannerz, 1996: 20-21).

Challenging Anderson's focus on linguistic unity, Andrew Higson argues for the existence of cultural diversity within a single imagined community as follows:

*On the one hand community, on the other, diaspora. On the one hand, modern nations exist primarily as imagined communities. On the other, those communities actually consist of highly fragmented and widely dispersed groups of people with as many differences as similarities and with little in the sense of real physical contact with each other. If this is the case, it follows that all nations are in some sense diasporic. They are thus forged in the tension between unity and disunity, between home and homelessness. (Higson, 2000: 58).*

Following this perception, the Belgian imagined community and consequently its national cinema could very much exist within the notion of conflict, specifically emerging out of the tension of the country's multilingualism and cultural dichotomy and diaspora. As such, the boundaries of the Belgian split are broken down, and a national cinema is forged as a unity out of what people imagine as two separate communities, and as a celebration of their cultural diversity and exchange (Higson, 2000: 60; Hjorts & Mackenzie, 2000: 3).

### 'Belgitude' & the Quantitative 'Rapprochement'

Concretely, the acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity within an imagined community creates the possibility to embrace the Belgian diversity and duality. Within the cinematic industry this leaves room for an intra-national rapprochement between the Flemish and French-speaking film industries, an empirically substantiated conceptualisation suggested by Belgian PhD-student Bram Van Beek and professor Gertjan Willems (Van Beek, 2023; Van Beek & Willems, 2022).

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Initially, Van Beek and Willems (2022) conducted a quantitative analysis of the Belgian film industry through a self-constructed database consisting of 1379 fiction films produced between 2000 and 2019. The researchers adopted a strict *economic* approach to define the 'nationality' of the movies in their database. This means that they looked at territorial boundaries and funding instead of textual or cultural clues to label films as minority or majority Belgian films and whether they 'belong' to the Flemish or French-speaking community. In the end, they found that the Belgian film industry experienced an internationalisation, with only 18% of the films produced between 2000 and 2019 being "fully" Belgian. But, most importantly they also found an intra-nationalisation marked by an increase in coproduced movies involving production companies from both the Flemish as well as the French-speaking communities, from a yearly average of three intra-national coproductions before 2009 to an average of nine per year after 2009.

Van Beek went on to conduct an audio-visual analysis to explore how the Belgian national identity, or 'Belgitude', a concept which emerged in the literature in the 1970s, has been re-imagined after the recorded increase in co-productions between the Flemish and Belgian Francophone communities. He defines the new-found 'Belgitude' as 'an identity constructed on the very absence of identity' (Van Beek, 2023: 4), and concludes that the Flemish-Francophone co-productions convey this 'Belgitude' either by constructing a cultural bridge between the two communities, or by portraying the "absence of identity" and the Belgian complexity through the film's protagonists, often living in Brussels, the bilingual capital of Belgium, where the two cultures and languages collide (Van Beek, 2023: 15).

Van Beek thus believes that there still exists a willingness within the cinematic industry to discover and express the Belgian national identity through film. He considers the increase in intra-national coproductions, discovered in his quantitative analysis with Willems to be a bottom-up reaction from the film industry against the existing political and regulatory discourses that wish to maintain and even intensify the divide between the Flemish and Francophone Belgian communities. Accordingly, he follows Vitali & Willems' argument explaining how films often reject the ideological trajectory dominant within the nation (Vitali & Willems, 2006: 7), and acknowledged that the Belgian film industry wishes to counter the socio-political trajectory through the construction, exploration and expression of a Belgian identity on screen.

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## Key Concepts and Concerns

In the previous theoretical chapter I have attempted to provide a comprehensive background on the concepts of the nation, nationalism, and more specifically national cinema as an important mediator of the national sentiment. The purpose of this theoretical background is to create a conceptual framework that allows me to conduct a deep dive into the polarised case of Belgium, first as a nation in search of a national identity, but more importantly in terms of a national cinema.

However, as outlined above, defining a Belgian identity and cinema seems almost impossible with the existing definitions and conceptualizations, such as that of the imagined communities by Benedict Anderson, due to the country's ethnolinguistic and cultural duality (Anderson, 2008). Moreover, the limited research that does exist is equally polarised between the two linguistic communities. As such, the Belgian film industry has generally been accepted as a split screen, divided into two separate cinemas; a Francophone in the South and a Flemish in the North (Mosley, 2001). This split is visible on every level, be it linguistic, cultural, political, institutional, or organizational, and has therefore further reinforced the cultural divide between the members of the two communities, who witness the differences between both on and off screen on a daily basis and consequently turn only to members of their own community (Billig, 1995, Higson, 1989, Willems, 2014).

Nonetheless, there are other researchers who believe in the potential of a contemporary Belgian identity and national cinema existing within and beyond the split, both on a linguistic and cultural level, through the acceptance of diversity within a single imagined community (Andrin, 2014; Bergfelder, 2005: 325; Hannerz, 1996: 20-21; Higson, 2000: 58; Niessen, 2020: 154). This belief is importantly supported by the very recent empirical work of Van Beek and Willems that reveals a growth in intra-national coproductions between the Flemish and the Belgian Francophone film industries (Van Beek & Willems, 2022). Moreover, this rapprochement not only shows the possibility of Belgian cinema as a united industry, but also reveals the modern 'Belgitude' based in solidarity, multiculturalism, a sense of in-between, and an outward look that extends beyond the Belgian borders (Van Beek, 2023: 13).

## Research Objectives

As a Flemish bilingual living in Brussels, with not only admiration for the cinematic arts, but active experience within the industry as both actor and producer, the idea of a rapprochement between the

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two communities within a seemingly increasingly separated Belgium intrigues me immensely. With this dissertation I therefore hope to build on the work of Van Beek and Willems, and explore the following two questions in particular:

- 1) Is there the potential for a united Belgian national cinema that expresses a certain Belgian identity, or 'Belgitude' within the Belgian cinematic split screen?
- 2) What are the drivers and hindrances of this potential rapprochement between the Flemish and the Belgian Francophone film industries?

Since Van Beek suggests that the rapprochement is a bottom-up reaction from within the film industry, my aim is to answer these questions from within the industry, by approaching experts on all levels, namely regulatory, artistic, production/business, and academic. As such, I hope to explore how the concept of nationality lives within the film industry, and whether a rapprochement is felt, or even wanted. Moreover, I hope to provide a contemporary exploration to the concept of nationality, that is at this very moment being used extensively by the Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang to promote a separate Flemish nation, reflective of the broader nationalistic right-wing trend that can be observed across the Western hemisphere.

Based on the literature review, Van Beek and Willem's recent research, and my personal knowledge of the Belgian film industry, I believe that from an economic perspective, a rapprochement between the Northern and Southern parts of Belgium is not only beneficial, but necessary for Belgian cinema to be able to compete on an international scale. However, I equally recognize that there still exists a distinct ethnolinguistic and cultural divide between the Flemish and Francophone communities, promoted by the Flemish nationalist sentiment propagated by nationalist parties such as Vlaams Belang, which hinders the rapprochement in the cinematic industry. Nonetheless, I remain a firm believer that despite the still-existing split and cultural clashes a cinematic bridge can be formed that portrays the somewhat chaotic Belgian identity characterised by its tormented artistry, absurd complexity, and self-relativity, with Brussels as an exemplary filmset.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this next section I will explain how I designed the research strategy from the conceptualisation to final execution and what methodological rationale I followed when doing so. I will also reflect on some of the issues that arose during the research process, including the ethical considerations.

### Research Strategy

For this dissertation I opted for the qualitative method of semi-structured in-depth interviewing. This method was chosen after a thorough analysis of the existing literature, talks with academic experts in the field and careful consideration of what would bring the most constructive results given the time and research depth constraints of a dissertation.

First of all, the methodology of semi-structured in-depth interviewing, despite having faced repeated concerns of objectivity and general scepticism by academics (Brinkmann, 2013: 4), has proven to be an effective research method especially when analysing and understanding lived experiences (Warren, 2002: 83) and when gathering knowledge from a diverse array of perspectives within a given sample (Brennen, 2017: 27-28). From my personal lived experience within the Belgian film industry, I have already had several casual conversations with industry professionals concerning the dynamics of the industry, and how co-productions have affected this dynamic in recent years. To transform these casual conversations into structured academic research in-depth interviews seemed the most opportune as they provide a balance between individual flexibility and academic consistency through a pre-determined structure in the form of a topic guide (Brennen, 2017, p. 29).

Furthermore, research on Belgian cinema remains limited, especially research combining Flemish and Belgian Francophone cinema, making Van Beek and Willem's recent quantitative research of the Belgian cinematic rapprochement (Van Beek & Willems, 2022) and Van Beek's audio-visual analysis of a united Belgian film industry with a distinct national identity (Van Beek, 2023) still quite unique and incomplete. I was fortunate enough to have a meeting with Van Beek during which he advised me that in-depth interviews with stakeholders and experts of the Belgian film industry would be a welcomed extension to his research, since, in his own words, 'he faces behind the numbers' were still missing, and because it would be a good addition in attempting to fill the gap in the literature on Belgian cinema as a whole (B. Van Beek, personal communication, 19 April 2024).

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Initially, both content as well as documentary analysis were considered as (supporting) methodologies. The former would have consisted of a content analysis of Belgian intra-national co-produced films in the last two decades, using semiotic and narrative analysis to examine linguistic diversity in dialogues and understand the evolution of nationalism and the Belgian identity in film. However, this method was quickly discarded, since Van Beek had already adopted a similar methodology in his PhD and because this kind of content analysis garnishes more valuable results on larger samples across different time periods, putting it beyond the scope of this dissertation (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 7-8). A documentary analysis on the other hand was considered next, potentially as a supporting methodology. The analysis would have been performed on a sample of Flemish regulatory film policy documents of the past 20 years provided by PhD-student Alexander De Man, who focusses his research on the diaspora in Flemish cinema and its socio-economic and political context (A. De Man, personal communication, 28 November 2023). Nonetheless, this analysis would reduce the focus of this dissertation to Flemish cinema, further enlarging the split in the literature on Belgian cinema. Nonetheless, a documentary analysis of policy documents from both the Flemish and Francophone sides could still be very valuable addition in future works.

### Research Methods & Tools

After settling on the strategy, I started to design the research using some key procedures and tools that allowed me to conduct a constructive analysis through the interview method.

#### Sampling

An important, yet challenging step in the research design is the sample selection. In total I interviewed 7 participants, of which the profiles are displayed in [Appendix A](#). The sample size was not predetermined but, while every interview was insightful and unique, conducting more interviews would have led to data saturation (Silverman, 2020: 73).

The required characteristics for the sample cases were straightforward. Firstly, all interviewees needed to be of Belgian nationality, and secondly, they needed to have a significant relation to the Belgian film industry. I interpreted the latter broadly as to gather a diverse range of perspectives within the industry, meaning anything ranging from creatives to professors and regulators. Eventually, I employed a purposive sampling strategy, to select interviewees that complied with the two fore-mentioned characteristics, while relying on snowball sampling, whereby I asked

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participants whether they could identify other potential candidates that also fulfilled the sample characteristics (Henry, 2009: 82; Silverman, 2020: 63). Finally, it was also of importance to have a balanced mix between Flemish and Francophone candidates, so that the assessment would be of a true 'Belgian' perspective.

It is important to note that with this sample I did not necessarily intend to achieve results that I would be able to extend to a larger population. Rather, my research method was based in grounded theory, albeit a 'lite' version (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 81), as I gradually built up a theoretical analysis based on the participant's experiences, shaping and reshaping my data collection along the way (Charmaz, 2006).

### Interview Topic Guide

The interview topic guide (see Appendix B) was divided into several sections, relevant to the research questions, with each section containing several potential open-ended, non-judgemental questions, intended to guide the focus of the interviews towards the participant's personal reflections and experiences (Brennen, 2017: 29; Charmaz, 2006: 25-26). A first draft of the topic guide was slightly adapted and shortened, after having consulted my supervisor, to ensure that I did not spend too much time on general introductory inquiries, but rather focussed the questions on the core concerns of my research.

### Conducting Interviews

All interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. Although, I had to heavily adjust the transcriptions, since Microsoft Teams was not always able to correctly understand what was being said. Furthermore, most interviews had to be translated from either French or Dutch to English.

I attempted to conduct the interviews in a way that encouraged the participants to thoroughly reflect on the research topics, by asking sufficient follow-up questions and showing genuine interest in their experiences, while allowing the participants to guide the interview, which oftentimes lead me to exciting new building blocks for the research analysis (Brinkmann, 2013: 17; Charmaz, 2006: 25-35). Moreover, during the interview process I was pleasantly surprised to witness how open and motivated most of the participants were, and often spontaneously recommended other potential



candidates. The interviews ended up ranging between 30 and 75 minutes, with an average of 42 minutes.

### Thematic Analysis

As analysis tool I opted for a thematic analysis, a flexible method ‘for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 78-79). A theme is here defined as ‘a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998: 161). I therefore started the analysis by first familiarising myself with the transcripts and the data. Next, following an inductive or bottom-up data-driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 83), I carried out a first round of coding, noting several specific observations in the different interviews. As such, I was slowly able to observe certain themes arising when comparing the observations both within as well as across the interviews (Charmaz, 2006: 54). I preferred the bottom-up approach above a theoretical analysis as an initial analysis method because my research questions are not only based on general theory, but for the most part on limited empirical research. However, as noted by Braun & Clarke ‘data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84). The themes that emerged from the first coding round were therefore reassessed on a more theoretical, deductive level, and refined to allow interpretation and to generate a compelling overall story from the analysis, supported by vivid extract examples per theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The thematic coding table, including extract examples can be found in [Appendix C](#).

### Ethics and Reflexivity

I recorded consent of all research participants via an informed consent form. To ensure that the participants were truly informed and aware of my research goals and intentions, I briefly restated my research purpose in the beginning of every interview and reminded the candidates that they were free to skip answers or to stop the interview at any given moment (Brennen, 2017: 31). However, I quickly found that most interviewees thought the ethical process too formal, and for some it even hindered their spontaneity and willingness to share personal stories (Warren, 2002: 89). With some of the candidates I therefore tried to minimise the official feel of the interview, to enable a higher degree of openness and authenticity, while still ensuring that they were fully aware of my research intentions and that informed consent was recorded.

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While the semi-structured format of the interviews gave me the opportunity to become a knowledge-producing participant during the interviews (Brinkmann, 2013: 21), this simultaneously held a risk of disturbing the power balance between myself, as researcher, and the interviewees (Brennen, 2017: 31), especially considering my strong connection to the research topic rooted in my extensive personal experience within the Belgian film industry and in the fact that I am a bilingual Flemish person living in Brussels. However, I believe that my ability to relate to the participants also allowed some of them to forget the academic context of the interview and open up more about their personal lived experiences in the industry, giving the research results more practical validity.

### RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

In this final section I will discuss and interpret the results from the 7 in-depth interviews I conducted with 2 actors, 2 directors, a producer, a professor in Belgian film theory and nationality, and a politician employed at an economic fund for the audiovisual arts, all with different levels of experience in the industry and with ages ranging from 24 to 62 (see [Appendix A](#)). This diversity in profiles allowed me to cover various topics in the analysis coming from different point of views within the industry and various generational perspectives.

In what follows, I will combine the results and my interpretation through an exploration of the common themes that were discovered across the interviews during the data-driven thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, as explained above. First the question concerning the existence of a Belgian national identity and cinema will be covered. Next, the drivers and inhibitors of the cinematic rapprochement between Flemish and Francophone Belgium will be studied, divided into two subthemes. The first explores the core themes in the rapprochement specific to the Belgian case, namely language, culture, and funding. The second briefly covers more modern and universal issues such as streaming platforms, the COVID-19 crisis, and the influence of the rise of European cinema against Hollywood. These interpretations will then be summarised in some key findings and implications. Quotes supporting these findings were selected because of thematic relevance and considering the background knowledge of the quoted interviewee in the covered topic. I furthermore tried to ensure that the selected quotes were balanced across the interviewees, to provide a diversified analysis and to avoid skewed opinions.

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## Core Themes

A general trend that I noticed immediately is that while the interviewees all had varying opinions on whether there exists a rapprochement between the Flemish and Belgian Francophone film industries, a general consensus across the interviews was that more collaboration between both sides would be beneficial for the Belgian film industry as a whole. Moreover, Brussels was often appointed as the ideal location to merge both communities in language, culture, and funding. However, in the interviews there was also clearly a 'split' between the more positive and hopeful enthusiasts of a Belgian national film industry, who believe that 'it exists, that Belgian cinema... And it would be great if it could exist more as a whole' (Participant 1), and on the other side the more pessimist thinkers, who believe that while it would be nice, having more intra-national coproductions, the reality of the country and its two separate communities will never allow a truly Belgian film industry, because the two communities are 'just different' (Participant 2), and the political and economic reality is that of 'two countries who are breaking up' (Participant 3). This juxtaposition between both could be seen across the various themes that I will discuss below.

## A National Identity

A first observation I made when analysing the interview data was the difficulty all interviewees had trying to define a Belgian national identity. Whether the interviewee in question believed there existed a Belgian identity or not, all clearly struggled to explain what it means to be Belgian. One participant even summarised this struggle as follows:

*The question is and remains the entire time, do we ourselves know what our identity is? Belgians are the least proud of their own country ... We don't have an unequivocal identity ... We even have such an identity crisis in our country that you can almost consider that as our identity (Participant 1)*

This idea of an identity formed through an identity crisis clearly resonates with the 'Belgitude' discussed in the work of Van Beek as something 'in-between' (Van Beek, 2023: 4), and with Higson's formulation of nations that are 'forged in the tension between unity and disunity' (Higson, 2000: 58). Multiple participants went on to describe how this lack of identity actually shapes a certain Belgian uniqueness, or 'Belgitude':

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*There is a certain type of humour that you can see ... It is very cynical, it is pretty caustic. But that is, I find, typically Belgian (Participant 1)*

*I think we don't take ourselves seriously. There would definitely be a sense of comedy ... very strong humour and auto-depreciation (Participant 4)*

*Belgium is, and especially Brussels, very cosmopolitan ... Many people find that terrible. But it is an incredible richness. (Participant 3)*

The fact that the Belgian identity is hard to define therefore doesn't necessarily mean that it does not exist. Rather, it is created out of diversity and duality, and out of this sense of loss and difficulty to imagine a community, a cynical self-depreciating humour arises, as a sort of coping mechanism for the sense of loss and perplexity.

Indeed, Ernest Mathijs in his book 'The Cinema of the Low Cultures' helps to explain how this culture of uncertainty, of looking for an identity, and of self-doubt is indeed a fundamental characteristic of Belgium and consequently how it is reflected in its cinema through magic realism, (over-)emphasis on authenticity, themes of self-destruction, dark humour and search for *eigenheid*, and a long-standing tradition of producing documentary films (Mathijs, 2004).

Further, this Belgian identity, forged out of in-betweenness and diversity, both from immigration as well as from the continuous reconciliation of opposing elements in the form of Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, and the multiplicity it therefore encompasses (Renouprez, 2020), is increasingly cosmopolitan, as previously acknowledged by Van Beek and confirmed by Participant 3 in the quote above, making Belgians citizens of the world with a dash of self-relativity and a knack for compromise (Van Beek, 2023: 13).

### Us versus Them

Nonetheless, hidden in the wording of the participant's answers I equally found the prevailing (subconscious) split personality of the Belgian identity. Even when an interviewee claimed they were 'Belgianist' (Participant 3), meaning that they did not cling to only one side of the country but identified themselves as 'Belgian', almost all interviewees used separatist terms, referring to the other side as something exactly that, 'other'. Examples include:

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*I think both on the side of the French-speaking as well as on our side (Participant 1)*

*I mean, you have so many [looks at me]. I'm saying you have, because I still consider you part of the North [smiles]. (Participant 2)*

*I don't think they have a commercial side like we have (Participant 6)*

This way of thinking, that is so deeply rooted within the Belgian identity, first reminded me of the modernist theorists of nations and nationalism, such as Gellner (1983) and Hobsawm (1992), who focus on the humanly constructed concept of nations and borders that separate people within a nation from the 'other', as well as Halls' conceptualisation of the identity as a 'constructed form of closure' in relation to the 'other' (Hall & du Gay, 1996: 4-5), and Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community that also implies this border-thinking (Anderson, 2008).

However, usually the nation forges this 'otherness' between nations, not within the nation. In the case of Belgium, it seems that the Belgian border was artificially constructed to unite two naturally separate imagined communities against a common 'other' enemy in 1830, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, yet the cultural and ethnolinguistic differences between Wallonia and Flanders remain deeply rooted. This natural sense of 'otherness' between both materialized itself in the separatist language (subconsciously) used by the interviewees. From the interviews it seems that the organic identities of the Walloons and the Flemish are primarily rooted in shared territory and language. One could thus say that within Belgium, on a regional or subnational scale, the concept of the 'organic' nation, as outlined by primordialists such as Anthony Smith (1979), prevails over the modernist idea that constructing borders inevitably leads to cultural homogeneity within a nation (Gellner, 1983: 55).

### Cinema Belge

So far, it seems that the Belgians are still very much struggling with their identity crisis, albeit on a subconscious level for some, because of the inherent differences between the Flemish and the Francophones. However, according to Higson, a national cinema can function as the establisher of a coherent identity within the imagined community (Higson, 1989: 38). Does the fact that the Belgians are in such an identity crisis then mean that there is no national cinema to establish a coherent identity? The very name of this sub-theme, Cinema Belge, suggesting the existence of a Belgian national cinema,

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comes from one of the interviewed participants who in fact had the strongest opinion about its non-existence:

*I love the myth of the Cinema Belge, which is then bilingual, both Flemish and Francophone, and pretty mixed. I love the myth that it is about surreal films, definitely not high budget, but always a bit out of the ordinary (Participant 3)*

This participant thus rejects Mathijs' reflection on the existence of a distinct Belgian cinema that is filled with magic realism and dark self-derogatory humour (Mathijs, 2004), and instead sides himself with the likes of Baudet, Mosley, and Sojcher, who agree that a Belgian cinema reflective of a certain Belgian identity or 'Belgitude' functions merely as a myth of the past (Baudet, 2014; Mosley, 2001; Sojcher, 1999, 2020). He went on to explain that he refuses to think in terms of national cinemas, because while from far away you might be able to assemble various movies under the same national umbrella, when looking more closely you are actually forcing together various authors who all have very different styles and tell very different stories.

Two other participants indirectly agreed with the non-existence of a Belgian national cinema:

*I will never come up with, or write something, or want to show something that is Belgium united ... I don't see who would think that way (Participant 2)*

*I don't feel like there is something, that can like summarize what Belgian film is, or what differentiates it from other cinemas (Participant 6)*

However, if Belgian cinema does not show what differentiates the Belgians from 'others', because we are simply 'not telling Belgian stories' (Participant 1), it shouldn't come as a surprise that the Belgians have difficulty defining and internalizing their Belgian identity, if, again, we follow Higson's theory on national cinema, that underlines its power to remind people of their ties with their nation (Higson, 1989, 2011) and Billig's theory on banal nationalism, that recognizes movies as shaping factors of a nation on a day-to-day basis (Billig, 1995). If the screens between the Flemish and the Belgian Francophone remain split, they will not be confronted with a banal Belgian nationalism (Billig, 1995: 15), and their identities will equally remain in crisis, further enhancing the separatist sentiment.

Interestingly, the opinion of Participant 2, a Walloon director, on the (lack of) potential of Belgian stories with a Belgian identity was directly opposed to that of Participant 1, a Flemish director:

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*I myself have been writing a series about the absurd Belgium for the past 6 years. I think there is a genius story there, that is actually very recognisable. But it's up to someone to tell it (Participant 1)*

Not only did Participant 1 believe in telling the Belgian story, which in his eyes would be one filled with the diversity and duality of our country and the reality of living 'in-between', he also had a strong opinion on what Belgian cinematic projects usually exude:

*A project like this always exudes a lot of personality and love, because everyone, from the craziest assistant to the biggest boss, has to pull their weight, because you don't have the means to do it for the money. You cannot work in Belgian cinema with the idea that you'll become very rich. You work in Belgian cinema because you really really want it. (Participant 1)*

Participant 4 similarly talked about the authenticity that Belgian films have, and the ability of Belgians to make masterpieces with very low budgets. Here the Cinema Belge has nothing to do anymore with ethnicity, cultural connections or believes. Instead, it finds common ground in a common sense of understanding and passion for a common goal, and it is exactly this Cinema Belge that is internationally known at all the big cinematic festivals, according to Participant 4. This sentiment can be confirmed when studying an article from Mediarte, a social fund for the Belgian audiovisual sector, that quotes interviews with members of the Belgian Society of Cinematographers (SBC) on what it is like to work on international sets (Mertens *et al.*, 2020). Ruben Impens, DOP (Director of Photography) of the movies Beautiful Boy and The Broken Circle Breakdown, for instance answered the following when asked what makes Belgian cinematographers so attractive:

*Doing great things with limited resources, but still taking bold risks. I think you could maybe consider that a Belgitude. (Mertens *et al.*, 2020)*

Both the 'non-believers' of the existence of a Belgian national cinema, as well as those who had a more positive or at least hopeful stance on the matter, repeatedly used the following words to describe the Belgian sentiment and its film industry: *hard-working, efficient, humble, cynical, dark, daring, passionate, and creative*. These descriptions not only emerged in the interviews but can also be found in the quotes from the article by Mediarte (Mertens *et al.*, 2020), and in a large chunk of the existing literature on

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Belgian cinema, such as that of Andrin (2014), Mathijs (2004), and Van Beek (2023), written over a span of almost 20 years.

Moreover, revisiting the idea of the ‘myth’ of the Cinema Belge, as an artificial umbrella of several distinct authors, as explained by Participant 3, the same authors were in fact repeatedly named by many of the different participants when describing Belgian cinema, including, Lukas Dhont (Participant 1, 3, 4, 5, 6), Jaco Van Dormael (Participant 2, 3, 6), the Dardenne brothers (Participant 1, 3, 5), and Adil El Arbi and Bilal Fallah (Participant 6, 7).

The myth of the Cinema Belge, that pools not only various authors, but two separate imagined communities, Wallonia and Flanders, with conflicting identities, might thus be based on a partly repressed reality (Baudet, 2014: 394), that could be fully resurrected if more Belgian stories were told, expressing the modern cosmopolitan ‘Belgitude’, that shows Belgium’s multiculturalism and diasporic identity, produced with passion, cost efficiency and self-relativity.

### Language

As discussed above, language is an obvious first barrier between the Northern and Southern parts of Belgium, and the very first mentioned in Mosley’s Split Screen (Mosley, 2001). It is also one of the barriers for the existence of a *Belgian* imagined community, if we adhere to Anderson’s idea that “the nation was conceived in language, not in blood” (Anderson, 2008: 288), and Verheul’s argument that ‘language was a key component in the formation of an imagined Flemish community’ (Verheul, 2016: 317), explaining how language fortified the nationalistic movement within Flanders.

It therefore did not come as a surprise that the language barrier was mentioned by five of the seven participants during the interviews. However, only one saw it as an insurmountable barrier for a rapprochement in Belgian cinema, as he explained how for instance the Francophones prefer to dub everything to French, instead of showing movies in their original language (Participant 2). The four others acknowledged the barrier, but equally recognized it as an essential part of the Belgian identity:

*It underlines what it means to be Belgian, namely you live in a world where several languages are spoken together (Participant 1)*

*It’s part of our culture, and I find it important to show that, to show it on screen. (Participant 5)*



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This shows once again that language as a criterion for nationhood, and therefore as an argument for the cinematic split of the Flemish and Francophone film industries can be rebutted by accepting linguistic diversity as an enriching factor of the nation, and, if accordingly shown on screen, as a representation and even celebration of the Belgian culture, elevating the imagined community and the sense of 'we-ness' that it evokes, beyond the spoken word (Bergfielder, 2005: 325; Hannerz, 1996: 21; Higson, 2000: 60), and opening the possibility for imagining the Belgian community and not just the Flemish or the Francophone one.

Moreover, when questioning the participant employed at the economic film fund Screen Brussels about the linguistic debate and whether they have quota concerning the language of projects, they answered the following:

*We don't really look at French-speaking or Dutch-speaking, but what we do look at is how you balance between bigger productions, so international film productions, and the smaller ones. (Participant 7)*

In other words, from an economic perspective the bilingualism of Belgian does not pose an issue either.

### Culture & Industry

However, the linguistic difference wasn't mentioned as the only divider between the Flemish and the Francophone communities. I noticed that especially the Francophone interviewees had a specific image of the Flemish film industry as a solid independent cinematic industry, complete with its own famous Flemish people ('Bekende Vlamingen' or 'BV's), a Flemish audience, and a Flemish cultural identity:

*In Wallonia, we don't have an industry. Like, yeah, we have a lot of people who are really motivated to do a lot of things and we're ready to give the art and the time and everything they have to make movies, but you have an industry, with everything included. With the actors that go on TV shows to make promotion and everything. (Participant 2)*

*On the Flemish side there is this real volition to keep the Flemish culture. (Participant 5)*

These quotes again emphasize one of the reasons for the cinematic split between the two communities. However, they do not exclude the prospect of forming a joint industry. An industry that could

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perhaps be built using the existing Flemish industry model, and that could again embrace the cultural diaspora present within the Belgian culture, as argued by one of the interviewees:

*Within a culture, you can still have smaller cultural attributes... Wallonia and Flanders they have their touch, they have their own identity, but it would also be nice to merge both*  
(Participant 4)

Again, the mere acknowledgment and acceptance of the cultural diaspora within the Belgian nation (Higson, 2000: 58) would allow Belgian cinema to overcome the more traditional definition of a national cinema, that focusses on cultural hegemony within the imagined community (Higson, 1989: 38), and to embrace and enhance the cultural diversity and exchange within and beyond its nation, which, according to Hjort & Mackenzie is key to the cinematic arts (Hjort & Mackenzie, 2000: 58).

### Funding

Nonetheless, acceptance and embrace of cultural and linguistic diversity by the industry will not be enough in the Belgian cinematic landscape. The Belgian film industry relies heavily on public funding, governed primarily on a regional level. As such, funding unmistakably represents the core barrier of the rapprochement. Even when the interviewees were capable of looking beyond cultural differences and acknowledged the benefits of an increased cinematic alliance between the Northern and Southern parts of Belgium, their faith in a cultural governance that would sufficiently stimulate intra-national coproductions was underwhelming.

Funding for the audiovisual arts in Belgium can be divided into three main categories, namely the Tax Shelter, which is regulated on the federal level, the cultural funds, regulated on a communal level ('gemeenschap'), with on the Flemish side the Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds (VAF) and on the Francophone side the Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel (CCA), and finally the smaller economic funds, Wallimage, Screen Brussels, and Screen Flanders, that are regionally ('gewest') determined. As participant 7 was able to explain, given her role in the economic audiovisual fund of Brussels, the Tax Shelter gives private companies an interesting tax break, and not only stimulates Belgian productions, but also attracts international producers to Belgium who can equally benefit from these tax advantages. The cultural funds focus more on the scripts and scenarios of the productions and whether they represent a certain Belgian, Flemish, or Walloon identity. Finally, the economic funds

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only intervene for a small part of the budget and focus on how the production could benefit Wallonia, Brussels, or Flanders from an economic perspective.

### **Federal Funding: Tax Shelter**

During the interviews, every participant spontaneously talked about the Tax Shelter incentive and how it has boomed the Belgian film industry since its introduction in 2004:

*I notice that there is more of a rapprochement. I think that the Tax Shelter is a factor there, that international productions come here, so both Walloons as well as Dutch-speaking people work together then, because, well yeah, you work for English people, so it doesn't matter. You all speak English together. (Participant 1)*

*There should be facilities between the two parts, that's for sure. For example, we have the Tax Shelter. (Participant 2)*

*The Belgian Tax Shelter applies to the whole of Belgium, and it's open to European coproductions as well. (Participant 4)*

The Tax Shelter has clearly brought together the two Belgian sides, but mainly through international coproductions. International players come to Belgium to benefit from the attractive tax break and do not see the borders or divides within the country but embrace it as a whole. The linguistic barrier is completely overcome because English dominates the set, and the cultural differences become irrelevant as the Belgians are merely recognised for their work drive, compromise skills, budget efficiency, and their creative and daring spirits (Andrin, 2014; Mathijs, 2004; Van Beek, 2023).

### **Regional Funding: Cultural & Economic Funds**

However, the Tax Shelter is only one category of funding, and rarely provides enough budget to produce majority Belgian productions. The cultural funds and, to a smaller extent, the economic funds continue to have a significant impact on which films are made, and given their communal and regional natures, they tend to be inhibitors of the rapprochement, as they prioritize funding projects that develop and enhance their 'own' culture and their 'own' economy.

Participant 3, who was highly involved in the VAF 25 years ago, was able to tell me how the minister of culture at the time, a Flemish nationalist, did not agree with the slogan "Belgian cinema, made in

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Flanders”, as it did not focus enough on the *Flemish* culture. Although they were able to convince him at the time, the VAF has now once again reverted its focus to marketing the brand of the *Flemish* film.

Similarly, the CCA’s mission is ‘encouraging and supporting audiovisual creation, diffusion, and promotion in the *Wallonia-Brussels Federation*’ (CFWB, 2024). Again, this shows that even when participants embrace the Belgian cultural diversity as part of the modern ‘Belgitude’, the rapprochement is still being hindered on an economic and governmental level. Moreover, participant 7 made it clear that while the economic funds aren’t necessarily opposed to cultural collaboration, they are so focussed on funding projects that will benefit their own region on an economic level, for instance whether the movie will create labour opportunities and generate monetary returns, that they unintentionally reinforce the split even further.

The VAF and CCA did come to an agreement in 2008 to enhance the coordination and cooperation between the regions and formalised the promise that both the VAF and the CCA would provide minority support for three feature or animated films from the other community, amounting to € 150,000 per film, or a total investment of € 450,000 each year (Temiz, 2023: 47; Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds vzw, 2009: 69). However, only 2 out of the 7 interviewees had heard of this agreement. Moreover, the two that were aware of the agreement, believed that although it provides a most welcome aid, it is not nearly enough to truly bring together the two industries.

In the end, all participants agreed that if no structural changes are made to the existing funding mechanisms and constructs, the creation of a true ‘Belgian’ film industry is impossible. As stated by participant 6, how these changes should be implemented, remains unclear, especially considering the changing political landscape after the last Belgian elections, and the uncertainty of what our next federal and regional governments will look like:

*I think there is just little room for that in Belgian politics. I think that it has to come from Flanders or Wallonia. Or you would have to create an administrative body at the federal level. (Participant 6)*

### Global Themes

Besides the core themes, specific to the Belgian film industry, several themes emerged across the interviews referencing to more global, external circumstances that impacted the rapprochement in

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recent years. The most re-occurring themes were the COVID-19 crisis, the rise of streaming platforms, and the continued growth of the European film industry as a worthy competitor of Hollywood in the Western hemisphere. These themes equally represent broader variables impacting national cinemas beyond the Belgian one in specific. I will briefly touch upon these themes below, however, further research would be required to investigate the exact influence of these specific themes on national cinemas on a global scale.

### COVID-19

Two interviewees specifically indicated the recent COVID-19 crisis as an accelerator of intra-national coproductions between the Francophone and Flemish film industries:

*I think that it has been going on since COVID that there are a lot of coproductions. I feel like it's since COVID that it was like let's join forces together. (Participant 4)*

*Since the COVID-crisis we have a lot more applications [at Screen Brussels]. It might be because a lot of people had to put their projects on hold. And now, after two years, they can relaunch them. So yeah, that could further encourage collaboration. (Participant 7)*

Moreover, because the cultural industry was put on hold for a prolonged period of time, apparently inciting more collaboration, the COVID-19 crisis simultaneously accelerated the previously existing digitalization trends in the audiovisual entertainment industries, further increasing global consumption and the accessibility to international markets (De Valck & Damiens, 2023: 2-18).

### Streaming Platforms

One such digitalization trend is the rise of streaming platforms, such as Netflix, HBO, Amazon, Disney+, and Streamz for Belgium. In a mere decade these platforms have significantly impacted how and which movies are produced, distributed and viewed by the audience at large (Meir & Smits, 2024: xxvii). Several of the interviewees noted this evolution in the industry, and especially how it raised budgets and ambitions:

*The fact that Streamz exists, that increases your offer. So, all of a sudden, we as directors became more ambitious. And we had to, because suddenly you have to compete with all those Americans, whereas previously it used to be a bit segregated, you had Flemish films on the one hand and then international films on the other. (Participant 1)*

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*So, you not only have that VAF endowment, you not only have that Tax Shelter, but if you have higher ambitions today, with the explosion of costs, production costs, you actually also need those streaming resources, to be able to make a larger production. (Participant 3)*

*You of course now have the streaming services. The resources come from more sides now, and automatically everyone will have to raise the bar to win over a larger market share. And I believe that those coproductions [the intra-national coproductions] free up more resources so that you have more funds available and create more ambitious projects. (Participant 6)*

In other words, the rise of streaming platforms has had a dual, cyclical effect. On the one hand they have forced producers, writers, and directors to increase ambitions in order to compete with an enlarged market and a changing distribution system. Accordingly, the increased number of intra-national coproductions is rationalised as a necessary economic alliance to face these new market challenges. On the other hand, the streamers have also unlocked new funding flows and sources of income, allowing more ambitious and expensive projects to be made, lowering the necessity to look across (cultural) borders for additional funding.

### Hollywood versus Europe

Overall, the interviewees established that the international ambitions for Belgian cinema, be it Flemish, Francophone, or as a single unit, have risen over the past few years:

*I find it beautiful that Belgium is establishing itself more and more as an adequate fiction producer. America used to be in that highest division a lot quicker, and now I feel like the Belgian film is also in it more and more. (Participant 6)*

Furthermore, in this regard the Belgian film industry, looked at as a union of two separate industries, serves as a kind of cinematic experiment for the European film industry that is trying to establish itself as a worthy competitor of Hollywood. Specifically, European cinema also attempts to encapsulate an array of national cinematic industries, distinguishable through their linguistic and cultural diversity, into a singular bordered industry (Sojcher, 2020), to face the competition of the Hollywood capitalist power machine in the West (Bergfelder, 2015; McMahon, 2022):

*It would of course be amazing to have more and more strong European opposition for those Hollywood films, because we really make an entirely different kind of cinema in Europe... There is a kind of layer of love that you do not have when you watch Hollywood things. (Participant 1)*

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Consequently, cooperation between the various national cinemas seems the most beneficial to further establish a strong and competitive European cinema. Further, while some interviewees expressed concerns that the European market will be overrun by these big Hollywood streamers, such as Netflix, many jurisdictional and structural constraints are still in place in Europe, designed to foster national cinemas and limit the power of these streaming giants (Burgess & Stevens, 2021: 77; Hill, 2016: 706-707). However, the continued focus on nationality and locality within Europe could equally hinder European competitiveness (Meir & Smits, 2024: xxxiii-xxxv). Thus, the future of European cinema as a whole and as a collection of national, and in the case of Belgium subnational cinemas, still strongly depends on political interference, funding mechanisms and accessibility, and on the willingness to collaborate across borders, language, and cultures, in the face of Hollywood.

### Key Findings & Implications

In general, the opinions on the Belgian identity, Belgian cinema and the unification of Flanders and Wallonia remain divided and filled with uncertainty and doubt. The existence of a Belgian national cinema, representative of a modern Belgian identity, or 'Belgitude', can therefore not yet be expressed as a fact, but merely as an opinion. However, from the interviews I can equally not conclude that Belgian cinema exists as an exclusively split screen with two separate national cinemas, as once described by Mosley (2001), nor can I ignore the possibility of a Belgian identity to be found within this split, and that would be further enhanced if more Belgian stories were told.

While the language used to describe Belgian cinema is still somewhat separatist or conflicting, there is more and more enthusiasm for a rapprochement between the Flemish and Belgian Francophones within the Belgian film industry. Especially the realization that from an economic perspective it does not seem feasible anymore to produce exclusively for a single subnational market has led both sides to reach out more to the other, as well as to international partners. In doing so, there is also the realization of what unites both sides under the Belgian flag, namely a shared enthusiasm and determination to produce meaningful cinema, that speaks to a larger audience, beyond even the Belgian one, with as most recent notable example Lukas Dhont's Oscar nominated film *Close*, pointed out by 5 out of 7 participants.

Nonetheless, all 7 participants also appointed the lack of governmental and regulatory support needed to make a Belgian film industry economically feasible. Although funding efforts such as the

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Tax Shelter and the agreement between the VAF and the CCA have clearly resulted in an increase in intra-national coproductions, the tensions within Belgian politics, with especially the unwavering popularity of the far-right Flemish nationalist movement, and the subsequent complexity of the federal and regional funding systems, continue to hinder cooperation on all fronts.

In the end, most agree that the issues of language, ethnicity and cultural diversity existing within Belgium can be surmounted by the shared passion and artistic willpower to make ambitious, resourceful and original Belgian films, that utilize the Belgian diversity as a source of inspiration rather than a constraint, as such enhancing this cosmopolitan 'Belgitude' that speaks to a larger audience, surpassing even the Belgian one, and that serves as an example for European cinema. However, while this movement is clearly embraced by multiple individuals within the industry, support is needed from above to push especially those who still doubt the Belgian potential and focus only on the disputes between the Flemish and the Belgian Francophone, stuck within the limits of their imagined community.

### CONCLUSION

From defining nations according to primordialists versus modernists, to debating the existence of the Belgian national identity and cinema and whether it is split amongst two imagined communities or co-exists as a multicultural entity, all definitions and discussions set out in this dissertation carry a certain duality and diaspora. But, if we follow Higson one last time and accept that 'all nations are in some sense diasporic' (Higson, 2000: p. 58), one could say that this thesis has proven the existence of the Belgian nation and identity, and revived the myth of the Cinema Belge, forged out of a sense of loss, of in-between, of dichotomy, and characterized through its creative artistry, budget-efficiency, absurdity, and self-relativity.

However, I cannot ignore the persistent cultural complexity, divide and uncertainty of the Belgian identity, further driven by the divergences of the political and economic context but also by the deeply rooted ethnolinguistic differences between the Flemish and Belgian Francophones, that to some extent continue to maintain the split screen within the Belgian film industry.

Simultaneously, the in-depth interviews with 7 Belgian film industry professionals and experts revealed a general enthusiasm from both sides of the country to cooperate with the other, to



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participate in cultural exchange, and to surmount the linguistic barriers, deemed by so many as the biggest obstacle for the existence of a united Belgian imagined community and cinema.

Moreover, from the thematic analysis conducted on the interview data I conclude that a Belgian national cinema is mostly hindered by economic, not cultural barriers. Mainly, the lack of governmental funding organized at a federal level has resulted in the prioritization of the regional cinema, especially on the Flemish side.

In the end, the myth of the Cinema Belge is ‘a dream of what Belgian cinema could be’ (Participant 3), but I can present-day not yet confirm its existence. However, the rapprochement, uncovered by Van Beek and Willems (2022) cannot be denied either, nor the enthusiasm of most within the industry to build a bridge between the Flemish and Francophone sides, in the hopes of gaining international allure, higher budgets and market share, and recognition of the Belgian creativity, talent, and artistry present on both sides of the country. This rapprochement has moreover been accelerated due to the Tax Shelter initiative, the recent COVID-19 crisis, the rise and acceleration of streaming platforms, and the growth in ambitions of European cinema on a global scale. Clearly, the Belgian film industry has accepted the globalisation of the industry and acknowledges that deeply rooted cultural and linguistic differences can be overcome and can even be advantageous when creating films with unique, yet globally attractive, perspectives. The question that now remains is whether the still polarized Belgian government and the audience is ready for a Belgian national cinematic rapprochement? The potential rapprochement witnessed in the recent national elections between the liberal parties of the North and South could be a first positive indicator of a federal rapprochement or at least reform.

From this conclusion, it should be clear that this dissertation should not be the last that explores Belgian cinema beyond the split screen it has been assumed to be. I believe that it would be beneficial to conduct either short interviews on a larger scale, or surveys to adequately generalise the implications made above on the industry perspective regarding the motivation to create more intra-national coproductions in Belgium. Moreover, the perspective of the Belgian audience is still lacking from this research, as well as a complete Belgian documentary analysis, and a political or governmental investigation on the potential of this cinematic rapprochement, both in Belgium, and more broadly in Europe. Finally, a close-up study of Brussels as meeting point for the Flemish-Francophone reconciliation could be a refreshing addition to this research.

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## APPENDICE

### Appendix A: INTERVIEWEE PROFILES

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Origin
Participant 1	Male	35	Director & Writer	Flanders
Participant 2	Male	46	Director & Writer	Wallonia
Participant 3	Male	62	Professor	Flanders
Participant 4	Female	24	Actor	Brussels
Participant 5	Female	42	Producer	Wallonia
Participant 6	Male	28	Actor	Flanders
Participant 7	Female	29	Politician	Brussels

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## Appendix B: INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

For industry professionals only

For industry experts (academics) only

### OPENING

#### THE PARTICIPANT

Could you briefly summarize what your relation is to the industry, for instance your current/past occupations?

What is your mother tongue?

- Do you speak Flemish/French [dependent on first answer]?

Have you personally worked on/been involved in Belgian intra-national coproductions, in other words co-productions between the Flemish and the Belgian francophone film industries (this can be both Wallonia and/or Brussels)?

Have you focussed your research on a particular part of the Belgian industry (Flemish/Francophone or both)?

#### SPLIT SCREEN

Briefly describe, in your own words, what comes to mind when thinking about Flemish cinema?

- Favourite productions?

What about Belgian Francophone cinema?

- Favourite productions?

In your opinion, what are some of the main differences between Flemish and Belgian Francophone cinema, besides language?

#### RAPPROCHEMENT

From your personal experience/expertise, have you noticed or felt a rapprochement between Flemish and Belgian Francophone cinema?

What does it mean to you for a film to be Belgian?

What do you think of when you hear the term 'Belgitude'?

Do you personally believe that co-productions between both work well?

- What are some of the difficulties?
- What are some of the benefits?

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- Does there exist a certain tension between both?

### CULTURAL DRIVERS

Is it important for you that Belgian films represent the Belgian national identity?

- What does this identity look like?

What do you think the role of language has in all of this?

- Do you for example believe that a 'Belgian' film should be in both Dutch and French? Can it be in English?
- What about the working language (behind the scenes, language of communication etc).

Is the Belgian audience looking for 'Belgian' films in your opinion?

What about the international audience?

### ECONOMIC DRIVERS

How do intra-national coproductions affect budgets and expenses? [If interviewee has knowledge of this]

Do you believe that the Flemish and Francophone industries can benefit from one another in an economic sense?

### REGULATORY DRIVERS

Do you think Belgian regulators are pushing intra-national coproductions, have you seen/felt an evolution?

- Do you believe regulators should do more/less to promote 'Belgian' cinema and to stimulate a national film industry?
- Have you heard of the 2009 agreement between VAF and CCA

What about on a European level?

### PERSONAL OPINION & CONCLUSIONS

How do you believe the Belgian film industry will evolve in the future?

- Will the industry evolve in harmony with the Belgian political landscape, or does it go against it?
- Could there be a united Belgian film industry one day? Would that make sense?

### CLOSING

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### Appendix C: THEMATIC CODING TABLE

To Be Belgian	
<b>A National Identity</b>	"The question is and remains the entire time, do we ourselves know what our identity is? Belgians are the <u>least</u> proud of their own country ... We don't have an unequivocal identity ... We even have such an identity crisis in our country that you can almost consider <u>that</u> as our identity" (Participant 1)
<b>Us versus Them</b>	"I mean, <u>you</u> have so many [looks at me]. I'm saying <u>you</u> have, because I still consider you part of the North [smiles]." (Participant 2)
<b>Cinema Belge</b>	"I love the myth of the Cinema Belge, which is then bilingual, both Flemish and Francophone, and pretty mixed. I love the myth that it is about surreal films, definitely not high budget, but always a bit out of the ordinary" (Participant 3)
Drivers and Inhibitors of the Rapprochement: BELGIAN	
<b>Language</b>	"It's part of our culture, and I find it important to show that, to show it on screen." (Participant 5)
<b>Funding</b>	"There should be facilities between the two parts, that's for sure. For example, we have the Tax Shelter." (Participant 2)
<b>Federal Funding: Tax Shelter</b>	
<b>Regional Funding: Cultural and Economic Funds</b>	"I think there is just little room for that [policy makers stimulating intranational coproductions] in Belgian politics. I think that it has to come from Flanders or Wallonia. Or you would have to create an administrative body at the federal level" (Participant 6)
Drivers and Inhibitors of the Rapprochement: GLOBAL	
<b>COVID-19</b>	"I think that it has been going on since COVID that there are a lot of coproductions. I feel like it's since COVID that it was like let's join forces together." (Participant 4)



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<b>Streaming Platforms</b>	“So, you not only have that VAF endowment, you not only have that Tax Shelter, but if you have higher ambitions today, with the explosion of costs, production costs, you actually also need those streaming resources, to be able to make a larger production.” (Participant 3)
<b>Hollywood versus Europe</b>	“It would of course be amazing to have more and more strong European opposition for those Hollywood films, because we really make an entirely different kind of cinema in Europe... There is a kind of layer of love that you do not have when you watch Hollywood things.” (Participant 1)