

Negotiating images of the nation: the production of Flemish TV drama, 1953–89

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From the start of Flemish television in 1953, domestic drama has persistently been one of its most popular programme categories. While frequently leading the ratings and winning numerous television prizes, Flemish TV drama has hardly figured as the object of academic research.¹ Nevertheless, it is one of the flagships of public broadcasting as it combines entertainment with information and education. Arguably, the strong appeal of drama makes it the ideal genre to embody the public broadcasting policy that, as Van den Bulck (2001) argues, aims to form a national culture. She shows how early Flemish public broadcasting tried to create a uniform high culture as a vehicle to educate its viewers, which she considers as a typically modernist project of a cultural elite. Moving on from her analysis, this article aims to investigate the production process of one particular programme category in more detail. The overarching argument concerns the mobilization of television drama in the construction of a national identity. While Van den Bulck's analysis is followed, an attempt is made to describe in more concrete ways the different factors governing the production process, starting from a textual analysis of the programmes.

Theoretical foundation

Television is often considered an important instrument for creating a national community. Many authors describe it as a source of common memories, images and experiences that unites viewers of diverging backgrounds (Hirsch, 1978: 394, 1982: 296; Caughie, 1986: 168; Scannell,

1992: 320; Abercrombie, 1997: 3; Van den Bulck, 2001). Western European monopolistic public service broadcasters (PSBs), in particular, were explicitly devised as institutions aimed at stimulating national unity (Newcomb, 1997: 4). Not only could they effectively create a national audience, they also often explicitly addressed the nation through 'programmes of national identity' on the occasion of public events and national ceremonies (Cardiff and Scannell, 1987). However, no such explicit national focus is necessary for a programme to lead to cultural identification. For instance, in the European context the mere use of a national language often makes a programme 'national' (Bourdon, 1992: 11). More implicit representations or references may equally contribute to the creation or confirmation of national identification (Brookes, 1999).

In one of the most influential definitions of nations, Benedict Anderson (1991) describes them as 'imagined communities', among other things because their members do not know each other but still have an image of the community. Moving on from the above observations on the importance of television, one could also call them 'image communities'. Television is one of several sources of images to provide representations that give a concrete shape to the abstract notion of the nation. Stuart Hall particularly emphasizes the importance of such representations in the formation of national identities:

National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about 'the nation' with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it. (Hall, 1992: 293)

In this view, national identities are the result of processes of discursive construction. Contrary to popular belief, they are not old and fixed entities, but instead social constructions within a specific historic and cultural context. In spite of the actual diversity within nations, they emphasize national unity (Hall, 1992; see also Barker, 1999; Easthope, 1999: 20-2; Wodak et al., 1999; Lull, 2000: 13).

In this view of national identity, television drama is a particularly interesting programme category. Not only does it take centre stage in prime-time programming, thereby reaching large portions of the national audience (Biltereyst, 1995: 24), it is also often considered as an important storyteller and myth-former for contemporary society (Williams, 1989; Tulloch, 1990; Gerbner, 1998). A similar view inspires the fear of 'Americanization', whereby the high level of imports of American television drama is considered as a threat to European cultural identities. While it is important to put so-called Americanization into perspective (see Biltereyst, 1995), the persistence of the theme in public debate confirms the perceived importance of television drama for national identities. This article, then, aims to investigate the actual workings of this construction of

national identity in domestic drama. Starting from a textual analysis of discursive patterns leading to a particular representation of Flanders, it moves on to look for factors explaining this portrayal. The Flemish PSB's cultural-educational project, as described by Van den Bulck (2001), is taken as a starting point, but other factors turn out to be equally influential for the formation of the television discourse about the nation.

Methodologies

In order most fully to investigate the role of Flemish TV drama in the construction of national identity, this article combines three kinds of analysis. To begin with, *qualitative content analysis* is used to reconstruct the television discourse on Flanders. This method, also called *non-frequency content analysis* (George, 1959) or *ethnographic content analysis* (Altheide, 1996), combines the systematic analysis of large bodies of text typical of quantitative content analysis with a more holistic approach to the text (Kracauer, 1952). To Wester (1995), qualitative content analysis studies the process of meaning production, starting from a specific question and conceptual framework and taking into account contextual information. It is a kind of discourse analysis, not in the strict sense of the analysis of linguistic, spoken or written texts, but in the wider sense of the textual analysis of cultural products, including images, as meaningful discourses. It is particularly useful for identifying representational patterns and themes. For this research, all domestic drama was analysed, from the start of Flemish public television in 1953 until the advent of commercial broadcasting in 1989. For practical purposes, only serial drama for adults was viewed, 32 programmes in total. This analysis allowed for the identification of broad patterns of representation, fitting within broader observations on the creation of national identities.

To reconstruct the production context of these programmes, two methods were used, document analysis and interviews. Whereas Altheide (1996: 2) considers all symbolic representations as documents, our *document analysis* was limited to written sources in the broadcasting archives. All the available files related to drama (annual reports, memos, production records) were systematically screened for relevant information. However, this proved insufficient because not all documents were automatically preserved and there was a degree of arbitrariness in the presence or absence of particular production documents. Moreover, the available documents mostly contain irrelevant practical information (e.g. call sheets) and rarely address issues of representation. Therefore, the written sources were supplemented by nine *expert interviews* with broadcasters (heads of drama, producers, dramatists and directors), a method often used to reconstruct the production process of television drama (Frentzel-Zagorska, 1988; Gitlin,

1994; Day-Lewis, 1998). This method, also named *elite oral history*, offers the advantage of the interviewees discussing processes and events in their own words (Van den Bulck, 2000: 109). Interviews give access to undocumented information and allow the exploration of underlying, often implicit, factors in the production process. The information obtained is more focused, though it is important to keep in mind that 'all interviews are reality-constructing, meaning-making instances' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 4).

It proved difficult accurately to reconstruct the actual production process, particularly for the early years. Not only there is little written information available, there are also many factors at play, and even for the persons concerned it is hard adequately to judge their separate impact. Above all, the interviews provide personal and subjective recollections of the production process. However, this subjectivity is not necessarily problematic, as it allows the reconstruction of a way of thinking and the perception of the broadcasters. Their stories show to what degree they are the product of their time and of the prevailing broadcasting policies. Together, the interviews form a discourse about television drama, about its function and purposes. However, this discourse is not uniform, and it contains significant contradictions, between theory and practice, official and semi-official versions, between the view from above and the view from below. The actual production process, then, is one of continuous negotiation between different parties and considerations.

The television discourse about Flanders

The qualitative content analysis focused on four recurring themes in discourses about the nation: national history, culture, language and character. First, shared *history* is important to the nation, as it justifies the nation's political autonomy by providing stories and images situating its origins in the past (Anderson, 1991; Smith, 1991). In this context, it is relevant that 20 out of 32 drama productions from the age of monopolistic PSB are situated in the past, that is, almost two out of three. While the first successful serial, *Schipper naast Mathilde* ('Skipper near Mathilde', 1955-63), is not situated in the past, it does portray traditional village life. After the failure of its contemporary successor, a cycle of popular period drama is started, culminating in 1969 with *Wij, heren van Zichem* ('We, the lords of Zichem'). This tremendously successful serial, based on the work of Ernest Claes, presents a chronicle of Flemish village life in the 1920s and is greatly influential. Most subsequent period serials are situated in the first half of the 20th century and focus on everyday life in rural Flanders. Together, they present a strikingly homogeneous image of Flanders, stressing national unity.

A second theme in discourses about the nation is the shared *culture*. The spread of a national 'high culture' – mostly art – was of crucial importance for the creation of the modern, homogenized nation (Gellner, 1983: 50-2; Smith, 1991: 91-2). Significantly, 15 out of 20 period serials are based on Flemish literary 'classics'. The most adapted author is Ernest Claes, a very Flemish-minded narrator with a preference for folk anecdotes. Generally, the serials are adaptations of similar regional, almost folkloric writing, which is indeed an important Flemish literary current (Van Gorp et al., 1998: 416). Still, the selection of this work is significant and, by systematically adapting this specific literature, the serials make it known to a broader audience, thus creating a sense of shared culture. In this way, TV drama also puts popular folklore at the heart of Flemish culture. The locations are mostly farming villages, set in an idealized countryside and peopled by simple country folk. This attention to folkloric culture fits within a wider tendency in nationalism, which considers farmers the guardians of old national habits (Burke, 1992; Thiesse and Bertho-Lavenir, 2001).²

Third, the national *language* is often considered as a crucial, primordial and distinctive attribute of the national people (Anderson, 1991: 144-5; Smith, 1993: 64). Therefore, the standardization and spread of a national language is an important factor in the creation of nations. Indeed, the Flemish monopolist public broadcaster BRT has a strict standard language policy, aiming to spread standard Dutch. However, regional dialects are often used in period drama for the sake of authenticity, and in comedy as a source of humour. The dialects are mostly 'cleaned-up', so the end result is a specific TV-Flemish combining dialect and standard Dutch. Just as the dramas construct a selective image of folk culture in a specific period of the Flemish past, a folk language is constructed that doesn't reflect real language use, but that does suggest the existence of a national language community.

Fourth, discourses about the nation often claim the existence of an old national people with a particular national *character* (Smith, 1991: 85-6). In view of the real cultural and ethnic diversity, this is clearly a social construction. The analysed drama situates the roots of the Flemish people among the rural labourers of the past, as these mostly take centre-stage. Moreover, they are mostly positively represented as simple, industrious, pious, virtuous, poor but happy, in contrast to the arrogant, lazy and decadent higher classes. Two masculine types are central in the representation of Flemish people: the silent, stubborn and industrious farmer and the cheerful, obstinate freedom fighter. Together, they form a prototypical image of the Flemish, corresponding to wider discourses about Flemish national character. Their obstinate, rebellious nature, so the story goes, enabled the Flemish to resist foreign domination and their industrious

nature allowed them to overcome poverty. Thus, in this respect, the dramas equally contribute to the formation of a discourse about the nation.³

The broadcasting context

The studied drama contains strong representational patterns, which together form a coherent image of Flanders. The remainder of this article will try to better understand the reasons for this specific and selective representation. As will become apparent, these images are related to the spirit of the age in the second half of the 20th century, particularly within public service broadcasting. The Flemish PSB NIR began broadcasting in 1953 as part of a unitary Belgian institution, but from 1960 it gradually became an independent Flemish institution under the name of BRT. This process mirrored the increasing Flemish political and cultural emancipation from the 1950s onwards, leading to the formation of a federal state. This was the end result of a long battle of the Flemish national movement, the 'Vlaamse Beweging', which started in the 19th century as a language movement striving for the acceptance of Flemish as an official language, French having long been the dominant language (Witte et al., 1990; Gevers et al., 1998).

The young Flemish PSB was modelled on the BBC and privileged information and education. As Van den Bulck (2001) demonstrates, this educational ethos was closely linked to cultural Flemish nationalism. To the early broadcasters, the mere fact that television was governed by the Flemish was significant: 'Flemish television means: direct visual contact with the whole world, through a medium that is operated by Flemish people and that is governed by Flemish values' (Anthierens, 1964: 38).⁴ Television was clearly considered as an instrument for Flemish emancipation, which was mostly conceived in cultural terms. The early broadcasters shared a very hierarchical notion of culture. Thus, programming director Nic Bal described the possibility of television 'opening the gates for the millions one thought condemned to a cultureless existence in the lower layers of society' (Bal, 1985: 282). This pioneer of Flemish broadcasting almost literally put into words the ideal of enlightenment and the subsequently criticized paternalism:

I was convinced that the new medium had to be put to work to elevate a people, which I didn't idealize because I realized its cultural deficits all too well. To me this 'beautiful Flemish people' was a class that needed to rise, to the light. (Bal, 1985: 224)

For this process of cultural emancipation, the early broadcasters mostly had recourse to 'high culture'. As elsewhere, the young medium sought legitimacy by referring to established artistic disciplines such as painting,

sculpture, architecture and, most of all, theatre and literature. The annual reports of the BRT frequently boasted about the attention lavished on 'our Flemish painters and sculptors', 'our cathedrals' and 'our own literary patrimony'. Indeed, 'our', 'own' and 'Flemish' were important themes in the broadcasters' discourse about television.

The broadcasters were greatly preoccupied with the Flemish cultural heritage, which they not only want to protect and promote but also to enrich. This attitude was clearly related to the process of nation formation, which considers the cultural patrimony as an important ethnic heritage. Despite the preference for high culture, the old popular culture or folklore was also considered as a legitimate source of entertainment. This fits within the triangular cultural hierarchy described by De Meyer (1995: 49–50): 'folk culture was good, high culture is good, mass culture is bad'. Folklore was considered as an essential part of the Flemish culture, and it was closely linked to 'our Flemish' high culture, as becomes apparent in the words of the first director of television Bert Leysen:

We will try to use this medium to show everything that our people can produce in the field of art and culture, entertainment and folklore; all the beauty and cultural riches our Flemish country possesses. (cited in Grossey, 1993: 189)

Note again the discursive references to the nation through the possessive pronoun 'our' and the apparently self-evident adjective 'Flemish'. The broadcasters believed in the power of television to educate the viewers into becoming 'real Flemish people', mostly through cultural programmes.

Domestic drama

The cultural-educational broadcasting policy also dictated drama production, evidently so as the Drama Department was part of the division of Cultural Broadcasts. The aims were clear: 'The Flemish broadcaster has the cultural and legitimate mission and moral duty to give the Flemish identity an adult aura in Flemish dramaturgy' (BRT, 1975). To understand how this aim was realized, it is important first to sketch the balance of power within the Drama Department. In this period, the Head of Drama was the central player in the production process. Almost autonomously, he made decisions on individual projects, which he then presented to the Director-General. Both Heads of Drama in this period, Hubert van Herreweghen (in the 1960s and 1970s) and Frans Puttermans (in the 1980s) had strong personalities and dictated the general guidelines. Dramatists, who help to select sources for adaptation and guide the screenwriting process, assisted them. Producers and directors, in contrast, were only involved in the production process after the selection of material and the completion of the script.

In the era of monopolistic PSB, the Heads of Drama and their assistants were mostly the 'enlightened' modernist intellectuals described by Van den Bulck (2001). They had a background in education or the arts, the very milieu in which cultural nationalism thrived. Van Herreweghen was a poet, Puttemans a language teacher, and most of their assistants came from the world of theatre. In this way, the broadcasters fitted within the prevailing cultural-educational broadcasting ethos, which they helped to shape. Both Van Herreweghen and Puttemans were extremely dedicated to Flemish cultural emancipation. In our interview, Van Herreweghen confirmed that it was his aim to stimulate Flemish culture. Being a writer himself, he wanted to introduce the Flemish classics to a broader audience. His successor, Puttemans, preferred original scripts but put even more emphasis on their 'Flemish' character, which is understandable in view of the increasing internationalization of the media in the 1980s. Puttemans was the initiator of *Made In Vlaanderen*, an anthology of exclusively Flemish drama. His aims are clearly culturally nationalist:

To cling consciously to the principle of bringing our own Flemish work on screen; to resolutely take upon us the promotion of our own Flemish dramaturgy; to preserve our authenticity and identity; to create recognizable characters and situations that mirror our Flemish society; to continue what the Flemish Movement has initiated and passed on to us today. (BRT, 1984: 162).

In our interview, Puttemans confirmed that *Made In Vlaanderen* proceeded from his concern to culturally counterbalance the increasing political Flemish emancipation. He therefore tried to broadcast an hour of domestic drama each week, dealing with 'our language, our background, our Flemish roots'.

So far, we may conclude that the monopolistic PSB wanted to make the viewers familiar with their rich cultural heritage and thus to stimulate their Flemish identity. Therefore, the question of whether the broadcasters had the explicit purpose of creating a Flemish identity can be answered positively, in line with Van den Bulck's (2001) conclusions. However, this observation needs to be put into perspective. First, it is important to note that these broadcasting policies, however condescending and paternalistic they may seem from a contemporary perspective, were effectively emancipating. They need to be situated in the context of Flemish self-definition within the increasingly international media landscape. Second, the above account is somewhat one-sided, as it is mostly based on claims made by the policy-makers, who did not refrain from using idealistic language. The cultural-educational, heavily literary and Flemish-minded ideals were less important in the lower ranks of production, as became apparent from our interviews with dramatists, producers and directors. Third, the privileged position of high culture was not as stable as is often assumed in nostalgic retrospect. While the early broadcasters were indeed keen to create an air

of social respectability, in practice, the broadcasts were not that elitist and, from the early years, there was discussion of the desirability of popular programmes. Goodall (1995: 119) notes a similar mythology concerning the early BBC. In Flanders, there is a tension between the mission to inform and to educate and the mission to entertain, which leads to a very ambivalent position towards popular programmes.

While the Drama Department was part of the division of Cultural Broadcasts until 1975, there too, entertainment was one of the aims. In contrast to the idealistic language about cultural emancipation, the actual drama offered was very varied, including many popular comedies as well as 'serious' adaptations of 'classics'. Both the Heads of Drama and their assistants confirmed that one of the primary aims of drama at the time was to entertain. In our interview, Van Herreweghen, Head of Drama in the 1960s and 1970s, claims that the purpose of serial drama was mostly to portray merry village life and cheer viewers up, rather than to educate them. When he emphasizes that serials had to be successful, he probably exaggerates the importance of success with the viewers as a defence against later accusations of unworlidity. Contrary to Van Herreweghen's statements, there was in fact a lot of controversy about popular programmes under his leadership. The broadcasters realized they also had to produce popular programmes, but these were not to their own taste. Thus there was a lot of discussion about the popular comedy *Schipper naast Mathilde*, which remained on the schedules for eight years, mostly thanks to its huge audience success. Similarly, the nostalgic village dramas of the 1960s such as *Wij, heren van Zichem* were not unanimously approved of within the BRT. There was even more criticism of contemporary comedies, which reflects the above-mentioned hierarchy of culture: privileging high culture, tolerating folklore but looking down upon contemporary popular culture. Nevertheless, in this period a lot of popular drama was broadcast, which serves as a caution against jumping to rash conclusions based on proclaimed production policies. While the monopolistic broadcasters followed a clear policy prioritizing highbrow, Flemish-minded drama, it is necessary to take into account other factors, which also influenced the eventual drama output.

A first factor emerged in the account given above: viewer responses. While the broadcasters admit they mostly judged potential productions according to their own taste, they were forced to take into account the tastes of viewers as well. However, they only made concessions either to perceived audience preferences or in retrospect, as there was hardly any audience research. For instance, Van Herreweghen pointed out that the start of the cycle of archaic popular drama in the 1960s was largely due to the failure of an earlier 'decent' contemporary production. The success of the first period serials confirmed the viewers' appreciation, so more of the same was produced. In the process, a compromise was sought between the

viewers' taste for popular comedy and the broadcasters' taste for serious drama. Folkloric, popular literary adaptations were as 'low' as the broadcasters would go, while they were thought to be entertaining enough for the viewers. The programmes both fitted within the cultural-educational broadcasting ethos and did not alienate the audience, unlike many 'serious' productions of the time.

Poverty

Besides viewer responses, domestic drama production was also influenced by a host of other considerations, mostly related to the broadcaster's 'poverty'. First, there was the literal, *financial* poverty: the budgets were extremely low. From the start, in 1953, television director Bert Leysen complained about the lack of budgets for a medium demanding, each day, 'monstrous amounts of money' (NIR, 1953: 10). Soon, the Flemish PSB became a European specialist in making many programmes on shoestring budgets. A few figures illustrate this (relative) poverty. In the 1970s, the BRT had the lowest budget and the smallest staff of all European broadcasters, apart from the Irish (BRT, 1976: 73). In this period, the Flemish broadcaster had to make do with the budget of a single Dutch broadcasting organization, while each German channel disposed of at least ten times this amount (Van Gorp and Billiet, 1977: 138). In the 1980s, extra budgetary cuts were made. In 1986 a Dutch programme cost on average 2,000,000 Belgian francs an hour (the equivalent of about 50,000 euros), a Flemish one 770,000 francs (about 19,000 euros) (BRT, 1986: 1). In 1987 the Dutch broadcasters disposed of about four times as much money as the Flemish (BRT, 1987: 1).

These financial restrictions were most strongly felt in the expensive drama category, where they seriously limit possibilities. For instance, screenwriters had to restrict the number of characters and extras, while the sets and costumes had to be simple (Van Marcke and De Poortere, 1977: 144). According to Head of Drama Van Herreweghen, the budgets also influenced genre choices. Thus, the 'small-scale realism' of many popular serials of the 1960s and 1970s was the only kind of period drama they could afford, elaborate period reconstructions with sophisticated costumes being too expensive. Keeping the above cultural hierarchy in mind, this suggests that the broadcasters would have produced more serious and prestigious 'heritage' serials, had they disposed of more money. Clearly, then, the dominant folkloric image of Flanders is also partly the result of mundane practical limitations. However, this analysis in turn should be put into perspective. First, the financial restrictions, though serious, should not be exaggerated. The frequent complaints in the annual reports were also a signal and a request for money to government. Second, the restricted drama

budgets were partly the result of mixed priorities within the BRT: while drama was called a flagship of broadcasting, more was invested in 'respectable' genres such as news, current affairs and art programmes.⁵

Partly due to financial restrictions, the BRT also faced severe shortages of *personnel*. The Drama Department, in particular, had an extremely small staff in relation to its output. Moreover, in the early years many broadcasting employees were trained on the job. Looking back, the BRT does not hesitate to call its pioneers 'amateurs' (BRT, 1978: 23). One category where the shortage was strongly felt was that of directors. Most of the early Flemish directors and producers had a background in theatre, which contributed to the theatrical nature of early drama. The shortage of directors and the relatively small drama output also allowed certain directors to heavily influence the production. Thus, most of the popular folkloric serials of the 1960s, such as *Wij, heren van Zichem*, were directed by the same director, Maurits Balffoort, who also wrote or co-wrote the screenplay. Considering the small number of persons involved in the fiction production process, the influence of individuals on the creation of representational patterns should not be underestimated.

There was also a shortage of actors. In the early years, recourse was mostly taken to theatre actors who were not used to more restrained television acting, which again added to the theatricality. Moreover, there were limitations on the availability of the actors, as most had full-time jobs in the theatre. In our interview, Van Herreweghen emphasizes the importance of such practical considerations for early drama productions. For instance, *Schipper naast Mathilde* was broadcast on Friday with a cast of predominantly older actors, because this was when these actors had their day off (Grossey, 1995: 166). The limited availability of actors made television casting very difficult, the question often being 'Who's free?' instead of 'Who's best for the part?' (BRT, 1960: 43). This problem was partly solved by the expansion of the company of television actors in the early 1960s. However, this created a new problem: the same actors kept on returning, quite often in similar roles, which again contributed to recurrences in the representation of Flanders.

The shortages of personnel were most strongly felt on the level of screenwriting. Until the late 1980s, there were hardly any professional Flemish TV screenwriters. Scripts were mostly written by people in other professions, mostly novelists or journalists, none of whom had trained as screenwriters. Therefore, finding good writers was mostly a process of trial and error. For instance, several writers were hired to write for *Schipper naast Mathilde*, in the hope of thus finding new talent (Internal memo B. Leysen, 01/06/1955). This procedure accounts for the uneven quality of the scripts, which were little adapted to the specificity of the medium. Moreover, although the broadcasters were very keen to produce new material, the shortage of screenwriters also led to a lack of original

screenplays. This made it difficult to be selective, which is an important prerequisite for quality.⁶ The situation remained problematic until the 1980s, when Frans Puttemans tried to remedy it:

It is surely easier and more fashionable to translate the international drama-literature. . . . However, in the long run, this will not go unpunished and our cultural character will be lost. . . . However, our attempts require a great deal of energy and investments in time and people. Flemish dramaturgy is not very rich and prosperous. (BRT, 1984: 162)

This comment brings together the different elements of the above account: in spite of the financial and creative poverty, it is necessary to stimulate Flemish dramaturgy, as this is important for Flemish identity.

Clearly, the shortage of original scripts contributed to the frequent adaptation of Flemish literature. Literary adaptations not only required less investment in screenwriting and guaranteed a basic quality, they also allowed the production to capitalize on the reputation and success of the literary source. However, not all authors can easily be adapted and, according to most interviewees, this was of great importance in understanding patterns in the drama output. Both Van Herrewegen and Puttemans state that realist storytellers such as Ernest Claes, with their linear chronologies and almost visual styles, are most easily adaptable. However, they add that these authors also tell 'the great stories of our people', which again betrays the importance of the Flemish character to the policy-makers. In the same vein, most interviewees claim that the frequent return to a similar past is the product of adapting to circumstances rather than deliberate choice. Looking for good stories, the Heads of Drama and the dramatists reportedly ended up with period material. For instance, Puttemans blamed the absence of contemporary literary adaptations on the fact that classical narrative is taboo in contemporary writing and that it is replaced by 'structural experiments and psychoanalytical games', which are hard to transpose to television. The classics, on the contrary, offer universal stories, of all ages (BRT, 1982: 143). One of the dramatists, Marga Neirynek, confirms that the return to historical literary sources was mostly a matter of necessity, but she adds that the ensuing serials show the real Flanders: 'That's us. That is the spirit of our people.' Again, this remark brings us back to the Flemish character of drama.

Conclusion

In the age of monopolistic Flemish PSB, many factors were at play in the production of drama. The Flemish-educational broadcasting policy provided the basic framework for judging potential productions and was authoritatively imposed by the Heads of Drama, whose personal literary

tastes fitted within the broader broadcasting ethos. They consciously strove for Flemish cultural emancipation, which led to a preference for serious, typically Flemish stories. However, in realizing these basic aims the broadcasters were faced with other factors, such as the viewers' taste for more popular fare. Financially, the choice of certain genres and themes was influenced by limited budgets. On the creative level, the shortage of screenwriters partly explains the large proportion of literary adaptations, while the 'adaptability' of a particular literature partly explains the recurrence of similar images of Flanders. Besides the 'elevated' policy aims, quite banal pragmatic considerations turned out to be decisive for drama output. Screenwriter Paul Koeck further elaborated on this observation, considering the dominance of folkloric period drama as the result of organic evolution and improvisation, following the success of the early folkloric dramas. In any case, it is important not to overestimate the effectiveness of the broadcasting policies, as the actual fiction offered, and the ensuing 'national' image of Flanders, turn out to be the result of a complex process of negotiation. However, the power of the broadcasters' convictions should not be underestimated either, as it is ultimately their conservative image of Flanders that is presented to the viewers.

Notes

1. With one notable exception, the work of D. Biltereyst (1995).
2. For more on the folkloric image of Flanders, see Dhoest (2001b).
3. For a more detailed analysis of the representation of the Flemish in television drama, see Dhoest (2001a).
4. All quotes are translations from Dutch by the author.
5. For more on the economic constraints on Flemish drama, see Dhoest (1999).
6. For instance, Stempel (1996: 33) notes that the American Kraft Television Theatre produced only 650 out of a massive 19,000 scripts.

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The relationship between online and offline communities: the case of the Queer Sisters

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One of the effects of the Industrial Revolution was the destruction of communities – at least that was received wisdom among sociologists until 1950s, when studies found that, in fact, traditional communities were maintained through new means (Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). As we are going through what some call the ‘information revolution’ (Altschiller, 1995), the fear of losing communities has resurfaced. The appearance of human associations on the Internet has prompted claims that it provides an escape from (Willson, 1997) and a substitute for (Doheny-Farina, 1996; Lajoie, 1996; Nguyen and Alexander, 1996) offline communities, that it fragments offline communities (Sassi, 1996). Are the fears about online communities’ grounded? Are online communities unconnected to offline communities? Many have pointed out the need to understand how online communities relate to offline communities (Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Slevin, 2000; Uncapher, 1999), but there have hardly been any such studies (Wellman and Gulia, 1999) and the topic has been left to opinion instead of evidence (Hill and Hughes, 1997; Kollock and Smith, 1999).

This article takes a first step towards filling the gap in existing research by examining the autonomy of online communities in relation to their offline counterparts. The article is based on a case study of a bulletin board on the world-wide web and the women’s group in Hong Kong, the Queer Sisters, who created the board. Using content analysis, an online survey, interviews and observation between September 1999 and August 2000, I found the community formed on the bulletin board differed from the Queer Sisters over major goals and norms. Although participation on the bulletin