

The Suppression of Satirizing Belgian Community Difficulties in Flemish Cinema and the Film Adaptation of Will-O'-the Wisp

Gertjan Willems
Ghent University

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Gertjan Willems,
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Abstract: In his article "The Suppression of Satirizing Belgian Community Difficulties in Flemish Cinema and the Film Adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp*" Gertjan Willems analyzes two film projects of Frans Buyens. In 1970, Buyens received a positive funding recommendation for *Top-Hit Girl*, a satire about community difficulties in Belgium. However, Minister of Culture Frans van Mechelen refused to support the project because it conflicted with his pro-Flemish views. The minister successfully swept this controversial decision under the rug by offering Buyens the option to trade his socially critical project for a film adaptation of Willem Elsschot's novel *Will-O'-the Wisp*. This case study sheds new light on an understudied period in Belgian cinema and on the work of Frans Buyens. It demonstrates how the Flemish cinema landscape could be heavily influenced by political ideologies and interventions. Political maneuvers ensured that a satirical treatment of Belgian community difficulties in cinema was suppressed. Flemish cinema was instead directed towards adapting literary classics, thereby confirming the national culture instead of critically investigating it.

Gertjan WILLEMS

The Suppression of Satirizing Belgian Community Difficulties in Flemish Cinema and The Film Adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp*

At the end of the 1960s, Flemish director Frans Buyens conceived *Top-Hit Girl*, a satirical film about the difficult relationship between the Dutch and French linguistic communities in Belgium. In 1970, he received a positive funding recommendation by the Flemish film commission for this project. For the first time since the inauguration of the subsidy system, however, the Minister of Culture, Frans van Mechelen (from the Christian Democratic political party CVP), refused to support a positively recommended film project. Instead, he gave Buyens a grant to produce *Will-O'-the Wisp* (*Het Dwaallicht*), a film adaptation of Willem Elsschot's 1946 novel by the same name. In 1973, the Flemish-Dutch co-production *Will-O'-the Wisp* was released in cinemas in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Until now, virtually nothing was known about the political and ideological factors in the production of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. This article contains the first rigorous analysis of the vicissitudes of *Top-Hit Girl* and *Will-O'-the Wisp* and sheds new light on Buyens's almost legendary reputation as a stubborn and uncompromising filmmaker. Thereby, it focuses on the political and ideological factors within Flemish cinema in the early 1970s. As such, this article contributes to Simone Murray's (*The Adaptation*) call for a "materialist" approach within the field of adaptation studies. In the wake of James Naremore's (*Film*) call to account for the contexts in which adaptations thrive, Murray advocates a focus on the power structures behind the production of adaptations. Within a European context, the role of various governments' film production policies is particularly relevant. The article draws upon original archival material from the archives of Frans Buyens in the Archief en Museum van de Socialistische Arbeidersbeweging–Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (Archive and Museum of the Socialist Workers Movement–Institute of Social History in Ghent, hereafter AMSAB-ISG), the Flemish government's film department records in the Rijksarchief Beveren (State Archives in Beveren), the archives of the Production Fund for Dutch Films in the EYE Filmmuseum (EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam), and the press cutting archives from the Cinematek – Koninklijk Belgisch Filmarchief (Royal Belgian Film Archive in Brussels).

Frans Buyens (1924–2004) was known as a humanist and a socially critical filmmaker. At a young age, he was already engaged in the trade union movement. His social engagement was also clear from his very first short documentaries, such as *Jean Jaurès* (1959), which was about the French socialist leader at the beginning of the twentieth century. Shortly afterwards, Buyens made one of the most important films of his career: *Fighting for Our Rights* (1962, *Vechten voor Onze Rechten*). This was a montage film about the fierce protests against the so-called Unity Law of the Belgian Government during the winter of 1961–1962 (Buyens, De Haes, Hogenkamp & Meynen, *Vechten*; Demasure, "Hét Filmdocument"). The anti-capitalist documentary occupies an important place in Belgian film history, not least because of the domestic controversy and international recognition the film was confronted with (Mosley, *Split* 122). Buyens's later films about nazism, concentration camps, and various political, social, ecological, and ethical issues reveal his continuing social criticism and humanistic engagement.

Buyens's work and life was also characterized by his artistic and cultural interests. In the period after the Second World War, he founded various cultural and critical journals, associations, and even a satirical theater. Simultaneously, he established himself as a writer with several children's stories, fairytales, and novels that he published on his own, as well as with journalistic and essayistic texts in various newspapers, magazines, and separate publications. Buyens showed a special interest in literary writers in whose work he could find a social or humanistic commitment. In the 1950s, he published essays on writers such as the Austrian Andreas Latzko and the Belgian Willem Elsschot (the pseudonym of Alfons De Ridder).

From the start of his documentary activities in 1958, Buyens had fiction film ambitions as well. One of his first feature film ideas was an adaptation of Elsschot's latest novel, *Will-O'-the Wisp* (1946). In this novel, the Antwerp citizen Laarmans accompanies three Afghan sailors on a fruitless quest for the mysterious Maria Van Dam. Buyens knew Elsschot and his literary oeuvre very well. In 1949, Buyens interviewed Elsschot for *Voorpost*, a left-wing cultural magazine Buyens established himself (Buyens, "Gesprek"). This interview also led to an essay on the social aspects and bourgeois morality of Elsschot's prose (Buyens, *Willem*). Elsschot highly valued this essay, after which the two authors maintained a good relationship. Nevertheless, Elsschot refused to sell Buyens the film adaptation

rights of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. Buyens was highly disappointed by this refusal and wrote a harsh letter to Elsschot (Van Hattem, *Willem* 503). This letter, however, remained unanswered.

Even if Elsschot had given his permission, it remains unsure whether Buyens would have succeeded in producing the film at that time. Producing feature films in Flanders in the 1950s was far from easy. The small domestic market and high production costs made it very difficult to produce a financially profitable film. For this reason, the Belgian government introduced the so-called "detaxation". This economically motivated support measure ensured that some of the entertainment taxes on cinema tickets of Belgian films were returned to the film's producer. The detaxation was an automatic aid that favored films that attracted the largest audiences. The measure was, in other words, hardly helpful to less popular films, with cultural rather than commercial aspirations, which was certainly the case for Buyens's film projects. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, such as *Seagulls Die in the Harbour* (*Meeuwen Sterven in de Haven*, 1955) or *If the Wind Frightens You* (*Si le Vent te Fait Peur*, 1960), Flanders had no feature film production that exceeded the artistic or qualitative level of the popular comedies by Edith Kiel and Jan Vanderheyden (Fowler, "Cinema"; Vande Winkel and Van Engeland, *Edith*). The few attempts at more "serious" films mostly failed because of a lack of resources and professional infrastructure. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the only fiction films that Buyens managed to produce until the early 1970s were two cheap films with limited distribution: the short film *The Target* (*De Schietschijf*, 1960) and the experimental essay film *Each of Us* (*Ieder van Ons*, 1971), which combines fiction with non-fiction elements.

At the beginning of the 1960s, plans were made to introduce a selective and culturally inspired film support mechanism to facilitate the production of films with artistic and qualitative ambitions. Initially, these plans were seen within a unitary Belgian framework, as was the case for the detaxation system. However, the negotiations for a Belgian Film Institute were thwarted by the Flemish desire for cultural autonomy (Willems, "Tot bevordering"). This led to a regionalized structure of Belgium's cultural film production policy.

On the Flemish side, a support system for Dutch-language films was installed in 1964. From then on, filmmakers could request financial support from a film commission. After evaluating applications, this policy body gave detailed but non-binding recommendations to the minister of culture, who would eventually make the final decision regarding funding. In the first year, the support system's budget was four million Belgian francs, which by the early 1970s had risen to twenty-four million Belgian francs. With this budget, only two or three feature film projects per year could be supported. Still, the introduction of the Flemish film support mechanism had a large and persistent impact in terms of the concrete production of films in Flanders. Since 1964, more than three-quarters of all Flemish feature films have received a government subsidy. On average, this support has counted for more than half of the Flemish share in the total finance plan for the supported films. Flemish film policy has thus had considerable power over what kinds of films were (not) produced in Flanders (Willems, "The Role").

The availability of culturally inspired government support created opportunities for Buyens's feature film ambitions. In 1967, he submitted two projects to the film commission, which found the production costs of the projects too high. Two years later, Buyens again tried his luck, this time by submitting four projects at the same time. The commission found that three of these projects were underdeveloped. The fourth project, however, *Top-Hit Girl*, succeeded in attracting the commission's attention.

Top-Hit Girl was a satire about community difficulties in Belgium. It told the story of a French-speaking young man from Brussels who travels through Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium. Buyens called it a humorous film about the Flemish-Walloon problem. The film touched upon the recent (1968) linguistic division of the Catholic University of Leuven, and the dialogues (which were in Dutch, French, and English) contained several explicit discussions about Belgian community issues. The film commission praised the "sarcastic approach to certain national issues, which are dealt with in a witty way" ("sarkastische aanpak van zekere nationale toestanden, die op een geestige wijze op de korrel genomen worden"; all translations are the author's [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 6]). Although not all commission members were convinced of the (cinematographic and dramatic) qualities of Buyens's earlier films, they all appreciated his "sharp social view of society" ("scherpe sociale kijk op de maatschappij" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 6]).

Buyens's socially critical attitude thus promoted the official support process. This was the decisive motivation to recommend a screenplay writing grant of 150,000 Belgian francs, which Minister of Culture Frans van Mechelen (CVP) approved. By providing a screenplay grant, the commission wanted to give Buyens the opportunity to elaborate on his film idea and respond to the doubts about his ability to use a more light-hearted and accessible film style than that of his documentary work. As

such, *Top-Hit Girl* was the first project since the introduction of the support system in 1964 that received screenplay support. This decision was motivated by the commission's desire to renew Flemish cinema by supporting more "original" films, which they gave an additional incentive by means of screenplay support (until the end of the 1970s, very few literary adaptations received screenplay support).

Buyens developed a screenplay, which largely met the commission's expectations concerning "a cosmopolitan and humorous vision of Belgium's community difficulties" ("de kosmopolitische en humoristische visie op de kominunautaire problemen" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 7]). The commission gave a positive support recommendation, after which Buyens started preparing the entire film production. He arranged the shooting locations, cast and crew.

Yet, the Minister of Culture still had to approve the subsidy. On 27 April 1971, more than half a year after the positive commission recommendation, Buyens received a call from Paul Rock, the director general of the Ministry of Culture, stating that Minister Frans van Mechelen would not grant the aid. Although he had previously approved the screenplay grant and the project was already approved by the director-general and the administrator-general of the Ministry of Culture, the Financial Inspection Department, and even the Minister of Culture's personal cabinet, Minister van Mechelen refused to sign the ministerial order. For the first time since the creation of the support system in 1964, the Minister decided not to support a positively recommended feature film project.

In an internal note, the minister justified his decision as follows: "I believe that the screenplay lacks content and that it offers too few opportunities for a successful film" ("Ik ben van mening dat het scenario elke inhoud mist en dat de uitwerking ervan te weinig kansen biedt voor een succesvolle film" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 128]). This vague and succinct formulation gives little insight into the motivations for going against the film commission's recommendation. Between the lines, the note seems to suggest that the minister would rather not formulate his precise motivations on paper. This thesis is supported by the fact that the minister wanted to minimize publicity surrounding his refusal to subsidize *Top-Hit Girl*. However, given that he was being confronted with the critical filmmaker and author Frans Buyens, this was no easy task. To satisfy Buyens, the minister expressed his willingness to offer compensation by subsidizing another film project. Such a ministerial promise, which went against legal prescriptions and normal practices, points to an attempt to sweep the *Top-Hit Girl* affair under the rug.

Accordingly, we can assume that the grant refusal did not originate from a "lack of content" in the screenplay, but probably exactly from the nature of the content that was present: namely, the satirical view on Belgium's community difficulties. Buyens was informed about the motivations underlying the grant refusal during a telephone conversation with Rock. The same day, Buyens sent a letter to Rock in which he stated: "Without going into detail, only this: I cannot agree with the reasons, but I can understand them" ("Zonder op deze plaats in te gaan op de redenen in kwestie alleen dit: ik kan niet akkoord gaan met de aangehaalde redenen, maar ik kan ze wel begrijpen" [AMSAB-ISG, nr. 832]). A little over a year later, Buyens stated in an interview that the minister was afraid that he wanted to ridicule Belgium (Diana, "Eva" 3).

Film critic Frits Danckaert, who was part of the film commission at the time, confirmed Buyens's assertion. According to Danckaert, Minister van Mechelen did not consider it appropriate to display Belgium's community difficulties in the cinema (*Van woord* 45). It is indeed not inconceivable that some pro-Flemish political actors, including Minister van Mechelen, would have had problems with this. The creation of a Flemish film support system in 1964 had been a major political achievement of the Flemish emancipation. The thought that this support system would now support a film with a critical and satirical view on certain aspects of the Flemish emancipation was troubling to some. In other words, the satirical treatment of Flemish-Walloon relations was the reason for refusing a grant to produce *Top-Hit Girl*.

Contrary to what one would expect based on his critical and non-conformist reputation, Buyens did not protest the ministerial maneuvers. Apparently, the dream to make a feature film was stronger than his objections to the course of events. Buyens agreed to the minister's proposal. On the very same day that Buyens got the call concerning the grant refusal, he suggested an adaptation of Elsschot's novel *Will-O'-the Wisp*. Buyens thus exchanged a project with a critical view on contemporary social, political, and community issues for a politically "safe" project.

According to Buyens, the choice to adapt a novel was made under the influence of the Ministry: "They told me: 'Boy, you'd best film a book'" ("Men heeft me toen gezegd: 'Jongen, jij moest maar eens een boek verfilmen'" [Verhoye, "Frans" 23]). Again, Buyens's claim is confirmed by commission member Frits Danckaert (*Van Woord* 45). Danckaert saw the film adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp* as an

example of the Ministry of Culture's vision for Flemish cinema as an extension of literature, which contrasted with the film commission's preference for original films.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that during the first decade of the support system, half of the supported films (14 out of 28) were literary adaptations (Willems, "Adaptation" 68). In part, this was due to the discrepancy between the theory and practice of the commission's policy. The commission's positive attitude towards original films was often undermined by an evaluation of original screenplays as lacking in quality. Consequently, they turned to adaptations. According to the commission's logic, it was "safe" to make adaptations because they could rely on pre-tested narrative qualities and on the public appeal of the literary source work. Furthermore, supporting adaptations of acclaimed literary works could be legitimized as an interpretation of the cultural task of promoting high-culture films. The consecutive Ministers of Culture were even more straightforward in endorsing these arguments for supporting literary adaptations. The Ministry's instruction to Buyens to adapt a novel is an illustration of how adaptations were appreciated as an ideal way to highlight Flemish literary heritage, which fitted into a Flemish cultural nation-building process (Willems, "Film" 135). *Will-O'-the Wisp*—an award-winning novel by the celebrated writer Willem Elsschot—in all respects belonged (and belongs) to this literary canon.

Since the end of the 1950s, Buyens never forgot about his dream to make a film adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. After Elsschot's refusal to sell the adaptation rights in 1959, Buyens tried to obtain the film rights again in 1968, this time from the heirs of Elsschot (who died in 1960), but they refused him as well. Buyens had an enduring fascination with a cinematic adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp*, and he had to quickly decide whether he wanted to take the opportunity for ministerial support. In this respect, it was much easier to choose a subject on which he had already been working. In combination with the ministerial directions to adapt a literary work, it should therefore come as no surprise that Buyens opted for an adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. The problem concerning the film rights also appeared to be solved in 1971. After a lecture in Rotterdam on Elsschot, the eldest daughter of the writer—Adèle De Ridder—was impressed by Buyens's vision of her father's work. Consequently, Buyens was able to convince her to release the rights.

Three days after Buyens's proposal, on 30 April 1971, minister van Mechelen stated that he was willing to fund the project. The minister asked Buyens to submit the synopsis and production dossier to the ministry, and he promised to decide as soon as possible. In June 1971, Buyens submitted the requested documentation to the film commission. The commission regretted that its previous positive recommendation was not followed and that "an original screenplay, *Top-Hit Girl*, was now sacrificed for an exploitation of the literary patrimony" ("een origineel scenario *Top-Hit Girl* opgeofferd wordt voor een afschuiming van het literair patrimonium" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 8]). Moreover, several elements were missing in the new dossier, including a full screenplay and information about the technical staff, the cast, and the budget.

Pending this information, the commission postponed its official recommendation. Nevertheless, the project was never resubmitted to the film commission. On 1 July 1971, Buyens was assured of ministerial support. According to the legal prescriptions, the minister could only make a support decision after having obtained a (positive or negative) recommendation from the film commission. Because the minister awarded the support without such a recommendation, the support for *Will-O'-the Wisp* was against the law. The film commission expressed its dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in a memorandum to the minister, but this did not change anything.

The exceptionally fast priority procedure indicates Minister van Mechelen's commitment to pleasing Buyens. The attempt to sweep the grant refusal of *Top-Hit Girl* under the rug proved largely successful. Against his habits, Buyens was indeed very sparing with critical commentary around the *Top-Hit Girl* affair. In an interview with the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, Buyens announced that his next film project, *Where Little Birds Cough* (1974, *Waar de Vogeltjes Hoesten*), would be a critical social satire about land speculators and environmental degradation in Antwerp. When Buyens was asked whether he had enough freedom in Belgium to make such a film, Buyens replied that he had encountered several problems at the beginning of the 1960s with official bodies and political personalities, but that this problem was now over: "In principle, I do not see why you could not make a film in full freedom here" ("In principe zie ik niet in waarom je hier geen film in volle vrijheid zou kunnen maken" [Zaagsma, 7]). Buyens thus refused to make an (obvious) reference to the problems he had encountered with *Top-Hit Girl*. Instead, he only talked about *Will-O'-the Wisp* in interviews. The few times that the project was mentioned, Buyens was very succinct about it or tried to avoid the issue. When the magazine *Film & Televisie* asked what had happened to *Top-Hit Girl*, Buyens's

comment on the ministerial support denial was "We'd rather not talk about that ("daar praten we liever niet over" [Wauters, "Praten" 6]).

In April 1971, when Buyens proposed to film *Will-O'-the Wisp*, he was still hoping to shoot the film in November and December of the same year. Despite the fast-tracked support procedure, this timing turned out to be too optimistic. Instead of the expected six million Belgian francs (the amount that was originally reserved for *Top-Hit Girl*), Buyens received a grant of only five million Belgian francs for *Will-O'-the Wisp*. Director-General Paul Rock justified this lower grant by referring to the limitations of the available funds. In addition, there was the expectation that it would be quite easy to find a Dutch co-production partner for an adaptation of *Will-O'-the Wisp*, as Elsschot was also famous in the Netherlands. This co-producer would then have to ensure a grant from the Production Fund for Dutch Films. Buyens was also in favor of setting up a co-production, but this turned out to be a more difficult task than expected.

After several months, Buyens found a suitable co-producer. The Jewish-Dutch Max Appelboom had studied in Antwerp just before World War II and was thus familiar with the Flemish context. In January, 1972, Appelboom informed the Production Fund for Dutch Film that his production company, Appletree Filmproductions, would co-produce *Will-O'-the Wisp* with Buyens's company, Iris Films Dacapo. However, it was another few months before Appelboom submitted the official grant application. The Production Fund discussed *Will-O'-the Wisp* on 3 July 1972, a year after Minister van Mechelen had agreed to support the film. The existing agreement between the Flemish and Dutch policy makers to regularly co-produce films from each other's regions advantaged the support process of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. The secretary of the Production Fund, Jan (J.G.J.) Bosman, stressed the importance of a benevolent attitude, given that the Belgian Ministry of Dutch Culture had recently supported two Dutch projects, it would be "reasonable to contribute to a Belgian project again next year." ("redelijk zijn het volgend jaar dezerzijds weer eens in een van oorsprong Belgisch projekt bij te dragen" [EYE Film Museum, nr. 106]).

Despite this positive attitude, the Production Fund was not inclined to grant *Will-O'-the Wisp* immediate support: Bosman talked about "next year". The available funds for 1972 were limited. The Production Fund wanted to reserve these funds for fully Dutch productions. Moreover, the Production Fund was not fully convinced of *Will-O'-the Wisp*'s production dossier. Just as the Flemish film commission had done more than a year earlier, the production Fund asked for a screenplay or a more elaborate dossier. Thus, the Production Fund also wanted to postpone its decision.

However, this caused a timing problem: Buyens was contractually obliged to spend the Belgian subsidy before December, 1972. Immediately after the deliberation of the Dutch Production Fund, Minister van Mechelen took action. In line with his previous efforts for *Will-O'-the Wisp*, van Mechelen sent a letter to the Production Fund, in which he explained the urgency of the case. He clearly expressed his desire that the dossier would be examined by the Production Fund "with the most favorable attitude in order to grant a subsidy from the Dutch side" ("met de meest welwillende aandacht onderzocht worden teneinde van Nederlandse zijde ook een subsidie te kunnen toekennen" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 139]).

The Ministerial intervention was not without consequence. On 12 July 1972, just nine days after the last meeting, the Production Fund agreed to grant a subsidy of 225,000 Dutch guilders. As on the Flemish side, the efforts of Minister van Mechelen led to a subsidy for *Will-O'-the Wisp* without a thorough assessment of the project by the relevant policy body.

However, it was awhile before the official support agreement was signed. Because he wanted to begin shooting in the autumn, Buyens tried to lobby Minister van Mechelen's head of cabinet, Johan Fleerackers, to make a special effort to encourage the Production Fund to quickly settle the matter. It is unclear whether Fleerackers or other political or administrative personalities made extra efforts for *Will-O'-the Wisp*, but in any case, the official agreement with the Production Fund followed quickly.

At the end of October 1972, shooting of *Will-O'-the Wisp* finally started in Antwerp. The co-production support implied the co-operation of a few Dutch employees, such as the cameraman Fred Tammes and Jaap Van Rij as production manager. The Dutch Sies Foletta and Tim Beekman got supporting roles as a barkeeper and as a pimp, but the main roles had already been given to Belgians. The main role of Laarmans was played by the popular theater actor from Ghent, Romain Deconinck. Buyens's daughter, Eva Kant (a pseudonym for Yvette Buyens), who was also selected to star in *Top-Hit Girl*, played two female leading roles: Maria Van Dam and Fathma. Dora Van der Groen was cast in the role of Laarmans's wife. The three foreign sailors were played by Mazhar Hussain (as Ali, the leader of the trio), Niza Faruqui, and Shafiq Ahmed.

In the novel, the sailors are Afghans, whereas they are Pakistanis in the film. Buyens introduced a number of other small changes, which usually stemmed from the transposition of literature to film, or from the transposition of the time setting of 1938 to contemporary times. However, Elsschot's story is largely the same in Buyens's film. The main character is Laarmans, who is in his 50s. On a gloomy autumn evening, he walks through the streets of Antwerp. He isn't very enthusiastic about going home, where his wife and endless boredom are waiting. Three foreign sailors ask him the way to the address of Maria Van Dam, a young woman they had met earlier that day in the harbor. Laarmans accompanies them in their fruitless search for Maria, who, like a will-o'-the-wisp, leads them deeper into the city and the night. The company passes through a birdcage shop and a police station and ends up at a hotel. After a conversation about religion, Laarmans and the sailors say goodbye and go their own way.

Throughout this story, Buyens made two important structural adjustments. These are both related to Laarmans's imagination. First, Laarmans's thoughts about the boring nature of his home are regularly shown. The portrayal of the taciturn, obliging woman and the distant, bitter atmosphere are reminiscent of Elsschot's poem, *The Marriage (Het Huwelijk)*. Second, Laarmans's erotic fantasies are shown, with Eva Kant performing topless or in skimpy, provocative clothes. On the one hand, these fantasies are about Maria Van Dam. She is interpreted in twelve different forms by the same actress, Eva Kant, which is an inventive cinematic intervention to emphasize Maria's elusiveness. On the other hand, there are the fantasies about Fathma (also played by Eva Kant). She is Maria's counterpart in an Asian city, where Laarmans imagines himself to be looking for her.

Marcel Janssens ("De verfilming" 294) interprets the erotic fantasy scenes as a result of the easy visualization of suggestive words like "horny" from Elsschot's novel and as a result of a commercial logic. Buyens himself argued that he only took creative considerations into account, not commercial ones. While referring to his independent reputation, he also argued that he wanted to stay faithful to Elsschot and that he did not want to add commercial elements to *Will-O'-the Wisp*. Buyens explained the introduction of erotic scenes as follows: "I have to visualize certain essential things. These are not commercial elements if I show them. It is the expression of his imagination" ("ik moet bepaalde essentiële dingen in beeld brengen. Dat zijn geen commerciële elementen als ik dat in beeld breng. Dat is dan de uitdrukking van zijn verbeelding" [T.v.d.E., "Het woord" [14]).

The novel indeed suggests that Laarmans's imagination contains all kinds of erotic fantasies, but the film makes these suggestions explicit. The film also returns more often to these fantasies and spends much more time on them than the novel does. Furthermore, there are some scenes that are not suggested in the novel and that seem to go against the spirit of the book, even though Buyens claimed that he wanted to remain faithful to Elsschot. The scene where Laarmans and the three sailors are together in bed, playing around with Maria, seems to be rather far from the content of the novel. Moreover, Buyens always emphasized the human and social aspect in his interpretation of Elsschot's literary work. The fact that he chose not to focus on this aspect in the film, but instead elaborated on the erotic aspect, indeed seems to point to a commercial motivation, as Janssens argued.

There can, of course, be no complete certainty about this argument, but it cannot be denied that the film was part of a broader trend in Flemish and Dutch films from that period. More and more films—such as *Mira* (1971), *Blue Movie* (1971), and *Turkish Delight (Turks Fruit, 1973)*—began showing nudity and/or sex (Mendik, "Turks"; Schoots, *Van Fanfare*). This trend in the Low Countries was in line with broader film tendencies in Europe and the United States (Williams, *Screening* 9). On the one hand, this trend was connected to a socially liberating element that was in line with changing sexual attitudes in the late 1960s–early 1970s. On the other hand, the trend also had an undeniable commercial dimension. Several of these films were box-office hits, partly because of their sexual content. This prompted other films to adopt this strategy.

However, *Will-O'-the Wisp* proved that images of topless women were no guarantee of popular success, even though the film received a lot of press attention. This attention was partly due to the efforts of the filmmakers, who invited journalists to the film set and organized a prestigious première on 9 May 1973. On the other hand, the fame of the popular theater actor Romain Deconinck and especially Willem Elsschot proved to be great publicity. From the moment the reviews appeared, however, the press attention was mostly negative. Deconinck was often praised for his performance as Laarmans, but this did not compensate for the negative comments on the slow pace of the film and the many long, drawn-out erotic fantasy scenes.

The general public was also unenthusiastic about *Will-O'-the Wisp*. In Belgium, the film was distributed in May 1973 in Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, Leuven, and Kortrijk, but after a few weeks, it had already disappeared from theaters. In the Netherlands, the film premiered on 4 September 1973

at the ninth international film week in Arnhem. After the Belgian experience, the film was shortened ten minutes. This did not significantly change the reception of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. In fact, the Dutch critics were even more negative than the Belgian ones. Only months after the Dutch premiere, the film was programmed to run for one week in Amsterdam and Eindhoven.

Parallel to the film's originating context, there was also a Belgian community issue involved in the release of *Will-O'-the Wisp*. In 1972, the rules of the Cannes Film Festival had changed. Before, the films on the program were chosen by their country of origin. However, from 1972 onwards, a committee of the festival itself made the final selection. The Flemish film commission tried to convince the festival organizers to always screen a Dutch- and a French-speaking Belgian film at the festival, "given the cultural duality of our country" ("gelet op de culturele dualiteit van ons land" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 10]). Specifically, the commission hoped that the festival organizers would select *Will-O'-the Wisp*. However, the Cannes delegates ignored the commission's concern and selected the Francophone films *Franz* (1972), Jacques Brel's directorial debut, and *Belle* (1973), by André Delvaux. The fact that various newspaper comments denounced the selection of the Cannes Film Festival shows that this was a sensitive issue in Flanders. In foreign countries, however, such Belgian internal complications were of secondary importance. The films were classified as Belgian, regardless of whether they originated from the Flemish or the French Belgian community.

The critical and public failure of *Will-O'-the Wisp* did not prevent Buyens from continuing with fiction films. At the end of 1973, he proposed two new film projects to the film commission, who decided that Buyens could choose himself which project he would further develop into a full grant application. Buyens chose (the never realized project) *Love, Love, Love* (*Liefde, Liefde, Liefde*), a story with little or no direct political links. The abandoned project was *Judge, Oh, Judge* (*Rechter, O, Rechter*), which was based on the book *Beware Marie: A Dangerous Time* (1944, *Oppassen Marie, 'n Gevaarlijke Tijd*). In this book, Flemish writer Albert van Hoogenbemt thematized disappointment about the lack of recognition for the resistance fighters during World War II. Again, this was a sensitive subject within the Flemish Movement. This made Buyens fear "a veto from above because of political and social reasons" ("van hoger hand een veto vreest omwille van politiek-sociale redenen" [Rijksarchief Beveren, nr. 10]). The negative experience with *Top-Hit Girl* thus had a further impact on Frans Buyens's career choices. Again, he exchanged a subject matter that was sensitive within a part of the Flemish Movement for a non-political project. In these cases, his desire to film was greater than his social and critical commitment.

It is beyond dispute that Buyens was an idiosyncratic and socially committed filmmaker. However, this article demonstrates that Buyens was also willing to make compromises. This confirms the findings of Ruben Demasure ("Hét filmdocument") that, in addition to an idealistic filmmaker, Buyens could also be a pragmatic filmmaker. The image of Buyens as the critical and uncompromising filmmaker should therefore not be idealized, as has happened too often. In his speech at the premiere of *Will-O'-the Wisp*, the chairman of the film commission, Joz Van Liempt ("Première" 25–26), characterized Buyens as follows: "not willing to make a single concession, a bit stubborn, but aware of his task, which he will fulfill uncommonly faithfully" ("tot geen concessie bereid, een beetje koppig, maar wel bewust van de taak die de zijne is, en die hij uitermate gewetensgetrouw vervullen wil"). This description is quite surprising, as Van Liempt was fully aware of the compromise Buyens made in order to make *Will-O'-the Wisp*.

Top-Hit Girl and *Will-O'-the Wisp* demonstrate how political, Flemish-ideological factors played a role in painting the Flemish film landscape. In terms of tone and theme (the satirical treatment of Belgian community difficulties), *Top-Hit Girl* fitted a broader cultural trend that began in Flanders in the 1960s. In literature, cabaret, and other cultural expressions, certain aspects of the Flemish Movement were being criticized (Couttenier, Willekens and Durnez "Literatuur"). Within fiction filmmaking—which, due to the high production costs and small domestic market, was highly dependent on government funding—pro-Flemish political actors succeeded in blocking this trend. Political maneuvers ensured that a satirical treatment of Belgian community difficulties in cinema was suppressed. By allowing Buyens to make *Will-O'-the Wisp*, the minister of culture tried to sweep the Flemish ideologically inspired refusal to support *Top-Hit Girl* under the rug. Flemish cinema was thus directed towards adapting literary classics, thereby confirming the national culture instead of critically investigating it.

A decade later, this was still the case. For his 1984 film, *The Lion of Flanders*, Hugo Claus was forced by political actors to follow Hendrik Conscience's national epic as faithfully as possible (Willems, "Conscience's" 4). Claus had to trade his critical-ironic approach for a romantic-nationalist story. Through interventions such as those applied to the production of *Top-Hit Girl* and *The Lion of Flanders*,

political actors have largely succeeded in keeping critical reflections on the Flemish Movement out of Flemish cinema. In fact, Flemish films have only very recently begun employing an explicitly humorous or satirical treatment of Belgian community issues or certain aspects of the Flemish Movement, as in *Brabançonne* (2014) or *King of the Belgians* (2016). If the Minister of Culture had been a bit more open-minded in 1971, *Top-Hit Girl* could have heralded this direction within Flemish cinema forty years earlier.

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Author's profile: Gertjan Willems conducts research in cinema and media studies funded by the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) at Ghent University. Willems's recent publications include "The role of film production policy in stimulating a Flemish identity (1964-2002)," *Communications: the European Journal of Communication Research* (2017) and "Cinema, the government, and the popular: popular and commercial aspects of cultural film support in Flanders (Belgium)," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2016).
Email: <<mailto:gertjan.willems@ugent.be>>