

# THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE HOME

## RESTORATIVE NOSTALGIA IN HERITAGE CINEMA AND THE CASE OF THE FLEMISH PEASANT FILM

Wetenschappelijk artikel

Aantal woorden: 8436

**Tim Bossaert**

Stamnummer: 20011750

Promotor: Prof. dr. Daniël Biltereyst

Commissaris: Anke Lion

Masterproef voorgelegd voor het behalen van de graad master in de richting Communicatiewetenschappen  
afstudeerrichting Film- en Televisiestudies

Academiejaar: 2019-2020





Deze pagina is niet beschikbaar omdat ze persoonsgegevens bevat.  
Universiteitsbibliotheek Gent, 2021.

This page is not available because it contains personal information.  
Ghent University, Library, 2021.



## Summary (Dutch)

Dit artikel heeft als doel om het concept van *restorative nostalgia* van Svetlana Boym<sup>1</sup> te verklaren en toe te passen op *heritage* cinema, meer bepaald op de Britse heritage film en Duitse *Heimat* film. Met deze nieuw inzichten en als oefening analyseer ik een variant van de heritage cinema: de Vlaamse boerenfilm.

Nostalgie kan beschreven worden als een tragische emotie van verlies en heimwee naar een tijd of plaats die niet meer bestaat of nooit echt heeft bestaan. In heritage cinema wordt een verleden gecreëerd volgens de actuele behoeften. Moderniteit en nostalgie zijn vreemd genoeg met elkaar verbonden. Ze bouwen een mythische thuis in een imaginair verleden. Het wordt conservatiever, stabiel en symbolischer voorgesteld dan de authentieke boerenmaatschappij waarop deze is gebaseerd en creëert nieuwe traditionele symbolen, rituelen, waarden en normen<sup>2</sup>. In de heritage films wordt een terug-naar-de-oorsprong narratief gehanteerd en wordt er dus geijverd voor een terugkeer naar een conservatieve status-quo.

De Britse heritage film representeert een imperialistisch beeld van de hogere klasse met pittoreske landerijen als decor. De populariteit van deze films in de jaren 1980 en vooral 1990 is gelinkt aan de toenmalige socio-economische crisis. In Duitsland kent men een langere traditie aan heritage cinema, de *Heimat* film. Deze wordt gekenmerkt door berglandschappen, grazende schapen, traditionele kledij en verhalen over jonge, eenvoudige mannen die heldhaftig de rust terugbrengen in een afgelegen dorpje. Het hoogtepunt van de *Heimat* cinema was vlak na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, als verstrooiing voor de diepe oorlogswonden. Zowel de Britse als de Duitse heritage film kan gezien worden als een zoektocht naar of een herwaardering van een nationale identiteit. Door een gebrek aan een kritische blik, het gebruik van stereotypering en pastiche en grote (vaak Amerikaanse) investeerders, bestaat het gevaar dat deze films verwateren naar een Disney-achtig format.

Deze zoektocht en gevaren zijn ook terug te vinden bij de Vlaamse boerenfilm. Door een vergelijkende, tekstuele filmanalyse te maken van vier zulke films – *De Witte* (1934), *Mira* (1971), *De Witte van Sichem* (1980) en *Rundskop* (2011) – identificeerde ik een reeks conflicten die zijn afgeleid vanuit het nostalgisch motief: een strijd tussen traditie en moderniteit, stad en platteland, katholiek en socialist, oude en nieuwe generaties, genderkwesties en conflicten tussen klassen. Het nostalgisch narratief maakt echter een geleidelijke evolutie van een *Heimat* narratief naar een donker, geconflicteerd verhaal. De restauratie is niet langer perfect, maar toont barsten. De personages ontwikkelen zich tot complexe, problematische en tragische figuren. De behoeften van het heden veranderen en daardoor ook het verleden.

---

<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic books, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.



# There is no place like home: Restorative Nostalgia in Heritage Cinema and the Case of the Flemish Peasant Film

## Abstract

The first aim of this article is to explain the concept of restorative nostalgia and to apply it on heritage cinema, more specific on the British heritage film and the German Heimat film. A second aim is to further enrich the study of heritage cinema with a practical case study of the heritage cinema in Flanders. Restorative nostalgia in heritage films represents the past by the needs of the present and a return to the original status, favourably a conservative status-quo. The quest for a national identity is the most important motive. It wants to rebuild a mythical place called home and creates new traditional symbols, rites, values and norms. The past and present become strangely connected and create a new understanding of time and space: an imaginative past determined by actual priorities. Also, as a matter of practice, this article contains a case study of the heritage cinema in Flanders (Belgium), which is called the Flemish peasant film. By performing a comparative textual film analysis on four such films – *De Witte* (*Whitey*, 1934), *Mira* (1971), *De Witte van Sichem* (*Whitey from Sichem*, 1980) and *Rundskop* (*Bullhead*, 2011) – I identified a series of conflicts, derived from the nostalgic discourse, around which the analysis is structured: struggles between tradition and modernity, city and countryside, catholic and socialist, old and new generations, gender issues and classes.

**Keywords:** nostalgia; heritage; Heimat; novel adaptations; national and cultural identity

## Introduction

The first part of the title is deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, it can refer to a well-known quote out of the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy clicks her red ruby heels three times and wants to find her way back home. In the beginning of the film, Judy Garland sang:

*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high.*

*There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby [...]*

*If happy little blue birds fly beyond the rainbow, why, oh why can't I?<sup>2</sup>*

She imagines a land far away where her dreams can come true and during the plot that feeling changes into a longing for home: the place where she belongs. The feeling of nostalgia comes to mind, not only within the film or the song, but also the film itself can allure a nostalgic feeling by viewers. On the other hand, the title phrase can also be read literally. In these social-economically and politically uncertain times we live in, the concept of home is a genuine problematic issue. Millions of people become refugees, fleeing for thousands of miles to find a new and better place to live, 'somewhere over the rainbow'. Unfortunately, many people have still not found a place to call home and are languishing in countless refugee camps or do not feel at home or do not feel welcome in their new country. Furthermore, in Europe and also beyond, as a reaction to this shift, feelings of nationality and national and cultural identity are emerging more and more. Home and homeland are open for debate, but regrettably kept closed to others. One outgrowth of the search for national identity, not only nowadays, is the heritage film. And whether there is a place to call home really exists in heritage cinema, is the main focus in this study. In other words, the questions this article wants to try to answer are: what is nostalgia, how does it work and how is it related to and used in heritage films?

The aim for this article is therefore to clarify the concept of (restorative) nostalgia and apply the concept on heritage films. A second objective is a practical case study of heritage films in Flanders, more specifically the Flemish peasant film, within the same framework. I will start with a thorough explanation of nostalgia in general and restorative nostalgia in particular. Secondly, I will situate and explore the heritage cinema and connect the chosen perspective on the British heritage films and the German Heimat films. As already stated, I will eventually put the acquired insight into practise with a case study of the Flemish peasant film. I have chosen four Flemish peasant films to conduct a comparative textual film analysis. Obviously, nostalgia is the starting point of the case study and the analysis is structured around a series of conflicts I have distinguished, derived from nostalgia, such as a struggle between tradition and modernity. Unlike most studies on Belgian cinema, my focus will be on the content of the films and less on the context and mode of production.



## The mythical home: restorative nostalgia

A much recurring concept in describing the heritage cinema is nostalgia. It is a composition of the Greek word *nostos*, meaning home or returning home, and *algos*, translated as longing. It can be described as homesickness, the desire for the fatherland or a romanticized or idealized longing for old times or childhood. But the emotion of nostalgia is not a positive one and stronger than only homesickness. The person who feels nostalgic misses something precious or important that he used to have or think he had. The problem with nostalgia is that you cannot return to the past: you cannot turn back time. In connection with heritage cinema, the explanation of (restorative) nostalgia in Svetlana Boym's book *The Future of Nostalgia*<sup>2</sup> is uttermost interesting and helpful. She defines nostalgia as an emotion of loss and displacement, and also as a romance of someone's own fantasy. In the context of cinema, she interprets nostalgia as a superimposition of two opposite images: the past and the present, home and abroad. It is a defence mechanism in a time of a constantly faster rate of life and historical revolutions. Nostalgia can be seen as a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the historical time and progress, but not as an opposition to modernity itself. Modernity and nostalgia are strangely attached to each other and create a new understanding of time and space. The past and present become connected: an imaginative past determined by actual needs. It also offers a promise to rebuild the ideal home and forsake critical reasoning for emotional bonding. There lays the danger of nostalgia: it has the tendency to entangle the actual home and the imaginary one, and the relationship between the personal and the collective memory. Thus, nostalgia is not only a defence mechanism, but also a mechanism of seduction and manipulation.

Boym<sup>3</sup> makes a distinction between two forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia thrives on the *algia*, the longing and postponing of the homecoming and can even be ironically represented. In contrast with reflective nostalgia, restorative nostalgia does not think about itself as nostalgia, but sees itself as the truth or tradition. Even stronger: restorative nostalgia wants to protect the absolute truth. It focuses on the *nostos*, on the lost home. As the word restorative signifies, it is about making a restoration of the past and therefore a return to the original status, favourably a conservative status-quo. The past is a value for the present, but not a duration, yet a perfect moment in time. Restorative nostalgia takes itself extremely seriously and gravitates towards collective and national symbols, rituals and culture in order to spatialize that time. In short, restorative nostalgia aims to rebuild a mythical place called home. It is important to note that the restored home differs from the genuine past. By restoring the past by the needs of the present, restorative nostalgia creates new traditional values and norms. It tends to overstate the historical customs and to depict the former society more conservative, invariable and symbolic than the original peasant societies where it is derived from<sup>4</sup>. In simpler terms, the past is

selectively presented to serve the present. Sequentially, it can create a cultural identity, an imagined community and even be politically manipulated, by the use of freshly created memories and a hazard of stereotyping 'the abroad, the other'. Within the restorative nostalgia, Boym<sup>5</sup> notices two main narratives: a return to origin and a conspiracy narrative. The latter is the most extreme form of nostalgia and is used for propaganda purposes by the Nazi regime for instance. What is more interesting to the heritage film is the return to origin. In this kind of narrative plot, the restorative nostalgia tries to make a total restoration of a certain time, place or monument in the past without the imperfections. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s there was a fascination for restorations: from restoring the Sistine Chapel (without the cracks), to making popular films about reborn dinosaurs, gladiators in a perfect Rome and the English fairylike countryside.

### **Back to the countryside: heritage films in Britain and Germany**

The term heritage in the context of cinema is mostly used in Britain. The British heritage film is not seen as a genre, but rather as a concept that has its roots in British film studies. It has a strong undercurrent of nostalgia, transmitted into historical and costume dramas and literary adaptations of classical works<sup>6</sup>. The English heritage film shows the glory of the upper class from a certain period of history<sup>7</sup>. They try to reconstruct an imperialist and upper-class Britain<sup>8</sup>. The undercurrent of nostalgia is a dialogue between an imagined past and a critical vision of the present. It is not only a representation of a certain time and place, but thus a social critique on society today. Heritage films are mostly linked with the socio-economic crisis in the 1980s, symbolized by former prime minister Margaret Thatcher. They reconstruct an image of the past that seems more attractive than the present and try to create a certain version of Englishness to eventually obtain a national identity. It is also about sending a positive and typically British image to the international public, a romanticized and sentimental image of the British past<sup>9</sup>. The concept of restorative nostalgia can therefore be applied to the English heritage film as a return to the origin narrative. First, the past that is mostly represented is a conservative image as a reaction to the industrialisation in the time where most adapted novels were written. They chose for instance the Edwardian or Victorian time, a time where life was simple, laid-out and clearly hierarchical. The problems such as poverty and inequality are simply left out of the plot. Films as *Room with a View* (1985) or *Remains of the Day* (1994) by James Ivory are perfect examples of representing such a conservative and perfectly organised Britain. In particular the first one is a picture-perfect illustration of a British heritage film: a literary adaptation (E.M. Forster's novel from 1908), Victorian England and the 'exotic' Firenze as decor, the upper class, early twentieth century

costumes, chaste morals versus desire, countryside versus city, sophistication, nudity scenes, a positive and romantic ending, well received by press and public, a high profit with a relatively small budget and a winner of several awards, including an Oscar for best screenplay. Secondly, as a reaction to the socio-economic tensions during the Thatcher-administration, the favourable traditional and right-winged picture of Englishness enabled these adaptations. Additionally, because of the commercial success, it started a cycle of films with a similar appeal. In other words, in the 1980s and 1990s it started a trend, a fashion of films, in order to try to repeat and exploit the success. The trend can be interpreted as a form of pastiche. Filmmakers and producers try to re-work the success into a film that is quite different, but still familiar enough to minimise risk and to repeat the box office output<sup>10</sup>. This phenomenon resulted in a brought variety of costume dramas and historical adaptations in Britain. The problem with these representations, is in other words the mythologizing and idealizing of the national past through the use of a stable and conservative iconography<sup>11</sup>. But not only in Britain heritage filmmaking takes place. Another country with a vast tradition of heritage cinema is Germany with a wide range of Heimat films.

The German word Heimat is very complex to translate<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, it is difficult to fully comprehend the connotation of the word and has no plain translation in English. The essential meaning of Heimat is feeling at home, belonging somewhere, being emotionally connected and is also a broad term that can stand for family farm, home or homeland<sup>13</sup>. In German culture Heimat is well-known as a literature and film genre and has its roots in Romanticism. The Heimat films primarily represent the search for identity, a quest best seen within the context of the turbulent history of the twentieth century in (a divided) Germany. But it does not only cover a film genre, but also a collection of cultural and ideological connotations that combine notions of connectedness and identity with an emotional attachment to a particular place or region<sup>14</sup>. The Heimat film has a hundred year old history: from the 1920s mountain films, through the Nazi Heimat films during the war, even until today. Although smudged by the Nazi regime, the Heimat film was particularly popular during the 1950s. It surprisingly flourished after the Second World War, with films such as *Heimatland (Homeland, 1955)* and *Heimweh (Homesick, 1957)*. The Heimat film during this period is often seen as a recovery genre, in order to forget the deep wounds that the war had made<sup>15</sup>. The films consequently did not mention the Second World War nor the politics of the Nazis. Heimat films are generally set in Alpine landscapes with grazing sheep. They portray young morally upstanding men (mostly hunters, rangers or loggers) and girlish women, dressed in traditional clothing and accompanied with typical folk music<sup>16</sup>. Also, just as the British heritage cinema, during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a certain revival of the Heimat film, in response to the uncertainty and the disintegration of East and West: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the Cold War. The characteristics of the films remain largely

unchanged, although with a more critical tone and a larger role for female characters. Technology is also making its appearance with cars and factories, in shrill contrast to the rustic countryside<sup>17</sup>. The Heimat genre has been understood as an expression of restorative nostalgia, memory and escapism, a glorification of the past and a reactionary element, by which the status-quo is asserted<sup>18</sup>. Even during the Nazi regime, the Heimat films kept their specifications. They were especially meant to be crowd-pleasing and passively serve as propaganda, rather than directly manipulate. This is in contrast with purely for propaganda intended films that were made during that time, such as *Der Ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940) or *Jud Süß* (*Süss the Jew*, 1940). The representations of Heimat films served the Nazi regime very well: stories about belonging, purity, health, strength and overcoming any evil that threatened the community<sup>19</sup>. The only difference from the perspective of nostalgia is the use of narrative plots and underlying sense. Whereas the 1920 mountain films were mainly return to origin stories, the Heimat Nazi films were preferable conspiracy plots. The conspiratorial worldview is based on a home that is under attack and about a battle between the good and the bad and eventually about the defeat of the mythical adversary<sup>20</sup>. The Heimat film is very much alive and without a doubt has a future. The concept of Heimat is still appealing because of a desire for safety, belonging and the search for national identity in an ever-changing Europe. As Alexandra Ludewig summarizes it: 'Heimat is dead. Long live the Heimat!'<sup>21</sup>. However, not everyone is excited about a certain future for heritage films in Europe. The restorative nostalgia in these films sometimes results in a simplified format due to a lack of a critical edge and through the use of pastiche, stereotyping, typecasting and clichéd iconography. Also, as a result of the internationalization of these films – not only in terms of audience, but also in terms of funding, including American investments<sup>22</sup> – they risk being reduced into a kind of high-class Disneyfication of Europe as a filmic theme park from which the displeasures of modernity have been conveniently banished<sup>23</sup>.

### **Cursing on the silver screen: the case study of Flemish peasant films**

It has never been easy making films in Flanders. Philip Mosley<sup>24</sup> identifies two major interrelated reasons. First, Belgium is culturally and linguistically divided between Dutch speakers in Flanders and French speakers in Wallonia<sup>25</sup>. Within the region of Flanders, there is yet another division between five provinces, each with his own different (variations of) dialects. The biculturalism of Belgian cinema has been affected by an evolving ideology of national unity, but has even so created ways to articulate national and subnational concerns in a diversity of film forms. Especially in Flanders, film was greatly influenced by the search for cultural identity and by the Flemish movement. The second reason is the lack of an infrastructure for filmmaking. The small size of the country, minor investments, little political and industrial interest and an openness to foreign – especially American – competition, caused a constant shortage of funds. The relatively small cinema audience and the already stated low economic resources, resulted gradually (from the 1960s) in a state intervention and funding. Consequently, the decision-making in the film industry became also politically charged and influenced<sup>26</sup>. Throughout that time, mainly during the 1970s and 1980s, the film policy in Flanders preferred films that could contribute to the Flemish cultural identity and therefore chose to support a certain kind of film based on traditional works of well-known Flemish writers<sup>27</sup> and resulted into a multitude of heritage films. This can also be seen as a compromise between the desire for high culture of the film policy and the public's preference for popular culture. These Flemish heritage films are often disdainfully called *boerenfilms*<sup>28</sup> and can be translated as peasant films, but is still a good description because of the rural setting. The word peasant is carefully chosen as a translation of the Dutch/Flemish word *boer*. Just as the word Heimat is difficult to translate, boer has the same problem. It means literally farmer, peasant or rancher. The English word 'boor' is maybe closer in sense, but not universally well-known. Thus, I chose peasant and not farmer, because of the connotation: a peasant better personates a member of the lower working class who is a fairly poor labourer. Yet it is not a perfect translation, because the setting is probably correct, but the ambiguity of the word in Dutch is not totally clear.

Both the British heritage film and the German Heimat film share a great deal of important characteristics, which can also be found in the Flemish peasant film. First and foremost, it is about a nostalgic search for a national and cultural identity and depicts a restorative nostalgia, a back to origin narrative plot. This national and cultural identity has been found in literary works from the nineteenth and early twentieth century and are often romantic stories about simpler times. These novels were written at the time of an emerging industrialization and were a response to the Enlightenment. Rational knowledge had to make room for imagination, art, subjectivity, the spirituality and emotions. Romanticists were

concerned about the present and escaped into the past, glorifying everything that was not man-made. In Flanders, the canonical works generally narrate an adoration of a rural life-style and tell stories about humble, hard-working and poor peasants who glorify nature, the past and the local community and where respect for traditional values, the Church and authority is obvious. Not all adaptations are based on Romantic stories. In response to Romanticism in Flanders, Realism was created around 1890 and eventually resulted in Naturalism. Authors such as Stijn Streuvels wrote naturalistic stories, still with nature as an important theme, but they were more realistic, even pessimistic and often created dialogues in dialect. The main character was often a simple and innocent victim of society. Nevertheless, Stijn Streuvels was often included in the romantic movement due to his subjective representation of nature. Naturalism was also prominent for only a short time, because the public opposed fatalistic, crude writing, eroticism and the lack of moralism. In other words, people preferred elevating, romanticising novels<sup>29</sup>. Just as the British heritage film and the German Heimat film, the adoration of the past and nature in peasant films is at least idealizing, if not a utopian idyll of a past that never was so picturesque.

## **Method**

The starting point of my case study is a comparative textual film analysis with an emphasis on the content of Flemish peasant films. To enhance the systematic of the study, I performed a comprehensive sequence analysis of the four films I chose to discuss: *De Witte* (*Whitey*, 1934) by Jan Vanderheyden, *Mira* (1971) by Fons Rademackers, *De Witte van Sichem* (*Whitey from Sichem*, 1980) by Robbe De Hert and finally *Rundskop* (*Bullhead*, 2011) by Michaël R. Roskam. This means that I divided each film into meaningful parts in which a 'completed event takes place which you can clearly define for analysis purposes'<sup>30</sup>. Then I divided the film analysis into three levels, namely the cinematographic, narrative and symbolic or ideological layer<sup>31</sup>, which I applied to each sequence. The cinematographic layer deals with the filmic means that were used, such as camera handling, editing and sound and because of the emphasis on the content of the Flemish peasant films, I fixated my research on the narrative and symbolic or ideological layer. This allowed me to make an in-depth reflection of the visual, thematic, narrative and cultural aspects, focusing on the multiple conflicts throughout the selected films. The reason why I carefully chose these four films is threefold. A first motive is commercial success and public reach. Secondly, I preferred to widen the field of research from the beginning of sound film in Flanders until today. An obvious third consideration is the presence of a pastoral theme.

## Films

The combination of these factors above leads chronologically to the choice of *De Witte (Whitey, 1934)* by Jan Vanderheyden. The film was made during the arrival of sound film in Belgium in the 1930s. The arrival of sound allowed local productions in regional languages. In particular Jan Vanderheyden quickly understood the commercial and cultural potential of sound film. His first feature was an immediate commercial success<sup>32</sup>. Although a technically quite limited film, *De Witte (Whitey)* is still considered a milestone and was the first popular Flemish talkie<sup>33</sup>. The film is an adaptation of the popular pastoral novel by Ernest Claes, published in 1920. It tells the story of the twelve-year old scamp Louis Verheyden (nicknamed Whitey), son of a rough peasant who keeps getting in trouble. The film was shot in the rural village of Zichem in Flanders and the inside shots were made in Berlin. Unlike the book, the film has a cheerful touch, shows a charming community and Whitey is quite adorable and pleasant. There is a clear influence noticeable of the German Heimat cinema. The second film I chose to examine is *Mira (1971)* by Fons Rademakers and was the first Flemish film that found a large audience for some time. It was unexpectedly an enormous box-office hit and was based on the novel *De teleurgang van de Waterhoek (The Decline of the Waterhoek, 1927)* by Stijn Streuvels. It describes a tale of a small rural community that opposes the building of a bridge. The film was a co-production with the Netherlands and had a Dutch director: Fons Rademakers, but the film was shot on location in Flanders<sup>34</sup>. Because of the great commercial value of the film, during the 1970s and 1980s, heritage films that were based on the Flemish literary patrimony, reappeared. They were the most prominent and prestigious genre of film production in Flanders at that time<sup>35</sup>. *Mira* started a series of comparable literary adaptations, such as *Rolande met de Bles (Chronicle of a Passion, 1972)*, *De Loteling (The Conscript, 1973)* and *Pallieter (1975)*, but not with the same success. They can be seen as a sort of pastiche, a copy of style. Especially producer Jan Van Raemdock wanted to repeat his commercial success of *Mira*, sometimes called the *Mira-formula*<sup>36</sup>. It was not until the 1980s that another peasant film was successful: *De Witte van Sichem (Whitey from Sichem, 1980)*, directed by Robbe De Hert. It was also an adaptation of the novel of Ernest Claes. This version is much more bitter and is closer in sense to the novel than the 1934 film. It does show the hopeless and impoverished reality of rural Flanders at the beginning of the twentieth century. The last film I chose is *Rundskop (Bullhead, 2011)*. It is the only film of my selection that is not based on a book, but inspired by a true event: the murder of federal veterinarian Karel Van Noppen in 1995. In 2012 *Rundskop (Bullhead, 2011)* received a nomination for an Academy Award for Best International Feature Film<sup>37</sup>, but finally lost to the Iranian submission *A Separation (2011)*. The Belgian crime drama was written and directed by Michaël R. Roskam and also set in a rural environment. The film was especially praised for the excellent acting performance of rising star

Matthias Schoenaerts. The Belgian actor trained for three years to gain 27 kilos of muscle to play the head role of Jacky Vanmarsenille, a tormented young peasant who injects his cows (and himself) with illegal drugs. Because of these prohibited growth enhancers, he encounters the hormone mafia. Yet, the film does not fully fit the tradition of Flemish peasant films, because it is not a literary adaptation and it does not take place in the rural past. But this film does share other characteristics, such as the theme, the countryside décor, the contradiction between city and countryside, the dialects, the costumes ... In other words, we can say that peasant films do not have a uniform description and that is why it is interesting to compare these films.

While viewing for a first time, it immediately struck to my attention that these films are largely built up by a series of conflicts. I took a closer look by not only investigating the selected films, but also by broadening my research area and consequently watching similar peasant films, such as *Pallieter* (1975), *De Vlaschaard* (*The Flaxfield*, 1983) and *Het Gezin Van Paemel* (*The Van Paemel Family*, 1986). Within the context of nostalgia, I could detect six interrelated conflicts<sup>38</sup>: a struggle between modernity and tradition, city and countryside, Catholicism and socialism, generations, gender and class. Therefore, I decided to focus on these conflicts and structure the analysis of these films around them.



## Results

The central conflict is the struggle between modernity and tradition. The Flemish peasant films show sympathy for the conventional way of living and are denoted as the good old days and simpler times. The mythical home in these films is a small rural community typically set at the end of the nineteenth or at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost every film starts with images of the Flemish countryside: wide and windy wheat fields, grazing cows, old and crumbled farmhouses and hard-working farmers dressed in almost colourless rags and wearing clogs – yet showing pleasure and proudness in their heavy labour. The main characters of the films are rigid, surly and angry peasant men who detest any form of progress. The nostalgic restoration of that past and traditional values is symbolically shown as a contrast between city and countryside and results in a battle between classes, generations and gender.

The most striking example of the conflict between traditionally countryside values and the modern city progress is the main plot in *Mira* (1971). As already mentioned, the story is about building a bridge over the river Scheldt. The bridge is a symbol for progress and is seen as a threat to the local community. The bridge would connect the small village with the big city and the locals are afraid their home and their way of living would be cast away. At the beginning of the film, the tone is immediately set: a citylike personage with a briefcase and a pocket watch contrasts with the local authority figure who is fishing and has time. The local figure is named Broeke<sup>39</sup> and is the ferryman and the dean of the village. Because of the bridge, he could lose his function as the most important man in the community. He personalizes the angry, rigid, serious and sully man who opposes any form of modernity and likes things the way they are. The man from the city calls upon dean Broeke to cross the river and starts a conversation about the anticipated build of the bridge. He notes that the bridge would be a real improvement and would be much more convenient. Dean Broeke is furious and strongly sides against it. Later on, he conflicts with another city figure: the surveyor, who is wearing a smart hat and a long raincoat. The surveyor measures the land twice in preparation for the build. He is disturbed, insulted and attacked with turf by angry locals during his supervision of the work. The first time he is guarded by gendarmes, who are wearing guns, shiny boots and uniforms. After leaving the site, his preparation work is demolished by the furious mob. The second time he is alone with his staff members and dean Broeke heats things up by threatening everyone who helps building the bridge, also his son in law Sieper who sees profit in building it. Sieper justifies the bridge because it is impossible to win the fight with big city men who control everything, that it is easier to go with the flow and concludes that it will always be like that. The surveyor will later be killed by Lander, Broeke's son. Afterwards, dean Broeke encounters yet another city type: the notary. He represents city progress. He drives a car (another progress symbol), is wearing driving gloves, a top hat and uses French

phrases such as *au revoir*. Dean Broeke tells him that things are going very badly in the village because of the bridge. The notary calls him contrary and says that everything will be fine. While leaving, Broeke calls after him: 'Don't say I didn't warn you'. The most important city figure is the engineer of the bridge called Maurice Rondeau, not coincidentally a French name. He is young, intelligent, well-dressed, insecure, slender, friendly and full of hope. He is in other words the opposite of a peasant. Mira, the main female character of the film, seduces him and she can be seen as an intermediate between the classes: the noblesse and the working class. She is a free-spirited young woman who – again not a coincidence – lived in a city for a while, in Paris, the city of love. After a stormy relationship with her uncle Lander, she sets her sights on the young engineer. She has been disdainfully called a slut on the one side, but also adored, and on the other side she does not fit in the higher circles.

*Mira (1971) © Eyeworks*



*Figure 1: A Clash of class. When the noble notary proposes to expropriate, he says: "Act like people, and not like ..." The peasants loudly response: "And not like animals? We will show you!" Then they mockingly pull down his pants.*

The conflict between countryside traditions and the modern city also results in a clash between these classes. Modernity in Flemish peasant films is often portrayed by the French speaking nobility, the upper class, the bourgeoisie, such as the notary, the surveyor and the engineer in *Mira* (1971) we have discussed earlier. An important catalyst of peasant films is the Flemish awareness and the struggle against the Frenchification of Flemish society in the nineteenth and twentieth century in search of a national

identity. Few heroic moments can be found in Flemish history and in the story of *De Witte* (Whitey, 1934) a frame narrative helps that search. When Whitey is punished by the head teacher, he gets locked up in the basement where he finds a copy of the novel *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*<sup>40</sup> (*The Lion of Flanders*, 1838) by Hendrik Conscience, who is often called 'the man who taught his people to read'. The novel has not only learned Flemish people to read, but is also a major symbol of the Flemish movement and the Flemish national emblem. Whitey gets intrigued by this fascinating story of the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, when the rebellious Flemish men conquered the great French army. Although they were later on defeated, this victory is considered a great symbol in Flemish national history. Whitey re-enacts the fight with his friends, but gets into trouble himself. In the 1934 film he soils his mother's white laundry and in the 1980 film his mother and the pastor have to intervene and after an umbrella fight with the pastor, he eventually gets punished. It can be seen as a symbol for the little Flemish man who stands up against the French-speaking domination. In a different frame narrative in *Rundskop* (*Bullhead*, 2011), this symbolisation can also be found. In the flashbacks of Jacky, the main character, we learn that he has been deliberately and violently castrated in his youth, by an older, mad and French-speaking boy. It is maybe farfetched for some, but for me the figurative meaning has many points of comparison with the story of the medieval Flemish man who lives under the patronizing authority of the French royal army. It is a storyline that is much used in the Flemish peasant films and Flemish films in general: the tragically underdog who suffers a hard life which is unavertable.

The mythical home in the peasant film is Catholic inspired as well. Even though the peasant swears a lot, idealistic he is a good Christian by nature: praying before eating, going to church at Sundays, thanking God for a good harvest ... The homes in these films are soberly decorated, but have room for several Mary statues and crucifixes. Even in the village café – a much used background - there are crucifixes on the wall and a well-known picture of 'God sees you' and ironically 'here we don't curse'. The traditional Catholic values and norms are personalized and guarded by the village priest. A good illustration of a such a figure is pastor Munte in *De Witte van Sichem* (*Whitey from Sichem*, 1980). The pastor radiates authority and kindness and is the moral compass of the community. He is very strict and feared by the community, but also very much liked by everyone. He is also seen as a reconciler and is very conservative. In contrast with Catholicism, the emerging socialism and the Church's opposition to that is very present in the film by Robbe De Hert. When pastor Munte enters the classroom of Whitey at the beginning of the film, he asks about The Seven Acts of Mercy from the Bible and talks about Jesus who is born and died for the people. When he asks a pupil why Jesus died, the pupil answers stuttering 'the socialists, damn it'. It is a well-placed gag, but also a setting of the tone of the film. Just after the pupil's answer this mood setting of the film continues.

They come to get the pastor because something awful has happened: a man has died on the fields because of the hard and dangerous work circumstances. Later on, pastor Munte gives a sermon in the church. He talks about inequality, but he explains it by saying that the inequality will be solved in heaven.

*De Witte van Siechem (Whitey from Sichem, 1980) © Dirk van Soom*



*Figure 2: Pastor Munte looks down at his flock: "You mustn't withdraw your given word and be envious. Envy is such an ugly word. Don't be jealous of what others earn, that is not a good way of living. In the eyes of the Lord, we are all the same: the poor and the rich. He will remove this difference through the equality of His love."*

Pastor Munte talks about socialism indirectly, another priest gives a much stronger and loud homily in which he warns the people about the dangers of socialism. He tells the story about an encounter he had on the train, where he saw a man dying from reading a socialist newspaper, which name he refuses to mention. He calls the man a victim of the decay of the society and declares the socialists ungodly and identifies them as a threat to the people, their values and morals, the church and even labour itself. When Whitey visits the city with his brother, they encounter socialists. As often in peasant films, the socialists are on strike and are protesting. His brother pulls him out of there in fright. When Whitey asks his brother what is wrong with socialists, he answers that they always mean trouble, they are never satisfied and they believe in nothing, not even in Jesus. He even calls them devils. The social issues are not avoided as in previous peasant films. Whereas the mythical home in *De Witte (Whitey, 1934)* and *Mira (1971)* is more idyllic and perfect-like, through the 1980 film the restorative nostalgia in peasant films initiate an evolution. The perfect home becomes less perfect and turns into a social conflict. The film, by the needs of the present, turns into an indictment of social inequality in the society. In the 1980s, just as in Britain, this inequality was

at the top of the list among progressive people, just as film director Robbe De Hert. This evolution continues in other Flemish films, such as *Daens* (1992) or *Rundskop (Bullhead,2011)*. *Daens* (1992) is directed by Stijn Coninx and is based on the novel *Pieter Daens* by Louis Paul Boon. It tells the story of priest Adolf Daens and his social struggle against the establishment, the French-speaking noblesse, in the Flemish city of Aalst at the end of the nineteenth century. The nostalgically portrayals of the rural environment becomes more and more disputed and results in a more tragical and raw representation of an impoverished community. In *Rundskop (Bullhead,2011)* the conflicted view on the countryside is not only visible through the dilapidated houses, relational quarrels and signs of inequality, but also through an intrapersonal struggle by the figure of Jacky, the main character of the film. He struggles with his own past, what we see through feedbacks, and consequently his present. He is constantly in conflict with himself, deciding what is right or wrong. He is, just as Whitey in 1980, a tormented and depressed figure as a result of an unfair and crooked society. By introducing intrapersonal conflicts, not only the nostalgic view on the local community has changed, but also the representations of film personages have evolved. Before the 1980, filmmakers mostly used one-dimensional characters, typecasting and stereotyping. Whitey in 1980 and Jacky are good examples of more elaborated and in-depth characters. The 1934 Whitey was also a rascal, but more in a playful way as the 1980 tragical Whitey.

*De Witte van Sichem (Whitey from Sichem, 1980) © Dirk van Soom, De Witte (Whitey, 1934) © Jos Hoeyberghs*



*Figure 3: By putting both Whiteys side by side, we see a very different closure: a tragically depressed boy who finds no way out and a laughing Whitey who lives happily ever after. The mythical home has shifted.*

The conflict between Catholicism and socialism is also a struggle between generations and gender. The more progressive ideas of the younger generation often clash with the opinions of the more conservative and older generation. The older generation is often symbolised by a strict father figure, someone who is authoritarian, but also compliant with the authority of higher powers, such as the Church

and the nobility. He knows his place and wants to keep it that way at all costs. In *Mira* (1971) that conservative figure is dean Broeke, in *De Witte* (*Whitey*, 1934 and 1980) he is personified by Boer Coene (Peasant Coene). It is important to note that the use of Boer before his name is a sign of respect. He is – in contrast with the father of *Whitey* – a highly respected and rich farmer. He manages a large farmers' organization and runs it in a very brutal and hard manner. But also *Whitey's* father is a personification of the older generation, a generation who has trouble to express feelings. A good example of this is the fact that *Whitey's* father cannot tell his son what he thinks of him, certainly not directly to his son. Later in the film we notice that not expressing inner feelings is problematic for both generations. The dichotomy of men and women is also related to the difference between generations in the represented peasant society. In the older generations, the differences between men and women are clear and sequacious. They know their well-defined tasks, roles and responsibilities. The men are prude towards their wives, Catholic, respectful to their own generation and very strict, hard and frequently violent to their offspring. The peasants' wives usually are passively tolerant women who sacrifice themselves for their husband, family and farm. They are often a buffer between father and son. The younger generation shows more signs of affection, sensuality and even sexuality since the release of *Mira* (1971). Mostly because of these explicit nude scenes, *Mira* became a huge success and actress Willeke van Ammelrooy was made an instant film star. Within the film, both older men and women condemn the exposed sexual behaviour of the new generation. Although an evolution is noticeable in the relationships between men and women, the narratives are still very male-centred. Even *Mira* (1971), that is named after the central female role of the film, still focuses on the male stories: first dean Broeke, then Lander and eventually Maurice, the engineer. Also, both the *Whitey* films as *Rundskop* (*Bullhead*, 2011) focusses on the male protagonists. Even though the female roles become more and more prominent, they remain literally and figuratively supporting roles. Typically, the female roles go no further than being mothers or lovers.

In comparison with the British heritage film and the German Heimat film there are not only similarities to be noted as already stated, but there are also some differences to be found. An important distinction is the ending of the narratives. Whereas the British and German heritage films almost consistently end with a victory over the (foreign) invaders and a happy return to the original state, the Flemish peasant films gradually evolve towards a more disastrous ending. The main characters are no home-grown heroes, but rather tragic victims of society. The first film I have studied, *De Witte* (*Whitey*, 1934), was made within the same tradition of the German Heimat cinema. It ends with a happy feast – a traditional annual carnival, frequently used in peasant stories – where everything ends well. But since *De Witte van Sichem* (*Whitey of Sichem*, 1980), the tone of the films increasingly changes to more negative

developments. The 1980 film also ends with a feast, but is problematically depicted with a suicide attempt of Whitey, a with force forbidden relationship, too much alcohol and a big fight. The film then shifts to the present time, where Whitey is a young worker in a printing house, where the novel *De Witte (Whitey)* is reproduced. He ends the film by saying once more: 'It is always the same, I always have to work as an animal'. The naturalistic style of the original novels is approached more closely and is continued in recent films such as *Rundskop (Bullhead, 2011)*. The joyfulness of earlier films has nearly completely turned to greyness and a pessimistic view of life. The status-quo is asserted, but is a negative one. The inevitable is accentuated here again. The absolute truth which the restorative nostalgia in these films wants to protect, is shifted because of the change of the needs in present times. The newer mythical home is not a pleasant one.

*Rundskop (Bullhead, 2011) © Savage Film*



*Figure 4: The hometown of Jacky darkens when gazing from a distance. The cracked return to origin narrative and troubled childhood make Jacky a perfect example of the newer complex and tragic personage.*

## Conclusions

In this article I have tried to conceptualize nostalgia within heritage cinema and to deepen the research with an example of the Flemish peasant film. The concept of restorative nostalgia described by Svetlana Boym<sup>41</sup> has proved to be very helpful to explain heritage filmmaking and their motives. She defines restorative nostalgia as a form of nostalgia that tries to make a total restoration of the past without the imperfections. By applying this definition to heritage cinema, I found that creating a cultural heritage and thereby a national identity are the most prominent motivations. By forming a mythical place called home, the past is represented as a picture-perfect ideal. It creates new traditional rites, habits, values and norms and subsequently makes history. The past and present become connected and create a new understanding of time and space: an imaginative past determined by actual needs. It decreases critical thinking by means of emotional bonding. It has the tendency to mix up the actual and imaginary home and the relationship between the personal and the collective memory. Thus, nostalgia is a defence mechanism and a mechanism of seduction and even manipulation. Also, another widely made concern about the heritage cinema is that these films can result into a simplified, Disney-like format, due to a lack of a critical edge and through the use of pastiche, stereotyping, typecasting and clichéd iconography.

The Flemish peasant film can be summarized as a form of heritage cinema that has gradually evolved from a Heimat narrative to a self-willed, tragic and multi-conflicted genre. The mythical home is in other words subjected to evolution. The one-dimensional past becomes fragmented and conflicted. The restoration is no longer represented as flawless, but rather as cracked. The main characters of the films develop from stereotypes into multi-layered, tragical and problematic figures: victims of society. The needs of the present shift and therefore the past as well. The main plot stays male-centred and stressed on the inevitable of the hard life of the working class, which is the status-quo. The nostalgic longing for a simpler life in our busy times is shown as a clash between modernity and tradition in these peasant films. It is figuratively perceived as a conflict between the crowded city and the rustic countryside. This results again into other struggles. The first derived struggle is that of the the upper and lower classes, the rich and the working man. The upper class is presented by the French speaking bourgeoisie, the lower class is personified by the obedient and impoverished peasant. This conflict is best seen as a recurring Flemish paradox: the feeling of inferiority (represented as the older peasant generation) and the rebellious nature (embodied by the younger peasant generation) of Flemish people. Secondly, peasant films also show gender issues between the authoritarian male and the accommodating, suffering wife or the sensual, superficial young female. Although these relationships evolve and the female roles become more and more important, the men are still the main focus in the story lines. The collision between the Catholic Church and socialist ideas



is a third significant conflict. The pastor plays the role of the moral guide of the community, warning for those socialistic devils. The Catholic values and norms are strongly defended as the only possible truth. Finally, the struggle between the conservative older generation and the opportunistic younger one occurs.

The ambition of this article was never to aim for exhaustivity regarding the study of heritage cinema, but only to contribute to the field of study and leave room for debate. For instance, a crossroad I did not take in this article is the discussion about the accuracy in heritage films. I have already mentioned the concept of history making and that encounters a lot of resistance. Many scholars reason that heritage filmmakers must work as strict as possible in order to educate and clarify history to the public. Others argue that complete accuracy is not essential. Editing and embellishing a part of history in order to reach a large audience is defensible. Another question I have not answered, is the inclusivity of heritage films. Which films can be included and be marked as heritage? Where can we draw the line? That brings us back to the beginning of this article: can we call *The Wizard of Oz* a heritage film or is the film in itself heritage? A lot of questions remain in this fascinating study of heritage cinema, but one has been answered with certainty: there is no place like home.

## Notes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Judy Garland, *Over the Rainbow*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 1939.
- <sup>2</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic books, 2001).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-56.
- <sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 43-44.
- <sup>6</sup> Belén Vidal, *Heritage film: Nation, genre and representation* (London: Wallflower, 2012), 1-51.
- <sup>7</sup> Andrew Higson, *English heritage, English Cinema: costume drama since 1980* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
- <sup>8</sup> Andrew Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film," in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 623-624.
- <sup>9</sup> Phil Powrie, "On the Threshold Between Past and Present: Alternative Heritage," in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, eds. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), 336-346.
- <sup>10</sup> Higson, "National Past," 602.
- <sup>11</sup> Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 47.
- <sup>12</sup> Alexandra Ludwig, *Screening nostalgia: 100 years of German Heimat film* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 24.
- <sup>13</sup> Peter Blickle, *Heimat: a critical theory of the German idea of Homeland* (New York: Camden House), 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Frederike Eigler, "Critical Approaches to "Heimat" and the "Spatial Turn", *New German Critique* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 28.
- <sup>15</sup> Blickle, *Heimat: Critical Theory*, 12-24.
- <sup>16</sup> Johannes von Moltke, "Evergreens: the Heimat genre," in *The German cinema book*, eds. Tim Berfeld, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 18-19.
- <sup>17</sup> Thea Dukes, "Verbeelding van thuis: de 'Heimat' in film," *Journal of European Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 157-179.
- <sup>18</sup> Ludwig, "Screening nostalgia," 9-38.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-134.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 52-53.
- <sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford history of world cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 766.
- <sup>24</sup> Philip Mosley, *Split Screen: Belgian cinema and cultural identity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1-25.

---

<sup>25</sup> There is also a German-speaking community in the eastern area of Belgium, but counts less than one percent of the Belgian population.

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed explanation, see Gertjan Willems, *Subsidie, Camera, Actie! Filmbeleid In Vlaanderen (1964-2002)*, (Gent: Academia Press, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Dhoest, *De verbeelde gemeenschap: 50 jaar Vlaamse tv-fictie en de constructie van een nationale identiteit* (Leuven, 2004), 143.

<sup>28</sup> Gertjan Willems, *Subsidie, camera, actie! Filmbeleid in Vlaanderen 1964-2002* (Gent: Academia Press, 2017), 155.

<sup>29</sup> Erica Van Boven and Mary Kemperink, *Literatuur van de Moderne Tijd: Nederlandse en Vlaamse Letterkunde in de Negentiende en Twintigste Eeuw* (Bussum: Coutinho, 2006), 112.

<sup>30</sup> Johan Van Kempen, *Geschreven op het scherm: een methode voor filmanalyse* (Utrecht: LOKV, 1995), 131.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Vos, *Het verleden in bewegend beeld. Een inleiding in de analyse van audiovisueel materiaal* (Houten: Uitgeverij De Haan, 1991), 14.

<sup>32</sup> Roel Vande Winkel and Dirk Van Engeland, *Edith Kiel & Jan Vanderheyden: Pioniers van de Vlaamse film* (Brussel: Cinematek, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Daniël Biltereyst and Sofie Van Bauwel, "De Witte/Whitey," in *The Cinema of the Low Countries*, ed. Ernest Mathijs (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 49-60.

<sup>34</sup> Mosley, *Split Screen*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> Gertjan Willems, "Film policy, national identity and period adaptations in Flanders during the 1970s and 1980s," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35, no. 1 (2015): 125–144.

<sup>36</sup> Gert-Jan Willems, "De Betekenis Van Producent Jean Van Raemdonck Voor De Vlaamse Film," *Tijdschrift Voor Mediageschiedenis* 18, no. 1 (2015): 51-67.

<sup>37</sup> Academy Award for Best International Feature Film is best known as Best Foreign Language Film prior to 2020.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that not every conflict is equally notable in each film.

<sup>39</sup> The name Broeke is a touch of irony: Broeke etymologically means bridge in Dutch.

<sup>40</sup> *The Lion of Flanders* is also adapted in 1985 by Hugo Claus and assistant directors Stijn Coninx and Dominique Derudder, starring Jan Decler and Julien Schoenaerts (father of Matthias Schoenaerts). For further reading, see Gertjan Willems, "Conscience's De Leeuw Van Vlaanderen (The Lion of Flanders) and Its Adaptation to Film by Claus," *Cicweb-comparative Literature and Culture* 16, no. 3 (2014): 1-9.

<sup>41</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 43-44.