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REGIONAL CINEMA, NATIONALISM AND IDEOLOGY: A HISTORICAL RECEPTION ANALYSIS OF A CLASSIC BELGIAN MOVIE, 'DE WITTE' (1934)

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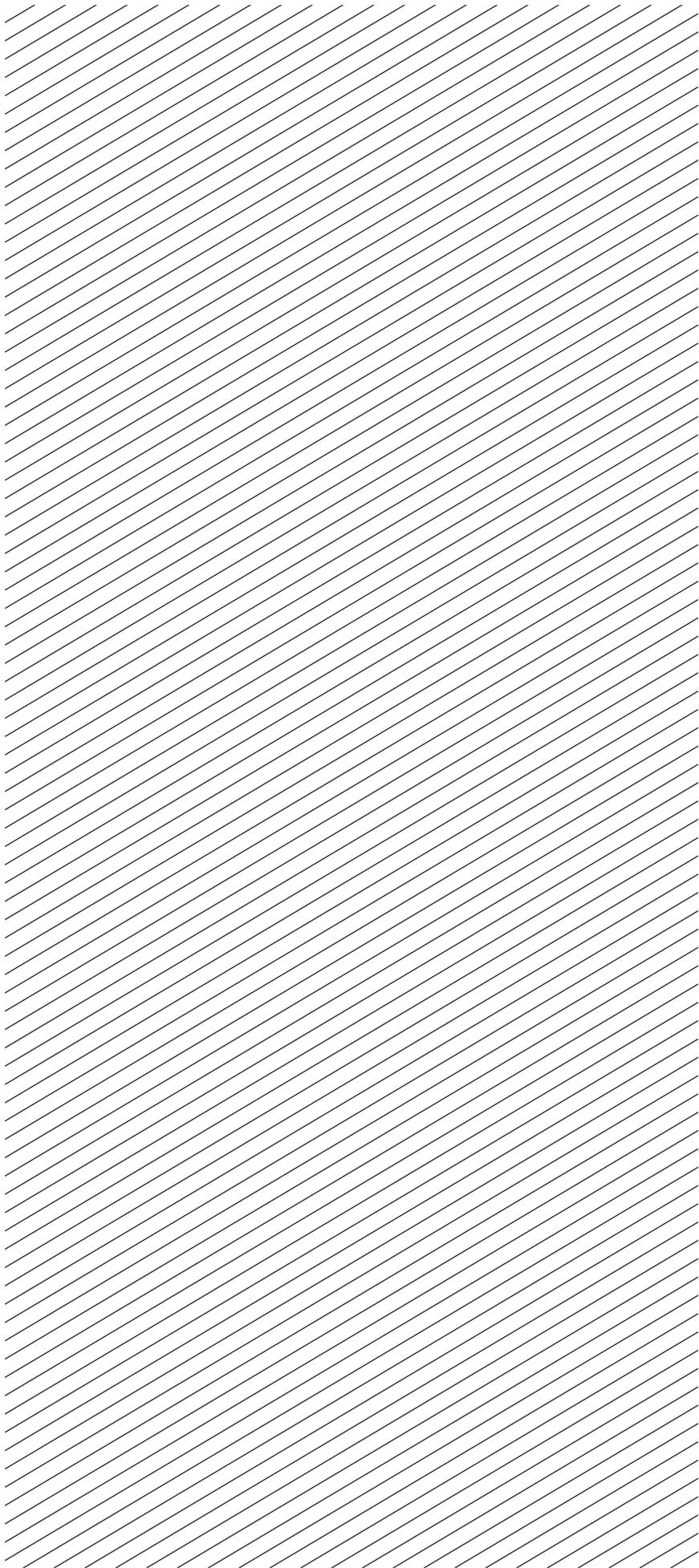




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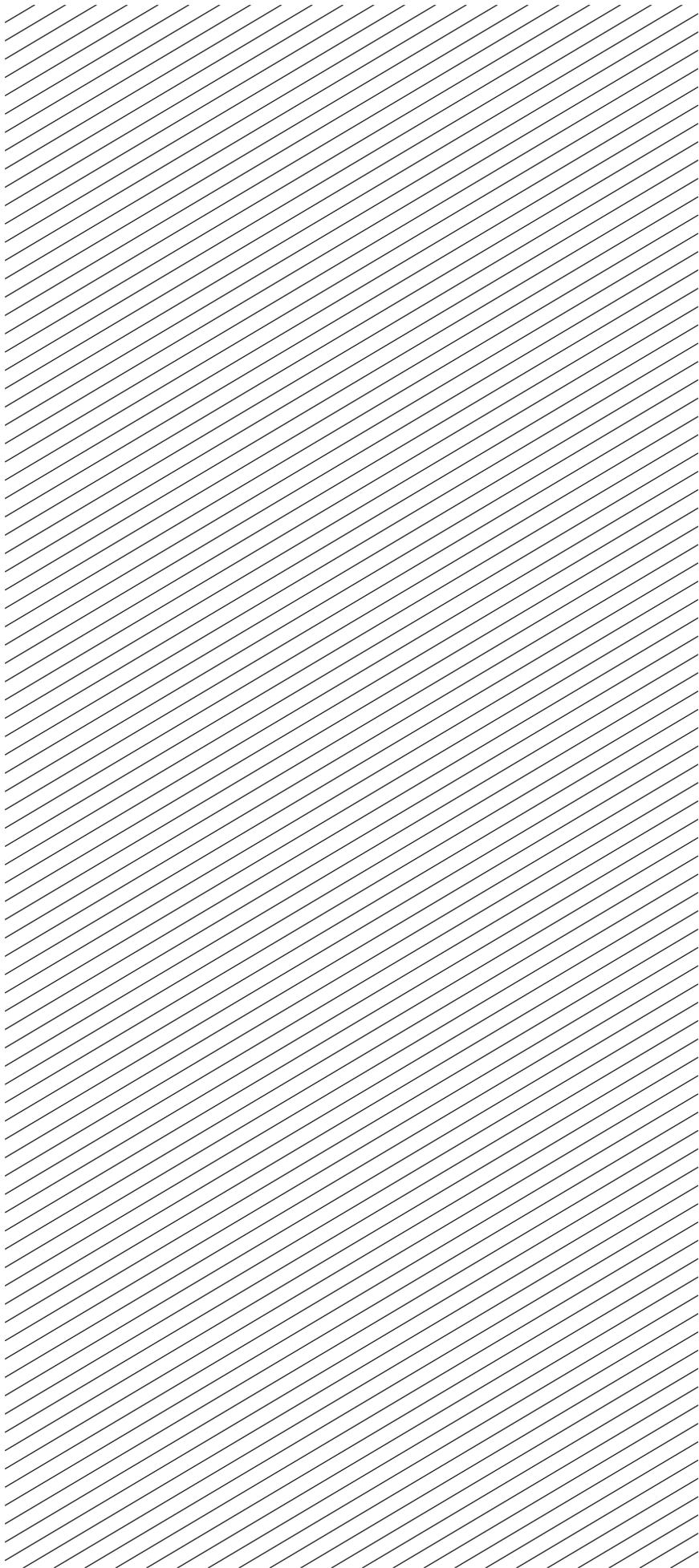
VOORWOORD

Zeventig jaar geleden, op 13 september 1934, ging 'De Witte' van Jan Vanderheyden in première. Voor de Vlaamse media was dit een zeer grootse gebeurtenis. Men beschouwde deze film als het onschuldig begin van een populaire regionale cinema. De lancering van 'De Witte' zouden we in een hedendaagse terminologie zonder problemen kunnen duiden als een media event van eerste orde. Producent en regisseur Jan Vanderheyden was in eerste instantie een handige zakenman, die zijn sporen had verdiend in de commerciële filmdistributie. Vanderheyden wist als geen ander zijn eerste filmproductie onder de aandacht te brengen en het tot een cultureel mediagebeuren te maken waar de aankondiging van het filmproject, de keuze van de acteurs tot het filmen zelf duidelijk aanwezig waren in de pers. Nog voor de eerste meter pellicule werd gedraaid was 'De Witte' een mediagebeurtenis, terwijl de film al snel de speelbal werd van commerciële en ideologische invloeden van buitenaf. Mede door deze grote media-aandacht wordt 'De Witte' vaak (verkeerdelijk evenwel) gezien als de eerste Vlaamse klankfilm. Deze schijnbaar onschuldige, vooroorlogse film is nog steeds een collectief referentiepunt in Vlaanderen en een icoon van de regionale populaire cinemacultuur.

PREFACE

Seventy years ago, on the 13th of September 1934, the première of 'De Witte' ('Whitey') of Jan Vanderheyden took place. This was a major event for the Flemish media. This feature film is often considered to be the innocent start of popular regional cinema in Flanders and Belgium. In contemporary terminology the launch of 'De Witte' can be seen as a media event of the first order. Producer and director Jan Vanderheyden was a respected business man who in first instance gained his success in the commercial film distribution. Vanderheyden's sharp business acumen was that he was able to create high expectations about 'De Witte' as a movie and to make it into a cult event. The announcement of the project, the choice of the main actors, as well as the shooting of the film itself were hugely publicized in the press. Before the first shooting took place 'De Witte' became a media event and the target of external pressures with commercial and ideological motives. Due to the major attention in the media 'De Witte' has been often (wrongly) considered as the first Flemish talkie. This seemingly innocent prewar feature film is still a collective reference in Flanders and an icon of the regional popular cinema culture.

With this publication the Working Group Film and Television Studies



Met deze publicatie start de Werkgroep Film- & Televisiestudies (<http://www.psw.ugent.be/comwet/wgfilmtv/>) van de Vakgroep Communicatie-wetenschappen (UGent) de nieuwe reeks Working Papers Film & TV Studies. Deze meertalige reeks wil lopend onderzoek over film, televisie en (in ruimere zin) beeldcultuur onder de aandacht brengen. De voorliggende publicatie over 'De Witte' illustreert enkele doelstellingen van deze reeks. Hoewel 'De Witte' beschouwd wordt als een mijlpaal in de Vlaamse populaire beeldcultuur werd de film nog maar zelden kritisch onderzocht, rekening houdend met de productie- en receptiecontext. Ook de commerciële en ideologische druk op 'De Witte' kwam nog niet aan bod. Zonder de tekstuele openheid van dit populaire cultuurproduct uit het oog te verliezen, is 'De Witte' een mooi voorbeeld van de mechanismen die proberen controle te krijgen over de ideologische invulling. Film- en beeldcultuur is daarom nooit zo neutraal of onschuldig als ze eruit ziet. Ze is meer dan we vermoeden, de drager van een bepaalde wereldvisie en articuleert dan ook een hegemonische ideologie. Historisch onderzoek naar de productie- en receptiecontext is in dit opzicht vaak meer onthullend en overtuigend dan onderzoek over hedendaagse beeldcultuur.

Daniël Biltereyst & Sofie Van Bauwel
September 2004

(<http://www.psw.ugent.be/comwet/wgfilmtv/>) of the Department of Communication Sciences (UGent) starts a new series of Working Papers Film & TV Studies. This multi-language series wants to put emphasis on current research on film, television and (in a broader sense) screen culture. This article on 'De Witte' illustrates some objects of the series. Although 'De Witte' is considered a milestone in Flemish popular screen culture, this feature film was rarely critically analyzed, taking into account the production and reception context. Without acknowledging the textual openness of this popular cultural artifact, 'De Witte' is an excellent example of the mechanisms which try to gain control on its ideological meaning(s). Therefore film and screen culture is never neutral or innocent as it seems. It is, more than we assume, the carrier of a particular world view and articulates a hegemonic ideology. In this account historic research on the production and reception context is often more revealing and convincing than research on contemporary screen culture.

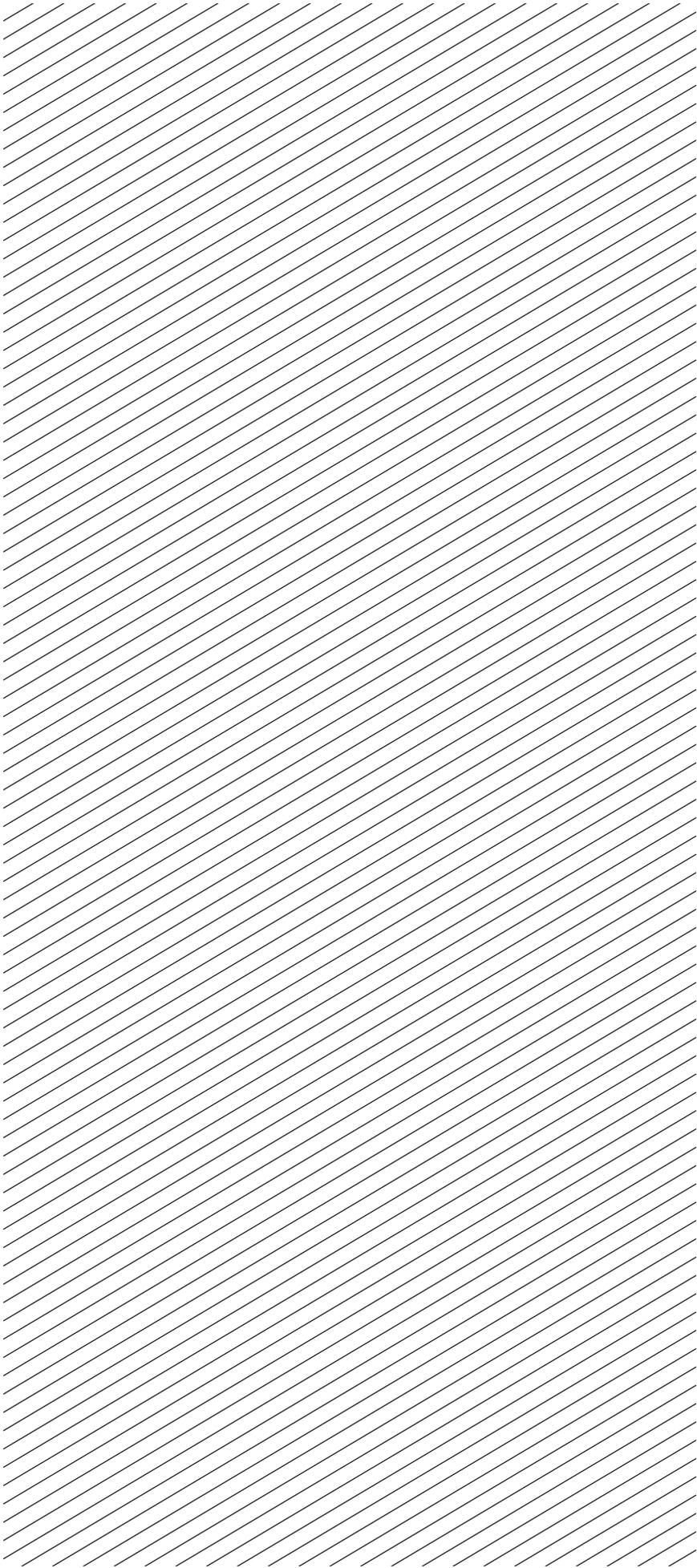
**REGIONAL CINEMA, NATIONALISM
AND IDEOLOGY: A HISTORICAL
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BELGIAN MOVIE, 'DE WITTE' (1934)**

ABSTRACTS

'De Witte' (1934) van Jan Vanderheyden wordt doorgaans beschouwd als een mijlpaal in de Vlaamse filmgeschiedenis. In deze eerste Working Paper belichten we de film als een, interessante uiting van de groei van de Europese regionale cinema in het spoor van de geluidsfilm. In deze bijdrage beschrijven we eerst de productie- en distributiecontext, gevolgd door de historische receptie en het succes van 'De Witte'. We inspireren ons hierbij op een materialistische visie op historisch receptieonderzoek, waarbij we oog hebben voor de manier waarop de filmproductie én de inhoud van de film al snel de speelbal werd van verschillende belanghebbende groepen. We belichten hier vooral de rol van de katholieke filmbeweging in België. We besluiten dat de film hierdoor, én meer nog dan het oorspronkelijke werk van Ernest Claes, een conservatief, nostalgisch beeld schetst van Vlaanderen. De film toont hoe een traditionele gemeenschap (met een duidelijke maatschappelijke orde, hiërarchie, respect voor macht, met kinderlijk kwaad) op de achtergrond wordt bedreigd door een modernistische stedelijke cultuur (de stad als plaats van maatschappelijke wanorde, onrust, zonde en verval).

ABSTRACTS

'De Witte' (1934) by Jan Vanderheyden is considered one of the first Flemish sound features and a milestone in Belgian film history. In this first Working Paper we see 'De Witte' as an interesting case of an emerging regional cinema in Europe after the introduction of sound cinema. After a description of the production and distribution context, we go into the question of the issue of the historical reception and success of 'De Witte'. Therefore we try to locate this 'classic' Flemish movie into a context of a growing Flemish film culture with links to folk art, popular culture and literature. Inspired by a materialist position in terms of historical reception analysis, we try to link this broader context of cultural criticism with the world drawn by 'De Witte'. Here we argue that the movie shows a consensual view, drawing a conservative, nostalgic picture of Flemish local communities threatened by modernist society. Ultimately the movie is about the clash of a nostalgic view upon traditional society (or: local community with social order, hierarchy, respect for church and power, with innocent childish evils) and the fear for the urban society (the city with social disorder and unrest, lack of respect for power and peace, with big evils).



⁰¹ A shorter version of this article was published as Biltereyst & Van Bauwel (2004).

⁰² Trumpbour (1995: 452, 472) for instance wrote how Belgium was celebrated by the American MPPDA as a free trade zone in film with few initiatives against Hollywood's market dominance.

⁰³ See de Poorter (1997: 130-141).

⁰⁴ For a broader historical analysis of Belgian cinema, see Mosley (2001).

⁰⁵ See Walsh (1999: 144-5).

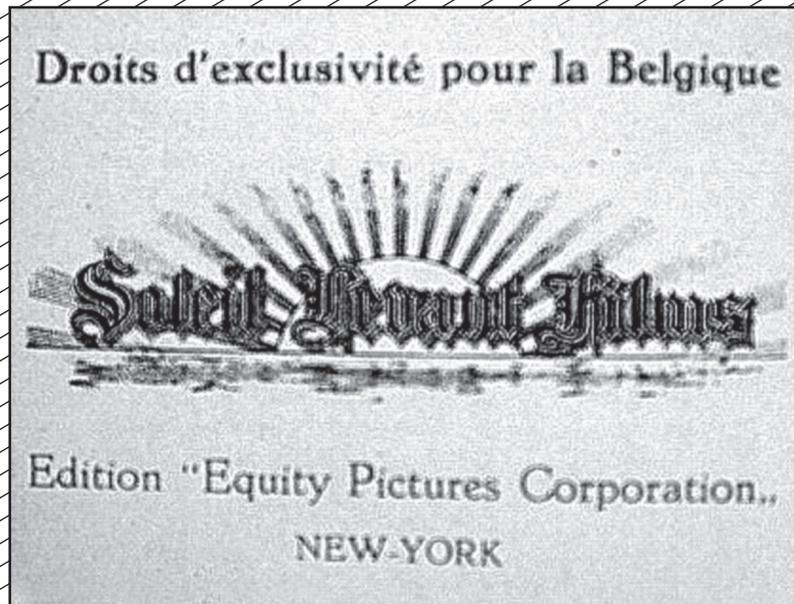


INTRODUCTION⁰¹

Throughout the interwar period Belgium was celebrated by the big international production centers as one of the most liberal film markets in Europe⁰² and had the highest rate of cinema going audience in Europe⁰³. Besides the huge import rate and the strong position of the distribution arms of American and German corporations, Belgium has often been seen as a 'natural' extension of the French film market. Initially the film market was dominated by the French industrial Charles Pathé but soon also the American distribution corporations entered the scene. The gravitational force from the French film industry however was powerful in many directions. French film corporations such as Aubert, Gaumont or Pathé were present on both the distribution and the exploitation scene, while they also lured away Belgian creative personnel (for instance Jacques Feyder, Charles Spaak, Fernand Gravey). The openness of the small Belgian film market was increased by the lack of any serious state intervention plan to stimulating local production or diminishing the inflow from abroad. As a result, Belgium may have been quite unique in that it showed, probably more than elsewhere in Europe, a fine cross-section of the international film output. However, it also included a weak local production⁰⁴. Especially in the northern, Dutch-language part of the country, local film production had great difficulties to develop due to the small local market, the lack of sufficient financial means, technical equipment and know how, as well as due to the attraction of the French-language film scene.

Similar to what happened in other regions and countries⁰⁵, the introduction of sound caused a growing demand for non-exportable material in the local language. Probably the most successful Belgian filmmaker and producer in playing upon the attraction of hearing one's own language has been Jan Vanderheyden (1890-1961), who produced in 1934 the first Flemish full-fledged talking picture. Based on a popular novel by Ernest Claes, 'De Witte' ('Whitey', 1934) is commonly seen as a classical film and a milestone in Belgian film history.

In this article we see 'De Witte' as an interesting case of an emerging regional cinema in Europe after the introduction of sound cinema. Though technically quite weak, the movie succeeded in gaining an amazingly wide audience and proved that popular cinema in a local language could be commercially viable. In the aftermath of 'De Witte', Vanderheyden produced nine films in the following five years, while also in the French-speaking part of Belgium a more continuous



In 1922 Jan Vanderheyden started working for Brussels-based film distributor Soleil Levant Films, specialised in US and British movies. Source: Revue Belge du Cinéma, 18.2.1923, 13(7): 28.

⁰⁶ The other successful filmmaker was Gaston Schoukens (1901-1961), who specialized in French-language comedies and vaudevilles, in some cases in a Brussels dialect.

⁰⁷ Other examples of 'pastoral films' are: 'Mira' (1971) a Dutch Belgian co-production of Fons Rademakers were the novel of Stijn Streuvels 'De teleurgang van de Waterhoek' was adapted; 'Rolande met de bles' (1972) of the film maker Roland Verhavert, based on the novel of Herman Teirlinck; 'Pallierter' (1973 and 1975) of Roland Verhavert; 'De Leeuw van Vlaanderen' (1984) of Hugo Claus and 'Het gezin van Paemel' (1986) of Paul Cammermans. See de Poorter (1997).

⁰⁸ See Staiger (1992).

⁰⁹ For more details on these biographical notes, see Geens (1986).

film production flourished⁰⁶. Often artistically poor and relatively unambitious, these movies tried to reach a local audience through the use of popular genres (mainly comedies and vaudevilles) or the exploitation of well-known literary works, often combined with casting local popular actors. According to Wim de Poorter (1997) 'De Witte' also initiated a trend of a film genre described as the 'pastoral film'. A genre often based on a well-known novel in Flemish literature, which visualized the rural country and community life in mainly catholic Flanders⁰⁷.

Inspired by a materialist approach in relation to historical reception analysis⁸, this article tries to understand the social meaning(s) of 'De Witte'. This also includes a struggle around those meanings, not only in the textual but also in the public reception of it. The production of 'De Witte' being a well-publicized public event, the movie also quickly became the target of external pressures with commercial, religious and ideological motives. After a short description of the production, distribution and public reception of this classic Flemish movie, we locate 'De Witte' as a crucial stage in the growth of a Flemish film culture with clear links to folk art, popular culture and literature, as well as to the ideological struggle around them. Ultimately we argue that the movie uses a consensual strategy in drawing a conservative, even nostalgic picture of Flemish local communities threatened by modernist society.

'DE WITTE' AS A CULT EVENT: PRODUCTION, INFLUENCES, DISTRIBUTION AND RECEPTION

When Jan Vanderheyden started considering the production of his first motion picture, he did not start from scratch. On the contrary, since 1916 he had been involved in international film distribution, first in London and then Paris as an export manager for 'Transatlantic Cy.', a firm that distributed 'Universal' movies on the Western European market⁰⁹. In 1922 Vanderheyden went back to Belgium, where he became the manager of 'Soleil Levant Films', a national distributor specializing in American and French pictures. Four years later he got more involved in the distribution of German movies, changing the name of the distribution firm into 'International Film Distributors' (IFD). With the arrival of sound, Vanderheyden and IFD specialized into dubbing German movies (often from the Aafa-studio) into French, bringing him closer to the sphere of film production. During one of his visits to Berlin, he also got involved with a German woman, Edith Kiel, who worked as a dialogue supervisor for the UFA-studios. Soon Kiel

Cet homme, est-il un des amoureux de

“La Marraine de Charley,,

qui court après elle pour lui offrir ses millions et son cœur !!...



Ou bien est-ce un Directeur de Cinéma, personnifiant tous ceux de la Belgique, cherchant à saisir la fortune qui passe devant lui, et qu'il est certain de trouver chez

Jean Vanderheyden

Directeur général de "SOLEIL LEVANT FILMS.

19, Rue Zérézo, 19, - Bruxelles-Nord

In this advertising from May 1925, Jean Vanderheyden promotes himself as Soleil Levant Films' general director. Source: Revue Belge du Cinéma, 10.5.1925, 15(19): 42.

¹⁰ For instance in Thomas (1995).

left Berlin, following Vanderheyden to Antwerp, becoming his life-long creative companion in writing and directing most of his popular movies.

In most accounts on 'De Witte'¹⁰, the motion picture is presented as quite amateurish and explorative in many perspectives, given the absence of any know how and technical equipment for sound film production in Flanders. This might have been true, but this must not obscure the commercial flair with which Vanderheyden launched his first movie. As an experienced and respected distributor, he succeeded in making it into a cultural and media event of the first order. The announcement of the project, the choice of the main actors, as well as the shooting of the film itself were hugely publicized in the press. The search of the main protagonists for instance was staged as a huge public event, closely followed and covered by the media. The final election itself (April 11th, 1934) was organized as a public contest attended by leading literary and cultural figures.

GERMAN MASTERS AND THE COMMERCIAL VALUE OF A SOFTLY CONTROVERSIAL HEIMAT BEST-SELLER

The choice of adapting the novel 'De Witte' by Ernest Claes (1885-1968) proved to be commercially interesting too. 'De Witte' was one of the most popular and best-selling Dutch-language books, translated and successfully sold into various other languages. In the 1930s, Claes was a first rang writer with a solid record in terms of book sales, public appearances and lectures, mainly within Catholic and Flemish-nationalist circles. With 'De Witte', his first novel published in 1920, Claes immediately became a widely acclaimed author. In 'De Witte' he used a loose narrative structure, as well as an unaffected style and a highly recognizable 'folk' language to tell the story and the many boyish adventures of a rogue (Whitey) in a small peasants community on the Flemish countryside. In this novel Claes, who had close links with German cultural life, was clearly influenced by Heimatkunst. Acting against modernist literary and art movements, this German literary movement cultivated a nostalgic view upon a well-ordered, traditional society. This included an orientation towards an unspoiled nature, glorifying the past and rural life. Acting against an urban and crude naturalist style, it cultivated pastoral life, using folk language, simple peasants stories and humor. Many of these characteristics match with Claes' 'De Witte', although it had been quite controversial when it appeared in 1920. Mainly within extremist Catholic circles, also in the Netherlands, Claes had been criticized for the 'pagan' characteristics of the charismatic and playful young Whitey.



Ernest Claes (in the middle with spectacles) with composer Renaat Veremans, director-producer Jan Vanderheyden, various actors and crew members during the shooting of 'De Witte' in Zichem.
Source: Archief Ernest Claesgenootschap

¹¹ The film credits of 'De Witte' indicate that Jan Vanderheyden and Willem Benoy (head of the main theatre in Antwerp, KNS, acting in the movie) were the directors of the movie. However, as later interviews with actors and collaborators (Geens, 1986) confirm, it was Edith Kiel who came to direct the film, while Vanderheyden could be called the producer.

¹² Verstreken (1988).

¹³ See P.F. in Thys (1999: 246).

¹⁴ G.A.B. (1934) (our translation).

¹⁵ Vanderheyden cited by Vincent (1986: 77) in Reynebeau (1994: 57) (our translation).

Vanderheyden's choice to adapt 'De Witte' was widely acclaimed in the press, where it was stated that Claes himself would be involved in the project. However, it soon became clear that Kiel did not see the film narrative potential of this anecdotal pastoral novel and she soon convinced Vanderheyden to use a stronger story line¹¹. Inspired by her experience in German commercial cinema, she reworked Claes' novel into a love story around the protagonist's brother and the local innkeeper's daughter. Afterwards, Claes and more traditional catholic critics deeply regretted this script intervention¹², denouncing it as a concession to international commercialism and its promotion of cheap 'sex appeal'.

We will come back to Kiel's firm hand in reworking the original story, but it nevertheless showed how this first Flemish sound picture had a clear commercial imperative from the start. The adaptation of the novel also indicates how this form of regional cinema did not escape from basic conventions in international commercial cinema in terms of story line, themes and protagonists. Also in technical and cinematographic terms, 'De Witte' would become highly influenced by contemporary German film standards. Vanderheyden's and Kiel's contacts with the Berlin studios lured German craftsmen to Belgium. These included camerawork (Ewald Daub), editing (Walter Von Bonhorst), sound recording and handling (Fritz Seeger and Hans Rutten, using the Tobis-Klang system)¹³. The interior sequences were shot in one of the best equipped German studios, the Johannestal studio of the Aafa (Althoff-Ambos-Film-AG) in Berlin (July 1934). In an interview three months earlier¹⁴, Vanderheyden tried to justify these choices, claiming that "lacking well-trained Flemish or Dutch personnel, we are obliged to appeal to the ultimate masters of the European film art: German technicians."

In many interviews Vanderheyden tried to induce this German quality reference to his film project, thereby underlining the historical importance of 'De Witte' for the future of Flemish cinema and Belgian film production. In retrospect it seems that the ultimate proof of Vanderheyden's sharp business acumen was that he was able not only to create high expectations about 'De Witte' as a movie or to make it into a cult event. But further, that he succeeded in creating a collective feeling of living through an historical momentum for Flemish (film) culture. This feature film can be seen as the cinematic articulation of rural folk culture, which was glorified in Flemish Catholicism. Emphasizing a Flemish identity, Vanderheyden created a discourse on a collective Flemish culture as he said that: "I'm engaged in producing films for our people, which are elaborating on a national character."¹⁵ This discourse has to be seen in the Belgian political and cultural



The German team with camera man Ewald Daub and editor Walter Von Bonhorst during the shooting of 'De Witte'.
Source: Archief Ernest Claesgenootschap

¹⁶ For an historical overview of nationalism in Flanders, see De Wever (1994), Deprez and Vos (1999) and Van der Elst (1950).

¹⁷ See Deprez & Vos (1999).

¹⁸ For the importance of cinema for the Belgian socialist movement, see Stallaert (1989).

¹⁹ Morlion (1934a).

context of the 1930 where the abstract notion of 'community' was shaped in the concept of 'the people'. Whereby it was given a surplus value in the nationalistic discourse on the Flemish identity. The Flemish nationalists articulated this identity with the common language, 'the language of the people', and made territorial claims referring to the rich historic tradition of Flanders. Within the context of the growing nationalism in the 1930, the concept of 'the people' was articulated together with and through common interest¹⁶. Subsequently, the ideology of nationalism was embedded with biological connotations which suggested the naturalness of the Flemish people. The right-wing mainstream in Flemish nationalistic ideology used an emotional rhetoric of traditionalistic ethics which was idealistically positioned against modernity.

GROWING PRESSURES AND CATHOLIC POWER

However, this also inflated expectations and created additional pressure on the project, certainly in this period of harsh political-economic and wide social crisis. For Vanderheyden and IFD there were clear economic imperatives and commercial risks, given the high production costs of the movie and the general recession in local distribution and exploitation. But what makes 'De Witte' such an outstanding case is that the film project became, more than ever and before its actual production stage, the plaything of ideological and religious pressures. Throughout the 1930s, Belgium lived through a period of intense conflicts along various lines. The kingdom saw the rise and success of more extremist political formations on the left and right, often associated with linguistic and nationalist aspirations¹⁷. In a highly polarized society, these conflicts were by no surprise interwoven with questions on the role of the state, trade unions and the church. Within this political-economic formation, culture and to some degree film culture have been part of this ideological struggle¹⁸.

Returning to 'De Witte', it was clear that especially catholic circles looked at it suspiciously and tried to influence the adaptation of Claes' popular novel. In fact, if we look at the articles published within catholic newspapers and magazines, it is clear that the 'De Witte' project was considered to be extremely important. In various articles, leaders of the powerful Catholic Film Action (Katholieke Film Actie, KFA) took the defense of the movie in progress, and insinuated their influence on it. In the leading Catholic newspaper 'De Standaard', one of the leaders of the KFA, Felix Morlion, wrote in several articles¹⁹ how he received the script of the future movie:



Father Felix A. Morlion (back) talking with writer Ernest Claes (on Morlion's left), director-producer Jan Vanderheyden (right) and composer Renaat Veremans.
Source: Archief Ernest Claesgenootschap

²⁰ Morlion (1934b).

²¹ Brohée & Cartuyvels (1933).

²² Morlion (1932) (our translation).

²³ Biltreyst (in press). For the importance of the Legion of Decency, see Black (1994).

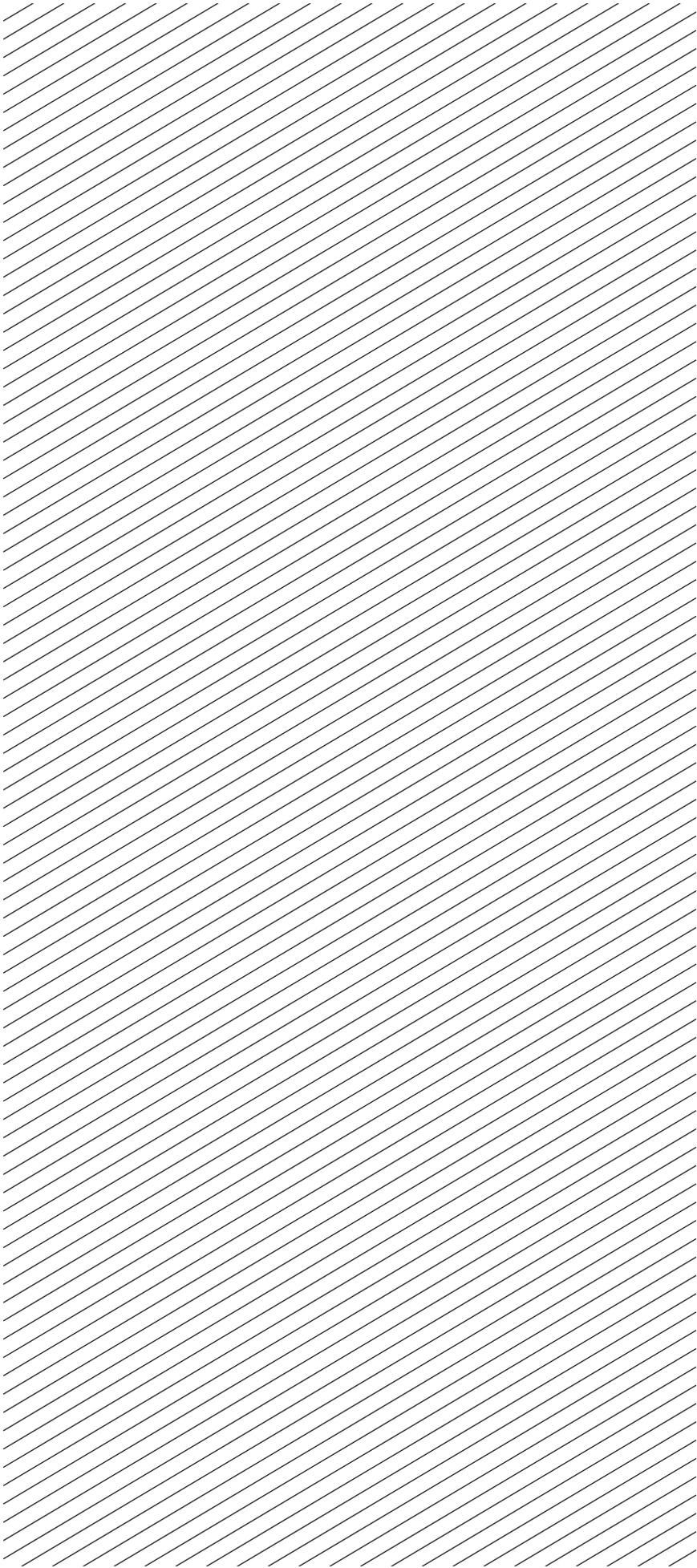
*From the beginning we received the script. Without being masterly, we think that the adaptation of Claes' novel is reliable, simple and healthy. ... It is remarkable how the producer himself has seen the necessity to retain the popular atmosphere, while avoiding everything that could affect the respect for the priest, or what could affect dignity and chastity.*²⁰

If we want to understand this quote, we have to go back to the importance of the KFA with Morlion as one of its most influential leaders. Since the 1920s Catholic leaders had been active in film distribution and exploitation (the latter known as the Catholic Film Central). In the beginning of the 1930s, the Catholics extended their range of action by trying to influence the press in their film coverage as well as to put more pressure on commercial cinemas programming 'unhealthy' movies. Therefore the KFA, which was supported by local bishops, installed a Catholic Film Classification/Censorship Board (1932). By 1933 the KFA claimed that they played a major role in film criticism in Catholic newspapers, which were extremely dominant in Flanders²¹.

Within this offensive atmosphere and inspired by the successes of their American counterparts, the Legion of Decency, the KFA dreamt of building a mass organization as well as of influencing what was considered the heart of all evil: film production. In many writings leaders of the KFA wrote about the necessity to enlarge the range of action from distribution and exploitation to production. These hard claims on influencing local production can be situated between 1932 and 1934. In 1932 for instance, Morlion wrote in an important manuscript on catholic film guidance ('Filmleiding'):

*It is important to guide the programming schedules in cinemas, as well as influencing censorship ... But guiding film production itself into a healthy direction, and increasing the proportion of good movies: this is the only sound solution to the cinema problem.*²²

In these and future writings and manifestoes the leaders of the KFA heavily supported the successes of the American Legion of Decency in influencing Hollywood. However they were confronted by the difficulty of influencing film production in small countries²³. When the 'De Witte' project was announced, the Belgian KFA was in an extremely offensive state of extending its range of action, not at least through recruiting local legions (called Catholic Film Legion, Katholieke Film Liga, KFL). Even from an international perspective, the Belgian catholic film



²⁴ Trumbour (1995: 453). See also Penne (1987).

²⁵ For instance Ernest, V. (1934), as well as: G.V.H. (1934).

²⁶ Morlion (1934c).



initiatives have been evaluated as quite exceptional. Recently John Trumbour²⁴ wrote that “in the Catholic Church’s international strategy on film, Belgium at times played a more central role than the U.S. Legion of Decency.”

Especially in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, the KFA proved to be quite influential through its growing number of legions, small local cinemas affiliated to the Catholic Film Central, as well as through its influence on Catholic newspapers. Within this context it is clear that any local Flemish producer, who tried to launch a film project with lucrative aspirations, had to take care of the KFA.

On the basis of the existing archive material it remains extremely difficult to determine the exact influence of this powerful lobby on ‘De Witte’. But even before the actual shooting, leaders of the KFA published several articles in which they openly defended the project. In several articles photographs show how Morlion and other members of the KFA were present during the shooting itself, while in socialist newspapers film critics denounced the KFA’s attempts to influence ‘De Witte’²⁵. In August 1934, one month before the premiere, Morlion wrote how:

*‘De Witte’ will be a healthy film. Simple rural life will be at the background of this movie but it will be essentially catholic. Even the most puritan observer will not be able to criticize the love affair ... ‘Whitey’ shows a direction which we as catholics can follow ... We live in a small country ... but in terms of ideas we can play an important role. There is a sound Catholic soil on which we can build. There is a tradition of artistic creation, which can be transported into modern art forms.*²⁶

UNEXPECTED SUCCESS AND CRITICAL SUPPORT

When ‘De Witte’ was presented (September 13th, 1934), Vanderheyden’s commercial flair again succeeded in gaining full public attention, hereby supporting press coverage with additional advertising in newspapers and trade journals. The premiere was attended by many leading figures including politicians, writers, artists, as well as representatives from the KFA.

The abundant press coverage was extremely mild, supporting this firstborn Flemish talkie. Some newspapers talked about an unexpected artistic triumph in all respects, whereby the main actor playing Whitey (Jef Bruyninckx) was seen as a revelation and a Belgian Jackie Cooper. Other newspapers however includ-

²⁷ Goegebeur (1934).

²⁸ Belloy (1934).

²⁹ S.T. (1934).



³⁰ I.N.T. (1939).

Jan Vanderheyden (sitting on the ground with large hat) surrounded by Renaat Veremans (in the middle), actor Jef Bruyninckx (boy in the middle), Stephanie Vetter (left from Jef Bruyninckx) and Felix Timmermans (above Jef Bruyninckx)

Source: Archief Ernest Claesgenootschap

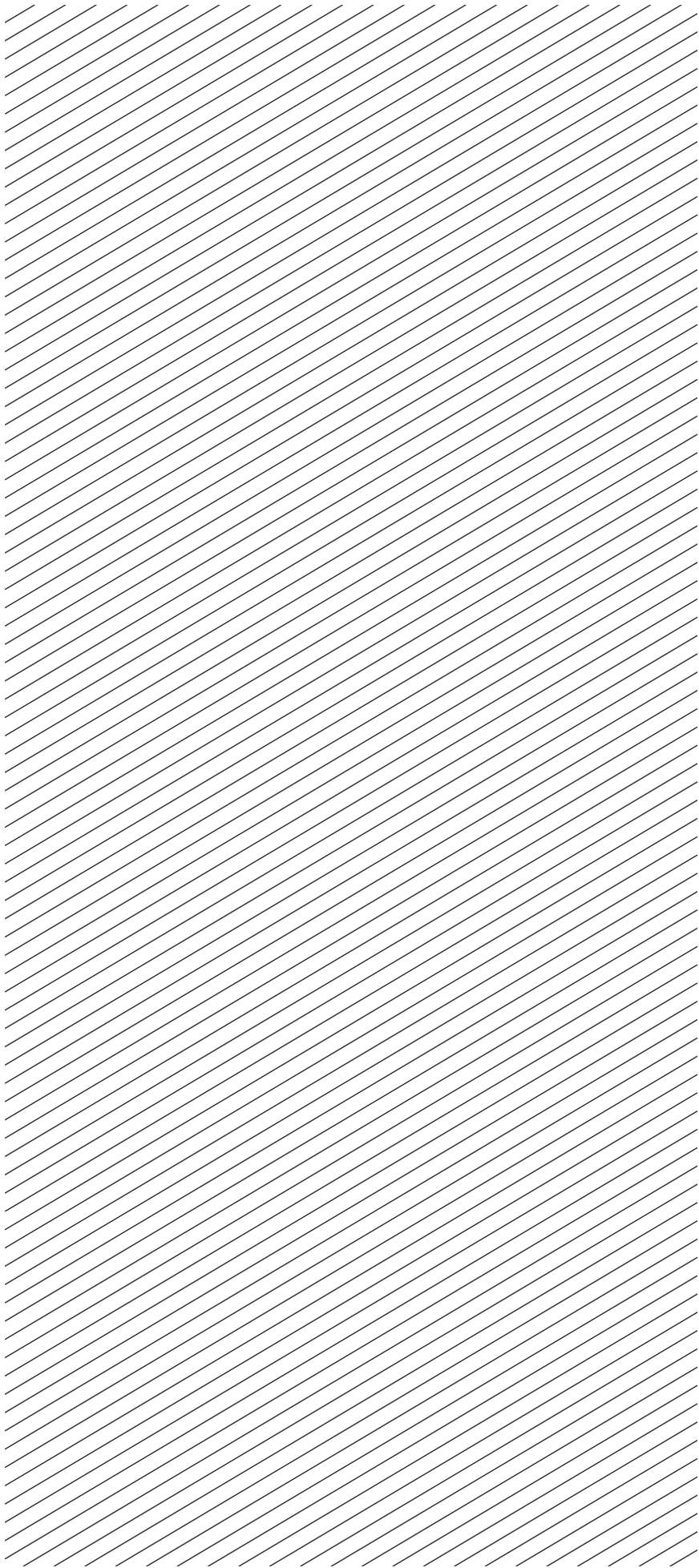
ed more critical remarks in terms of technical or cinematographic insufficiencies²⁷, as well as in relation to verisimilitude²⁸. Trying to compare the harshness of real peasants' life with the one in the movie, some journalists denounced the romantic side in the movie²⁹. Within more catholic newspapers some criticism was formulated about Kiel's intervention into Claes' novel, mainly with the intrusion of the love affair.

All in all, 'De Witte' soon grew out to be an unexpected audience success for many years. In IFD advertisings we see how the film first toured in most major Flemish towns, followed by a successful career in the Netherlands (January 1935) and Brussels (May 1935). In the following years 'De Witte' was due to be projected in nearly all film houses in Flanders. Even after the Second World War up to the 1960s, this mythical movie was programmed over again, mostly with a renewed success.

In the meantime Vanderheyden and IFD did not wait for new projects. In 1935 two new comedies were launched ('Alleen voor U'/'Only for You', 1935; 'Uilenspiegel leeft nog'/'Uilenspiegel still lives', 1935) and more projects were to follow. For most of these movies, Vanderheyden turned to Dutch studios, but in 1939 he launched his own production stable in Antwerp³⁰. By that time he was considered the most important film producer in the country. In 1980 a second adaptation followed, directed by a more leftist critical filmmaker, and again Claes' novel seemed to be immortal: 'De Witte van Zichem' by Robbe De Hert broke all records in terms of audience, while a new reprint of the novel sold like gold.

A CONSENSUAL AND 'HEALTHY' VIEW UPON SOCIETY

Claes' novel may have been a softly controversial work, whose critical layers were masked by humor, mostly remaining out of sight of the average reader. The undercurrent criticism in the novel did not so much reside in the many recalcitrant gags by the protagonist and his gang, but rather in an ambiguous atmosphere around Whitey. While joyful and funny through small acts of naughtiness, the lad also embodied small acts of rebellion and resistance against different forms of authority. Among those authorities within the peasant's town we can observe the church (conflict with the community priest), educational (gag with and punishment by the school teacher), and patriarchal system (conflict with and hard punishment by the father and elder brothers). At a third level of read-



³¹ Herdu (1945), H.D. (1945) and Geens (1986).

³² See also D.S. (1999).



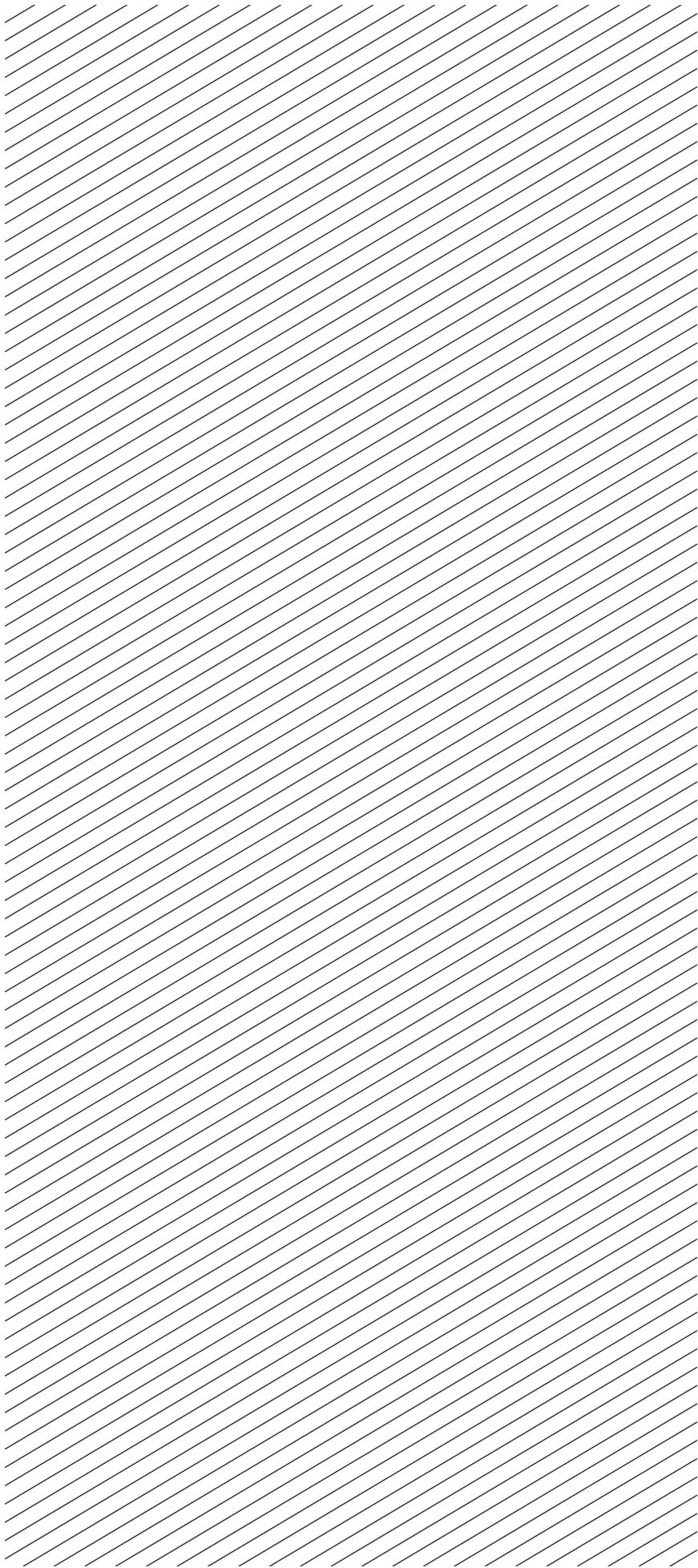
ing the figure of Whitey, there is the inverse atmosphere of funniness, where the boy radiates deep tragedy and compassion. At a deeper level Whitey stands for youth and the search for freedom, repressed by an interconnected system of authority(ies).

The crucial question is then whether the undercurrent criticism can also be observed in Vanderheyden's and Kiel's adaptation. In this article we claim that this is not the case, at least as a result of commercial imperatives and external pressures. We claim that 'De Witte' as a motion picture shows, more than the novel, a consensual, highly conservative view upon Flemish society.

COLLABORATION, RIGHT-WING SYMPATHY, AND THE IDEAL OF HEALTHY 'FOLK CINEMA'

It may be tentative to found this statement on the hegemonic nature of 'De Witte', further on the basis of more contextual arguments. We for instance now know what happened with the main players in the film project in the 1930s, the Second World War and later on. And, sadly enough for the movie, these individual political and ideological trajectories have been quite damaging or incriminating. At the background of these individual stories we must refer to the development of a substantial part of the Flemish nationalist movement in Belgium, which came closely tied up with extreme right-wing ideologies and collaboration with the German occupier.

A most controversial figure is Jan Vanderheyden himself, who during Occupation had been chairman of the Belgian Chamber for Cinematography (Chambre Syndicale Belge de la Cinématographie/ Belgische Syndicale Kamer van de Kinematografie). At the end of the Second World War Vanderheyden fled to Berlin with his partner, but soon seditious articles appeared describing the producer as the 'Fuehrer' of Belgian cinema, while Kiel was simply seen as a nazi spy³¹. Three years later he was arrested and put in jail. Released in 1951 he started again as a producer, mainly of cheap popular comedies written and directed by Kiel. Even up till today it is not clear in how far Vandeheyden's collaboration was inspired by ideology (including Flemish-nationalist sympathies) or opportunism. The latter might be more important given Vanderheyden's pre-war commercial drive in general³². However, while more research is needed, it is clear that the incriminating aura around Vanderheyden has cast her shadow over his popular movies, including 'De Witte'.



³³ De Schutter (2000). See also a television documentary: A. Van de Vijver (2002) 'Ernest Claes' Histories, VRT, 30.5.2002.

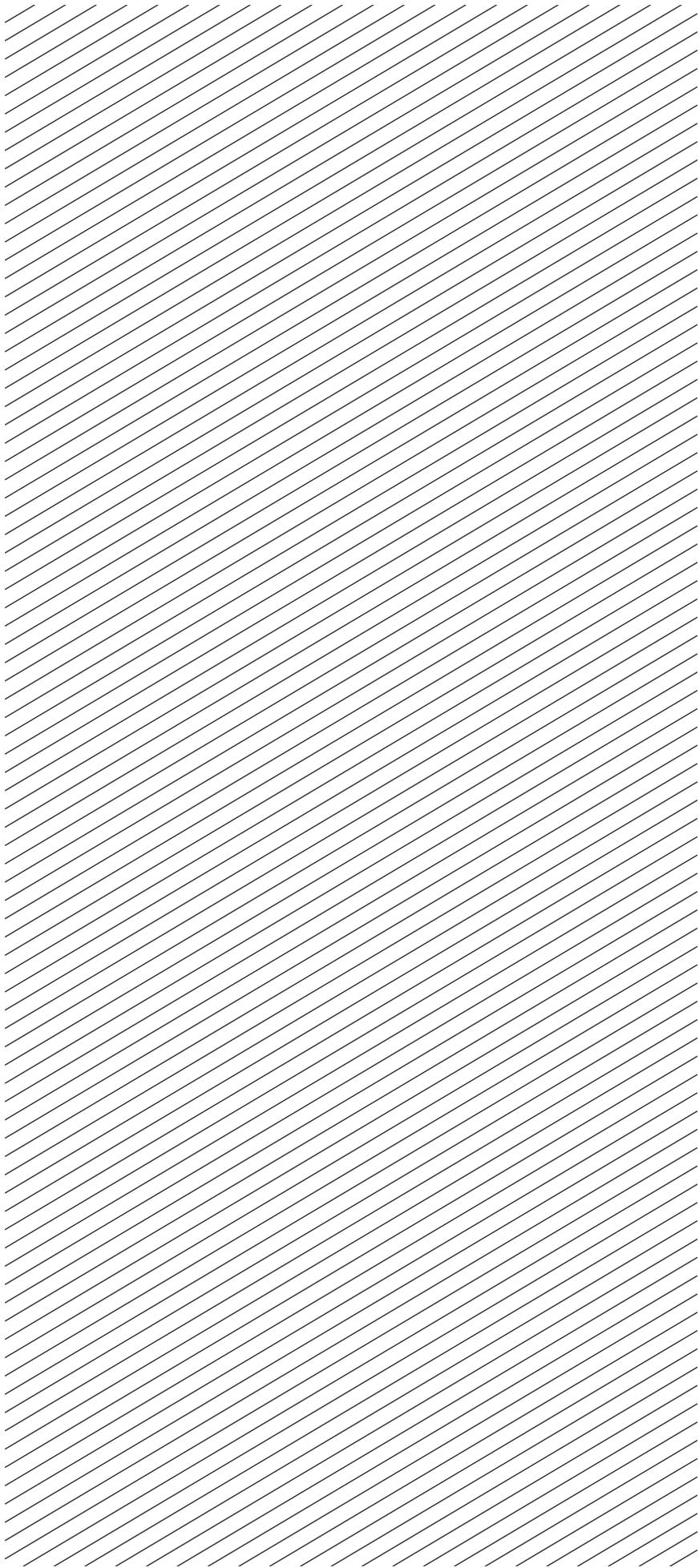


A quite similar story can be told around Claes. After the War the novelist was arrested on the basis of a relatively small file (e.g. having written for the extreme right-wing and Flemish-nationalist newspaper 'Volk en Staat'). After a well-publicized trial, Claes was soon released and he quickly became popular again. However, only quite recently more incriminating facts and material came to the forefront³³. One of these elements is that the writer privately had outspoken pro-German sympathies and that he had written in an affirmative sense about Nazi policy in a foreign newspaper. Archive material indicates how he probably was a silent, but important supporter of the leading collaborating Flemish nationalist party VNV.

A third example of a personal trajectory deals with people within the KFA. It would be wrong to see this organization as prepared to collaborate with Nazi Germany. In fact, the KFA as an organization was heavily opposed both to international Communism or Bolshevism on the one hand, but also to Nazism or Fascism on the other hand. But some people within the KFA were more engaged in a mixture of ideas around the New Order and Flemish national autonomy, based on a Catholic worldview. An interesting example here is the important film critic Jeanne De Bruyn, who first worked as a propagandist and writer for the KFA but later wrote for the newspaper 'Volk en Staat', known for its crude support for Flemish nationalist aspirations and the New Order policy.

De Bruyn tried to integrate aesthetic and ethical arguments into her criticism, the later being inspired by a Catholic and conservative ideology. Compared to other KFA critics and activists, De Bruyn did much more stress artistic and creative aspects in her often crude criticism of contemporary film productions. Only from this perspective and returning to 'De Witte', we can understand why she first wrote probably one of the most negative evaluations of the first full-fledge Flemish talking picture. In her first writings on 'De Witte' she tackles the poor story line, acting, and several other technical shortcomings. In an article, called 'De Witte as film star', published just after the premiere, she even criticized the influence of "the taste of the German industry and its musical comedies, which try to integrate corny songs, dances, and mistakes", while this does not fit into a Flemish rural context. She concluded:

Probably we have been attacking the movie ... too hard. We do not want to give the impression that De Witte is a complete failure. We praise the movie's



³⁴ De Bruyn (1934) (our translation).

³⁵ Nys (1998).

³⁶ Richard (1978).

³⁷ See Geens (1986) (our translation).

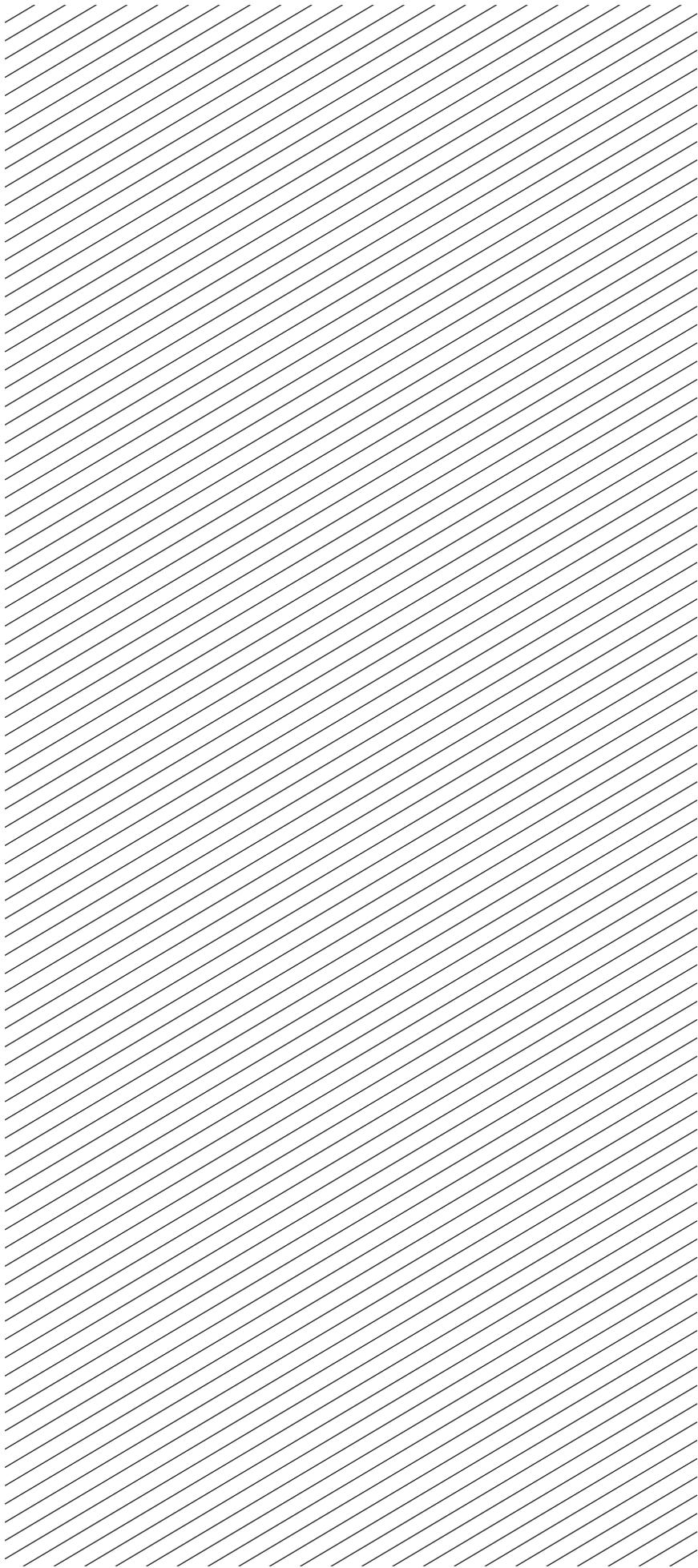


*photography, music and gags. For a Fleming it is clear that this movie is worth ten times more than any average foreign production. Only because we find here the healthy folk spirit, which will characterize, we hope, future Flemish productions. But referring to those future movies: a strong script, young players, and a well-trained director, - is this too much?*³⁴

In later articles on 'De Witte' and other Vanderheyden films, De Bruyn increased her ambivalent position. For De Bruyn, who became an influential critic in Catholic newspapers and magazines, Vanderheyden and his products were definitely artistically weak. However, through Vanderheyden's work she came close to her ideals about folk cinema ('de volksfilm'), often confronted with intellectual cinema³⁵. As an influential and educated intellectual, De Bruyn soon developed an anti-intellectualism, combined with a distrust of international, cosmopolitan modern art. In an ideal form, 'folk cinema' was characterized both by technical and creative genius, but moreover by extra-filmic elements. Here she referred to the intense relation between cinema and the people, the use of 'folk' themes ("volkscheigen thema's") and other concepts, resounding contemporary German ideas about the ideal of folk ("völkisch") culture³⁶. These ideas on intellectualism, internationalism, modern art and folk cinema, however, whether or not inspired by German writings, were also to some degrees present in how Vanderheyden talked about the type of films he intended to make. His ideal was "to produce movies which coincide with folk nature."³⁷

CONSERVATISM, COMMERCIALISM, CENSORSHIP

Using this contextual approach and writing nearly three quarters of a century later, it becomes tentative to read Vanderheyden's and Kiel's 'De Witte' in a rather biased manner, even up to compromising the movie. It includes the danger of not seeing the openness and the different semiotic layers in the movie. It might sound strange, but this highly suspicious view is in complete contrast with the general audience's view upon 'De Witte'. The public image of the movie is one of innocent pleasure and entertainment, of a nostalgic and primitive expression of authentic popular Flemish cinema. This means that we should acknowledge the textual openness of the picture, probably explaining to a great deal the long-time success of 'De Witte' among various social groups. Also, we have to be careful in interpreting references to folk art within the Belgian political and cultural context of the '30s, where the abstract notion of 'community' had close ties with the concept of 'the people'. In the nationalistic discourse on Flemish



³⁸ Morlion (1934a) (our translation).

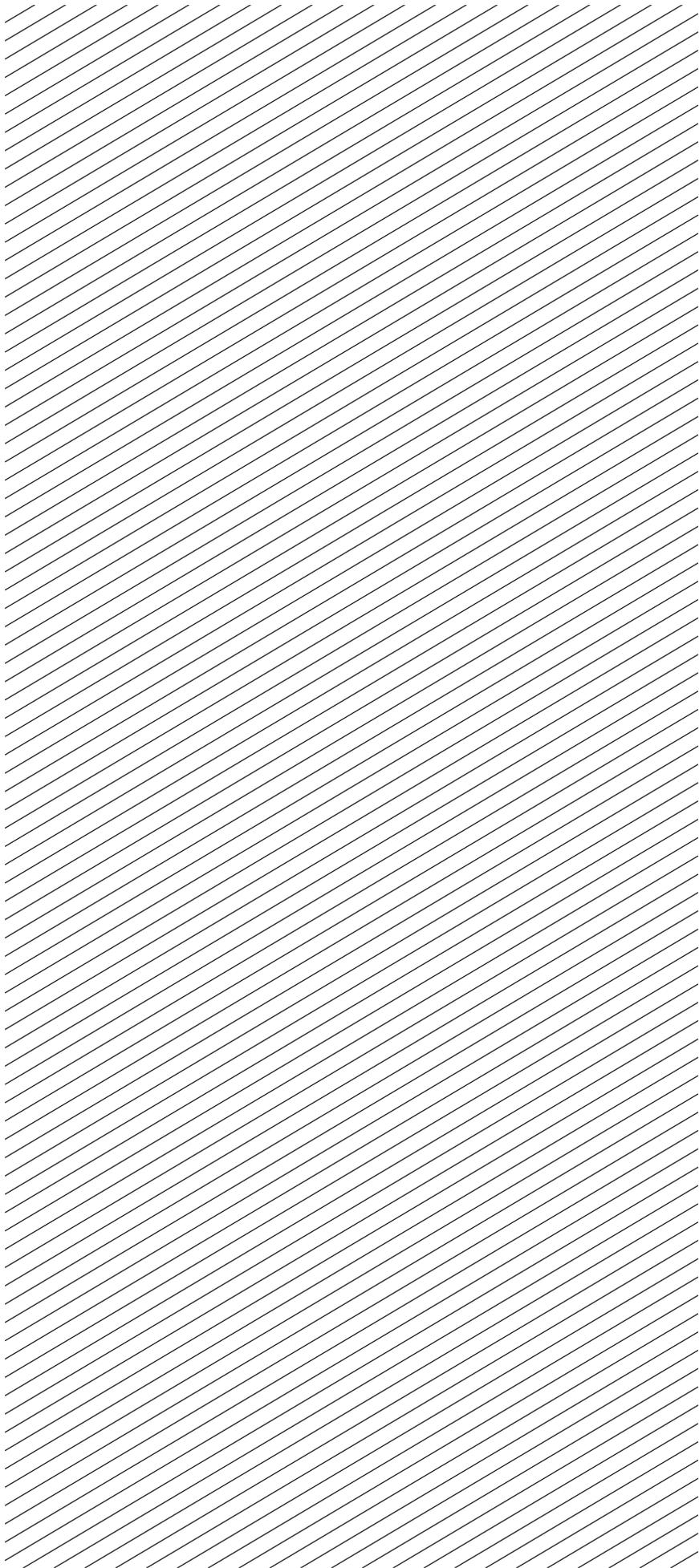


identity, nationalists used a common language ('the language of the people') and made territorial claims referring to the rich historic tradition of Flanders. Subsequently in the 1930s the ideology of nationalism was often embedded with biological connotations suggesting the naturalness of the Flemish people. The right-wing mainstream used an emotional rhetoric of traditional ethics, which was positioned as an ideal against modernity.

Still however and concentrating on the movie as a text, we must acknowledge its clear conservative worldview. It is not difficult to see how the picture is about a nostalgic view upon traditional society against the unarticulated fear for urbanity. Although the movie starts as an ode to Flanders with images of different Flemish cities, the city remains out of sight in the rest of the picture. The lyrical introduction not only expresses nationalism, defined on the basis of medieval history and the old richness of Flanders. But at the same time, 'De Witte' denies urban realities such as the social disorder and unrest at the end of the 19th century. 'De Witte' concentrates on a hermetically sealed local community with a clear social order, hierarchy, respect for church and power. The movie concentrates on innocent childish evils, not on the big evils and social conflicts in and around the cities, often associated with a lack of respect for power and peace.

Comparing the novel with the movie, it is clear that some rather critical scenes were left out the picture. Besides commercial imperatives by the makers, external pressures did have their influence here. It seems for instance that Vanderheyden gave in to concerns expressed by Claes and members of the KFA. Morlion for instance openly wrote how Claes (seen as the script advisor) did "radically left out what could in one or another sense be disturbing." And he continued with the (evident!) example that "we will not see how Whitey confesses other boys' sins, or how the priest jumps out of the confessional box to catch one of the boys who had stolen apples." These and other examples show that the movie will be "healthy", ultimately illustrating that "our Flemish people overall are sound folks"³⁸.

Another example of external pressure, limiting the critical potential of 'De Witte', deals with official censorship. Since 1920 Belgium had a film classification law banning cinema attendance for children under 16 for all films, unless the picture was approved by a state film classification board. Even in a small country with practically no local production as Belgium, the board had wide influence on how and what kind of movies were shown. Similar to what happened in other

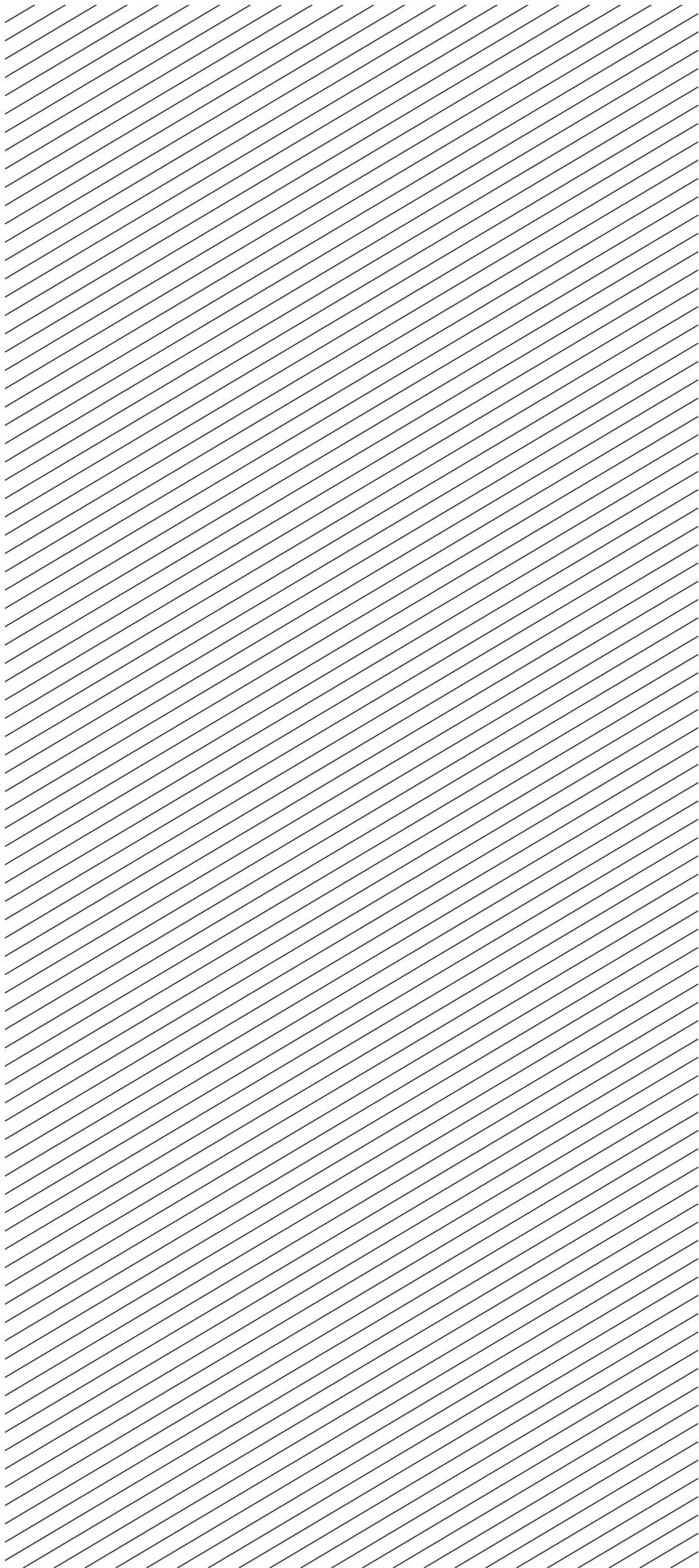


European countries and the USA, the Belgian censorship/classification board received wide criticism in the 1930s, mainly because of its severe decisions. From an economic point of view, it was crucial for distributors and producers to have their movies labeled as permitted for children. This will have been also the case with Vanderheyden, who as a distributor must have known perfectly well the many taboos and sensitivities of the classification board. But even when he made this joyful, “healthy” picture, the board decided that ‘De Witte’ had to be cut in one short scene in order to be open for consumption by children and young adolescents. This cut referred to one gag in which the pupils with Whitey as the front leader, put a needle under the schoolmaster’s cushion. For the classification board this scene had to be cut because it made a fool of the schoolmaster, eventually undermining its respect and authority. Less clear but probably more effective, had been forms of self-censorship.

CONCLUSION

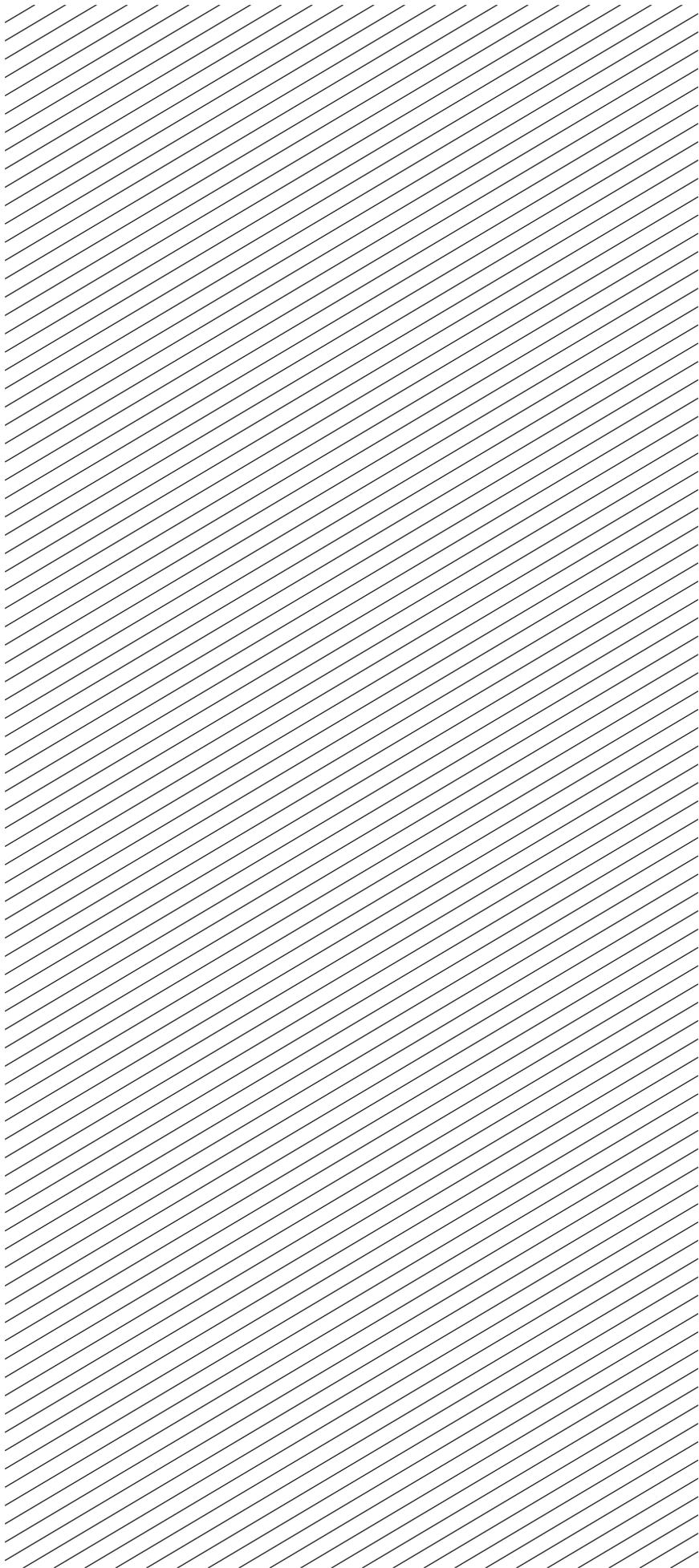
Most accounts of ‘De Witte’ see this classic Flemish movie as a milestone in the development of Flemish and Belgian popular cinema in the Interwar period. It is seen as the innocent beginning of a truthful, popular regional cinema, resulting from the need to consume movies in one’s own language. The long-time success of the movie among a very wide section of the Flemish audience obscured the fact that this movie carries a conservative, hegemonic view upon Flemish society. ‘De Witte’ shows a nostalgic consensual view on the Flemish local communities where the fear of urban modernist society is articulated. ‘De Witte’ concentrates on a hermetically closed local community with a clear social order, hierarchy, respect for church and power. This feature film can be seen as the cinematic articulation of rural folk culture, which was glorified in Flemish Catholicism.

As we tried to indicate ‘De Witte’ has been, more than any other Flemish movie before, a cult event exposed to severe external pressures. What makes ‘De Witte’ so interesting is that their influence has been so blatantly clear and effective. These inflated expectations and additional pressure on the project has to be contextualized in the harsh political-economic and social crisis of the 1930s in Belgium. This era was confronted with the rise of extremist left- and right-wing political formations. Especially in Flanders political discourses were embedded with nationalistic ideologies to construct a Flemish identity. Right-wing mainstream nationalists used the common language ‘of the people’ and an emotional



rhetoric of traditional ethics against modernity. Territorial claims referring to the rich historic tradition of Flanders were made, and film culture became part of the ideological struggle between the different players in the ideological and religious realm. Especially catholic circles and the Catholic Film Action looked at the film project with suspicion and tried to influence the process. 'De Witte' had become an important cultural popular product with significant importance for Flemish culture and thereby Flemish identity.

This ideological struggle over 'De Witte', combined with Vanderheyden's fear for a commercial disaster, made the adaptation of Ernest Claes' original novel into a keen illustration of Gramsci's classic idea about a successful hegemonic culture. We could say that 'De Witte' incorporates to a small degree challenges to authority, hereby however making the ideology of the ruling classes appear to be natural. Various systems of pressure and control regulated what could be shown and what was to be left out. Nearly half a century later, with the remake of 'De Witte' (De Hert, 1980), many things had changed, but still again other mechanisms were in charge in trying to control what was to be seen on the screen as well as what was not. But this, of course, is another story.

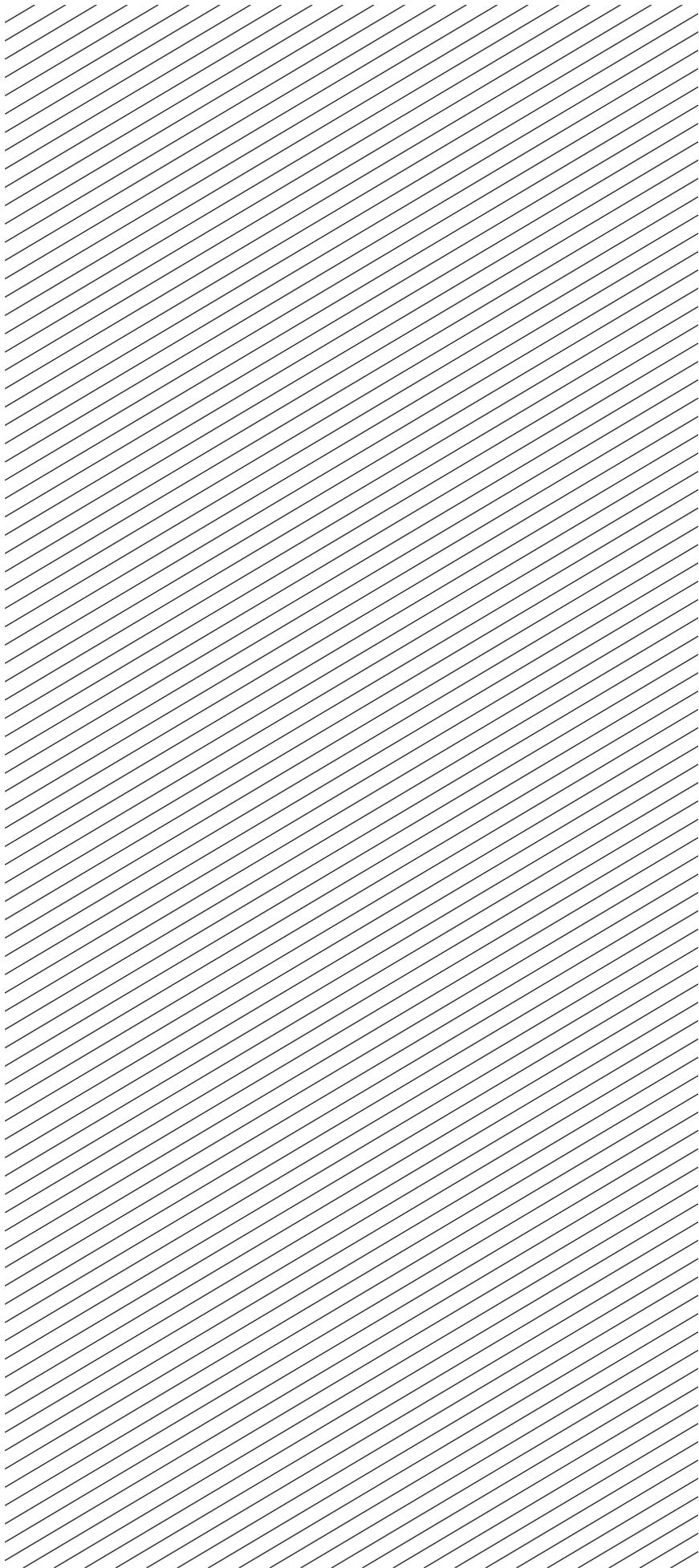


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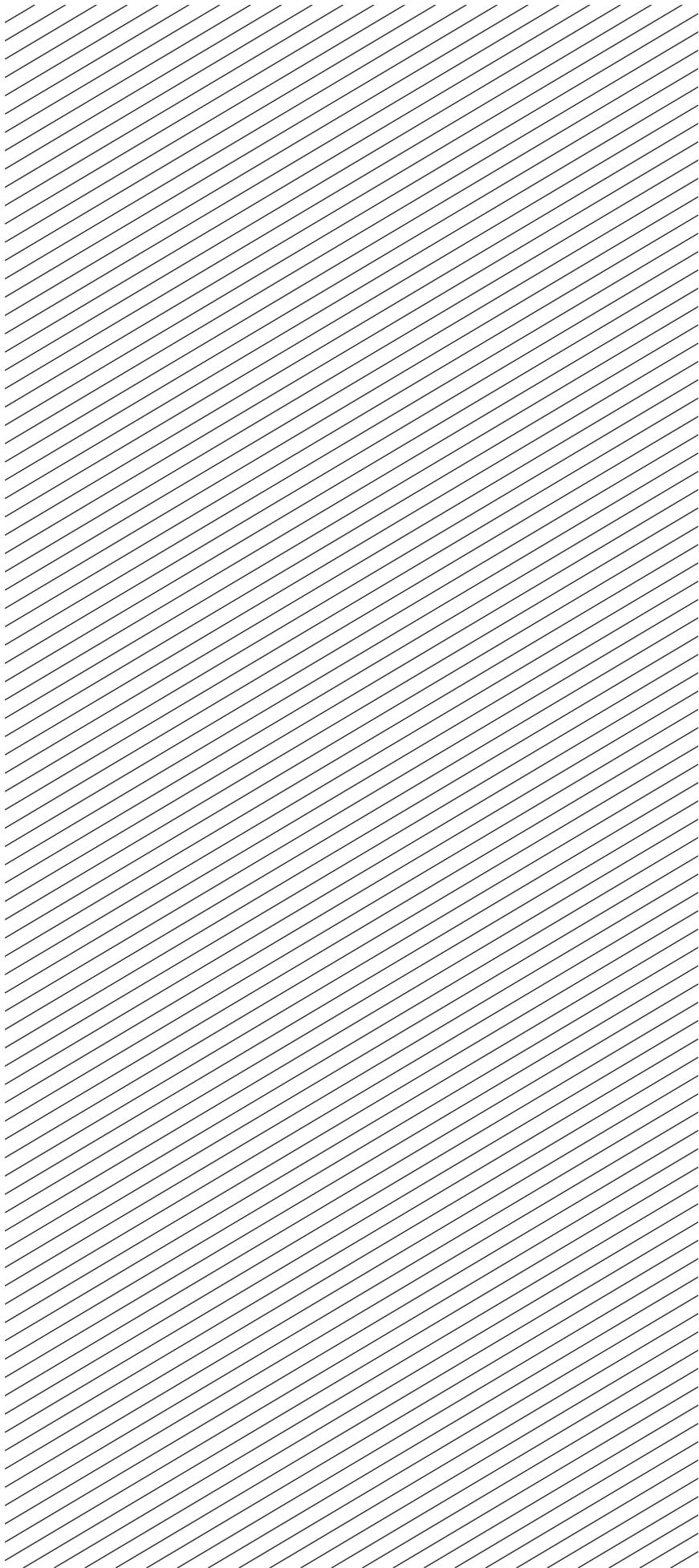
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FILMOGRAPHIE

De Witte (1934) (French: "Filasse", English: "Whitey")

Director: Jan Vanderheyden (with Edith Kiel)

Producer: Jan Vanderheyden (Jan Vanderheyden-Film p.v.b.a.)

Script: Edith Kiel (after Ernest Claes)

Camera: Ewald Daub

Editing: Walter Von Bonhorst

Music: Renaat Veremans

Actors: Jef Bruyninckx (de Witte), Magda Janssens (mother), Jef Van Leemput (father), Gaston Smet (Niske), Willem Benoy (school teacher), Nand Buyl (friend) and Nora Oosterwijk (Treske).

PERSONALIA

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