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# **STARS AND NATIONAL CHARACTER. AN ANALYSIS OF FLEMISH STAR ACTORS**

Alexander Dhoest

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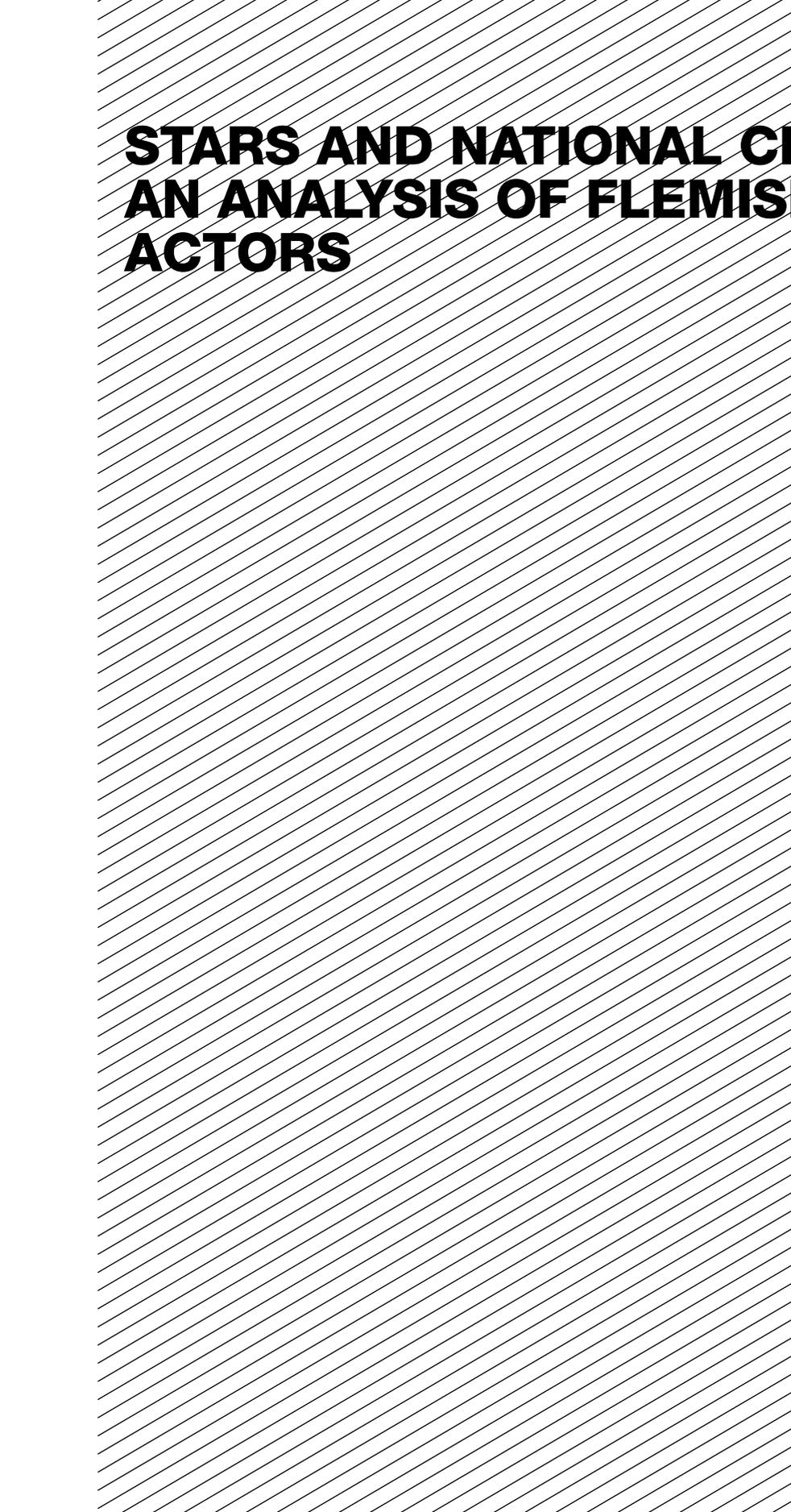




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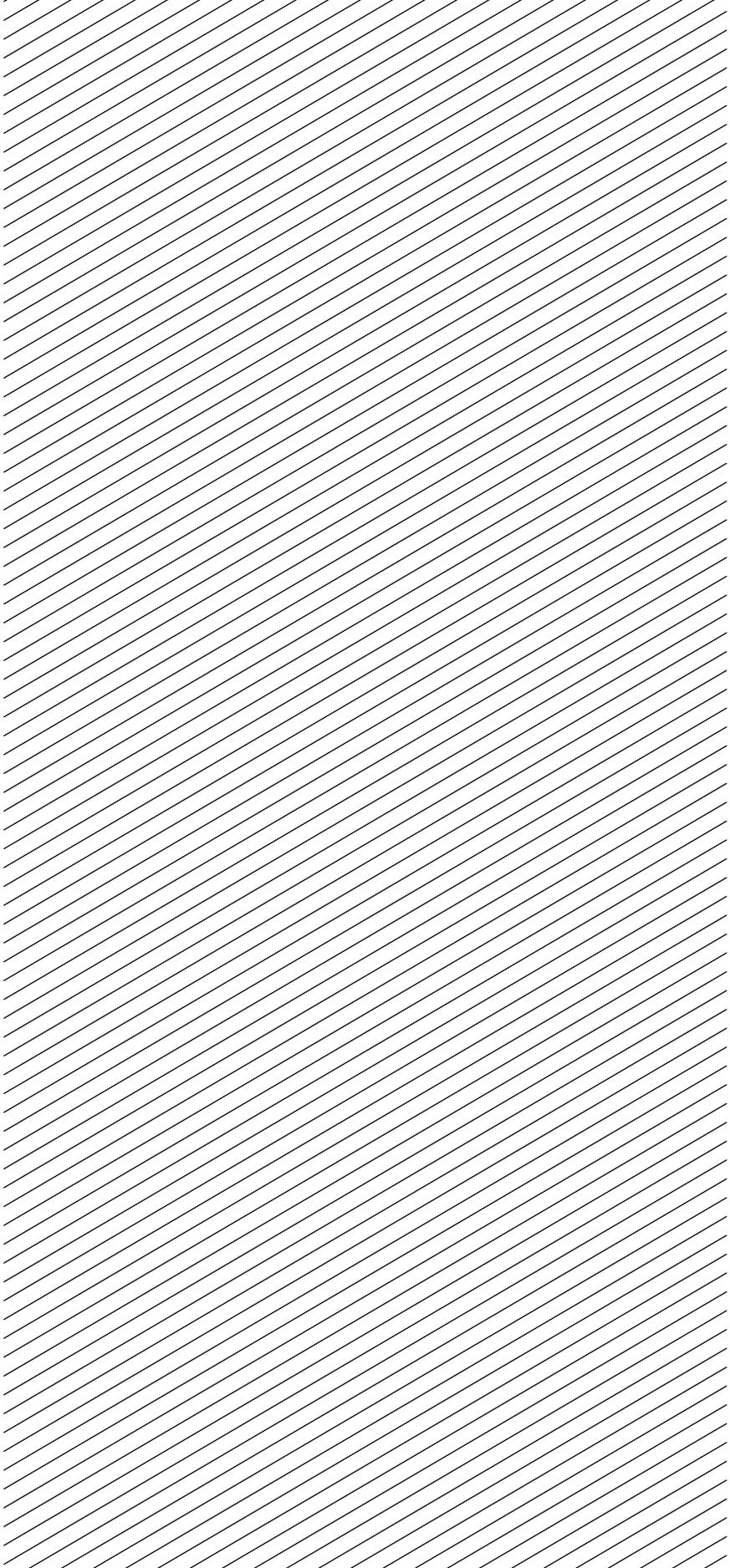
**STARS AND NATIONAL CHARACTER.  
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ACTORS**

## ABSTRACT

*Dit artikel vertrekt van de vaststelling dat de Vlaamse film- en televisiefictie geen 'star-system' voortbracht. Vlaanderen heeft zijn aandeel bekende acteurs en actrices, maar doorgaans is hun imago onopvallend. Ze worden meestal voorgesteld als nederige vakmensen, en hun persoonlijkheid wordt ondergeschikt aan hun rollen. Er is een interessante parallel met het Vlaamse 'nationale karakter', zoals het sociaal en discursief geconstrueerd wordt. De Vlamingen worden vaak voorgesteld als hardwerkende, nuchtere mensen. Dit discours over Vlaanderen wordt verbonden aan een geschiedenis van verdrukking, waarin plattelandsarbeiders de Vlaamse taal en cultuur in stand hielden. Dit vindt ook uiting in de hoofdrollen in Vlaamse film en televisiefictie. Op basis van de carrières van filmacteur Jan Decler en televisieacteur Jo De Meyere analyseert dit artikel de discursieve constructie van het nationale karakter doorheen acteerwerk en karakterisering. Beide acteurs spelen vaak 'typisch Vlaamse' rollen: ofwel stille, koppige werkers, ofwel 'underdogs' en vrijheidsstrijders. De voorkeur voor dergelijke rollen wordt vaak verbonden aan de Vlaamse 'volksaard', die sympathiseert met de underdog en op-scheppers wantrouwt.*

## ABSTRACT

This article starts from the observation that Flemish film and television fiction have not generated a star system. Flanders does have its share of famous actors and actresses, but their persona is generally inconspicuous. Most often, they are represented as humble artisans, and their personality is subordinate to their roles. There is an interesting parallel here with the Flemish national character, as it is socially and discursively constructed. The Flemish are often represented as hard-working, no-nonsense people. This discourse about the Flemish is connected to a history of suppression, during which the rural working class has safeguarded the Flemish language and culture. This is also reflected in the leading parts in Flemish film and television drama. Using the careers of film actor Jan Decler and of television actor Jo De Meyere as an example, this article analyses the discursive construction of national character through acting and characterisation. Both actors often play 'typically Flemish' roles of either silent, stubborn workers, or of underdogs and freedom fighters. The preference for such roles is often connected to the Flemish national character, sympathising with the underdog and distrusting show-offs.



<sup>01</sup> See Dyer (1979: 1).

<sup>02</sup> Dyer (1979: 8-13).

<sup>03</sup> See McDonald (2000).

<sup>04</sup> Dyer (1979: 20).

## INTRODUCTION

This article starts from the observation that the concept of stardom, as it is developed in mostly English-language literature, is hardly applicable to Flemish cinema. One of the reasons for this seems to be the contradiction between the very nature of stardom and the self-image of Flanders and its national identity. To elaborate this point, I will first go into the 'classical' definition of film stardom, attempting to apply it to Flemish acting. In addition, the distinction between film 'stars' and television 'personalities' will be related to Flemish film and television. Then, two concrete examples will be used to investigate the relationship between the roles and images of (male) Flemish actors on the one hand and national identity on the other. One of the aims of this article is to analyse and situate screen actors within their specific historical and cultural context. In relation to the historical dimension of this analysis, it is important from the outset to keep in mind the changes in the nature of stardom and its filmic context, as well as wider social evolutions. This analysis of Flemish film and television acting primarily covers the period between the mid 1960s and the late 1980s, occasionally extending the analysis to include the 1990s.

## FLEMISH STARS?

Star studies are a small but important sub-field within film studies. Beside genres and directors, stars are a crucial organising principle of both film production and film analysis. Star studies rely on close textual analysis of star images, but generally, they also analyse the industrial production context of stars, as well as their wider cultural context, including the intertextual circulation of star images. Therefore, the concept of stardom allows the analysis of cinema in its multiple intersecting dimensions, avoiding a narrow focus on the film text.

In his seminal monograph on the subject, Richard Dyer distinguishes between the sociological approach of stars as a social phenomenon, and the semiotic analysis of stars as part of the cinematic signifying system.<sup>01</sup> Both are interdependent, but for analytic purposes, it is useful to distinguish them. On the social level, stardom is closely linked to the industrial organisation of film production. As Dyer points out, stars function as an important form of capital in the film industry, particularly so in classical Hollywood.<sup>02</sup> From the 1920s until the late 1940s, studios invested strongly in the formation and promotion of star images, which led to the formation of a comprehensive star system.<sup>03</sup> On the consumption side, while audiences may have a limited role in the formation of star images, they are decisive for their success.<sup>04</sup>

In Flanders, the industrial organisation of film production as a precondition for a star system

<sup>05</sup> See Meers (2001: 142).

<sup>06</sup> See Finney (1997: 52).

<sup>07</sup> See Dyer (1979: 38).

<sup>08</sup> Dyer (1979: 72).

<sup>09</sup> Dyer (1987: 3).

<sup>10</sup> Butler (1991: 11).

<sup>11</sup> Geraghty (2000: 185-186).

is not fulfilled. There has never been a Flemish film industry to speak of, as most films are produced on a one-to-one basis. While individual films have proved successful in the home market and - more rarely - abroad, they have not enabled a cinematic production line to be established. There are no studios, only small production companies working project by project, each time struggling to close the budget. Within the small country of Belgium, Flanders is an even smaller geographic region with a population of about 6 million, within an equally confined linguistic region only spreading to the Netherlands. Because of the restricted domestic market and the lack of wider European or international interest, films are rarely profitable. As noted by Meers, this tendency afflicts most European cinema since the 1980s, particularly in smaller countries.<sup>05</sup> The limited budgets imply limited possibilities for promotion or other efforts that might contribute to the creation and exploitation of star images. Therefore, while Flanders has its share of talented actors, these are not turned into marketing assets nor do they guarantee box-office success, certainly not until the late 1980s. On the consumption side, this situation is mirrored by the notably low interest of the Flemish audience for domestic films. Flemish films are rarely profitable at the box office, and Flemish actors seldom figure as audience-pullers, let alone for the international market. This fits within the wider lack of European stars appealing across national borders, as noted by Finney.<sup>06</sup> On the sociological level, then, there isn't much room for stardom in Flemish cinema.

Turning to the semiotic level, Dyer describes stars both as signs, operating within the signifying system of the film, and as images ('a complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs') with a broader circulation.<sup>07</sup> Crucial to the notion of stardom is the fact that star images are not limited to the film text, but circulate across media texts, ultimately forming a complex and evolving totality.<sup>08</sup> Elsewhere, Dyer provides a useful account of the constituents of the star image:

*A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the stars through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private life'. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech.*<sup>09</sup>

The star image, then, exceeds film images of the actor, incorporating these in a wider discourse about the person 'behind the actor'. Therefore, not all actors are stars, but only those whose image circulates broadly in culture.<sup>10</sup> Geraghty confirms this view, stating that the star image is 'constructed intertextually (across different films), and extratextually (across different types of material)'.<sup>11</sup> To her, a duality between both is a central characteristic of stardom: the

<sup>12</sup> See also Dyer (1979: 39).

<sup>13</sup> Gledhill (1991: xiv).

<sup>14</sup> Finney (1997: 56).

<sup>15</sup> See Williams (2002: 31-32).

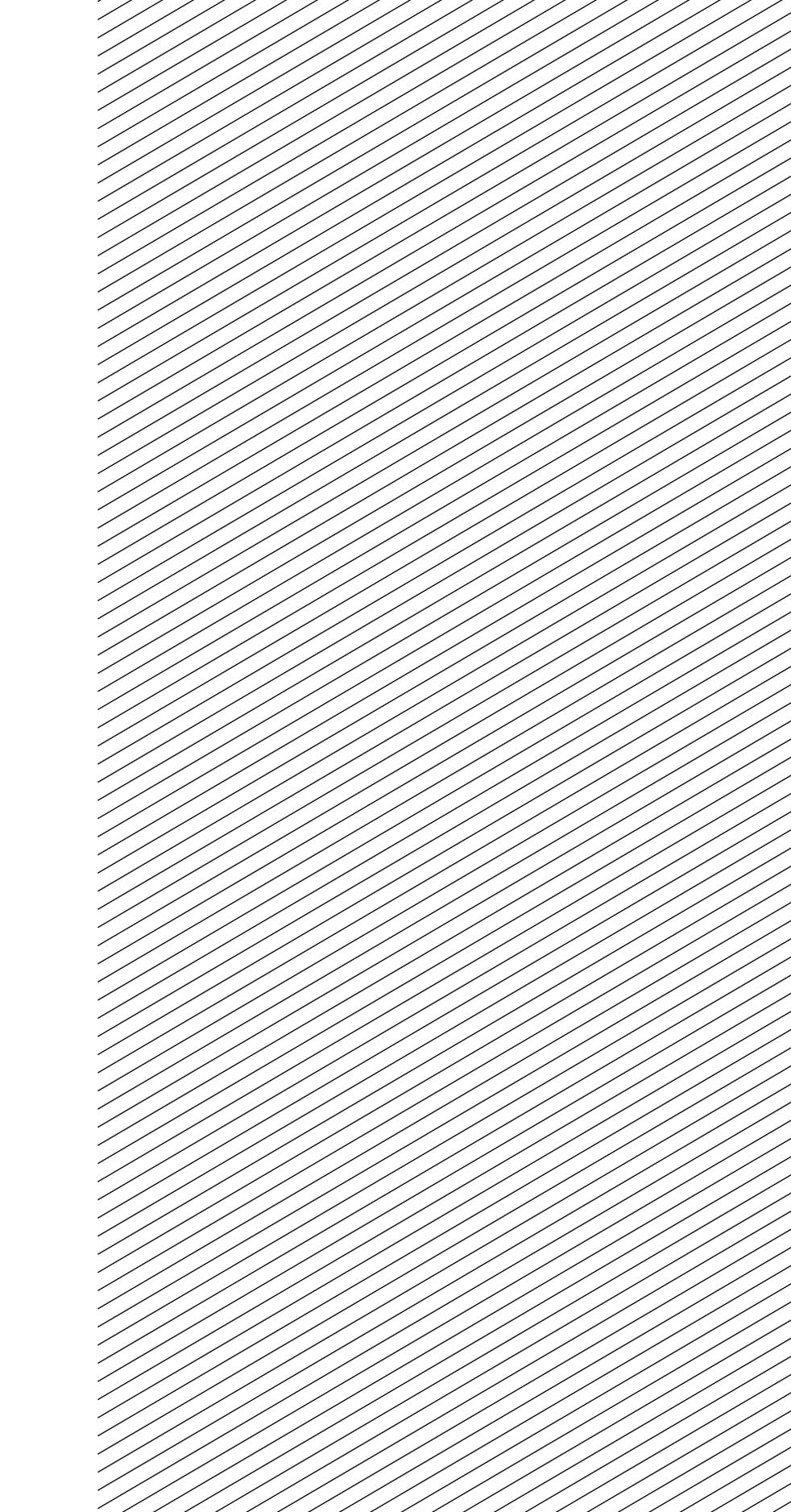
<sup>16</sup> Sojcher (1999: 55 & 71).

<sup>17</sup> These films echo the successful popular comedies of the 1930s, particularly by director Jan Vanderheyden (Biltreyst & Van Bauwel 2005: 13).

contrast between character and actor, between fictional performance and life outside. In classic Hollywood, this duality is based on a contrast between the public and private, between the extraordinary film world and the ordinary domestic life of the stars.<sup>12</sup> For an actor to be a star in this classical sense there must be a contrast between both their public and private lives. Put succinctly: 'Actors become stars when their off-screen life-styles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance'.<sup>13</sup>

On the semiotic level, too, the basic preconditions for stardom seem to be absent in Flanders, particularly before the 1990s. Partly because of the lack of an infrastructure of promotion, Flemish actors seldom have widely and intertextually circulating 'images'. There is no cult of their personality, as there is no established movie or tabloid press, nor the corresponding fan culture. Moreover, the press responses to domestic films and actors are generally quite critical, in a marked contrast with the glorification of Hollywood stars. This, again, fits within a wider European tendency of scarce support for European stars as noted by Finney.<sup>14</sup> Even the more established British cinema has an ambiguous relationship to stars, on the one hand wanting its own stars, but on the other hand being suspicious of the whole concept and valuing theatrical acting more highly.<sup>15</sup> Besides being critical, the press interest in Flemish actors mostly concerns their professional careers, their personal lives generally staying out of the picture. Therefore, the contrast between public and private lives is mostly absent. Moreover, while the little coverage of their private lives does stress their 'ordinariness', as is the case with Hollywood stars, their public persona hardly qualifies as 'extraordinary'. Contrary to the glamour of Hollywood cinema, ordinariness (being 'like the common people') is a central value in Flemish film and acting, so on this level, the formative contrast for stardom is equally absent.

Generally speaking, the concept of stardom is hardly applicable to Flemish cinema. However, some qualifications are required to avoid sweeping generalisation and to do justice to the historic dimension mentioned in the introduction. As indicated earlier, this account is mostly applicable to Flemish cinema from the mid 1960s until the late 1980s. As described by Sojcher, the introduction of a film selection commission awarding film subsidies led to the development of Flemish cinema from 1965. From then on, there was a consistent though limited film production, prioritising 'serious' cinema often based on literary classics.<sup>16</sup> This conservative trend persisted well into the 1980s, the more idiosyncratic cinema of young filmmakers remaining a marginal phenomenon. From the 1980s, however, a new trend of more popular films, mostly comedies, proved Flemish films could also be profitable.<sup>17</sup> In these films, comedians with stage and particularly television credentials such as Gaston and Leo in 'Zware jongens' ('Tough guys', Robbe de Hert, 1983) and Urbanus in 'Hector' (Stijn Coninx, 1987) attracted relatively large audiences. While these remained exceptional at first, particularly from the 1990s such a popular cinema became more established. In this way, a modest star system was introduced,



<sup>18</sup> Dyer (1979: 24-25).

<sup>19</sup> See Ellis (1992: 105-107).

<sup>20</sup> Langer (1981: 354-355).

<sup>21</sup> Wexman (1990: 20).

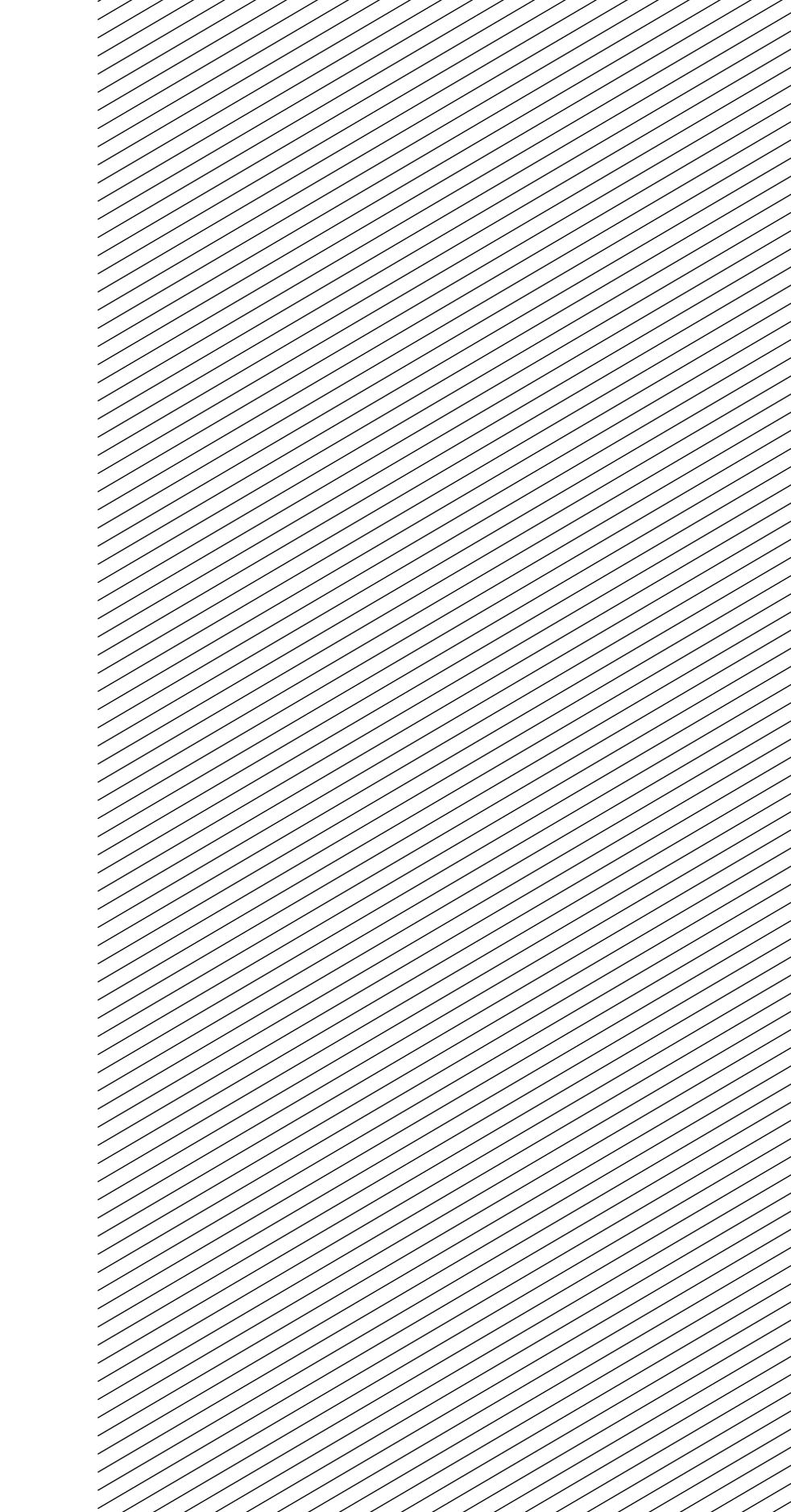
capitalising on the television fame of actors.

Meanwhile, Hollywood stardom had changed quite dramatically from the 'classical' star system in the studio era. Dyer notes the evolution from stars as ideal figures (gods and goddesses, heroes and models) to stars as identification figures embodying typical ways of behaving.<sup>18</sup> In terms of the opposition established above, the emphasis shifted from the extraordinary to the ordinary - or more precisely: to a combination of the extraordinary with the ordinary. At first sight, this adapted form of stardom seems more appropriate to the description of Flemish cinema. Another evolution affecting stardom even more radically is the changing nature of film viewing in the age of television, and the rise of television 'stars'.

## **TELEVISION STARS?**

Stardom is classically located in cinema, not in television. While television actors are often called stars, Ellis argues that television does not produce the requisite contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Instead, television cultivates a sense of ordinariness and immediacy, replacing the rarity of film performance with a sense of familiarity. Image and performance match more closely, the performer's image ultimately being equated with a role or at least a genre. What television does present, according to Ellis, are personalities, people who are famous for being famous, and famous in so far as they appear on television.<sup>19</sup> To Langer, television thus takes a step further in the above-mentioned evolution of cinematic stardom, by completely replacing extraordinariness with ordinariness. Television's 'personality system' is presented as part of life, stressing intimacy and immediacy through the regularity and predictability of appearances.<sup>20</sup> Like Ellis, Langer claims that television personalities seem to play themselves, regardless of the role they are actually playing. Wexman situates this tendency within television's aesthetic of realism: performers seem to be ordinary and characters seem to be like the actors performing them. While she admits that this 'true-to-life quality' is important and the continuity between the actor's role and his or her off-screen identity may be great, Wexman also draws attention to qualities that surpass the ordinary.<sup>21</sup>

This is a first crack in the categorical distinction between film stars and television personalities, which is hard to hold on to on more accounts. For instance, on the production side, both fulfil similar roles. If cinema, particularly Hollywood in the studio era, organised a star 'system' in an attempt to control audience interest, so does television with its personality system:



<sup>22</sup> Lusted (1986: 73).

<sup>23</sup> Langer (1981: 355-356).

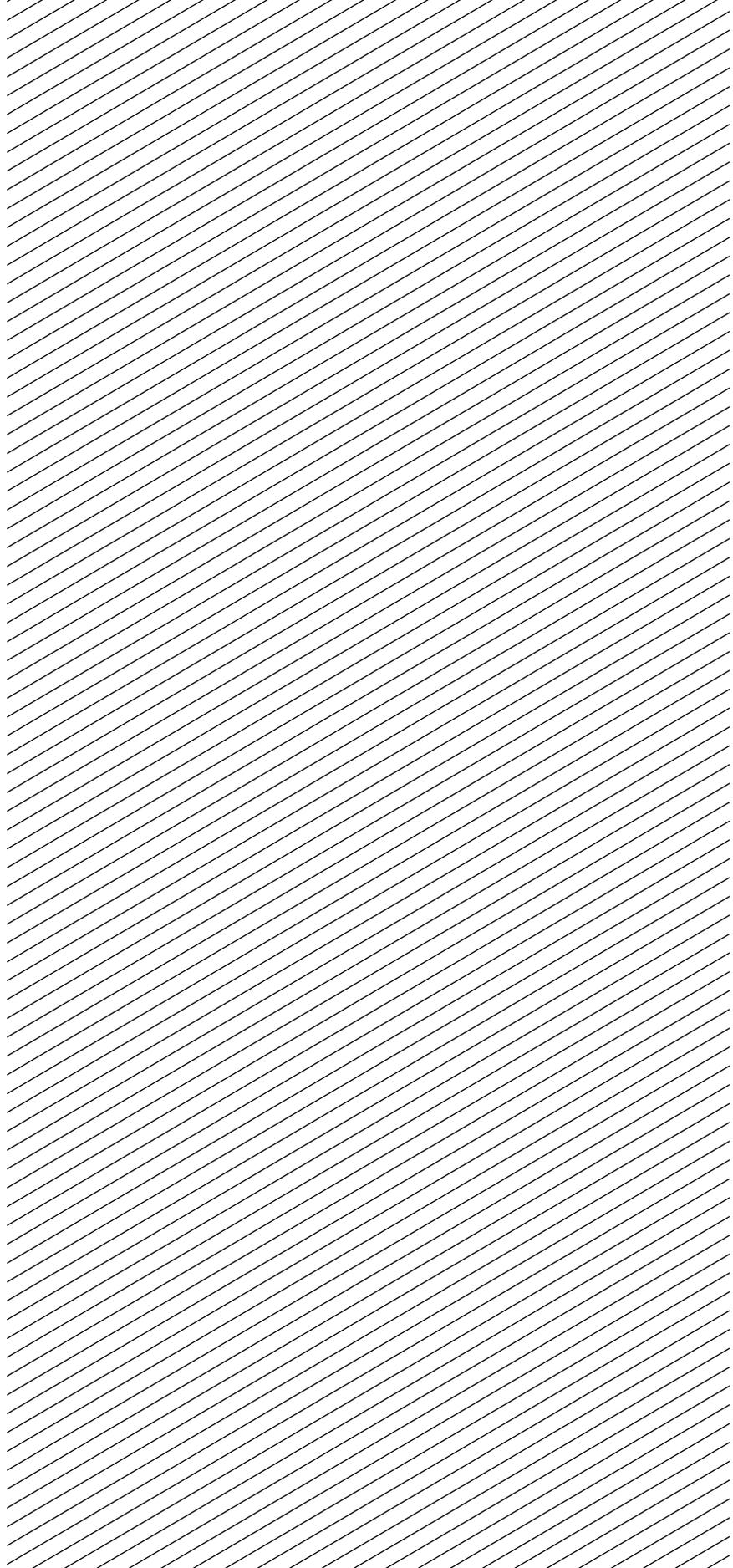
<sup>24</sup> See Geraghty (2000: 183-193).

*A stock of recognised names acts as an assurance that audiences will return again (and again) to their role as viewers, perpetuating - via advertising or licence revenue - the flow of cash to maintain the institution.*<sup>22</sup>

In both cases, the interest of the 'system' from the industry's point of view is economic. Moreover, the boundaries between the film and television are becoming increasingly blurred. For instance, the context of viewing, which was formerly distinct, shows more and more overlap. Langer contrasts television viewing 'in the comfort of one's own home' with film viewing in an unfamiliar, exceptional setting away from home.<sup>23</sup> However, films on television, video and DVD have fundamentally changed the context of film viewing. Now, films are also an important part of the close and continuous television presence, inviting a more casual and intimate mode of viewing. As an effect, the binary oppositions identified by Langer - distance/intimacy, ordinary/extraordinary, familiar/exceptional, immediate/remote - have lost their explanatory power. In particular, the exceptionality contributing to the extraordinariness of film stars is eroded, as films can now be watched at will.

Partly because of this changed relation between film and television, film stardom as such has also evolved. As described by Geraghty, film stars now have competition from singers, footballers, models and soap actors. Geraghty distinguishes between three other categories of 'famous people', which also influence stardom. First, there are celebrities such as Liz Hurley, who are mostly known for their private lives and lifestyles instead of their work. Professionals, such as regular soap actors, are mostly known for their work, which is perceived to be in line with their public persona. This concept is akin to the above-mentioned concept of 'TV personalities'. The performers are a third category, also known primarily for their work, but emphasising the skills involved in performing (like Jean-Claude Van Damme's fighting skills). This generates three alternative categories of stardom, the star-as-celebrity, the star-as-professional and the star-as-performer. Of these, the star-as-professional is most akin to the television personality through the association with a particular role or genre and the correspondence between the star persona and the roles played. The star-as-performer, on the contrary, provides an alternative for the eroded 'classical' notion of stardom by emphasising the work of acting, often linked to the realistic 'method' style of acting.<sup>24</sup>

In Flanders, television may provide an alternative for the absence of film stars. On the social level, Flemish television has always formed an organised industry, however modest. The public broadcast monopoly until 1989 allowed to partially overcome the limitations of the small home market, by centralising production and subsidising it through the license fee. This implied a consistent, though small, output of domestic television drama, which moreover - unlike domestic film - did extremely well with the audience. While there was no elaborate let alone organised



<sup>25</sup> Butler (1990: 64).

fan activity, actors in popular serials were cherished and they did become 'public property'. Moreover, contrary to the scarce opportunities to see Flemish film actors at work, television actors could be admired more regularly, therefore fulfilling one of the conditions of stardom. While their appearances were not as exceptional as those of Hollywood stars, they never became completely ordinary either, because of the modest fiction output, prioritising single drama and short serials. Correspondingly, on the semiotic level their image did circulate more widely extra-textually, thanks to a modest press and promotion machinery. However, another basic condition for stardom was not fulfilled in Flemish television of the public broadcasting monopoly era. As their filmic counterparts, Flemish television actors didn't present a contrast between the ordinary (in private) and the extraordinary (in public). Partly, this can be attributed to the nature of television, whose 'personalities' were always nearer to the public than Hollywood's filmic stars. However, there seem to be other relevant contexts for this ordinariness. For one, the private life of Flemish television actors was hardly discussed, much like that of their filmic counterparts. Moreover, Flemish drama of this period was much akin to cinema in that it was based on similar literary sources, in which 'ordinariness' was a central value. So, while a status similar to that of film stars was possible for Flemish TV actors, like Flemish film actors nor their persona and nor their onscreen characters quite fitted the bill.

Again, however, it is necessary to stress the historic specificity of this analysis. From its start in 1989, commercial broadcasting adopted a completely different drama strategy. The domestic drama output soon increased, short serials definitively making way for long serials, mostly soaps and sitcoms. The earlier scarcity was replaced by omnipresence, so that television actors more closely fit the above definition of television personalities. At the same time, the press and promotion activity increased, focussing more widely on their private lives. On the whole, commercial television - and in its trail the modernised public broadcaster - seem not to have generated stars, but rather a plethora of personalities whose ordinariness far exceeds their extraordinariness. A term was invented to name this category, 'BV's' or 'Bekende Vlamingen' (Famous Fleming), a seeming contradiction in terms mostly operating on the above-defined domain of celebrities. However, as mentioned earlier, some of these personalities made the move to cinema, both capitalising on their television fame and transforming it into a modest form of film stardom. Nowadays, the majority of successful domestic films feature television personalities. This fits within the wider tendency noted by Butler, for more actors to cross the previously 'formidable' line between television and film acting.<sup>25</sup>



Charismatic severity: Jan Declair in 'Karakter'.  
Source: Buena Vista International



The young Jo De Meyere (second left) as the sensitive Herman Coene in 'Wij, heren van Zichem'.  
Source: VRT/Focus

<sup>26</sup> For this research, I studied their key parts through textual analysis of films and series, and I analysed their press coverage. To this end, I read the complete press clippings (reviews and interviews) on both actors at the broadcasting archive, taking note of recurring themes and important quotes in order to reconstruct the press discourse on their careers.

<sup>27</sup> This being said, there are two 'formidable' actresses which could be the object of a similar analysis, Ann Petersen and Dora Van der Groen.

## STARS AND SOCIETY

What becomes apparent from the above account is the fact that stardom takes on different shapes in different contexts. In Flanders, the classical notion of stardom is not applicable. One could argue that this is the case in most of continental Western Europe, but the diversity within the European audiovisual landscape cautions against too broad generalisations. For one, on the economic level the size of the home market and linguistic barriers have serious consequences for the viability of a film industry, which in turn provides a breeding ground for stars. Larger countries with a large linguistic market have more chance of developing their own stars, as is proven by Great Britain. However, this institutional-economical explanation is restrictive, as there are also cultural processes at work, which make for divergent notions of stardom. Stars also, and importantly, function as cultural icons, often in relation to the national context. As I will illustrate further on, in Flanders there is a distrust of the very notion of stardom, the discourses surrounding acting emphasising ordinariness. This tendency can and will be related to the Flemish social context.

To investigate this matter, I will analyse the roles and images of two actors, which will be related to broader discourses on Flemish identity.<sup>26</sup> I already observed that film and television drama of the analysed period show many similarities, and that Flemish television in many ways was a more probable location for the formation of stars. To investigate this, I compared a film and a television actor. I selected the 'biggest names' in both industries, actors with a long career including many lead parts. It is not coincidental that both are male: female actors tend to be given less prominent roles.<sup>27</sup>

In cinema, Jan Decler is the Flemish household name. He has a long filmography, starting in the early 1970s with lead roles in several crucial films of the period. Particularly in the 1990s his status of 'first Flemish actor' was confirmed by lead roles in three films nominated for the Academy Awards as 'Best Foreign Language Film', two of which actually got the Oscar: 'Antonia' ('Antonia's Line', Marleen Gorris, 1995) and 'Karakter' ('Character', Mike van Diem, 1997). It is telling, in relation to the weakness of Flemish cinema, that both were co productions with Dutch directors.

In television drama, the status of Jo De Meyere is similar. While other actors rise and fall in the public eye, he has been a regular of TV drama from the 1960s. He played lead roles both in the most successful Flemish serial of the 1970s, 'Wij, heren van Zichem' ('We, the Lords of Zichem', 1969), and in the most successful Dutch serial of the 1970s, 'Dagboek van een herdershond' ('Diary of a shepherd dog', 1978). Like Decler's, his prominence was confirmed in the 1990s with leads in several prestigious and successful serials such as 'De bossen van



**Jan Decler as Father Daens, another strongheaded champion of the working class.**

Source: VRT/Favourite Films

<sup>28</sup> Everaerts (2000: 245).

<sup>29</sup> See Mosley (114-116) and Sojcher (1999: 57-61).

<sup>30</sup> Wauters (1984).

<sup>31</sup> Forbes & Street (2000: 45).

<sup>32</sup> Sojcher (1999: 57-58).

<sup>33</sup> See Dhoest (2001a & 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Convents (1998: 1149-1150).

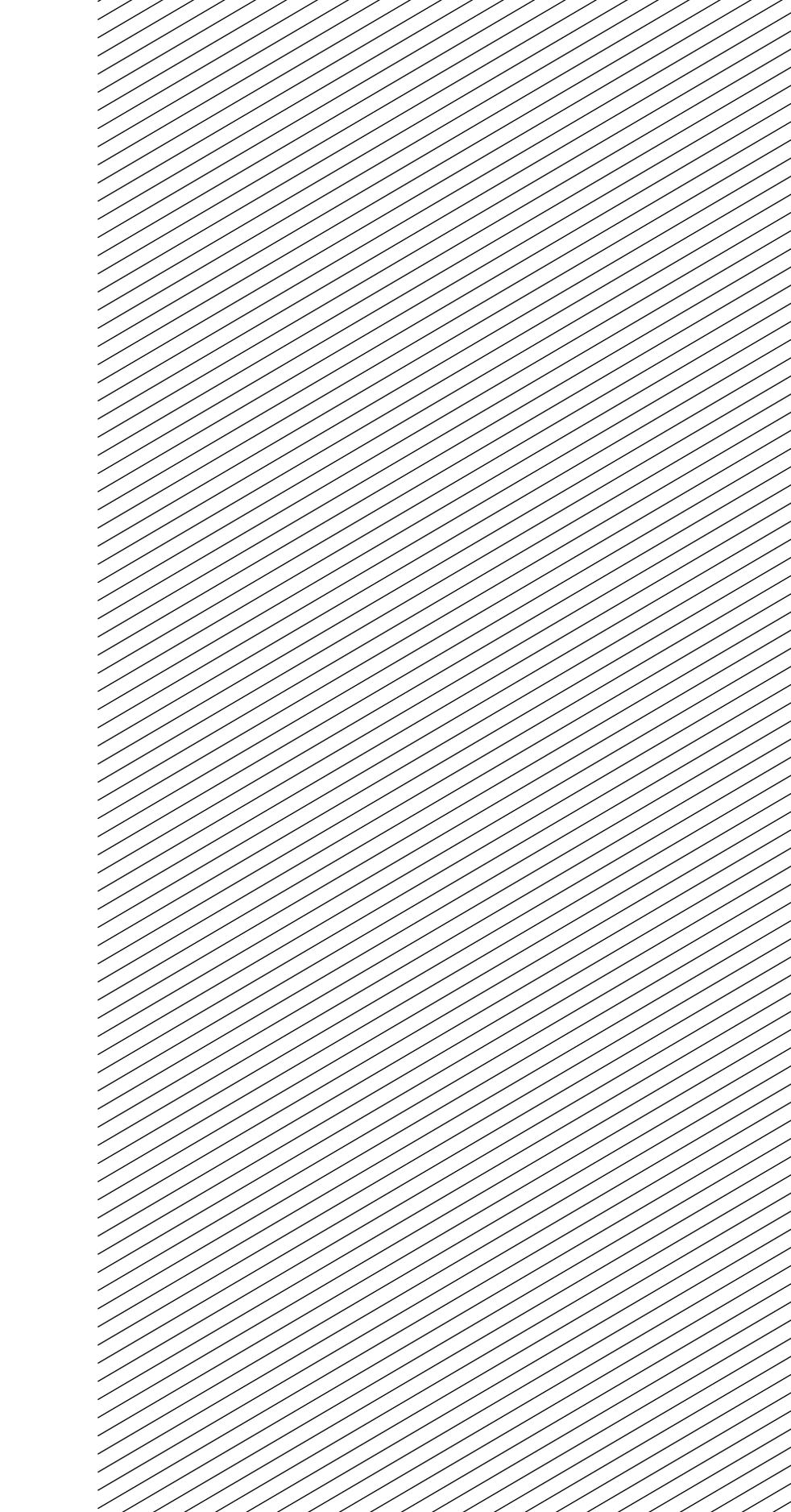
Vlaanderen' ('The forests of Flanders', 1991), 'Heterdaad' ('Caught in the act', 1996) and 'Stille waters' ('Silent waters', 2001). While the careers and images of both actors show important differences, which will be elaborated further on, the purpose of my analysis is primarily to bring out their similarities.

## ROLES

In order to get a sense of the kind of actors Declair and De Meyere are, looking at their key parts and films/dramas is a good starting point. Rather than going into the minutiae of their parts, my purpose here is to give a broad overview of their career, focussing on the continuities and evolutions. To start, both actors operate on the field where Flemish film and television overlapped in the 1970s and 1980s, period productions. In film, the selection commission had a marked preference for 'typically Flemish' work, often based on literary sources.<sup>28</sup> These classical adaptations mostly depicted life on the Flemish countryside in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, they were very much part of a 'quest' for national identity, in which the Flemish past figured prominently.<sup>29</sup> Thematically, a basic opposition contrasts the pure, 'old' countryside with the decadent, 'modern' city.<sup>30</sup> This is a familiar opposition in period film and even in European cinema as a whole, where the fraught tension between the city and the countryside is a dominant theme, as well as 'pastoral' or 'Heimat' cinema.<sup>31</sup> Formally, Flemish period film prioritises pictorial *mise-en-scène* ('pretty pictures') over narrative structure and therefore is often criticised for its academism.<sup>32</sup>

In television, similar period literary adaptations dominated the screens from the mid-1960s until the late 1980s.<sup>33</sup> While single drama and comedy often ventured into contemporary terrain, about two thirds of the serials of the monopolistic public broadcaster were situated in the past. Most of these returned to the same period, the Flemish agricultural past in the first half of the 20th century, which they portrayed in a similar, folkloric way. The parallels between film and television were further stimulated by the fact that the public broadcaster often acted as a co-producer of period films.<sup>34</sup> The net effect is a very homogeneous image of Flanders in film and television drama. This representation of Flanders needs to be situated in the context of Flemish political and economic emancipation, particularly from the 1950s. Flanders had previously been a poor region dominated by a French-language elite, but it quickly developed to become a strong community with the federalising Belgian state. This process was accompanied by efforts towards the creation of a national identity, heavily relying on the shared past and cultural heritage.

Significantly, both Declair and De Meyere made their fame in period roles. After some roles in



<sup>35</sup> See Dhoest (2001b).

<sup>36</sup> Simons (1998).

single TV dramas, Jan Declair makes his film debut in 'Mira of de teleurgang van de waterhoek' ('Mira or the decline of the Waterhoek', Fons Rademakers, 1971), one of the prototypical Flemish 'peasant dramas'. This film recounts the opposition of the inhabitants of a small village to the building of a bridge that would modernise their region. Declair plays the role of Lander, the son of the ferryman who is most strongly opposed to the bridge. Lander is erotically involved with his flirty niece Mira, the ensuing steamy scenes accounting for much of the publicity surrounding the film. The romance between the simple country boy Lander and his niece only lasts halfway through the film. Then, as an act of resistance, Lander attacks and drowns some of the bridge builders. He is imprisoned, and Mira gets involved with and finally marries the bridge engineer Maurice, a representative both of the higher classes and of modernity. Mira's loose morals, lack of principles and frivolity are opposed to Landers idealism and determination. He figures as the face of resistance against modernity, standing for traditionalism and praise of 'the good old life'. Declair's somewhat coarse physique and his strong facial features make him an ideal representative of the common Flemish people, a role he will often play again.

As argued by Dhoest, working class characters stand central in the representation of the Flemish past in period film and TV drama.<sup>35</sup> They are mostly represented as simple, virtuous people, as opposed to the decadence of the higher classes. Two characteristics recur in the portrayal of the Flemish worker, diligence and self-will. This leads to the formation of two central masculine social types. On the one hand, the Flemings are often represented as hard workers, with a silent, almost stiff no-nonsense attitude to life. On the other hand, the Flemings are also represented as freedom-loving rebels, finding their way around rules and resisting all kinds of authority. This second type is akin to the archetypical figure of Tijn Uilenspiegel, as described by Charles de Coster as a freedom fighter.<sup>36</sup> Often, this characterisation is combined with the unspoilt idealism and simplicity of an underdog figure. The character of Lander in 'Mira' clearly fits within the second category, while his simplicity as contrasted with Mira's frivolity moreover makes him a 'better' Fleming.

After 'Mira', Declair is often cast in similar roles playing out his rugged looks, epitomising Flemish working class masculinity. Rebelliousness is a recurrent characteristic of these roles, combined with a denouncement of the oppression of the Flemish workers, mostly by the French-speaking upper classes. For instance, in 'De loteling' ('The conscript', Roland Verhavert, 1973), Declair plays the role of Jan Braems, a young farmer who is paid to take the place of a rich man's son in military service. This decision is the start of his downfall, as he becomes blind after visiting a prostitute and catching a disease. Meanwhile, his fiancée Katrien, unable to pay the lease, loses the family farm and goes on a journey to search Jan. She finds him but on their way back to the village she is raped, as the blind Jan stands by helplessly.



Jan Declair as the young rebel and national icon Jan Breydel in 'De Leeuw van Vlaanderen'.

Source: VRT

This high-strung melodrama is based on the work of Hendrik Conscience, the foremost 19th century Flemish-Belgian nationalist author. As in 'Mira', the loss of innocence is an important theme, as are the negative effects of suppression by the French-speaking bourgeoisie. Again, Jan Decler in the lead part personifies the Flemish common people and their strength in the face of adversity.

After 'De loteling', Decler continues to play a wide variety of roles, but he is often typecast as a working class rebel. This is epitomised in 'De Leeuw van Vlaanderen' ('The lion of Flanders', Hugo Claus, 1984), the adaptation of the eponymous novel into a film and a miniseries. This 19th century novel by Hendrik Conscience was responsible for turning the 1302 'Battle of the Golden Spurs' into the founding Flemish myth. It recounts how the rebellious Flemings resisted and defeated the well-armed troops of the French king. Though far outnumbered by the French and counting many untrained civilians, the Flemings supposedly defeated them thanks to their bravery. This attitude is symbolised by the Flemish lion, a symbol of bravery omnipresent on weapons and flags. The tone is unabashedly nationalistic, reaching its highest peak when the Flemish warriors kiss their native soil before the battle. Significantly, Jan Decler is cast as one of mythic figures of the battle, Jan Breydel, the master of the butcher's company fighting the French cavalry barefoot, armed with axes and other working tools. Decler is cast again as a strong national symbol, combining elements of both national types: the prototypical rebel and the silent common man who overcomes adversity through hard work.

In 'Het gezin Van Paemel' ('The Van Paemel family', Paul Vercaemmen, 1986), Decler plays the role of Masco, a scruffy poacher rebelling against the village baron. While this is a playful role, in the 1990s Decler's roles more strongly emphasise his charismatic severity. This is most clearly the case in the Oscar-winning 'Karakter' ('Character', Mike van Diem, 1997) where he plays the almost inhumanly severe bailiff Dreverhaven. In the Oscar-nominated 'Daens' (Stijn Coninx, 1992), based on the novel 'Pieter Daens' by Louis Paul Boon, he plays the title role of Father Daens, a late 19th century priest who becomes aware of the miserable fate of factory workers in the city of Aalst and who takes their side. Daens, again, is a typically Flemish figure resisting authority, in this case a Catholic priest going against his superiors and the factory owners. Contrary to the previous roles discussed, he is a middle class figure, but he unequivocally takes the side of the working class, visiting them in their homes and writing about their misery in his brother's newspaper. The parallel between film and television is illustrated by the fact that 'Daens' was conceived as both a film and a miniseries. Decler's roles in the 1990s also confirm the above-mentioned changes in the 1990s, which are more favourable to a modest form of stardom. 'Daens' was very much marketed as 'a Jan Decler' film, his face and name figuring prominently in publicity.



A shift of image: Jo De Meyere as the brutal farmer Speeltie in 'Hard Labour'.

Source: VRT/Vic Meulemans



Jo De Meyere as journalist Constant Reynaert, denouncing the upper class.

Source: VRT/Marc de Vilder

Jo De Meyere's first claim to fame was his role as farmer son Herman Coene in 'Wij, Heren van Zichem' (1969). This 26 episode serial, based on the work of Ernest Claes, is a chronicle of Flemish village life in the 1920s. There are many characters and storylines, but the one about Herman is particularly important thematically, as it deals with the Flemish nationalism. When Herman goes to college, he is forced to speak French and thus to deny his cultural roots, which awakens his Flemish feelings. On the Belgian national holiday he interrupts an official ceremony shouting: 'In Flanders the Flemish language!', after which his fellow students call 'The Flemish Lion!' Herman is expelled from school but goes to university in Leuven where he becomes truly involved in the battle for the acceptance of the Flemish language. Herman Coene is a young, seemingly vulnerable but very idealistic character. Jo De Meyere's physical fragility is contrasted with his mental strength, the figure of Herman Coene again referring to the Flemish type of the rebel.

In the 1970s, De Meyere is often cast in similar roles, combining idealism with strength of character. In the mid 1980s, his image of 'good' fellow is breached by the role of farmer Speeltie in 'Hard laueur' ('Hard labour', 1985). This serial based on the naturalistic novel by Reimond Stijns shows a grim picture of the miserable conditions of Flemish farmer life at the turn of the century. Speeltie is an extreme version of the archetypical Flemish farmer, hardworking and silent. He is portrayed as a real brute, beating his wife and children and even killing his opponents. His behaviour is presented as a reaction against animal-like poverty, and while it is negative in its extremity, it does refer to the social type of the industrious Flemish farmer.

From then on, De Meyere is cast more often in similar roles emphasising his severity, though often combined with the earlier rebelliousness. For instance, in 'De bossen van Vlaanderen' ('The forests of Flanders', 1991), he plays the part of Constant Reynaert, a journalist investigating several murders between the two World Wars. He links them to Knight Joseph de Bellicourt, the village mayor, an unscrupulous power-mad person. Like Daens, Reynaert is a middle class character taking the side of the common people, denouncing their exploitation by the nobility and bourgeoisie. Unlike his earlier roles such as Herman Coene, De Meyere as Reynaert is a severe, imposing figure, who nonetheless again shows the typical rebelliousness and strength of character. Like Declair, De Meyere becomes somewhat of a star in the 1990s, among others by playing the role of strict inspector John Nauwelaerts in the successful police series 'Heterdaad' (1995). In 2001, his position as leading man is confirmed by a lead role in the prestigious serial 'Stille waters'. He plays the role of Alexander Vorlat, a hardworking businessman with dubious professional ethics. As in previous roles, De Meyere as Vorlat is an imposing, silent and authoritative figure.



A figure of authority: Jo De Meyere in 'Stille Waters'.  
Source: VRT/Phile Deprez

<sup>37</sup> Forbes & Street (2000: 47).

<sup>38</sup> Heene (1990: 247). All quotes are translations from Dutch by the author.

<sup>39</sup> Libert & Heene (1998: 9).

<sup>40</sup> Vandemaele (1997) and Vermeersch (1990).

<sup>41</sup> Six (1995: 55).

<sup>42</sup> Libert & Heene (1998: 9).

<sup>43</sup> Camps (1997: 36).

<sup>44</sup> Lafarge (1988: 19).

<sup>45</sup> Vandendaele (1988: 48).

## IMAGES

The above account suggests some important similarities in the onscreen image of Declair and De Meyere. Both made their fame in period drama, and they often play 'typically Flemish' characters. Both started off with an image of rebelliousness and strong self-will, later evolving towards the rough and severe. Thus, on the level of the film text both actors function in similar ways. This is paralleled by striking similarities in their off screen persona, as becomes apparent in extra-textual material. As mentioned above, there isn't an established Flemish film or media press, but magazines and particularly newspapers have regular film and television pages. An analysis of the press response demonstrates clear consistencies in writing about the two actors. This is all the more surprising, as they had quite different careers and are often classified as different kinds of actors.

Jan Declair has strong stage credentials, his theatre career equalling his film career in length and prestige. After being one of the driving forces of left-wing theatre in the 1970s, he became an established stage presence in the 1980s, also directing, teaching and finally figuring as artistic leader at the theatre school Studio Herman Teirlinck. This stage experience undeniably heightens Declair's prestige, theatre acting being more highly valued in Flanders than film and particularly television acting. This is also the case in other European countries, which is one of the reasons why many British and French screen actors have a stage background.<sup>37</sup> Writing about Declair's acting, not only on stage but also in film, is invariably positive. To many he is 'undeniably the most praised Flemish film and stage actor'.<sup>38</sup> He is praised for his charisma and his humanity, and he is called a natural talent.<sup>39</sup> One of the fiercest television critics calls him 'a grand master of human feelings', while another calls him 'a living legend'.<sup>40</sup>

The press criticism confirms Declair's onscreen image as identified above. Thus, he is considered as the masculine face of Flemish film, playing all the typical parts.<sup>41</sup> Often, his appeal is situated in a combination of roughness and sensibility.<sup>42</sup> His image is closely linked to his physical appearance:

*His head carved from Ardennes stone, a dark mug, bony of build, pontifically present, earthy and strong - few actors can make a role as physical as Jan Declair.*<sup>43</sup>

Most commented upon are his strong scrawny head and his firm 'masoned' figure.<sup>44</sup> These qualities make him easy to cast and indeed to typecast. The issue of typecasting is addressed most critically by Vandendaele writing about Declair's films of the 1970s: 'Often he had to play the archetypical Flemish cart-horse in films mostly containing beautiful pictures of fields'.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>46</sup> De Haes (1975).

<sup>47</sup> Bos & Fransen (1983).

<sup>48</sup> Vandendaele (1988: 53).

<sup>49</sup> Van Roy (1998).

<sup>50</sup> Vandemaele (1997).

<sup>51</sup> Alleman (1999).

<sup>52</sup> Lafarge (1988: 20).

<sup>53</sup> Barkman (1997: 70).

<sup>54</sup> Lafarge (1988: 19).

<sup>55</sup> See Geraghty (2000: 190-193).

<sup>56</sup> Dyer (1979: 157-160).

When asked about his image of tough but sensitive guy in period drama, Declair is ambiguous. On the one hand, he calls it false, as it doesn't correspond to his personality at all. Moreover, he says he never quite liked the folkloric representation of Flanders in his early films.<sup>46</sup> He also denies having fabricated this image himself, instead blaming directors for always casting him in similar roles. He admits not always having been happy with his casting, for instance as Jan Breydel in 'De Leeuw van Vlaanderen', another tough guy of little words.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, Declair says he ultimately didn't mind playing those roles, as he always makes the best of a part, hoping to end up being cast in less obvious parts.<sup>48</sup>

Declair's attitude towards his roles betrays another basic characteristic clearly emerging from the press clippings: his modesty and down-to-earth personality. For instance, after winning an Oscar with 'Karakter', a film carried by his acting, he firmly denies any ambitions to make it in Hollywood, despite offers.<sup>49</sup> He doesn't like too much attention around his person, nor does he like to give interviews or make public appearances in television game panels: 'I'm a grey mouse. What does my opinion matter?'<sup>50</sup> He is often called the Belgian Gérard Depardieu, because of his numerous films and his strong onscreen presence, but he dislikes the publicity and stresses his own ordinariness: 'My life would lead to a very boring movie'.<sup>51</sup> Declair doesn't believe a great actor necessarily has an interesting life or even is an interesting person.<sup>52</sup> He doesn't like to talk about his private life, with the exception of his emotions, which he considers to be crucial to his acting. Despite his image of a slightly stiff, silent man, he is a very sensitive person with a strong emotional life. Professionally, he believes in hard work, in making every role he plays the best he has done yet.<sup>53</sup> To him, acting is about losing one's own personality and disappearing into a role.<sup>54</sup>

This conception of acting is reminiscent of Geraghty's account of the actor as performer, drawing attention to the work of acting. Following King, Geraghty claims this kind of acting aims for 'impersonation', disappearing into the part, as opposed to personification, where the actor's personality is consonant with the part. It is akin to method acting, in that it emphasises the combination of work, craft and talent.<sup>55</sup> However, while Declair attempts to 'disappear into his roles', he also has a very recognisable style and physique, he makes his roles his own, a quality associated by Geraghty with the star as professional. Because of his frequent casting in similar roles within the same genre, there is a close connection between Declair's film and professional roles. Dyer calls this style of performance, which seems not to be acting but being, the Hollywood studio style, as opposed to the Broadway style, which involves the ability to be different in every part.<sup>56</sup> Declair is more of a performer than a professional, but his acting contains elements of both. While he is a strong character actor, most of his roles are consistent with both his physique and his public image.

<sup>57</sup> Bonte (2001).

<sup>58</sup> Libert (2001).

<sup>59</sup> Jensen (1991: 24).

<sup>60</sup> Verstraete (1984).

<sup>61</sup> De Keyzer (1999).

<sup>62</sup> See Vandendaele (1985: 15; 1999: 40) and Libert (2001).

<sup>63</sup> Kempen (2002: 12).

<sup>64</sup> Jensen (1991: 22).

<sup>65</sup> Collier (1984: 23).

<sup>66</sup> Vandendaele (1985: 14).

<sup>67</sup> Verstraete (1984) and Vandendaele (1985: 16).

The same holds true for Jo De Meyere, though in a different balance. While Declair has a recognisable face, De Meyere is more of a chameleon, adapting more strongly to the roles he plays, also physically. He calls himself 'an actor without a head', relying on camouflage and physical change because he doesn't have an expressive face.<sup>57</sup> He admits he is sometimes jealous of actors who have 'a head':

*Take Jan Declair. He comes in, ten minutes before he has to start acting, he gets into his costume, walks on set and the shooting can start. And De Meyere? He has already spent an hour and a half with the make-up artist to have his face made up.*<sup>58</sup>

If Declair is more of akin to Hollywood stars in this respect, De Meyere is more of a character player, as he admits himself.<sup>59</sup> To him, a good actor has to be able to undergo a strong metamorphosis, to 'become' the character he or she plays.<sup>60</sup> Needless to say, this puts him firmly in the 'performer'-category as defined by Geraghty. De Meyere himself uses the term 'comédien' in this context, as opposed to 'actor':

*Actors primarily want to think along with their character, and above all: to be themselves, to dig into themselves and to expose themselves. Not me. (...) I try to rule myself out and to get into the character.*<sup>61</sup>

As such, he doesn't consider himself to be an 'artist', but rather a professional in an artistic profession.<sup>62</sup> While Declair is more of a self-willed artist often taking risks, De Meyere prefers security. Most of his professional career, he was a member of the public broadcaster's dramatic ensemble earning a steady income, thus becoming something of a 'civil servant - actor'.<sup>63</sup> Like Declair, he has a theatre background and stage credentials, but much more modestly, so he is a less prestigious actor in that way, too. More so than Declair, he emphasises the hard work involved in creating a character and admits he is obsessed with his work: 'I'm busy with my work day and night'.<sup>64</sup>

While De Meyere emphasises the act of impersonation, he too from the start had a very outspoken image played out in most of his roles. Particularly in the beginning of his career, he was often typecast. Most of his roles were consonant with his physiognomy, as he admits himself: 'I have the physiognomy of an anti-hero. (...) I have something fragile, something vulnerable that intrigues many people.'<sup>65</sup> For a long time, De Meyere had a young and 'green' image due to the idealistic roles he played: 'The fragile, sympathetic anti-hero Herman Coene still follows him like a shadow'.<sup>66</sup> Because of this association with similar parts in the same genre, De Meyere is also somewhat of a 'professional' as defined by Geraghty. However, while De Meyere didn't want to disavow these roles, in the mid-1980s he was anxious to change this image, as

<sup>68</sup> Vlaeminck (1985).

<sup>69</sup> Adriaens (1999).

<sup>70</sup> Vandendaele (1985: 14).

<sup>71</sup> Kempen (2002: 12).

<sup>72</sup> De Keyzer (1999).

<sup>73</sup> Vandendaele (1985: 19).

<sup>74</sup> Libert (2001).

<sup>75</sup> Vandendaele (1985: 15); Jensen (1991: 24).

<sup>76</sup> Kempen (2002: 9).

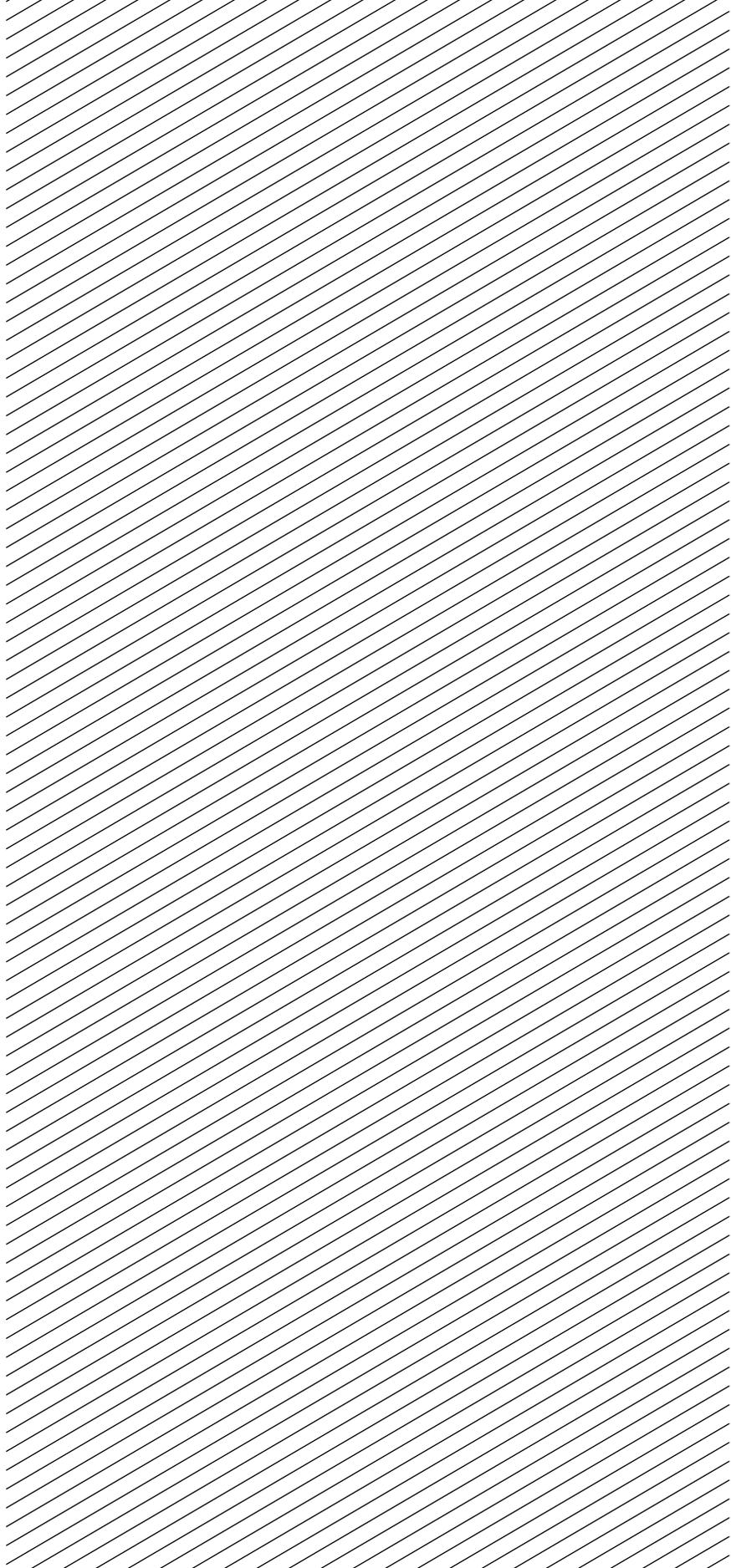
it was too kind.<sup>67</sup> Like Declair's roughness, it didn't correspond to his own personality, so he played the role of the harsh farmer Speeltie. This role disturbed many viewers because of the breach with De Meyere's prototypical soft image.<sup>68</sup> After that, he mostly played harder roles, an image he carries until today.<sup>69</sup>

Like Declair, De Meyere gets overwhelmingly positive reviews. He is also considered as the 'grand man' of his field, playing all the 'archetypical' parts.<sup>70</sup> He is also similarly 'unavoidable', as he admits to his own shame: 'No film can be made or Jan Declair is in it, and no big serial can be made or Jo De Meyere is it'.<sup>71</sup> De Meyere's ambiguity towards his own productivity betrays a similar attitude to that of Declair: a great humility. In interviews, he puts his accomplishments into perspective and he mostly emphasises the simplicity of his personal life.<sup>72</sup> When asked if he ever wanted to conquer the world, he firmly answers: 'Nóó!'.<sup>73</sup> Like Declair De Meyere is quite shy and he loathes publicity around his person. Like Declair, and to his dislike, he is increasingly played out as a promotional asset in the 1990s.<sup>74</sup> Still, he refuses to participate in game shows and talk shows, considering his acting as the only promotion necessary.<sup>75</sup> As he comments himself: 'I'm not a sandwich man'.<sup>76</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: IMAGE AND NATIONAL CHARACTER**

In spite of their differences, Declair and De Meyere have similar professional images. They are most often represented - and indeed, they present themselves - as simple and humble artisans. They consider their personality to be subordinate to their roles, and both are known for being able to melt together with the various roles they play. Their success is attributed to a combination of talent and hard work, the latter being contrasted to frivolity and quirkiness. In reviews and interviews, most of the information and questions concern their professional life. Their press coverage expresses seriousness and a work ethos rather than a cultivation of their personality or personal lives. Neither actor figures in the gossip columns, discretion being part both of their image and of their press treatment. The emphasis on their talent put aside, the press coverage mostly stresses their authenticity.

Obviously, not all Flemish actors have the same image, but there is a general tendency toward such toned down images lacking excess or glamour. Moreover, as 'leading men', both Declair and De Meyere present exemplary and influential images of acting. One could argue that every country has this kind of 'serious', 'character' actors, and that the discourses surrounding them aren't uniquely Flemish. However, I want to argue that the image of both actors, and even their success, is related to broader discourses about Flemish identity and in particular about national character.



<sup>77</sup> Vermeersch (1990).

Flemish nationalism came to existence after Belgian independence in 1830. Most clearly from the early 20th century, it strove for the political, linguistic and cultural emancipation of the Flemings. The so-called 'Flemish movement' situated the national roots among the ordinary people of the past, who supposedly had safeguarded an ancient cultural heritage. Discourses about the nation in history and literature recounted how the Flemings were faithful to their roots through centuries of oppression, which rendered them stubborn and rebellious, distrusting authority of any kind. Moreover, the Flemings were represented as hard workers, their industriousness making for the defeat of poverty. Central values in this image of Flemishness are simplicity, modesty, and diligence. The sympathy is with the underdog, and show-offs are distrusted.

Needless to say, the images of both Declair and De Meyere fit nicely within this definition of national character. I am not suggesting that they consciously adapted to it, or that they became successful because they embody essential Flemish values. Rather, I think that their images both refer and contribute to this broader national image, taking elements from it and confirming them. As argued earlier, both actors also played 'typically Flemish' parts. Often based on literary classics, the films and serials they play in recount national history. Clearly, there is a correspondence between their public persona and their onscreen image, both referring to and constructing accounts on the Flemish national character.

The emphasis on ordinariness, both in their onscreen and offscreen persona, strongly reduces the star potential of De Meyere and Declair. In this respect, the whole concept of stardom seems to be at odds with the definition of Flemishness, at least in the period under consideration. Indeed, the absence of heroes, both in real life and on screen, seems to be typically Flemish. For instance, Flemings are renowned for the limited support they give to fellow-countrymen excelling in any domain. To the contrary, there is a certain degree of distrust, as Jan Declair confirms: 'Success in Flanders is dangerous to life. (...) As soon as you stand out just a little, your head has to go off.'<sup>77</sup> In spite of their strong nationalism, particularly in the analysed period, Flemings are hardly chauvinistic. Declair's and De Meyere's humility, then, fit nicely within the definitions of Flemishness.

Onscreen, both central types played by Declair and De Meyere, the silent, stubborn hardworking farmer and the idealistic rebel share 'ordinariness' as a central characteristic. They are no heroes, but rather anti-heroes, another factor diminishing their star potential. However, this

<sup>78</sup> Anthierens (1964: 215).

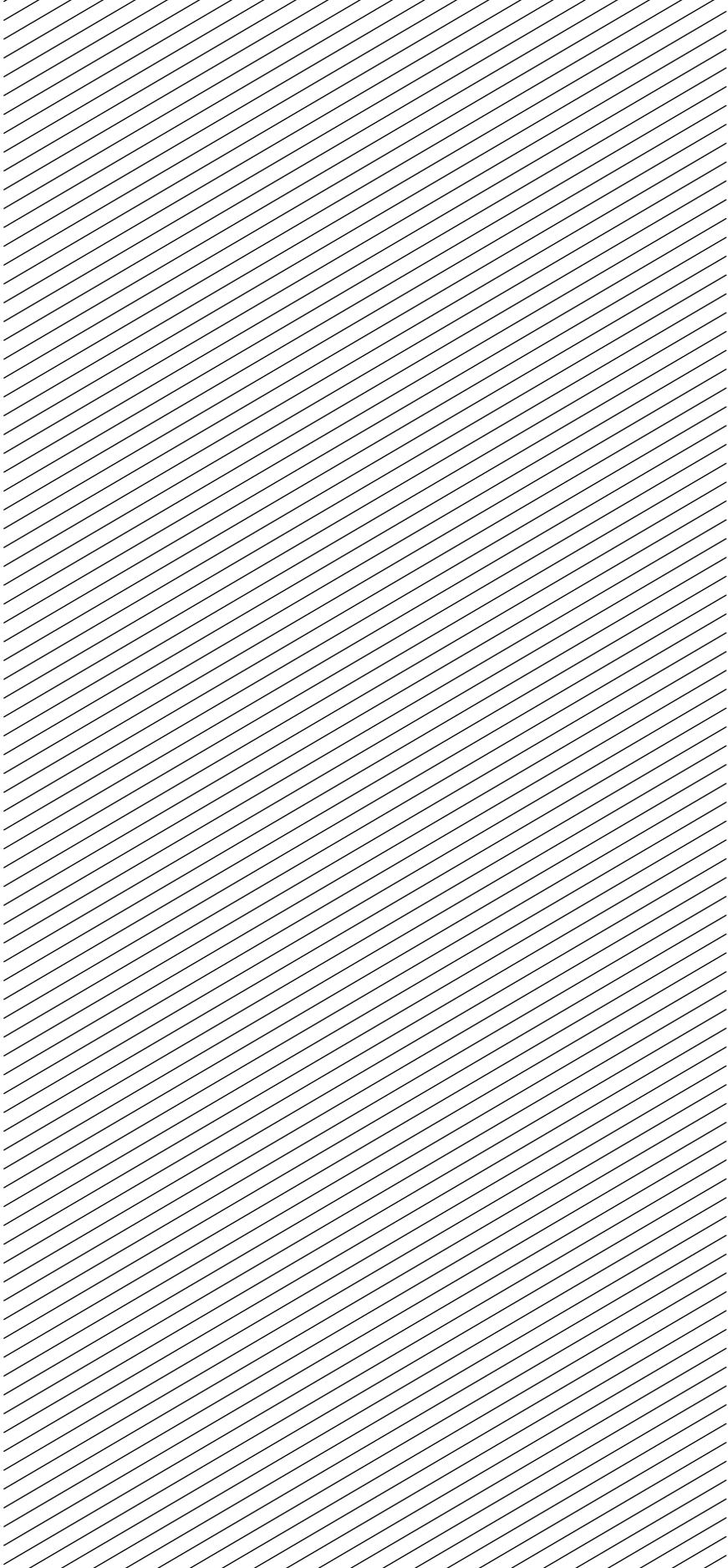
<sup>79</sup> Droste (1993: 19).

<sup>80</sup> Sartor (1999: 25).

characterisation does fit within definitions of the Flemish character, as mentioned earlier. These parts are not isolated, but fit within a wider media discourse about the so-called 'Flemish national character'. For instance, Anthierens claims that television is a reliable mirror of 'our national character', which he describes as industrious, persevering and self-willed.<sup>78</sup> Comparing them with the Dutchmen, Droste types the Flemings as diligent but awkward workers.<sup>79</sup> Sartor identifies a broader pattern in Flemish film, where lead characters are often moody, stubborn and silent, 'reminiscing our old peasant descent'. Often, films also deal with the individual curtailed in his self-development, referring to the rogue Tjil Uilenspiegel.<sup>80</sup>

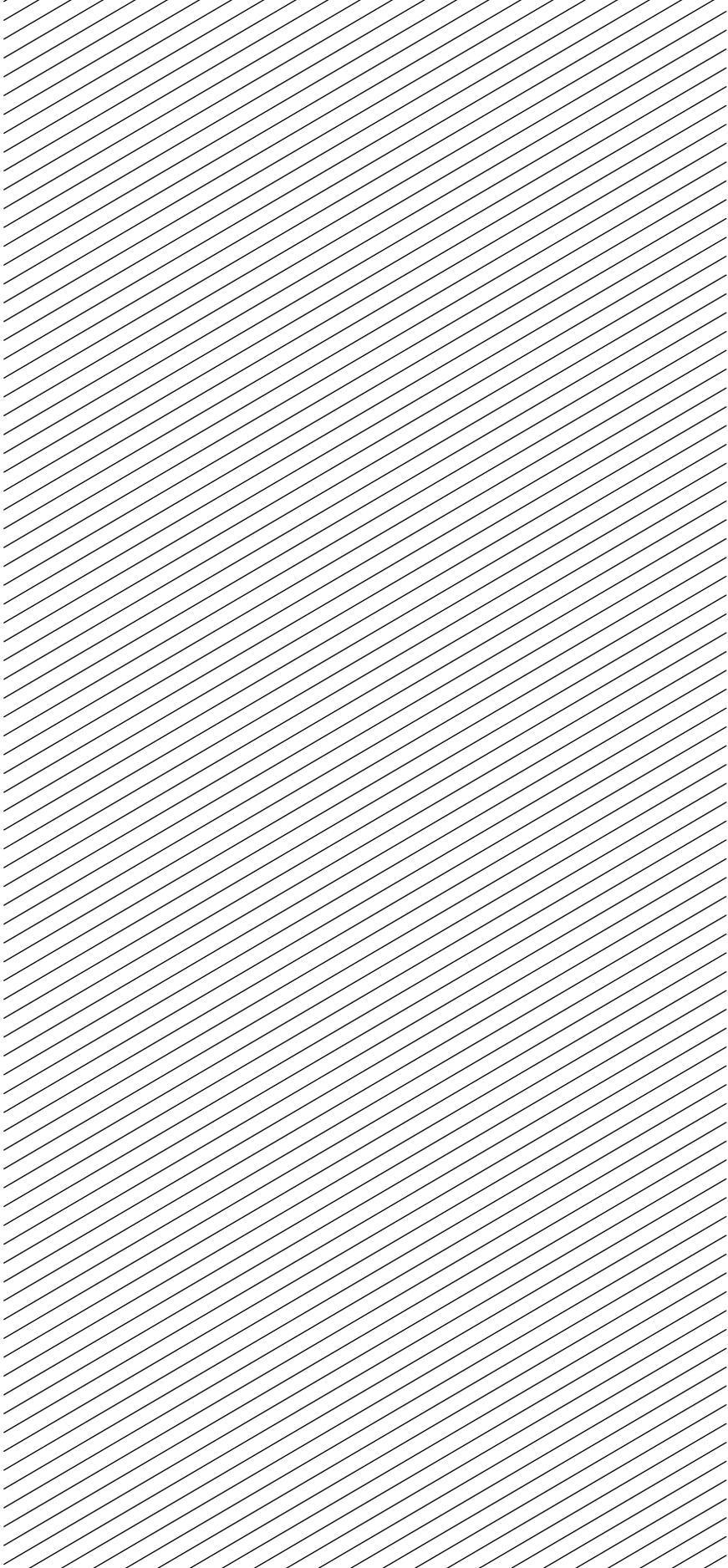
To conclude, it is important to put the claims of this article into perspective. The argument is not that the Flemish screen doesn't have stars because these don't fit into an innate, essential Flemish character. Just like actors and their images don't simply reflect society, they don't simply reflect national identity either. However, within a particular historical and cultural context, Flanders between the 1960s and the 1980s, the concept of stardom seems to be at odds with national identity as it is discursively constructed. This isn't a straightforward 'reason' for the absence of stars, the economic restrictions probably having a more direct influence. However, the cultural climate provides an important context, within which certain conceptions of acting, certain roles, kinds of performance and professional images are stimulated and validated while others are not. Therefore, the close analysis of these two actors can learn us much about the Flemish cultural climate. More generally, in an international context such star studies can provide an invaluable source of cultural history.

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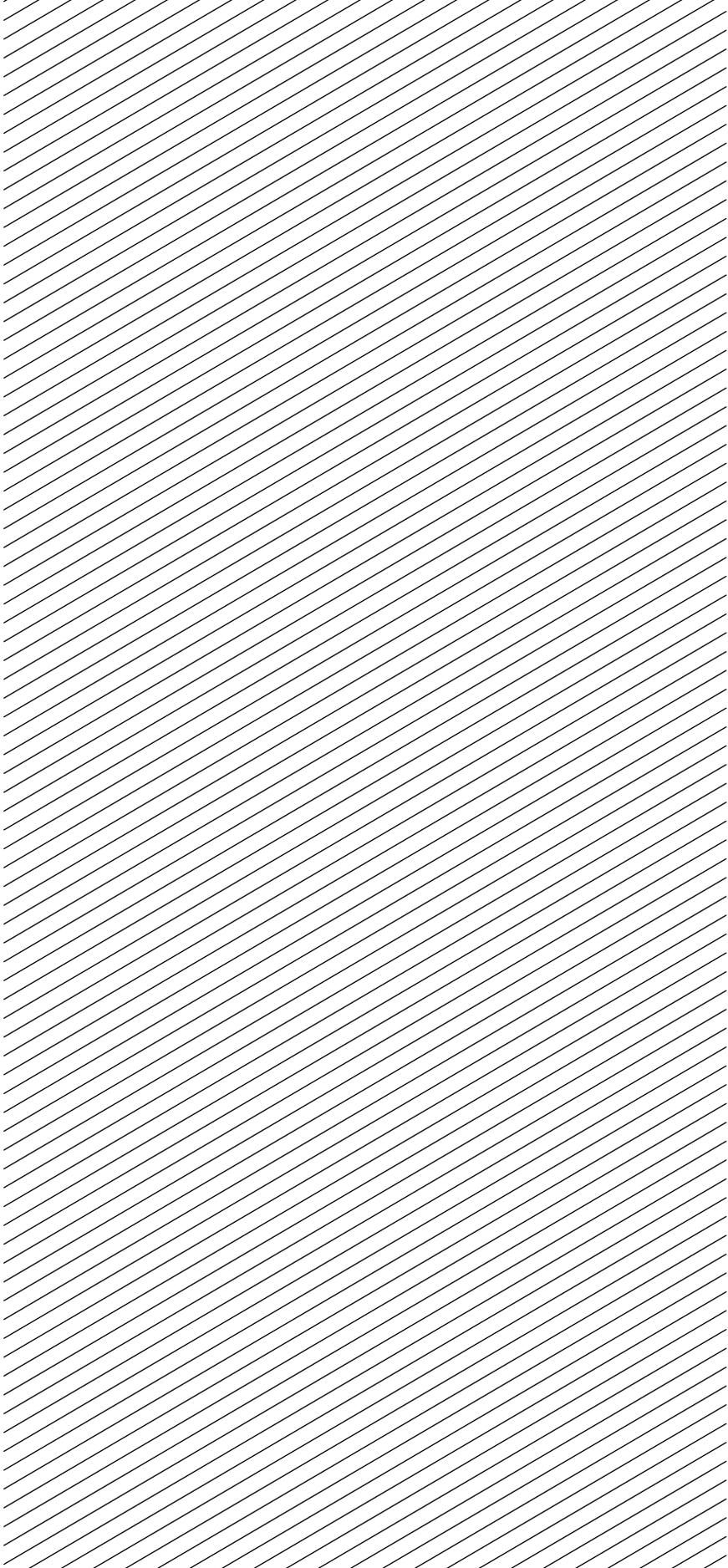


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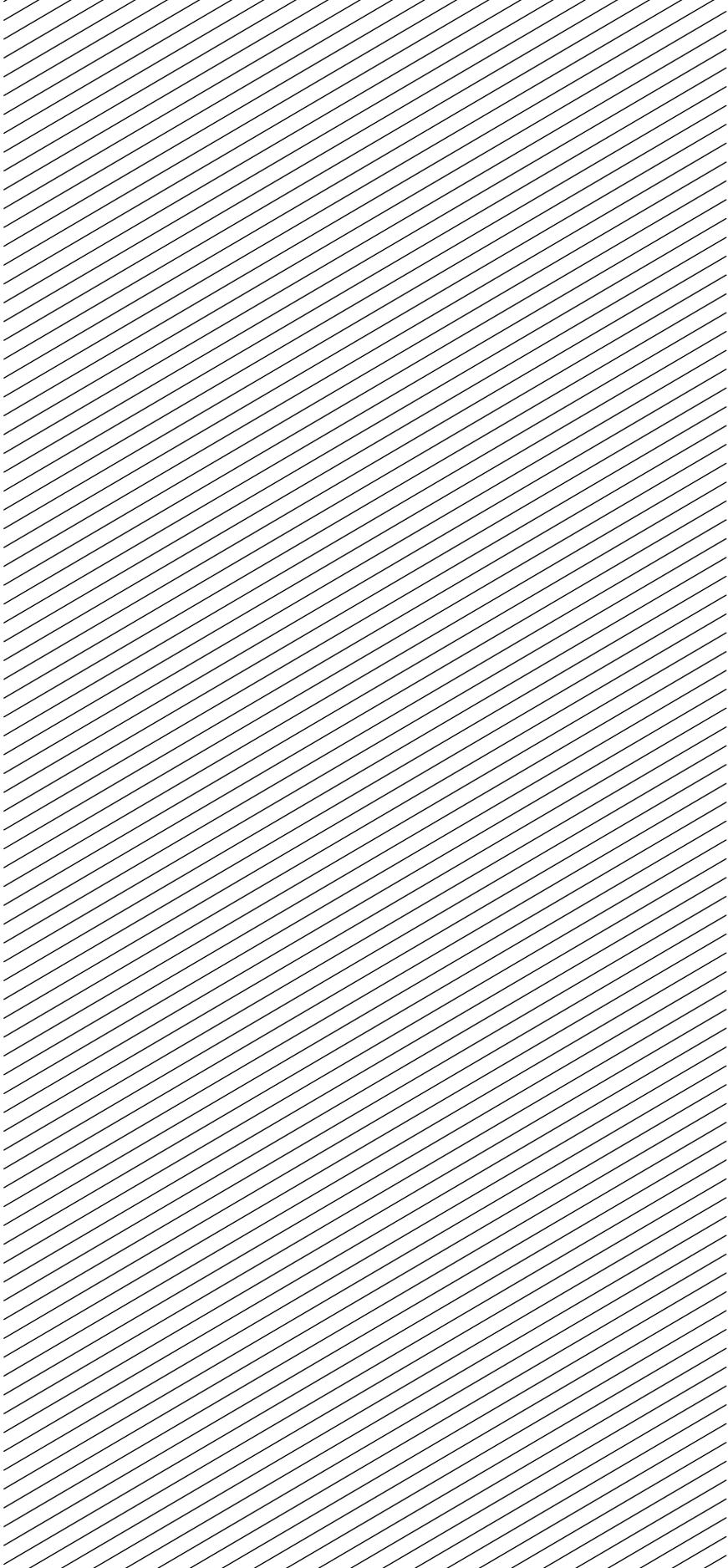
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