



Working Papers Film & TV Studies  
WP 2008/1

# **FORBIDDEN IMAGES**

## **A LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN BOARD OF FILM CLASSIFICATION (1920-2003)**

**Daniël Biltereyst, Liesbet Depauw and Lieve Desmet**

## Working Papers Film & TV Studies

### Editors

Daniël Biltereyst & Sofie Van Bauwel

### Address

*Werkgroep Film- & Televisiestudies*  
Working Group Film and Television Studies  
*Vakgroep Communicatiewetenschappen*  
Department of Communication Science  
Korte Meer 7-9-11  
9000 Gent  
Belgium

### Phone

0032 9 264 68 90

### Web

<http://www.wgfilmtv.ugent.be/>

### Design

Kameleon Graphic Design - Hans Van Acker

### Press

Academia Press  
Eekhout 2  
9000 Gent  
Tel. 09/233 80 88  
Fax 09/233 14 09  
[info@academiapress.be](mailto:info@academiapress.be)  
[www.academiapress.be](http://www.academiapress.be)



De uitgaven van Academia Press worden verdeeld door:

J. Story-Scientia bvba Wetenschappelijke Boekhandel  
Sint-Kwintensberg 87  
B-9000 Gent  
Tel. 09/225 57 57  
Fax 09/233 14 09  
[info@story.be](mailto:info@story.be)  
[www.story.be](http://www.story.be)

Daniël Biltereyst, Liesbet Depauw and Lieve Desmet

**Working papers Film & TV Studies**

WP 2008/1

**FORBIDDEN IMAGES**

**A LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH PROJECT  
ON THE HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN BOARD  
OF FILM CLASSIFICATION (1920-2003)**

Gent, Academia Press, 2008, 60p

ISBN 978-90-382-1247-0

D/2008/4804/63

U 1096

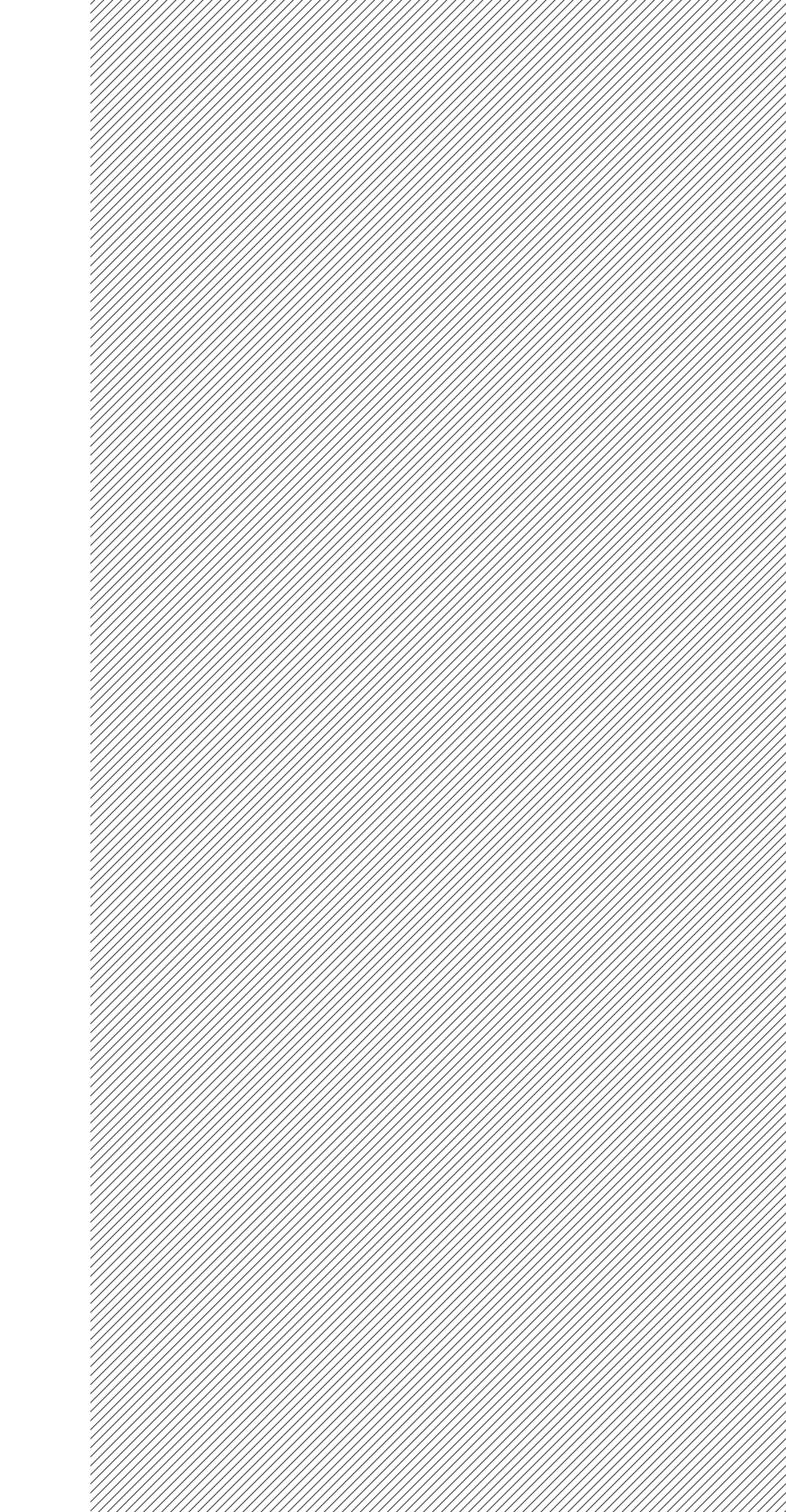
Niets uit deze uitgave mag worden verveelvoudigd e/of vermenigvuldigd door middel van druk, fotokopie, microfilm of op welke andere wijze dan ook, zonder voorafgaande schriftelijke toestemming van de uitgever.

**Working Papers Film & TV Studies**  
WP 2008/1

Working Papers Film & TV Studies  
WP 2008/1

**FORBIDDEN IMAGES**  
**A LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH PROJECT**  
**ON THE HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN BOARD**  
**OF FILM CLASSIFICATION (1920-2003)**

Daniël Biltreyst, Liesbet Depauw and Lieve Desmet



*“On l’a dit et redit, la conception actuelle du cinéma est  
un des facteurs importants de la criminalité infantile.  
Films sans goût, sans saveur, sans beauté,  
qui constituent l’école de l’immoralité et de la perversion.  
Perversion du cœur ...,  
perversion de l’esprit ...,  
perversion de la volonté,  
par la fâcheuse école de l’indiscipline et du vice.”*

- Paul Wets (juvenile judge, Brussels, 1920)

## VOORWOORD

*Deze Working Paper is gebaseerd op een grootschalig onderzoeksproject over de geschiedenis van de Belgische Filmkeuringscommissie, die tot stand kwam naar aanleiding van de zgn. Wet Vandervelde in september 1920. Het onderzoek ging in 2001 van start als een niet-gefinancierd project over de structuur en de werking van de Filmkeuringscommissie. Het onderzoek leidde tot research seminars, studentenpapers en eindverhandelingen. In juni 2002 keurde het Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen het project “Verboden Beelden” goed.<sup>1</sup> Dit project knoopte uitdrukkelijk aan bij recentere ontwikkelingen in onderzoek over filmcensuur. In de lijn van ‘new (film) history’ en onder invloed van cultural studies-benaderingen wordt de afgelopen jaren meer aandacht gevraagd voor de meer ‘productieve’ kanten van (film)censuur. Naast een onderzoek naar hoe filmcensuur concreet verloopt, had het project vooral tot doel om in een breder perspectief te kijken naar het ruimere maatschappelijke, culturele en ideologische kader waarbinnen filmcensors en andere spelers op het terrein van film opereren en met elkaar in onderhandeling treden over wat er al dan niet kan getoond worden. Vanuit een culturalistisch oogpunt wilde dit onderzoek naar ‘storende beelden’ het negotiatieproces bestuderen tussen de makers van beelden enerzijds en allerlei maatschappelijke groepen en instanties anderzijds (waaronder de filmkeuringscommissie en het publiek). Ultiem ging het onderzoek over de grenzen van wat een samenleving verdraagt in termen van de representatie van ethische en sociale vraagstukken. Het project combineerde daarbij archiefonderzoek, allerlei methoden binnen tekst- en historisch receptieonderzoek, alsook meer kwantitatieve methoden. Deze geïntegreerde aanpak leverde heel wat inzichten op, niet alleen in verband met de*

## PREFACE

This Working Paper is based on a wide-ranging research project on the history of the Belgian Board of Film Classification, which was based on the September 1920 Film Law (often called after the Minister of Justice, Emile Vandervelde). The research started in 2001 as a non-funded project dealing with the structure and practices of the Board. The research project was extended to research seminars, student papers and masters theses. In June 2002 the Flemish Scientific Research Council agreed to finance a research proposal for four years. The research project “Forbidden Images”<sup>1</sup> tried to link up with recent developments in, and criticism against, a dominant strain of research and literature on film censorship/control/classification. Mainly as a result of ‘new (film) history’ and the influence of cultural studies theories on film studies, scholars began to conceive the ‘productive’ sides of film censorship. The purpose of the project was not only to investigate what concrete censorship boards have done, but rather in a broader perspective to look at the wider social and cultural ideologies determining those groups’ activities. This more culturalist perspective considers research on images that are troubling as an incisive way to study the borders of what a given society can tolerate in terms of the representation of social and ethical issues. The research project combined archive research, textual analyses, historical reception methods and several quantitative approaches. This integrated approach has produced numerous insights, not only into the history of the film classification board and its practices of control, but also into the development of the Belgian film market (distribution and exploitation), film politics and film culture at large. We hope that this Working Paper, which brings together the main results of this longitudinal project, also indicates that the research material is a valuable source for studying shifts of norms and values in regard to one of the major forms of

<sup>1</sup> FWO-Project “Verboden Beelden: Een onderzoek naar de betekenis van film als bron voor maatschappelijke controverse aan de hand van archiefmateriaal van de officiële en van de katholieke filmkeuring in België (1920-2000)”. Promotor-onderzoeker: Daniël Biltereyst, onderzoekers: Liesbet Depauw en Lieve Desmet. Zie: <http://www.wgfilmtv.ugent.be>.

<sup>1</sup> FWO-Project “Forbidden Images. A research into the meaning of film as a source for social controversy and censorship in Belgium, 1920-2000”. Promoter-researcher: Daniël Biltereyst, researchers: Liesbet Depauw and Lieve Desmet. More information: <http://www.wgfilmtv.ugent.be>.

*geschiedenis van de filmkeuringscommissie. Het onderzoek was ook nuttig om andere ontwikkelingen in de Belgische filmmarkt en filmcultuur beter te begrijpen.*

*We hopen dat deze Working Paper, die voor het eerst de belangrijkste bevindingen van het “Verboden Beelden”-project samenbrengt, aangeeft hoe dit soort materiaal bredere inzichten biedt in de ontwikkeling van maatschappelijke normen en waarden, hier voornamelijk in het licht van film, één van de meest populaire vormen van entertainment en populaire cultuur. Een analyse van de concrete beslissingen van de filmkeuringscommissie geeft ons inziens interessante inzichten in de veranderende gevoeligheden van een samenleving ten aanzien van de (cinematografische) representatie van misdaad, geweld, seksualiteit, publieke orde en allerlei andere gevoelige materies. We beschouwen dit project dan ook als fundamenteel onderzoek, niet alleen voor het domein van film- en mediastudies, maar ook voor disciplines binnen het ruimere domein van cultuur- en sociale geschiedenis.*

*Daniël Biltereyst & Sofie Van Bauwel*

entertainment and popular culture. An analysis of the concrete decisions of the film classification board can produce insights into the changing sensitiveness towards (in this case cinematographic) representations of violence, crime, sexuality, religion, public order and other social and ethical sensitive issues. We very much like to consider this “Forbidden Images” project as fundamental research which can be used by future students of film and media culture as well as other researchers interested in cultural and social history.

## ABSTRACT

*Het medium film is ongetwijfeld één van de meest populaire vormen van entertainment maar tevens ook één van de meest gevreesde. Vooral na haar explosieve groei in de jaren 1910 gingen wereldwijd stemmen op om het medium aan banden te leggen om zo haar schadelijke invloed te minimaliseren. Tegen 1920 hadden de meeste Westerse landen dan ook één of andere vorm van filmkeuring of -censuur geïnstalleerd. Gezien de verstrekende gevolgen van filmcensuur op het vlak van filmproductie, -distributie en -vertoning heeft het fenomeen nooit gebrek gehad aan academische interesse. Dankzij Kuhns 'eventualization/diagnosis' model is de academische opvatting van filmcensuur de laatste jaren geëvolueerd van 'filmcensuur als een probleem' naar een meer culturalistisch concept. Een evolutie die uiteraard boeiende nieuwe perspectieven bood voor onderzoek naar filmcensuur. Als gevolg verschenen vele studies over filmcensuur in landen zoals Duitsland (Buchloh, 2002), Frankrijk (Douin, 1998), Groot-Brittannië (Robertson, 1985, 1989), Luxemburg (Lesch, 2006) en Nederland (van der Burg & van den Heuvel, 1991). Jammer genoeg is de geschiedenis van de Belgische filmkeuring lange tijd genegeerd door filmwetenschappers, ondanks het feit dat België een zeer lange traditie heeft gekend van het censureren van films.*

*Deze paper gaat dieper in op de geschiedenis van de Belgische filmkeuring door middel van uniek cijfermateriaal over het aantal gekeurde films, waar ze vandaan kwamen, hoe ze werden gekeurd en bovenal: welke beelden de grenzen van de toelaatbaarheid van representaties overschreden en daardoor geknipt moesten worden vooraleer een film als kinderen toegelaten werd beschouwd. De resultaten die hier worden voorgesteld komen voort uit een langlopend historisch onderzoek naar 'Verboden Beelden'.*

## ABSTRACT

Over the years, the movies have been the most attractive, popular – and worried about - of all mass entertainment media. By 1920, most Western countries had installed some form of film censorship and/or classification. Because of its wide ranging consequences for film production, distribution and exhibition, film censorship has always been able to attract extensive academic interest. Recently though, the academic view on film censorship has shifted from the conception of a mainly repressive apparatus and 'censorship as a problem', to a more culturalist notion of film censorship. From the perspective of Kuhn's 'eventualization/diagnosis' approach the practices of a classification/ censorship board can be seen as a manifestation of hegemonic views on social matters, an idea which opened up new and exciting perspectives for film censorship research. As a result, many innovative studies have appeared on film censorship in countries like Germany (e.g. Buchloh, 2002), France (Douin, 1998), Great Britain (Robertson, 1985, 1989), Luxembourg (Lesch, 2006) and The Netherlands (van der Burg & van den Heuvel, 1991). Sadly though, Belgium's film classification history has been largely ignored by film scholars, despite its long tradition of mutilating films.

This paper looks into the history of the Belgian board of film classification, presenting unique figures on the number of classified films, where they came from, how they were classified and most of all: which images seemed to cross the boundaries of acceptable representations and were cut in order to make films suitable for a juvenile audience. The findings presented in this paper are the result of a longitudinal research project which ran for four years and which systematically registered and analysed every classification decision made by the Belgian board of film classification (from 1922 till 2003).

## INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the movies have been the most attractive, popular – and worried about – of all mass entertainment media. Since the 1910s, when their popularity and industrialisation peaked, they have been accused of attributing to social problems such as crime, profanity, fornication and violation of public morals. By 1920, most Western countries had introduced some form of film censorship and/or classification which had an impact on film production, distribution and exhibition.

Because of its wide-ranging consequences film censorship has attracted extensive academic interest for decades. At first, researchers restricted themselves to investigating censorship in major film production countries (e.g. in the United States, the UK or France, see Hunnings, 1967, Randall, 1970) or in totalitarian regimes such as Nazi-Germany (e.g. Wetzel & Hagemann, 1978), fascist Italy or the Soviet Union (e.g. Taylor, 1998). Lately though, the history of film censorship in many more countries has been thoroughly scrutinized and publicized. Moreover, the academic view on film censorship has shifted from a conception of a mainly repressive apparatus and ‘censorship as a problem’, to a more cultural notion of film censorship as something that has productive aspects as well (e.g. Kuhn, 1988; Staiger, 1995). These productive aspects became apparent in Kuhn’s (1988) ‘eventualization/diagnosis’ model which assumes that film censorship does not only consist of a top down dimension. Although censorship often takes place within the practices of concrete institutions, such institutions should not be seen in isolation but as both active and acted upon within a wider set of practices and relations.

From the perspective of an eventualization/diagnosis approach the practices of any board of classification/ censorship can be seen as a manifestation of hegemonic views on social matters.<sup>01</sup> This shift indicates that film censorship is a form of social disciplining which can be regarded as a ‘significant social response to representations’ (Staiger, 1995: 15-6) rather than as an imposed decision of an alienated institution.

For instance, the film industry often complied with the control of and consensus on public values because they had a lot to gain from safe, non-provocative films. Especially during the early years of film classification, family films that did not damage the reputation of the medium turned out to be more profitable in the long run than the short-lived commercial successes of controversial films. Furthermore, film censorship constituted a challenge for writers, directors, actors and other creative people within the film industry intent upon exploring the limits of acceptable representation.

Apart from studying the specific censorship activities, the new film censorship research also looks for ‘the wider social and cultural ideologies determining those group’s activities’ (Staiger, 1995: 14). It asks for an examination of the specific process of negotiation between industry, filmmakers and censors who have to arrive at some kind of consensus on the acceptability of certain images, scenes or films. This negotiation process makes it rather unlikely that film classification boards would take decisions that completely went against social sensitivities. In this regard research into ‘images that are troubling’ is extremely fruitful as a way of revealing the boundaries of acceptable representation within a certain social constellation.<sup>02</sup>

In contrast to its neighbour countries, like Germany (e.g. Buchloh, 2002), France (Douin, 1998; Hervé,

<sup>01</sup> The ‘eventualization/diagnosis’ model served as a substitute for the ‘prohibition/institutions’ model.

<sup>02</sup> This vision on film censorship is inspired by Michel Foucault’s conception of social power, in which power is no longer seen as something that is imposed but as something much more complex. See Foucault (1977).



2001), Great Britain (Robertson, 1985, 1989), Luxembourg (Lesch, 2006) and The Netherlands (van der Burg & van den Heuvel, 1991), Belgium has a history of film classification that has been largely ignored by (film) historians. In 1920, a law on film classification was passed. The new law provided a non-obligatory classification to protect children under sixteen from the alleged dangers of cinema. Liberal as that might seem at first glance, a thorough analysis of the control exercised on films during a period of more than 80 years shows that Belgian film classification was rather strict and – like their foreign counterparts – made frequent use of the fact that they could demand cuts before a film received the Children Approved (CA) label (Depauw & Biltreyst, 2005).

This working paper looks into the history of the Belgian Board of Film Classification (BeBFC), presenting unique figures on how many films were classified, where they came from, how they were classified and, most of all, which images seemed to cross the boundaries of acceptable representation and were cut in order to make films suitable for a juvenile audience. The research data are a valuable source for studying shifts of norms and values in regard to one of the major forms of entertainment. An analysis of the BeBFC's concrete decisions produces insights into the changing sensitiveness towards the (in this case cinematographic) representation of violence, crime, sexuality, religion, public order and other sensitive social and ethical issues.

## 1. CONTEXT

Throughout history, new media of mass entertainment have been denounced by high-minded reformers as 'a sign of social decay, a corrupter of the young, a threat to the very existence of civilization as we know it' (Schechter, 2005, 119-20). The film medium did not escape this kind of criticism, especially not after its spectacular rise in popularity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In most Western countries film began to be subjected to a wide variety of moral measurements and restraints just before and after World War One. The allegations towards films were twofold: on the one hand, the specific circumstances under which the films were shown were regarded as 'morally unhealthy' and sometimes outright dangerous. Obviously, the fear of inflammable nitrate burning down a film theatre and causing casualties was a pertinent one, but also the fact that cinemas were meeting-places for the working class and for men and women together made moral campaigners wary of this new form of mass entertainment.

On the other hand, certain film content was regarded as unacceptable since it was likely to put undesirable ideas in the 'weak minds' of children and the lower classes. Both allegations can be related to film being an urban phenomenon. As Lary May argued in his classical work on the emergence of mass culture and film industry, *Screening out the past* (1980), film often portrayed values and norms associated with city life and the problems of a modern urban environment (e.g. violence, drugs, crime, divorce, new forms of cohabitation) which ran counter to and even rebelled against a very formalistic conservative Victorian morality and which bound to trouble the moral guardians.

The control mechanisms inflicted on film took on diverse shapes, ranging from high taxes on cinema tickets to the introduction of severe censorship on film content. Initially, decisions concerning the latter were taken on a local level, but soon most Western countries passed over into a nationally co-ordinated system of film

## Le scandale de la censure

Les ciseaux de la censure ont, paraît-il, mutilé de façon aussi odieuse que ridicule, les images des " Temps modernes ". Justement indigné par ce vandalisme, M. Robert Poulet écrit dans " Cassandre " :

" Songez que Charlie Chaplin a mis cinq ans à terminer ce nouvel ouvrage, dont il n'est sans doute pas un centimètre qu'il n'ait longuement étudié et pesé! Et quand un tel artiste s'est enfin décidé à livrer son œuvre au public, dans l'état où il l'estime accomplie, on voit des gens se ruer sur ce produit de la plus pure imagination poétique et le mutiler à leur guise. Que dirait-on si n'importe quel imbécile, détenteur d'un Rubens, se permettait de lui enlever un morceau, sous prétexte que " cela fait mieux " ou que le sein de Digne allume l'œil de ses rejetons!...

" C'est aussi pour des raisons de moralité publique que certaine commission de censure a exigé le massacre de " Temps modernes ". Il fallait rendre le nouveau Charlot accessible aux enfants!... Il paraît que les deux coups de revolver tirés dans le film, et que le geste de Paulette Goddard chipant quelques bananes, auraient pu corrompre irrémédiablement le sens du bien et du mal chez les " moins de seize ans ". C'est sombrement idiot!... Toute personne douée d'un minimum de discernement élémentaire comprendrait que ce qui importe dans un spectacle, au point de vue moral, ce n'est pas le fait, c'est l'" esprit ". Tous les enfants savent fort bien que les crimes et délits commis dans le film de Chaplin n'ont aucune valeur exemplaire: ils vous diront tous: " C'est pour rire! " Mais il paraît que la mentalité des censeurs officiels est encore au-dessous de ce qu'on peut attendre d'un adolescent tardif et anormal.

" Je me suis renseigné. On m'a dit que ces critiques improvisés sont des hommes et des femmes du monde. Charlie Chaplin est censuré par Chrysale, par Philaminthe et par M. Poirier. Dès lors je pose une question très sérieuse: Ne pourrait-on, bien gentiment, avec la plus grande politesse, renvoyer ces messieurs et dames à leurs parties de bridge et à leurs tasses de thé!..."

### Modern Times (1936)

An interesting case of how the BeBFC proceeded in terms of cuts, is Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). The book of cuttings (16.3.1936) shows that the movie was only available for children if five cuts were made. One of those cuts dealt with the well-known scene where Chaplin suggests (or indicates) the use of cocaine in American prisons. Also the use of violence and theft were reasons to cut the movie. These practices of censorship were deployed by many film critics, as is the case in this article.

Source: *La Flandre Libérale*, 3 April 1936

<sup>03</sup> See for instance the US (Lunders, 1955; Leff & Simmons, 1990; Jacobs, 1991) and Great Britain, where in 1909 the Cinematograph Act was voted and where three years later the British Board of Film Censors was founded (BBFC, nowadays: British Board of Film Classification) (Lunders, 1955; Robertson, 1989).

<sup>04</sup> Examples are Sweden (where film censorship was imposed in 1911), Norway (1913), France (1916), Belgium (1920), Italy (1923) and The Netherlands (law of 1926, altered in 1927) (Lunders, 1955; Douin, 1998).

<sup>05</sup> We will use the term 'censorship' as an overlapping term.

<sup>06</sup> With the development of film censorship systems terms like 'licences' or 'classifications' were also being used (e.g. Great Britain, France).

ensorship/classification. In some countries the film industry armed itself against the growing opposition by a form of self-regulation, thus avoiding a (more severe) governmental censorship.<sup>03</sup> Elsewhere, central governments installed an obligatory censorship, mainly during the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>04</sup> All of these boards of film censorship/classification functioned according to their own specific type of rules but most of the time they had the option to forbid or approve certain films, and some of them could ask for cuts before they gave their seal of approval. Many classification boards worked with age categories which again were country-specific (e.g. 12, 14, 16, 18 years or for all). In addition, each censorship board had its own specific sensitivities towards political, social and ethical questions. For instance, the French film censorship/classification system was generally more concerned with the political messages of films or the country's image than with moral or ethical topics. In Great Britain, on the other hand, films conflicting with the prevailing ethical standards ran into much more trouble with the British Board of Film Censor (BBFC) than overtly politically inspired films (Douin, 1998). The disparities between the different systems of film control were partly reflected in the terminology used: while in some countries the term 'censorship'<sup>05</sup> was used (see e.g. the UK)<sup>06</sup>, other countries spoke of 'visa' (e.g. France), 'contrôle' or 'classification' (e.g. Belgium).

It is remarkable that the introduction of an obligatory film censorship in most Western democracies (which often explicitly denounced and forbade censorship of the press) caused relatively few problems. This could serve as an indicator for the perceived inferiority of the medium at the time, when the movies were often regarded as being purely designed for entertainment.

In Belgium, though, no film censorship existed. At least not in theory. Indeed, film censorship literature has often described the Belgian system as quite liberal. The above-mentioned Hunnings (1967: 394-5) claimed that, contrary to other countries, in Belgium 'no censorship of films for adults has ever existed in any form'. Phelps (1975: 242) wrote something similar about the lack of 'adult film censorship'. This liberal conception of Belgian film classification stemmed from its non-obligatory character, introduced by the 1920 law on film and usually referred to as 'the law Vandervelde'. Named after the Socialist leader and Minister of Justice Emile Vandervelde, the Belgian law on film was clearly inspired by the public debate on and the fear of the bad influence film allegedly had on children. It didn't aim to impose censorship but to protect children by lawfully forbidding people under 16 to attend film screenings. The only exception to this general principle was made when the films shown were classified by the newly created Belgian Board of Film Classification (BeBFC; in Dutch: Filmkeuringscommissie; French: Commission de Contrôle des Films) as Children Approved (CA). Before granting this CA label, the board could ask the distributor to make certain cuts in the films up for classification, which they very often did. But in principle, film distributors could skip film classification and offer their films directly to exhibitors who screened them as strictly adult (16+) pictures.

In theory then, there was no censorship law, but daily practice showed that the film industry presented almost all of their films to this board of film classification. This 'benevolence' stemmed from commercial considerations, since children and families usually formed the main audience of film theatres. Internal documents of the board show that the film industry not only complied with most of the imposed cuts, but went even further by conducting preliminary cuts before classification began. The practice of cutting films in Belgium, its reasons and wide-ranging implications have long been left unexplored by academics. In this regard, the research project *Forbidden Images* plays a pioneering role and the findings presented in this paper are the first of their kind for Belgium.

## 2. FORBIDDEN IMAGES: METHODOLOGY

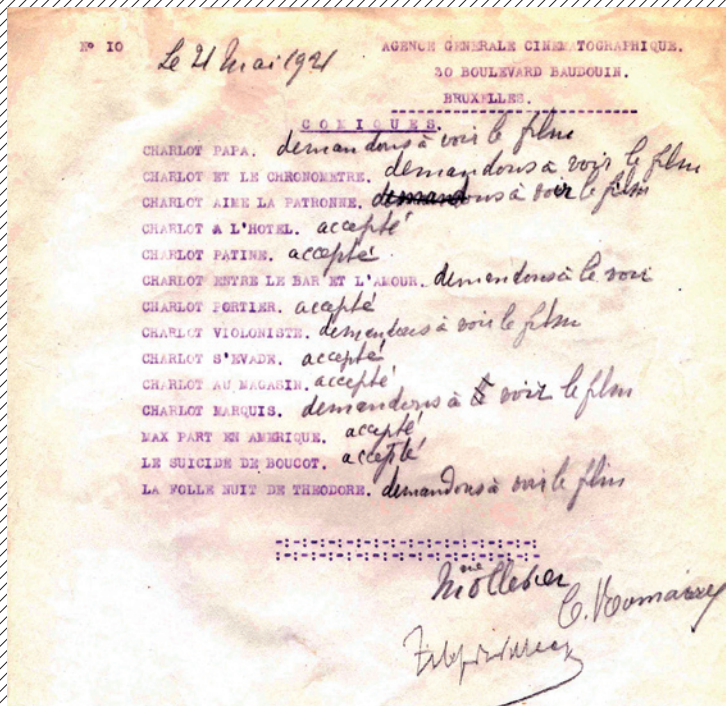
In order to get a precise view of the Belgian film classification history, the Forbidden Images research project turned towards the Belgian Board of Film Classification's (BeBFC) original archive material. The BeBFC kept a hand-written inventory of all their decisions, listing the Belgian title of the film, its distributor, genre and length, the date of classification and the actual classification: Children Approved (CA), Children Not Approved (CNA) or Children Approved after Cuts (CA-C). Apart from this inventory, they had a separate list with descriptions of all the cuts they had ever asked for. This rich archival material has been turned into three separate databases, as is shown in table 1.

*Table 1. Summary of databases for the Forbidden Images research project*

	BeBFC's INVENTORY	BeBFC's CUT DESCRIPTION
<b>Sample</b> <b>Type of entries</b> <b>Goal</b>	1. INVENTORY COUNT no sample, all titles included number of feature films, short films, documentaries, newsreels, cartoons, attractions to get a general idea of all films classified between 1922-2003	
<b>Sample</b> <b>Type of entries</b> <b>Number of entries</b> <b>Number of identified titles</b> <b>Info direct from original listings</b> <b>Additional info</b> <b>Encoded info</b> <b>Goal</b>	2. INVENTORY DATABASE 1 September - 31 November of each year <sup>07</sup> feature films only 10 041 7 616 Belgian title/classification date/distributor/genre/classification (CA, CNA, CA-C) original title/origin/production year/director information on number of classified films, their origin, classification decisions,...	3. DATABASE OF CUTS no sample, all titles included all type of films 9 727 8 122 Belgian title/classification date/distributor original title/origin/production year/director per film up to three encoded reasons for cuts: 14,289 encoded reasons information on reasons why films were cut

<sup>07</sup> The sample consisted of all feature films presented during 1 September-30 November of each year, on the condition that at least 100 film titles could be identified. If not, the classified films during December and August could also be entered.

Firstly, all films mentioned in the hand-written inventory were counted. A distinction was made between short films, feature films, cartoons, newsreels, attractions and documentaries. This resulted in a database called Inventory Count which gives an overview of the type and number of films that were annually classified by the BeBFC.



### Chaplin silents

In the first months of its workings the BeBFC classified movies mostly on the basis of title and scripts. Many older short movies were presented, including comics such as those by and with Chaplin. This protocol dated 21 May 1921, for instance, accepted most comics for children, although the jury asked for a special viewing session for movies such as *Charlot papa* or *Charlot entre le bar et l'amour*.

Source: BeBFC Archive

<sup>08</sup> The identification was conducted by systematically going through specialist magazines such as *La Revue Belge du Cinéma*, an archival research in the Royal Belgian Film Archive, an extensive film database (CITWF2), websites such as [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) and [bifi.fr](http://bifi.fr), and more specialised websites (e.g. a Belgian website selling hundreds of film posters).

<sup>09</sup> In 1992, the board asked for their last cut in a film called *Méchant Garçon* (1992, France, Charles Gas-sot). In it a scene of sexual intimidation was cut.

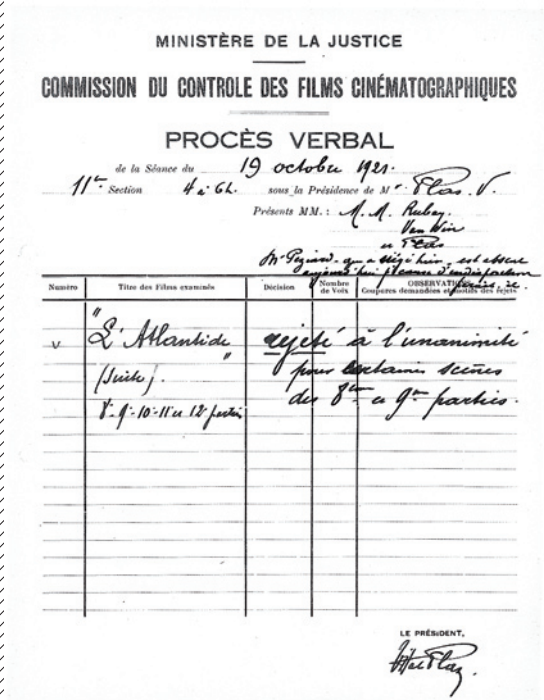
Secondly, an Inventory Database was drawn up based on a sample of all the feature films that had been classified by the board between 1922 and 2003. Officially, the BeBFC started in 1921, but due to technical problems and serious protest from the film industry, it did not function properly until 1922. This Inventory Database was closed with the year 2003 (the beginning of the project). For each feature film the classification decision (Children Approved/CA, Children Approved with Cuts/CA-C, and Refused or Children Not Approved/CNA) was entered, together with the information on length, genre, and whether the film had been presented in appeal or not. For each film then, an attempt was made to retrace the original title, production year, origin, distributor, director and producer (identification). Films presented during the silent era were extremely difficult to track down, since the main existing databases (e.g. The Internet Movie Database) are less accurate for this period and contain many fewer alternative titles. Moreover, the Belgian film industry proved to be very creative during this period in coming up with local (mainly French) versions of a title. Of the 10,041 feature films in the database 7,616 could be identified.<sup>08</sup> The data were analysed with the statistical program SPSS. The results of this analysis enable us to outline the number of classified films between 1922-2003, the development of their classification decisions, the origin of these films and an development of the film distribution market.

The third database was based on the descriptions of cuts listed by the classification board. As can be seen in Table 1, this Database of Cuts is not a sample, but consists of all films on which cuts have been imposed between 1922 and 6 August 1992.<sup>09</sup> First, a code book was drawn up based on the internal circulars of the board, the BeBFC's secure transcriptions of all the cuts they ever asked for, as well as some foreign guidelines for cutting films (such as the detailed lists of the BBFC). The code book consisted of 15 major categories (violence, crime, sexuality, language, drugs) and 110 subcategories (e.g. within the category 'crime', it was possible to specify 18 subcategories such as burglary, kidnapping, murder, theft). With the aid of this codebook it was possible to systematically encode up to three given reasons for the obligatory cuts per film, resulting in 14,289 coded reasons for 9,727 film titles. Of the latter, 8,122 could be identified by their original title, production year, origin, distributor, director and producer. This database in particular provides a lot of analytical possibilities, among which the outlining of the evolution of the film classification board's sensitivities. In addition, this kind of data also makes it possible to compare the cutting of films according to their country/continent of origin.

## 3. FORBIDDEN IMAGES: FINDINGS

### 3.1 NUMBER OF CLASSIFIED FILMS

Our first database, the Inventory Count, provides us with insightful information on the magnitude of the classification board's activities. Between 1922 and 2003, exactly 45,365 films were classified, the majority of which (54,3%) were feature films. Apart from feature films, the commission also classified a lot of trailers, both short and long documentaries, animation films, attractions and, sporadically, commercials. The extraordinarily large number of films presented during the first year of the board's existence is due to a special arrangement which allowed film distributors to submit their entire film stock as quickly as possible. In order to manage the classification of these thousands of films, the board decided not to screen the



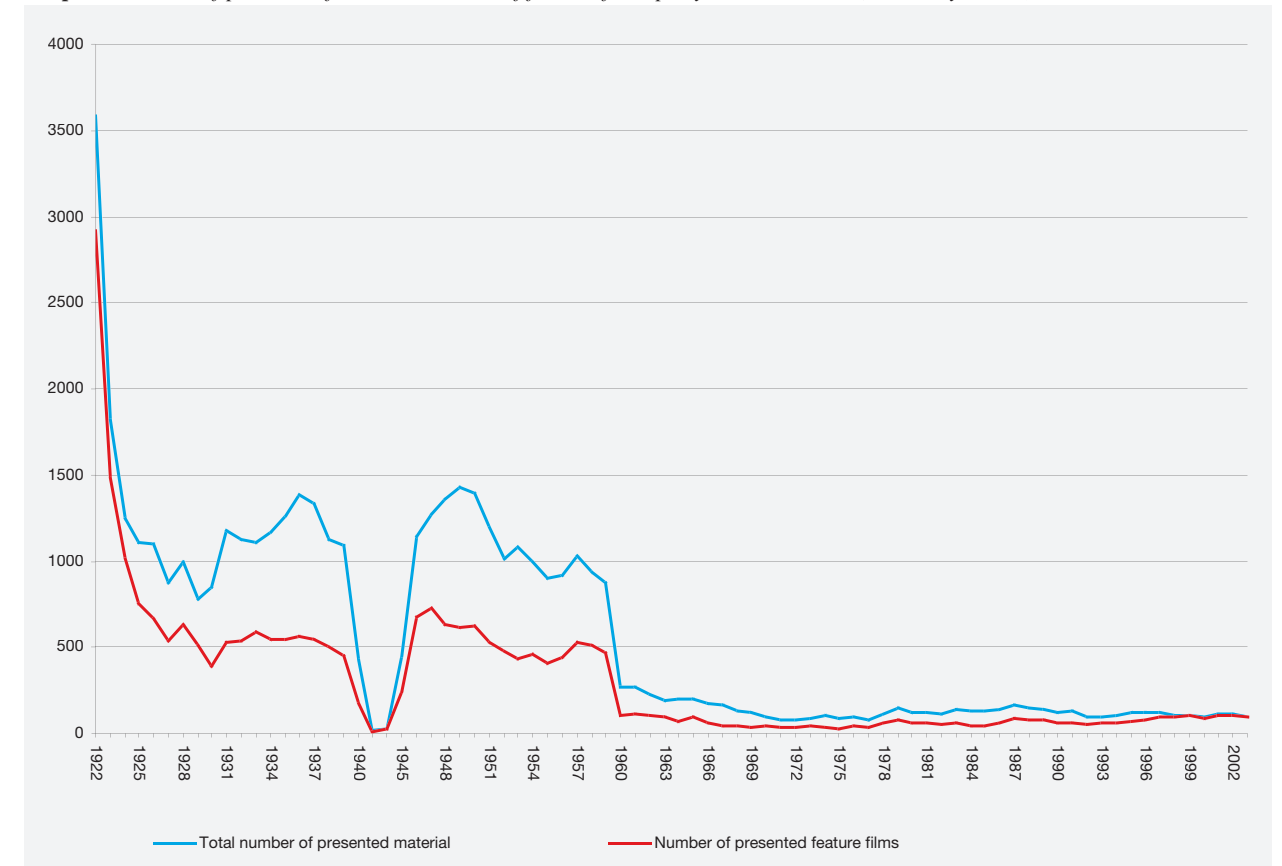
**L'Atlantide (1921)**

The first major film production by Belgian born film director Jacques Feyder was an adaptation of Pierre Benoit's controversial and popular novel of the same title. In 1921 and 1922, Feyder's epic movie, which was shot on location in the Sahara desert, became a major hit. The movie was first released in Paris in June 1921 in the prestigious Gaumont Palace. In October 1922, the French distributor Aubert proposed L'Atlantide to the BeBFC, which argued that the movie could not be screened for children (19.10.1921).

Source: BeBFC Archive

movies but to base their decision solely on the film scenarios. In 1923 then, the number of classified pictures dropped to 1,819 and from 1924 until World War II, numbers stayed fairly stable around 1,000 classified films per year, apart from a small decrease during 1929-1930. Approximately half of these classifications concerned feature films.

**Graph 1.** Number of presented films and number of feature films per year, 1922-2003 (Inventory Count)



During World War II the BeBFC remained active until April 1941, when it was abolished after a collision with the German occupiers. The latter installed a censorship of their own, a subject that ranges beyond the scope of this research project. Consequently, graph 1 shows a serious decline in numbers of classified films for these war years. After the Second World War, the board started classifying again as early as September 1944, but things became quite complicated and confusing when a military censorship was installed at the same time. So for over a year, two official boards of film censorship – one established by the Ministry of Justice and the other by the Ministry of National Defence – were operating simultaneously. While in 1945 barely 418 films were submitted to the BeBFC, that number rose to over a 1,000 films one year later. This boom had to do with the elimination of military censorship on the one hand, and the fact that Hollywood dumped their films in vast numbers on the Belgian market (see graph 5).

MINISTÈRE DE LA JUSTICE  
Commission du Contrôle des Films Cinématographiques

**PROCÈS-VERBAL**

de la Séance de 4.9.1947  
à la Section 1 sous la présidence de M. Beckand  
Présents MM. : Beckand  
Van der Linden  
Van der Linden

NUMÉRO	TITRES DES FILMS EXAMINÉS	DÉCISION	NOMBRE DE VOTES	OBSERVATIONS (censure, excisions et notes sur les notes)
x	<u>Abolished en anglais</u> <u>La Beauté</u> <u>(Gone with the Wind)</u> <u>24 p. 6222 m.</u>	<u>refusé</u>	<u>11/11</u>	<u>Abolished du refus: ce film</u> <u>est basé sur l'histoire</u> <u>culpable d'une femme</u> <u>qui emploie tous les moyens</u> <u>pour séduire le mari de</u> <u>son amie - Il est de plus</u> <u>agréablement de scènes de</u> <u>ménages, de violence</u> <u>et de l'expression de</u> <u>faux principes vraiment</u> <u>immoraux.</u>

LE PRÉSIDENT.  
Beckand

**Gone with the Wind (1939)**

The American film classic *Gone with the Wind* (1939) came to Belgium in 1947. It was released with a 'Children not approved' seal because the film was based on a 'guilty love of a woman who uses all possible means to get a friend's husband'. The movie was also considered to be full of 'false immoral principals' (4.9.1947).

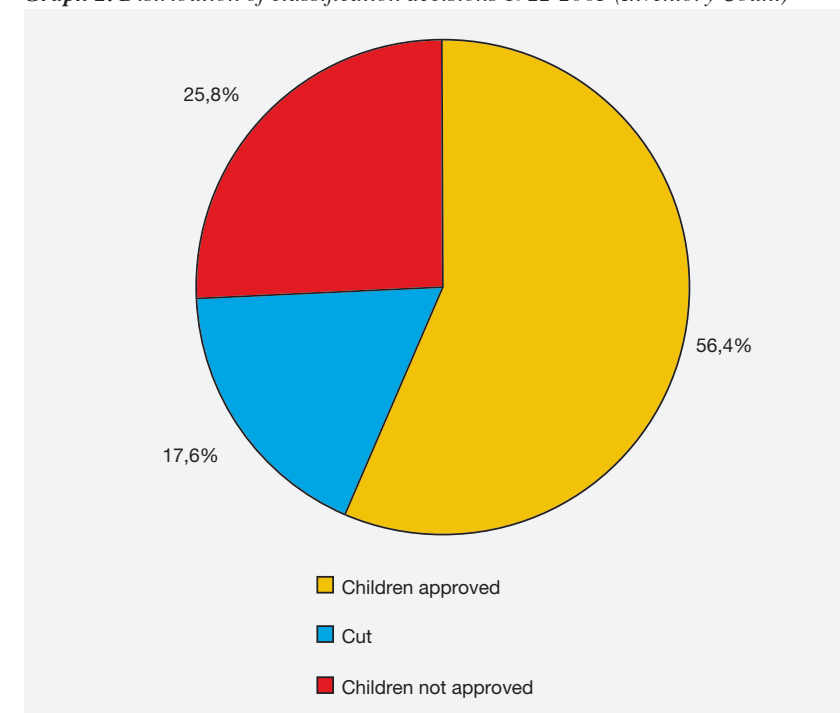
Source: BeBFC Archive

During the post-war period, the board reached their highest number of yearly classified films in 1949 (1,317, of which 41,3% feature films) to progressively dwindle to their lowest point of 196 titles in 1975. Some 114 titles of these were feature films. This dramatic reduction in the number of submitted films after 1960 is difficult to explain, but it seems to coincide with the decline in cinema attendance, the decreasing number of film theatres, the decline of the studio system, the blockbuster phenomenon and hence the reduction of the number of annually produced Hollywood films (Van Heghe, 1977; Thompson & Bordwell, 2003; Cook, 1996). Still, we have to be careful with these assumed associations, since not all films that were screened before a Belgian audience were classified. This was especially true during the 1950s and 1960s, when international film production was exploring such provocative themes as sexuality, eroticism, pornography, violence and drugs. Many film distributors rightfully suspected their films would never receive the CA label – not even with extensive cuts – and skipped film classification altogether.

**3.2 BASIC CLASSIFICATION DECISIONS**

Due to the exceptionally large number of classified film titles and the methodological difficulty of identifying them, we decided to continue with a sample of the films mentioned in the board's inventory (cf. § 2). This Inventory Database proved extremely fruitful when trying to answer questions such as the proportion and increase in the number of CA, CNA and CA-C films (see graph 2, 3 and 4).

*Graph 2. Distribution of classification decisions 1922-2003 (Inventory Count)*



Bruxelles, le 12/3/57.

"L A STRADA"  
\*\*\*\*\*

Relation des coupures effectuées au film

Dans la 2de partie : dialogue et partie de scène pouvant prêter à confusion ;

Dans la 4eme partie: 1) partie de la conversation entre la femme et Gelsomine  
2) réflexions de Gelsomine à Zampano, au cours de leur randonnée.

Dans la 5eme " 1-2) : raccourcissement de la lutte entre le Fou et Zampano, notamment enlèvement de la vue en 1er plan de ce dernier, le couteau à la main.

Dans la 6eme " : raccourcissement de la conversation de Gelsomine et du Fou - après l'arrestation de Zampano.

Dans la 11eme " : enlèvement de la scène pouvant faire supposer le vol des objets religieux

Dans la 12eme " : 1) raccourcissement de la bagarre  
2) partie de la scène où Zampano constate et craint le décès du Fou  
3-4) le transport du corps ainsi que la mise en scène pour faire croire à un accident.

Dans la 14eme " : raccourcissement de la bagarre extérieure entre Zampano ivre et les consommateurs.

L'ensemble des coupures s'élève à cent vingt et un mètres environ.  
\*\*\*\*\*

### La Strada (1954)

Another movie with a long history of classification and censorship was Fellini's *La Strada* (1954). The movie was introduced to the BeBFC in August 1955. *La Strada* didn't receive the children-seal for various reasons. In its report (17.8.1955) the jury referred to its "brutal realism", to images of "murder" and to the "simulation of an accident in order to disguise murder and violent riots." Only in April 1957 the movie was reintroduced before the BeBFC. In a letter to the Board, distributor Royal Films meticulously indicated the pre-emptive cuts or 'coupures préalables', more than ten in total, including scenes which might upset the censors and audiences for reasons dealing with religion, violence and drunkenness (letter 12.3.1957). But even now, again, the Board argued that *La Strada* was a brutal spectacle of a man who "terrorizes a young 'innocent' girl" (3.4.1957). In another session, in May 1957, the BeBFC still refused to deliver the 'Children Approved' seal.

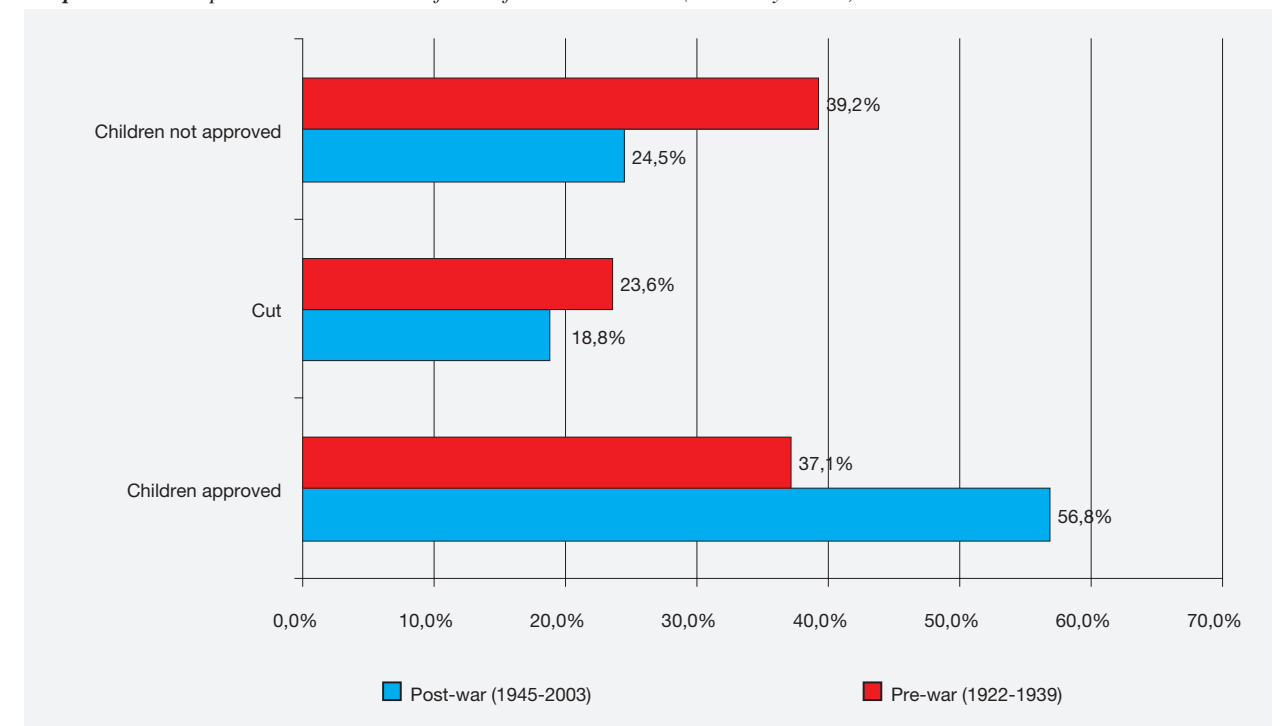
Source: BeBFC Archive

<sup>10</sup> The difference tests between proportions for children approved before and after the war, cut before and after the war and children not approved before and after the war have p-levels of 0,000.

Between 1922 and 2003 over half of the classified titles (56,4%) received the CA label. A quarter of the films (25,8%) were refused (CNA), while the remaining 17,6% were approved after cuts had been made (CA-C). So there seemed to have been a slight disproportion of CA films while the CA-C films were in the minority, although their percentage was still fairly high.

However, this distribution differed greatly from one period to another. For instance, graph 3 shows that during the pre-war period the board acted more severely than during the post-war years. Before the war, 23,6% of all presented films were cut, compared to 18,8% after the war. But the most obvious differences can be found in the two remaining categories: before the war only 37,1% of the films became children approved (CA), compared to over 56,8% during the post-war era. The percentage of refused films (CNA) shows an opposite distribution: before the war 39,2% of the films were refused for a juvenile audience. After the war that percentage had crumbled to 24,5%. All differences in proportions of categories before and after the war are statistically significant.<sup>10</sup>

**Graph 3.** Pre- and post-war distribution of classification decisions (Inventory Count)



Surprisingly, the proportion of cut films during the post-war years was still fairly high, but when we look at graph 4, it becomes obvious that this is mainly due to the censorship practices during the 1950s and 1960s. After 1970, the percentage of adjusted films dropped dramatically to completely disappear after 1992. Graph 4 shows the annual distribution of the classification categories and makes it possible to identify the 'problem years' during which the percentage of cut films exceeds the one of approved films. This happened in 1929,



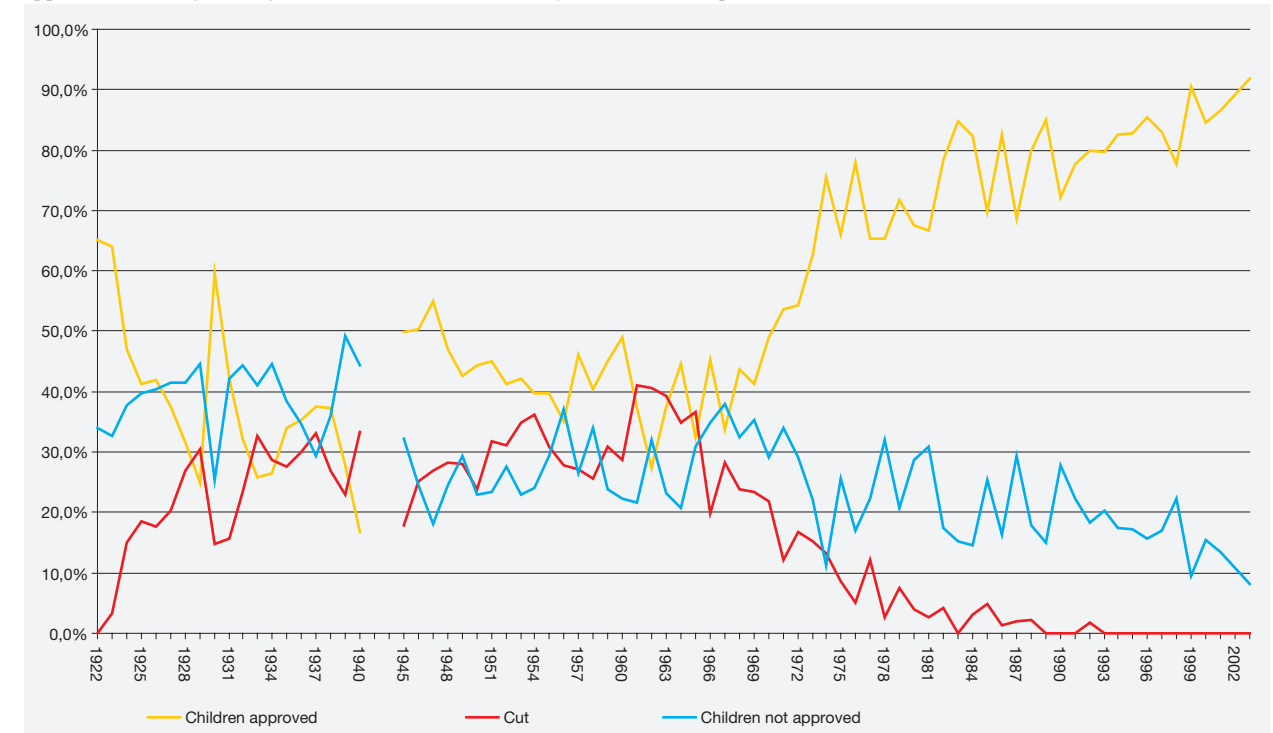
### Casablanca (1942)

Michael Curtiz' Casablanca (1942) came to Belgium after the war. In November 1945 both the movie and its trailer were sent to the Board of Film Classification. The BeBFC decided to admit the trailer only after cutting a scene where "a man was killed/shot in the back by the police". During the same viewing session (17.11.1945) the jury argued that the movie could not be shown to children arguing that images of "international espionage" and a "suspicious milieu" are not fit for them. In May 1950 Warner Bros went to the Board again, now with a version which was so mutilated that the Board's president De Busschere wrote that the movie had been subjected to so many cuts that it has become somewhat incoherent. This highly cut version was open for family viewing (7.5.1946). Five years later, in July 1951, Casablanca was shown to the Board again, probably in a less cut or even complete version. Now the BeBFC agreed to give the 'Children Approved' seal without cuts (4.7.1951).

Source: Ghent University Library

1933 and 1934, and 1961 to 1963. We could do the same analysis for percentages of the CNA films which surpass the percentages of CA films from the second half of the 1920s until the beginning of the war (1927-1929; 1932-1935; 1939-1940) and after the war sporadically in 1956, 1962 and 1967. These two findings combined lead to the identification of four extremely troublesome years during which the proportion of CA films was at its lowest and was surpassed by both the percentages of cut and CNA films, namely 1929, 1933, 1934 and 1962. Of course, this type of analysis does not permit us to take into account all the preliminary cuts conducted by film distributors, so it could well be that in reality the proportion of cut films was even higher.

**Graph 4.** Evolution of the BeBFC's decisions: children approved (CA), children approved with cuts (CA-C) and children not approved (CNA) (feature films, 1922-2003, %, Inventory Database, sample)



### 3.3 ORIGIN OF CLASSIFIED FILMS

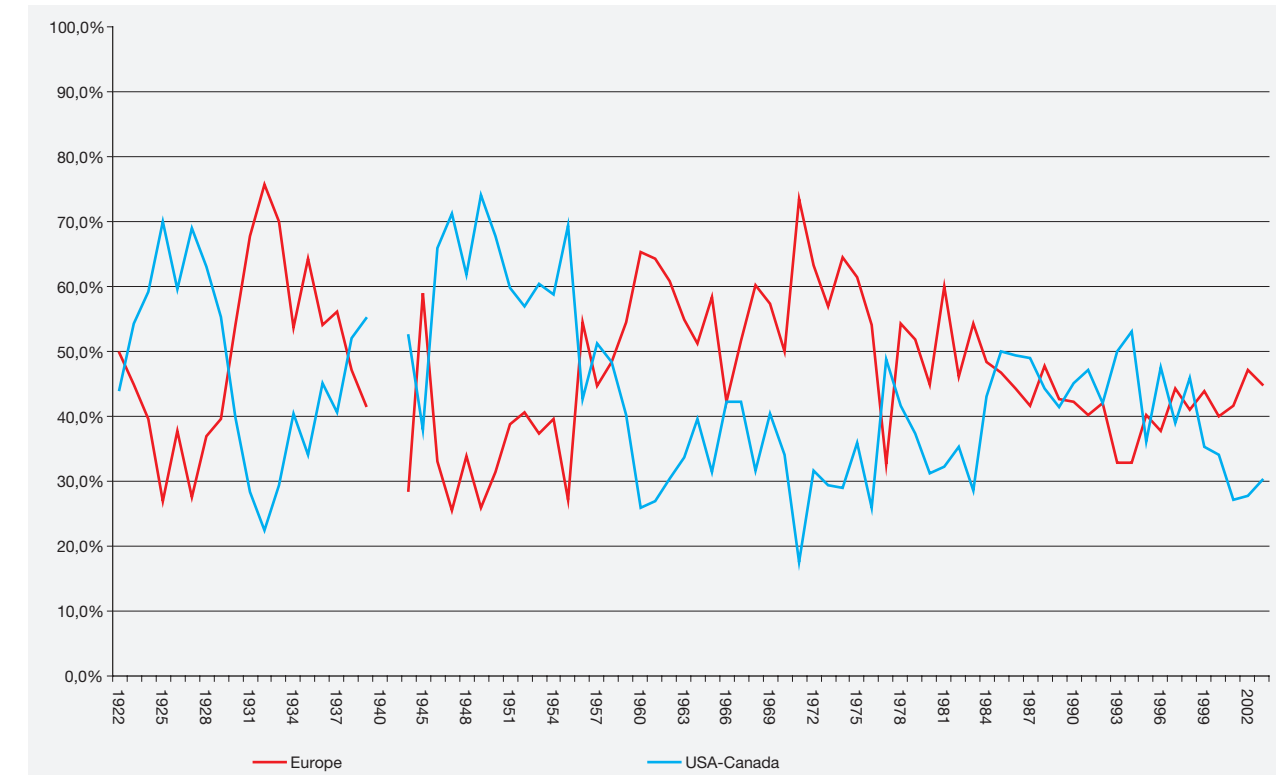
Apart from containing data on the classification decisions, the Inventory Database (which is a representative sample of all classified films) also holds information which enables us to trace the origin of the (classified) films in Belgium. Interestingly, analysis of the Inventory Database revealed that the partition of European films (44,9%) and American films (44,8%) remained relatively stable for the whole period under scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> Even when we take co-productions into account, the division between European and American films turned out to be equal both before and after World War II, with a small imbalance of European films (49,1% against 48,2% of American films) during the inter-war period. These figures, however, have to be nuanced when

<sup>11</sup> The proportion of films stemming from areas other than Europe and Northern America has always been extremely marginal.



looking in detail and in a longitudinal perspective. As graph 5 shows, American films most certainly have dominated the Belgian film market during certain periods, such as the silent period and the immediate post-war years.

**Graph 5.** Evolution of European versus USA-Canadian classified films per year, 1922-2003 (Inventory Database, sample)



In this regard, the research findings stemming from the Inventory Database closely coincide with international historical descriptive studies about the European-American film industrial relations. For instance, the international rise of American cinema is mostly situated during the 1920s, with an increasing number of American distribution houses in Europe, a growing structural interference of Hollywood in local film markets, and the enormous export of American films themselves. Graph 5 on the origin of the feature films within the Inventory Database, reveals how the portion of American films increased during the first half of the 1920s (from 43,5% to 70,4%). The introduction of sound made the percentages of annually classified American films drop under those of European productions. In 1932, the percentage of American films in the database reached its lowest point of 22,4%. After that, it climbed back up again to 55,5% at the end of the 1930s. Initially, the adoption of synchronised sound systems had meant an opportunity for European – most notably French – film industries, who had a clear language advantage in Belgium. Between 1931 and 1934 the portion of European films was about 70%. However, language alone was not the only factor to affect this development. The shifts in film supply originating from either Europe or America were also influenced by new overseas strategies concerning film production, promotion and international distribution (cf. larger investments in (co)production,

Coupages préalable

Revisions  
1<sup>re</sup> Section  
- 9 - 7 - 1963  
51886

THE UNITED ARTISTS S.A.B.  
247, rue Royale, Bruxelles, Tél.: 17-75-94

présentent  
" SOME LIKE IT HOT "

(Some Like It Hot)

S.A.  
Revisions  
16-7-1966  
51900

**Fiche Technique**  
Produit et mis en scène par Billy Wilder  
Scénario de Billy Wilder & I.A.L. Diamond  
d'après une histoire de R. Thorndike  
Photographie ..... Charles Lang, Jr.  
Montage ..... Arthur Schmit  
Musique de ..... Adolph Deutsch

**Distribution**  
Daguer ..... HUBERT MORIS  
Joe ..... TOBY CUNNINGHAM  
Jerry ..... JACK LEWIS  
Spats ..... GEORGE RAFT  
Mulligan ..... PAT O'BRIEN  
Osgood ..... JANE B. HARRIS  
Bonaparte ..... MARSHALL BRONOFF

Producteurs associés ... Decca Harris et I.A.L. Diamond  
Titillettes de Miss Monroe ..... Jerry Kelly  
Gen ..... Fred Lau

Joe ..... JACK WEAVER  
Policier ..... MELVIN FRANK  
Westphal ..... GEORGE D. SPENCER  
Bainstook ..... DAVID R. TAYLOR  
Garde du corps de Spats :  
MICK MORGAN et HARRY WILSON  
Delores ..... DONNA M. WILSON

**Synopsis**  
Chicago, février 1929 - Deux années à l'époque de la prohibition.  
Renseigné par Toothpick, l'agent fédéral Mulligan fait une descente dans un débit d'alcool clandestin explicité par Spats Colombo, et en ordonne la fermeture. Au gain de représailles, Spats liquide l'industriel et ses acolytes. Involontairement deux des maîtres de l'orchestre de son établissement, Joe et Jerry, sont témoins de ce sanglant règlement de compte. Reconnus par Spats, ils décident de partir à une escapade comique. Comprant que leur vie est gravement menacée, Joe et Jerry se déguisent en fermes et réussissent à se faire engager dans un orchestre féminin sur le point de partir pour la Floride. Dans un palace qui les ombre vers Miami, ils passent la nuit au milieu de jolies filles qui composent l'orchestre et se lient plus particulièrement avec la plus séduisante d'entre elles, Daguer. Pendant le voyage, Joe et Jerry connaissent des situations du plus haut burlesque où leur tempérament est mis plus d'une fois à bien rude épreuve !  
À peine arrivés à Miami, Jerry est poursuivi par les maffioses d'un milliardaire détreuvé, Osgood Fielding III, qui lui propose bientôt de l'inviter à bord de son yacht. Joe, qui n'est pas resté insensible aux charmes de Daguer, persuade Jerry de rester Osgood à terre. Profitant de l'absence de ce dernier, Joe, incarnant le rôle d'un jeune et séduisant yachtman, séduit Daguer et parvient sans trop de peine à l'entraîner sur le yacht d'Osgood dont il se prend le propriétaire. Quand qu'il terre Jerry dans un établissement jusqu'au petit matin de languoureux tonges dans les bras de son "suspensif", Joe profite dans les bras de Daguer d'inoubliables instants.  
Peu après leur retour à l'hôtel, Joe et Jerry ont la déconcertante surprise de constater que Spats et ses gars du corps de garde sont installés dans l'établissement où doit se tenir un "congrès" réunissant les principaux chefs de la contrebande de l'alcool. Le Président du "syndicat du crime", Little Bonaparte, qui ne pardonne pas à Spats d'avoir laissé échapper les deux témoins de son règlement de compte, le fait supprimer en pleine réunion par Johnny Paradise. Dans la terrible confusion qui s'ensuit, Joe se noie à Daguer la notification dont elle a été l'objet mais avant l'aube qu'elle lui a inspiré. Daguer l'aide de lui en réalisant l'assure de toute sa tendresse. Jerry, de son côté, confesse en supériorité à Osgood... et tous les deux poursuivis par les gangsters que la police arrive à vaincre, rejoignent en toute liberté le yacht surpriseux d'Osgood.

**Some like it hot (1959)**

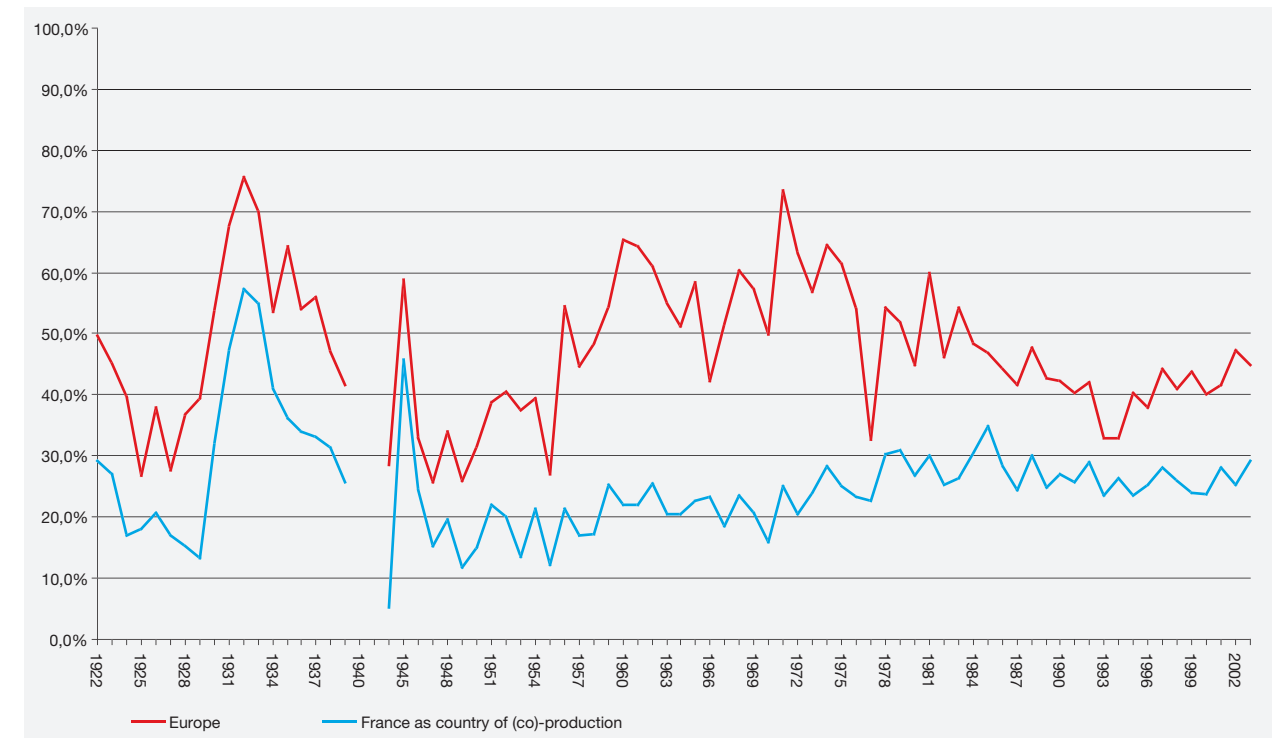
Also Billy Wilder's classic Some like it Hot (1959) did not receive the 'Children Approved' seal. Although United Artists' Belgian branch agreed to cut the movie twice, mainly on violence, the BeBFC did not accept Some like it hot.

Source: BeBFC Archive

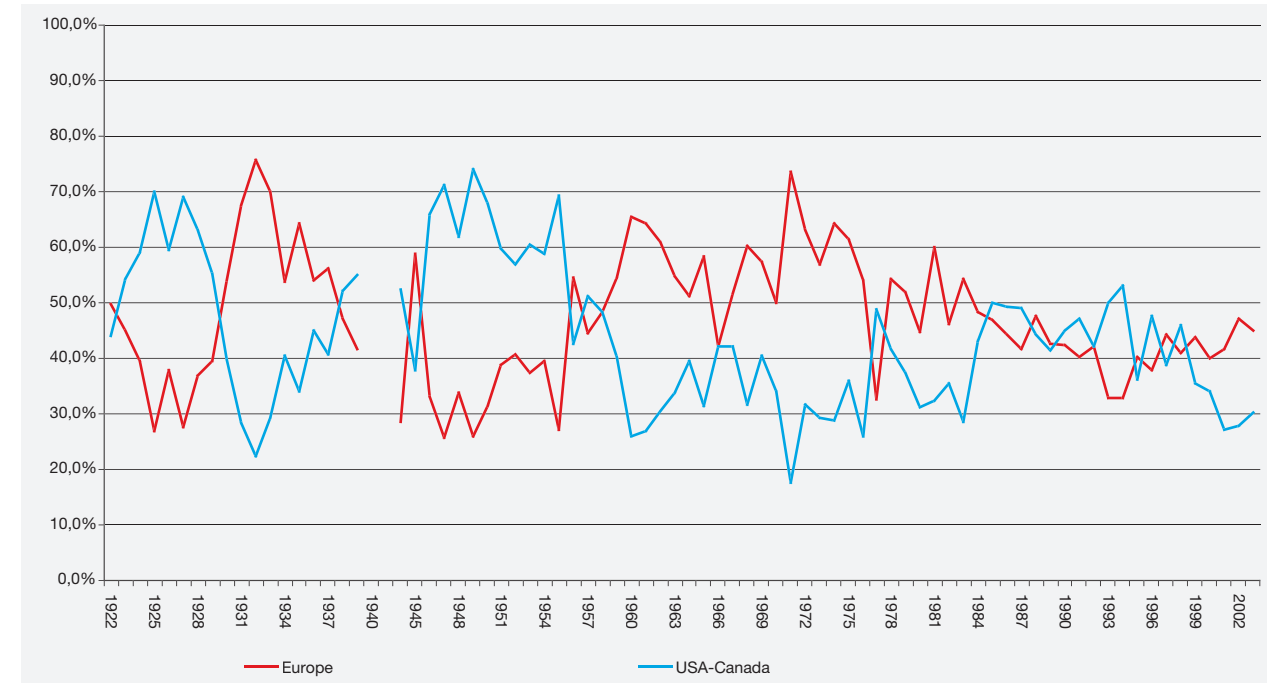
further development of the star system, the refinement of the promoting machine, stronger networks of distribution in Belgium). Moreover, the fact that the proportion of European films decreased after 1934 can be explained by quite a number of factors, such as the crisis most national film industries had to overcome and the decreased interest in German films in Belgium (see graph 7).

When looking at the post-war period, graph 5 again corresponds with international studies, indicating how American films were largely exported to European film markets after the war. In Belgium, this led to a staggering percentage of 74,1% of American films in 1949. From the end of the 1950s though, European films made a spectacular come-back, at least in the Inventory Database.

**Graph 6.** Evolution of percentages of French films compared to percentages of European films of the classified titles per year, 1922-2003 (Inventory Database)



**Graph 7.** Evolution of country of origin Great Britain, Germany and Italy of the classified films per year, 1922-2003 (Inventory Database, sample)



Graph 6 clearly shows that the majority of the European films on the Belgian film market were French, especially during the first years of sound film when neither dubbing nor subtitling was really operational yet. German films were also quite common then, but their popularity collapsed after 1935 (graph 7). Apart from France and Germany, Great Britain and Italy proved to be rather important for the Belgian film supply as well. During the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, the percentage of both Italian and French films was a match for the proportion of American films on the Belgian film market.

### 3.4 REASONS FOR CUTTING FILMS

An important part of the historical research into the Belgian film classification system was the analysis of the reasons why the board asked for particular footage to be eliminated. The Database of Cuts, used for this type of analysis, consists of 9,727 titles and 14,289 encoded reasons for cuts.

This rich database can be employed in various ways, ranging from the analysis of specific periods in time, certain genres or the origin of films. In this paper it is impossible to present all findings, so we will only present some of the general results. As table 2 shows, the main categories for cutting films were violence (41,6%), sex and eroticism (22,10%), and crime (17,5%). Another often mentioned reason for cutting films is the unfavourable representation of marriage and family (8,0%). Finally, the fifth most mentioned reason for cuts (3,6%) had to do with representations of the body in a non-erotic way (such as showing a corpse,



### King Kong (1933)

During the 1930s horror cycle most distributors did not offer their horror films to the BeBFC because they knew it was pointless. Nevertheless, there are some horror titles in the BeBFC's Inventory, all having received the CNA label. The only horror title that ever passed the BeBFC was the trailer for King Kong, albeit with extensive cuts. In order to obtain the much desired CA label distributor Filma had to (1) cut the scene where the companion of the woman is about to be sacrificed to King Kong, (2) the scene where the monkey undresses the woman on the rock, (3) all the scenes of the companion on the fore-plan, (4) the scenes where one can see clearly the young girl dressed very lightly after the undressing scene and (5) the scene where one sees the gigantic eagle crash into the young girl. The image of the wing carrying the girl and placing her on the terrace can stay. Considering that this is a trailer, one could seriously wonder what was left of the original footage.

Source: *King Kong (1933, USA, Cooper & Schoedsack, RKO)*

a disfigurement, tattoos). Categories such as religion, the use of offensive language or the representation of drugs were much less frequent, as were gruesome scientific images or violations of societal norms on discrimination and racism. Due to the specific nature and the high frequency of suicide as a reason for cutting films, this category was regarded as a main category of its own. Suicide was mentioned 328 times as a reason for cutting, which comes down to 2,30% of all encoded motivations.

**Table 2.** Main reasons for cutting films as encoded in the Database of Cuts (1922-1992)

Main category	Frequency	Percentage
violence	5948	41,60%
sex and eroticism	3155	22,10%
crime	2500	17,50%
marriage and family	1143	8,00%
body	516	3,60%
suicide	328	2,30%
drugs	165	1,20%
other	150	1,00%
language	127	0,90%
authorities and nation	126	0,90%
gruesome scientific images	104	0,70%
religion	18	0,10%
discrimination and racism	9	0,10%

Sensitivities towards these main categories have not always been the same and tend to differ across time and according to the origin of the films. Graph 8 illustrates the evolution of the three main categories over time. The graph becomes less relevant after 1970 due to the enormous drop in cut films, but before that time the graph reveals that violence was clearly the dominant reason for mutilating films. The percentage of images cut because of their unacceptable portrayal of violence stays fairly stable, as did the images that portrayed some sort of crime. There is somewhat more variation in the annual percentages of eliminated images containing sex and eroticism. For instance, this type of images has seriously run into the censor's scissors during the further restriction of the Hollywood production codes (see period 1930-1934). After the code was enforced the importance of sexuality as a reason to mutilate films somewhat decreased, but since World War II, the percentage of cut images due to their too explicit sexual content has continued to rise.

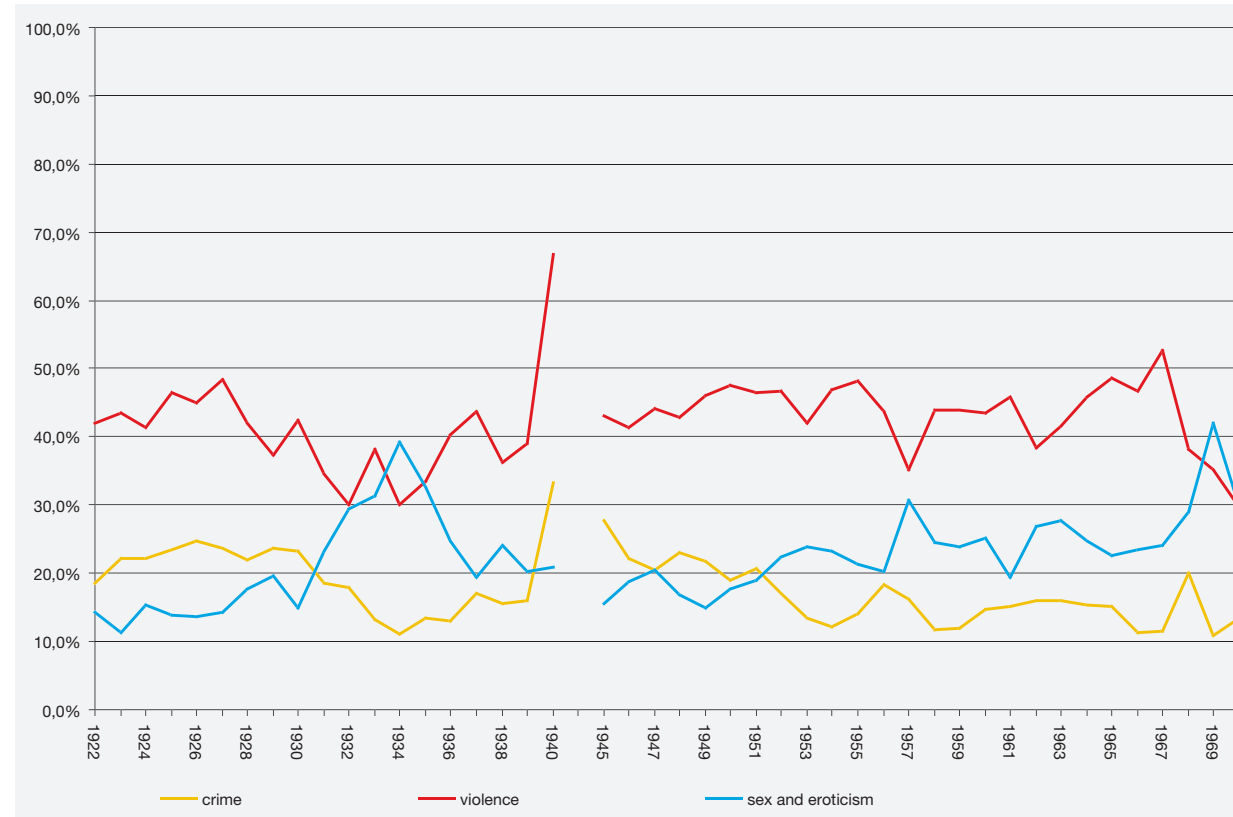


**Tarzan and his Mate (1934)**

Since Tarzan films were regarded as children's films in Belgium, they were often severely cut in order to make them acceptable for a juvenile audience. For instance, the BeBFC asked distributor MGM to cut 10 scenes in Tarzan and his Mate, eight of them had to do with violence. The remaining two had to do with Jane's nakedness which also caused quite a stir in the film's country of origin. At the beginning of the film the killing of a black carrier by the white Martin Arlington had to be omitted. Not that the censor cared much for the indigene characters in the film, they were allowed to die by the dozens, but it is likely that the scene was too reminiscent of the Belgian atrocities in Congo.

Source: *Tarzan and his Mate* (1934, USA, Gibbons, MGM)

**Graph 8.** The evolution of the three main reasons for cutting films, 1922-1992 (Database of Cuts)

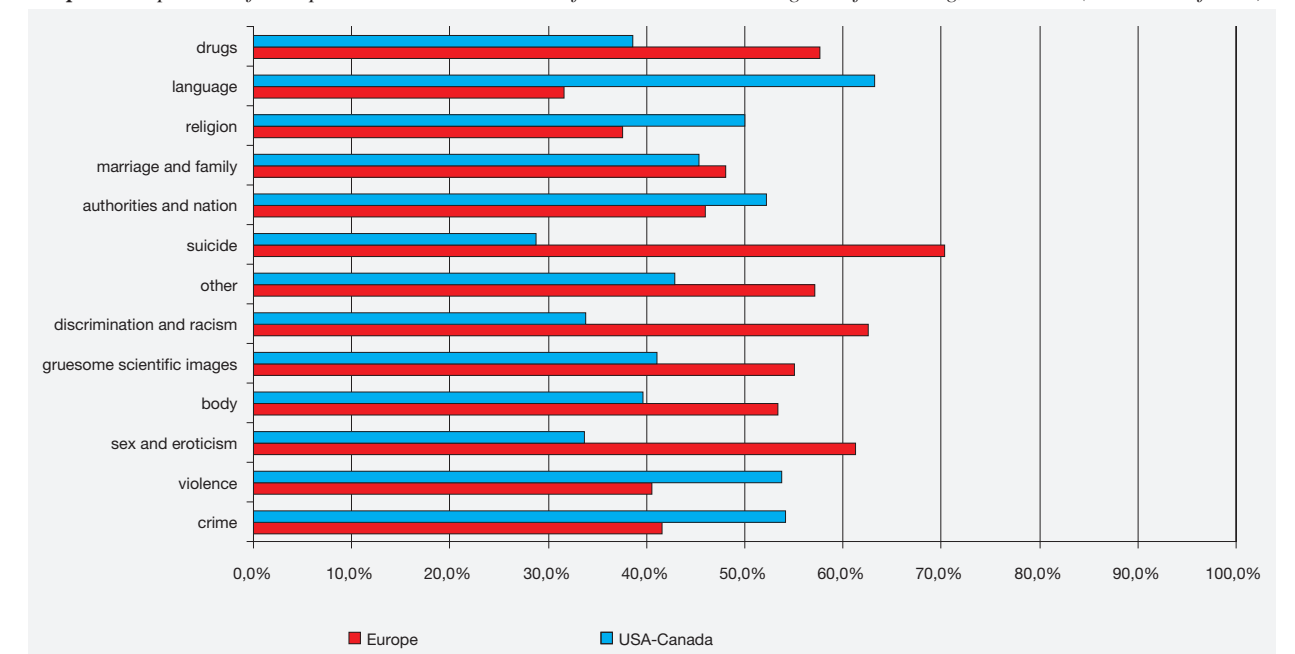


The reasons for cutting films differed not only from one period to the next but also according to the origin of the classified films. Table 3 and graph 9 reveal that American films were mainly responsible for cuts that had to do with crime, violence, language, religion, authorities and representation of the nation, while there is an imbalance of European films in categories such as drugs, suicide, marriage and family, discrimination and racism, gruesome scientific images, sex and eroticism, and finally representations of the body in a non-sensual way. These findings conform with broader notions within popular film criticism concerning the use of violence in American films and eroticism in French movies.

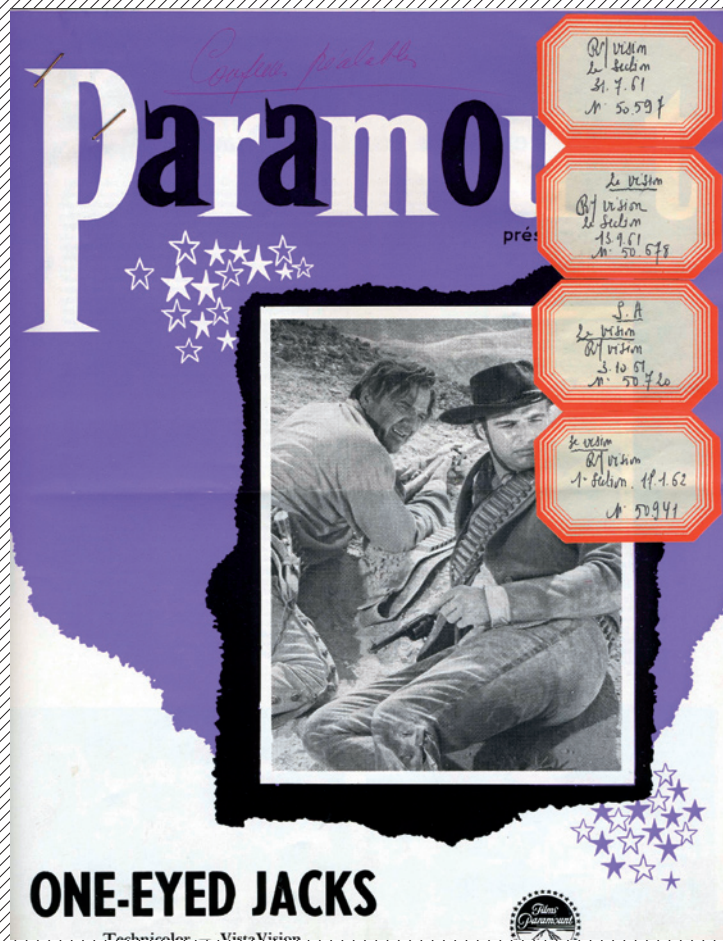
**Table 3.** The main reasons for cutting French and American films (% , Database of Cuts)

Main category	Europe	USA-Canada
crime	41,60	54,20
violence	40,50	53,80
sex and eroticism	61,30	33,70
body	53,40	39,60
gruesome scientific images	55,10	41,00
discrimination and racism	62,50	33,80
other	57,10	42,90
suicide	70,30	28,70
authorities and nation	46,00	52,20
marriage and family	48,00	45,30
religion	37,50	50,00
language	31,60	63,20
drugs	57,60	38,60

**Graph 9.** Proportion of European and North-American films within main categories for cutting, 1922-2003 (Database of Cuts)



Evidently, though, it is not always possible to draw up specific lines between the various main categories (where does violence stop and crime begin?) but this difficulty could be addressed by analysing the 110 subcategories rather than the main categories to which they were assigned. In table 4 the 25 most often mentioned subcategories are summed up. Overall, the BeBFC seemed to be most anxious about images of people fighting, representations of weapons, depictions of murder and portrayals of adultery having a negative impact on young people’s minds.



**One-eyed Jack (1961)**

Marlon Brando's One-eyed Jack (1961) was one of those movies with a turbulent classification history. In July 1961, Brando's hard western was screened for the first time before the BeBFC (31.7.1961), resulting into a refusal. Even though the distributor agreed to cut hard into the movie ('coupures préalables'), the Board continued to refuse One-eyed Jack for children.

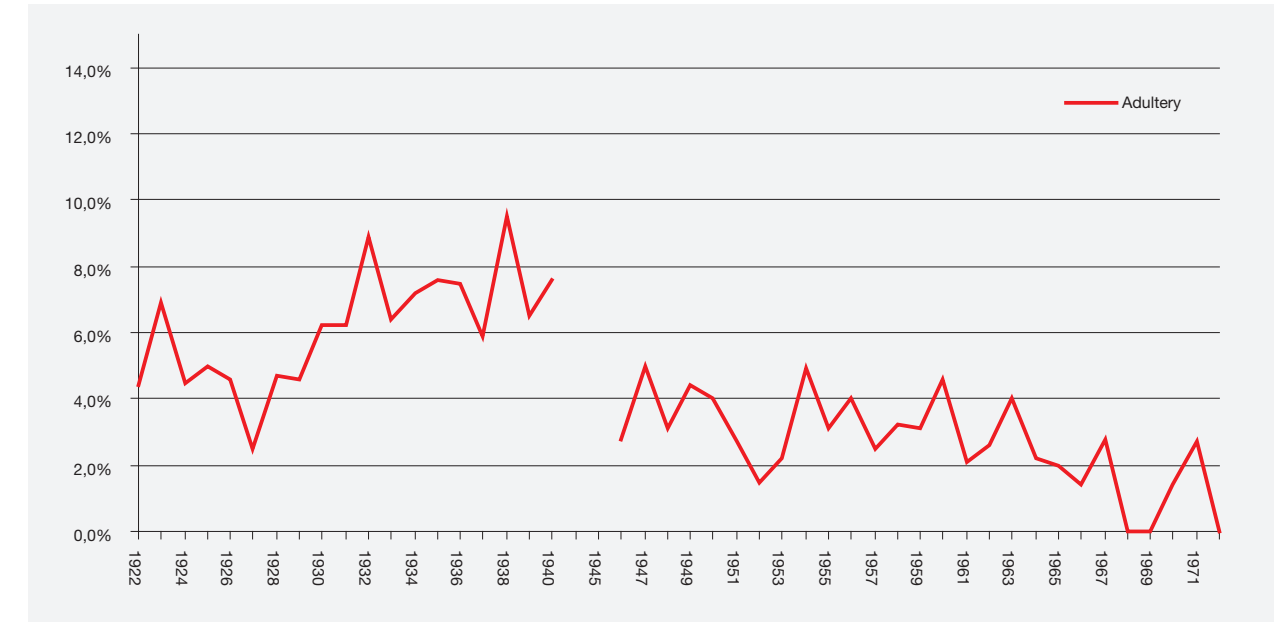
Source: BeBFC Archive

**Table 4. Subcategories for cutting films (Database of Cuts, 1922-1992)**

Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Fighting	1933	13,5
Weapon not fire-arm	1438	10,1
Fire-arm	1242	8,7
Murder	660	4,5
Adultery	650	4,6
Love scene	634	4,4
Kiss	594	4,2
Theft	572	4
Dance	418	2,9
Naked	407	2,8
Violence towards women	353	2,5
Suicide	328	2,3
Undressing	286	2
Forgery	273	1,9
Violence involving animals	256	1,8
Arson	234	1,6
Bedroom	231	1,6
Seduction	224	1,6
Traffic in women, prostitution	223	1,6
Torture	210	1,5
Corpses	198	1,4
Gambling	181	1,3
Blood, wound	177	1,2
Alcohol abuse	142	1
Execution	141	1

This research makes it possible to analyse the evolution of each of these subcategories, but for this working paper we will only give one example, namely the evolution of adultery as a reason for cutting films as presented in graph 10. The graph ends with the year 1972 since after that no image was ever cut out of a film on account of adultery. The representation of adultery was more troublesome in the pre-war period than the post-war years: 60,6% of all the times adultery was mentioned stemmed from pre-war classified films.

**Graph 10.** The evolution of the adultery as a reason for cutting films, 1922-1972 (Database of Cuts)



Again, the distribution of European and American films within these categories was unequal. Graph 11 illustrates the subcategories that could be related to sensuality and representations of the body, while graph 12 represents the subcategories that have to do with violence and/or illegal activities. The dominant colour in graph 11 is obviously red (European) and the colour blue (USA-Canada) dominates graph 12. Not one subcategory in graph 11 is dominated by American films, although the distribution of European and American films within cut images containing a kiss was fairly equal.

Graph 12 nuances graph 9 somewhat, in a way that within certain specific depictions of violence or illegal activities – such as the depiction of torture, suicide or forgery – European films dominate the American ones. In all other categories, though, it is clear that the majority of cut images stemmed from American films, again confirming international notions that American films are more violent than their European counterparts.



*Edm. Verhaert*  
*Uitvoer. verspreid.*  
*BeBFC*  
 - 5 - 6 - 1968  
 542437

**"LES ENNEMIS"**

Scénario et mise en scène : HUGO CLAUUS  
 Assistante ; Lili Veenman - Prise de vue : Herman Nuyts - Eclairage : Guido Collet - Script : Uta Stassen.  
 Directeur de production : Camiel De Bruyne - Assisant : Pierre Drouot  
 Interprètes : Mike : Dol Negro - Willy : Fons Rademakers - Richard : Robbe de Hert  
 Production : ROLAND VERHAERT

La guerre est ridicule. Deux hommes se trouvent un jour face à face, un fusil à la main, et ils doivent tirer. Simplement parce qu'ils sont nés à deux cent ou à deux mille kilomètres de distance. Il n'y a qu'une ligne théorique, tracée quelque part entre deux voisins. Elle n'est même pas visible sur le sol. Elle est au bout du point de mire. Imaginez un américain sorti du Nevada, ou du Colorado, perdu dans nos forêts ardennaises où même un braconnier a parfois bien du mal à retrouver son chemin.

Voilà ce qui arrive à Mike, soldat de première classe, de la 32e Division Aéroportée en décembre 44.

Les allemands ont tenté une percée vers la Meuse. C'est le dernier sursaut d'une armée agonisante mais il est d'une rare violence. La rapidité de l'offensive Von Rundstedt a semé la panique dans les troupes américaines qui se replient en hâte. Mike, qui a trop bu et en conséquence trop bien dormi, se réveille un beau matin tout seul dans une ferme en ruines qui servait de retranchement provisoire à son unité. Il est rejoint là par Richard, jeune anversois réfugié dans la région et qui, tenté par l'aventure de la guerre, veut rejoindre l'armée américaine. A deux, ils gagnent un village voisin où ils réquisitionnent une moto qui ne les mènera en fin de compte que dans une avancée de chars allemands. La machine est détruite mais Mike et Richard ont la vie sauve.

Ils errent pendant toute la journée. Au soir, repus de fatigue, affamés, ils trouvent refuge dans une ferme isolée. Là, si l'on excepte le vieux père, les femmes sont restées seules. La mère qui a à peu près l'âge de Mike, la fille, un peu plus jeune que Richard.

Au cours d'un repas trop arrosé, une complicité toute érotique va s'établir entre ces êtres emportés dans la même débacle. Mike et Richard passent la nuit cachés dans les foin, pour échapper aux patrouilles allemandes.

Au petit matin glacé, sous le prétexte d'une livraison de petit déjeuner, la mère apporte au soldat, sa part de récompense de guerrier. Jeannette est enfermée dans une autre grange et Richard ne peut que lui demander au travers de la grille cadoussée qui barre le chemin, de se montrer nue pour qu'il emporte au moins cette image tendre et rose dans un combat dont il n'est pas certain de sortir vivant. Jeannette accepte, mais un camion allemand arrive. Poussé par une force qu'il ne peut dé penser autrement, Richard tue l'officier. Le chauffeur se réfugie dans l'étable où Mike va le retrouver en ché derrière les vaches et le fait prisonnier.

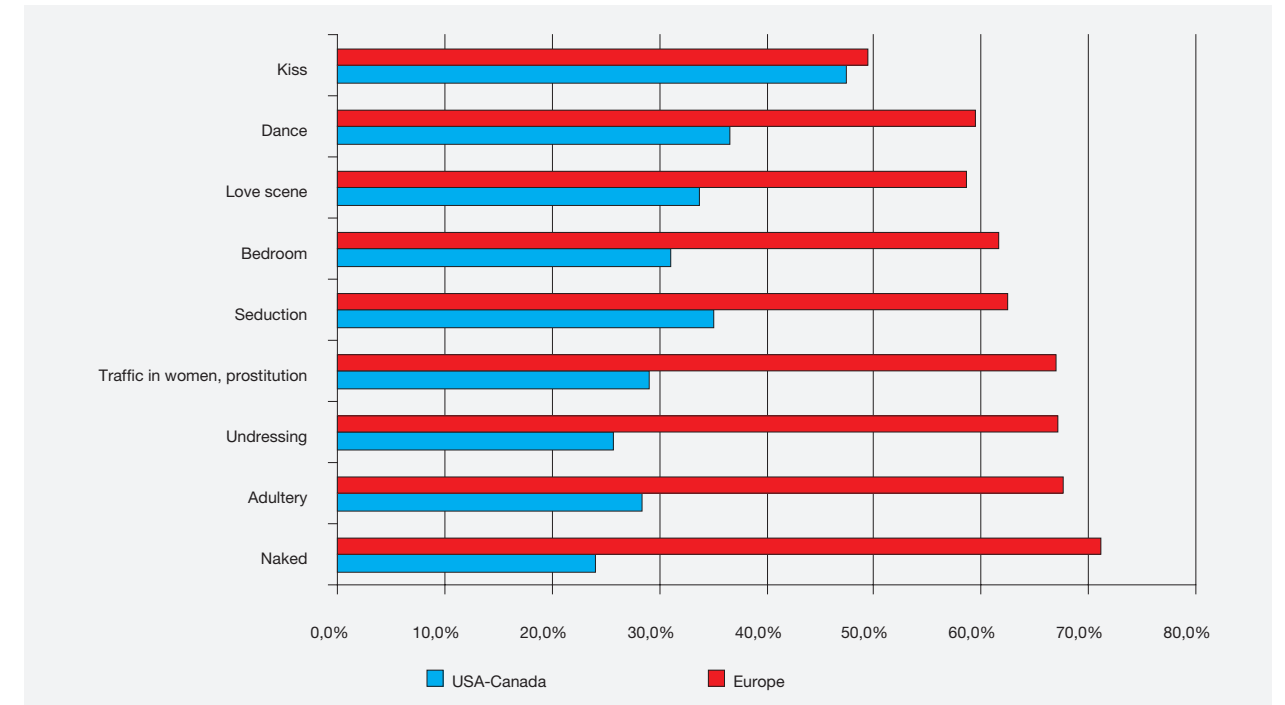
Willy se laisse prendre. Il n'a plus tellement le goût de la guerre à son âge. Le cercle est fermé. Les ennemis sont réunis et dans l'inraisemblable boueulade qui va les emporter, poussés d'un front à l'autre, ils vont par soif de vivre se prendre d'amitié. D'une amitié si profonde qu'au travers de mille aventures, ils en oublieront, jusqu'à l'éblouissement final d'une attaque trop violente, qu'ils n'étaient pas vraiment frères avant de se rencontrer.

**De vijanden (1968)**

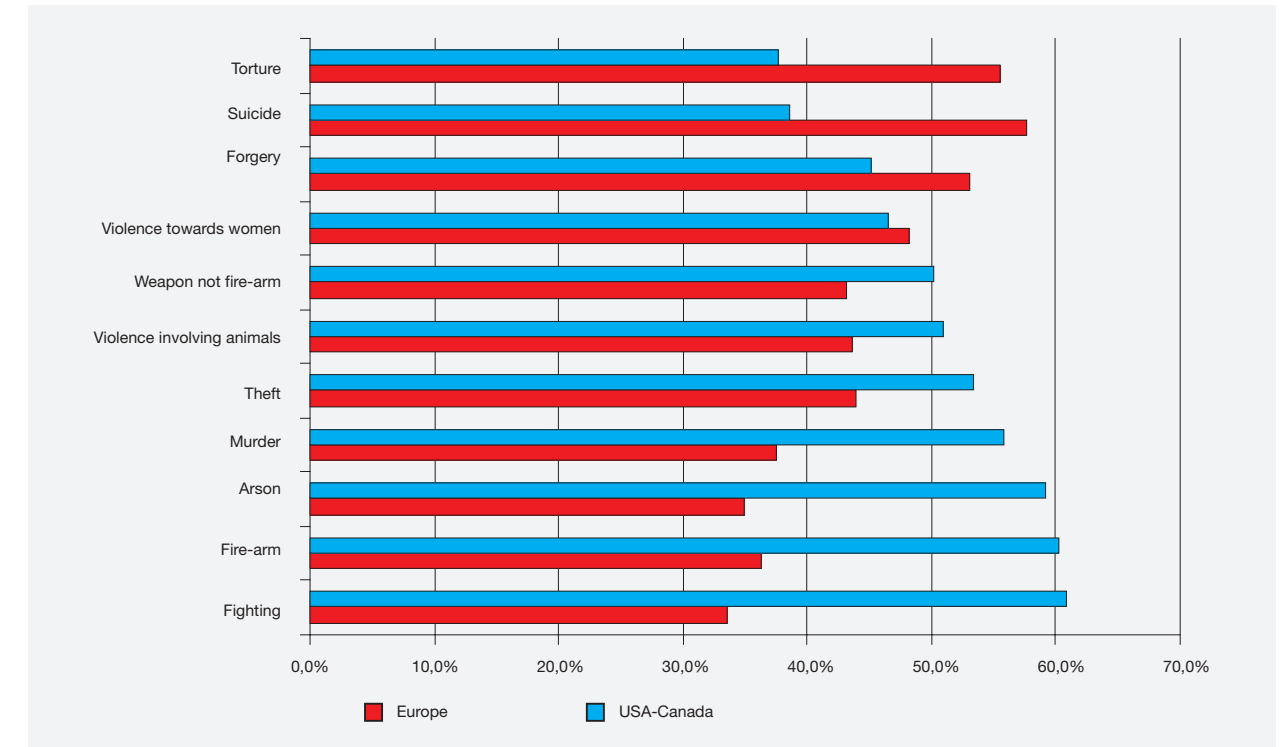
In 1968 Belgian novelist Hugo Claus made *The Enemies* (*De Vijanden*), a war movie on the December 1944-January 1945 Battle of the Ardennes, better known as the War of the Bulge. The movie was released as 'Children Approved' only after two cuttings. Besides the image of a naked girl, a whole scene with the rape of a woman by an American soldier had to be removed (5.6.1968).

Source: BeBFC Archive

**Graph II.** Portion of European and North-American films within main subcategories for cutting related to sex and eroticism, 1922-2003 (Database of Cuts)



**Graph 12.** Portion of European and North-American films within subcategories for cutting related to violence and illegal activities, 1922-2003 (Database of Cuts)



## CONCLUSION

Systematically analysing the BeBFC’s decisions has proven fruitful in many ways. First of all, the findings indicate that the Belgian system of film classification, despite international appraisal for its liberal character, acted very harshly towards films. Until the 1970s, the BeBFC repeatedly asked film distributors to eliminate images and sound from films. In addition, the portion of films that reached an under-aged audience uncut only started to increase in a significant way from the second half of the 1960s. For more than 70 years, cutting films was a common practice in Belgium and although there was some sporadic protest from the film industry and critics, it was abandoned as late as 1992. This rather nuances the idea of Belgium being an exception within the international context of film censorship. Although legally there was no such thing as film censorship in Belgium, our findings support the idea that in practice, there was.

Secondly, the databases revealed the origin of films on the Belgian film market, providing much needed information on the country’s film historiography. The data can be used not only for the history of local film censorship, but they provide insights into the number of films on the Belgian film market, the origin of the movies, etc.

Thirdly, the analysis of why certain images were cut is important for purposes of broader social history (e.g. studies on changing mentalities). This part of the Forbidden Images research project helps clarify the boundaries of acceptable representations of 'troublesome issues' such as violence, crime, sex and eroticism. While marriage, for instance, was regarded as a sacred institution and one of the cornerstones of society, adultery was never to be suggested or shown (even the word adultery was taboo for a long period of time). Interestingly, the major reasons for cutting films differed according to the continent of origin of the films, which significantly reaffirms some popular beliefs about the different attractions of European and American films.

Despite the usefulness of the first rough findings presented in this paper, it is obvious that the analysis needs to be further refined. Apart from scrutinizing the database data further according to period, origin and subcategories, these findings should be regarded as a broader background against which specific case studies into possibly offensive genres, films or controversial directors can be placed. And thus film censorship/classification research forms an integral part of historical reception research and a special form of audience research (with a specific audience, namely film classifiers trying to protect youth from the harmful effects of film). Historical case studies (e.g. Biltreyst, 2006) have revealed that the specific practices of film classification were often less strict than is generally assumed, that the internal discussions between classifiers could be intense, and that classifiers often negotiated with film distributors or directors to decide upon which images should be omitted. Through this type of case study, it becomes possible to grasp the shifting sensitivities of the board – and arguably society – towards probable offensive images and subjects.

We would like to thank the Flemish Scientific Research Council (FWO-Vlaanderen), Cleveland Moffett, as well as the members of the Working Group Film and Television Studies at the Ghent University. •

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Allen, R. & Gomery, D. (1993)** *Film history: theory and practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

**Bilteyst, D. & Van Bauwel, S. (2004)** 'Whitey', pp. 49-60 in E. Mathijs (ed.) *The Cinema of the Low Countries*. London/New York: Wallflower Press/ Columbia University Press.

**Bilteyst, D. & Vande Winkel, R. (2004)** De historiografie van Clemens De Landtsheer en Flandria Film. Deel II: De Bedevaartfilm: productie, censuur en propaganda. *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen op het gebied van de geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging*, 63 (2), 67-86.

**Bilteyst, D. (2005a)** Youth, moral panics and the end of cinema. On the reception of 'Rebel without a Cause' in Europe, pp. 171-189 in J.D. Slocum (Ed.) *Rebel without a Cause: Approaches to a Maverick Masterwork*. New York: SUNY.

**Bilteyst, D. (2005b)** Amerikanisering, jeugdcultuur en morele paniek. Over de receptie en censuur van Amerikaanse jeugddelinquentiefilms van de jaren 1950 in Europa, pp. 299-314 in F. Saeys & H. Verstraeten (eds.) *De media in maatschappelijk perspectief*. Gent: Academia Press.

**Bilteyst, D. (2006)** "Down with French vaudevilles!" The Catholic film movement's resistance and boycott of French cinema in the 1930s, *Studies in French Cinema*, 6 (1): 29-42.

**Bilteyst, D. (2007)** American juvenile delinquency movies of the 1950s and the European Censors: The cross-cultural reception and censorship of *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle*, and *Rebel without a Cause*, pp. 9-26 in T. Shary & A. Seibel (eds.) *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*. Dallas: University of Texas Press.

**Black, G. (1994)** *Hollywood censored*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Buchloh, S. (2002)** "Pervers, jugendgefährdend, staatsfeindlich". *Zensur in der Ära Adenauer als Spiegel des gesellschaftlichen Klimas*. Frankfurt: Campus.

**Cook, D. (1996)** *A history of narrative film*. New York & London: Norton.

**Depauw, L. & Bilteyst, D. (2005)** De kruistocht tegen de slechte cinema. Over de aanloop en de start van de Belgische filmkeuring (1911-1929), *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, 8(1): 4-26.

**Douin, J.L. (1998)** *Dictionnaire de la censure au cinéma*. Paris: PUF.

**Foucault, M. (1977)** *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

**Hervé, F. (2001)** *La censure du cinéma en France à la Libération*. Paris: ADHE.

**Hunnings, N.M. (1967)** *Film censors and the Law*. London: Allen & Unwin.

**Jacobs, L. (1991)** *Wages of Sin*. Madison: Wisconsin UP.

**Van Heghe, J. (1977)** *Film als bron voor geschiedschrijving (in België tussen 1920-1940)*. Gent: Universiteit Gent, unpublished MA thesis.

**Kuhn, A. (1988)** *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925*. London: Routledge.

**Leff, L. & Simmons, J.L. (1990)** *The Dame in the Kimono*. NY: Grove.

**Lesch, P. (2005)** *In the name of public order and morality. Cinema control and film censorship in Luxembourg 1895-2005*. Luxemburg: CNA.

**Lunders, L. (1955)** *La censure des films et l'admission des enfants au cinéma à travers le monde*. Brussels: CEP.

**May, L. (1980)** *Screening out the past: The birth of mass culture and the motion picture industry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Miller, F. (1994)** *Censored Hollywood: sex, sin, and violence on the screen*. Atlanta: Turner.

**Phelps, G. (1975)** *Film Censorship*. Letchworth.

**Randall, R.S. (1970)** *Censorship of the Movies: the social and political control of a mass medium*. Madison: Wisconsin UP.

**Robertson, J. (1985)** *The British Board of Film Censors. Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950*. London: Croom Helm.

**Robertson, J. (1989)** *The Hidden Camera: British Film Censorship in Action. 1913-1976*. London: Routledge.

- Schechter, Harold (2005)** *Savage Pastimes. A cultural history of violent entertainment.* New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Staiger, J. (1992)** *Interpreting Films. Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema.* Princeton: PUP.
- Staiger, J. (1995)** *Bad Women. Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema.* Minneapolis.
- Stevens, L. (2002)** *Strafrecht en seksualiteit.* Antwerp: Intersentia.
- Taylor, R. (1998)** *Film Propaganda, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.* London: Taurus.
- Thompson, K. & Bordwell, D. (1994)** *Film History: An Introduction.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Thompson, K. (1985)** *Exporting Entertainment.* London: BFI.
- Van der Burg, J. & van den Heuvel, J.H.J. (1991)** *Film en overheidsbeleid. Van censuur naar zelfregulering.* 's-Gravenhage: SDU.
- Walsch, F. (1996)** *Sin and Censorship.* New Haven: Yale.
- Wets, P. (1920)** *Une enquête sur les spectacles cinématographiques à Bruxelles.* Brussels. (special issue of the Bulletin de l'Office de la Protection de l'enfance, nr. 14, 28 pp.)
- Wetzel, K., & Hagemann, P. A. (1978)** *Zensur. Verbotene Deutsche Filme 1933-1945.* Berlin: Volke Spiess

**Editors**

Daniël Biltereyst & Sofie Van Bauwel

**Address**

*Werkgroep Film- & Televisiestudies*  
Working Group Film and Television Studies  
*Vakgroep Communicatiewetenschappen*  
Department of Communication Science  
Korte Meer 7-9-11  
9000 Gent  
Belgium

**Phone**

0032 9 264 68 90

**Web**

<http://www.wgfilmtv.ugent.be/>

**Design**

Kameleon Graphic Design - Hans Van Acker

