

OLD FEARS, NEW HOPES: FLEMISH TV FICTION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ALEXANDER DHOEST

Name: Alexander Dhoest

Email Address: alexander.dhoest@uantwerpen.be

Academic Centre: University of Antwerp

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ABSTRACT

The overarching narrative about TV drama and TV more generally is one of continuous change. Taking a step back, in this paper I reflect on changes and continuities in the past 25 years. Starting in the late 1990s, I discuss the challenges facing European serial drama production as the market increasingly commercialised, digitised, and globalised. From a product typically associated with domestic markets,

popular mostly with national audiences, it turned into a transnational commodity, as U.S. drama had been for a long time. Taking the case of Flanders, a small region and TV market, as a starting point, I discuss how these evolutions had an impact on the quantity and quality of drama, with particular attention to the issue of national identity. I argue that, despite many changes and new challenges, including increasing competition, domestic fiction continues to occupy a privileged position in Flanders. Fears about the viability of Flemish drama are not new, but rather the reiteration of old worries, which have challenged the industry – and academics – for at least a quarter century now. Streaming, in particular, carries competition to a new level, but it also creates new possibilities for coproduction and transnational distribution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent and quick spread of SVOD platforms like Netflix and Disney+, the narrative about TV fiction and television more broadly has been one of rapid change, disruption and threat. Existing broadcasting models have been questioned, viewing behaviours have drastically shifted, and “television” as a medium seems to have shifted to a new model, that of “online tv” which (Johnson 2019) defines as “a subset of internet-connected video services that shares core characteristics with earlier forms of TV”, providing “access to editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-connected devices within a closed infrastructure, privileging viewing over other activities” (Johnson 2019: 33).

Undeniably, current “television” differs from former models in many respects, but taking a step back, there are many continuities and echoes from past hopes and fears. In this paper, instead of only focusing on the present, I want to take a longitudinal approach, starting in the late 20th century when linear television still ruled supreme. In this analysis, I focus on television fiction, a key programme category both in terms of quantity and in terms of centrality in discourses about television. In Europe, TV fiction has always been closely tied to issues of cultural and national identity, each country producing its own fiction to cater to local tastes (de Leeuw et al. 2008). However, TV fiction has also always been surrounded by fears in relation to American dominance, threatening both the quantity and quality of the local fiction offer (Buonanno 2008).

In this paper, I hope to provide a clearer view on continuities, thus counterbalancing the predominant narrative that everything is different now. Yes, things have changed, but no, television fiction is not dead nor is everything we witness today so new. In doing this, I will take the Flemish case as a starting point for a broader, European reflection. Flanders is a small region, with a population of some 6.8 million people, as part of the broader Belgian state. The official language is Dutch, which is shared with the Netherlands, but accents are quite different, so Dutch spoken in the Netherlands is perceived as somewhat of a foreign language, and vice versa. French-language Belgium has its own media ecology, which is more oriented to France and will not be further discussed. By focussing on Flanders, I want to do justice to the specificity of local contexts in Europe, while also reflecting on the position of smaller linguistic regions and nations in an increasingly globalised TV market. As elaborated among others by Raats and Lordache (2020), small television markets are characterised by smaller budgets and limited export possibilities.

2. FLEMISH TV FICTION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Flemish TV started in 1953, with a public broadcasting monopoly. In this period, which lasted until 1989, domestic TV fiction occupied a privileged position in the schedules. While single plays were strongly represented in early schedules, serial formats quickly became the norm, although mostly restricted to a single season. Some of the most popular productions of the monopoly period were serials. Not all that many shows were made, some 32 over a period of 36 years, but they occupied a central position in the schedules, and they carried a lot of the broadcaster’s prestige. While often popular in tone, they were inspired by strong wish to “educate” the viewers about their cultural heritage and national past. Hence, almost half of the productions in this period were literary adaptations (15 out of 32), and 20 were situated in the Flemish past (Dhoest 2004). Thus, as in many other European countries, in this early period Flemish TV fiction had a strong “national” flavour, helping to construct a sense of Flemish identity within the broader Belgian context (de Leeuw et al. 2008). This fitted within the Public Service broadcasting ethos, which was strongly inspired by the BBC and strongly oriented inwards, on the nation’s self-definition (Van den Bulck 2001).

In 1989 the first commercial channel, VTM, started to broadcast in Flanders, as part of the European wave of television liberalization and commercialization. One of the big fears, at the time and across Europe, was that commercial broadcasters would massively import cheaper, mostly American fiction, which would lead to a loss of national identity – in cultural terms – and harm national TV industries – in economic terms. Another fear was that increasing competition would impact ratings and make domestic fiction, one of the most expensive program categories, unprofitable. Or, alternatively, that it would lead to ever cheaper productions and lowering quality (De Bens 1991, Bondebjerg et al. 2008). Quite the opposite happened. Not less, but more serial TV was made, not only by the first commercial broadcaster VTM but also by public broadcaster VRT. Serial TV turned out to be one of the key “weapons” in the war for viewer attention among Flemish channels. Flemish serial fiction was also a key asset in the competition with the increasing number of international channels. Flemish fiction, in short, turned out to offer a unique selling proposition; beside a public asset, it also became a commercial asset. Viewers still preferred domestic fiction over international fiction, so Flemish serials continued to occupy central positions in the schedules.

However, there were some significant changes in the 1990s, most importantly an increase in serialisation. More episodes were made, in popular genres, in longer and multiple seasons. Daily soaps, the long-form serial format by excellence, were introduced, both on commercial broadcasting (*Familie*, 1991) and on public broadcasting (*Thuis*, 1995). These programs became the cornerstones of daily schedules, which they continue to be until today. In the “series” format, with self-contained episodes, the sitcom was the most popular genre. Many new shows were launched, and a few reached the status of “evergreens”, *FC De Kampioenen* (VRT, 1990, 21 seasons) and *De Kotmadam* (VTM, 1991, 25 seasons). Both are still repeated until this day. Finally, crime shows of all kinds were developed, often “serialised series” (Bignell 2004) offering the combined appeal of the “crime of the week” series and serials with continuing storylines throughout the entire season. As a result, from the 1990s Flemish domestic fiction was revitalized.

As to the fear about lowering quality, more popular, cheaper genres were produced, in contrast to the dominance of prestige heritage fiction in the monopoly period. However, the increased output led to professionalization of all aspects of TV fiction, with a steep learning curve and increasing production value, particularly in view of the relatively low budgets. More people wrote and made serial TV fiction professionally, getting the chance to hone their skills and gradually improving the level of scripts and production value. Moreover, the growth of popular productions was accompanied by a parallel stream of “quality productions”, often single season high profile serials with high ratings.

As to national identity, serial TV fiction remained strongly rooted in Flanders: it was written and produced in Flanders, for Flemish audiences, and was hardly ever exported, except to the Netherlands. However, compared to the monopoly period, the focus was less on cultural heritage and the national past. Rather, popular genres such as soaps and sitcoms focused on everyday life in contemporary Flanders, creating a sort of banal, everyday nationalism (Dhoest 2007). American fiction, which did increasingly appear in the schedules, was mostly limited to daytime TV or smaller commercial channels. The key positions in the prime-time schedules of the main channels, at that time, were occupied by Flemish fiction, which also topped the ratings.

To illustrate these evolutions, Table 1 lists the twenty highest rated programs on Flemish television in 2002 (twenty years before the time of writing). It features seven Flemish serial fiction productions (in bold face), with top ratings as

high as 1.6 million viewers (on a population of about 6 million) and market shares over 50%. The top 20 did not contain any imported fiction, and the highest rated international fiction that year was the British sitcom *Keeping up appearances* (1990), which occupied the 61st position in the rankings and was the only international series in the top 100 that year.

	Title	Channel	Rating
1	Eurovisie Songfestival	TV1	1,812,100
2	Eurosong	TV1	1,680,500
3	Stille waters	TV1	1,620,800
4	FC De Kampioenen	TV1	1,463,000
5	Via Vanoudenhoven	TV1	1,416,900
6	Hoe? Zo!	TV1	1,248,900
7	Flikken	TV1	1,237,500
8	Sedes & Belli	TV1	1,209,400
9	De Pfaffs	VTM	1,201,100
10	Recht op recht	TV1	1,171,000
11	Het leven zoals het is - Politie	TV1	1,064,600
12	1 jaar gratis	TV1	1,064,500
13	Sportpersoonlijkheid van het jaar	TV1	1,058,000
14	De kotmadam	VTM	1,053,200
15	Pauline & Paulette	TV1	1,043,500
16	De gouden schoen	VTM	1,039,300
17	Wie wordt euromiljonair?	VTM	1,034,500
18	Miss België	VTM	1,020,600
19	Telefacts	VTM	1,003,700
20	Verschoten & zoon	VTM	999,900

TABLE 1: TOP 20 TV PROGRAMS FLANDERS 2002 (SOURCE: CIM).

3. THE 2000S: INCREASED COMPETITION

By the early 2000s, Flemish TV fiction had survived the arrival of commercial broadcasting, but new challenges and fears arose. The key theme, from then on, was competition.

First, there was the competition of *new genres*. In particular, the early 2000s marked the arrival and massive success of reality TV. The first Flemish season of *Big Brother* was produced in 2000, and as in other countries across Europe, it was a big event. Not only was it very popular, but it also directly competed with serial fiction. It offered viewing pleasures similar to those of the soap opera, with the extra appeal of “realness”. More generally, “real life soaps” or “docusoaps” became very popular at the time, and in many cases, they were cheaper to produce than fiction (Dhoest 2005). However, competitive elements became more and more prominent in reality TV, so it increasingly differentiated itself from serial fiction and became more akin to game and entertainment shows. Scripted fiction kept its privileged position as purveyor of drama, despite competition from new semi-documentary formats.

A second form of competition was that of *new channels*. On the national level, the first commercial channel VTM was joined by two more channels in 1995, VT4 (later VIER, now Play4) and Ka2 (later Kanaal 2, now vtm2). However, in a small market such as Flanders, with corresponding low commercial budgets, serial fiction was too expensive for most of them. Flemish fiction continued to be mostly scheduled on the main public channel TV1 (later één) and the main commercial channel VTM, which remain the market leaders to this day.

On the international level, Flanders has a history of early and strong cable access (some 85% in the mid 1980s; Saeys 2007) which in principle made it easy for viewers to switch to international channels. But while Flemish viewers did massively watch TV from the Netherlands in the 1980s, they returned to and stayed loyal to Flemish channels from the 1990s (Bauwens 2007). To this day, Flemish channels manage to attract most linear TV viewers. Language and culture, it seems, did remain important thresholds for viewers to switch to other national channels and content – so “cultural proximity” saved the day, the audience attraction to cultural products which are closest to their own culture (Straubhaar 2007).

In 2002, the year previously discussed in terms of fiction offer, the first public channel één had a market share of 26.4%, commercial channel VTM came second with 25.5% (Bauwens 2007). Dutch channels, which had a market share of up to 25% in the 1980s, fell back to 5% in 2002. In 2012, ten

years later, één had a market share of 34.4% and vtm 18.2%. Added up, all Flemish channels still had a market share of 80% (VRT 2013), which is higher than the European average of 70% (European Audiovisual Observatory 2023).

A third evolution increasing competition for the viewer’s attention was the rise of *digital TV* from 2005. Viewers could increasingly view what they want, when and where they want – also known as “me TV”. However, research shows that Flemish viewers were rather slow to pick up these possibilities, which for a long time were either hard to use (technologically) or expensive – hence inconvenient (Dhoest and Simons 2016). Several services were launched in Flanders, mostly with limited success and limited impact on viewing behaviour.

The 2013 Digimeter report, which gives an annual overview of media use in Flanders, showed that 86% of the total population had access to digital TV, but they mostly used it to consult the electronic programme guide, to skip ads, or to record programs for later viewing. Viewing on demand and streaming only played a marginal role at this time and were mostly used by younger viewers (De Moor, Schuurman, and De Marez 2013). The TV set was still the most popular device for watching TV content, for about 88% of viewers, and 42% only watched TV content on their TV set. Interactive, online extensions were only used by a small, mostly young part of the viewers.

4. THE 2010S: DIGITISATION

So, what was the impact of this increased competition and digitisation on serial fiction in 2012, ten years after the previous period discussed and ten years before the time of writing?

	Title	Channel	Rating
1	De pappenheimers	één	2,055,629
2	Witse	één	2,004,666
3	Tomteterom	één	1,740,998
4	Geert Hoste kookt	één	1,585,878
5	Salamander	één	1,538,554
6	Quiz me quick	één	1,535,627
7	Sporza: Cyclo-cross Koksijde	Canvas	1,512,261
8	Twee tot de zesde macht	één	1,463,415
9	God en klein Pierke - Piet Huysentruyt	één	1,419,337

Title	Channel	Rating
10 Thuis	één	1,404,099
11 Het 7 uur-Journaal	één	1,392,255
12 Scheire en de schepping	één	1,369,375
13 Soccer EC Finals Spain-Italy	Canvas	1,366,373
14 Colchester Zoo	één	1,364,637
15 Soccer EC Finals Spain-Italy	Canvas	1,360,794
16 God en klein Pierke - Erik Van Looy	één	1,342,077
17 God en klein Pierke - Daniël Termont	één	1,331,700
18 Man bijt hond	één	1,302,461
19 Danni Lowinski	VTM	1,269,303
20 Soccer WC Qualifications Belgium-Scotland	Canvas	1,246,971

TABLE 2: TOP 20 TV PROGRAMS FLANDERS 2012.
RATING= LIVE+ 6 DAYS. (SOURCE: CIM).

As Table 2 shows, the 2012 top twenty still contains five Flemish fiction productions (down from seven in 2002), with ratings going over two million for crime show *Witse* (2004-2012), which is part of the strong Sunday evening fiction slot on public broadcasting. Again, no international fiction in the top 20, the highest ranked international production being *Flikken Maastricht* (2007-), a Dutch spin-off from a Flemish series, on 27; and again, *Keeping up appearances*, now on 76. There is no American fiction in the top 100, as in 2002. Quantitatively, in 2012, the domestic fiction production remains large, with 14 productions in the top 100 (compared to 15 in 2002).

As to the quality of productions, beside the generic fiction initiated in the 1990s, the 2000s and 2010s also were a period of revived “quality” fiction. Following the example of American “quality TV” such as HBO’s *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) as well as the success of “Nordic noir” such as *The Killing* (2007-2012), Flemish producers started to make more innovative and daring shows. More than before, they portrayed contemporary Flanders in ambitious and innovative productions. While the prime market remained the domestic one, some shows (such as *Salamander*, 2012-2018) were sold abroad and increasingly, the international market became a secondary target (Raats and lordache 2020). This testifies to the maturity of the industry, which despite its small size managed to compete on an international level. However, the domestic market remained small, so the focus remained on fiction appealing to a broad, mainstream

audience rather than niche audiences. These shows remained strongly anchored in the national, Flemish context, but became more varied as a range of local settings and dialects were featured, such as those of Occidental Flanders (*Eigen kweek*, 2013-2019) and Limburg (*Beau Séjour*, 2017-2021). Following the example of Scandinavian fiction, in particular, this local flavour was seen as an international asset rather than a drawback.

Parallel to this evolution, Flemish fiction also became more diverse. From the rather homogenous representation of Flanders in the 20th century, 21st century fiction became more varied. Beside rural settings, urban settings were also increasingly shown. Ethnic and racial diversity was added, although often through a limited number of “token” characters (Dhoest 2014). Sexual diversity was also increased, both in quality fiction and in mainstream productions such as soaps, which regularly featured gay, lesbian and occasionally trans characters in a “normalized” way (Vanlee et al. 2018).

Because of all these evolutions, in the early 2010s Flemish fiction was thriving in terms of quantity, quality and diversity. But then came Netflix, which became available in Flanders in late 2014. This was a game changer, opening the market for streaming video on demand (SVOD). Contrary to earlier ways of viewing on demand, it was convenient: relatively cheap, easy to use and offering a giant library of content. As in other countries, Netflix changed viewing habits in Flanders. Streaming partly replaced illegal downloading, which younger viewers had been doing for a while. It provided easy access to a large library of often quality American shows, which previously were mostly accessible on DVD (the HBO model) or, with a long delay, on linear TV.

5. THE 2020S: THE IMPACT OF STREAMING

Because of these evolutions, the Digimeter of 2022 shows a drastically changed viewing landscape. 66% of viewers have a smart TV, and 56% have access to one or more paying streaming platforms. Netflix is the market leader among SVODs (50%), followed by Disney+ (19%) and the local platform Streamz (12%). Monthly live linear TV viewing is down to 75%, while monthly streaming is up to 49% (and up to 79% for those between 24 and 35) (De Marez et al. 2023).

So, what does this imply for Flemish, and more broadly European, serial fiction? On the one hand, it revived old fears, as streaming is competition on steroids. There is so much

to choose from, in a wide variety of genres. The European Audiovisual Observatory counted 1324 titles, 23,844 episodes and 14,165 hours of audiovisual fiction produced in Europe in 2021, a clear increase since 2015. In 2021, global streamers released 115 original European series, about 75% of which were commissioned by Netflix (Fontaine 2023). In 2022, 324,646 cumulated TV seasons were available to EU customers in 497 VOD catalogues, 14% of which were of EU 27 origin, 12 other European origin and 51% of US origin (Grece 2022).

Most of this is serial fiction, which further strengthens its position as key asset in audiovisual services. Initially, most of the offer on Netflix was American, further strengthening the position of American fiction as the main competitor for viewing attention – much more than other fiction from other regions, including Europe. Increasingly, however, productions from other countries, including European ones, started to be popular beyond their national borders. In 2022, European works (film and TV seasons) made up 32% of VOD (Video On Demand) catalogues in Europe (EU27), while American works still made up 49%. Big countries like France, Spain, Germany and Italy produced the most exported content (Grece 2022).

Meanwhile, Netflix increasingly invested in local productions – partly because European regulations obliged it to, but partly also because these productions could help to conquer national markets. In all of this, however, a small linguistic region and market like Flanders initially stood at the side lines. Some Flemish productions were picked up in license deals (e.g. *Tabula Rasa*, 2017-) or co-produced by Netflix (e.g. *Undercover*, 2019-), but so far these were few and far in between, while “full” Netflix originals in Belgium remain scarce (Afilipoaie, lordache, and Raats 2021; lordache, Raats, and Afilipoaie 2022).

If viewers increasingly turn to Netflix and other international streamers, and if the content these provide is mostly international, does this threaten the strong position of Flemish fiction on the domestic market? Will audiences and budgets shrink further, thus reducing the production output and quality, which in turn would reduce audiences? Is what we experience now a “perfect storm” of shifting media use, financial cutbacks, decreasing advertising revenue and increasing global competition by streaming platforms, threatening the sustainability of TV drama in small markets, as argued by Raats and Jensen (2021)?

Indeed, as before, the position of Flemish fiction seems to be threatened, but there are also some positive continuities and new hopes. In 2022, despite growing national and inter-

national competition, Eén remained market leader with 32%, VTM following with 17.7%. Added up, Flemish channels still had a market share of some 80%, although it is increasingly spread over more and smaller players. While linear viewing became less popular, the same few national players did continue to dominate the market, with a central position of a strong public service media company.

Flemish fiction also remained an important part of the schedules. A massive 726 hours of Flemish fiction were broadcast in 2022 on the main channels één and vtm (including reruns), as opposed to 186 hours of American fiction (own calculations, based on VRT data). As Table 3 shows, the top twenty of 2022 contains four domestic fiction productions, again a slightly lower number (partly due to the soccer world cup), with top ratings near 1.6 million, which is down from the earlier peaks over 2 million. However, again, there was no international fiction in the top 20, and only two international serials far down in the top 100 (*Flikken Maastricht* on 91, and on 95 *Dalgliesh*, 2021-). In 2022, the average ratings for Flemish serial fiction in prime time (on één and vtm) are still about three times higher than those for imported fiction (519,993 versus 175,531), while the market shares are about twice as high (28,56 versus 14,54%; own calculations, based on VRT data).

	Title	Channel	Rating
1	The masked singer	vtm	1,905,330
2	WC Soccer Belgium/Canada	één	1,893,700
3	Taboe	één	1,767,680
4	WC Soccer Belgium/Morocco	één	1,764,070
5	WC Soccer Argentina/France	één	1,680,820
6	Factcheckers	één	1,604,290
7	WC Soccer Croatia/Belgium	één	1,597,930
8	Twee zomers	één	1,585,280
9	Chateau Planckaert	één	1,580,410
10	Reizen Waes, Nederland	één	1,469,670
11	De mol	Play4	1,422,800
12	Chantal	één	1,422,410
13	Soccer WC France/Morocco	één	1,380,430
14	Andermans zaken	één	1,349,320
15	Vrede op aarde	één	1,347,310
16	Reizen Waes, wereldsteden	één	1,336,500

Title	Channel	Rating
17 Thuis	één	1,310,840
18 Down the road	één	1,285,350
19 Undercover	één	1,260,640
20 Dwars door de lage landen	één	1,239,040

TABLE 3: TOP 20 TV PROGRAMS FLANDERS 2022.
RATING= LIVE+ 7 DAYS. (SOURCE: CIM).

There is also an interesting newcomer: *Undercover* (2019), a Netflix original co-produced with public broadcaster VRT, which occupied the 19th position in the 2022 ranking for linear viewing but also did well on Netflix, particularly in the Netherlands. Like Swedish-Danish co-production *The Bridge* (2011-2018), *Undercover* is situated near the border, in this case between Belgium and the Netherlands. This allows it to introduce characters from both countries in a credible manner, bypassing the big challenge for European co-productions, that of “Europudding” where all national flavour is lost (Buonanno 1998). *Undercover*, like many recent productions, is strongly “glocal”. On the one hand, it is strongly rooted in a national setting, thus remaining appealing to the primary, national market. On the other hand, it conforms to international genre and quality conventions, also rendering it appealing for the international market. This is increasingly important to recuperate the growing production costs in a hypercompetitive market. Moreover, as the success of Nordic Noir and Spanish productions like *La casa de papel* (2017-2021) has demonstrated, local flavour can actually be appealing to international audiences. In the attention economy, it allows productions to distinguish themselves from the pack – even if this often depends on playing out national stereotypes. As Bengesser et al. (2023) found, viewers in several European countries were attracted to (crime) fiction from other European countries because of national and cultural stereotypes.

All of this creates new opportunities for Flemish fiction, in co-production with other broadcasters or streaming platforms, to be exported and to circulate transnationally. Flanders, not having a clear national identity, partly surfs on the Nordic Noir wave of dark fiction, sometimes adding the Belgian cliché of surrealism. Consequently, some productions dare to deviate from social realism which has been the dominant norm throughout the history of Flemish fiction. Some elements of fantasy are introduced, such as the ghost of a dead girl in *Beau Séjour* (2017-2021) and the hallucinations of

the main character with amnesia in *Tabula Rasa* (2017), two productions that did well internationally on Netflix. Most recently, the first science fiction serial was broadcast, *Arcadia* (2023-), a Belgian-Dutch-German co-production and the most expensive Flemish fiction ever, with a budget of about 1 million euro per episode (Vergeyle 2023).

While continuing the focus on broad, mainstream audiences – which is necessary to be profitable in the small domestic market – some productions dare to be more edgy or focus on a specific audience segment. On the one hand there are more expensive, “quality” productions, often co-productions, increasingly in collaboration with streaming platforms, which explore genre boundaries and invest in narrative complexity and visual stylisation. This is in line with broader European evolutions, where more (but shorter) high-end series are produced, a 72% growth in number since 2015 (European Audiovisual Observatory 2023). On the other hand, there are also cheaper, more daring productions, emulating the success of shows like *Skam* (2015-2017) or *Euphoria* (2019-) in addressing “risky” issues. These target younger viewers and are mostly or only available online, such as *wtFOCK* (2018-), a *Skam* remake, and *Roomies* (2022), a lesbian serial. Both evolutions lead to a fiction offer that is less provincial, still strongly anchored in the national but offering a more diverse view and allowing more artistic freedom.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the overview above indicates, the past decades have been a period of continued fears over the future of Flemish TV fiction, in terms of both quantity and quality. Increased competition, whether national or international, from commercial channels or SVODs, has continuously challenged the established position of Flemish fiction. Competition is more present than ever, particularly for younger audiences who lost the habit of linear viewing and who predominantly use streaming, which is strongly international and still mostly dominated by US content. Therefore, average ratings for linear TV are declining, including those for Flemish TV. From an average of some 625.000 viewers in 2002, the average viewership of Flemish fiction (in prime time, on één and vtm) is now about 520.000 (own calculations, based on VRT data). Moreover, as noted by Raats and Jensen (2021), Flemish drama is particularly dependent on public funding, be it through the participation of public service media, through subsidies or tax cuts.

At the same time, there are continuities and new hopes. Public broadcasting has maintained a strong position in Flanders and Flemish fiction has remained a staple of broadcasting while increasingly, new opportunities arise for co-production, including with streaming platforms. This, in part, stimulates export of Flemish drama, which is also aided by the growing market for non-English drama as well as policies and producers focusing on high-end drama combining universal themes with local authenticity (Raats and Lordache 2020). Together, these evolutions give reason to hope that Flemish fiction will be able to reinvent itself yet again, particularly as audience engagement with fiction remains strong.

For a number of years now, observers have expressed their worry over “peak TV”: there is so much content around, much of it serial fiction, which created an unsustainable situation as it exhausts financial means, creative energy and audience attention (Porter 2023). To some, this leads to “peak redundancy”, different players in the market starting to adapt their strategies and reduce their output, although others point out that this also creates new opportunities, for instance leading to more inclusive and international productions (Berman 2021). Ultimately, I would argue, we currently experience a period of “peak seriality”, with an unprecedented number of serials, often with multiple seasons or spin-offs, constituting narrative “universes” stimulating familiarity and connection with audiences. For now, audiences keep investing time in, and engaging with, serial fiction. It is increasingly hard to attract attention, but for those shows which manage to jump out from the pack, audience engagement remains strong, which gives reason to hope for the future of TV fiction, also in small markets like the Flemish one. It will necessitate flexibility, adapting to a new media ecology and viewing habits, but past experiences have shown that the industry is resilient, continuously exploring new possibilities to tell captivating stories.

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TV shows

Arcadia (2023-)
Beau Séjour (2017-2021)
Big Brother (2000-2007)
Dalgliesh (2021-)
De Kotmadam (1991-)
Eigen kweek (2013-2019)
Euphoria (2019-)
Familie (1991-)
FC De Kampioenen (1990-2020)
Flikken Maastricht (2007-)
Keeping up appearances (1990-1995)
La casa de papel (2017-2021)
Roomies (2022)
Salamander (2012-2018)
Skam (2017)
Tabula rasa (2017)
The Bridge (2011-2018)
The Killing (2007-2012)
The Sopranos (1999-2007)
The Wire (2002-2008)
Thuis (1995-)
Undercover (2019)
Witse (2004-2012)
wtFOCK (2018-)