POPULAR CULTURE AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

AN INTRODUCTION

LIESBET VAN ZOONEN

Guest Editor

Abstract

Popular culture is becoming ever more important to political communication and political understanding. In this article popular culture is defined as schematic in its syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures, individualised and gendered. These three features are shown to underlie and guide the performance of popular culture as political communication, especially when popular culture appears as political fiction in movies and television series; when popular culture is used as a political stage for political actors who take on standard personas; and when popular culture functions as a political practice in itself, for instance, in talk shows and popular music. These three ways in which popular culture functions as a form of political communication are elaborated in the various contributions in this special issue to which this article provides the introduction.

Popular culture is becoming ever more important to political communication and political understanding. Many examples testify to this trend: notorious is the appearance of Bill Clinton in the popular Arsenio Hall talk show, playing the saxophone in the campaign of 1992. At least one Dutch liberal candidate for parliament is known to have followed the Clinton example in 1994 by playing his saxophone in a Dutch popular show (cf. Brants and Van Praag 1995). Television offers the most visible expressions of the popularisation of politics (e.g. Hart 1994). As an entertainment medium, television contains many popular genres which politicians increasingly are using to circumvent the traditional channels of political journalism. The American presidential campaigns again provide a landmark: the Larry King talk show witnessed the beginning of Ross Perot's 1992 campaign; Clinton started his 1996 campaign on local television and breakfast television (Patterson 1993). Television not only offers many popular genres, but has also popularised traditional information genres like news and current affairs. Whereas this situation has been part and parcel of the American political scene (Postman 1984), it is relatively new to the European situation which saw the popularisation of politics exacerbated by the emergence of commercial television in the late eighties. Much more than traditional European public broadcasting, commercial broadcasting is dominated by infotainment genres in which human interest stories and interviews with ordinary people and celebrities about their private lives and emotions are core ingredients. Adjusting to commercial competition serious informative programmes of public broadcasters have incorporated entertainment conventions (cf. Brants 1998).

Developments in commercial and public broadcasting in Europe have thus constructed a relatively new stage for politics and politicians, which is pervaded by the codes of popular culture. This holds not only for television, but also equally for the communicative efforts of parties themselves: themes and styles from popular culture have become the rule in political advertising rather than the exception (cf. Jamieson 1996). Likewise, political parties like the liberals (VVD) in the Netherlands have adopted popular formats like that of the talk show in organising meetings with their members and constituencies (Bolkestein and Brandsma 1998). Throughout the world popular heroes like musicians, sports(wo)men and movie stars have regularly appeared as political supporters (e.g. Brownstein 1992).

Although politics has always contained elements of popular culture (see e.g. De Haan in this volume), the present situation is often said to be different in the sense that popular culture at present seems to have overwhelmed and concured politics. The current assumed ubiquitous popularisation of politics is thought to undermine the quality of the political process and the viability of democracy in the long run (e.g. Hart 1994; Postman 1984). In such arguments, politics and popular culture are constructed as each others antagonists which seems justified by their origins in the two different social traditions of modernity on the one hand (politics) and orality on the other (popular culture). As I have argued extensively elsewhere, the folkloric world of popular culture ruled by coincidence and marked by suspicion and sensation seems to be thoroughly at odds with the modern tradition of contemporary politics and political culture, with its belief in rationality, progress and the capacity of people to take control over their own destinies. Despite these antagonistic roots, the present convergence of popular culture and politics in the way parties and politicians organise their various communicative efforts suggests that they have become complementary resources for political communication rather than oppositional (cf. Van Zoonen 1998b).

This suggestion is supported by the few studies that have examined whether and how people use popular culture as a source for the development of their political knowledge and understanding. Barnhurst (1998), for instance, investigated the paradox that while young citizens have turned their backs on traditional news media and seem deeply unaware of basic political facts and information, they do hold strong political opinions and rather sophisticated views on the distribution of power in society. Working with the self-written life histories of young citizens in the United States and Spain, Barnhurst traces the development of their political knowledge to a scattered understanding arising from various popular genres such as pop songs, TV commercials, documentary films and personal discussions. In Gamson's (1992) study of how ordinary people make sense of politics, traditional news media are not found to be as marginal as in Barnhurst's group of young citizens. However, traditional news media appear to be only one resource together with experiential knowledge and popular wisdom, the latter defined as "shared knowledge of what 'everyone' knows," often expressed in proverbs and rules of thumb (1992, 123).

Despite the self-evident importance of popular culture in the institutional processes of political communication, as well as in the everyday understandings of politics, theory and research on such articulations of popular culture and politics is rare (but see Street 1997). The present volume is part of a wider effort to put these issues on the academic and political agenda (see Van Zoonen 1998a,b,c). If popular culture emerges as a prominent resource for political communication and for political understanding, what then is the "political" nature of popular culture? How does political culture function as a form of political communication? We will answer these questions in this volume along three related dimensions: popular culture as political fiction, which occurs when politics and politicians are the subject of, for instance television series, movies or novels. In this volume, Brian Neve thus examines the way presidential politics have been framed in Hollywood movies of the nineties. A second dimension concerns popular culture as political stage which occurs when politicians appear in popular genres as is analysed, for instance, in John Street's contribution in this volume about — among other things — a talk show performance of the British prime minister Tony Blair. A third instance of "political" popular culture is when popular culture itself takes on the form of political practice, as has happened with many kinds of popular music ranging from the protest song of the sixties to the black rap music of the nineties. In this volume Göran Bolin examines the political dimension of a popular public practice of film swapping. This introduction explores the common threads in these three dimensions of popular culture as political communication. To do so we first need to discuss the structure and ideology of popular culture in more general terms.

Structural and Ideological Features of Popular Culture

As argued before, popular culture is firmly embedded in the social tradition of folklore and orality. Television in particular has been shown to be the storyteller of contemporary societies (Carey 1988). Popular culture stories carry all the features of oral and folklore narratives, as laid out in Valdimir Propp's (1923) classic study on fairy tales. These features pertain to the syntagmatic structures of stories moving through an initial stage of harmony, to disturbance, conflict or other kind of intervention — which then can be complicated by misunderstandings and subplots —, to fi-

nally end in resolution. On the paradigmatic side of folk stories we see oppositional dichotomies between characters such as heroes and villains, virgins and whores, victims and perpetrators, etc. We find these features in many contemporary popular genres, like various kinds of television drama (Fiske 1988) and the wide range of popular journalism (Bird 1992). Popular culture is not only a schematic genre in terms of its paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures, it is also highly personalised and individualised. Individual actors and their actions are what move popular narratives forward. They are discussed in rhetoric labelled as "private language" by Kress (1986), which positions its readers or audiences as individuals guided by common sense. It is a rhetorical style that is typical of the oral spoken tradition, but that is nevertheless found in the many written forms of popular journalism (e.g. Fiske 1992). The syntagmatic, paradigmatic and personalised characteristics of popular culture have an unmistakable gender dimension to them. Thus in syntagmatic terms, women are very seldom the actors that move the story forward; some paradigmatic oppositions are limited to women (virgins and whores), whereas others are projected primarily (but not exclusively) onto men (heroes and villains) (cf. Van Zoonen 1994). As a result of gender, popular culture stories about women are usually markedly different from popular stories about men. One difference, for instance, is that women feature often in family stories (e.g. Byars 1991) and men in action and adventure stories (e.g. Krutnik 1991) and another is that women appear more often as victims and whereas perpetrators tend to be men (e.g. Haskell 1987).

The structural features of popular culture can thus be identified as schematic, personalised and gendered. As a result popular culture has often been condemned as a politically conservative and intellectually debilitating force. Sparks (1992, 41) claims, for instance, that the personalised character of popular culture conceals the structural nature of social problems: "The central problem is rather that [it offers] the experience of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality. The simple reality is that the nature of the social totality is neither constituted through immediate experience nor entirely comprehensible in its terms. Between the individual and the social totality are complex mediations of institutional structures, economic relations and so on." Such a comment and other critical approaches to popular culture can be traced to the work of the members of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947; Marcuse 1964) which was dominant until the mid-seventies and early eighties. However, with the emergence of feminist and cultural studies, popular culture has been reclaimed as a possible site of protest. A classic example is Janice Radway's (1984) study on reading romance novels, in which she argues that reading romance novels can be seen a form of protest against the distanced rational forms of masculinity that patriarchy prescribes. Other radical interpretations of popular culture as a form of resistance can be found in the work of John Fiske (e.g. 1990; 1992). Such studies have received as much criticism as they have received support, indicating that the specific ideological (conservative or progressive) character of popular culture is very much in debate. In addition, popular culture as a whole and its specific genres seem too wide and complex to expect any kind of general outcome on its ideological leanings. Rather, specific genres may offer or prevent specific political opportunities. The Dutch gossip press, for instance, has on the one hand a very open and appreciative coverage of homosexual relations, but frames women on the other hand in rather traditional terms of family life (cf. Van Zoonen 1998c,d). Likewise, Joke Hermes

has shown that women's magazines function for individual female readers both as a source of empowerment and as a means to realign them with traditional femininity (Hermes 1995). When thinking about the political nature of popular culture then, we need to think of its structural features (schematic, personalised and gendered) rather than of its ideological features. The latter are bound to be diverse and contradictory and contingent on specific contexts of use and interpretation. How then, do the structural features of popular culture affect its political performance as fiction, stage and practice?

Popular Culture as Political Fiction

Politics is not a very current subject matter for popular culture. Hollywood has shied away from the topic as Brian Neve (1992) argues, and in television series the professions that have feature more prominently are lawyers, doctors, policemen and journalists. Nevertheless, politics and politicians have been constructed in popular fictional forms in small but substantially significant proportions. In these fictions, the schematic, individualistic and gendered features of popular culture have produced regularly recurring frames of meaning. Consider how politics occurs in two romance novels. In one of Barbara Cartland's (1976) hundreds of booklets, *The Enchanted Waltz*, which is set in Vienna on the eve of the great peace conference of 1815, the heroine is told: "Women should stay out of politics and out of diplomacy too. At its best it is dirty business" (p. 21). In a Mills and Book novel, this one set in contemporary America, the heroine is left by her *fiancée* — after having supported him in his campaign — for a women who is more befitting to his career. Someone else asks her: "Tell me what a nice girl like you is doing in a dirty business like politics?" (Hammond 1993, 36). The man asking the question turns out to be the hero of the story and some time later the heroine ponders that "he seemed really interested in her as a human being. That was something she wasn't used to in the hard chaotic world of politics where everyone seemed to use each other" (p. 52). It is not uncommon to see politics and femininity constructed as each other antithesis. In popular genres, politics is often represented as a cesspool of dishonesty in which corruption, bribery and blackmail are not uncommon. Women as traditional symbols of innocence and virtue often figure to demarcate the opposition of corrupt politics with humanity and decency (cf. Sreberny and Van Zoonen 2000a, 1-2).

Other outsiders to the political system also feature prominently to construct a paradigmatic opposition between good ordinary people and unreliable political representatives. In the proverbial Frank Capra movies of the 1930s, that opposition is framed as simple, small town decency against big-city, national exploitative politics. In his detailed analysis of the way presidential and candidate politics are framed in American films of the 1990s Brian Neve (in this volume) shows that this paradigmatic opposition appears in two forms with a different ideological meaning. In a number of "personal" independent movies, such as Oliver Stone's *Nixon* and *JFK*, or Warren Beatty's *Bullworth*, the individual is confronted with the uncontrollable, behind the scene forces of economic and military powers. The social analysis underlying such projects is a liberal one, according to Neve because of its emphasis on structural constraints on political power. More mainstream productions of the nineties, informed by a more traditional analysis of social problems, renew the Capraesque theme of the political Augean stable cleaned by the white raven from the outside, for instance in films such

as *Dave* and *The American President*. The optimistic notions of political renewal that speak from such films have been superseded, however, by films which contain a similar opposition between corrupt politics and decent individuals, but in which the solution lies not in cleaning up the mess, but in adjusting and conforming to it. As the paradigmatic structure of popular culture requires, the heroic white raven who is uncontaminated by the wheeling and dealing of politics as usual, has a counterpart in a political villain as well. The villain takes on the form of the devil in disguise: the ostensibly noble politician who hides behind his public face all kinds of private misbehaviour. This character provides another lens through which popular culture looks at politics and appears regularly in television series about politics. In the 1990s British series *House of Cards*, for instance, the main character is the chief whip of the conservative party who has an iron grip on his MP's, and who does not shy away from having an all too curious journalist with whom he has had an affair killed. A recent Dutch four episode television drama *Het jaar van de opvolging* (The year of the succession) followed the rise and fall of a young politician bound to become the next party leader of a fictional liberal democrat party. Already in the first episode, an ugly secret from the past comes to haunt him, which eventually leads to his withdrawal from politics.

A particular variety of the popular paradigm has less to do with corruption than with incompetence. As Bird (1992) has shown in her extensive review of supermarket tabloids in the United States bureaucratic waste and incompetence are a perennial topic for those magazines, especially in stories that show how Washington bureaucrats are "pouring hardworking taxpayers' money down the drain." In television, this theme has provided the basic narrative structure to comedies such as the American Spin City, featuring Michael J. Fox as the savvy spin-doctor to the naive and superficial mayor of New York. Most famous in this genre, however, is the British *Yes (Prime) Minister*. The series which ran for two consecutive periods in the 1980s, deals with the conflicts between politicians and their civil servants, personified in (prime) minister Jim Hacker, permanent secretary Sir Humphry Appleby and principal private secretary Bernard Woolley. Hacker is shown to be a rather clumsy politician mainly interested in his popularity with voters, continually struggling with his main civil servant who feels primarily responsible for maintaining the power of the whole civil service, including his own. The series has acquired considerable acclaim for its supposed realism and humour. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once stated: "Its closely observed portrayal of what goes on in the corridors of power has given me hours of pure joy" (www.yesminister.demon.nl).

The Republican Legacy

Popular culture thus does not seem very supportive in its fictional representations of political practice. Suspicion and disdain for the people's representatives reign supreme and a brief, cursory look back into time, suggests the historical traces of these frames. Robin Hood, fighting the corrupt sheriff of Nottingham Forrest may be seen as the first hero of the plain man fighting the tainted mores of state representatives. Burke's (1978) history of popular culture mentions a number of archetypal villains in 18th century street ballads. The greedy clergyman, the selfish civil servant and the covetous tax collector are among them. But apart from its popular history, the paradigmatic opposition between corrupt politics and heroic individuals taking on the system, has a long political history as well, as is laid out in Ido de Haan's contribution

to this volume. We can read his article as a story about the way popular culture's paradigmatic opposition between corrupt politicians and decent citizens is related tot the populist tradition in politics and more fundamentally tot the republican concept of politics as developed in the Italian city-states of the late middle-ages. Drawing among other things from the writings of a key republican like Machiavelli, De Haan explains that the main danger to social justice and stability, according to republicans, was not the lack of political judgement on the part of the people, but the unrestrained ambitions of the elite. As De Haan summarises, republican thought "assumed politics was prone to corruption, which it interpreted as the intrusion of private interests in political life and the emergence of a class of people who came to consider politics not as an occupation of all citizens alike, but as their private enterprise… The solution to this predicament was the coming of a new prince, with god-like characteristics, who would obliterate the whole corrupt polity. He would re-instate a healthy new polity in its place, which relied primarily on support and the wisdom of the people."

It is striking how the syntagmatic structure (how the story of political renewal develops) and the paradigmatic structure (corrupt politicians versus virtuous citizens) of republican political thought, resembles the popular structures found in contemporary political fictions as described above. In addition, the republican vision hinges on the transformative role of the individual (the new prince), just like the popular vision. Personalisation, so often said to be one of the contemporary flaws of politics, thus has a long history in political philosophy and — as De Haan shows additionally in his analysis of the performance of nineteenth and twentieth century politicians — in political practice. What may be new to the present situation, is the stage on which these personalised political performances take place. The main stage is no longer located on the political soap box of the 19th century, nor in the serious fora provided by political journalism in press and on television during the greater part of the 20th century, but it is constituted in the many infotainment genres that popular culture offers.

Popular Culture as a Stage

Anecdotes abound of politicians performing on popular culture's stages: Harold Wilson had himself photographed with the Beatles, Boris Yeltsin danced on stage with a Russian rock band and Francois Mitterand had a whole stable of artists surrounding him (Boom 1997). This list could easily be expanded to, e.g., the way politicians have aligned themselves with sports heroes and movie stars. Such alignments are no longer just incidents but have become conspicuous parts of contemporary campaigns, as appears from John Street's analysis of the Labour campaign of 1997 (in this volume). Labour used a video cut to the sound of D. Ream's 1993 hit "Things Can Only Get Better" to reach young voters.

However, more common cases of popular culture providing a stage for politicians can be found in the many instances of popular journalism in print (tabloid and gossip journalism) and audio-visual media (talk shows and infotainment). In both these varieties the rules of the genre assure that politicians feature predominantly as private individuals, as human beings rather than as representatives of political parties or government. Furthermore, politicians appear to be framed within the larger syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures of popular culture. Bird's (1992) study on US supermarket tabloids shows several recurring themes of which two are particularly relevant to stories about politicians: first, from rags to riches themes which have a political vari-

ety in stories about "from rags to power," and second, stories under the heading of bureaucratic waste and competence. Klein's (2000) more specific study on political coverage in the German tabloid *Bild Zeitung* shows that amidst of common tabloid frames, specific ones for politics are: "politicians as ordinary people," "politics as personal conflict," "the people versus the power bloc" and "political education." Politicians as ordinary people is by far the dominant frame in the *Bild-Zeitung*, which is paralleled by my own work on the representation of politicians in the Dutch gossip press (Van Zoonen 1998c). The ordinariness of politicians is primarily constructed by presenting them as plain family men, emphasising the many personal sacrifices they have to make for the sake of the national public interest. From Klein's and my own work also emerges a clear gendered subtext in popular culture's treatment of politicians. In the *Bild-Zeitung*'s portrayal of female politicians stereotypical foci on care orientations, housewife qualities, beauty and tenderness often occur; in the Dutch gossip press such features are less openly evoked. The focus is instead of the odd position women have in politics, and the exceptional case of their preference for a political rather than a family life (Van Zoonen1998c, 2000).

The aura of authenticity that hangs around the private sphere suggests that the popular focus on politicians as private people portray them "as themselves," rather than in their "artificial" role of politicians. Nevertheless, politicians as private persons performing on popular stages are just as well involved in the construction of a public "persona" than when they are operating as representatives of the people, as political candidates. As Corner (2000) has shown, politicians construct "persona's" in three interrelated spheres relevant to political culture: the one of political institutions and processes, the mediated one of public and popular communication and the one of the private sphere. Although the latter is seemingly disconnected from both spheres it is in fact closely related, especially when it comes to the privatised performance of politicians on popular stages. The notion of persona is relevant to understand this performance. The term is known in theatre and literature as indicating a particular role one plays which is temporary. In the more general sense, persona is "an aspect of the personality shown to or perceived by others" (Corner 2000). Crucial to present day politics, is that the construction of a political persona is a highly mediated process, with the revelation of personal features as well as the perception of them deeply influenced by the terms of their representation in media genres. In the case of popular journalism, personal stories of politicians are obviously subjected to the specific paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures of popular journalism that are relevant to politics, as laid out above. Moreover, politicians have to take into account which models of political heroism are available in their political culture. As Schwartzenberg (1977) has discussed, politicians have become moulded as archetypes rather than persons of flesh and blood. He distinguishes between several stereotypical roles politicians can play: the hero, the ordinary man, the charming leader, the father figure and — especially for women — the prima donna. Krempl (1996) applied Schwartzenberg's general approach to an analysis of the specific roles that Sylvio Berlusconi performed in during his rise and fall from politics and found many varieties of the basic typology in Berlusconi's overall performance. The political archetypes have a clear gender dimension to them, as emerges from Wahl Jorgensen's (2000) analysis of constructions of masculinity in the American presidential campaigns. Sports, fraternity, the military and the family provide often used *mise en scčnes* in which male candidates can step into archetypes that are befitting to the presidency.

Popular culture as a political stage thus appears to show politicians as themselves, but in fact their performance is subject tot the rules of popular and political culture. As a result we see political personas rather than individual human beings. There is one genre in popular culture in which this process can be followed and analysed relatively directly and easily: this is the television talk show. Talk shows offer ample opportunities for politicians to construct the political persona they desire and they offer for most people the only way to see and hear politicians talk and to interact with politicians, be it in the para-social way that television allows for (Horton and Wohl 1956). John Street's analysis (in this volume) of the appearance of British prime minister Tony Blair on the popular Des O'Connor show just after he won the elections in 1997, shows that Blair deployed several conversational devices to promote his individual political image. From the various themes in the conversation, Blair emerged in particular as the ordinary, family man and the charming leader, but managed to convey an image of political hero as well, by mentioning in passing his achievements in the Northern Ireland agreement. The comparison of Van Zoonen and Holtz-Bacha (in this volume) of the performance of Dutch and German politicians in their respective talk shows reveals a less schematic picture however. Despite the highly personal codes and conventions of the genre, some Dutch and German politicians seem to manage to escape from the personal human interest anecdote and move the conversation to more general party political issues. This does require certain conversation and rhetorical qualities that are not given to all politicians.

Apart from providing a stage for the actors of politics, talk shows have also been mentioned to be a political practice in themselves, especially those varieties of the genre that include audience discussion. It is to this political aspect of popular culture — as a political practice — that we finally turn.

Popular Culture as Political Practice

Popular culture functions as a practice of politics when groups or individuals that are excluded from traditional social and political channels use it as a means of political expression. Radio and television talk shows in particular perform the function of giving a voice to the otherwise unheard. They are sometimes considered to be new public arenas that make the private public by focusing on hitherto taboo topics. Whereas this is the basis for severe criticism on talk shows as being not much more than irrelevant "freak shows" (Priest 1995), it is also the ground for its political potential. Women in particular, but also blacks and working class people have found their concerns more easily expressed and debated in talk shows than in the more traditional institutions of the public sphere. Leurdijk (2000) qualifies talk shows therefore as a postmodern public platform for debate, and examines in particular how the Dutch multicultural society is talked about in these genres. She concludes that the talk shows do offer an opportunity to women and men from different ethnic backgrounds to get their voices heard, in a framework that allows for more diversity than traditional news media do. "[Talk shows] are more like a collage of opinions, experiences and examples than like a proper debate between opponents weighing pros and contras on the basis of rational argument" (p. 271). Through the sharing of individual experiences, talk shows thus allow not only new topics into the public arena, but also new styles of talking about them. The restrictions of the bourgeois public sphere as discussed in the work of Habermas (1989) and his critics (Calhoun 1992) are thus alleviated in favour of a

more diverse spectrum of topics and styles considered appropriate for public concern and debate. Livingstone and Lunt (1994) take a similar angle in their research on the value and significance of televised public discussion and debate. They conclude, that whereas talk shows as a political practice are subjected to the rules and prescriptions of making television, they nevertheless succeed in cutting across various symbolic oppositions which are usually encoded in popular culture, such as the one between public and private, information and entertainment, commercial and public. Talk shows thus seem to escape at least one of the defining features of popular culture because of its unpredictable, variegated nature, which breaks down common schematic syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures. In another sense, however, talk shows intensify the features of popular culture by its relentless focus on individual experiences and solutions. Rapping (2000) therefore concludes that talk shows offer a form of public collective therapy, rather than of public political debate.

Other genres too have given voice to marginal social groups. Popular music loudly distributed the social and student protest of the sixties, just like it nowadays expresses the experience and concerns of black youth. Stapleton (1998), for instance, shows hip hop music to be the site of political controversy as well as a means of various types of political action articulated with the black experience of the American inner cities. Young people in particular have been very creative in transforming diverse genres of popular culture like pop music into an arena of their own "politics" as becomes very clear in Göran Bolin's contribution to this volume. Bolin describes how young men who are fans of so-called video nasties have created an alternative cultural public sphere around their fandom, which includes the exchange (swapping) of films through (inter)national networks, the production of action and horror fanzines, the organisation of film festivals, etc. Apart from a very detailed analysis of the internal and external processes of communication, Bolin extensively discusses the theoretical consequences of these kinds of practices for our understanding of the traditional bourgeois public sphere and its democratic qualities. Especially in the sometimes conflictual encounters of the film swappers with the official public sphere, it becomes clear that their alternative cultural public sphere function as "an extra buffer within the lifeworld in order to counteract threats of system colonisation. Within alternative publics less powerful social groups such as the film swappers can raise their voices in a way that they are denied within the dominant large scale bourgeois public." In addition, it proposes new topics and new forms of communication into the common public sphere, in a process that is similar to the way talk shows or popular music — or other less analysed popular genres for that matter — open up and modify the codes of that common public sphere.

Conclusion

In this introduction to the theme "Popular Culture as Political Communication" I have focused on the way structural features of popular culture affect the performance of popular culture as respectively political fiction, a political stage and a political practice. Having identified these structural features as schematic in a syntagmatic and paradigmatic sense, as individualised and as gendered, it has become clear that these features pervade popular culture's political articulations. Nevertheless, in each and every article taken up in this volume, we will see exceptions to this general process. In Hollywood movies, for instance, one does find cases in which the political process is not completely reduced to individual motives and relations, but is contrasted with the

more structural powers of the economy and the military. Additionally, the talk show offers an example of the way popular culture cuts across its own schematic categories.

The question remains as to how the structural features of popular culture affect its ideological performance as political communication; are these kinds of "popular politics" beneficial to a liberal or a conservative agenda? In the articles of both Neve and De Haan, it is argued that "popular politics" in the guise of populism has a rather bad reputation because of the way it has been abused by various right wing and fascist parties to lure people into anti-democratic attitudes and behaviour. De Haan, however, argues that populist politics needs to be rescued from authoritarian use, because it does offer possibilities for a progressive politics. It may be the only way within current postmodern societies pervaded by the symbols of the popular culture industries, to restore the relation "between the people and their representatives, to regain the necessary sense of community between public officials and their publics. With the loss of ever more ideological and "real" social links, inevitably the restoration of such communities will, for the most part, take place on a symbolic level" (Van Zoonen 1998b, 197). We therefore need to understand the nature of these symbolic levels, increasingly those of popular culture, in order to understand the nature and consequences of contemporary political communication. John Street argues likewise in his contribution to this volume, when he says that we need "to develop an approach and criteria for understanding and judging the use of popular culture as politics." The articles in the present volume will offer such approaches, angles, tools and evaluations.

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