HIDDEN DEBATES: RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULAR CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

This article proposes that paying attention to popular cultural practice will benefit "cultural citizenship" and, in turn, the vitality of the public sphere. Although popular culture in Habermassian terms does not fully qualify as a lifeworld domain, the enthusiasm of its users is a strong point to its advantage. Otherwise "ordinary people" hardly participate in public life, which foregrounds them as (emotional) witnesses rather than as experts or persons holding a view or an (interesting) opinion. As debate resulting from popular culture use tends to be among fans, neighbours or co-workers and is in point of fact "hidden," a further step would be needed to use the underlying issues and points of view debated in everyday life for public use. Internet communication shows that this is well possible. Indeed, the public-private and the fiction-non fiction boundaries are blurring, and citizenship is practiced in many places. Qualitative audience research could be a key force in reinvigorating the public sphere. By involving audience members themselves and following their cue or by using peer-to-peer formats, it could develop into "civic research" in much the same manner as civic journalism.

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The practice of audience research teaches those of us engaged in it a curious double truth[1]. While audience members in many ways are incredibly media-literate, they are as incredibly naïve in others. Moreover, quite a large number of us lack a vocabulary in our capacity as audience members to talk about what makes using the media worthwhile and what might be the quality or qualities of specific media, genres or texts. Likewise when it comes to issues of public knowledge, there is a strong moral sense of rights and obligations but little proof of actual insight in how government or politics work. Nor is there nearly as much civic practice as the moral vocabulary often used would suggest, nor is what civic practice does exist very effective (cf Gamson 1992; Eliasoph 1994).

When we assume that that media use, both in its everyday and its fan forms, contributes (often implicitly) to citizenship, we are faced with a triple challenge. The first is to show how that is the case, contrary to the daily self-understanding of audiences, whose initial reaction to why they read or watch television or play games is to say that it is for relaxation, "just for fun." The second challenge is to show convincingly what the use and even need for an unconventionally broad understanding of "the public sphere" would be. And thirdly, why audience research would provide not just insight in both popular culture and the public sphere, but could offer a relay to more explicit use of the citizenship potential in popular cultural practice for public debate.

We need to do more justice to why and how popular culture matters and we need to reinvigorate citizenship. Citizenship, it hardly needs saying, is the key quality that we assume when talking about the public sphere. In that regard I want to argue that citizenship, which I understand as that which binds us, that we feel committed by and responsible for in relation to relevant others and to strangers, currently is *elsewhere*. Consequently, broadening what we understand the public sphere to be is an urgent project.

Discussion of the public sphere is, of course, not synonymous with discussion of citizenship. By presuming on their close connection, my argument will be a bit forced. Theoretically, there is little to stop critics from understanding popular cultural practice in e.g. a Habermassian sense. Neither his theorisation of the public sphere or his theory of communicative action forbid this (Habermas 1962; 1981; 1984). It would mostly mean separating, in Habermas' terms, system and lifeworld aspects of popular culture. As global industry, popular culture involves the media of money and power. In everyday reception practices, however, it could be argued that lifeworld criteria, such as truth, moral rightness and sincerity, as well as the role of the citizen, are more relevant. In previous debates about these issues, however, cultural studies has been reproved for making exactly such a cut. Stern criticism has been directed at its overly idealistic and naïve understanding of audience practice (e.g. Curran 1990; Ferguson and Golding 1995). To renew such a discussion between a cultural and a political economic perspective seems little fruitful. Given that the status of popular culture today in academia is less precarious than it was a decade ago, there is also more room to take an even-handed look at what popular culture means and could mean to us, rather than idealise or demonise it.

As I am interested in how popular cultural practice might be a resource for an engaging public sphere and open public debate, I want to focus on how popular culture addresses us in our role as citizen (rather than as consumer or client).

I will try to offer an alternative to what I see as the enduringly dominant view that understands citizenship to derive from and to be intimately connected with public opinion formation in and via the political or "proper" public sphere only. Discussion among many about what is best for all of us, is understood to be supported by and take place predominantly in (news) media. Journalism functions as democracy's watchdog and as mediator for citizenship. This relation between the media, citizens and governments, embodied primarily by the newspaper has existed from the mid 18th century onwards (McQuail 2000). The fate and quality of democracy from such a perspective is in the hands of the reading public. The fact that newspapers are read less and less (Schoenbach et al 2005), and that young people regard news as important but boring (Costera Meijer 2006), is therefore a matter of concern. Both more narrowly formulated questions of what we expect from the news as citizenship medium, and questions of how citizenship is nurtured and bolstered in the broader domain of media culture are of evident importance now that the media landscape is changing rapidly, not least due to technological change and innovation.

It is my idealist conviction that media and cultural studies scholars should be organic intellectuals in a Gramscian sense and get back in touch with the street, with everyday talk as close neighbour to (public) debate. In my attempt to locate and make sense of the important "hidden debates" that develop in the realm of popular culture, I will advance my argument on four fronts. I will start with a discussion of the presence and the representation of ordinary people in the media. They have changed, signifying a changing public sphere and public debate. After that, I will turn to possible points of departure for a more cultural understanding of the public sphere, and will pay particular attention to how internet shapes this issue. The concluding section turns to the uses of popular culture and the role of (ethnographic) audience research in making explicit the potential public value of these uses.

The Changed Presence and Representation of Ordinary People in the Public Sphere

New technology over the past 25 years has given us an exploding volume of more and more lavishly illustrated news via new and old media. Digital video and photography travel fast and speeded up processes of news dissemination. Institutional control over news content has lessened. "Ordinary people" appear in new roles both as producers and as faces in the news. In news media, we encounter more than the professionals and experts who used to dominate screens and pages (Corner and Pels 2003). Although letters to the editor, and discussion and forum pages in newspapers are still mostly for those of us who have titles and functions that legitimate those opinions, vox pop segments and frequent references to opinion polls in newspapers and news programmes on radio and television make other faces and voices present.

The appearance of ordinary people in the media dates back most obviously to the introduction of television, in which audiences became visible around sports fields or in theatres. In the Netherlands it was the introduction of commercial television at the end of the 1980s that allowed ordinary people lines of their own. Everyday experience and observation was foregrounded in new reality formats

and chat shows (Leurdijk 1999; Livingstone and Lunt 1994). *Oprah Winfrey*, *Jerry Springer* and other talk shows were aired and given their Dutch counterparts. With amazing openness a huge range of subjects was introduced, from fashion to incest (Masciarotte 1991). Often denounced as women's television (emotional and unruly according to male interviewees, see Livingstone 1994), reality television paved the way for current practices of introducing and illustrating shocking subject matter via the accounts of those involved in what happened. Experience, what life feels like, became part of the domain of the news.

There is little against the use of the vox pop as practice of referencing what events mean to people. Emotion is part of how we come to interpret the world around us and form opinions about it. Anger, hatred, grief and sorrow point to how we understand the relation between individuals and collectivities, and what standards we feel should prevail. However, vox pop segments offer little sense of a wider orientation or reflection on responsibilities. There is no link from the individual to what turns individuals into members of a public. Politically, direct appeal to emotion and gut feeling by populist parties moreover has made this type of knowledge extremely difficult to use in processes of understanding what our common good or common responsibility would be. The ordinary men and women we see appearing do so under conditions dictated by the media or by political logic. Vox pop news segments for instance frame those shown as impacted by events they had no control over, either directly as victims, or as bystanders. Seldom are they asked for a political opinion or analysis of what has happened. Neither deliberation nor reflection is at stake in their construction as witnesses (Couldry 2000).

Unsurprisingly then, despite the fact that ordinary citizens have made their way onto the national stage; this has had little political impact. Although helped by developments in media content and technology and strengthened in a good many European countries by populist tendencies and movements in politics in the late 20th century, this produced national success for a small number of politicians but neither political agency nor public opinion formation for those outside the domain of politics. Not unsurprisingly the political establishment (including politicians, journalists and public servants) have remained fans of the old and trusted technology of polling.

Opinion polls are used on an unprecedented scale, fanning worries about poll-driven democracy (at least in the Netherlands). News media like to report on them. But do they provide a conduit for audiences to become publics? The utopia of such early pollsters as George Gallup was exactly that. The use of scientific method would deliver true knowledge and democracy (Glynn et al 2004, 68-9). Citizens and government officials would be perfectly informed about each other via the press. Technically, such consultation of citizens has come within easy reach. There is no need to organise national voting over every other small issue. Information is readily gathered and delivered. But this is hardly what happens. Taking my cue from Dutch practice, opinion polls appear to have little political meaning or impact. They may inform citizens about each others' views and ideas but only in the most cursory of manners, and with little visible results.

Three major opinion polls conducted and reported on in 2004 and 2005 in the Netherlands showed shockingly low levels of trust in Dutch government. This includes a poll by the government's Public relations Institute (Voorlichtingsinsti-

tuut 2005)[2]. No more than 35% of respondents said they had any confidence in the sitting cabinet and prime minister. Statistical measures were not made available; it was taken on faith that the respectable research agencies involved were indeed delivering representative outcomes for the Dutch population. Although a massive vote of distrust, the same cabinet, prime minister and parliament remained in office. Parliamentary democracy has not been widely queried. The legitimacy of the system appears not to be at stake. If that indeed is the case, why conduct opinion research at all?

Public scepticism about polling is rife. High non-response has made this clear as has everyday experience of being bothered at importune moments by market research companies. From this perspective the very high response to the *21 minute poll* in the Netherlands is of interest. 150.000 people spent 21 minutes filling out the on-line questionnaire during the 7 weeks the internet module was available. While internet polls are by definition not representative and cannot qualify as acceptable evidence of "public opinion" by scientific standards, the technology is used to forge a new bond between publics, market researchers and journalists. A high number of questions involved concrete policy decisions. The overwhelming negative judgement of what the Dutch government is doing by respondents was read as intentional critique. Rather than the unintended consequence of a more and more cynic state of mind among the general population, distrust of government and the state was set as the new standard. The poll results after all also showed that business and enterprise were not regarded with either worry or pessimism (http://www.21minuten.nl)[3].

To read polls as describing a given state of reality, argues Justin Lewis (2001) is to allow them to continue to be a cultural practice that confirms a conservative hegemony. Understanding them as constructing that reality (as a research format), and of being put to specific purposes in professional media practice is more useful. Polls can help, when read attentively, show how the democratic contract is changing. Currently we can see that in the heart of parliamentary democracy hegemony is produced as cynical disengagement from bureaucratic government fed by individualist ideology that governments themselves like to promote. Such a paradoxical result taunts any notion of everyday citizenship, defined as a reciprocal relationship of responsibility and trust between the nation-state and its nationals, as patently ludicrous.

Reading and understanding opinion poll results is not easy. It requires specialised social scientific training and it requires discipline. Neither of these seems in sufficient supply among journalists today[4]. Nor, for clarity's sake, are all polls *political* in nature. Although discussion of citizenship points to political polling, the majority of polls are of a different nature, which requires yet another type of "decoding" skill.

A small inventory of news items that mentioned "poll" or "opinion measurement," delivered over a 1000 hits in three national newspapers for the year 2004 in the Netherlands[5]. Most newspapers have at least one poll a day; the more populist newspapers use more poll results as independent news items. These polls cover a great many more topics than "horse race" statistics for upcoming elections or policy issues (McNair 1999). They blend into conventional marketing research and tell us about such amazing subjects as talking behaviour while going to public

bath rooms. Women, the newspaper item tells us, on average will keep on talking, while men don't[6]. Such polls may make us more aware as newspaper readers of the commercial nature of this type of research. They show how polls are used by journalists as a device to tell stories. They also help broaden the category of "the citizen." As clients especially of government agencies, citizens have long figured in newspaper print, but they are present in other roles as well. They are there as consumers who make choices, who construct identities. In itself this points to the need to redefine citizenship in relation to being a consumer or a client (Cronin 2000). Such a broad notion of citizenship may help revitalise journalism as a separate and critical professional force in democratic society by rooting it much more firmly in everyday life worlds.

To Understand the Public Sphere Culturally

Everyday life worlds include the use of a vast and wide-ranging array of popular cultural texts. We can identify specific ideological problematics in how audiences, readers and viewers talk about the popular forms they return to. The nagging questions are hardly ever explicit but they refuse to go away. Some of these are more obvious, such as the relation between ordinary citizens and the state (and other states). Think of such television series as *24*, or earlier spy fiction (Miller 2001). *24* is a "real time" thriller about a government anti-terrorist agency trying to ward off assassinations, nuclear and biological disasters. It is also, however, about parenting and more particularly about fatherhood. Key character agent Jack Bauer's relation with his daughter Kim is no less than an experiment in rethinking parenting away from "mothering," the dominant form, and especially away from the notion that parenting is about hands on care. Jack Bauer may not seem much as a dad, but he does allow his child to make her own mistakes (Hermes 2006b). This is a thematic that is closely related to the more general ideological quagmire of defining a strong post-feminist, enlightened masculinity, also to be found when taking a closer look at what binds us to popular culture in other genres. Both in interviews about football (or soccer I), detective fiction and quality TV drama for women, it can be found as an underlying theme (Hermes 2005).

While influential political science research has narrowed down citizenship to voting, which leads predictably to an interest in a particular type of opinion polling, culturally inclined scholars have taken up citizenship in terms of community building and bonding. Shared underlying concerns and the construction of subjectivity are two, connected points of entry. Toby Miller (1993; 1998) for example understands (cultural) citizenship as the disciplining of subjects in the cultural realm in capitalist social formations. He sums up his *The Well-tempered Self* by stating that "culture is a significant area in the daily organisation of fealty to the cultural-capitalist state" (1993 218). For him citizenship is a realm of subjection rather than freedom, in which disciplining and seduction both hold sway. However aware we are, in ironical or postmodern mode, that we are fooled, tied down and regulated by different types of invitation that come our way to be included and to belong; to be a selfless, responsible citizen or just a witness, to be a happy consumer, we also take them up, enjoy them, live them. Miller concludes that: "the civic cultural subject – the citizen – is produced as a polite and obedient servant of etiquette, within limited definitions of acceptable behaviour" (1993, 223). The intersection

of political and civic domains would not be a bad example for what we would ordinarily call "the public sphere."

Neither culture nor politics are domains of freedom but neither are they governed by totalitarian rule. While we are hailed to understand ourselves as worthy or unworthy citizens via the types of culture we prefer and consume, we may use and redefine culture in unexpected ways. John Hartley (1996; 1999) describes how "the knowledge class" has mostly been in the business of guarding their terrain and exclusive knowledge against the lack of taste and insight of the multitudes. "The knowledge class" has preferred to understand drama, literature and indeed popular culture, as areas of determination (in that they reflect deeper structures or truths) rather than as areas of production. In full knowledge of the status of television and other popular media, audiences have however made use of capitalist logic to protest class difference while "selling out" to global media conglomerates. This double-edged practice has been referred to both as resistance (Fiske 1989) and as submission (Curran 1990).

While we may rightly be critical of how particular economic logics dictate what is culturally available, there is merit in understanding how audiences make fuller use of what is possible than elite disdain for popular media suggests. In this light John Hartley has suggested that television is in fact a "transmodern" teacher that combines oral logic, information and entertainment (1999, 41). Television has taught us to understand "difference," he claims, as well as neighbourliness (idem). Against Miller's more pessimistic analysis, Hartley suggests that in *The Well-tempered Self* Miller has hidden a call to arms: to be intemperate and to resist disciplining by the corporate-capitalist state, in favour of parody politics and incivility (1996, 62). Hartley summarises in *Popular Reality*: "In other words, Miller's analysis (against the grain of his main thesis) describes not only the formation of a 'postmodern subject', but also what I'd call a postmodern politics of reading, centred on 'the actions of living persons' in relation and reaction to popular media and powerful truth-discourses; his incivility is my media citizenship" (idem). For Hartley, media citizenship is grounded in his intent to undo the intellectual-made divide between "the knowledge class" and ordinary people. Intellectual and popular culture are understood as "mutual, reciprocal and interdependent sites of knowledge production" (1996, 58-9). Hence Hartley's use of "reading" and "readerships" to describe media audiences as a taunt of how intellectuals like to describe themselves:

> *"Readerships" are the audiences, consumers, users, viewers, listeners or readers called into being by any medium, whether verbal, audio-visual or visual, journalistic or fictional; "reading" is the discursive practice of making sense of any semiotic material whatever, and would include not only decoding but also the cultural and critical work of responding, interpreting, talking about or talking back – the whole array of sense-making practices that are proper to a given medium in its situation* (Hartley 1996, 58).

Reading for Hartley moreover is a *practice* not a subjectivity, part of the cultural repertoire of actions that people may undertake (1996, 66). Shared cultural frameworks and how they are (continuously) built and rebuilt are at stake. Rigorous investigation of what the core values in using both journalism and popular culture are, should therefore include examination of how it fascinates and binds, how it

is incremental in community-building as well as in practices of exclusion. *Cultural* citizenship is the consequence of actions and debates in the range of contexts that make up the (semi) public sphere of mass media consumption. We should neither overestimate the public sphere of political science nor underestimate the realm of popular entertainment.

Studying cultural citizenship is a project of understanding public opinion and the building of shared identities among audiences. It includes a number of "rights" (to belong to a community; to offer one's views; to express preferences) as well as responsibilities (such as respecting other people's tastes, or how they are different from oneself). It is how we use (popular) media texts and everyday culture generally to understand, take up, reflect on and reform identities that are embedded in communities of different kinds (ranging from virtual, interpretative communities to membership of sports clubs or fan groups). Implicitly part of this ongoing activity of purposeful everyday meaning-making in relation to mediated culture is the production of distinctions, norms and rules. Cultural citizenship offers both the ground rules of interpretation and evaluation and the space to be excited, frightened, enthralled, committed or any of the huge range of states of mind and feeling that we connect with the use of popular media rather than just be concerned or pleased as becomes the informed citizen, the newspaper reader of old. Cultural citizenship thus refers to processes of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, which we are well familiar with but have failed to understand as the unruly but necessary input for more formally defined citizenships. While intentionally focusing on political citizenship, Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) shows in her *Entertaining the Citizen* how publics are constituted, politically and socially in more places and in more ways than a focus on parliamentary politics would allow for.

Cultural studies offers more examples of how popular culture constitutes "publics" by offering frames of reference. John Mepham suggests we understand the provision of "usable stories" in popular drama as a mark of quality (1990, 57). Ien Ang coined the term "emotional realism" to underline the value of the prime time soap opera *Dallas* for its viewers in reflecting on amongst other things gender roles and relations (1985). Stuart Hall speaks of "fictional rehearsal" as a quality of watching soaps. I found similar mechanisms in interviews with readers of women's magazines, who described the pleasure of temporary imagined ideal identities while reading (Hermes 1995). To call this "cultural citizenship" helps make visible not just the construction of identity and difference, but how the construction of the willingness to engage with the political needs grounding. Now that "being informed" has lost its lustre for many (the decline in newspaper reading), to be replaced by the supply of and demand for more experiential accounts, a broadened notion of citizenship is needed to see where there is democratic potential but where it remains unrecognised.

Internet as a Particular Site for Cultural Citizenship

Internet-related forms of communication may well provide interesting examples that are perhaps easier to accept because they so obviously bridge public and private spaces, and different types of media usage: entertainment, consultation and information, and communication. Information and experiential knowledge blend.

Internet communication may serve as exemplary case for future uses of multi-variety media content that can be but is not necessarily clearly defined as either fact or fiction. Web communities can serve different types of citizenship goals, some political, others national or cultural. All of these, however, can be understood from the broad, cultural, definition of citizenship given above, involving a variety of knowledges and activities, that include emotion, sensation and experience and deliver, in varying degrees, a state of being informed and of commitment to larger communities. Internet is a site where old arguments will have to be reshaped.

Of course the internet also serves old-fashioned political citizenship goals. Peter Dahlgren and Tobias Olsson (2005) found this in their research on the media use of different groups of young people in Sweden. Among those researched were youth members of political parties and extra parliamentary activists. While keeping informed by referring to a range of media sources (including newspapers), the internet allows them to visit the web sites of rival political parties and engage in discussion with them. Just training their debating skills, is what they claim. But also, from a citizenship perspective building their own community by defining what for them is competent membership, and building bridges to others who hold like convictions about competences but differ in political outlook.

Spectacular examples also exist of spontaneous action by groups of "civilians" on the web. Christine Hine (2000) describes the example of the Louise Woodward case in 1997. Woodward was a British au-pair charged in the United States with shaking the baby in her charge to death. Although building a website in 1997 was hardly as easy as it is today, a sizable number of sites appeared to support Woodward. Mostly, notes Hine, springing from strong nationalist feelings (2000, 113-4).

Less than a decade later, we see news travelling even faster, and leading to intense "outbursts" of national feeling. Unexpected shocking events are such an example. In the Netherlands the murder of filmmaker and Islam critic Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004 was such an occasion. Internet sites carried the news before the national media were ready to go public. But mostly this murder made the name of a Dutch Moroccan web community, called Marokko.nl. Especially for young people, Moroccan and Dutch, it provided a space to which they could turn to check their sense of the seriousness and implications of unfolding events and to debate their views, often forcefully. Although the webmasters did shut down the website temporarily to regroup, they provided a meeting point that continues to be very popular.[7] Although in many ways exceptional, this website supports the thesis that new technology is facilitating a new public sphere that combines exchange of information and evaluation in which emotion and experience are not discounted but an accepted part of processes of opinion formation.

Internet technology is also used by web communities to support for instance the almost immediate and coinciding deployment of different nationalisms. Louisa Stein offers the example of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. Stein was living and working in New York at the time, building fan websites for her research on American teen television, on series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Roswell* (1999-2002). While television, land line and mobile telephony took a long time to be restored, her new broadband modem came to live again fairly quickly. It provided a lifeline to the rest of the world and it brought her a stream of emails from her *Roswell* contacts via a usually carefully guarded internet list.

Stein (2002) notes how the *Roswell* fans used their expertise as viewers of the series which deals with aliens in the small American town that witnessed a UFO attack in the 1950s, to make sense of the 9/11 attack. The series deals with such topics as difference, alienation, community and problematic patriotism. This made the *Roswell* viewers well-prepared observers and critics of what had happened. What is striking most of all in Stein's account is how her virtual contacts connected seamlessly with her real-life family and friends and became an on-line family. Through their *cultural* connection (shared love for a television show), a citizen-type connection came into being. After sharing concern and grief, the *Roswell* fans moved to political discussion of terrorism but also of American foreign policy. Until the moderators decided that it was time to close down off-topic discussion and *Roswell* again was the main topic of discussion.

We may feel that internet especially facilitates small enclosed communities or is changing to a network logic that does connect but from point to point rather than around common themes. In any case, its power to facilitate and intensify connection and communication between large groups of people remains impressive in any case. News in this context becomes another type of "commodity," linked more directly and more intensely to emotion than to reflection. On short notice *reflection* is not what internet users want. Nor is it what these sites provide in the long run. Web sites, whether the *Roswell* lists or Marokko.nl, at some point return to "business as usual." Meanwhile, however temporarily, the internet is a public sphere in the classic sense of the word: there is debate and publics have been formed. What we are witnessing is not the coming together of groups of friends, but groups of strangers who aim to connect to others based on shared and disputed agendas and goals. Media events make clear that cultural bonds may be as strong as those forged in political arenas and perhaps even more valuable in the sense that they reconnect political issues and answers to worlds outside the in-crowd domain that politics still is.

On the net, then, we see newly enthusiastic citizen practices as once they were connected with the newspaper as medium. Quite disconcertingly even without going so far as to understand practices of watching and discussing football as part of the public sphere, these new internet-based practices are not easy to square with notions and ideals of "being informed." "To be informed" developed out of several centuries of newspaper use and were perhaps strongest in what Daniel Hallin (1992) termed journalism's period of High Modernism in the mid-1950s and 1960s. Internet practice, e.g., hardly recognises older measures for truth-as-factuality and reliability. Moreover the net appears to allow for *incidental* rather than for *structural* citizen practices. The transition from audience member to "belonging to a public" is not a permanent elevation but a temporary one.

Popular Culture Revisited via Ethnographic Audience Research

Let us for a moment assume that a great many citizenship practices do exist but are difficult to recognise as such. What is it, especially, that keeps us returning to popular culture? As audience member, I would find it hard to accept that popular culture would be about no more than sex, violence and sensationalism. Neither meaning nor relevance of cultural texts is necessarily on the surface. Going by audi-

ence research, the discursive character of practices of meaning construction across genres is crucially important here. No matter whether we are talking about television drama or newspaper content, content has meaning because it has narrative quality (cf. Bird 1992, and Bird and Dardenne 1988, Hermes 1999). We understand news as much as other types of content in terms of stories and central characters that, over time, we get to know. Audience research has also consistently shown that all media content is checked for its possible value as information. Reading women's magazines or romances, watching Dallas or sports programmes: all offer learning opportunities. Although audience research itself is one of the few practices in which audience members explicitly and systematically reflect on popular culture, this does offer initial proof that popular culture might well be a too little recognised public sphere resource. Neither its critics nor its users seem aware of what might well be at stake here.

Current and dominant conceptions of the public sphere, especially in live debate and everyday understanding, tend to return to a hierarchic understanding in which truth, rationality and "being informed" are of far greater importance than emotion or intuition. In their Public Connections project, for example, Nick Couldry and colleagues found that only those among their informants who liked the news were comfortable expressing how the media connected them with the public sphere (Couldry 2004; 2006). Likewise Ingunn Hagen's respondents in her mid 1990s television news research project were apologetic about not performing dutifully as citizens by, e.g. remembering what last night's news was about (Hagen 1994). While obviously this means that journalism is faced with a challenge (Lewis 2006), this state of affairs begs the question of how and where we choose to be tied in to the social order. How could a case for popular culture be made in this regard?

To start, for most of us, popular cultural texts (television series; thrillers; magazines, pop music) are far more real than national politics. In everyday life our allegiances and feelings of belonging often relate more easily and directly to (global) popular culture than to issues of national or local governance. On a daily basis we discuss new, exciting series with friends; we cheer together with numerous others we will never get to know when the national football team scores; we worry over suitable television for our children. We do all this in the secure knowledge that others like us exist and that they share a sense of elation, outrage, happiness or concern; that they are familiar with the arguments we want to use and the examples we refer to. Popular culture offers us imagined community (Anderson 1983), or, perhaps more accurately a shared (historical) imaginary (Elsaesser 2000) or even "social imaginaries" (Taylor 2004). Popular cultural texts help us know who we are; and include us in communities of like-minded viewers and readers. While formerly the nation might be thought to have primarily organised our sense of belonging, our rights and duties (civic and political citizenship, and more practically social citizenship), it is now facing serious competition from international media conglomerates as well as from fan cultures (cf. Turner 1994, 154) that invite us into new types of collectivities that stretch far beyond national borders and produce small self-enclosed enclaves within it.

If popular culture has the power to make people bond and feel they belong, we are, in effect, considering popular culture as a public sphere, in which democracy is at work. That means, that we should review whether popular culture is truly

democratic in its effects; what kind of citizenship is (cultural) citizenship, how does it exclude besides include? From a bird's gaze three characteristics of popular culture stand out.

First of all, popular culture makes us welcome and offers belonging. Its economic and celebratory logic (depending on its corporate-capitalist origins, or its user or reader provenance), after all, make it imperative that ever more buyers or like-minded fans are found. Even if conditions are set for entrance: a fee, purchase price, authentic interest or the right subcultural credentials, they often make participating all the more attractive. A second characteristic is the fascination we have with popular fiction, pop music, dedicated internet sites for TV series, much loved media stars or computer games, because they allow us to fantasise about the ideals and hopes that we have for society, as well as to ponder what we fear. Utopian wishes mix with feelings of foreboding about how our culture and society will develop, with the pleasure of sharing and a range of (often visceral) emotions, mulling and deliberation inspired by what we read, watch, listen to. Popular culture, thirdly, links the domains of the public and the private and blurs their borderline more than any other institution or practice, for more people – regardless of their age, gender, and ethnicity. In that sense it is the most inclusive and democratic of domains in our society, regardless of the commercial and governmental interests and investments that co-shape its form and contents. It offers room for implicit and explicit social criticism, both of a conservative and populist nature and of a more left-wing critical signature.

Audience ethnography can help lay bare in more detail aspects of popular culture that are otherwise hidden or of little interest to others, embedded as they are in everyday audience practice while crucial –for better or for worse- for social cohesion and the continuation of the social order. There might be an exchange of views, or actual debate, but only amongst those who know of one another's interest in a particular genre. Occasions in which popular culture invites strangers into actual debate are rare. Given also that popular culture does not insist on any kind of reflection, rigorous or otherwise, much of the cultural citizenship implied in using the media or the popular arts is hidden as a, mere blimp in routine activity or in small daily pleasures. Interviews can therefore be key moments of realising citizenship potential by opening up routine to reflection, and with luck, to debate.

Audience ethnography broadly defined includes attention to textual detail and history where needed. But what exactly is it that we need to look for? First of all a public sphere perspective would be interested in what kind of "readerships" or communities are built by dispersed audience members: what is it that binds readers? How does a particular popular field address them and what does it allow them to reflect on? Secondly, since we want to know more precisely what it is that makes popular culture worthwhile and how that could be a public knowledge resource, we need to look for what claims and criticism are voiced in relation to the "text" or popular practice discussed. What traces of "processes of working through" are there, or "rehearsals for real life" in how popular culture is talked about and used? What "usable stories" are indeed offered? Thirdly, given that cultural citizenship is an instrument to assess the public sphere value of popular culture in terms of the bonding and reflecting opportunities it offers, rules of inclusion and exclusion that are developed are of interest. An example of the latter would be knowing

the technical rules of football; or familiarity with the individual sports histories of trainers and players, but also literally on what grounds one may call oneself a detective reader or a fan of a particular television series.

Ethnography, used in such a way, is concerned with understanding and explaining how social and cultural practice gives rise to agendas, to constructions of femininity and masculinity, and imagined identities. By returning to audience ethnography, i.e. longer-term and repeated contact with audience members, dialogic practice may come into being (Marcus and Fischer 1986). The study of live-occurring web debate is another possibility. To intervene successfully in such debate and to use research encounters, will necessitate reorientation for researchers themselves. It would not do to come across overly didactic or paternalistic, nor, presumably would such behaviour deliver very high quality data. We would need to rethink how and on what grounds we achieve "rapport" as well as dust of "action research" as a viable strategy. Rather than look for uncontaminated material, we would invest in research-as-process. After all, who could have foretold the relative success of civilians making their own news? If there can be civic journalism, why not "civic research" as well?[8]

A "civic research," processual logic would do justice to how popular culture exists. It is like a huge piece of fabric, pulled in different directions by the many parties involved: producers, advertisers, readers, critics, activists and legislators. While holding on to the fabric is what binds them, it is also what they fight over. The fighting, the holding onto and claiming of the fabric could easily be reconceived in terms of public debate and be made part of research practice, no matter how unequal the power positions held. Popular culture is not a mere "web of meaning," nor is cultural citizenship a state of being or research an enclosed project. For audience members, a material claim to belong and to be recognised as a co-owner is involved. Cultural citizenship is taking responsibility for (one's piece of) popular culture. We take responsibility for popular culture by judging it, and we use it to find yardsticks to judge others by. Unfortunately, this is a "debate" that is mostly pursued in a stenographic format. Popular culture and cultural citizenship are often about defining what is "normal." About finding out what (degrees of) difference are tolerable. How can we be a "we," a community, imagined or otherwise; in what regards do we need to be the "same"; can we respect each other without forcing straightjackets on to each other that prescribe desired sex; sexual preference; looks; interpretative codes, or are such straightjackets part of the pleasure? The challenge is to make this explicit without, in doing so, tongue-tying discussants more at ease with outrage or cynicism.

Constructions of masculinity and feminity are examples of the major ideological quagmires that popular culture scripts solutions for, by, as it were, test-running scenarios. Given that most popular texts are open to a wide range of interpretations, it is impossible to find out which scenarios appeal without audience research. Scenarios are also recognisably a feature of public debate. The most important obstacle, quite likely then, would be the popular recognition that political talk and political effects seldom match. We need to face that politics and policy debate have become so complex that there is no easy or simple way into understanding what is at stake. However, the other way around, it is possible to narrativise public issues along lines of popular genres. It also possible, conversely, for those who do

partake in public debate to lend an ear to what happens in the domain of popular culture and likewise recognise the complexity and importance of practices of use of popular genres.

By letting go of old divisions an interlocking set of communities and networks that are reminiscent in a way of what Negt and Kluge (1972/1993) called "counterpublics." They would not perhaps be happy with my appropriation of their term. It is a bit of a step from Marxist criticism to a pragmatic inclusion of the mixed commercial-political logics of the realm of popular culture in the life-world. To take that realm seriously and understand it as a public sphere is ultimately to divest governmental politics of its frightening grandeur. It is to make clear that politics is not something belonging to (informed) elite, that you need to qualify for – but is about who we are, and what we, all of us, want to make of the world we live in. The cynical distance that more and more people take from politics and the public sphere, defined in a restricted way, makes clear that the modern project of educating people to become good citizens has come as far as it can. It is time to turn round our ideal of the public sphere, and recognise that it should be open to many forms of literacy and to more claims than truth, and more styles than rational behaviour. Habermas' notion of communicative rationality clearly points this way, even if it is not used as radically as I am suggesting here. Martha Nussbaum likewise pleads the case of recognising the value and importance of emotions (Nussbaum 2001). While we might not want to do away with "truth" altogether, debate becomes intelligible when it is acknowledged that it is often hard to reconstruct "the" truth in full and that intuition and emotions hardly always mystify and obscure. They may as much aid making sense of what is going on. Facts do not speak for themselves, while the art of interpretation can be practised as much in popular as in public culture. Given that (mis)quoting Shakespeare has long been part of public practice (Hawkins 1990), such courtesy might well be extended to popular culture of a later date.

Currently, the public sphere has little appeal. Only for some politics is exciting, to do with conflicts, characters and histories people have with one another and the ideals that drive them. A broadly conceived public sphere would include the energies generated by football fandom, or use the knowledges and literacies of readers of thriller novels even if those have to come to public debate initially via and in audience research as practice. We know that what bind us are not day-to-day administrative decisions. That we bond in drama, excitement, hopes and expectations as well as in disappointments, criticism and at times, despair. Both for journalism and for audience research, there is a task here to redefine their professional standards and obligations. Public debate should be about "us" and include all that we find inspiring and enlightening, rather than distinguish between an "us" and a "them" while using highly codified language. Only by walking such a road, will we find out whether to be naïve or cynical are a comfort or a choice for audiences. Despite being an academic, I know I am in many ways an ordinary audience member, I suppose I would like to know what identities are concealed behind all those other "ordinary audience members," even though I may well not much like what I find. Only thus can the public sphere be what we want it to be, something that energises and that connects and includes.

Notes:

1. This paper was originally presented as talk at "The Public Sphere and Its Boundaries" Conference, Tampere University, Finland, 25-27 May, 2006. The argument presented here borrows from two earlier publications: the Introduction to Rereading Popular Culture (Hermes 2005) and 'Citizenship in the age of Internet', published in the European Journal of Communication 21 (3) (Hermes, 2006a). I thank the editors of EJC and Sage for their permission to reuse material. I also thank Risto Kunelius and Robert Adolfsson for their comments.

2. The other two polls are a NIPO/TNS poll, reported on in all the big newspapers (2004) and the so-called 21 minute poll, a widely advertised internet initiative of McKinsey operating in the Netherlands in consort with a popular and a quality newspapers and companies who make the use of internet their business.

3. Poll results were reweighed to minimize effects of overrepresentation of groups because of self-selection induced by the method used.

4. Mostly this argument is voiced informally and in debate. E.g. *NRC* (Dutch quality newspaper) vice editor-in-chief Sjoerd de Jong lamented in a debate with journalism students on Monday 24 October 2005, U. of Amsterdam, that he wished for more beta-trained journalists who would be able to understand and value research results. See also Justin Lewis's more recent work, e.g. laid out in a conference paper at Making Use of Citizenship, Leeds, January 2005.

5. The national on-line newspaper archive LexisNexis was used for two quality (*Volkskrant* and *NRC*) and a popular newspaper (*Telegraaf*), as well as the on-line edition of one of the three newspapers for 2004 in its entirety to check the validity of search terms.

6. *Volkskrant*, 4 June 2004.

7. A year after the murder of Van Gogh the site has 85,000 members (number provided by Marokko. nl), while the Dutch Moroccan community consisted at that time of no more than 330,000 people.

8. "Civic research" is Robert Adolfsson's term, for the use of which I thank him. It denotes new forms of action and peer-to-peer research that engage informants as co-researchers, i.e. as research subjects rather than objects.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

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Send abstracts or any requests for further information to:

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