

The moral imagination in primetime television

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ABSTRACT ● In this article, we discuss how primetime programming is unjustly the subject of the moral panic constructed around television, a moral panic that seems primarily useful to maintain the high vs low culture dichotomy. To assess the moral content of primetime television, we used a framework derived from literary culture, since narratives' content and morality (or, rather, [moral] imagination) are primarily discussed within this tradition. We will argue that primetime television (news, soap operas, sitcoms, and so on) is not only rife with reflections on what counts as a moral issue, who we are, who the 'other' is and various ways of deliberating moral issues, but also that the content of primetime programming contradicts the arguments used in the moral panic surrounding primetime television. ●

KEYWORDS ● genre ● morality ● narrative analysis

Introduction

Since its early days, television has been closely linked with public morality and specific concerns about it. Many have accused television of contributing to the construction of a moral panic, but others have also singled out television itself as a subject of moral panic,¹ notably the content of television with respect to public issues such as the degradation of family values, civil conduct and democratic values (Tavener, 2000). Most recently, for instance, the media have addressed once more the issue of teenagers' sexual

behaviour and their watching sexually explicit programmes on television. Although the research involved suggests the contrary (Collins et al., 2004), the public debate centres on the idea that watching television causes teenagers to engage in sexuality too early in their lives (ANP, 2004; Picaver, 2004).

If, during the past decades, television has gradually become accepted as an object of serious academic study and as one of the primary storytellers in contemporary society (see Allen, 1992; Coolen, 1997; Gerbner, 1999), scholars have focused in particular on concerns associated with the external qualities of this popular medium. They have explored the significance of television, for instance, in terms of its usefulness for identity building (McKinley, 1997), as a form of resistance to dominant ideology (Fiske, 1987), for its role in enculturation (Allen, 1992), as a domain of emotional realism (Ang, 1985) or for its potential to structure unstructured time (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999). Whenever scholars considered television in a positive light, such an assessment was largely tied to its impact rather than its content. Lusted (1998: 176) has suggested that in regard to popular culture, 'residues of suspicion can still be discerned' in academia and that 'sympathy is extended less towards the forms of popular culture themselves'.

Indeed, in cultural studies, many scholars still seem to hold back from engaging with the *content* of television. Although authors such as Jenkins et al. (2002) argue for a new cultural studies in which the form of popular culture is explicitly taken into account, the apparent interest in popular culture generally hides a deepseated dichotomy between culture and Culture. Its persistence reveals itself in several ways. For example, Cohen (1999) notes that academics who study movies tend to present themselves as critics of art rather than as scholars of popular culture. Interestingly, Jensen, in her study on the mass culture debate in the United States, argues that textual readings of television are legitimate, especially when they are done in conjunction with the theoretical canon. It allows academics to demonstrate their sophistication – that they are 'not brutish, doltish, or barbaric' (Jensen, 2002: 136). According to Jensen, this 'legacy' of the Culture vs culture debate prevents us from studying the intrinsic value of culture. In this context, Hartley (1992: 153) observes that the intellectual and aesthetic history of popular culture is 'too often lost in the perennial arguments about high and low culture'. It is these perpetual arguments that Tavener (2000) rephrases as the moral panic that is constructed around popular television. According to Tavener, this moral panic seems especially useful for sustaining and perpetuating the high vs low culture dichotomy. In a similar vein, Jenkins et al. (2002: 27) argue, a common thread in the Culture vs culture debate involves the use of the culture concept 'as an instrument by the educated and middle classes to maintain their ideological authority by defining "good" and "bad" culture'.

What, then, is assumed to make Culture so different from culture? The public debate on this issue suggests that high culture offers insights that enrich us while low culture does not (see Catholic Wisdom Publications, 2003; Februari, 2004; Langerveld, 2003; McNamara, 1998). Statements such as, 'Recent research shows that television watching adversely affects children's thinking, speaking, imagination, senses, physique, feelings, and behaviour' (Catholic Wisdom Publications, 2003) are common and occasionally also considered to be common knowledge (see Spigel and Curtin, 1997). It is often argued in these public debates (and, in more nuanced ways, in academic debates as well) that Culture, through its complexity, offers insights that could enhance the imagination, whereas culture, because of its simple and superficial content, diminishes our imagination. As Hakemulder (1998: 23) claims: 'It could be countered that other (non-literary) discourse types may have similar beneficial effects. Soap operas might equally contribute to insight into human character. One property that distinguishes literary narratives from other narrative discourses, however, is its complexity.' It is important to enrich the imagination, considered as an essential human characteristic (Hartley, 1992; Johnson, 1993). Fostering the imagination prevents society from moral decline; more likely than not, a well-cultivated imagination turns us into morally mature citizens (Hartley, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1938). One could argue that high culture is considered to offer insights that, together, construct *moral* imagination. Complementary popular television is identified as the cause for the moral decline of society because it would not offer such insights. Hakemulder (1998: 24) continues: 'The way popular culture deals with such issues is hardly inductive to sophisticated moral discrimination.' It is important to note here that the arguments are of a theoretical nature. As Cohen (1999: 142) argues: 'it is entirely possible to regard art itself as a waste of time. Gallery-hopping and museum-visiting and concert-going can seem idle activities, mainly self-indulgent and distracting.' Cohen concludes by claiming that the distinction between high and low culture is an indefensible one.

Although there is much research concerning the content of popular television (one of the most famous examples being Gerbner's research, 1969, 1988), the *moral* content of popular television is underresearched. Most research focuses on one particular element of popular television's content, such as family patterns, stereotypes or communication patterns (Alexander, 2001). The rare research that does focus on (moral) values in primetime television presents us with results that contradict the moral panic arguments (see Bachen and Illouz, 1996; Selnow, 1990).

Given the theoretical nature of the pro-Culture arguments and the limited research on the moral content of television, there is almost no empirical evidence that culture, either high or low, provides insights that contribute to the construction of the moral imagination, even if this does not

necessarily imply that these (theoretical) arguments are invalid (Cohen, 1999). These observations prompted us to ask whether the theoretical arguments that are assumed to be valid for high culture are also applicable to popular television. Since the idea of how (high) culture adds to the moral imagination is mostly elaborated on in what Rorty (2000) calls the literary culture – notably, the different moral insights offered by (literary) narratives – we have used a literary framework to assess the moral content of popular television. Our leading question is: how does primetime television imagine morality? Is it possible to evaluate television content without reproducing the high vs low culture dichotomy that excludes television as a valuable cultural form?

In this article, we explore and assess television content as serious as literary narratives. We will analyse what moral imagination primetime television's narratives present. Given that, in the Netherlands, TV attracts most viewers between 20.00 and 22.00, we concentrated on programmes in this timeslot. Our sample consists of all the primetime programming of seven Dutch channels:² three public (Nederland 1, 2 and 3) and four commercial ones (RTL 4, SBS 6, Yorin and Net 5) broadcast during one week in May 2003, including all programmes that started or finished somewhat earlier or later. As we excluded programmes that ended after 22.30 (eight movies and two soccer games), our analysis is based on a total of 81.6 hours of television. Furthermore, Dutch primetime television is interesting because of its international orientation. From the analysed programmes, 35.5 percent were produced in the US, Belgium, Germany, the UK and the Scandinavian countries. This is why our results also offer an indication of the moral content of television programmes from our surrounding countries and the US.

The imagination of television

What is this moral imagination that (television) narratives are supposed to proffer? According to Johnson, moral imagination can be understood as 'the ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action' (Johnson, 1993: 202). Taking narrative as one of the basic structures through which people give meaning to their lives and the events in their lives, imagination and narrative are closely interrelated (Johnson, 1993). According to Johnson, narratives offer us three different kinds of insights that together construct moral imagination: insights into which situations are morally relevant; into possible ways of deliberation in a certain situation; and into the consequences of actions and decisions for both protagonists and others (see Bogdan et al., 2000; Booth, 1988; Nussbaum, 1995, 1997, 1998; Rorty, 1989). We rely on these three kinds of insights for our analysis of television narratives.

The concept of narrative cuts across genres and therefore allows us to compare fictional and non-fictional genres. We follow Thwaites et al. (2002) in their conception of narrative sequence. They identify three basic phases: equilibrium, disruption and closure. In addition, the narrative's genre and complexity are of importance. Although Nussbaum (1995, 1997), Rorty (1989) and Bogdan et al. (2000) indeed suggest that narratives in general may be morally imaginative, they emphasize the relevance of the (realistic) fictional nature of narratives. Nussbaum argues that a narrative's *fictional* nature enables the reader to identify with a character, thus establishing a sense of similarity or shared experience, while the *realism* simultaneously allows the reader to keep a distance, so he/she can critically reflect on the experiences presented and become aware of differences with a particular character. Hakemulder (1998) suggests the complexity of the plotlines and the round characters of the literary narrative to be pivotal features for the narrative's moral imagination. To address these issues we have included all genres in our analysis, fictional as well as non-fictional, including news, current affairs, talk shows and light entertainment such as game shows and lifestyle programmes.

In order to assess moral imagination in primetime television's narratives, first, it is imperative to identify the moral themes found in primetime programming. Which situations are presented as morally relevant? How is it possible to determine 'what counts as morality' in a television text? Regarding heroism as a moral theme, for instance, it is relevant to ask what appears as truly heroic and what are the characteristics of, and conditions for, true heroism (see Gerbner, 1969).

Second, we analysed the different ways of deliberating a moral theme, the scope of the styles of moral reasoning that the narrative presents. As a starting point for analysis, we distinguished two styles of moral reasoning inspired by Carol Gilligan (1982) and Gilligan et al. (1988): rule-governed (based on an ethics of justice) and sensibility-guided (based on an ethics of care). In a rule-governed style of moral reasoning, the individuals involved are presented as independent from each other and as having a sense of duty and obligation towards each other. They rely on the application of rules and principles to realize their goals. The sensibility-guided style of moral reasoning presents individuals as interdependent and focuses on their mutual relationships. The interactions direct what is to be done while the welfare of others and preventing others from coming to harm are central considerations. Moreover, the sensibility-guided style of reasoning is contextual and inclined towards empathizing with the Other.

It is commonly argued that women are orientated more towards an ethics of care (and, thus, to a sensibility-guided style of reasoning) while men are mainly geared towards an ethics of justice (hence, a rule-governed style of reasoning). Moreover, the ethics of care are often not even assigned moral value (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al., 1988; Rachels, 2003; Tester, 2001).

These arguments point towards the traditional (Kantian) conception of morality and moral reasoning as based on rationality and thus excluding a more emotional conception of moral reasoning. The power dynamics founding this conception of morality prompted us to wonder about the third element of moral imagination: the consequences for the Other. We were interested to know whether television narratives reproduced these mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in moral reasoning; in other words, who was presented as reasoning in which style on Dutch primetime television. If Gilligan et al. (1988) only consider the issue of gender in their argument, we also take into account other relevant social categories, including ethnicity, age, class and religion.

Approach

A major premise of our investigation is that a narrative's moral imagination is dependent upon its moral complexity, while moral complexity is a function of two dimensions. The first dimension is thematic: how many different moral themes can be distilled from the text? A consideration of this concern will give us a grasp of the moral range of the text (i.e. the moral diversity of its narratives). The second dimension is the internal richness of the moral theme or its moral depth: how many and which varieties are presented of one particular theme? We called these varieties 'moral messages'. These messages could appear in several ways within one narrative. We called these variations 'sub-messages'. A narrative's moral complexity is, therefore, the result of these two dimensions.

We have chosen (verbal) closure as the starting point of our analysis because, with the restoration of the narrative's equilibrium, (moral) judgement may be passed on its preceding events. It becomes possible to decide who was really guilty or innocent or who was truly in love or which things are better now.

Accordingly, it is with narrative closure that the greatest pressure for the text's preferred reading may be activated. . . . In such celebratory endings, narrative closure works as a powerful means of expressing positive cultural myths and an attractive invitation to accept them. (Thwaites et al., 2002: 124–5)

Furthermore, using narrative closure as a starting point of analysis also gave us a means to assess genres such as soap operas. Although the overall narrative of soap opera is obviously not closed, singular plotlines are. By adopting Thwaites et al.'s (2002) conception of narrative sequence, these plotlines could be included in our analysis.

Last, but not least, narrative closure proved a useful tool for discriminating narratives with a manifest moral theme from those without one. Based on related studies, we formulated some moral themes beforehand, such as

family (Strom Larson, 1993), friendship (Booth, 1988), legitimate authority (Vardy and Grosch, 1999), heroism (Gerbner, 1969), legitimate violence (Gerbner, 1988), love (Bachen and Illouz, 1996), civilized conduct (Selnow, 1990) and legitimate religion (Rachels, 2003). Other moral themes popped up during the analysis merely because we could not fit them into an already formulated category. These included civilization, meaningful death, the good life and fairness.

We identified moral closure on the basis of specific verbal statements in our sample. According to Rachels (2003), *moral* statements can be recognized by their use of 'ought' and 'should', their aim on conduct and a good/bad evaluation. Of the 81.6 hours of the primetime television programming analysed, 53.8 hours ended on a specific moral note. An example is the current affairs programme *Nieuw Economisch Peil* (New Economics; RVU/Teleac/NOS). It dealt with the pros and cons of globalization and the solution to world poverty, while its moral theme involved 'civilization'. After globalization activists on both sides argued their case, the programme concluded with a statement from one anti-globalization activist. She claimed that if we care about our future, we should do something about world poverty, thus arguing that it is our moral obligation to help poor countries. Other programmes in our sample failed to have such unambiguous moral closure. One example is an episode from the Canadian series *Rail Away* (producer unknown), an informative travel programme that featured a train trip from Halifax to Toronto, giving information on the different cities along the way and closing with a reference to the subject of the next episode. Other narratives sometimes presented a moral theme, but did not have moral closure.³ In this respect, some of our research data have a limited value for our research concerns.

Of all the programmes in our sample with explicit moral closure we identified the moral messages conveyed. These may be presented as either a moral claim, such as 'a child should be the number one priority in your life' (*Birth Stories*), or a specific question, for instance, how one should deal with a relationship that has turned into a daily grind (*Hearts and Bones*; BBC). From these messages we identified the moral themes involved.

Subsequently, we traced all the various arguments that were tied to the moral message in each programme in our sample. Their logic was used either to justify a particular message or as an assessment of the relevant features of the moral question addressed. Next we gauged the internal logic of the arguments and statements: were they reducible to the same moral message? If so, it allowed us to identify the programme's moral theme, including potential sub-messages that could be suggestive of the theme's moral depth. If the reasoning was not reducible to one message, this meant there were more moral messages and (possibly) more moral themes in the programme. Regularly, we identified several moral themes in one programme. Taken together, they constituted the programme's moral range.

The third dimension we investigated was the style of moral reasoning presented in a narrative. Moral imagination partly consists of the ability to envisage the range of possibilities for contemplating or solving a moral issue (Johnson, 1993). As explained, inspired by Gilligan (1982) and Gilligan et al. (1988), we formulated two types of moral reasoning: the rule-governed style of reasoning and the sensibility-guided style of reasoning. Interestingly, during the analysis, two other styles of reasoning appeared: a postmodern self-reflexive style of reasoning that denaturalized morality and the subject's relation to it (see Hutcheon, 1989); and a more autonomous, self-governed style of reasoning that presented morality as an activity itself (see Foucault, 1983). Every argument was assessed on style of reasoning.

Last, but not least, we analysed who was presented as a moral subject. All the moral arguments and statements were traced back to whose point of view was expressed. Where possible, we described the subject in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, region, sexual preference, religion and class.

The moral complexity of primetime television

Our study reveals that primetime television addresses many different moral issues (see Figure 1). We traced 114 moral messages in the 53.8 hours of primetime television with a moral closure. The messages address a large range of topics, ranging from how to break up a relationship to the acknowledgement of the holocaust. Together, these messages constituted 12 moral themes: love, good family, friendship, civility, legitimate authority, legitimate violence, meaningful death, legitimate conviction, heroism, the good life, fairness and civilization.

The first thing that draws our attention is the uneven distribution of the moral messages over the 12 moral themes. Three themes dominated primetime television: 'what counts as good family?' (17 messages); 'what counts as civility?' (25 messages); and 'what counts as civilization?' (17 messages). Concerns tied to civility, civilization and family together made up for 51.8 percent of the moral messages presented on Dutch primetime television.

A second striking feature is that the moral range of non-fictional genres seemed equally as large as the moral range of fictional genres.⁴ We expected moral range and moral depth in primetime television to be related to genre. After all, the literary framework (Bogdan, 2000; Nussbaum, 1995, 1997; Rorty, 1989) emphasized the fictional character of a narrative as a condition sine qua non for the development of moral imagination. Although fictional and non-fictional genres differed in their moral themes, their moral range seemed comparable.

Nevertheless, the moral messages revolving around 'good family' were primarily found in fictional genres, while non-fictional genres dealt far more often with messages involving issues of civilization and civility. As such, this

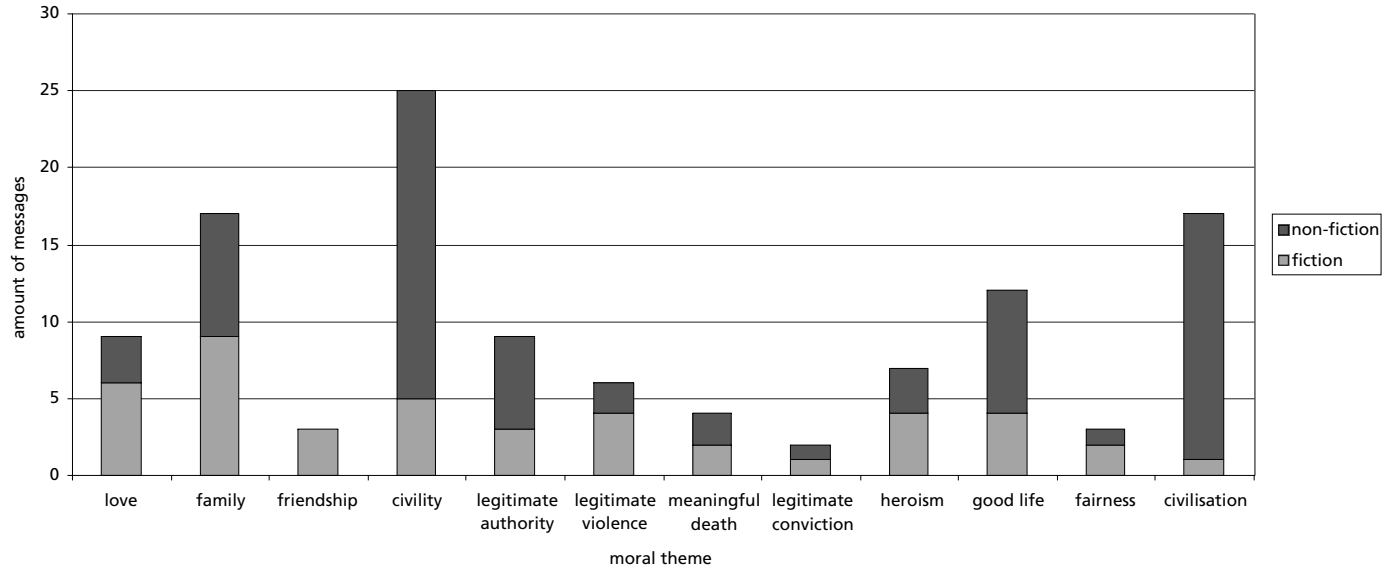


Figure 1 Actual moral range of primetime television

division suggests a difference in emphasis rather than a structural difference. The non-fictional programming capitalized on moral narratives that invite reflection on public issues, involving, for example, the rules of debate (civility), the significance of democracy (civilization), the need to tackle poverty (civilization) and the rules concerning teamwork (civility). By contrast, fictional programmes concentrated more often on the individual concerns of private life, such as the reciprocal nature of friendship relations (friendship) and the significance of loyalty in familial relationships or the emotional value of family (good family).

Similarly, moral depth proved as much a feature of fictional as of non-fictional genres. Fictional genres on average have 1.9 sub-messages per moral message, while, for non-fictional genres, this ratio is 1.7 sub-messages. We suggest that the similarity between fictional and non-fictional genres is due to the specific themes presented and the time dimension in their narrative development.

The number of *plotlines* a genre allows, it seems, determines moral range, whereas the amount of *time* set aside for these plotlines to develop determines moral depth. Hakemulder (1998) describes the time dimension of a narrative as the main feature for it to function as a resource for the development of (moral) imagination (the longer the narrative, the more intricate its plotlines and the larger its number of in-depth characters – the two features of a narrative that predetermine moral imagination). The time dimension seems to be an independent predictor of moral complexity. This becomes apparent when we compare one week (or seven broadcasts) of the daily evening news to one week (or five episodes) of a primetime soap opera. Both programmes are broadcast daily and have a complex narrative structure. In the soap opera, we identified the development and closure of seven plotlines. We traced four moral messages (moral range), of which each had two or more sub-messages (moral depth). This soap opera may thus be considered a morally complex programme. In comparison, the evening news contained both shorter and longer plotlines. An example of a longer plotline involved the war in Iraq and America's intervention ('what counts as legitimate authority?') and this item included several sub-messages. The evening news can thus be labelled a morally complex programme. These results suggest that the time a plotline gets to evolve as the pivotal feature in complex literary narrative is an element of both fictional and non-fictional television narratives.

Second, moral complexity seemed also to be determined by themes. Some themes showed greater moral depth than others, regardless of the genre in which they were dealt with. The moral themes 'what counts as family?', 'what counts as legitimate authority?', 'what counts as legitimate violence?' and 'what counts as a good life?' were presented on average with two sub-messages per moral message. For example, the aforementioned message in the evening news *NOS Journaal* (NOS), revolving around 'what counts as

legitimate authority?’, dealt with the question of whether the intervention of the US in wars and in other countries should be allowed. This message was composed of three sub-messages: the intervention in Kashmir and Afghanistan, the peace process in Palestine and Israel and the rebuilding of Iraq after the war. All these sub-messages closed with statements about the suspected hidden agenda of the US in these matters, something that was openly condemned by the voiceover.

By contrast, the messages that provided us with answers as to ‘what counts as civility?’ had 1.5 sub-messages on average. For example, in the American drama series *Everwood* (Warner Bros), one message was about a daughter slamming the doors in the house while having an argument with her father. This issue was morally concluded through a conversation about how you can have an argument in a more civilized way.

Styles of moral reasoning

To gain insight into the different styles of contemplating the moral issues that television narratives offer, we analysed the messages and sub-messages in terms of their style of moral reasoning (see Figure 2). Several concerns were relevant. First, Gilligan et al.’s (1988) suggestion that sensibility-guided reasoning is frequently not recognized as a style of *moral* reasoning caused us to expect it to be under-represented in primetime television. Second, Benhabib (1992) suggests that the rule-governed style and the sensibility-guided style are tied to the public sphere and private sphere respectively. We anticipated, therefore, that styles of moral reasoning were genre-related and theme-related, with sensibility-guided reasoning more prevalent in fictional genres such as drama and soap operas, because they deal more often with private matters, and rule-governed reasoning more prevalent in non-fictional genres like news, current affairs and talk shows.

We counted a total of 476 verbal expressions on moral themes in our sample. In accordance with Gilligan et al. (1988), rule-governed reasoning was indeed dominant on Dutch primetime television: 78.2 percent of the moral expressions were styled as rule-governed. Of all the other verbal moral expressions, 16.2 percent were framed in a sensibility-guided style. The remaining ones relied on a postmodern self-reflexive style (3.8 percent) or an autonomous self-governed style (1.9 percent).

The suggestion of Gilligan (1982) and Gilligan et al. (1988) that rule-governed reasoning is recognized as moral reasoning par excellence is corroborated by our analysis, even though over 20 percent of the expressions did not have a rule-governed style. But rule-governed reasoning even dominated when it seemed more logical to expect a sensibility-guided style. For example, in the Canadian docudrama *Birth Stories* (Cineflix), the moral message was the overall importance of having children

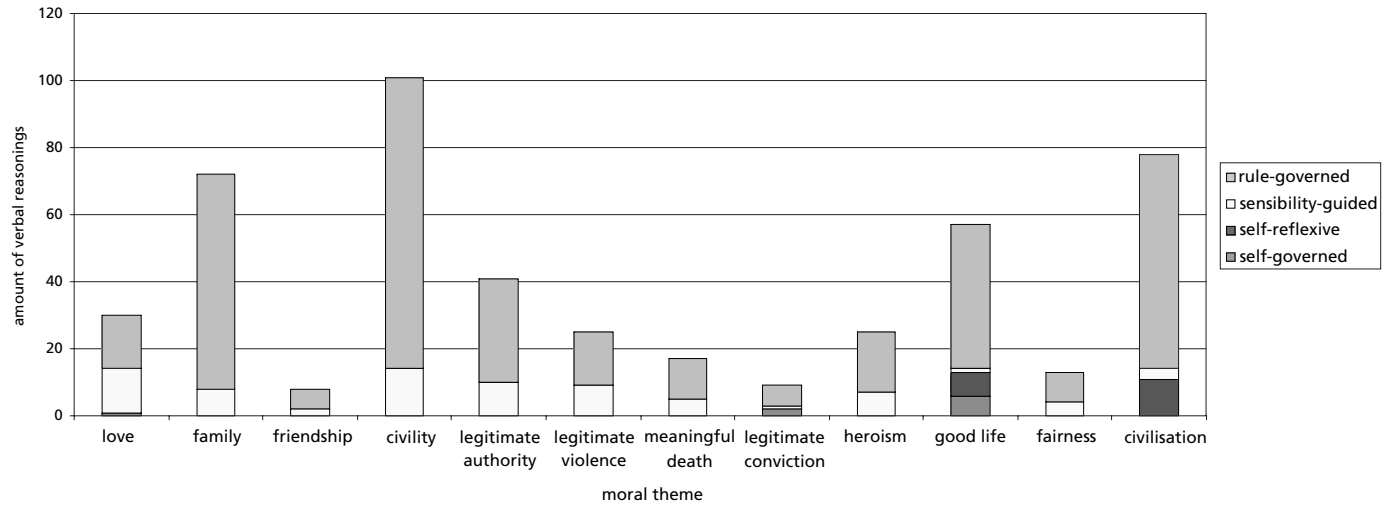


Figure 2 Styles of reasoning per moral theme

and the question of what makes a good parent. A rule-governed style of moral reasoning expressed itself in statements such as those from Sari, a young woman who was in hospital for six weeks due to complications during her pregnancy. The only thing she worried about was her son who was left at home. Sari felt guilty for not being there. When the new baby was born, she came home. Her son was angry with her, refused to talk to her and disobeyed her. Sari explained that she had been a bad mother for not being there. In other words, good parents are always available: that is the basic right of children. If the narrative had afforded space to a sensibility-guided style, Sari would have accepted her son's anger because he was very young. How could a 4-year-old be expected to understand the situation? In this style of reasoning, Sari would be presented as feeling less guilty because her situation was life-threatening. This might be considered as more important than being available to her son full-time, especially since her husband took care of their son all the time, so he was not neglected at all. Strikingly, instead of offering two styles of moral reasoning (which seemed to make sense considering the situation), only a rule-governed style was presented: a mother should be there for her child, irrespective of the situation.

The styles of moral reasoning presented in Dutch primetime television were only partly related to genre. Although Benhabib's (1992) suggestion on styles of reasoning and their specific ties to the public and private spheres seems to be confirmed by our data, the interrelation of styles of reasoning and genre hardly appears to be distinctive. Of the rule-governed style of reasoning, 33.3 percent were presented in fictional genres and 66.7 percent in non-fictional genres, which is basically in line with Benhabib (1992). Of the sensibility-guided style of reasoning, 42.9 percent were found in fictional genres and 57.1 percent in non-fictional genres, which contradicts Benhabib's claim.

Furthermore, styles of moral reasoning were only partly related to private sphere or public sphere topics in the manner suggested by Benhabib (1992). For example, in the evening news (non-fiction), the US secretary of state Colin Powell requested the discontinuation of UN sanctions against Iraq. This request was presented in a sensibility-guided style of reasoning. Powell explicitly requested friend and foe to unite in giving aid to the Iraqi people, thus prioritizing the relationship with the Iraqi people and their welfare – a public topic argued in a sensibility-guided style.

In the same fashion as moral complexity, styles of moral reasoning were related to moral themes. Whereas none of the moral themes was styled exclusively as rule-governed or sensibility-guided, the ratio between the styles differed per moral theme. The rule-governed style of reasoning prevailed in the three dominant themes in particular: 'what counts as good family?' (88.9 percent); 'what counts as civility?' (86.1 percent); and 'what counts as civilization?' (82.1 percent). For the latter two, this prevalence is

closely in line with Benhabib (1992). The moral themes ‘what counts as civility?’ and ‘what counts as civilization?’ were often linked to public topics in which rules and obligations were discussed. But the dominance of a rule-governed style of reasoning in messages revolving around good family was surprising because ‘what counts as good family?’ seemed to be the theme most closely associated with the private sphere. Messages revolving around ‘what counts as legitimate authority?’ also conflicted with Benhabib’s assumption that styles of moral reasoning are linked to private and public topics. In messages about legitimate authority, 24.4 percent of the verbal expressions were phrased in a sensibility-guided style of reasoning. Since authority is commonly backed up by rules and arguments about duty and obligations, this is remarkable. It can be explained by the fact that the sensibility-guided style of reasoning on questions of authority was frequently accounted for (and therefore verbally expressed) in exceptional situations. For example, in the American drama series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (UPN), the moral message of who ought to have the authority to set limits on the use of violence was discussed in several styles of reasoning. The heroine Buffy wants to kill a demon, who is also a former friend of Buffy and her friends. She adopts a rule-governed style, reasoning that because the friend is now a demon, she should be killed like any other demon. One of Buffy’s friends counters this logic in a sensibility-guided style. He argues that since the demon is a former friend and they all have a relation with her, the rules do not apply as they do for total strangers. He explains that they all know what terrible situations their friend has suffered and that they should try to understand her and care for her: ‘When our friends go all crazy and start killing people, we help them.’

Commonly, messages involving legitimate violence were also presented in a sensibility-guided style (36 percent). For example, in an episode of the popular Dutch police series *Baantjer* (RTL/Holland Media Group), a murder gives rise to the moral message ‘should we excuse violence in the context of loyalty or should we consider all violence as wrong?’. The victim is a notorious wife beater who accidentally dies after two female friends of his wife beat him up with a baseball bat. While a rule-governed style of reasoning gives way to arguments about the issue that (physical) violence is never an appropriate solution to a problem, a sensibility-guided style prompts arguments on the wife’s position. Unable to resist her husband’s aggression, her best friends intervened on her behalf. This female solidarity is appreciated openly in the end, and, even though the violence was unjustified, the reason for it is understood. The welfare of the victim’s wife was taken into account as well as the relationship between the women.

A comparatively large share of the messages revolving around ‘what counts as civilization?’ was couched in a self-reflexive style of reasoning (14.1 percent). An explanation might be that this style was often used in satirical programmes. Such programmes often focus on social order and

thus on ‘what counts as civilization?’. Messages revolving around ‘what counts as a good life?’ were also frequently framed in self-reflexive reasoning (12.3 percent) and self-governed reasoning (10.5 percent). This can partly be explained by the theme itself, as such reasoning basically involves setting one’s own rules in shaping one’s life and refers almost directly to the aesthetics of existence as formulated by Foucault (1983).

Subject and object positions and styles of moral reasoning

Our last research concern focuses on whether subject positions in television programmes are linked to styles of moral reasoning (Figure 3). Relevant aspects include gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, religion and region. In our sample, we identified 436 subject positions as suitable for analysis (other subject positions involved the use of a voiceover or an institution).

Women took up 39.4 percent of the moral subject positions while men expressed 60.6 percent of the moral concerns, which turned out to be a significant difference.⁵ However, in 2002, only 35 percent of the people on Dutch television were identified as female (Sterk and van Dijck, 2003). This perhaps suggests that the percentage of women on television is rising and that, more importantly, women are not excluded as moral subjects. In addition, styles of moral reasoning on Dutch primetime television were not gendered. For the dominant rule-governed style of reasoning, the distribution of women and men in subject positions is 39.6 percent and 60.4 percent respectively, which is an almost perfect reflection of the percentages of men and women in moral subject positions on Dutch primetime television. Yet we find a distribution of 46.6 percent women and 53.8 percent men taking up subject positions in verbal reasoning styled in a sensibility-guided way. These results suggest that Gilligan’s observation of gendered styles of moral reasoning is not applicable to moral reasoning on primetime television. One could argue that styles of moral reasoning on television are more equally distributed between women and men than earlier research would suggest.

Once more, a consideration of the separate moral themes reveals a few striking patterns. Although it is hardly surprising that men figured more prominently as moral subjects in narratives that dealt with public sphere issues such as civility, legitimate authority and civilization (Benhabib, 1992), messages revolving around legitimate violence were dominated by women. This unexpected outcome may be explained by the fact that most of the narratives addressing violence as a moral theme took place in the private sphere (for example, wife beating, rape and robbery) or dealt with violent acts by women. Violent acts by men were probably considered more common and thus less newsworthy or less interesting as a moral theme and, hence, less visible as a morally relevant topic than the violent acts of women.

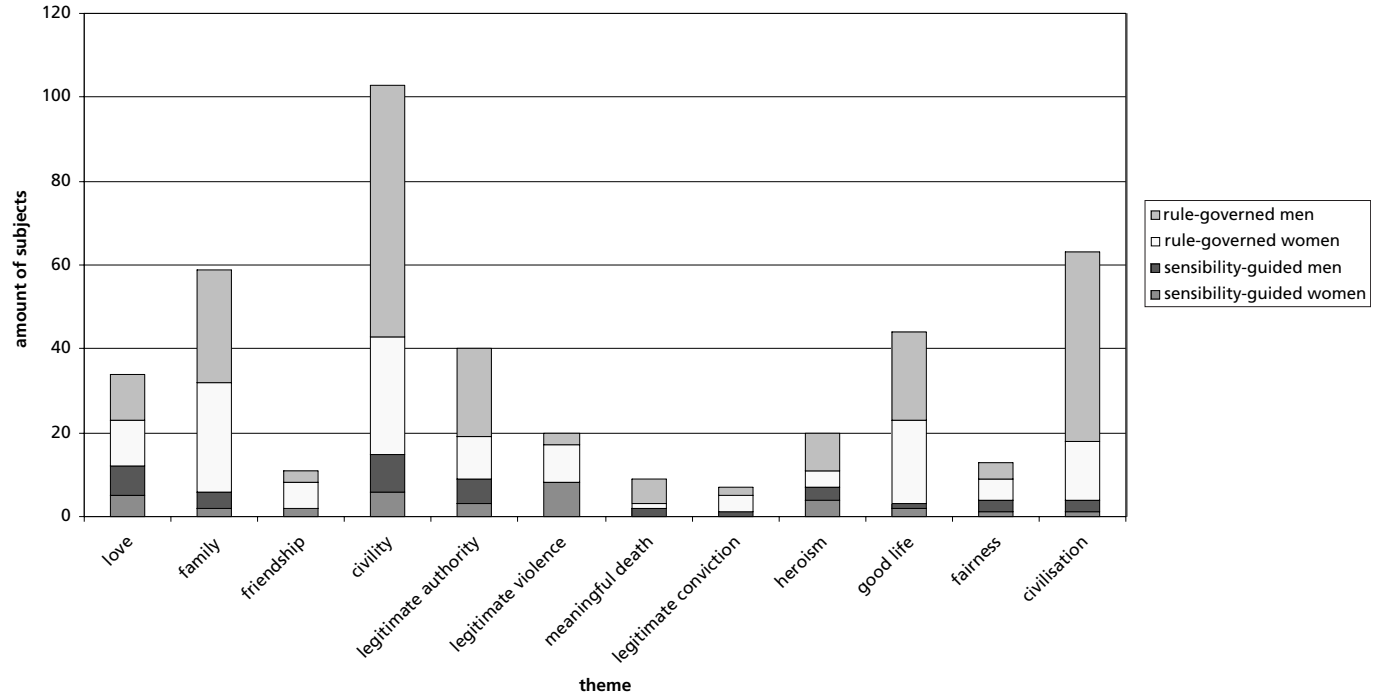


Figure 3 Styles of moral reasoning and subject positions

This result does suggest that male violence is more ‘normal’, and therefore acceptable, than female violence (see Foucault, 1976). However, it is worth mentioning that very excessive violence, such as premeditated murder, will exclude the perpetrator from humanity. In these cases, however, the moral theme presented is humanity and who belongs to it rather than violence (i.e. ‘what counts as civilization?’).

Regarding the relationship between morality and specific subject features (ethnicity, sexuality, religion, region, class and age), our study also revealed some eye-catching results. In our sample, non-western ethnic minorities took up 18.3 percent of the moral subject positions, while, in the Netherlands, only 10 percent of the population belonged to a (non-western) ethnic minority (CBS, 2003). At first sight, this over-representation of ethnic minorities as moral subjects perhaps suggests a colourful picture of Dutch television, but the over-representation is more likely to be explained by the fact that the week included the national celebration of liberation day (5 May) and the anniversary of the murder of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in the previous year. This latter event, in particular, evoked a lot of debate on multicultural society in current affair programmes, in which the majority of the interviewees or those partaking in the debates were of Moroccan descent. Still, genres such as lifestyle programmes and sitcoms also had a large percentage of non-white subject positions (respectively, 28.6 percent and 50 percent). Apparently, there is no indication to assume that there is a connection between ethnicity and moral reasoning on primetime television.

By necessity, the data on age are in part based on estimates, but of the moral subjects on primetime television, some 87 percent fell in the age category 20–65 years of age. As only 61.8 percent of the Dutch population are in that age category, this means that children, adolescents and the elderly were significantly under-represented as moral subjects on primetime television (CBS, 2003). On average, women appeared to be younger than men. While a slight majority of men seemed to be in the 40–65 age category (51 percent), a slight majority of women looked as if they were between 20 and 40 years of age (52.6 percent). Women who used a sensibility-guided style of reasoning were of various ages, ethnicities, positions in the family, and so on, while the majority of the men who used a sensibility-guided style of reasoning were white, older and from one of the higher social classes. These men were in general presented in positions with a more varied style of moral reasoning than younger, lower-class or black men. These observations suggest that instead of being related to gender, styles of reasoning are related to class, ethnicity and age. In the American sitcom *Friends* (NBC), for example, one moral message involved the notion of good family. In a sauna, one of the main characters, Chandler, accidentally sits down on the lap of his father-in-law. Chandler feels the need to apologise to his father-in-law face-to-face because that is how it should be done (an example of rule-governed reasoning). His father-in-law responds as follows: ‘I understand

completely, there's nothing more horrifying than embarrassing yourself in front of your in-laws.' Later in the episode, he promises never to mention the issue again because he understands Chandler's embarrassment and does not wish to harm their good relationship as in-laws. In our sample, this sensibility-guided style of reasoning was typical for white, upper-(middle-) class men over 65 years of age.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the moral imagination of primetime television narratives. What kind of issues and questions does contemporary primetime television present as morally relevant and with what level of sophistication? Which styles of moral reasoning are used and by whom? Our analysis shows that in primetime narratives, over 50 percent of the moral messages focused on three moral themes: family, civility and civilization. It is exactly these three moral themes that are often the topic of the moral panic constructed around popular television: the loss of family values, dysfunctional behaviour and the weakening of democratic values. In primetime television, these values dominate the moral landscape. Moreover, the content of these moral themes conflicts with the arguments used to enhance the moral panic around television content. In other words, primetime television frames these particular themes in their positive sense, as pro-family, pro-democracy and pro-civility values. The theme of 'good family' is dominated by messages such as, 'family should never be let down' and 'a child is the number one priority in life'. Instead of devaluing family values, these messages reinforce the idea of the family as the cornerstone of society. Second, the moral theme of 'civilization' contains messages that reject non-democratic forms of organizing society and celebrate (the western idea of) democratic values. Examples are statements such as, 'we ought to live together peacefully' (Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and 'democratic freedom ought to be estimated as the supreme good in society'. The weakening of democratic values, it seems, is less likely to be part of the content of television. Finally, the moral theme of civility, or civil conduct, contains messages such as, 'arguing is done verbally, not physically', 'you should not lie' and 'you should always keep your promises'. These messages seem to promote 'functional behaviour' instead of 'dysfunctional behaviour'. When we look at the other themes potentially tied to 'dysfunctional behaviour', such as the contemporary discussion of random acts of violence, we find similar results. For example, in general, violence is judged as bad in primetime television unless exceptional circumstances are at stake.

In conclusion, our evidence suggests that the moral panic around the content of primetime television is unwarranted. As indicated by Tavener (2000) and Jenkins et al. (2002), this moral panic is especially useful for

sustaining the high vs low culture dichotomy. However, by insisting on this particular distinction between culture and Culture, we not only keep ourselves from studying the intrinsic value of popular culture in critical and productive ways, but, for no good reason, we also discard television narratives as a useful tool in the larger cultural effort aimed at raising and educating morally mature individuals who can act as responsible and socially involved citizens.

Notes

- 1 We follow Hall et al. in our conception of moral panic: ‘When such discrepancies appear between threat and reaction, between what is perceived and what that is a perception of, we have good evidence to suggest we are in the presence of an ideological displacement. We call this displacement a *moral panic*’ (1978: 29; emphasis in original).
- 2 We selected only those television channels that had a market share larger than 5 percent during the year 2002.
- 3 For example, an episode of the sitcom *Frasier* (NBC) dealt with a conflict between Frasier and his brother that could only be resolved by the intervention of their father. Since this episode did not have a verbal moral closure, it is excluded from our analysis. However, this exclusion obviously does not mean that the programme does not have moral significance.
- 4 Non-fictional genres took up to 1.76 times more hours in the analysed week than did fictional genres.
- 5 For this analysis, a χ^2 -test is used, resulting in $\chi^2 (1.423) = 3.85, p < .05$.

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