Imagining Moral Citizenship. Gendered politics in television discourses

Tonny Krijnen

One of the most strident sounds of contemporary political parties in the Netherlands over the last few years has been their appeal to morality. This so-called 'norms and values' discussion is incited primarily by current Prime Minister J.P. Balkenende who is inspired by the work of the American sociologist Amitai Etzioni. In Balkenende arguments Etzioni's conceptions of socioeconomics and communitarianism[1] resound. An important strand in this discussion focuses on the media in general and more specific on television's influence on society's morals. In Balkenende's book *Aan de Kiezer (To the Voter)*, for example, he addresses a Dutch quiz show host on the topic of so-called 'pulp on television' and its (negative) effects on the moral fibre of Dutch society (Trouw, 2006).

Obviously, this association of television with morality is not a new one. In the public debate, television as a popular medium is often pointed at as the cause of society's moral decay. Adornoesque arguments resound, such as the suggestion that watching television will numb the mind, or teach its audience bad morals. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (1997) even speak of the naturalisation of the notion of television as a social pathology. These arguments originate in the way the medium is positioned within the aesthetic debate in which mass culture is opposed to high culture. As Lynne Joyrich (1996: 22) states: "Historically, mass culture has often been figured as feminine and denigrated for its supposed threat to the stability of the masculine dominant order of high art.". The assumed feminine nature of television seems a pivotal feature in the evaluation of its assumed impact on society.

Since the relation between television and morality is usually judged negative, discussions do not revolve around the question whether or not television has an impact on society's morality, but rather on the assumed negative nature of this impact. As Tavener (2000) shows, this discussion should be considered a moral panic. The debate on television and moral panic is twofold: on the one hand we find the accusation of television contributing to the construction of moral panics[2], on the other hand television is often considered the subject of moral panic. This study deals with the latter — the content of television is often the central issue in debates revolving around television. Within these debates, television is often

[1] Adherents of communitarianism argue that we have lost the assumption of the true value of community life, since we understand our relations to one another as primarily instrumental (Tiles, 2000). When priority of the individual or the community is of question, the latter has often the largest impact in the most pressing ethical questions.

[2] I follow Hall et al.'s conception of moral panic stressing that: "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*." (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978: 29).

seen as the culprit regarding the degradation of family values, civil conduct, and democratic values (Tavener, 2000). To this shortlist of public issues as topics of special concern in relation to television impact it is reasonable to add 'violence'. As Williams (2003 [1974]) already argued in 1974 most debates on the effects of television concentrate on controversial content such as violence. Vasterman (2001) argues the societal turmoil around so-called 'meaningless violence' to be a media hype for there is a discrepancy between threat and reaction, i.e. the number of cases of meaningless violence existing in society and the perception of this amount. Additionally, one can also think about the assumptions of increased violent or aggressive behaviour as induced by watching TV or playing computer games. Though a clear and direct relationship between violent behaviour and watching TV has never been proven and research results are contradictory (Giles, 2003), arguments stating that TV and games cause antisocial and aggressive behaviour and should therefore be forbidden, restricted, or otherwise be secured from society are popular. Again the perceived threat exceeds the existing one. The content of television with regard to violence can thus be considered as a moral panic and should be added to the shortlist of issues around which the debate on television revolves. Thus, the core question in this study is: What discourses on civil conduct, democratic values, violence and family are imagined by prime time television narratives in the Netherlands?

The urgency of the 'norms and values' debate is embedded in a conception of 'good citizenship'. The four issues that form the heart of this debate (i.e. civil conduct, democratic values, family and violence) are closely connected to diverse conceptions of citizenship. Though traditionally, three forms of citizenship (civil, social and political) can be distinguished (Marshall, 1950), we can also speak of cultural citizenship (Van Zoonen, 2004). Cultural citizenship emphasizes a sense of belonging to a *community* and not so much to the *nation state*. This sense of belonging is more symbolically induced and this makes media an important discursive arena in which (cultural) citizenship is formulated and constructed (Hermes, 1998; Van Zoonen, 2004). In this study we focus on the moral axis of cultural citizenship.

A paradoxical deadlock seems to be evoked by the use of two different conceptions of citizenship in the 'media and morality' debate. Politicians' appeal to reinstate 'norms and values' calls for a traditional conception of citizenship that relate to Enlightenment ideas. The morality underlying this kind of citizenship is thus based on rational arguments, rules and obligations (Poole, 1991). The media are rejected and held responsible for undermining

important norms and values constructing this kind of citizenship (e.g. patriotism, respecting legitimate authority, understanding rights and obligations (Selnow, 1990)).

On the other hand, simultaneously with this call for traditional citizenship values, important arguments used in the 'norms and values debate' call upon a sense of belonging to a community, and hence for cultural citizenship. To cultural citizenship, however, the media are particularly important as explained. Because of the confusion of conceptions of citizenship, within the debate a sense of belonging is emphasised, while television — an excellent storyteller and therefore arena to discuss this sense of belonging — is rejected. Arguments in the debate on citizenship centralize the assumed negative role of the media, and obscure the relation of norms and moral values and the media.

Adding to the complexity of the debate is the fact that the relationship between television and morality is under-researched. In this article the moral discourses on civil conduct, democratic values, violence and families as they are imagined by prime-time television in the Netherlands will be analysed and related to the conceptions of citizenship.

Television's imagination of the moral discourses on civil conduct, democratic values, violence and family are researched with the employ of a framework derived from, what Richard Rorty (2000) calls, 'the literary culture'. Authors from the literary culture investigate the relation between cultural forms and their relation with morality. Within this tradition narratives are considered an important resource for reflection on everyday moral issues. The emphasis is put on gaining insight into the ‘other’, with the primary aim of learning to speak with terms like *us* instead of *them* (Rorty, 1989; Nussbaum, 2001). Additionally, literary culture argues for the acknowledgement of an affective, emotional dimension in a traditionally rational conception of morality.

To answer the central research question on the kind of televisual discourses on civil conduct, democratic values, violence and family which are imagined by prime time television narratives in the Netherlands.

Television and morality: a gendered dispute

Television's position as low culture product that is opposed to high culture, is due to the high Culture/low culture dichotomy. Among other foci of attention, the Culture vs. culture debate has been concerned with mass media since their early existence. Looking at this particular facet of this debate, one finds that the assumption on which it is founded — that high culture would make us morally better people, and low culture would not — is often obscured. High

culture could supposedly inoculate against the so-called bad effects of low culture (Jensen, 2002; Joyrich, 1996).

High culture forms, such as literature, can be regarded as belonging primarily to the masculine domain and are mostly thought of as having the opposite 'effect' of its feminine counterpart: low culture. High culture supposedly inoculates us to the hazardous and unhealthy effects of low culture. Exposure to high culture would evoke critical reflection while low culture makes its audience childlike and feminine (i.e. no rational critical reflection, but emotional reflections) (see Jensen, 2002; Joyrich, 1996; Spigel & Curtin, 1997; Cohen, 1999).

The Culture vs. culture dichotomy arose in the early Romantic period (Boenink, 1997; Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc, 2002). The individual was rediscovered and needed to break free from the masses. This breaking free could be achieved through a certain shock-experience. An experience that could be evoked by the arts and would make one reflect on morality and rediscover the self. The arts could teach us more than the, until then, celebrated rationality; the arts would add the emotional dimension to rationality (Benjamin, 1939; Rosenblatt, 1938). According to Martha Nussbaum, it is artistic quality that holds this potential (2001, p. 433) when she said that: "for I believe that there is a prima facie and general correlation between artistic merit and the ability to engage the personality at a deep level". Furthermore, Nussbaum argues against an elitist view of the arts and argues television, among other mass media, to be a 'potent educator of citizens'. Nevertheless, in general, the arts are still conceived of within a traditional masculine order of high culture (Joyrich, 1996).

The Romantic period delivered us with a relatively untraditional conception of morality which is adopted in this study. It was in this period that arguments to add an affective dimension to morality occurred. During the Enlightenment morality became embedded in rationality and the public sphere (Poole, 1991) and thus as merely belonging to the masculine sphere. Trying to break free from this rational straight jacket, the Romantic period questioned the rational basis of morality. As John Dewey (1891: p. 100) argued: "Some…entertain the idea that a moral law is a command: that it actually tells us what we should or should not do! The Golden Rule gives me absolutely no knowledge, of itself, of what I should do." Dewey argues that rational rules and principles are not sufficient to guide us in our moral decisions and suggests that *imagination* bridges the gap between moral principles and moral action. According to Dewey (1891), moral decisions and actions are situated. We assess each moral situation according to theoretical notions (and these might be a stock of moral principles, rules or conventions), while simultaneously taking all relationships

between people involved into consideration (thus forcing the individual to re-interpret the existing theoretical notions according to the situation). In this perspective an emotional, and thus 'feminine', dimension enters moral reflection. It is this wider, less gendered, or maybe more accurate and more balanced, conception of morality — combining rationality and emotion — that we embrace.

Starting from these viewpoints, the imagination as a necessity to bridge the gap between moral principles and moral action, and taking into account the necessity of the shock experience, the relation between narratives and the moral imagination was explored for the first time. According to John Dewey (1894) and Louise Rosenblatt (1938) narratives inform us about the context of moral issues and the involvement and feelings of ourselves and the 'other' in moral situations. These insights in the relationship between narratives and moral imagination are further reflected upon by the literary culture (see Nussbaum 1995, 1997, 2001; Rorty 1989). Authors from this tradition argue that narratives function as a moral laboratory, as they offer an opportunity to explore and reflect upon moral issues and deliberate without enduring the consequences of everyday moral decisions (see Hakemulder, 1998; Widdershoven, 1993). Important is that this framework only explains how narratives can evoke reflection on moral insights. The content of these insights is not known and surely can not always be evaluated as positive (see Bogdan 1992; Nussbaum 2001). Additionally, it is important to realise that the content of the narrative is quintessential in terms of what the reader can reflect upon. Which is not offered by the narrative might not be reflected upon at all (Nussbaum, 1997; Schudson, 1989). This makes an exploration of what narratives imagine on a moral level an even more pressing issue.

According to Mark Johnson (1993) narratives offer three kinds of insights which together construct the moral imagination of a narrative. These three insights more or less transgress the classic binary ratio vs. emotion, i.e. moral vs. a-moral dimensions. Firstly, moral imagination takes into account the ability to recognise an issue as a morally relevant one. In order to ponder upon a moral issue, one needs to be able to recognise it as such. There is a certain importance, or interest, in the situation that is in need of recognition (see Nussbaum 2001). Additionally, we might note, from our wider conception of morality, moral issues not only take place in the public sphere but also in the private sphere. Family issues for example, might have the same moral quality as issues revolving around public issues such as abortion or euthanasia - although one might argue these to be private issues as well. Morality in this conception also revolves around everyday life issues as well as around public dilemmas.

Secondly, the various ways of deliberating a moral issue are of relevance. There is always more than one perspective or position available in the evaluation of a moral issue. Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) argue for two moral orientations, or perspectives, to deliberate a moral issue: ethics of care and ethics of justice. The *ethics of justice* perspective can be understood as a style of deliberation in which 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 realise their goals. This style of moral deliberation is closely connected to the traditional, and therefore masculine, conception of morality (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Poole, 1991). The *ethics of care* perspective can be understood as a style of deliberation that presents the individuals as interdependent and focusing on their mutual relationships. The leading question is how to act responsively and protect vulnerability in a particular situation (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). This style of moral deliberation can be marked as more feminine. Research shows that men are oriented more towards an ethics of justice style of reasoning, while women tend to be oriented more to an ethics of care style of reasoning (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

Thirdly, the ability to take into account the various consequences for the people involved is of importance. Insight into the motivations, feelings and character of other people is pivotal (Rorty 1989; Johnson 1993). Insight into the human character does not only concern the ‘other’ but also the ‘self’. In order to envisage the potential help and harm likely to come from our actions, we need to develop the sensitivity to recognise other human beings as fellow sufferers: not to think of them as 'them' but as 'one of us'. This can only be achieved by a detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like (Rorty 1989). Regarding the Other and the Self might be called one of the manifest feminine dimensions of moral imagination. In Seyla Benhabib's (1986) wording, we are dealing here with a *concrete other*. Dealing with a concrete other (instead of a *generalised other*) means that we view every individual as a unique person with her or his own unique thoughts, history and emotional constitution.

Though authors from the literary tradition explicitly state that literature is not the only narrative resource for the development of moral imagination, popular culture is habitually left aside. The reason for this exclusion is not, as noted before, because television is automatically considered inferior, but as Nussbaum (2001) clarifies: the media are relatively vulnerable to market pressures and therefore might lack the artistic quality that is essential to evoke reflection. While the framework derived from the literary tradition is useful, it is important to move beyond the assumed contradiction between market and culture, between money and

morality, and try to delve into the intricate ways in which television narratives imagine morality.

Employing the Literary Framework

To explore moral insights in television narratives two weeks of Dutch prime-time television were analysed[3]. Included were the three public channels Nederland 1, Nederland 2, and Nederland 3, and the four commercial channels RTL 4, Yorin, SBS 6 and Net 5. Since television in the Netherlands attracts the largest number of viewers between 8pm and 10pm, programmes in this timeslot were recorded[4]. In total 161.6 hours of television programmes have been analysed on the moral insights they offer[5].

In the conception of cultural citizenship, as adopted within this study, the media in general are of symbolic importance. Meaning that not only news and current affairs programmes are deemed relevant, but also the more 'entertaining genres' such as soap opera, drama, comedy are considered significant (see Hermes, 1998; Van Zoonen, 2004). During the analysis no genre was therefore excluded. However, I want to draw attention to a gendered conception of television genres as well. The more entertaining genres are traditionally conceived off as 'feminine genres', while new and current affairs are conceived of as 'masculine genres' (Gledhill, 1997). This gendering of an already gendered medium will prove to be relevant.

Concentrating on the four issues, or rather themes, of civil conduct, democratic values, family and violence, a discourse analysis was conducted. The discourse analysis is inspired by Michel Foucault's (1970) work on strategies operating to maintain the status quo. According to Foucault (1970), there are internal and external procedures to control and delimit the discourses that tell us what is normal and what is not, what is true and what is not, who is to be taken seriously and who is not. In order to reconstruct the discourses on civil conduct, democratic values, violence and the family as imagined by television, for each theme three questions are answered. The first question is: What is recognized and acknowledged as civil

[3] The first week ran from 5 May to 11 May 2003, the second from 6 September to 12 September 2004. The selection of the seven channels analysed was based on their relatively large market shares of least 5% each in May 2003 (SKO, 2003). Channels such as RTL 5, V8, MTV, TMF and National Geographic were excluded because they had a market share of less than 5%.

[4] All programmes that for the greater part fell within the prime-time slot were included. Programmes that started before 7:30pm or ended later than 10:30pm were excluded from the analysis. This meant that most soccer games and movies were excluded, which is a serious limitation to this study since it means that two genres are more or less absent. Furthermore, the prime-time slot constitutes another limitation: it excludes children's programmes.

[5] In total, for the week of May 2003 80.3 hours of prime time television were included in the analysis. In September 2004 81.3 hours could be included.

conduct, democratic value, family, or violence? The answer to this question reveals the more manifest content of a discourse. The second question runs: What strategies are employed to maintain the status quo on that particular topic? The answer to this question reveals the more latent content of a discourse. Special attention is paid to the disjuncture between discourse and practice, in order to investigate the *stability* of a discourse. The assumption being that the larger the disjuncture, the less stable the discourse is. The third and last question is: Which moral subject positions are created and constructed within the discourse? The answers to this question reveal the excluding and including power of the discourse. With the help of these three questions the four important issues around which the debate on norms and values revolves are researched, in order to enlighten the relationship between television's moral imagination and cultural citizenship.

Discourses on citizenship

Civil Conduct

Civil conduct as a moral issue is abundantly discussed in prime time television and a welter of topics are discussed in terms of civil conduct. Topics range from lying and keeping one's promises to employers stealing money from their employees. These topics were most of the time reasoned about in an ethics of justice style, and thus quite often formulated as moral rules (e.g. you should not lie, steal, break promises et cetera). White, middle class men take up most of the moral subject positions within this discourse. Furthermore, civil conduct was imagined in all genres, ranging from the evening news to soap opera, though not in similar ways.

The discourse on civil conduct operates on three levels: an individual level, a social level and societal level. At the individual level, we find quite a few regulatory behavioural rules on civil conduct aimed at 'decent behaviour' for the individual. For example, in *the Adams Family* a Dutch docu-soap on Adam Curry and Patricia Paay, Adam Curry goes to the memorial service for Pim Fortuyn (a Dutch politician that was murdered). He explains how he was offended during the service by the behaviour of several people. Firstly, by three women who claimed to be a second cousin of his wife Patricia and kept chatting about that. Secondly, by a woman who wanted her picture taken with him. Adam judges this behaviour as: "Just not done at a funeral". These messages are aimed at the individual; it is what ‘you’ should do. Though these moral rules are explicitly formulated in prime time television, it is unclear what strategies are employed to maintain status quo. In other words, the consequences for not

following these rules are opaque. In that perspective, the excluding power of discourse does not seem very large.

The second way the discourse on civil conduct operates is on a social level. On this level the discourse informs us how one is supposed to deal with others in the same society. In other words, what is decent behaviour in direct relation to other people? Of course, "not lying" also has to do with other people, but the formulation is directed towards the individual and individual behaviour, while messages on this level focus on interaction. The discourse explicitly indicates the second party for whom the individual's behaviour will have consequences. An example of this formulation of civil conduct on the social level is found in *People from the Zoo* (*Mensen van de Dierentuin)* a Dutch documentary on people who work in the Zoo. One of the employees, André, has prolonged his stay in Korea (saving a seal) without permission. His colleagues were thus forced to put in some overtime. In the episode the conversation between the manager, Tine, and André is pictured. Tine explains the consequences of André's actions and states that: "Within a team you have a responsibility for others." and "Those others should not fall victim to your actions." Again, strategies to enforce this social civil conduct are unclear and the consequences for not following these rules can only be guessed at.

The third level of civil conduct operates is a societal level and includes moral rules for (governmental) institutions. This level enlightens us on how they should behave in a decent manner. Topics range from forensic research to health care, but are all formulated as "the decent thing to do" and therefore are allocated to civil conduct. A good example of how civil conduct is imagined on the societal level can be found in *Network* (*Netwerk)* a current affairs programme that is broadcasted during the week just after the evening news. This episode features a discussion on forensic research. Central to the discussion is the idea of transcending privacy matters through DNA-samples. It is pointed out that a DNA-sample gives much more information about a person than is needed for research in a crime case, for example whether the person is genetically prone to suffering a terrible disease such as cancer. Throughout the discussion, the moral issue revolves around the question of what would be a decent way of dealing with this privacy matter. It is in this category that strategies to maintain status quo become more visible. The consequences for not following the rules, though implicit in the programmes, could be harsh. For example, when the problems between ethnic groups in society are not resolved a society cannot function and, as suggested by the programme, could be a ground for racism. Similar argumentation can be used for good health care. If health care is not good, people might die.

Furthermore, the discourse on civil conduct operating on an individual level is mostly constructed in fictional programmes (soap series and drama) and infotainment/entertainment programmes (reality TV, game show, talk shows), while when operating on a societal level it is mostly constructed in non-fictional programmes (current affairs and news). Civil conduct is formulated in terms of behavioural rules and decent manners for individuals as well as for governmental institutions. Breaking these rules, however, is for the better part without consequences. The lack of consequences for breaking the rules on civil conduct is in sharp contrast with the way the discourse on democratic values is constructed.

Democratic values

The discourse on democratic values in Dutch prime-time television is formulated around the question 'What is a good way of governing a country?'[6]. The answer indicates that a good way of governing is anything that is similar to Western democratic model of government. All topics constructing this discourse were formulated in an ethics of justice style of reasoning. The discourse on democratic values was constructed through a large number of rules about what constitutes a well-governed society, which presents us a very clear picture of the Western idea on democracy. Prime-time television narratives formulate democratic values as "In a well-governed society freedom is valued the highest" (*NOS Journaal;* news), "Fidel Castro's regime is wrong since it is repressive" (*Netwerk*; current affairs), "A good government is not corrupt" (*NOS Journaal*; news), and "In a well-governed society people live peacefully together" (*Netwerk*; current affairs). Strategies to maintain the status quo are highly visible and sanctions on not following the rules are severe: badly-governed societies are excluded as subjects in international politics. In the two weeks analysed, a typical example was found in the evening news (*NOS Journaal).* One of the messages was: "A good government should not withhold any information from its people." The reasoning behind this discourse makes clear that withholding information is considered corrupt and therefore the government and relative society (in this case the news item was about Putin's regime in Russia) are excluded as a serious partner in politics. Another example is found in the sitcom *Becker*, in which the main character Becker is called upon to serve jury duty and tries to get out of it. The discussion between the different characters in the sitcom revolves around the

[6] This question of course relates partly to the 'norms-and-values' debate incited by the Balkenende government as discussed in the introduction. In contrast to the three other discourses, this one concerns the government itself. Ironically, this issue is the one least discussed in the 'norms-and-values' discussion.

moral question of how to be a good citizen. In this episode the juridical system of the U.S.A. is criticised and ridiculed.

The discourse on democratic values is primarily constructed in non-fiction genres (with the one exception of the message in the sitcom *Becker*). The moral subject positions are dominated by white, middle class men. The severity of sanctions on not following the rules as they are constructed in the discourse indicates that there is no agreement on the idea of what "a good way to govern a country" actually is: i.e. there is a disjuncture between discourse and practice. Obviously, other ways of governing than the Western idea of democracy are flourishing, and the dismissal of those modes of governing is one of the discourse mechanisms to reinforce the Western ideal of democracy.

Violence

The discourse on violence seems imagined by prime time narratives in a rather straight forward manner: violence is bad and one should never engage in it. However, on a deeper level a complicated and contradictory discourse emerges. First of all, only physical violence is presented as violence. Psychological warfare, verbal abuse, wars, sexual assault are concepts not imagined as violent behaviour in prime time programmes. A good example is a rape scene in a Dutch soap opera *Good Times, Bad Times* (Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden*).* Though the act of rape seemed to have taken place and was partially visualized in one of the episodes, this situation was not discussed in terms of violence and a judgement of what actually happened lacked. Peculiarly enough, later episodes suggest that the rapist was too intoxicated to be responsible for his act and the victim forgives him. So, in prime time television violence is framed as direct acts of physical attacks. This kind of behaviour is strongly judged as immoral and good citizens do not engage in violence.

Second, though violence is rejected and valued immoral, prime time televisions provides us with ample reasons to excuse physical violence. These reasons are primarily connected to self-defence and to the vital importance of saving the world. One is therefore allowed to become physically violent when one has to defend him or herself. In the evening news (*NOS Journaal),* the robbery of a jeweller was discussed. The jeweller shot one of the thieves in his knee. The jeweller was heralded for successfully defending himself because there were extenuating circumstances. However, his kicking one of the robbers while he was down on the ground, wounded, was rejected as an act of violence. So, his act of self-defence is not phrased in terms of violence to be rejected, though his kicking of a defenceless person

is. Another good reason to use violence is when one is supposed to save the world (as for example Buffy the Vampire Slayer is).

Strategies to maintain status quo are complicated even further by the fact that in prime time television, most acts of violence discussed took place in the private sphere. With the exception of the example formulated in the evening news, acts of violence that were discussed as a moral issue were imagined solely in drama series. Furthermore, the (moral) subject positions created by the discourse on violence are all taken by women. This unexpected outcome might be explained by the fact that most of the narratives addressing violence as a moral theme took place in the private sphere (e.g. domestic violence, rape, and robbery) or dealt with violent acts by women. Violent acts by men might be considered more common and thus less newsworthy or less interesting as a moral theme, and hence less visible in prime time television as a morally relevant topic than the violent acts of women. This result does suggest that male violence is more 'normal', and therefore accepted, than is female violence (see Foucault, 1970). However, it is worth mentioning that extreme violence such as premeditated murder will exclude the perpetrator from humankind.

Family

The discourse on family is constructed in prime time television with less variety in rules and regulations than the discourses on civil conduct, violence, and democratic values. While the other discourses are primarily constructed with messages that tell us what we *should not do*, the discourse on family is constructed with more positive messages (i.e. what we *should do*). These messages celebrate the importance of having children, of wanting to become a parent, and focusing your life on your family. They naturalise the central position of family. Furthermore, the family discourse in Dutch prime-time television is clear on what a family looks like. When it consists of a mother, a father, and some children, within this family everyone feels very connected and attached to one other. These strong ties are even there when there is no such thing as a biological connection. For example in the movie *Stuart Little* a mouse is adopted into the Little family and by the end of the story, he feels like 'a real Little'.

However, a peculiar tension became visible in the discourse on family indicating a rather large disjuncture between discourse and practice. On the one hand the discourse on family constructs the family as a natural unit, and as the cornerstone of life and society. Messages such as "Children belong with their parents" (*Prem Time*; current affairs), "Parents

should always be available" (*Birth Stories*; docudrama/*Kinderziekenhuis*; docudrama), "Having a child is the most important thing in life" (*Birth Stories*; docudrama), "You should never let your family down" (*Charmed*; drama series/*Medical Detectives*; crime report/*Spoorloos*; docudrama/ *Patty's Posse*; docudrama/*Moesha*; sitcom/*Stuart Little*; film), and "A good mother is omniscient" (*Medical Detectives*; crime report) formulate the family as a natural group with incredibly strong ties one cannot live without.

On the other hand, the strategies to enforce the discourse are re-emphasized over and over again and sanctions for breaking the rules are surprisingly brutal: namely the loss of children, sometimes even death. In particular, mothers who fail to be good parents (or who are not omniscient mothers) are sanctioned. These severe sanctions suggest that the family is not such a natural unit after all. Assuming that the worse the sanctions are, the less 'naturalising power' the discourse might have. A good example on how this discourse is constructed is found in the American crime report *Medical Detectives.* One of the items is about a woman who was murdered by her husband. This man had also murdered his previous wife, a fact that went undiscovered for a long time. The way this issue was presented in the programme made it clear that no one could have prevented this horrible event. Nevertheless, the item was constructed around the parents, especially the woman's mother who blamed herself for not being able to protect her daughter, stating: "I should have smelled the rat". Something similar happens in an episode of *CSI Miami*. A young boy is thought to have been murdered, but later in the episode it appears that he committed suicide because his parents did not pay enough attention to him. The episode is closed by the message that runs: "Parents should never let their children down.".

What is interesting is the fact that children, though they are presented as everyone's heart's desire, do not have a say in this. When children occupy a subject position in these matters, they are hardly taken seriously[7]. Children can be angry, but most of the time, there are no consequences and sometimes they even are presented as young ones who still have to learn. For example, in the drama series *Everwood*, the young boy Ephram blames his father for being away from home too much. He is angry about it and feels neglected. At the end of the episode he has learned his father's reasons for being away and apologises for his angry behaviour. His point of view on the functioning of the father within the family is thus neglected.

[7] Nor are children taken seriously in subject positions tied to other moral themes.

The majority of the discourse on family is constructed in fictional genres and in infotainment/entertainment genres. Interestingly though, most messages on family were formulated in American docudrama (such as *Birth Stories*) or drama series (e.g. *Gilmore Girls, Charmed, Touched by an Angel*). This apparent American origin of the 'family discourse' raises interesting questions about cultural homogenisation (of morality) that should be answered in a next study.

Conclusion

The four topics — civil conduct, family, democratic values, and violence — upon which the so-called "norms-and-values debate" focuses are imagined in prime time television as more or less elaborated discourses. While the discourse on democratic values and part of the discourse on civil conduct is formulated in the more 'masculine genres' such as news and current affairs, the discourses on violence and family are primarily constructed by 'feminine genres'. These results leave us with an interesting puzzle.

Firstly, I want to argue that prime time television can not be rejected for undermining norms and values important to citizenship. On the contrary, the discourses constructed in prime time television seem rather to reinforce these values: democracy is celebrated, violence is rejected, family is constructed as the cornerstone of society, and civil conduct is emphasized on different levels. So, I argue with Tavener (2000) that arguments focusing on television as the culprit of society's moral decay can best be viewed as a moral panic.

Secondly, the gendered dimensions of the television genres in which the discourses are constructed seem to matter and complicate the call for better citizenship. Family, for example, is imagined as the cornerstone of society but in a very problematic way (the consequences for not being a good parent are brutal). Additionally, the discourse is primarily constructed within feminine genres such as drama series and docu-drama that are taken less serious. Also, while violence is rejected, problematic violence is constructed as direct physical attacks taking place in the private sphere, while ignoring violence taking place in the public sphere (like wars and ‘male’ aggressive behaviour) as a moral issue. Thus, we might say that two important topics that in the longing for better citizenship are imagined in prime time television in a problematic way. The arguments that concentrate on violence in the debate are not about women and violence acts in the private sphere, but about violence in the public sphere, the kind of violence that is not constructed as a problem in prime time television but naturalized or excused. The fear of degradation of family values in the public debate does not revolve

around daughters being murdered by their husbands, but about the change of family structures, such as one-parent families, divorced parents, or sometimes homosexual parenting, and its presumed effects. The extreme disjuncture between discourse and practice might be a sign of the transition of values in Western society.

As is the case in the discourse on violence, within the other discourses there are also strikingly absent topics. A few examples are the absence of rudeness in public everyday life in the discourse of civil conduct, the absence of a discussion on tolerance towards other ideals about governing countries in the discourse on democratic values, and the absence of other family constructions in the discourse on family. This study focussed on rather manifest moral discourses in television and did not pay attention to what is not discussed. In Fiske's (1987) terms we could say the ex-nominated moral themes are just as important for analysis of moral citizenship as imagined by prime time narratives.

In this nomination and ex-nomination of moral topics the gender dimensions seems of explicit importance. The discourses on civil conduct and democratic values are primarily constructed in masculine genre, while the discourses on violence and family are primarily formulated in the more feminine genres. Along the lines of Gledhill's (1997) argument these results do indicate that since masculine genres are taken more seriously, topics discussed within the discourses on civil conduct and democratic values are also taken more seriously than topics revolving around violence and family are. Furthermore, within the discourse on civil conduct and democratic values the subject positions created by the discourses are dominated by men. This not only means that women are ex-nominated as subjects in the discourses on civil conduct and democratic values, but also indicates that men are ex-nominated as subjects within discourses of family and violence.

The values for traditional conception of citizenship, however, seem to be primarily constructed by the more feminine genres and are therefore taken less seriously. This does obviously not mean that television undermines these values; television's role in constructing citizenship might just not be very large. In conclusion, it seems clear that the media, and television in specific, can better be considered as a discursive arena in which the meaning of important values is constructed than as causing society's moral decay.

References

Benhabib, S. (1986) "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: the Kohlberg-Gilligan controversy and moral theory" *Praxis International,* 5(4): 402-424.

Benjamin, W. (1939) "Enige motieven bij Baudelaire" (W. Notenboom, Trans.) pp. 87-110 in J. Van Heemst (ed.) *Kleine filosofie van het flaneren: passages, Parijs, Baudelaire*. Amsterdam: SUA.

Boenink, M. (1997) "Boeken met een boodschap. Literatuur en normatieve oordeelsvorming" *Krisis. Tijdschrift voor filosofie,* 68(3): 13-28.

Bogdan, D. (1992) *Re-educating the Imagination. Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement.* Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Cohen, T. (1999) "High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 57(2): 137-143.

Dewey, J. (1891) "Moral Theory and Practice" pp. 93-109 in J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Early Works, 1882-1898. Part III: 1889-1892. Early Essays and Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*. Carbondale/Edwardsville/London/Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press/Feffer & Simons, Inc.

Dewey, J. (1894) "Moral Philosophy" pp. 132-151 in J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Early Works. Part IV: 1893-1894. Early Essays and The Study of Ethics. A Syllabus*. Carbondale/Edwardsville/London/Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press/Feffer & Simons, Inc.

Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture.* London/New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1970) "The Order of Discourse. Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France" pp. 48-78 in R. Young (ed.) *Untying the Text. A Post-Structural Reader*. Boston/London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Giles, D. (2003) *Media Psychology*. Mahwah/London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Gilligan, C., & Attanucci, J. (1988) "Two Moral Orientations" pp. 73-86 in C. Gilligan, J.V. Ward & J. McLean Taylor (eds.) *Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gledhill, C. (1997) "Genre and Gender: the case of soap opera" pp. 291- 336 in: S. Hall (ed.) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications Ltd.

Hakemulder, J. (1998) *The Moral Laboratory. Literature and Ethical Awareness.* Utrecht: Dissertation Utrecht University.

Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978) *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State and Law and Order.* London/Basinstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd.

Hermes, J. (1998) "Cultural Citizenship and Popular Fiction" pp. 157-168 in K. Brants, J. Hermes & L. Van Zoonen (eds.) *The Media in Question: Popular Cultures and Public Interests*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Dehli: Sage.

Jenkins, H., McPherson, T., & Shattuc, J. (2002) "Defining Popular Culture" pp. 26-42 in H. Jenkins, T. McPherson & J. Shattuc (eds.) *Hop on Pop. The politics and pleasures of popular culture*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Jensen, J. (2002) *Is Art Good for Us? Beliefs about high culture in American life*. Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc.

Johnson, M. (1993) *Moral imagination. Implications of cognitive science for ethics.* Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Joyrich, L. (1996) *Re-Viewing Reception. Television, gender, and postmodern culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Marshall, T. H. (1950) *Citizenship and social class and other essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1995) *Poetic justice. The literary imagination and public life.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1997) "The narrative imagination" pp. 85-112 in M.C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating humanity: a classical defence of reform in liberal education.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought. The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poole, R. (1991). *Morality and modernity.* London/New York: Routledge.

Redactie Politiek (2006, 19 October 2006) "Nieuwe zet van Balkenende in Campagne" *Trouw,* pp. 4-5.

Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, irony and solidarity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, R. (2000) "The decline of redemptive truth and the rise of a literary culture" Retrieved May, 5, 2003, from http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/index.html

Rosenblatt, L.M. (1938) *Literature as Exploration*. New York/London: D. Appleton-Century Company.

Schudson, M. (1989) "How culture works. Perspectives from media studies on the efficacy of symbols" *Theory and Society,* 18(2): 153-180.

Selnow, G. W. (1990) "Values in prime-time television" *Journal of Communication,* 40(2): 64-74.

SKO. (2004) "Persbericht Kijkcijfers 2003" Retrieved 24-03-2004, 2004, from www.kijkonderzoek.nl

Spigel, L., & Curtin, M. (1997) "Introduction" pp. 1-18 in L. Spigel & M. Curtin (eds.) *The Revolution wasn't televised. Sixties television and social conflict*. New York/London: Routledge.

Tavener, J. (2000) "Media, morality, and madness: the case against sleaze TV" *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* 17(1): 63-85.

Tiles, J.E. (2000) *Moral Measures. An Introduction to Ethics West and East*. London/New York: Routledge.

Van Zoonen, L. (2004) *Media, Cultuur & Burgerschap. Een Inleiding* (3rd ed.). Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.

Vasterman, P.L.M. (2001) "Zinloos Geweld als Mediahype" *Bestuurskunde,* 10(7): 299-309.

Widdershoven, G.A.M. (1993) "The Story of Life: Hermeneutic Perspectives on the Relationship Between Narrative and Life History" pp. 1-20 in R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (eds.) *The Narrative Study of Lives* (vol. 1). Newbury park/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Williams, R. (2003) *Television. Technology and Cultural Form* (2nd ed. [1974]). London/New York: Routledge.