Re-reading Popular Culture

Joke Hermes

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In memory of my father, Wim Hermes (1924–2000)

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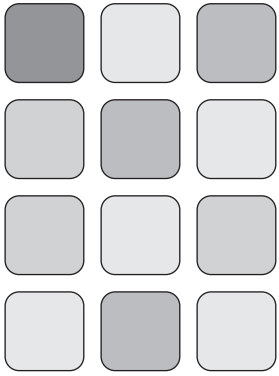

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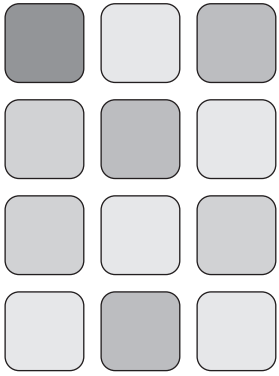

preface and acknowledgments

To defend popular culture is a patently ridiculous project. Those who love it do not need to hear it defended, while those who are not enamored of popular television, detective novels, or sports are unlikely to be convinced (or for that matter reached by this book). The ridiculousness of defending popular culture extends to the identity that you acquire when doing so. To defend popular culture to those who cannot see its merits as a domain that is of interest in and of itself is to label oneself as someone who celebrates popular pleasures, and who is "against" high culture. To celebrate popular culture is not to understand that the world has changed, and that the "old" division between the popular and the arts hardly exists any longer. To defend popular culture is to misunderstand its mind-boggling power to influence us, and it is to confess to a total lack of common sense when it comes to understanding where critical priorities should lie: with politics, power, and how and by whom the world (including the media) is run. To defend popular culture, then, is a way of saying that you are a naïve idiot on several counts – and that hardly presents a coherent picture. To complicate matters further, most writing about popular culture is read as defending it.

It is high time to challenge such a state of affairs. This book does not so much intend to defend popular culture as to take it seriously. But it does not want to do so in an uncritical manner. By my standards, a critical, serious look at popular culture takes into account its qualities and its limitations; by knowing that those of us who like it are not getting what they want, but what they can choose from. Although such choices have an effect in shaping what will be on offer, I readily grant the argument that, as consumers, readers have little control over popular culture. But as viewers and readers we do have a say in how popular culture may have meaning for us. We use popular culture for a variety of means, which includes worthy goals as much as mindless relaxation or routine filling of time. Popular entertainment offers many an opportunity for incidental

learning that may make us more receptive to the world around us or have us reflect on our priorities in life.

In popular culture, as in the arts generally, we tend to follow patterns in choosing certain programs, book genres, or artists over others. I do not much care whether this goes under the name of taste or peer group pressure. Taking popular culture seriously means that I do care about how such favorites keep us enthralled and engage our fantasies about who we want to be and how we would like to live our lives. In short, popular culture is connected to who we think we are, to how we understand our responsibilities and rights, how we hold out hope for the future, or how we are critical of the state of things in the environments in which we move and of which we feel we are part.

Popular culture, then, can disclose to those who are interested what collective fantasies we hold, what scenarios and criticisms circulate. Key to understanding popular culture and to assessing its uses is the very massiveness that so often counts against it. Readers and viewers know that there are like-minded others "out there" – as well as others who are critical or misunderstand the appeal of a certain genre or medium entirely. Popular culture is not the stuff of lowest common denominators; it is the stuff of citizenship and connection. It could and should lead to widespread discussion, but it does not often do so because we are not used to understanding popular culture as a resource, as offering tools and content for public discussion. It is still mostly seen as an object of scorn, concern, or bewilderment. It can only offer tools if we learn to re-read it – in so doing, looking beyond its mixed reputation, the money that is made by successful artists or television producers, and the sometimes gross imagery or offensive language – in search of the fantasies and feelings that connect us (with varied intensity) to others. Whether this is called "community" or "affinity" or "cultural citizenship" is immaterial. The point is that we can make much better use of popular culture.

This may sound suspiciously like (a new form of) celebrating popular culture, but wait and read the case studies brought together here. My informants, all of whom I want to thank here for their time and willingness to put their views and experiences into words, are not always appreciative of popular culture. They may use it as a counterweight to daily burdens and irritations, and from time to time they may feel empowered by it – but disappointment is as important a factor. Insofar as this book is about the merits of taking popular culture seriously, it suggests that we do so at the level of hidden public and semi-public agendas, at the meta-level of citizenship. Of course, it is my deep wish that we will one day use popular culture more in public debate as a shared source of references and knowledges. But that requires an altogether much higher level of popular cultural literacy, which, as the final chapter will make clear, requires a major shift in how popular culture is still talked about.

I hope that this book presents a level-headed approach to and inventory of what popular culture might have to offer in terms of cultural citizenship. The level-headedness came late, and the book took a long time to mature. There are, as a consequence, many people I need to thank. Any misconceptions and mistakes are, of course, my own.

There are formal thanks to be offered. The broad argument of this book emerged while I was conducting separate research projects. This means that chapters were published as journal articles first, and then revised and revisited here to show how popular culture is instrumental in organizing a sense of belonging and reflection on how we belong. I want to thank the editors and publishers of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Television and New Media*, *Etnofoor*, and my co-editors of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* for permission to reuse material, as well as the editors of *International Media Research: A Survey* (John Corner, Philip Schlesinger, and Roger Silverstone) for inviting me to write a chapter on gender and media that, in retrospect, was the start of this book. Most of all, I need to thank Jayne Fargnoli, at Blackwell, the funniest and most elegant e-mailer in my computer's address book, whose enthusiastic endorsement of the project was the last push needed to finish it.

Thanks are also due to a great number of friends and colleagues. Mariette van Staveren, Stefan Dudink, Mieke Aerts, and Myriam Everard offered inspiring discussions of the personal and the political and commented on the earliest chapters of the book. My former colleagues and students at the Department of Communication of the University of Amsterdam, among whom I would especially like to thank Liesbet van Zoonen, Irene Costera Meijer, Kees Brants, and Joost de Bruin, discussed cultural citizenship and popular culture with much enthusiasm. My current colleagues and friends at the Department of Media Studies at the same university, Jaap Kooijman, Maarten Reesink, Vincent Crone, and Rob Leurs, read draft versions of chapters, offered comments and suggestions, and restored my confidence with such varied means as their good company, food and wine, and a number of cooperative projects. I would also like to thank Chris Straayer, Anna McCarthy, Toby Miller, John Hartley, Nick Stevenson, and Gareth Stanton for overseas inspiration and intellectual friendship.

My bimonthly meetings outside the walls of academia with Irene Costera Meijer, Garjan Sterk, and Marianne van den Boomen – where we discuss popular culture, philosophy, and ourselves over dinner – continue to be defining moments of intellectual friendship and of what feminism is all about, from heated discussion to unconditional support. Likewise, I am happy to share a long history with Alkeline van Lenning, Evelien Tonkens, and Monique Volman that dates from editing what was then the Dutch *Journal of Women's Studies* (*Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies*), and to review work, careers, and life in general on a regular

basis. I still love being an editor, all the more so for editing the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* with Pertti Alasuutari and Ann Gray. Unlikely trio that we are in some ways, we have built what is to me a precious friendship within a working relationship that extends to our partners and families. When he asked us to start the *Journal*, Pertti did not know that Ann and I negotiated the North Sea on a regular basis to spend time with one another, or that we would consider editorial weekend meetings perfect occasions for good shopping. Without Ann and without Pieter Hilhorst, my partner, I do not know how I would have managed to enjoy life and finish this book. Their support, encouragement, careful reading, and great company has meant that I have been able to do both. It has meant more to me than I can say. Thank you both.

Last but not least, all my family is present in this book. We all enjoy watching television; we exchange books and talk about them. I would not have known of the pleasures of watching football and male gossip without Pieter; and much of my enthusiasm for popular culture comes from sharing it with my mother and sister, Phiet de Haas-Spoel and Hetty Hermes. My father's mystification as to how I can love wholeheartedly what he saw as an area to be approached with caution, and a good measure of nostalgia, has always inspired me never to take my own pleasure in and reference for popular culture for granted. Although I miss him, I do have my wonderful children Sacha and Noah to share an entirely new world of heroines, heroes, and bad guys and girls. Fortunately, they also like to read and be read to, sometimes from the same books that my father read to me, and they laugh at his jokes, which I can't tell half as well. I dedicate this book to him.

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- "Gender and media studies. No woman, no cry," in John Corner, Philip Schlesinger and Roger Silverstone (eds.), *International Media Research: A Critical Survey*. London: Routledge, 1997, 65–95

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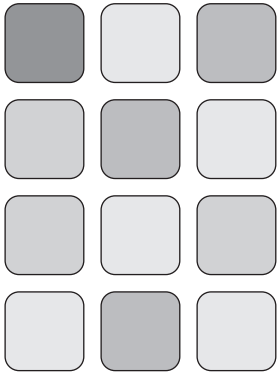
Joke Hermes



introduction: popular culture/cultural citizenship

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

Popular culture is seldom given the credit it is due; nor are the types of community building that directly result from using it recognized for their cohesive social force. This book intends to remedy that situation. While this chapter offers a theoretical grounding for its claim that popular culture produces cultural citizenship, and explains what that is, the rest of the book is based on the experiences of popular culture's users. Football, police series, thriller and detective novels, *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, children's television, and digital games will

provide the background against which the merits of popular culture will be sketched and theorized. The case study chapters (1–6) can be read separately; chapter 7 returns to the theoretical discussion that has started here.

In somewhat more detail, the itinerary of this chapter flows from a meta-narrative of what I understand to be the uses and qualities of popular culture. While unfolding the general argument of the book, various ways of thinking about popular culture will be reviewed, ranging from popular culture as abstract arena of struggle over meanings, and resistance to class or gender dominance, to concrete everyday practices in which belonging, community, and identity are at stake. These practices can be sports or television fandom, the reading of literary bestsellers, or web discussion. My perspective is shaped by early cultural studies discussions of culture as lived, and as shaped in power relations (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts 1978; Hall 1980); and by the influential work of John Fiske and John Hartley (Fiske & Hartley 1978; Fiske 1987), who gave short shrift to any notion of popular culture as "low" culture and regarded it as an important domain of pleasure and meaning-making in its own right (cf., Storey 1997). Building on to the tradition started by these authors, and combining their insights with ethnographically inspired research that developed out of the tradition started by David Morley (1980, 1986), work on television audiences by Ien Ang (1985) – specifically, on watching *Dallas* – and by Janice Radway (1984), on the reading of romances, I will argue the case of popular culture while weighing its uses and resistive force against its disciplinary and exclusionary effects.

If popular culture truly has the power to make people bond and feel that they belong – and whether and how it does is what this book is about – it makes sense, first of all, to give credit to Fiske and Hartley's notion that popular culture may be understood as democracy at work. But it also means that we should review whether popular culture is truly democratic in its effects: What kind of citizenship is (cultural) citizenship? And how does it exclude as well as include? In cultural studies discussions, Fiske and Hartley's (late 1970s/early 1980s) idealism has given way to discussion of the disciplinary and exclusive forces that are also at work when we enjoy popular texts. The sections of this chapter that are called "Freedom and stricture" and "The politics of self-formation," which are based on later work by John Hartley and on the work of Toby Miller, both outline and help to define "cultural citizenship" for the purpose of re-reading popular culture: What makes it valuable and what might we want to be critical of?

From a discussion of cultural citizenship and the forces of freedom and discipline, the chapter moves to the more concrete issues at stake in the book. Via what John Mepham (1990) has termed "usable stories," and similar suggestions

by Stuart Hall and John Ellis that we look at what popular culture allows us to do across genres, I will turn to the analytic method used in this book and the image of popular culture that I would like readers to keep in the back of their minds. It ends with an overview of the case studies that will be discussed in the chapters to come.

The citizenship qualities of popular culture

Popular culture has been celebrated as a domain of resistance against dominant power relations. In turn, such views have been criticized for their naïve notion of power and politics (Curran 1990). Both arguments have merits, though I sympathize more with the former (positive) view of popular culture than with the latter negative view. Criticism of popular culture even from a radical political point of view is easily coopted for elitist and conservative purposes, and therefore needs to be wielded with much care. It requires a balancing act to both do justice to the pleasures and uses of the popular and reflect on it critically – which is what I intend to do in this book. The citizenship qualities that I suspect popular culture possesses appear to offer a means of walking this tightrope. Three features of popular culture stand out in this regard.

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

Democracy is deliberation by many on the best life possible for all. By minimizing the number of rules that are set for such deliberation, and maximizing the number of people who are invited to participate, we will obtain the best possible result: an ongoing and unruly process that we learn from, that entertains us, and that provides ways and means to act in the real world. For better or for worse, that realm is popular culture rather than centralized governmental politics. "Popular" by my definition denotes "of and for the people." "Culture" is both how we understand the world, as where and how we live our lives, and the production of artifacts that amuse or move us, that have us thinking about who we are and how "being" is done. In (popular) culture, the world, history, relationships between people, and so on are represented to us by means of codes and conventions all of which have their own historical lineage, and that we interpret using the particular cultural knowledges that result from our biographies. Given the enormous range of codes and conventions that are possible, the tension produced by the contradictory forces of history, and the inherent drive in all art and culture to find new forms of expression, popular culture is a domain in which we may practice the reinvention of who we are.

Cultural citizenship, rather than citizenship generally, is the term that will be used in this book to analyze the democratic potential of popular culture, even though it lacks formal structures of guaranteeing rights or enforcing duties and obligations. Citizenship has been discussed and fought over since the French revolution in 1789. It is the most concrete form that emancipation has taken in Western society. Most authors writing about cultural citizenship follow Marshall's (1994 [1964]) reconstruction of civic rights as the first stage of citizenship, to be followed by political rights (the vote), and the social rights fought over during the twentieth century. This is citizenship defined as the rights and obligations that individuals have in relation to the nation-state. Social movements claiming cultural rights for particular groups mark a new era of citizenship discussion (cf., Rosaldo 1999). Such identity politics are not the focus of this book, however. I am interested here in how cultural citizenship as a term can also be used in relation to less formal everyday practices of identity construction, representation, and ideology, and implicit moral obligations and rights.

In media and cultural studies, cultural citizenship has also been used by writers others than myself, as a theoretical means of bringing together social power relations, the role of governments, and regulation on the one hand, and cultural representation and meaning-making on the other. The combination is never entirely stable. After all, what is involved are the wayward and ephemeral qualities of cultural texts and artifacts, that may well work against forms of regulation. Relying on earlier political philosophical discussions, concrete questions have been posed as to what binds us, under conditions of globalization and

multiculturalism that are more likely to drive us apart. Jostein Gripsrud (1999) edited *Television and Common Knowledge*, which focuses on citizenship and news genres (once understood to be the tool of democratic control for citizens) in television. Nick Stevenson (2001, 2003) and Bryan Turner (1993, 1994, 2001), to name but two prolific writers, have written and edited books and articles that translate political science discussions to the realm of media and cultural theory. Recurrent themes concern globalization (the end of the nation-state) (Turner 1994, p. 158), individualization (as a consequence of postmodernity), and the threat implied by these historical forces for the deep quality of citizenship (idem), conceptualized as the willingness to take responsibility for others (cf., Stevenson 2003, p. 31). In general, these studies deal in very general terms with "culture," or turn, traditionally, to news media (Gripsrud 1999). An interesting addition to this perspective is provided by Liesbet van Zoonen in her *Entertaining the Citizen* (2004). Most useful for my purposes is the work of John Hartley and Toby Miller, to be discussed in the next section, which pays explicit attention to (popular) culture and its modes of expression; the forces that shape it, and the uses to which it is put.

Freedom and stricture

Toby Miller (1993, 1998) understands (cultural) citizenship as the disciplining of subjects in the cultural realm in capitalist social formations. He sums up his *The Well-Tempered Self* by stating that "culture is a significant area in the daily organisation of fealty to the cultural-capitalist state" (1993, p. 218). Postmodern technologies of the self, which are also the subject area of his *Technologies of Truth* (1998), work particularly well in the twin domains of culture and citizenship. The "well-tempered self" is a reference to J. S. Bach's musical score, *Das wohltemperierte Klavier*: "which uses all the major and minor keys of the clavichord . . . and is regarded as an exemplary exercise in freedom and stricture" (1993, p. ix). Working his way through a wealth of material – philosophical, political, and cultural – Miller lays bare for contemporary society how people become subjects; how they are continually, in Foucault's words, invited and incited to recognize their moral obligations. To be human is to be subjected to continuous training and reforming; to be invited to find both individuality and a social sense of self, to be a never-accomplished project.

There is no way in which Miller's dazzling array of examples and references can be summarized here. However, I take from his book the notion that citizenship is a realm of subjection, and hence a realm of both disciplining and

seduction. These are key terms in understanding the debate about what popular culture may "do to us" (rather than we with it); but they are also key analytical instruments to analyze viewer and reader discourse. However aware we are, in ironical or postmodern mode, that we are fooled, tied down, and regulated by the different types of invitation that come our way to be included and to be belong – to be a selfless, responsible citizen, to be a happy consumer – we also take them up, enjoy them, and live them. Miller concludes that: "the civic cultural subject – the citizen – is produced as a polite and obedient servant of etiquette, within limited definitions of acceptable behaviour" (1993, p. 223). One of the questions to be answered, then, concerns what self-imposed rules (in addition to those of industry and government) govern the communities (and the sense of community) that are built in and through popular culture. As will become clear, I wish to describe such (self-) disciplining without according it special weight either negatively or positively. Discipline – like hypocrisy, for instance – has its values as a "daily vice," much along the lines of Shklar's discussion of hypocrisy, jealousy, and other little-regarded forms of behavior and states of mind (Shklar 1984). It is the underlying system of marking some areas or some people out for extreme disciplining or exclusion on historically explainable, but ultimately arbitrary, grounds such as race or gender that needs to be challenged.

Balancing the costs and gains of popular culture has not traditionally been core business for literary and media critics, who have kept discussion of popular culture on a deliberately somber and pessimistic note. Hartley (1996, 1999) uses John Frow's term "the knowledge class" to describe and explain how critics have mostly been in the business of guarding their terrain and exclusive knowledge against the lack of taste and insight of the multitudes. It may sound rather obvious to suggest that it depends on the vantage point taken whether popular culture can be understood as cultural citizenship; that is, as an arena in which not only meaning is struggled over, but identity, subjection and subjectivity, community, and inclusion and exclusion as well. But it needs to be kept in mind that "the knowledge class" has preferred to understand drama, literature, and indeed popular culture, as areas of determination (in that they reflect deeper structures or truths) rather than as areas of production. This is not without its consequences for those who like to use popular culture. As Miller puts it: "Struggles enacted between total determinacy and total indeterminacy across the body of literary theory encapsulate the critical question here: whether symptomatic textual criticism subjectifies people undertaking it in terms of their relationship to various forms of knowledge; or whether it is amenable to a politics of identity, a politics of self-formation that abjures the subjection of others" (1993, pp. 62–3). Needless to say, popular culture has mostly been understood in

determinist and negative terms. How, in terms of the project of this book, can we then re-read popular culture as a politics of self-formation? What tools are available in existing media and cultural theory? What opposition might be expected? What forces are present in the realm of popular culture itself? What identities do we (as the writer and as the readers who are reading this) forge for ourselves?

The politics of self-formation

Hartley poses this very question in *The Uses of Television* (1999), in a more pragmatic fashion, by reconstructing the history of television criticism. Early television criticism mixed the literary competencies and outlook of its practitioners with strong pedagogical zeal, which meant that viewers, television's end-users, were not included in debate. Television was damned even before it functioned as a mass medium: "Ever since Matthew Arnold theorized a political connection between culture and modernity (1869), the belief among 'university men' and schools inspectors was that culture would tame the Englishman's propensity to use his freedom to riot" (1999, p. 69). Culture was defined in the interwar period, as opposed to "what is proposed by the majority": "It follows that the critical onslaught which television has faced throughout its existence has its roots not in the medium itself but in a pre-existing discourse of anxiety about popularization and modernity; a quite straightforward fear of and hostility to the democratization of taste" (Hartley 1999, p. 66).

Like Miller, Hartley uses a Foucauldian framework to address the triangle of popular culture, intellectual reflection, and citizenship. According to Hartley, Miller's *The Well-Tempered Self* suggests in the nooks and crannies of its closed argumentation a call to arms: to reject temperance and to resist being disciplined by the corporate-capitalist state, in favor of parodic politics and incivility (1996, p. 62). Hartley summarizes as follows in his *Popular Reality*: "In other words, Miller's analysis (against the grain of his main thesis) describes not only the formation of a 'postmodern subject', but also what I'd call a postmodern politics of reading, centred on 'the actions of living persons' in relation and reaction to popular media and powerful truth-discourses; his incivility is my media citizenship" (idem). For Hartley, media citizenship is grounded in his intent to undo the intellectual-made divide between "the knowledge class" and ordinary people. Intellectual culture and popular culture are understood as "mutual, reciprocal and interdependent sites of knowledge production" (1996, pp. 58–9): hence Hartley's use of "reading" and "readerships" to describe media audiences, as a taunt to how intellectuals like to describe themselves. " 'Readerships' are

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

Moreover, for Hartley, reading is a *practice* not a subjectivity, part of the cultural repertoire of actions that people may undertake (1996, p. 66). Although Hartley has never been able to care much for audience research, the point is well taken in relation to the project of this book. As citizens, the readers quoted here do not need their deepest being explained; rather, shared cultural frameworks and how they are (continuously) built and rebuilt are at stake. Rigorous investigation of what the core values of popular culture are should, therefore, include examination of how it fascinates and binds, how it is incremental in community-building as well as in practices of exclusion. Audience ethnography would seem to be an important tool for doing so. Cultural citizenship is, after all, the consequence of actions and debates in the range of contexts that make up the (semi-) public sphere of mass media consumption. Many of those actions and debates will never be published as news or reported on by other means, and will remain invisible unless cultural scholars go to the trouble of asking people about them. To me, this point of view follows logically from Hartley's observation, in *Popular Reality*, that we should neither overestimate the public sphere of political science nor underestimate the realm of popular entertainment. I agree with Hartley that the readership of "mass communications" constructs itself as "an imagined community whose public sphere is symbolic, but much more real than the Roman Forum ever was for the general public" (1996, p. 71). Those who "lament the passing of an informed, rational public sphere and the rise of popular entertainment media" both overestimate "the extent to which the Enlightenment public sphere was achieved as an institutional and socially pervasive reality" and fail to understand "the role that the public media do play in producing and distributing knowledge, visualizing and teaching public issues in the midst of private consumption" (1996, p. 156).

In the later book *The Uses of Television* (1999), Hartley moves from media citizenship and cultural citizenship to "do-it-yourself" citizenship, expanding on the thesis put forward in *Popular Reality*. DIY citizenship moves away from the disciplining that is, according to both Miller and Hartley in earlier work, inherent in all citizenship, and the strong streak of governance that runs through it. Do-it-yourself citizenship focuses on difference rather than identity – the two incompatible axes along which television works. As Hartley puts it: