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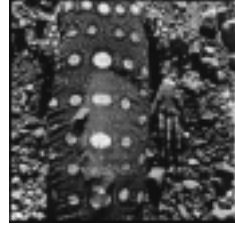
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Of irritation, texts and men
Feminist audience studies and cultural citizenship

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A B S T R A C T ● This is a case study of reading detective fiction which argues that different types of methodological and theoretical questions about relations with informants have not been raised sufficiently often in feminist audience studies or have been lost from its research agenda. They are: how to approach the culturally well established?, what is the place of texts in (feminist) audience research? and, how does this affect the positions of researcher and researched? In this case study (set up to research constructions of femininity and feminism in crime fiction), masculinity emerged as an issue because of nagging doubts about the interaction between interviewers and interviewees. Doubts and irritation led to reflection on issues of class, and then masculinity and on how to lay two old ghosts: the fear of being paternalistic in overinterpreting what informants say as an expression of their deepest being rather than as the discursive material that is produced in interview situations; and the fear of conflating audience interpretations with what a researcher may read into a text. Ghosts need laying to rest; therefore the issue of masculinity today is used here to introduce texts into the audience research project. The combination of audience and textual analysis is used to show the link between popular fiction and the public sphere, or how popular genres may contribute to cultural citizenship. ●

K E Y W O R D S ● audiences ● crime fiction ● cultural citizenship ● feminist audience research ● masculinity

The methodological pitfalls of qualitative audience research have generally been well documented by its critics and by methodologists. All of us qualitative audience researchers are well aware that we often work with very small samples (as indeed is the case here) from which it is not really possible to generalize, although we none the less often do (see Geragthy, 1998). Nor do we spend as much time with our informants as we probably should and as implicitly promised in our often-voiced allegiance to anthropological or ethnographic principles (Gillespie, 1995: 55). Be that as it may, I am often impressed with work with audiences, and with how interaction between academics and those who are not academics leads to new impulses and insights and generally forces us intellectuals to broaden our scope and develop new visions of the (social) world. Whereas text-based work is often the more brilliant for the meanings that can be generated from small bits (or huge corpora) of writing or visual images, audience-based work is more moving and points to how we tend to overrate the meaningfulness of any single text once it is part of an everyday setting.[1] Obviously, feminist audience studies is confronted with all of these issues. Here, I will focus on the relation between audience-based and text-based research, on powerful interviewees and on irritation. I would also like to bring back, albeit briefly, an old ghost from the feminist past: the ghost of paternalism and unequal power relations in audience research. I do not think it will want to be laid to rest unless confronted head on.

Anthropologists have documented how difficult it may be to gain access to, or elicit information from, powerful informants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 139) and how gender is a highly important factor in negotiating relations with others (Warren, 1988). For some reason, this type of anthropological reflection has not reached cultural studies, but then nor has the tradition of extended periods of fieldwork. We have preferred the series of long interviews, the textually oriented discussion of reflexivity and ethnographic writing on the discursive power of the intellectual versus the described Other (cf. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986) to form our view of what ethnography and qualitative work with audiences should be like. This new perspective on audience research merged well with how we as feminist researchers had trained ourselves to be sensitive to power relations, and it strengthened our understanding of ourselves as representatives of the powerful academy (cf. McRobbie, 1991 [1982]). Powerful informants, or men for that matter, were not part of this at all. The net result was that, although some highly interesting autobiographical accounts were published by scholars of cultural studies, reflecting on the position and perspectives of the researcher her- or himself, the issue of actual field relations was almost totally elided.[2] Ellen Seiter's (1990) discussion of a difficult interview must stand as the exception to this rule. In 'Making Distinctions in TV Audience Research: Case Study of a Troubling Interview' she documents an interview with two middle-class, middle-aged men.

Rather than co-operate and work with the two interviewers, as had other interviewees in the soap opera project, these two men were especially interested, according to Seiter, in flaunting their knowledge of TV and their superior taste. A transcript of the interview accompanies the article and offers a rare opportunity to compare the researcher's interpretation with the actual material.

From the transcript it is obvious that Seiter's male co-interviewer was the one addressed by the two men. It is also obvious that they are not only trying to impress the two interviewers with their knowledge of TV technology, among other things, but that they are also trying to please them. In many ways, I was reminded of my own father, who would be at least as difficult a subject for research of this kind, and who would not really know how to listen to the questions and understand what was being asked of him. His eagerness to please in interactions with my partner and friends often manages to make me feel uncomfortable because of its misplacedness and his misreading of what it is others are asking from him. It may therefore be vicarious guilt over how I have in a way outclassed my father in terms of particular types of cultural knowledge and capital that leads me to think that Seiter is slightly too harsh in her assessment of the two men. At the same time, I can feel her irritation and anger mounting acutely, and share her intuition that a certain type of arrogance is also at the root of what troubles her in the interview. In a similar manner, in a recent project on crime fiction, I was upset about how difficult it turned out to be to close the distance between myself and my co-interviewers on the one hand, and our respondents on the other.

On irritation

The project initially dealt exclusively with feminist crime fiction (Hermes, 1998) and then gradually expanded to crime and detective fiction more generally (both in books and on TV). Central to it were questions of pleasure, of gender construction and gendered identities, and also of how these particular texts might offer social criticism or utopian visions of a better world. This last set of questions I grouped under the label 'cultural citizenship'. As an audience researcher, I felt that it was not enough simply to document an interpretation of my own reading. I therefore decided to approach a mixed group of readers of detective and crime fiction, biased in terms of gender towards women, and including a number of self-identified gay people (women and men). They, I reasoned, are the readers most likely to consume those thrillers and detective novels that can be argued to embody a significant part of the women's and gay liberation movements' ideas and visions (Coward and Semple, 1989; several authors in Irons (ed.), 1995; Munt, 1994; Whitlock, 1994; Zimmerman, 1990: 63, 210–11), and among whom

it would hence be easiest to identify how reading a popular genre may link up with more political forms of knowledge and practice – the link that, according to me, is cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship is a term introduced in cultural studies to address the power of cultural formations (Allor and Gagnon, 1994). In this formulation popular pleasures are neither simply a threat to our individual senses of discernment and judgement and instruments of domination, nor are they to be celebrated as a source of liberation. Reading popular texts both ties us to the rules and structures of societal power and offers reflection on them. This dual process of actively becoming part of and taking part in cultural practice is an aspect of citizenship. It motivates us to take belonging (being part of social groups) seriously and to reflect not only on its pleasures and horrors (for example, in reading crime fiction) but also on the concomitant rights and obligations of being a member of society, a citizen.

With an assistant and help from a group of students, 19 readers of crime fiction were interviewed at some length. They had replied to our postings on two specialized Internet sites, were clients of a thriller bookstore in Amsterdam or, in a few cases, were relations of our friends and acquaintances. Five were self-identified feminists, four were men and five were gay (four women, one of the men). Although we had not particularly intended this to be the case, most of them had (professional) middle-class backgrounds. Generally, they were a nice and co-operative group of people. Some of the time, however, their elaborate strategies to ward off any suggestion that they were not in full control of interpretations of their own reading and positions as men and women, and also, in many cases, of the interview situation, baffled us and, when we were analysing the material, irritated us. In part this was related to class position and the management of social relations in a research context. But it was also a result of a more general lack of terms or access to a repertoire through which to express important parts of what fascinates crime readers in the (sub)genres they like.

One of our two group interviews provides a case in point. My assistant Cindy Stello felt actively excluded by our three informants after she had failed to pick up on the title of a particular novel. She pointed out to me how I had been addressed throughout the rest of the interview and how the interviewees had consistently used 'we', 'our group' or 'our circle'. My own frustration was with how they ridiculed some of my questions, as well as my opening statement in which I tried to point to the difference between high and low culture and the difficult position of crime fiction in the middle. I had hoped to break the ice and relieve my guests (the interview was at my home) of any feelings of unease. My question met with near-derision. The cultural status of the detective was totally unproblematic. To think otherwise was too old-fashioned for words. Time was when you had to hide or be ashamed of reading popular books, but this was considered to be in the dim and distant past.

Henry, one of the three interviewees, a few of whose remarks and observations I have singled out for this article (man, 48, public servant), held the view that detectives are no longer seen as 'low' culture (to applause from the other two participants, and this was the first subject broached in the interview). He even felt that: 'Detectives today are more an art form than they have ever been. Ten or twenty years ago, they may have been looked down upon but today. . . .' This was enough to make the researcher feel guilty for forcing an apparently ridiculous and possibly insulting point of view on these readers. Irritation took over later. For all their vehement disagreement with me on the question of the social standing of thrillers and detective novels, our three informants did not so much argue that popular culture has become more accepted; rather they were categorizing the popular books they liked as Literature. They took pains to make it clear that they were collectors of a particular author, or subgenre, and also that they were Readers who were aware of the value of Good Books. We, the interviewers, were obviously the barbarians to whom such distinctions needed to be explained, or, worse, who were trying to talk them into being readers of trash with all its suspect pleasures. This group interview was not an exception – in the other group interview and in several of the individual interviews we came across the same type of 'impression management' (cf. Goffman, 1973).

Irritation is the last thing you need in the kind of audience research that cultural studies has invested in. After all, our only material is what informants can and will tell us. As Dave Morley has famously suggested:

> In the case of my own research, I would accept that in the absence of any significant element of participant observation of actual behaviour beyond the interview situation, I am left only with the stories that respondents chose to tell me. These stories are, however, themselves both limited and indexical of the cultural and linguistic frames of references which respondents have available to them, through which to articulate their responses. (1989: 24)

If the words of our informants are all we have, then it will not do to allow irritation to cloud our attention to what they say. For irritation not only threatens respect and thus careful and unprejudiced attention to, and representation of, what respondents have to say, it is very nearly a crime against what Gadamer called *Verstehen* (Gadamer, 1986; Warnke, 1987) – understanding, the very possibility of building a shared horizon across the divide of research and everyday life. This does not mean that it should be buried and forgotten and, like Seiter, I feel it needs to be discussed, to be the subject of interpretation and theorization.

Having been trained in feminist research methods, I have been left with a particular legacy. Three deep convictions have remained with me over the years. The knowledge produced in research is not just of academic importance, but is always and also of political importance. The power inherent in

one's position as an academic needs to be wielded with care. And, as a woman, I have a special obligation in terms of researching questions of gender and femininity. Feminist research, for me, is synonymous with showing respect. This is one of the reasons why I came to prefer the use of discourse analysis rather than more naturalistic and descriptive frameworks. After all, how are you to do justice to the complexities of another person's life – morally, methodologically or theoretically? Although it does seem possible to reconstruct funds of cultural knowledge – whether they be discourses, repertoires or vocabularies – a discourse perspective allowed me to neatly circumvent that old ghost of paternalism: of knowing better than my respondents what moved them and how popular forms had meaning for them. My irritation in a sense took me back in time, to what in my personal biography has come to be the cultural painfulness of upward mobility and the need inspired by it to prove one's middle-class or upper-class credentials. But my interviewees may have totally different backgrounds; I can't say because I don't know. So how can I interpret this and do myself the favour of finishing with this ghost of paternalism once and for all?

In the group interview I was aiming for a form of subservience to the group process. As a well-meaning feminist researcher I wished to enable the others to feel free to express themselves. I certainly did not want to impose my own frame of reference on the group. My intentions misfired badly. I had neither correctly understood the position our interviewees wanted to take up, nor that they may have expected something totally different from an academic (we will never know what). I felt guilty and mad in equal measures. In retrospect, I can see how the dutiful feminist in me was out to get 'the real story', as in naturalistic approaches to social reality, while knowing, of course, that there is no real story to be reconstructed. Rather, there are only fragments of stories that allow us in audience research to build a picture of the cultural knowledges that interviewees draw on in gaining pleasure from reading crime fiction as well as in making it meaningful. This much becomes clear in light of the fact that the same defensive but also arrogant, middle-class way of talking was part of the interviews conducted by my students too. It was not aimed at me or at the other interviewers personally. It is much more a matter of convention, of the discursive construction of talking about popular fiction. It could well be the case that my fears of having imposed myself or my own interpretive framework are preventing me from seeing how my 'populist' defence was also a provocation to a reaction that is all the more interesting for its vehemence and at times arrogant insistence.

Games with ghosts are dangerous enough. Any positive effect of how I and the informants clashed in the group interview needs at least to be consolidated by paying close attention to the bits and pieces of their cultural knowledge that they offered. The ghost would have me worrying over power and paternalism, which would easily cloud the issue here, which is, stated

in a perhaps somewhat functionalist manner: what goals were served by the particular way in which talk of crime fiction is organized? What else is there in the material that my irritation may help me see? How can being trained as a feminist help me find more in the interviews, rather than locking me into methodological feelings of guilt?

Some issues were not problematic for our interviewees (if surprising and in some regards disappointing for me). Women's position in society is an example of this. Most of our informants stuck faithfully with a notion of women's emancipation as a taken-for-granted feature of today's world. With the exception of only some of the self-identified feminists, feminism was generally seen as over the top, too much, too aggressive and not properly appreciative of women's qualities as women. Emancipation should be our goal. Issues of women, emancipation and feminism had obviously been given a place on the maps of meaning our informants used. Apparently, a ceasefire had been reached concerning women and femininity, in which a notion of natural differences between men and women continued to win out over more radical feminist suggestions that gender difference is constructed or a performance, rather than a given. The position of men was a different matter. This became clear only when I decided that a more 'symptomatic' reading of the interview material was the best way to confront and lay to rest fears of paternalist mismanagement of interview relations, and to use my irritation to reconstruct and subsequently theorize a part of the material that we had mostly left alone: the books referred to in the interviews. To read up on, or familiarize oneself with, the material one has been talking about is not a big step in an audience research project, but how to handle the material is another matter which is at least as problematic, both politically and methodologically, as the management of interview relations.

I feel strongly about the status of audience research versus the somewhat higher status (especially in terms of theory) of textual analysis. When the two are combined (as in older feminist work on popular culture), they jar. It is the researcher's (superior) reading of a set of texts against the partial or non-politicized understanding of audience groups. Here comes the ghost of paternalism and condescension again. It blemished, for instance, Janice Radway's (1984) ground-breaking study on romance novels. Radway's conclusion insults romance readers. The body of her research respects the rules and norms of romance reading as practice, and romance readers as individuals who can articulate their views and sense of self. In the conclusion, however, Radway suggests that romance readers would be feminists if the world were to change a bit, and that in such an ideal world there would be no further need for romances. It marks them as the lesser feminists, and marks feminists as the better women. It does not take pleasure itself, or the nature of the pleasure of reading a fictional formula text, seriously at all (Ang, 1987). Likewise, in a study of the history of women's magazines Ballaster et al. (1991) offer a last chapter based on interviews with readers and

interpret what these readers have to say in an overly concerned vein. While they tell us that they share the pleasure these readers obviously take in the magazines, they counsel that (traditional) women's magazines should be taken only in small doses, because, like eating too much chocolate, they would otherwise make you ill.

Feminists have not had a good track record of combining analysis of the text with interpreting audiences' uses of them. Nor have we always been very careful in our text-based work to make clear that, without asking audiences, we cannot speak for them, which implicitly is exactly what we have done. The reason for, and legitimation of, work with popular media texts has too often kept to a modernist frame of reference in which popular texts are always dangerous and possibly damaging for the less tutored. This is paternalism at its worst, and is out of line with the respect we feminists otherwise value so highly. More generally, too, it is obvious that audience research is not easily combined with textual analysis. Apart from the highly different types of analytic tools we have become accustomed to using, there remains a sense of drawing on knowledges that are too disparate. Apart from highly descriptive introductions of the material the audience research is related to, many recent studies have therefore left the text for what it is and concentrated on the audience (Hagen, 1994a and 1994b; Hermes, 1995; McKinley, 1997). We may have lost something in the process. It should be possible to talk about texts and interviews without talking about identities and personal choices in life. Both types of material are also indicative of shared social knowledges, of what issues we debate and how we debate them, and of the means we have available to do so. The sometimes defensive, sometimes aggressive manner of defending 'their' crime novels that we found in our interviewees may not be a question of personal style as much as an indication of the constraints inherent in the mechanisms of 'middle-class' discourse on popular culture.

Less systematic than Radway (1984), who had her informants give her lists of the best and the worst romances they had read, but inspired by her example, I followed the only clues left over in the material – namely, the novels with which I was unfamiliar that were referred to in the discussions. This symptomatic reading cannot stand as more than a speculative undertaking. The texts studied do not answer questions about what members of the audience are really like, or why, ultimately, they like crime fiction, but the books mentioned in the interviews may provide some idea of what the group of readers we studied felt was important. They have, in Morley's words, 'indexical value' (Morley, 1989: 24). In the light of my search for the links between popular culture, and especially popular fiction, and the public sphere, it is important to understand how there may be issues of public and political importance that can be understood only through a roundabout route. After reading the books, I suspect that the position of men and of what we understand and would like masculinity to be, is an issue

that is only partially addressed by existing vocabularies and repertoires. On, then, to recently published bestseller thrillers and what they can teach us about this.

Masculinity and the text

It was a long time since I had read a large number of titles by male authors (I know, I am a very parochial feminist) and I was amazed by what I found. Mixed in with recent work by feminist thriller writers, there is a strong suggestion that, although gender studies may have put masculinity on the agenda, this has not reached everyday life. Men, and in a sense masculinity, are, of course, still mostly what detective and thriller fiction is about, notwithstanding the enormous and long-standing popularity of these genres for women as readers and writers (see also Coward and Semple, 1989). A yearly authoritative guide for thriller and detective fiction writers and their work in print in the Netherlands, consisting mostly of Anglo-American authors and a small number of translated and Dutch authors, portrays 266 male authors against 108 female authors in 1999. More female authors have male protagonists than male authors have female protagonists. Also, the standard for writing a particular type of detective (a private eye, a police officer) is set by older male-dominated genres (the mystery of the closed room, the noir or the classic private eye, the police procedural, perhaps even the action and adventure thriller can be taken to be part of this group) against which the amateur spinsters of the Golden Age of detective fiction form a – wrongly endearing – contrast (huge numbers of corpses litter Agatha Christie's novels, for instance) (Nesaule Krouse and Peters, 1975). Compounding the implicit male dominance in crime fiction is the fact that today's women crime writers have more often than not sought to create professional women as crime fighters, thereby (implicitly) referring to sets of standards that have historical ties to masculinity rather than femininity (cf. Tasker, 1998). My claim, therefore, that masculinity may be more problematic than femininity in terms of the generic rules of interpretation for crime fiction developed by readers over time may strike an odd note. It is certainly the case that my own perception of this state of affairs is strongly slanted towards feminist issues, and masculinity has traditionally mostly been an issue because of its undesirability rather than anything else.

I did not (re)read classic noir novels (such as *The Maltese Falcon* [1930]) that were also mentioned, but chose instead to focus on more recently published novels that I had not read before. Among the authors I read are Kinky Friedman, David Baldacci and Ken Follett. Friedman was great fun. The name Friedman is used by both author and protagonist of the novels and it guarantees those readers who savour parody and irony a lot of reading pleasure. The same Henry I quoted above referred to Friedman as an author

who 'tilts reality' and thus puts everything in a new perspective. This accords more literary merit to Friedman than I would think he is due. He is interesting, though, for the manner in which he satirizes masculinity (his own included) by operating on the cutting edge of cowardice and loyalty to friends. Women in the Kinky universum can best be characterized as the unknowable other. Masculinity itself, although satirized, is secure in the thought of its enormous task in the world. It may be undoable, but it gets done.

Kinky's sympathetic version of traditional masculinity was complemented for Henry by Tony Hillerman's native Indian thrillers, who show him the soft side of masculinity. Interestingly, these are novels about men who are not touched by the particular type of insecurity that has taken hold of the male protagonists in Baldacci's *Total Control* (1997) or Follett's *The Third Twin* (1996, also a TV mini-series), which were recommended to me by women as excellent thrillers. Baldacci and Follett join a growing number of male authors who have broken with tradition (it used to be rare for men to write female heroines in crime fiction, see Craig and Cadogan, 1981), presenting us with women as central figures in the narrative.[3] Both suggest that men have somehow lost the challenge posed by feminism and women's entry into professional fields formerly monopolized by men.

Baldacci's *Total Control* (deemed 'excellent' in the group interview quoted in this article) introduces a well-off professional couple, Jason and Sydney Archer. (Her masculine name should immediately alert us.) Jason, although a brilliant computer technology executive, manages to get ensnared in what for him will be a deadly game. Although we are not told until halfway through the book that he did it all for the best reasons (service to his country and money for his family), Archer gets himself abducted and ultimately killed, leaving Sydney to fight for his reputation and hers, and her own and their daughter's life, with all the acumen of her professional knowledge as a lawyer and her strength. Sydney is the real hero of this novel, wielding guns and intellect alike. In fact she is only a heroine in so far as she becomes the romantic interest of FBI agent Lee Sawyer, who is trying to locate her husband. Sawyer is divorced, lonely and overweight and no match for how Jason Archer is described (athletic, beautiful, intellectually gifted). Jason Archer's position is that of the prototypical female: good looks, lack of common sense, easily sacrificed for the sake of the story line. In fact, we do not even know how or when he is killed; he more or less gets lost as the story unfolds. The modern male's predicament is that he is little more than an asset to a successful woman and no longer up to what was demanded of men traditionally. Of course, *Total Control* also offers us FBI agent Sawyer, the ordinary guy who loses his family (through divorce) because of his pressured job (life is tough on men these days). Yet he may well win against muscle men and glamour boys, by ending up with Sydney Archer. The author leaves it to us to finish

this particular scenario for ourselves. Sydney, meanwhile, is pregnant with dead Jason's child.

Traditional masculinity's lack of an answer to feminism, and women's 'new' position in the world, is dramatized even further in Ken Follett's *The Third Twin*. Again a professional woman is the central character in the novel. The men are mostly power-hungry or raping beasts (with one exception, of course, to provide the New Woman with a mate). The woman, Jeannie Ferrami, is the one to climb on a white horse to battle injustice and crime. Hers is the classic male position, with the exception that she herself is of course also a victim of rape by one of the men – not something that, generally speaking, happens to men in crime fiction.[4] Follett offers us a succinct case against masculinity and its excesses. Socialization, he suggests, is the only solution. The only question is, by whom? The one man who has managed to curb his agressive drive, the man Ferrami falls in love with, was raised by a traditional housewife. Should she, the traditional 'good' woman, be the one, or is it up to the professional woman, who is a better man for having breasts rather than anything else? Ferrami, after all, a geneticist, is the one who, from early on in the novel, stresses that biology is never destiny, which enables her to believe in him.

The story lines in these novels and the positions that male characters find themselves in are exemplars for the confusion over masculinity that can also be found in other genres. Jackson et al. (1999) interviewed men about men's lifestyle magazines and concluded that men tend to fall back on traditional and sexist repertoires of interpretation, for lack of other ways of expressing a position more in line with the changes feminism has wrought in society. Others, too, have underlined how men, since second wave feminism, have been faced with the unpleasant task of giving up traditional privileges without any clear reward or evident means and strategies to do so (Seidler, 1991; Tolson, 1978). Gender studies research makes clear how masculinity has operated as the norm, thus making itself invisible and largely unspeakable. Dudink therefore counsels the 'outflanking manoeuvre' rather than an attempt to deconstruct masculinity head on (1998: 430–1). Undeniably, here is a task for cultural critics to show how the absent presence of masculinity (as invisible norm and concretely as room for men to do whatever they liked) has turned, in some fictional genres at least, into an absent presence; there hardly seems a role for them left. Poor Jason Archer's death does not even merit narrative space. He just gets lost.

Neither Jackson et al.'s male interviewees, nor my mixed group of respondents, had the means available to do more than hint at male identity as a possible site of trouble and strife. Generally, the preference of the few men in my research project was to read thrillers and detective novels that do not question masculinity, but that deal with the burden of being a man sarcastically, especially when it comes to women. The noir detective is the strongest example: whatever you do as a man, it is never good

enough; don't ever trust a woman, she will betray you. But in other novels too, women are kept at a distance. They are absent or at the very least a source of eternal mystification. Often, women do not come into the story at all, having walk-on parts at most (as in the action and adventure thriller). This is not to argue that the pleasures of the text cannot be explored outside gendered terms – for example, in terms of mood or description – but to point out how gender, and especially masculinity, is invisible for the readers I interviewed. Henry did read the thrillers and detective novels his female partner likes, but he did not offer any comments on them. He did find the struggle of TV series *Prime Suspect*'s Jane Tennison moving. For him she occupied the position of an honorary male. He was not convinced by comments from the two women in the group interview that her 'male' strategy of coping with a woman-unfriendly workplace could be interpreted as a loss for women, rather than a gain for them. This suggests that men may be more comfortable with traditional models of masculinity, even when it comes to individual women's struggle to achieve better positions. How this will ultimately affect men's positions and their (remaining) privileges is conveniently left out, even though this question haunts popular genres.

The women in our research were more open to dramatized criticism of masculinity (men as women's enemy, as rapist, as agent of violence, as portrayed by women thriller writers). They also offered off-hand suggestions about the type of man or masculinity they preferred, for which TV police detectives Morse (*Inspector Morse*) and Frost (*A Touch of Frost*) were given as examples. It strikes me that both Morse and Frost are older and that although they obviously like to be with women, there is no regular woman in their lives. Morse is a hopeless romantic who is unlucky in love, Frost a slightly more pragmatic widower, who nevertheless will take on the cause of women and waifs if necessary. They are seen as gentlemen and, despite their bullying of their sergeants, as basically gentle men. Neither needs to reconstruct his masculinity, nor, for that matter, seems threatened by feminism. As romantics, they both offer Man as an asexual being rather than as a menacing beast driven by lust. They are not merely traditional men; they are traditional men of a highly particular ilk. The men's preferences in novels and the women's preferences in TV series suggest that romantic, individualist versions of (gentlemanly) masculinity were a preferred way out of the disreputable place in which masculinity has found itself since the feminist criticism of the 1970s, and its subsequent translation into popular fiction genres. This is the case whether these versions are of a more English type, personified by Frost and Morse, who are members of a larger organization, or whether they are of a more American type, offering man as loner.

Questions of cultural citizenship

Before I conclude this article by discussing cultural citizenship, a short word on its hardly exemplary or faultless methodology. I have used my own experience to try to lay to rest a ghost that still hovers over feminist audience studies, both in how we conceive of fieldwork relations (but hardly discuss them) and in how we theoretically legitimate combining interview quotations and impressions with other types of material. We should discuss fieldwork relations and we should also find ways and means of reintroducing the text in our work without being stopped beforehand by a fear of paternalism. The fear of paternalism is a fear of overinterpreting what informants have to say. Letting go of this fear while paying close attention to what we feel the material *is* able to tell us (instead of a discussion of men becoming insecure, a reconstruction of a grey area in everyday talk) is the only way forward. This also means letting go of naturalist assumptions. There is no right question to ask. Hopes of seeing 'the real story' emerge are no help, whereas the theoretical questions and methods of radical discourse are. After all, socially shared knowledges are what is especially of interest to audience studies, not overly psychologized readings of sets of haphazardly assembled individuals. As such, the elements of such socially shared knowledges brought together here provide some clues towards visualizing the relation between popular culture and the public sphere. They are a series of arguments and examples that together may show how crime fiction, in its current forms in popular book and TV genres, is important in terms of cultural citizenship.

Citizenship is usually understood in terms of rights and obligations, and as a constitutive part of the nation-state (Marshall, 1994 [1964]). In so far as cultural citizenship is introduced as a concept, it relates to issues of representation of specific groups (Hartley, 1999: 139, 159; Murdock, 1999; Rosaldo, 1999). Cultural citizenship is thus closely connected with 'identity politics' (Voet, 1998: 91–5). Identity politics refers to groups that understand themselves to be groups, and it refers back to rights (which are often felt to be denied to the group). With the notion of identity politics, the concept of identity itself has changed 'image'. From a descriptive tool, it became a political term. More or less the same thing has happened to the term 'representation', which in itself already had connotations of democratic politics and techniques and conditions of making visible. As a result, neither 'identity' nor 'representation' feels quite right for my project. It was never a project about the representation of women in detective fiction, or about constructions of either masculine or feminine identity. The whole idea was to link changing conditions of 'being a woman' or 'being a man' to popular tales. Given the havoc wreaked by second wave feminism, I would expect such tales to be attractive because of their instructive and perhaps moral content. I expected them to reflect on current conditions of living

one's gender, and perhaps offer elements or remnants of feminist ideology that could be seen as a source of inspiration to heroines in especially the feminist detective novel, and also to writers and readers (as implied by the text). I was not (nor am I) interested in questions of identity per se, but in the links wrought between the popular text and larger social and cultural issues. The status of the text in this sense is one of offering a certain type of knowledge as well as pleasure and excitement. Readers may use these knowledges or, of course, find their own highly idiosyncratic ways through the text. By using a large enough number of books, and by talking to a large enough number of readers, it should be possible to find traces of such linkages, of how we (and by 'we' I mean all of us users of popular culture, rather than us academics, or even smaller subgroups) come to terms with changing social and cultural conditions. Popular culture, to my mind then, provides us with a 'peri-political' form of citizenship that is none the less of extreme importance, especially perhaps when it comes to areas that beset us with confusion, as is the case currently with masculinity.

My argument, then, is that it is not only interesting to reconstruct the set of rules and standards of reading that provide readers of crime fiction with a certain type of pleasure and a sense of who they are, but that it is also an area from which we can learn about what fascinates a particular group of readers. Questions, for example, of what, for them, needs resolution, is unfinished business that jars, that needs reassurance. For the largely middle-class group of readers of which I myself am a part, this could well be masculinity and its links to sexuality and violence. This in turn implies criticism of who should be part of the polity. At the very least it implies unease over who we should come to terms with, over how we live our lives, and how much room we should claim for ourselves. These are all issues that link directly to political issues and to citizenship. However, this is not a link of reasoning and argument (and neither of course was my route to offering this argument). It is a link that consists equally of fascination, abhorrence (all our readers felt that crime fiction should never be too bloody or too violent), experiential knowledge and a gut sense of what is right and wrong, all encrypted in particular codes or vocabularies.

I cannot claim this to be a representation of the interview material, nor would I claim that the novels and characters I discussed directly support this argument. Such would be to take the paternalist route, the 'I know what these readers are talking about, even if they do not realize this themselves'. And I may have gone further down that road than I intended, unwittingly doing exactly what I criticized Radway and Ballaster et al. for. My goal, however, is simply to suggest that our cultural resources are highly limited when it comes to talking about masculinity and about violence. What is obvious from the interviews is that highly politicized feminist positions on masculinity, violence and sexuality are much too radical to be palatable for a wide audience, even though our readers felt involved in these issues. I

found little evidence of crime fiction offering utopian hope, but I did find
traces of how these texts offer a beginning of social criticism. That, perhaps,
could be a realizable goal of feminist work with audiences: to trace what
binds us to particular forms of culture and to offer not so much explanation
or description, but to work with fascination and to develop what can be
said about such forms in relation to the social, cultural, political state of
affairs we find around us. Rather than simply use texts we as academics find
appealing or fascinating, thereby benefiting a cultural elite, we could extend
common knowledge and offer repertoires and vocabularies to take up issues
that are of everyday importance but that find their way to public debate only
in too shorthand a form to be any use at all for our sense of well-being and
our belief in democracy as a system.

Notes

I would like to thank Ann Gray and Pieter Hilhorst.

1 See Hermes (1995: 12–17) on the fallacy of meaningfulness in cultural studies
  work.
2 Interesting examples are Fiske (1990), who offers a discussion of his own
  living room; and Probyn's use of autobiographical details to structure her dis-
  cussion of gender and gendering in cultural studies (1993) and of identity and
  (not) belonging more recently (1996).
3 Another well-known example would be John Grisham's *The Pelican Brief* and
  The Client, featuring a female law student and a female lawyer.
4 A notable exception, for example, is Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing*,
  and there are gay thriller writers who have taken up this theme.

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