Engaging the Moral Imagination by Watching Television: Different Modes of Moral Reflection[1]

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Abstract

Even though there are ample voices arguing for the importance of television for building a moral civil society, television is often still assumed to have a negative influence on its audiences' morality. However, the audiences' moral activities when watching TV are under-researched. In this article insights from philosophy and cultural media studies are employed to explore the complex moral reflections the audiences engage in when they watch TV. TV narratives are viewed as a moral laboratory in which the reader can experiment with moral decisions and thus engage the imagination. Forty-one in-depth interviews among a variety of people were conducted. Results show that TV audiences engage in at least three modes of moral reflection - interpretative, additional, and associative - while watching TV. Additionally, the open or closed character of the TV narrative is quintessential to engage the audiences' imagination.

Key words: moral reflection, audiences, television, in-depth interviews

Introduction

One of the on-going debates about the media revolves around their relationship with morality. Television is especially often targeted as the culprit of society's moral decay. The idea of 'television as a social pathology' (Spigel and Curtin, 1997) is familiar within both the public and the academic debate. While in the public debate most voices express concern, the academic debate is less easily defined. What is remarkable, however, is that our understanding of morality, and the audience's relationship with television on a moral level, is under-researched.

In public debates, television's negative influence on the morality of its audiences is more or less assumed. Arguments about the pernicious effects of sexually explicit images and violence in movies and television serials on the (mental and physical) health of today's

youth are common. These arguments are often misinformed or represent a misinterpretation of research results (cf. Spigel and Curtin, 1997; Slade, 2002).

Discussions about the effects of television are ongoing in a number of different academic fields. There are media effect studies which focus on the relationship between the violent or sexual content of television programmes and the behaviour of children or adolescents. Here academics formulate an indirect relationship between morality and TV content: it is the effects that are deemed wrong, not TV itself. Results of these studies are contradictory and inconclusive (Giles, 2003). They are, nevertheless, often used to support the claims in the public debate (cf. Crosley, 2008). However, other media psychologists who focus on emotion and empathy have shown a more direct relationship between morality and TV, relating the experience of emotions to moral reasoning (p.e. Zillmann, 1991; Johnson, 1993). Recently, they have emphasised the more positive impact of television, positioning it as a laboratory within which individuals engage in the playful learning of necessary survival skills (Steen and Owens, 2001; Tan, 2008).

Alternatively, there are cultural studies approaches that regard television as an important story-teller in contemporary society which also functions as a resource for enculturation (Allen, 1992; Fiske, 1987; Gerbner, 1999). Television offers stories and images that can be appropriated by the audience within the understandings of everyday life (Livingstone, 1999). Many scholars have explored and provided empirical evidence of this function of television. In the last three decades we have gained an understanding of what audiences actually do with television and how they can engage actively with television content. Often, authors implicitly touch upon the issue of morality and television content.

For example, Ien Ang (1985) has shown how a 'tragic structure of feeling' is inscribed in the meaning of *Dallas*. Ang locates the experience of pleasure here: *Dallas* thus functions as a starting point for the melodramatic imagination. Referring to Peter Brooks, the melodramatic imagination can be understood as "an attempt […] to bring into the drama of man's quotidian existence the higher drama of moral forces" (Ang, 1985, p. 79). In other words, this type of imagination evoked by soap opera might be considered as a way to deal with moral issues. Almost twelve years later, McKinley (1997) showed how young girls construct a variety of meanings while watching teen programme *Beverly Hills 90210*. However, underlying these constructions is a process of re-producing dominant notions of female identity. Instead of an empowering function of *Beverly Hills*, McKinley demonstrates how adolescent girls tend to 'go with the flow'. In other words, they mostly accept the (possibly moral) messages. A decade later again, Joost de Bruin (2008) shows how girls from various ethnic backgrounds talking about (Dutch) soap opera and drama have several ways of positioning themselves and their ethnicity, using different performative styles. Engaging actively with the texts, they perform a smart self, a sensitive self and a moral self. These selves give room to a more performative interpretation of sense making. What remains

implicit in these studies is how people appropriate TV insights on a *moral* level. The notion that audiences engage on a moral level with media, and television in particular, is often only hinted at (cf. Hermes, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2004). More often, audiences are shown to formulate moral judgements about aspects of programmes (cf. Hill, 2007). General explorations of audiences' moral reflections are scarce, if they exist at all.

Concerning television content, only a few explorations of the ethical lessons of television can be found. Gay Hawkins (2001) and Annette Hill (2007, 2005) both explore the ethical lessons in reality TV while Christina Slade (2002) discusses a wider range of TV genres, such as news, soap operas, cartoons, and advertisements. These authors all conclude that television content is often morally complex and offers the audiences opportunities for moral reflection. However, the focus is on content and therefore does not provide us with insights into how the audiences actually engage in moral reflection.

That the media are of quintessential importance to the notion of morality is re-emphasised by Roger Silverstone. Silverstone (2007) not only postulates that the media are dialectically intertwined with everyday life, but he also considers the role of television, or rather the media in general, to be of vital importance for the creation of a moral civil society in the future. However, insight into what audiences actually do on a moral level when they are watching television (or consuming other forms of media) and how to understand morality with regard to TV content is still in need of investigation.

In contrast to the scarcity of empirical work, there is ample theoretical insight into morality and other narrative genres. Philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1989) and Martha Nussbaum (2001), have investigated the relationship between cultural forms and morality, and the importance of narratives for moral imagination is intricately scrutinized. Narratives are perceived as a moral laboratory within which the reader can experiment *with imagined* moral decisions and their consequences. The moral insight offered by the narrative is, thus, subsumed into the viewers' moral imagination (Nussbaum, 2001; Rorty, 1989)[2]. It is important to note though, that these philosophers provide us only with theoretical ideas, and empirical work is highly exceptional.

In this article, I will explore how audiences engage in moral reflection when they watch television. Taking a perspective on TV programmes as narratives, several questions arise such as: 'What kind of moral issues does the viewer ponder upon when watching television?', 'How are moral meanings constructed?' and 'What kind of TV programme induces moral reflection most often in its viewers?' I would like to emphasise that this investigation focuses on one element of the activities of the TV audiences: moral reflections as induced by TV content. The focus lies with the *how-part* of the reflection and not the *what-part* of them. The central research question in this paper is: *How do television narratives engage the moral imagination of audiences?* A framework derived from the

literary tradition was employed to conduct 41 in-depth interviews, with the aim of investigating how television narratives feed into the moral imagination of viewers.

On Moral Imagination and the Narrative

The relationship between narratives and their readers' moral values is theorized by several philosophers. As we will see, these insights on literary narratives can be applied easily to how audiences morally engage with TV narratives. Literary narratives are considered to be an art form capable of engaging the individual's moral imagination. According to Martha Nussbaum, it is artistic quality that holds this potential (2001, p. 433): "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". Authors from the literary tradition explicitly state that literary narratives are not the only narrative resource for the engagement of the imagination, with the mass media considered to be a "potent educator of citizens" (Nussbaum, 2001). Nevertheless, popular culture is habitually ignored. The reason for this exclusion is not because television is automatically considered inferior but, as Nussbaum (2001) clarifies, the media are relatively vulnerable to market pressures and, therefore, may lack the artistic quality that is essential to induce reflection. Nussbaum's point of view brings us back to an almost classic 'high' versus 'low' culture opposition. It would take too long to resolve this debate here, but I would like to emphasize that I perceive this distinction as rather artificial. Many authors in both media and philosophy have shown how this distinction is an artificial construct (Cohen, 1999; Fiske, 1987; Jensen, 2002). Bearing these comments in mind, the use of a literary framework seems beneficial when it comes to investigating how television narratives might engage the imagination.

The notion of moral imagination is rooted in the work of Romantic philosophers. During the Enlightenment a rational notion of morality became embedded in the fabric of the Western society (Poole 1991). This notion formulates moral decisions as based on a rational and disembodied consideration of (objective) rules of what is right and wrong. Trying to break free from this rational straight jacket, philosophers from 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 argued that rational rules and principles are not sufficient to guide us in our moral decisions and suggested that *imagination* bridges the gap between moral principles and moral action. According to Dewey, moral decisions and actions are situated. We assess each moral situation according to theoretical notions, while simultaneously taking all relationships between people involved into consideration and envisioning the possible consequences.

In this study, morality is understood as the effort to guide our conduct by reason — that is to engage our stock of theoretical notions of right and wrong — while simultaneously

engaging the imagination to take into account the interests of each individual who will be affected by what we do (cf. Rachels, 2003). Moral imagination, the core concept of this study, reflects this notion of morality and is understood as "an ability to [envisage] various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action" (Johnson, 1993, p. 202). Narratives, functioning as moral laboratory, provide an excellent opportunity to exercise this capacity for moral imagination, for they provide an opportunity to deliberate, explore and reflect upon moral issues without having to endure the consequences of everyday moral decisions (Hakemulder, 2000; Widdershoven, 1993). According to Johnson (1993), narratives could offer us three insights that engage this imagination: the recognition of the moral quality of an issue, the different perspectives possible, and the consequences for all people involved.

Firstly, narratives could offer insights into what issues are of moral quality. To morally reflect upon an issue, we must be able to recognise it as such. For example, an issue such as multiple sexual partners is not considered as a *moral* issue by all people and certainly not in all cultures. To evaluate an issue as moral, acknowledgement of a certain importance, or interest, is pivotal (Nussbaum, 2001). By engaging our imagination, we can understand that some issues are of moral significance, not necessarily because we experience them to be of moral significance, but rather when someone else (for example a character in a narrative) does. This notion is similar to that proposed by researchers on TV and audiences. Cooper (1999) for example uses the concept of relevancy, while Bird (2003) speaks of a personal chord that needs to be struck, for an issue in a TV narrative to be become a topic of debate. Moreover, we can learn to understand that private issues, such as friendship and love, also have a moral aspect. Consequently, morality in this study also revolves around everyday life issues as well as public dilemmas.

Secondly, narratives can offer insight into the various perspectives or forms of deliberation on a moral issue. There is always more than one perspective available in such evaluation. Carol Gilligan and Jane Attanucci (1988) formulated two moral orientations, or perspectives, with which to deliberate upon a moral issue: the ethics of care and the ethics of justice. The *ethics of justice* perspective can be understood as a style of moral deliberation in which the individuals involved are presented as being independent from and, yet, as having a sense of duty and obligation towards each other. They rely on the application of rules and principles to realise their goals (Gilligan and 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 issue concerns how we act responsively and protect vulnerability in a particular situation (Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988). These two moral orientations will function as a starting point to investigate how audiences deal with the different moral perspectives they encounter when watching TV.

Thirdly, narratives offer insight into the various consequences for those involved in a particular situation. Insight into the motivations, feelings and character of others is essential to the final moral decision (Johnson, 1993; Rorty, 1989; Bogdan, Cunningham and Davis, 2000; Nussbaum, 2001; Silverstone, 2007). This third insight relates directly to the moral orientations discussed, and can be described in terms of empathy, as articulated by Ed Tan (1996). Tan formulates empathy as being the willingness to understand (movie) characters in relation to the featured events. I propose that this conception of empathy also relates to an awareness of a *concrete* instead of a *generalised* Other. Dealing with the former means that every individual is regarded as unique, with her or his own thoughts, history and emotional constitution (Benhabib, 1986). It is important to note that insight into the human character not only concerns the Other but also the Self; namely, understanding our own motivations and feelings, but also recognising and acknowledging the Other within us (Silverstone, 2007). In order to envisage both the potential help and harm that are likely to result from our actions, we need to develop the sensitivity to recognise other human beings as fellow sufferers. This can only be achieved by detailed descriptions of what unfamiliar people are like, and a re-description of what we ourselves are (Rorty, 1989).

Additionally, and drawing on insights from the literary tradition, two considerations are important for the engagement of the moral imagination: the social-historical context of the reader and the genre of the narrative. As in the field of television studies, authors from the literary tradition argue that the reception of the narrative depends upon one's social-historical background. Reflection on the Other — recognising the Other as an individual similar to oneself, although simultaneously acknowledging a difference — is more difficult when the boundary between the Self and the Other becomes harder to cross (Nussbaum, 1997). In other words, depending on the readers' social-historical context, the insight offered up by the narrative might be more or less easily utilised for moral reflection.

The genre of the narrative is also of importance. According to the authors of the literary tradition, if a narrative is to engage the imagination, the basic requirement is its realistic fictional character (Nussbaum, 1997; Rorty, 1989). Within the realm of television, we can recognise a welter of genres that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from one another (Creeber, 2008). Nevertheless, all TV programmes can be regarded as narrative texts (Barthes, 1985). Hill (2007) showed in her study of British and Swedish audiences how (factual) genres each engage audiences in specific ways. In other words, the genre of the narrative does matter in terms of what audiences do with the narrative. However, the focus of this paper lies with what audiences do with the narratives on an explicitly moral level and not on how the variety of genres ties into this. So, instead of trying to distinguish different genres, I will follow Fiske's interpretation of 'open' and 'closed' texts (Fiske, 1987). Some television narratives can be regarded as open texts in the sense that they assemble multiple voices within, enabling multiple interpretations that are never singular. For example, a debating programme on a current issue offers multiple opinions which audiences can

interpret themselves. Others may resemble more closed texts, in that they promote a more singular meaning, hence a singular interpretation. For example, some talk show hosts like Jerry Springer, close their show with a singular message on what to learn, limiting the interpretations available to the audiences. How the open or closed character of the TV narratives relates to the engagement of the imagination will be explored.

Employing the Literary Framework

To explore how people subsume the insights provided by television narratives into their imagination, forty-one in-depth interviews were conducted between September 2004 and June 2005[3]. The particular interviewees were chosen in an attempt to ensure as much variety in gender, age, ethnicity and educational level[4] as possible. Although these features will be noted for each interviewee in the results section of this paper, the primary focus of this study is on how TV narratives engaged the interviewees' imaginations, and not on how the social-historical background of the interviewees is related to the (content of) moral reflections.

Interviewees were contacted with the help of acquaintances of the researcher, and were not her friends or relatives. To prevent them from adopting a moral position in advance, they were originally asked if they would like to take part in an interview about watching television. It was only in the debriefing that they were told about moral imagination. Almost all the interviews took place at the interviewees' homes, although two persons preferred to be questioned at work.

The method of active interviewing as formulated by Holstein and Gubrium (1999) was used. The active interview poses the interviewee as a productive source of knowledge. The interviewer guides the interviewees in talking about the chosen topics, while ensuring that they use their own language and wording. During the interview, meanings are produced in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This means that the interview data offers insight into the 'assembly process' of meaning as well as 'in what is assembled' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999, p. 119). This turns the active interview into a valuable method for this study, since the focus lies with the question on how people reflect on moral issues and therefore on the 'assembly process'.

The interviews were unstructured and guided by a topic list (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999). The topic list contained subjects such as moral issues, moral deliberation, the Other, favourite genres etc. The moral issues discussed were raised by the interviewees themselves. This means, that the interviewees were not asked for moral opinions. Instead they formulated for themselves their like or dislike for a certain programme as grounded in its moral quality. The topics taken into the analysis were those that the interviewees formulated in terms of: an evaluation of right and wrong, a notion of what one should (or

could) do, and the Other (and the Self). The duration of the interviews ranged from forty minutes to one hour and forty-five minutes.

The interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and analysed with the help of the computer programme, Atlas.ti. The method of analysis was inspired by the grounded theory approach to the analysis of qualitative data, as formulated by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998). This involved three coding phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In the first phase, open coding, the interviews were labelled freely, meaning that all of the interviewees' quotations that seemed relevant for this study were given a label referring to its content. For example, all moral statements were simply labelled 'moral statement', usually with an additional label referring to the topic the statement was about. During the second phase, axial coding, attention is paid to the labels themselves. The labelled quotes are then organised into relevant groups. For the purpose of this study, relevant groups can be understood as being: the moral issues the interviewees formulated during the interview; the different styles of moral deliberation they used to explain their views on these issues; and how they took account of the Self and Others while reflecting thereon. Additionally, attention was paid to what kind of television programmes evoked the reflection, namely the interviewees' specific interests that were touched upon by the moral issue. Reflections on similar moral issues were compared to one another, not only on content, but also on how the interviewee arrived at the particular viewpoint. In a practical sense, this means that many categories were grouped together, leading to a reduction of labels and categories. Finally, in the third phase, selective coding, the left over groups of quotes are interpreted in order to formulate over-arching concepts for differences and similarities between groups. In other words, these concepts explain what all the quotations in one group have in common, and how to understand them in relation to quotations in other groups.

Moral Imagination - Modes of Reflection

All interviewees used television narratives to reflect on morally relevant issues, including the various perspectives and motivations and feelings of all people involved in the moral issue. In other words, each of them showed they were engaging the moral imagination in some way. As explained, the concept of moral imagination refers to the range of one's comprehension of morality and the ability to adequately deliberate these moral issues. The focus of this paper is on the 'how' dimension of moral imagination: how do people use TV narratives at a moral level. Interestingly, diversity in how people engage their imagination manifested itself during the interviews. The diversity was largely found in the way interviewees reflected on moral issues and questions in relation to TV narratives. Three modes of moral reflection emerged: interpretative, additional and associated reflection. Though moral issues reflected upon were diverse, three issues were reflected upon more often than others: issues revolving around civil conduct (which includes good manners as well as what is thought of as decent interaction between people), issues around violence (revolving around questions such as when violence can be understandable or excusable),

and issues around love (revolving around questions such as what real love is or how to deal with each other in a relationship). Interestingly enough, reflection on moral issues was induced by all sorts of genres, and thus independent of their fictional or non-fictional nature. In other words, interviewees referred to the evening news broadcasts as often as they referred to quizzes, soap operas or reality TV when discussing their moral reflections. Of the reflections, 41.5% were induced by fiction genres such as drama, soap opera and sitcoms. Non-fiction genres such as news and current affairs induced 23% of the reflections. Infotainment or entertainment programmes, such as docudrama, lifestyle programmes and reality TV were responsible for 35.5% of the reflections. Within these broad categories the diversity of genres is still enormous, though each genre was reflected upon in more or less equal amounts. Only the fiction genres 'horror' and 'science fiction' were rarely referred to by the interviewees. We might therefore conclude that genre is not the best denominator here. What did matter was whether the text was of an open character. I will illustrate the three modes of moral reflection evoked by television narratives[5] while simultaneously trying to do justice to the richness and variety of the moral issues reflected upon.

The three modes of moral reflection that emerged during the analysis indicate that the consideration of moral issues is not a one-dimensional process, and the moral imagination is engaged in several ways. Indeed, the different modes of reflection indicate the various ways interviewees went from insights into moral issues as offered by the narrative to the moral issues actually reflected upon, since these are not always identical. I named the modes of reflection after the way interviewees dealt with moral issues in the narratives they discussed: *interpretative reflection*, *additional reflection* and *associated reflection*. Interpretative reflection is employed most often by the viewers (about 75% of the occasions), whereas additional and associated reflections were employed less often (each 12.5% of the occasions). The three modes present a continuum, in which at one end interpretative reflection points to moral reflections directly related to the televised narrative, whereas at the other end, associated reflection refers to moral considerations that are triggered by the narrative, but not directly related to it.

Interpretative reflection indicates reflection on a moral issue as it is offered by a narrative. Interviewees present the moral issues reflected upon as identical to the moral issues offered by the narrative and thus as their interpretation of the programme. The topic or theme of a programme is recognised as a moral issue and is reflected upon as such. For example, Anouk brought up the moral issue of civil conduct when explaining why she likes watching *Expeditie Robinson (Survivor)*, a reality programme about two teams of people surviving together on a deserted island.

> It's about two islands where people, who do not know one another, where
> they are dumped, so to speak. But, they are supposed to, [for] as long as

possible, to survive together. But, it's just, it's nice to watch the psychological warfare.
(Anouk, 30-year-old Dutch woman, higher education)

Later on, Anouk explicates a specific moment of reflection while watching the programme. She elaborates on one of the team's members, who was not accepted by the other participants:

But you start thinking about it, where does he go wrong? Or at least, you start to think up some things, [...] that he really is plotting with one of the women, or that he is saying weird things to someone, that's when you think: surely, that's not very clever. [...] So on the one hand I respected him, because he was really good at it [surviving], on the other hand, socially, he was entirely incapable.
(Anouk, 30-year-old Dutch woman, higher education)

While interpreting a significant event in the programme, the rejection of one team member, Anouk simultaneously reflects on the issue of civil conduct in trying to answer the question whether this participant went wrong in his interactions with others. As Anouk says, she starts to think up some things, trying to figure out for herself what is right and wrong, while she still has respect for the candidate. In this sense her imagination is engaged on a specifically moral level.

Interpretative reflection was induced by a variety of narratives. This not only included reality TV, but also news, current affairs and drama. For example, Wendy reflects on the behaviour of one of the main characters (Paris) in the drama series, *Gilmore Girls*. Paris has been dating two men at the same time and decides to end the relationship with one of them. She calls him up to do so and then lies about several things. Wendy evaluates this behaviour as being wrong:

Well, you just don't call someone like that and say: it's over. Not when you're in a relationship. And she had already lied a lot as well. Lane [Paris' friend] was just staying the night since she had had a fight with her mom. But Paris said she used to be a drug addict, and that she was tripping. [...] I don't think she should lie. You should not lie. Not saying something, that's different. For example when you have a surprise for your parents, then you won't admit that. You keep your silence. You are actually lying, but that doesn't apply right there and then.
(Wendy, 17-year-old Dutch woman, higher education)

When news and current affairs evoked interpretative reflections, the specific behaviour of a public figure often turned out to be the centre of attention. For example, Jurgen explains why he does not like to watch the typical talk show:

> Well, all those vulgar, I am irritated by the vulgar, all those sexual topics do not interest me the slightest bit. I think those [are] ridiculous, all those dirty words they say. I think you have to remain civil. Look, I like saying crazy things when I know people fairly well. Being a bit smutty. But on television, I think: stay decent. And I think often, those duologues are an incredible waste of time, I think. A waste of energy.
> (Jurgen, 94-year-old Dutch man, higher education)

In the explanation of his dislike of talk shows, Jurgen simultaneously reflects on the moral theme of civil conduct. He evaluates the use of bad language as being wrong. Since his reflections are directly related to the content of the programme being discussed, they should also be considered as interpretative.

Sometimes, however, news gave rise to deliberations on other kinds of issues. Interviewee Barbara discusses the new law on identification requirements that have been an item in the evening news and in current affairs programmes. This new law requires everyone to be able to show proof (by means of a legal document such as passport or identity card) of his or her identity at all times in the public space. Barbara deliberates the idea of proof:

> Well, just imagine, that I walk to the post box and I don't have my driver's licence with me, but I do have all my cards, for the bank and uh…Now, I would say, look, here's my name, and this is my husband's name, and here is my cell phone, call 'we'. […] It is about being able to show who you are. Not about a certain form, and that if you do not carry that [form], you are wrong. It shouldn't be like that.
> (Barbara, 75-year-old Dutch woman, higher education)

Barbara makes clear she does not deny the importance of proving who you are, but the way an individual should prove this. She relates this idea to her everyday life in which she does not always carry the kind of proof required by law, and she imagines several ways of how to prove her own identity in several different ways. She concludes that limiting proof to certain documents is wrong. Barbara thus engages in moral reflections on a topic as it is discussed in current affairs, making her deliberations a case of interpretative reflection.

Additional reflection indicates a supplementary mode of moral reflection. The interviewees not only latched onto a moral issue offered by the narrative, but they also included something from their own point of view which is external to it. For example, Anton tries to

explain his thoughts about the violence used by two women in a detective story. In an attempt to save a friend from her violent husband, they try to teach the husband a lesson, beating him up with a baseball bat. During the assault, the victim trips, topples over a balcony and is accidentally killed. Anton, while trying to imagine being in a similar situation in real life, adds to this issue by coming up with other solutions:

> Well, if one of my friends, so to speak, would be in a situation in which their partner would be really boorish towards a friend of mine. Well, in any case I would think that [was] a horrible situation. And I think that I would first talk, mostly with acquaintances, about how to solve this.[...] What would I do? I don't know if I'd go to that person to talk about it. And I definitely would not waylay that person with a baseball bat. [...] No, I would try to hand that friend the tools, so to speak, to solve their problems.
> (Anton, 29-year-old Dutch man, higher education)

Later on, Anton starts to add to the moral issue he has described:

> So I don't know how, how intense that [knowledge of a friend being abused] is. So, I can imagine it's pretty intense. But then I would, [...] one way or another you're punishing someone in such a way that I think you're taking the law into your own hands. I would go to the police, if I really think the person can't handle it on their own…
> (Anton, 29-year-old Dutch man, higher education)

While discussing this issue, Anton reflects on the violence used and adds to the narrative, offering other solutions to the problem.

Like interpretative reflection, additional reflection is induced by a variety of narratives and concerns a variety of moral issues. A good example is formed by the reflections of Ruth on her favourite current affairs programme *Het Elfde Uur* (*The Eleventh Hour*). When asked for an example of an episode she thought was important to her, she turns to discuss the behaviour of the talk show host: Andries Knevel. She brings up an episode in which Andries Knevel is talking to a Dutch man who became a Muslim. The topic of their conversation is the death threats received by Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician who is known for his controversial statements. During the interview, Ruth never takes a stance on the death threats but reflects on a related issue:

> Andries Knevel going like: so you would want that Wilders, he has to die? And that's when he [the guest] said it: yes. And: [host] do you want to kill him? [guest:]Well, no, that's not necessary. [host:] Yes, but he could get a terminal disease for example? And then I think, that guy answered: yes. But I thought,

how that Adries Knevel was pushing too hard. Because he actually fed him the words, and I don't think that's reasonable. I think: you shouldn't do that.
(Ruth, 65-year-old Dutch woman, average education)

In her discussion of the programme, Ruth ignores the issue the programme was about and adds an issue to her interpretation of the narrative. It is this added issue that her reflections focus on.

Associated reflection reaches even further than additional reflection in the sense that interviewees were induced to reflect on issues that can be associated, but are entirely different from the issues offered by a narrative. A good example of this is provided by Clark when he explains what he thinks of a young girl having a relationship with her teacher in the drama series *Gilmore Girls*. Through association, Clark ends up reflecting on verbal abuse on public transport.

I know that it is not allowed, you should not have relationships with pupils. ...In our school the teachers are really young. And people just admit that they are gay, 'cause a lot of teachers are lesbian or gay. Also … in trams or something, you often hear people being called homo or fag. I think that is really stupid, just calling someone fag. I would never do that.
(Clark, 14-year-old Surinamese-Dutch boy, average education)

First Clark evaluates the relationship between the young girl and her teacher as not allowed. Subsequently he crosses over to his own school situation, and ends up at name-calling in public transport, something he evaluates as wrong behaviour.

Similar to the other two modes, associated reflection was also induced by all kinds of narratives, including current affairs, news and documentaries. A good example of this is provided by Jurgen who explains how he enjoys watching Discovery channel and National Geographic since these channels give him an opportunity to enhance his knowledge. When asked for an example, Jurgen recalls several documentaries on the concept of the Expanding Universe he watched on Discovery Channel. This concept makes him think about the time and space dimensions of his experience. However, these questions make him directly associate this complexity with the existence of God. And he ends up reflecting on how to be a good human being:

I think the cosmos is so complex, that I think, yeah, Jesus, has it ever been nowhere? Or has it always been everywhere. You know, the expanding universe. [...] Where is it going? If I learn a star needs a hundred years for its light to, needs this time to reach me. Then when I see it, it's been a hundred years ago, and then it still has,...the expanding universe. That's when I think,

> yes, jeez, there should be, there has to be a God. There has to be. So, it's like
> this: I don't understand it. I do understand there has to be something. And you
> have to do good, to your fellow, your fellow human being.
> (Jurgen, 94-year-old Dutch man, higher education)

Jurgen moves from a documentary on the expanding universe to reflections on how to be a good human being; the ethical question ('How to lead a good life?') he arrives at through association.

The three modes of moral reflection, the three ways in which the insights provided by television narratives are appropriated by the interviewees and engage their imagination, were induced by different narratives. They do, however, have one thing in common: every topic reflected upon was of special interest to the interviewees. These interests are similar to what Nussbaum (2001) argues is an essential element of moral imagination, and could be related to various features of the interviewees' lives, such as work, study, hobbies, partners, neighbours or family. The apparent ease of the interviewees appropriating moral insights offered and engaging their imagination is in sharp contrast to the way in which the interviewees encountered different moral orientations within the television narratives.

Insight Into: Styles of Moral Reasoning

The second element of moral imagination which was explored in this study revolved around how audiences reflect on the moral orientations as offered by TV narratives. Interestingly enough, the results of this aspect of the analysis reveal that, although all the interviewees used both dimensions of moral deliberation (i.e. ethics of care and ethics of justice) to explain moral issues that had caught their attention, the different perspectives offered up by the narrative were not subsumed into the imagination. However, it is here that the importance of the open or closed character of the text manifests itself most clearly. When the topic of conversation during the interviews turned to moral perspectives in the TV programmes, all interviewees showed appreciation for multiple perspectives, i.e. open texts. Closed texts which give the viewer a direct and clear moral message were rejected by the interviewees.

An example of how moral orientations are reflected upon is offered by Dewi discussing a scene in the drama series *Gilmore Girls*. Dewi explains how in this scene reasoning through an ethics of justice is applied, while she herself reasons through an ethics of care. She discusses the same episode that Wendy did, in which one of the characters, Paris, breaks up with her boyfriend over the phone, without giving him any explanation (and lying about several things as well). Dewi explains:

> And I think it's really a pity. She [Paris] doesn't give a real reason, she just
> says: it's over because it just doesn't work she says, but she doesn't give the

reason. I think I would break up with a reason. That's really better. Yeah, that's better, if you break up with a reason. Because the boy will think: what did I do now? That it's his fault, while it's actually her fault. He will start to feel really guilty.
(Dewi, 12-year-old Surinamese-Dutch girl, low level education)

So, while explaining a break up scene in *Gilmore Girls*, Dewi's reasoning reveals an ethics of care approach. In her opinion, Paris is doing something wrong because her actions will unnecessarily harm the boy (resulting in him feeling, needlessly, guilty). However, the fact that Dewi uses these perspectives in her explanation is not the same as her engaging her imagination.

As already stated, the interviewees openly appreciated narratives which incorporated different moral orientations. Inge explains why she likes *Baantjer* (a Dutch detective series) and expresses an admiration for the final scene of each episode where the main characters reflect on what has happened and what the motives of the perpetrator were. In this scene, a number of opinions are expressed, and different styles of reasoning are explicitly employed by the characters:

> […] and subsequently the analysis of *Baantjer*, from De Cock [main character in the series] and his comrades, of what has happened and what life is about. He always says something sensible. That it's a shame, or life takes its own turn. I think it's meant like that: which lessons can we learn?
> (Inge, 28-year-old Dutch women, higher education)

For Inge, the different points of view expressed in this scene are something she likes a great deal. Nevertheless, these differing perspectives do not seem to be subsumed into her imagination. Inge was not the only interviewee who dealt with different styles of reasoning in this way. Sometimes, an interviewee explicitly mentions the different moral orientations, but also immediately discards them as 'just not very interesting'. For example, Michiel discusses how he actively searches for contradictory voices in the media in general.

> That's why I enjoy going into Fort Sjako [alternative bookshop] and buy and read those left wing magazines, even though I'm part of [the] relatively right wing, legal environment, with a relatively right wing government. That's why I always pick out thinkers who, on a philosophical level, formulate a different world view than [the one] you usually encounter. I need that kind of balance.
> (Michiel, 26-year-old Dutch man, higher education)

When asked to give an example, he refers to a recent episode of *Tegenlicht (Back Light)*; an informational programme that often seeks to cover more than the popular opinion on

recent developments in the western world. In this example, it becomes clear that closed texts might not engage the imagination on moral deliberation, even when it involves a viewer (Michiel) who explicitly looks for contradictory opinions. In this episode of *Tegenlicht*, a Dutch reporter travels to the USA to visit some American veterans who served in Iraq, who had featured in a series of photographs meant to show the less heroic side of the war in their country. The reporter interviews the veterans, and discusses the rights and wrongs of the war in Iraq with them. The programme certainly made an impression, yet Michiel also directly expresses the view that the alternative perspective does not engage his imagination:

> For example, that boy who was rubbing his eyes constantly, since he had a lot of itchy scars, and that looked really awful. A little scary, it's such an important part of the face of course. So, those images stick. On the other side, the backlight that is produced, at a certain moment, I think it is less important. (Michiel, 26 year old Dutch man, higher education)

Although insight into the different perspectives offered by the narrative was not subsumed into the imaginations of the viewers, the open or closed character of a text is important. Indeed, it is my view that the availability of multiple perspectives in a text is the key to the engagement of the imagination. When a narrative proposes a singular meaning, the viewers tend to reject this and focus more on the subtext (like Michiel does when he both explains his empathy for someone with scars on his face, but also rejects the programme's message). The open nature of a text is also crucial to reflection about the human character.

Insight into the human character
Reflections on the third part of moral imagination, insight into the other and ourselves (the human character), are induced by the whole range of television narratives (with fiction, non-fiction and infotainment/entertainment genres each responsible for one third of the interviewees' reflections on the human character). Engagement with this part of the imagination is, according to the interviewees, an important reason to favour a programme. Reflecting on the human character thus appeared to be a pleasurable process for all interviewees. For example, Jelle explains that the reason for liking his all-time favourite programme *Hill Street Blues* is found in the variety of personalities:

> You used to have a variety of cops who all had their own story to tell. And the more often you watch a series like that, the better you get to know the characters, with all their mannerly and unmannerly characteristics, and that is fun. You, you learn to predict things that characters are going to do, or how they are going to do something, and that is because you know them longer. […] And the characters, let's say, they were kind of magnified. And you can show characters as … either extremely unsympathetic or extremely

> sympathetic … And … someone who is extremely sympathetic also has some
> bad habits and manners, and, and vice versa … Yeah, it's a whole palette of
> different personalities.
> (Jelle, 53-year-old Dutch man, low education)

For Jelle, the pleasure is found in predicting events and getting to know the characters. A little bit later on he declares that this palette of different personalities found in Hill Street Blues, but also in other programmes, resembles real life and that he, as he formulates it, "learns about other humans". As with the other interviewees, Jelle shows an appreciation of the narrative offering opportunities to reflect on insights into the human character (it is his original reason for calling it his all-time favourite TV programme).

Reflecting upon the human character always requires a display of empathy, as formulated by Tan (1996). The interviewees in this study often tried to understand the motivation and feelings of television characters within the situations they found themselves. One of the ways those interviewed engaged their imagination was by putting themselves in a character's place. Identification with a television character is also one way of reflecting on the self (Rorty 1989), and an important part of moral imagination. For example, Lisa (13-year-old Dutch girl, average education) puts herself directly in the shoes of one of the main characters in her favourite youth soap opera *ZOOP* when she discusses an issue of one friend giving some advice about his love life to another. In *ZOOP*, this friend tells his friend to stop the relationship because of a three year age difference. Lisa thinks this advice is wrong and when asked why she feels like this, she explains:

> Well, he is in love and he can't just, he can't just stop that, so you just have to
> go for it and find out what she thinks of him. So, I would give him that kind of
> advice.
> (Lisa, 13-year-old Dutch girl, average education)

By putting herself in the character's situation, Lisa seems to be able to imagine what she herself would do, and thus gains insight into her own moral position. Lisa's reflections thus demonstrate how narratives can function as a kind of moral laboratory (Hakemulder, 2000; Widdershoven, 1993) where one can experience other people's lives and experiment with moral positions. In this way, one's own feelings and opinions can be explored.

Although all the interviewees reflected on the human character, there appeared to be limits when it came to gaining insight into the Other and ourselves: a clear "them and us" distinction. This distinction sometimes manifested itself when the interviewees expressed their feelings towards the people they encountered in television narratives. A good example is provided by Pien who explains why she is interested in people who participate in popular talk shows, such as *Oprah Winfrey* and *Dr. Phil*:

> But I used to watch it more from a sociological perspective or, I don't know whether I should say it like that, and anthropological maybe. Because it is often a different class [that] these people are from, in general they're not scientists who are in there [the talk shows] and who participate in talk shows, since they're not highly educated people, so they do have another level. And that's something you certainly notice in those talk shows. […] So, I think it is interesting to watch these shows such as Catherine Keyl [the Dutch Oprah Winfrey]. I just want to see how these people think and talk about such issues. […] And also to figure out, if the topic is something that concerns me, or that I find important, how I can with those people, or how I could, so to speak, outline a policy or something like that.
> (Pien, 23-year-old Dutch woman, higher education)

By treating people who participate in talk shows as objects to study, Pien creates an "us versus them" distinction. Instead of imagining herself in their place and truly engaging her imagination, Pien positions participants as 'those people' that she needs to outline a policy for. 'They' are not part of the discussion. 'They' are not granted the opportunity to speak for themselves. In other words, their voice is taken away from them. This clear exclusion is what we might call a classic Foucauldian way of robbing people of their voice in order to maintain a certain status quo (Foucault, 1970). In other words, Pien does not engage in a detailed re-description the self, the important part of moral imagination as formulated by Richard Rorty (1989). She does not have to reflect on her own position, or that of the Other.

Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the question *'How do television narratives engage the moral imagination of audiences'*. The analysis of the interviews demonstrates that sometimes TV seems an excellent resource for audiences to engage their moral imagination about everyday moral issues. We have seen how interviewees have different modes of morally engaging with TV narratives. Interviewees showed how they interpret, add on to, and make associations with moral issues in TV narratives and the people involved in these issues. They actively ponder right and wrong on a variety of issues and imagined themselves in similar situations as characters on TV. Of course, we do not know whether the interviewees became morally richer, but only that they do engage in moral reflections. Assuming that the cultural studies authors and philosophers discussed earlier in this paper are right, we might conclude that sometimes people become ethically more aware when watching TV.

We have also seen, however, that regularly the imagination is not engaged at all. Especially reflections on the second part of moral imagination, styles of moral reasoning, seem not induced by TV narratives at all. Sometimes, the different perspectives available in TV narratives were simply rejected by the interviewees. I would like to suggest that in order for

moral reflection to happen, the TV narrative needs to have an open character. As became apparent during the interviews, viewers reject closed texts which offer a singular moral message but appreciate open versions. For the narrative to be able to engage the imagination, this openness should not be defined by manifest perspectives in the texts, but by the absence thereof. To utilise Fiske (1987), heteroglossia is the elementary feature required of a narrative if it is to engage the moral imagination.

These remarks might seem obvious, but they are not. Though a large body of work on audience activities and sense making with regard to television exists, what the audience exactly does on a *moral* level has been under-researched. In this study a literary framework was used to investigate this 'something'. Employing this framework made it possible to focus on moral reflection per se. A first, though modest, light is shed on how the audience engages morally with their favourite TV programmes from different genres, generating insight into the relationship between television and its audiences' morality.

The three modes of moral reflection revealed here do not show *what* is reflected upon but on *how* these reflections are assembled when audiences are asked to (re)construct these reflections on TV narratives. These modes of reflection do not have a one-on-one relationship with the decoding positions (as formulated by Stuart Hall (1973) and others). While decoding positions are more about what meaning is constructed, the modes of moral reflection can, in my opinion, be viewed as an *expansion* of these positions. Morality, as we have seen, is not necessarily of similar political nature as the decoding positions are.

Underlying these moral reflections is the personal chord that needs to be struck (cf. Bird, 2003; Cooper, 1999; Nussbaum, 2001). For the imagination to be engaged the moral issue at hand needs to be of certain value or interest to the viewer. All interviewees were first asked to talk about their favourite programme. This programme was used to engage in a conversation on possible moral insights that might evoke moral reflections of the interviewee. It was here that the pivotal connection of the moral insights with the interviewees' everyday lives became visible. Television narratives therefore seem an excellent laboratory for the viewer to experiment with moral decisions and their consequences, as long as these are everyday moral decisions.

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Notes

Amsterdam School of Communications Research who facilitated the original study on which this article is based.

[2] Different authors use different names for this concept; for example, sympathetic imagination, empathetic imagination, or compassionate imagination. The dynamic of the concept is, however, similar.

[3] Fifteen of these interviews were conducted by students under supervision of the researcher.

[4] The level of education is only indicated as: low level, average or higher education. Low level education means an interviewee has finished primary school and sometimes lower vocational education. Average education means the interviewee has finished secondary education or intermediate vocational education. Higher education means the interviewee has finished higher professional education or university.

[5] To guarantee privacy and anonymity to the interviewees, the names of the interviewees, registered below the quotations, are all feigned.