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

Popular culture is seldom given the credit it is due; nor are the types of community building that directly result from using it recognized for their cohesive social force. This book intends to remedy that situation. While this chapter offers a theoretical grounding for its claim that popular culture produces cultural citizenship, and explains what that is, the rest of the book is based on the experiences of popular culture’s users. Football, police series, thriller and detective novels, Sex and the City, Ally McBeal, children’s television, and digital games will...
provide the background against which the merits of popular culture will be sketched and theorized. The case study chapters (1–6) can be read separately; chapter 7 returns to the theoretical discussion that has started here.

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

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

From a discussion of cultural citizenship and the forces of freedom and discipline, the chapter moves to the more concrete issues at stake in the book. Via what John Mepham (1990) has termed “usable stories,” and similar suggestions
by Stuart Hall and John Ellis that we look at what popular culture allows us to do across genres, I will turn to the analytic method used in this book and the image of popular culture that I would like readers to keep in the back of their minds. It ends with an overview of the case studies that will be discussed in the chapters to come.

The citizenship qualities of popular culture

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

First of all, as argued above, popular culture makes us welcome and offers belonging. Its economic and celebratory logic (depending on its corporate-capitalist origins, or its user or reader provenance), after all, make it imperative that ever more buyers or like-minded fans are found. Even if conditions are set for entrance – a fee, purchase price, authentic interest, or the right subcultural credentials – they often make participation all the more attractive. A second aspect is the fascination that we have with popular fiction, pop music, dedicated websites for TV series, much loved media stars, or computer games, because they allow us to fantasize about the ideals and hopes that we have for society, as well as to ponder what we fear. Utopian wishes mix with feelings of foreboding about how our culture and society will develop, with the pleasure of sharing, and with a range of (often visceral) thoughts, emotions, and deliberations inspired by what we read, watch, and listen to. Thirdly, popular culture links the domains of the public and the private and blurs their borderline more than any other institution or practice, for more people – regardless of their age, gender, or ethnicity. In that sense, it is the most democratic of domains in our society, regardless of the commercial and governmental interests and investments that co-shape its form and contents. It offers room for implicit and explicit social criticism, both of a conservative and populist nature and of a more left-wing critical signature.
Democracy is deliberation by many on the best life possible for all. By minimizing the number of rules that are set for such deliberation, and maximizing the number of people who are invited to participate, we will obtain the best possible result: an ongoing and unruly process that we learn from, that entertains us, and that provides ways and means to act in the real world. For better or for worse, that realm is popular culture rather than centralized governmental politics. “Popular” by my definition denotes “of and for the people.” “Culture” is both how we understand the world, as where and how we live our lives, and the production of artifacts that amuse or move us, that have us thinking about who we are and how “being” is done. In (popular) culture, the world, history, relationships between people, and so on are represented to us by means of codes and conventions all of which have their own historical lineage, and that we interpret using the particular cultural knowledges that result from our biographies. Given the enormous range of codes and conventions that are possible, the tension produced by the contradictory forces of history, and the inherent drive in all art and culture to find new forms of expression, popular culture is a domain in which we may practice the reinvention of who we are.

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

In media and cultural studies, cultural citizenship has also been used by writers others than myself, as a theoretical means of bringing together social power relations, the role of governments, and regulation on the one hand, and cultural representation and meaning-making on the other. The combination is never entirely stable. After all, what is involved are the wayward and ephemeral qualities of cultural texts and artifacts, that may well work against forms of regulation. Relying on earlier political philosophical discussions, concrete questions have been posed as to what binds us, under conditions of globalization and
multiculturalism that are more likely to drive us apart. Jostein Gripsrud (1999) edited *Television and Common Knowledge*, which focuses on citizenship and news genres (once understood to be the tool of democratic control for citizens) in television. Nick Stevenson (2001, 2003) and Bryan Turner (1993, 1994, 2001), to name but two prolific writers, have written and edited books and articles that translate political science discussions to the realm of media and cultural theory. Recurrent themes concern globalization (the end of the nation-state) (Turner 1994, p. 158), individualization (as a consequence of postmodernity), and the threat implied by these historical forces for the deep quality of citizenship (idem), conceptualized as the willingness to take responsibility for others (cf., Stevenson 2003, p. 31). In general, these studies deal in very general terms with “culture,” or turn, traditionally, to news media (Gripsrud 1999). An interesting addition to this perspective is provided by Liesbet van Zoonen in her *Entering the Citizen* (2004). Most useful for my purposes is the work of John Hartley and Toby Miller, to be discussed in the next section, which pays explicit attention to (popular) culture and its modes of expression; the forces that shape it, and the uses to which it is put.

### Freedom and stricture

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

There is no way in which Miller’s dazzling array of examples and references can be summarized here. However, I take from his book the notion that citizenship is a realm of subjection, and hence a realm of both disciplining and
While starting from and respecting the situatedness of the production of meaning, the end result of the enterprise of this book is a theoretical understanding of how popular culture has meaning and value. It is in the conjunction of local circumstance, international media genres, and situated production of meaning that we can see unfold how popular culture mirrors widely shared underlying concerns and allows for the concretizing of these concerns in ways deemed fitting by local users. This mechanism, which is at the heart of how popular culture is always amenable to conceding its textual authority to permit specific uses, has my special interest. In the end, it is popular culture itself that I want to defend, rather than its concrete practices of use, even if such a distinction is mostly academic. Concrete practices do, of course, reflect on how we value popular culture itself. Hooliganism in relation to football, is an example, as is the invention (by marketeers) of the “literary thriller” in relation to popular reading. However, in the case of global popular culture such material practice is not isolated but is linked to local practices in other places (to copy or mull over). Audience materials therefore need to be contextualized and abstracted from their place of origin in a dialectical and comparative process similar to what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called “grounded theory.”

Popular culture as (revolutionary) force

A last huge question remains: if, indeed, popular culture is the domain in which allegiances are built and through which we feel connected, through which in effect the social order is stabilized, it is reasonable to ask how the cultural citizenship that it produces is a social and cultural force. Does it change things in the real world or is it only a result of what happens elsewhere (in the offices of the CEOs of multinationals, or of presidents)? Following Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as the negotiated result between two balanced powers (Gramsci 1972) and Foucault’s definition of power working bottom-up, we need to tread carefully here. After all, if all power has its counterforce, and if all force fields produce balance as a result of the many forms of power working at the same time but in different directions, stabilizing each other as a result, the popular arts and popular news forms may not be radical forces in themselves, but still part of the ongoing balancing act that is social and cultural life. Even if it might have its revolutionary moments, popular culture only rarely produces a revolutionary impulse.

To find out how popular culture may be implicated in social change, we need to look at longer periods; to become aware of how identity constructions,
representations, and ideologies are rebalanced in the popular domain. Charting such social change from a long-term perspective on popular cultural texts will only constitute a small part of this book – not because it is not important, but because such work has become part of the received knowledge in the academy, especially in television and film studies. Examples are easy to name: David Oswell’s work on early television programming for children, which called into being a new type of pedagogical and marketing expertise (Oswell 2002); Ella Taylor’s mapping of representations of the (work) family throughout television’s history, in which it transforms from the blood-related extended family to the postindustrial nuclear family, to the self-created families of colleagues and neighbors (Taylor 1989); or studies that follow the illustrious career of James Bond and chart the changing mores of legitimate public and private sexual behavior (Bennett & Woollacott 1987; Chapman 2000). And these are only a few among many.

The image of popular culture that I want the reader to retain after the reading of this book is of popular culture as a huge piece of fabric, pulled in different directions by the many parties involved: producers, advertisers, readers, critics, activists, and legislators. While holding onto the fabric is what binds them, it is also what they fight over. The fighting, the holding onto, and the claiming of the fabric are all of interest here. Popular culture is not a mere “web of meaning,” nor is cultural citizenship a state of being. For audience members, on whom I will focus, a material claim to belong and to be recognized as a co-owner is involved. Cultural citizenship is taking responsibility for (one’s piece of) popular culture. We take responsibility for popular culture by judging it, and we use it to find yardsticks to judge others by. Popular culture and cultural citizenship are often about defining what is “normal” – or, put differently, about finding out what (degrees of) difference are tolerable. How can we be a “we,” a community, imagined or otherwise? In what regards do we need to be the “same”? Can we respect each other without forcing straightjackets onto each other that prescribe desired sex, sexual preferences, looks, and interpretive codes, or are such straightjackets part of the pleasure?

The authors discussed here point to the fact that the pleasures, meanings, and displeasures of popular culture are of little relevance in defining the quality, as such, of texts or artifacts – but that they are a means of reflecting on who we are. As such, they may create belonging, identity, and community. I will in addition argue that popular culture does from time to time spill over and initiate rebalancing in other domains. Questions of whether and how men can be feminists were not first asked in parliament or in the halls of academia, nor were they high on the agenda of the women’s movement itself. They were voiced in the double-edged narratives of comedy. Sitcoms such as Family Ties
(NBC, 1982–9), and later Roseanne (ABC, 1989–), wondered (tongue-in-cheek and seriously) what caring masculinity could be like from different class and narrative perspectives. Middle-class Alex Keaton’s hippie father had a hard time with his Reagan-admiring son (played by Michael J. Fox), while Dan had to negotiate being sexy, caring, and convincingly working-class masculine as husband to the ebullient Roseanne. Rewriting the ridiculous triple standard for women (to be assertive, beautiful, and caring beings) as a result of the popularization of feminist thought, and to develop a feminine masculinity for heterosexual women, was left to young women kicking ass in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), Nikita (1997–2001), Charmed (1998–), and Alias (2001–), after glossy women’s magazines in the 1980s tried new definitions of the “power woman,” who combines a career with a family and looking glamorous, and tried to break up feminist criticism into digestible bits (Gough-Yates 2002). Their “I am no feminist but . . .” formula may have seemed the most atrocious betrayal of feminism, but it also offered the possibility to appropriate elements for those who were not convinced by the cause.

Constructions of masculinity and femininity are examples of the major ideological quagmires that popular culture scripts solutions for, by, as it were, test-running scenarios. This may take the form of sacrificing the occasional male in recent thriller novels, since their role in relation to strong women protagonists is difficult to fathom (chapter 4). Or it may involve seeking recourse to established, but not highly regarded, forms of racist discourse to express unease over the sharp increase in black players in the Dutch national football team in the 1990s (chapter 1). Given that most popular texts are open to a wide range of interpretations, without audience research it is impossible to find out which scenarios appeal. In all of the chapters, I will use my knowledge of, respectively, football, the police series, thrillers and detective novels, Internet fandom, and children’s television and games to sketch the field. But what I will mainly do is follow up on the cues given by interviewees and, whenever necessary, return to the books or programs that they mention.

The chapters to follow

Chapter 1, then, deals with football talk and the national team. The community building capacity of sport in general comes as no big surprise. What makes this case study of the construction of national identity interesting as cultural citizenship is that, in the period during which male and female football fans were interviewed, the Dutch national team had an unusually high number of