The people’s detective: true crime in Dutch folklore and popular television

Stijn Reijnders
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

On 30 April 1999, Marianne Vaatstra left her parental home to go dancing in Kollum, a nearby village in the north of the Netherlands. On the way back, a few kilometres from home, Marianne was grabbed from her bicycle and dragged into a field, where she was tied up with a length of rope and her bra. After being brutally raped the 16-year-old girl had her throat cut.

The murder of Marianne Vaatstra produced an immense turmoil. Not only did the young age of the victim and the brutality of the crime attract attention, the fact that there was a hostel for asylum seekers in the vicinity provoked questions and insinuations. Did the way in which Marianne had been raped and murdered not suggest that her attacker was a foreigner? Were the judicial authorities scared of getting their fingers burnt on the asylum problem, a highly sensitive topic in Dutch politics at the time? With all the media attention, the storm soon took on national proportions. The Dutch media monitored the progress of the investigation year in, year out. But, in spite of all the publicity, the Vaatstra dossier was finally consigned to the unsolved cases file in summer 2003.

Moral panic

One of the television programmes involved in reporting the murder was Peter R. de Vries – Crime Reporter, presented by Peter R. de Vries,¹ which can be seen as a ‘populist’ variant of reality crime programmes, comparable with foreign models such as America’s Most Wanted (Fishman, 1999). Unlike reality crime programmes like Britain’s Crimewatch and America’s Cops, which generally work together closely with the police, the populist
variant takes an independent stance and often criticizes the work of the judicial authorities and the police. It also devotes more time to dramatized reconstructions of crimes and emotional interviews with the relatives. Thus, a few days after the Marianne Vaatstra killing, de Vries set off with a cameraman for the scene of the crime. Neighbours, local officials, friends of Marianne, the local police – no one escaped the ‘watchful eye’ of the popular crime reporter.

Not everyone was happy with the presence of the Peter R. de Vries team. Critics argued that the programme was engaging in ‘unhealthy interaction’ with the emotions of the local population. In particular, the presenter’s suggestion that all males living in the vicinity – including those at the asylum seekers’ hostel – undergo a compulsory DNA test rubbed some people up the wrong way. Peter R. de Vries was thought to be stirring up a ‘lynching mentality’ that was developing into a ‘witch hunt against asylum seekers’.

This is not the only scathing criticism the Peter R. de Vries programme has attracted. During a hostage-taking in 2000, for instance, the chief constable in charge accused the programme of ‘jeopardizing the course of the investigation’. De Vries had ‘acted in a highly irresponsible manner’. In yet another case de Vries had been taken to court for making stolen police diskettes public and thus ‘seriously harming the national interest’. A well-known Dutch criminologist considered that de Vries was spreading ‘disquiet as to the reliability of the police and the judicial authorities’. Journalists and TV producers also expressed concerns about de Vries, who, they said, represented the crumbling of professional values, with a journalism based on stunts, unverified rumours and speculation. The Peter R. de Vries programme was a ‘dangerous form of entertainment . . . a window to the criminal underworld’. Other critics regarded it as a ‘circus act’ and its presenter as a ‘common sensation-seeker’ or as ‘taking advantage of emotions he has aroused himself’. De Vries, they said, ‘drags people’s characters and reputations through the mud out of needless sensationalism’, ‘purely for the sake of the viewing figures’.

The sharp criticism of Peter R. de Vries is not unique or restricted to the Dutch situation: similar programmes such as America’s Most Wanted have elicited the same reactions in other countries. The populist variant of reality crime programmes has been denounced by critics worldwide as a threat to the moral order and as being representative of an over-commercialized, degenerate television culture – trash TV. As a result of these morally abhorrent programmes, victims like Marianne, say the critics, are being abused not once but twice (Donovan, 1998: 118–21; Fox and Van Sickel, 2001: 24–47, 67, 194; Surette, 1998: 78–80).

Regardless of the legitimacy of such moral claims, criticism like this obscures the wider cultural and historical context of the popular true crime genre. In this article, I shall examine this context in detail, arguing that
Peter R. de Vries follows an existing tradition and morality in the history of popular culture. Before expounding my arguments on the subject I should like to discuss briefly the background to this article and the methodology I have adopted.4

Method

The study of Peter R. de Vries is part of a doctoral research project at the Universiteit van Amsterdam into the relationship between television culture and popular culture. I am exploring the area where media studies, cultural history and ethnology overlap to find an answer to the following question: What position does present-day television entertainment occupy in the cultural history of popular entertainment in the Netherlands? Since the advent of television, public debate on the medium has been dominated by cultural pessimism. Popular entertainment programmes in particular are said to exemplify the cultural and moral decay of Western society, a process for which Dutch critics have coined various deprecatory names suggesting dumbing-down and superficiality (Van Zoonen, 2002). The aim of this study is to discuss television culture in its popular historical context. Popular television programmes are forms of culture rooted in the history of popular entertainment.

The research project is broken down into three thematic areas: crime, play and eroticism. This article sets out the findings of the exploration of the first theme. For this purpose I analysed 16 Peter R. de Vries programmes broadcast between May 2002 and June 2003.5 A qualitative analysis of the programme content revealed patterns in the way in which crime is presented. What types of crime does the programme select? How are they depicted? How are the victims, criminals, relatives and police officers portrayed? What kind of morality does this reflect? I also looked at the role of the presenter and the voice-over, the use of background music and other dramatic techniques, and how the programme addresses the viewer.

I then checked my analysis of the content of Peter R. de Vries against knowledge of historical forms of popular entertainment, focusing on murder ballads and crime reports from the second half of the 19th century. In the first instance I made use of secondary sources, but, as the literature on the history of popular entertainment is patchy, and a lot of it is foreign, I backed up the claims and analyses with a diagonal analysis of primary sources. For this I selected a collection of murder ballads at the Meertens Institute – one of the largest collections in the Netherlands – and the 1873–83 volumes of the Geïllustreerd Politie Nieuws (Illustrated Police News), a well-known and at the time sensational weekly magazine. The ballads and crime reports were subjected to the same questions as Peter R.
Crime-filled media

It is undeniable that ‘true crime’ has grown in popularity during the past few decades. The boom in reality crime programmes and other crime programmes on television is just one example. There is also the growing popularity of crime reporting in non-fiction and a quest in film and television drama for maximum ‘realism’ in the representation of criminal reality. Television, literature and cinema seem to have been obsessed with the world of crime since the 1980s (Brants and Brants, 1994; Buxton, 1990; Cavender and Fishman, 1998; Durham, 1995; Glynn, 2000; Wilson, 1997). This is not the first time that Western society has shown such a massive interest in the subject, however.

In the second half of the 19th century, when the modern mass media were still in their infancy, true crime was one of the predominant subjects of entertainment. This was rooted in the public execution, which until the abolition of hanging in 1854 provided an excuse for large-scale popular festivities every year, complete with music, dancing and specially brewed ‘gallows beer’ (Holzman, 2001; Schild, 1980; Spierenburg, 1984). Children were given the day off from school and pamphlets giving information on the forthcoming spectacle were handed out. At unofficial popular counterparts of the public execution – charivari and other events where people took the law into their own hands – the ritual punishment of unconventional behaviour was similarly surrounded with festivities (Blok, 1989; Braekman, 1992).

On top of these penal events, a host of popular media revolved around true crime. First there were the ‘murder ballads’: itinerant singers could be found at funfairs, executions and other popular festivities giving news of the latest crimes, usually gruesome attacks in a nearby village that had caused great unrest by their violence (De Vuyst, 1976; Franken, 1978). Then there was the Chamber of Horrors (a forerunner of today’s Haunted House): this was a small room where a well-known murder was represented by wax figures. Concealed mechanisms brought the display to life, with falling axes, rotating eyes, pistol shots and the like. Another fairground attraction was the peep-show, where you put a coin in and were shown a stereoscopic picture. These regularly featured pictures of criminals and their victims, as well as biblical scenes and townscapes (Helsloot, 1995; Hemels, 2002). Lastly, there was crime reporting in the newspapers. The abolition of stamp duty on newspapers in 1869 resulted in growing competition between the dailies, which were then forced to come up with
more exciting news. As a result, the number of crime reports went up and the style of reporting became even more sensational (Franke, 1981; Papke, 1987). Then there were a host of popular magazines that confined themselves entirely to popularizing crime news. The Geillustreerd Politie Nieuws, for instance, starting in 1873, devoted itself each week to ‘extraordinary incidents, crimes and accidents’. Descriptions of murderous attacks and triple child murders were illustrated by wood engravings that left nothing to the imagination.

During the course of the 19th century the murder ballads, Chambers of Horrors, peep-shows and crime reports increasingly featured the same crimes, and some murders gained national notoriety as a result. A typical example is the media hype avant la lettre surrounding Hendrick Jacobus Jut, a man from The Hague who committed a bloody murder and robbery on a lady and her maidservant in 1872. Newspapers portrayed the suspect as a bloodthirsty, cruel killer. Itinerant singers proclaimed the fate of the victims and demanded the reintroduction of the death penalty. Popular peep-shows also showed pictures of the dreaded Jut. The collective hatred was turned into a new fairground attraction, the Head of Jut. The public were invited to hit a representation of the suspect’s head as hard as possible with a hammer. When the convicted Jut died after two years in prison, his head was kept in preserving fluid and displayed to the public. Thus at least five media – the press, a murder ballad, a peep-show, a fairground attraction and a museum – devoted attention to one and the same crime (Helsloot, 1995: 273; Jansen, 1987: 106–8; Polak, 1973: 50–57; Van den Eijnde, 1995).

Not only was there more regular reporting of the same crimes, certain stereotypes and clichés also came into vogue regarding the ‘typical’ killer or victim. Murder ballads incorporated references to newspaper reports, and the newspapers in turn referred to popular Chambers of Horrors, resulting in shared cultural codes, themes and stereotypes, which together formed an intertextual entertainment culture surrounding true crime. The question is whether the content of the Peter R. de Vries programme is related to this 19th-century entertainment culture, and if so, how? Do we find the same types of crimes, criminals and victims cropping up in the programme? What similarities or differences are there in terms of narrative structure, themes and morality?

The quintessential story

If we compare Peter R. de Vries with the murder ballad, the popular crime report and similar 19th-century forms of entertainment, we find a number of striking similarities. First, all these forms of entertainment display a preference for a particular type of crime, seeming to focus mainly on
shocking crimes of violence, preferably murder or manslaughter. Violent crime among acquaintances, friends, family members or loved ones lends itself particularly well to an exciting story. Examples of common subjects of murder ballads are the innocent girl murdered by her lover and the parents-in-law poisoned by a daughter-in-law. More than half the murder cases reported in Peter R. de Vries, too, involved the partner as a suspect (11 of the 21). Clearly the everyday relationship between the victim and the criminal not only lends an additional dramatic dimension, it also makes it easier for the viewers to identify with the protagonists. The usual motives behind the crimes are thus ‘taken from everyday life’ in many cases: jealousy, lust, alcohol abuse, greed and revenge (Beijering, 1999; Burt, 1964; Cohen, 1973; Franke, 1981: 62–90; Nissen, 1996; Papke, 1987: 62–70).

Second, the true crime ‘story’ has a standard narrative structure. Murder ballads begin as a rule with an exhortation to listen, followed by a résumé of the events. The ballad ‘Gruwelijke moord’ (Gruesome Murder, published in Van den Broek and Peeters, 2000), for instance, begins with the words:

Good citizens here assembled,  
Come and listen to my song.  
We shall sing to you  
Of what came to pass in Oud-Gastel.  
A woman fifty-two years of age  
Was done to death one night there.

It goes on to give a chronological account of the crime, referring first to the victim’s daily life, then to the crime itself and then to the trial, if there was one. Most murder ballads conclude with a brief moral. In crime reports from the second half of the 19th century the exhortation at the beginning and the homily at the end are less prominent, but the basic structure is still apparent: a résumé is followed by a sketch of the victim’s peaceful life in an orderly community; then the crime is depicted, in all its gory, gruesome detail, as a violation of that order; peace will not return to the community until the criminal has been caught and locked up.

If we look at the narrative structure in Peter R. de Vries we find striking parallels. By way of illustration here is a brief account of its report of the murder of Amarantha Schamle, broadcast on 5 December 2002. The Schamle report began by saying that a body had been found in suspicious circumstances in a home in Schiedam. Archive home video footage of a family having fun in a playground was then shown. The voice-over lends meaning to the images: ‘A young, complete family with their future ahead of them. At least that’s the way it looks. In reality these scenes are a thing of the past, for Amarantha Schamle’s life came to an abrupt end in April 2000.’ There follows an interview with the victim’s mother, who describes her daughter as ‘a happy girl, always cheerful’. Son-in-law Robert, on the
other hand, is described as ‘long-term unemployed’. Amarantha had decided to leave her husband. Various reconstructions are then shown in an attempt to portray Amarantha’s last few weeks up to her death. The report ends with pictures of the courtroom where the suspect Robert was acquitted for lack of evidence. As scenes of Amarantha and her child pass before our eyes, the voice-over communicates a feeling of despondency: ‘Robert is and will remain a free man. [Amarantha] wanted to start a new life, but instead she met her death.’

The following basic structure can be seen in this report: résumé – peaceful initial situation – murder. The absence of the ‘punishment’ finale is emphasized, just as in ballads about unsolved killings: ‘the last word has not yet been said on this case’. Other Peter R. de Vries reports are similarly structured. So do Peter R. de Vries and 19th-century entertainment culture have an identical narrative structure? Not completely: one of the differences, for example, is the introduction of serialization. Peter R. de Vries usually devotes several programmes to one and the same case. But the serialization aspect should not be exaggerated: typical features of serials such as the cliff-hanger are absent, for instance. And individual reports ultimately conform to the standard story pattern. In general, both Peter R. de Vries and 19th-century murder ballads and crime reports discuss the same crimes in the same way.

Yet another feature that connects Peter R. de Vries with its 19th-century predecessors is the claim to be providing the most realistic picture of criminal reality based on authentic information: it is the fact that it deals with crime that ‘really happened’ that lends this type of entertainment its attraction. This is why crime reports, creators of Chambers of Horrors and reality TV programmes are keen to interview ‘experts’ and present scientific ‘facts’. The physiological aspects of horrific murders are examined and explained in an almost fetishistic manner – all ‘for the sake of finding the truth’. Notwithstanding their claim to authenticity however, both 19th-century and contemporary true crime genres use a lot of stylistic literary devices.

Melodrama, blame and shame

We find more or less the same stylistic literary devices figuring in the murder ballad, the crime report, the Chamber of Horrors and the Peter R. de Vries show alike. One of the main inspirations behind this shared literary style lies in the tradition of melodrama, a 19th-century form of popular theatre that tackled emotional subjects in a recognizable everyday setting with an explicit moral attitude. Because of the emphasis on the ethical conflict, the characters in melodrama were not well developed; rather they symbolized certain abstract principles. These fixed, stereotyped
portrayals had – as a result of the enormous popularity of melodrama – an
effect on performing arts and other types of entertainment outside popular
theatre (Brooks, 1976). In the entertainment culture based on true crime
three stereotypes emerged repeatedly: Good, Grief and Evil. This trio
formed the ideal blueprint for depicting the conflict between the victim, the
next of kin and the criminal.

In melodrama Good was generally personified by a kind, innocent girl
from the lower classes. She was a member of a caring, secure family and
usually lived in the country. In some cases a child would take the place of
the maiden as the paragon of innocence and purity, referring to mankind
before its fall from grace (Brooks, 1976: 32–4; Metayer, 1996).

In the murder ballad and crime report of the second half of the 19th
century we find a stereotyped representation of Good in the depiction of
the victim. Both these media show a clear preference for killings of young
girls. There is even a sub-genre of the murder ballad that has been called
the ‘murdered-girl ballad’ (Cohen, 1973). This is usually about a helpless
young country girl who is enticed to a lonely spot by a villain. When he
announces his intention to kill her she pleads for her life in vain and is
gruesomely done to death. The popular press also has a preference for
young maidens and ‘inexplicable’ murders of children and young adults.
By omitting detrimental details from the victim’s past and exclusively
stressing her innocence and good conduct, the portrayal elevates the victim
to the status of a martyr. The murder comes to symbolize a threat to virtue
(Workman, 1978).

We find a similar process in Peter R. de Vries. In the selected
programmes, 21 reports were devoted to murder cases: these had a young
woman as the victim in 14 cases (12 of them white women), a child in 4
cases and a man in 3 cases. In other words, over three-quarters of the
reports conform to the ‘classic pattern’ of the young white woman or child
as the victim. These victims are then presented as symbols of innocence
and helplessness. One example is a report on Ine Wijnen, ‘a woman who
was gruesomely murdered – she didn’t stand a chance’, broadcast on
3 April 2003. The report presents the victim as a ‘quiet, sweet unassuming
woman who took a lot of interest in other people’. According to a female
friend, she was ‘great company and very helpful’. Information that might
detract from this positive image is deliberately not mentioned. It is only at
the end of the programme that more balance is brought into the case, when
the suspect’s lawyer refers to Wijnen’s ‘penchant for experimentation’ and
her ‘constantly changing SM contacts’. This information, of course, does
not detract from the fact that this was a violent killing, but it does mar the
image of an ‘innocent and sensitive’ victim who has got caught up in an
underworld of sex lines and handcuffs purely by a ‘fatal chance’.

The victim’s martyrdom is reinforced by showing the relatives’ grief. In
the murder ballad and the crime report we usually find this theme
embodied in the person of the mother. The victim’s mother visits the convict in prison, where she implores him to tell her where the crime was committed. Or she falls to the ground weeping by her child’s grave, in a clear reference to the Christian symbolism of the grieving Mary. In both cases, the mother represents the grief of the entire community (cf. Cohen, 1973).

For the sake of comparison, here is an account of a Peter R. de Vries report broadcast on 26 September 2002. It opens with a vignette of Marion van Buuren and her little girl Romy, who, having been on the missing persons list for a long time, turns out to have been murdered by Marion’s ex. The camera zooms out to show Marion’s mother with de Vries. There follow scenes of the funeral, the speech made by Marion’s mother, the coffin being kissed and archive pictures of the victims. In the next shot the camera pans across a desolate landscape of dunes. In a hollow beside a collection of bouquets are de Vries and Marion’s parents. When de Vries asks them how they are, they both burst into tears. When she recovers, Marion’s mother points to a bush in the dunes, saying she wishes she had been that bush so that she could have heard her daughter’s and granddaughter’s last words.

What elements do we recognize in this example? The mother kneeling down in the wilderness, at the spot where her daughter met her death, can be seen as the classic pose of the inconsolable relative. How can one go on living without the person who has been wrenched from life so needlessly? The grief of the next of kin serves to put a face on the community’s grief. De Vries makes the link literally when he tries to cheer up Marion’s mother by saying, ‘Well, Corry, the whole country has shared your feelings.’

A third stereotype borrowed from melodrama is that of the bestial killer. In melodrama Evil usually took the form of a stranger who infiltrates the slumbering community and pollutes it with his wickedness. Evil was absolute and grotesque; there was little scope for doubt or psychological nuance (Brooks, 1976: 33). We find this stereotype figuring repeatedly in the murder ballad. Murderers are represented as being either completely without emotions or, on the contrary, highly passionate. They are usually strangers or new relatives (e.g. a daughter-in-law or lover) who pursue their prospective victims cunningly and cold-bloodedly. Not until the murder is committed do their suppressed lusts come to the surface (cf. Cohen, 1973).

We find a similar stereotype in the 19th-century crime report, which invariably describes criminals either as calculating and cold-blooded or as possessed by lust. There is little scope for subtlety: in the Geïllustreerd Politie Nieuws suspects are by definition ‘lazy, insolent and shifty’, ‘degenerate’, ‘evil’, ‘a man whose conduct of his life leaves a great deal to be desired’ or ‘not a lover of the fair sex’ (Polak, 1973: 155, 85, 13, 124). Every detail of the suspect’s past history is dredged up and exposed to the
public gaze in the newspaper. Particular attention is paid to the criminal’s external appearance. According to the science of character that was popular at the time, criminality was caused by a genetic abnormality, so a criminal character could be identified from particular physical characteristics. Once popularized, this knowledge resulted in a process that could be called the ‘animalization’ of the criminal. Criminals were ascribed animal attributes such as joined eyebrows, low foreheads and pointed noses. Their behaviour was thought to be inhuman, evidence of an inferior, bestial disposition. Killer Jan had ‘fiery eyes’ according to a report in the Geïllustreerd Politie Nieuws in 1879. ‘His demeanour and the look in his eyes are not very reassuring. His glance is wild and there is something animal in his countenance’ (Polak, 1973: 99).

In Peter R. de Vries, too, most of the criminals are close relatives, generally spouses, displaying their ‘animal’ nature in an orgasm of violence. They dunk bread rolls in baths of blood or have oral sex with a dead woman. A suspect in Peter R. de Vries is invariably ‘an unstable character with a history of mental illness’, someone who has ‘gone down in the world’ or ‘brazen’.7 Much is made of the precise details of the suspects, using old photographs and videos, or interviews with people who know them, frequently using a hidden camera. In the programme broadcast on 5 June 2003, for instance, a man in a park is tackled about his paedophilia: his surname, job and home town are mentioned without hesitation. Particularly important in scenes of this kind are the social indicators: suspects drive around in ‘suspicious numbers of expensive Mercedes’ and live in ‘neighbourhoods that have a bad name’. When a programme shows pictures of two possible con-men, this elicits the following commentary from the voice-over: ‘And there go our salesmen, Mervin and his mate, dressed in jog suits and leather jackets and adorned with caps. Neither of them the prototypical reliable sales rep.’8 By revealing personal details and commenting on dress, physical appearance or lifestyle, Peter R. de Vries commits character assassination of suspects before they have been tried and convicted.

The discrediting process goes a step further than the one we are familiar with from 19th-century entertainment culture, however. The programme not only discredits suspects by revealing details about them and giving a social commentary on the information, it also forces them into positions calculated to bring them into disrepute. A good illustration is a broadcast on 2 May 2002, in which a suspect was forced into making a public confession. In this report de Vries discovered the address of a man possibly involved in fraud. After first talking to the neighbours de Vries gains entry to the suspect’s home, where he confronts him with the accusation. The suspect soon bursts into tears and frankly confesses his crime. On camera he admits to being a ‘bastard’. Tearfully he promises to mend his ways:
'It's a shame this has to happen on Peter R. de Vries, but perhaps this is a good lesson for me.'

**The people’s hero**

So far we have mainly considered the similarities between the Peter R. de Vries programme and its 19th-century predecessors, ignoring an important difference: a number of stereotypes that we have not found in 19th-century entertainment culture play a major role in Peter R. de Vries, mainly literary stereotypes associated with the presenter. What are these stereotypes and where do they come from?

Crime fiction was long dominated by the British detective genre, featuring heroes such as Sherlock Holmes, Auguste Dupin and Hercule Poirot (Roosendaal, 2002). If we look at the role played by de Vries in the Peter R. de Vries programme, we find a number of unmistakable features of the classic British sleuth. In the studio footage in particular, de Vries tries to present himself as a detective: he is neatly dressed in a jacket and surrounded by classic props, a magnifying glass and a pair of scales. He is seen operating recording equipment or – in preparation for an excursion – bending over maps and plans. Occasionally he even goes so far as to disguise himself, like some reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes, the archetypal British sleuth, in a moustache, beard and glasses.

He also copies the discourse of the classic English detective. De Vries does just not do reports, he ‘starts investigations’. Claims by suspects are checked ‘for their veracity’ with the aid of ‘dogged detective work’.9 The classic model of argument and logical deduction is not just a guiding principle, it also openly legitimizes the programme. When a suspect in the Putten murder case, owing partly to accusations in Peter R. de Vries, finally agreed to take a DNA test in autumn 2002, he turned out to be innocent. Without the slightest embarrassment de Vries announced in the next programme, broadcast at 5 December 2002: ‘After 25 years of crime reporting we see again how unfathomable people’s reasons for cooperating or not cooperating can be. Still, we can cross Hans V.’s name off the list. Elimination remains an essential part of detective work.’

Since the 1920s classic British detective fiction has faced growing competition from the American hard-boiled detective story, starring rough, street-wise private detectives (Brown, 1993; Goulart, 1972; Inciardi and Dee, 1987; Roosendaal, 2002). Various stylistic traits of this ‘new’ genre can be seen in Peter R. de Vries. The first cue is dress: for outside broadcasts, de Vries exchanges his presenter’s jacket for a leather jacket and jeans. Once out on the streets he provokes a confrontation with the suspects, usually in a city setting, and he is not averse to a bit of pushing and shoving. In the 24 October 2002 programme, for instance, there was
consternation when a suspect tried to escape: de Vries set off in hot pursuit, grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back. De Vries uses the same brusque style when talking to suspects. When a lawyer suspected of fraud (in a broadcast on 21 November 2002), says that he does not want to speak to de Vries, the latter retorts, ‘Yes, but I do want to speak to you. . . You are playing the chic lawyer, but you’re just a swindler.’ As the suspect makes his getaway, de Vries grins into the camera, ‘That’s what they call “taking to your heels”.’ In these examples heavy-handed tactics are used to provoke confrontations with suspects, with character assassination and shaming and blaming playing a more important role than logical argument. Suspects are held to account on their sense of honour.

De Vries, like the hard-boiled private detective, regularly comes into conflict with the law. When he is not given access to the dossier on the murder of Arthur Ghurahoo, in spite of support from the 11-year-old boy’s family, he feels he has been ‘thwarted’ by the authorities, which he considers ‘an adequate reason to get tough’. The point made by the public prosecutor, Rutgers, that giving de Vries access would be ‘against the rules’, is parried by de Vries questioning how important those rules are in his case. Arthur’s gravestone appears on the screen. Sometimes the police appear to be willing to cooperate but simply are not able to, or have no such aspiration. Then de Vries claims that they ‘are not permitted to act as an agent provocateur’, ‘are too busy’, ‘are just doing nothing’, ‘are being negligent’, ‘are not really interested’, ‘couldn’t care less’ or ‘are sticking their heads in the sand’. It is not so much that the police force is corrupt or incompetent, they just don’t have enough time or manpower and are tied hand and foot by legal restrictions. ‘Luckily there is your presenter,’ says de Vries, ‘who is happy to make time when there is a bunch of fraudsters on the loose!’

In effect what we have here is a third stereotype, that of Peter R. de Vries as a superhero. Where the police cannot or will not act, de Vries steps in and comes to the aid of innocent victims, ‘On the other side of the world’ if necessary. With combined forces he is able to come to the aid of innocent victims. Like the classic superheroes, Batman and Superman, who first saw the light of day in American comics from the 1930s, de Vries goes into action when there are young women in need and the police are powerless. ‘We have lost all our faith in the law,’ said the father of Marianne Vaatstra at a press conference. ‘The Vaatstra family hopes that Peter R. de Vries can solve Marianne’s murder.’

The programme itself repeatedly shows letters or emails from people asking for help. They beg de Vries to act: ‘Peter, help us trace the beast who murdered our son so inhumanly.’ De Vries is held in high regard by both victims and criminals. When a fraud victim receives little support from the police he decides to ‘take matters into his own hands’ by emailing de Vries. Even prisoners on the run turn in desperation to de Vries, asking
him to take on their cases and prove their innocence. A famous instance is the Putten murder case, where the suspects were acquitted partly as a result of Peter R. de Vries programmes – a success that the programme made much of. In all these examples the image of superhero de Vries looms large, last hope of the desperate, saviour of the outcast, hero of the people.

Conclusion

If we compare Peter R. de Vries with the murder ballad, the popular crime report and similar forms of entertainment from the second half of the 19th century, we find a number of similarities. All these media display a preference for shocking crimes of violence ending in fatality, preferably with a family member or a loved one as victim. A résumé is followed by a sketch of the victim’s peaceful life in a loving environment. The crime temporarily turns the world on its head, attacking fundamental values and virtues. Not until the criminal has been arrested can the community restore moral order. The story is told based on powerful stereotypes: the victim is a young, innocent woman and the criminal a cold-blooded – or hot-headed – ‘beast’. The immeasurable suffering of the next of kin puts a face on the moral panic. In a word, all these media narrate the same murders in the same way with the same protagonists.

These strong similarities in the content of the different entertainment forms point to the existence of shared cultural registers. There is an entertainment repertoire of true crime, a stock of narrative structures, themes and stereotypes that can be employed in a popular representation of an atrocity (Rooijakkers, 1994: 77–85). This repertoire is not static or immutable: the Peter R. de Vries television programme features a number of stereotypes not found in the 19th century. Over the years, the stock of true crime stereotypes has been topped up from various sources. In the 19th century, the tradition of public execution provided rituals for punishing criminals, while at the same time new scientific notions of criminality were popularized. Stereotypes of the ‘typical’ criminal, victim and next of kin were borrowed from melodrama. During the 20th century, the stock was again topped up with new themes and stereotypes taken from first the British detective story, then the American hard-boiled detective genre and lastly the superhero comics. It may be that the reality crime programme phenomenon in turn is adding new elements to the entertainment repertoire of true crime.

The Peter R. de Vries crime programme owes its popularity largely to the contemporary context. Since the 1980s, the subject of crime has occupied centre stage in both the range of entertainment on offer and the wider public debate on security and values. Crime has become a hot topic
at all levels of society. *Peter R. de Vries* adopts a specific position in the debate, one that does not always coincide with the predominant views of columnists, programme-makers and politicians. The resulting heavy criticism of the programme may in turn have contributed to its growing popularity. *Peter R. de Vries* indeed presents itself as a critic of the law enforcers, as standing up for the powerless, using television as the battlefield. Here the programme relies on a long-standing entertainment repertoire, displaying traces of its predecessors going back as far as the 19th century.

The topical nature of the furore about crime and values does not prevent recurring patterns being found in debates of this kind. Ultimately it would seem that there are only a limited number of ‘roles’ for the ‘participants’ to choose from. In the case of *Peter R. de Vries* we see how its criticism of the failure of the police and the resulting decision to take matters into its own hands are in line with a moral attitude in the history of popular culture that commands broad support. De Vries’ image as saviour of the people and thorn in the flesh of the Powers That Be is suspiciously like the mythology surrounding the 13th-century popular hero Robin Hood. Evidently there has long been a tension between the official penal culture, with its institutions and official structures, and a non-official penal culture based on a more emotional, moral notion of ‘natural justice’. In the tradition of the charivari and other popular tribunals of the past, people sometimes seem to feel the need for a system of justice ‘of their own’ outside the monopoly of force exercised by the state. After all, if a young girl is murdered in a disgusting manner and the police cannot do anything, surely we need to explore other ways of finding a solution? Sometimes the law has to be broken, runs the argument, if justice is to prevail and moral order to be restored. This idea may have been behind a comment by de Vries when he was asked, at the height of his popularity, about the importance of his programme: ‘I think the programme has become a kind of minor institution, somewhere between the law enforcers and the people’ (Scheepmaker, 2002). As the system of justice has moved further away from the sense of justice, a gap has formed, and it is in this niche that go-betweens like *Peter R. de Vries* operate, fulfilling a traditional need using new media.

**Notes**

1. The programme is subsequently referred to as *Peter R. de Vries* in italics. The presenter is referred to by his surname, de Vries.
2. Citations from daily newspapers *Het Parool* (27/06/2001: 4) and *Het Parool* (9/12/2000: 3) respectively.
[1997]: 6); Het Parool (02/06/2000: 2) NRC Handelsblad (21/01/1997: 19), Trouw (22/01/1997: 1, 21/03/2002: 20) Het Parool (02/06/2000: 11), NRC Handelsblad (28/01/1997: 21) and Algemeen Dagblad (21/03/2000: 3) respectively.

4. This study has been made possible by a stipend from the Televisie Radio Omroep Stichting (TROS) for research into popular television culture. The research is being carried out at the Centre for Popular Culture, which is part of the Amsterdam School for Communication Research of the Universiteit van Amsterdam.


6. Cf. the programme broadcast on 15/05/2003, which contrasts a home video of a family outing at a camp site with the following comment: ‘But this family’s carefree life came to an abrupt end on the afternoon of 27 July 2002. That day the eldest son Hjalmar did not come home from school.’


11. Citation from daily newspaper NRC Handelsblad (13/12/1999: 2).


References


**Stijn Reijnders** is doing his PhD at the Centre for Popular Culture of the University of Amsterdam. He examines the continuities and discontinuities between contemporary television entertainment and historical forms of popular culture. He currently focuses on participatory spectacle shows, and has published recently in the Dutch journals *cULTUUR* and *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, and the international journal *Ethnologia Europea* (2006, forthcoming).

**Address:** University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands. [email: s.l.reijnders@uva.nl]