

## UNPLUGGED

# Portrait of the Homo Academicus as a Messy Female Investigator

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'Neil, I know this might be very distasteful to you, but have you considered publishing this book under a woman's name?'

Naomi Alderman, *The Power*

### May 2006. Faculty of Economics and Management, French University, laboratory meeting

Three doctoral students present the progress of their thesis. Two men and one woman – she is the last to speak. It suits her: she listens, observes, and prepares herself mentally. Her turn comes. She details her investigation: using pop culture to better understand what management stands for in French culture. In concrete terms, it means analyzing movies to see how management has been portrayed since the end of the 19th century and comparing it with the definitions derived from the classical approaches in management sciences. The first questions, which are now becoming a routine – this is her second year in her PhD – are the following:

- What is the use for history in a PhD in management?
- Where are the managerial applications?
- A single representation or several: shouldn't the title of the thesis be changed?
- Is it really possible to see so many films? When do you work?
- Is it art history?
- Where has the theoretical framework disappeared?

You cannot take this lightly because you are a doctoral student, because you have more determination than certainty, and because the opinion of the community on what you do is essential.

A colleague, an economics professor, asked her what women represent in her subject of study. The question is candid, it makes sense (women form a small, marginal, anecdotal portion of the representation of business management in French cinema), but

it could have been asked earlier to the other doctoral students on their own subject of study. This is what she will answer because she is annoyed by the questions that preceded. A doctoral student is sensitive, regardless of gender.

### May 2016

British author Naomi Alderman publishes an anticipation novel entitled *The Power*. The premise is extremely effective because of its simplicity. It is delivered through an epistolary exchange between Neil, a researcher, author of an unpublished historical research, and a female academic and well-established author. The context is settled: women hold power and men are poor, fragile little things who are subservient to them. This has always been the case. Laughable, powerful, subversive, wrote the critic. The doctoral student who has become a doctor still laughs about it.

### In the meantime

In the meantime, the economics professor's question has gained ground. The now doctor felt compelled to return to it in an attempt to understand the de facto persistence of gender inequality in the space of organizations. Her perspective is linked to her field of research: considering that social representations play a powerful role in this persistence. Can we dream of something we do not have any idea of? Can we project ourselves into a role for which we have neither images nor representations?

Thus, she studies these representations through popular culture. She writes: 'In order to grasp the weight of social representations of possible roles for women in organizations, contemporary television series offer a promising area of investigation. The portrayal of organizations in Scandinavian and English-language television series over the past decade has offered a new set of possible role models for working women: from the executive woman in high heels and a glass of wine to the pugnacious and anti-social investigator to the surgeon

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confronted with the glass ceiling phenomenon. Returning to these portraits through an exploratory typology (the work is in its early stages), it is possible to grasp how popular culture is not only a chamber of echoes of stereotypes but also allows for criticism of professional practices related to issues of gender inequality'.

Her purpose is not to make accusations against the media and the fictions that are disseminated there, but rather to try and understand how some of these fictions can move the issue of women's place in organizations forward. Today, she would like to focus on one aspect of this research: a broadening of possible role models for women.

### **Conducting an investigation**

The PhD provides an opportunity to conduct an in-depth investigation. The researcher has devoted more than 3 years of her life to this. The investigation, which is the hallmark of the social sciences and humanities, is interpreted by popular culture through the narrative of police investigations and detective stories. The parallel with academic research has aroused the interest of academics such as Luc Boltanski, Barbara Czarniawska, Umberto Eco and Carlo Ginzburg.

The police narrative appears to reveal what investigative work is all about: Who carries it out? How is it carried out? Who – private detective or policeman, amateur or professional, and woman or man – achieves a satisfactory result? What is a satisfactory result?

After the detective novel's trend began in the 19th century, television series have taken over the investigation. And more and more diverse women have become formidable investigators. In the last decade, an increasing number of fictions has put forward portraits of female investigators that offer a new horizon to the homo academicus of any sex.

Investigation in TV series appears in four main categories for women: it is a conceivable profession, a way of exercising power, and a mode of total commitment or a vocation. Based on these characters, we will try to provide answers to our four questions.

### **The investigation, a profession for women?**

The detective novel has featured female investigators since the 1920s, but these characters have remained amateurs. With Agatha Christie (1890–1976), Poirot made a profession of investigation, whereas for Miss Marple, it has been just a hobby since 1927. Before Marple, Agatha Christie had given life to very young female investigators and determined amateurs, such as Anne Beddingfeld, a rare character to take on the role of the narrator in Christie's work (*The man in the brown suit*, 1924) or the irreverent young Lady Eileen Brent, known to her friends as Bundle (*The secret of Chimneys*, 1925; *The seven*

*dials mystery*, 1929). This profile of resourceful young girls is also found under the swarming prose of Christie's contemporary, Patricia Wentworth (1877–1961). More than the circumstances, it is their romantic spirit that draws her heroines into wild investigations. The epitome of this type of female investigator can be found in the heroine of *The astonishing adventure of Jane Smith*, published in 1923. These characters of the 1920s are nourished by cinema and literature. Thus, Anne Beddingfeld refers several times to Pamela, heroine of 'The perils of Pamela', a probable reference to a 20-episode serial film produced from 1914 onward, *The perils of Pauline*. Anne, the fictitious character, finds a model and inspiration in the movie character: 'Pamela was a magnificent young woman. Nothing daunted her. She fell out of airplanes, adventured in submarines, climbed skyscrapers and crept about in the Underworld without turning a hair'.

The profane quality has long persisted to color the involvement of women in an investigation. Nancy Drew and Fantômette represent archetypes and models for a young reader: Nancy, a nosy high school student, appeared in 1930 and was reinvented in 2019 in a television series of the same name. Fantômette experiences a similar fate in the *Bibliothèque Rose* (a publishing collection aiming young female readers) from 1961 to 2011 and in a television series and comic strip.

However, Miss Marple finds a professional twin in Wentworth's Miss Maud Silver. Miss Silver, a former governess, has opened a detective agency, which she runs successfully and which leads her to solve 32 investigations between 1928 and 1961. However, it seems that it is the 1960s and television that give breath to this rise in power to professional women. Even if the professional woman investigator arrives in the television series in an opportunistic way, the very first season of the so British TV series *The Avengers* focused on a male character. The second season opened with two male characters, John Steed and Dr. King, who was quickly replaced in 1962 by a new character, Cathy Gale, played by the actress Honor Blackman. The scripts having already been written, Honor Blackman will benefit from the redistribution of roles to find herself in the shoes of a character never seen before on television: a woman of action, anthropologist and judoka. The investigations are conducted by a duo of professionals. The female character is no longer a stooge, and Cathy Gale inaugurates a profession that will see a succession of leading female investigators in television fiction. Thus, in the United States, for NBC, Angie Dickinson will embody from 1974 a *Police Woman*, title of the series known elsewhere under the name of Sergeant Anderson. In 2014, the BBC will again feature a fictional character investigating alone with detective sergeant Catherine Cawood in the very dark *Happy Valley*. In the meantime, several series have offered the possibility of female duets, such as the American *Cagney & Lacey*, broadcasted from 1982 for

seven seasons or more recently, *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010, seven seasons).

### **Investigation as a means of exercising power**

Fictional heroines can not only conduct investigations but also lead investigative departments. This was not until 1991. English television saw the chief inspector Jane Tennison, played by Helen Mirren, prevail against the phallocracy of her institution and her own teams. This series, *Prime suspect*, is adapted from the novels of Lynda La Plante. The series will influence other productions: in the United States, a version of La Plante's novels will be released in 2011, and before that, the audience will have enjoyed two new bosses with Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson played by a 40-year-old Kyra Sedgwick in *The Closer* (2005, seven seasons) and with Commander Sharon Raider played by Mary McDowell, 60 years old at the start of *Major crimes*, a series derived from the latter (2012, six seasons). Great Britain is not to be outdone with two landmark series: *Vera* (2011, 11 seasons), a series based on the character of the chief inspector detective Vera Stanhope played by Brenda Blethyn, now 76 years old, and *No offence* (2015, three seasons), where the detective inspector Viv' Deering leads her team, largely female. The explosive mix of efficiency on the field, outspokenness, and coarseness, and the absence of complexes of this 50-year-old leader played by Joanna Scanlan (54 years old at the start of the series) are key to the success of the series.

An investigation can, thus, be carried out from the top of the hierarchy, sometimes even against the higher level, in an atmosphere of mocking and dubious boys' club, by a woman.

The access to positions of power and the age range of the protagonists of the investigation have a jubilant effect for any viewer. These characters are like so many authorizations. Thus, Vera embodies the possibility of a female Columbo. No glamour and yet the title role. And let us be honest, the prospect is welcomed with joy by any young doctoral student of 40 something. Investigation becomes the place for everyone to make a career and reach positions of responsibility.

### **Investigation as a vocation**

Conducting and resolving an investigation can be an opportunity to express one's identity. Self-expression will come through entering the investigation. In order to become an investigator and solve an investigation, it is necessary to adopt the right toolbox. Sherlock Holmes does not exist without his deerstalker, his pipe, his cocaine in 7% solution, and his doctor Watson.

Laura Holt, a private detective played by Stephanie Zimbalist, managed to fulfill her vocation by hiding behind the false nose of an imaginary *Remington Steele* who gives his name to the

series started in 1982. Wearing a very Chandlerian felt hat, she led the investigations from start to finish but accepted to have their success attributed to a handsome scammer embodied by the future James Bond, Pierce Brosnan. This masochistic principle managed to unfold for five seasons. But Steele can also be seen as a hyper-vitaminized Dr. Watson.

The 21st century seems to display vocations freed from male justification. The feminist and combative *Miss Fisher* (2012, three seasons and a film in 2020) establishes herself as a free agent in the Melbourne of the 1920s. Single, bisexual, and armed with a beautiful but effective golden revolver with mother-of-pearl grip, she confronts the villains during her investigations. Two other recent heroines make do with a tautological attribute, the private detective's coat of arms. The young protagonist, Mma Ramotswe, played by Jill Scott in the series *The No.1 ladies' detective agency* filmed in Botswana for the BBC and HBO in 2009, boasts a sign on her agency's storefront. In *Stumptown* (2019), the wonderfully named Dexedrine Parios confirms her certification to work as a private detective. These three figures, Phryne Fisher, Mma and Dex, experience their commitment to the profession as the natural expression of their abilities. They are made for it. The fact that they choose to ignore why is one of the driving forces behind the story. As professionals in the investigation but outside the police institution, they manage to identify infamies and crimes that the police ignore and solve them. One remembers that this quality (external to the milieu and intimate to the trade) is the motive provided by Frederick Winslow Taylor to explain his ability to reform the shop floor.

### **The interviewer, a committed figure**

Here, the question arises as to what constitutes a satisfactory result. The British series *Line of duty*, which began in 2012, deploys in its first season an investigation led by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the equivalent of the Bureau of Internal Affairs in the United States. The Commission unmask a crooked female inspector. The first season offers a complex investigation with a convincing resolution when the second season opens with the preparation of the trial and the counter-investigation carried out as best as possible by the incarcerated policewoman. The succession of new episodes will come to refute everything the spectator previously believed in to lead to the arrest of another culprit. Incidentally, it is an argumentative mode that Paul Veyne, the French historian, used: convince and then dismantle and let the reader or the disillusioned spectator learn from his/her credulity.

How to avoid investigative bias? Recent Scandinavian fictions provide an answer through an unprecedented investigator character. For her, commitment to investigation is total. It is led to the detriment of her career and private life. Investigation is her way of life. Being out of the social game allows her a

better clarity of judgment. The resolution of the investigation is vital, and she cannot let go of anything without undermining her own identity. This is a new posture for female characters. Until now, the figure of the misanthropic cop has been a male trope. This representation changes with two Scandinavian series: *Bron/Broen* (2011, four seasons, Sweden, Denmark) and *The killing* (2007, three seasons, Denmark and 2011, four seasons for the US version).

Three monomaniacs: investigation is their *raison d'être*; the rest is just frivolity they dispense with. Who are they? Saga Norén, detective in the Malmö police (played by Sofia Helin), Copenhagen inspector Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl) or Seattle police detective Sarah Linden (Mireille Enos). The first, who has Asperger's syndrome, perceives human mechanisms and motivations all the better because she is incapable of empathy. Paradoxically, these wacky investigators are liberating role models. One is entitled to prefer one's profession to one's family, to display a tenacity that is painful for one's colleagues and hierarchy. It is also a new possibility open to women.

All of these figures, increasingly visible on screen, offer a stimulating range of ways of carrying out an investigation, whether it be of a police or academic nature.

## What is next?

I never thought you needed to be a woman to talk about the female experience. As a person educated in the French system, I strongly cling to the idea that you may be a [gay, straight transgender, Asian black, native White, etc., man, woman, or whatever] and have a say about the part played by women or [gay, straight transgender, Asian black, native White, etc., man, woman, or whatever] in society and organizations. See the female characters in Dos Passos' trilogy, *U.S.A.*, or in Sonallah Ibrahim's *Zaat*. However, I can only note the fact that female writers, in the field of investigation (both in detective story and academic research), often allow themselves a panel of male and female investigators when their male counterparts favor heroes, that is, Poe and his *Chevalier* Auguste Dupin, Chesterton and his Father Brown, Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, Gaboriau and his *Monsieur Lecoq*, etc. More curiously, while Barbara Czarniawska is interested in the novels of Lynda La Plante, Eco, Ginzburg, and Boltanski seem to be drawn to male detectives born from the pen of male authors. Funny, isn't it? Shouldn't one write under one's name and expect to be read?