Mediapolis: Popular Culture and the City

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Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg, *Mediapolis: Popular Culture and the City*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2006, ISBN 9789064506338, 240 pages

At the end of *Mediapolis* Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg struggle in a fascinating way to describe contemporary urbanity. They touch upon the crux of their vision in a flash of inspiration: 'We should not regard architecture as the predominant means of shaping a city, of arranging it, or even of establishing it. Architecture is a link in the complex of media processes in which it has nestled.'

A major portion of *Mediapolis* analyses these media processes – the authors call it an exploration. They link these processes to *mediascapes*, in which popular culture is intertwined in and by the city. In this analysis, the authors produce what by Dutch standards is a wild mix of continental philosophy, cyberpunk, architectural concepts and '90s pop theory. The latter is immediately one of the book's greatest strengths. Theory in pop music in the Netherlands has traditionally been lacking, certainly in comparison to the UK or Germany, where it can be employed without any problem in tackling issues of identity, technology or mythology. The fact that De Jong and Schuilenburg fish generously out of a pool of ideas (Afrofuturism, sampladelia, scenius in connection with post-structuralism) makes their theoretical premise startling, except perhaps for a select company of Anglophiles already familiar with it. The second quality of *Mediapolis* lies in the way in which this view of pop music is confronted with ideas about the city.

The book opens with a study of the new generation of military computer games, in which simulations of the US army display a growing culture of control, a strict collection of rules for the use of (virtual) violence. A culture of control that is also steadily encroaching into reality, in which we have traded rights for fear and in which the dubious 'war on terror' is being slavishly accepted. De Jong and Schuilenburg, however, echo Michel Foucault in the idea that power always implies resistance. The battle for public space has not yet been definitively settled, such as in the *urban container*, in which work, shopping, housing and travel functions are combined in a compressed internal space that, like a fort, keeps out the big bad outside world. With J.G. Ballard in mind, a unique psychopathology will undoubtedly emerge here to cast a spanner into the works. Yet where, they wonder, 'are the cracks and empty spaces in our society where virtual resistence can nestle?' These are found in Arabic *intifada* games, which are not just an alternative for the simulations of the US army, but also an example of liberation practices, the formation of a common social identity and community.

The somewhat high-strung construction of the argument is characteristic of *Mediapolis*: rapid shifts between thinkers, between virtual and 'real' worlds, between pop and theory. The reader may suddenly find himself in a critique of the postcard architecture of Frank Gehry, for instance. Like the British architecture collective Archigram, the authors argue that the city in fact is never definitively settled. Using pop music like techno and urban, a collective term for hiphop and R&B, they present a different form of urbanity. They describe techno as a 'sonic' space that creates a mental picture of the city and, in the case

of urban, as a series of products of activities through which a sensation of urbanity-without-the-city can be elicited. In short, there exists a physical city and an immaterial city, built out of urban fantasies and new sound communities. To sample it in the style of the authors: 'The coherence, unity, and the survival of the group – major notions for every form of community – are not based on physical proximity but rather on shared sounds and rhythms. The power and seduction of sound are strong enough to bring people together without there being mention of a transcending morality of overarching identity as the guiding principle. In this case, they are restless and asymmetrical groups that can be defined as spatial and process multiples.'

Through all these combinations, the complexity and the level of abstraction in *Mediapolis* is slowly magnified into the well-nigh utopian vision of Nodal Urbanity. Four media processes shape this: the virtual character of flows and networks (virtuality); the city as a fusion of word, image, movement and sound (multimediality); a global ramification of continually changing togetherness (connectivity) and an open environment linking several closed systems (interactivity). The physical structure of the city is imbedded in the intersections of these four media processes, which in turn impact architecture itself and inevitably form a new experience of the urban space. We live in an infinite process of change, devoid of history or future, the Mediapolis as Schizopolis. This latter provocative vortex in the book entails something powerful and elusive: the city as an overwhelming entity with its dark corners and overabundance of possibilities, suggesting that contemporary nationalist outbursts (the *urban container* on a national scale?) are a last rearguard action.

A few questions remain insufficiently addressed in *Mediapolis*. The absence of film is conspicuous, when the role of the city therein, from *Blade Runner* and *Akira* to *2046*, should provide sufficient food for thought, if only in the interaction with pop music (and techno in particular). And as in many studies of popular technological culture, the less well-off tend to be ignored. The Mediapolis that is explored and analysed here certainly has its share of poorly lit alleys, no-go areas and the urban spaces that represent their antithesis. But what life beyond the new virtual city limits looks like, and how people there view the dazzling lights and jittery rhythms, or how they hope to gain access to it, seems a good subject for a follow-up study.

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Tags

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