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## Mediapolis. A Review

**Mediapolis** by Marc Schuilenburg and Alex de Jong. This text was spoken in Dutch by Siebe Thissen during the presentation of *Mediapolis* in the Netherlands Architecture Institute (Rotterdam) on 11 January 2007. Translated by George Hall for 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. [www.010publishers.nl](http://www.010publishers.nl)

*Mediapolis* is an exciting and particularly intriguing book. Take the title itself: *Mediapolis* is more like the title of a DC comic by Peter Kuper or Frank Miller than a serious treatise on the present-day metropolitan situation. The authors, Marc Schuilenburg and Alex de Jong – alias Studio Popcorn – display a preference for popular culture because pop culture, as they write in their introduction, offers ‘an opportunity to approach our living environment from a different angle’. This is an understatement. It should have been: ‘because our current living environment is completely pop-cultural in its nature’. The authors have enriched the Dutch language with two splendid terms: pop modernism and pop philosophy. My own experience has taught me that pop culture in the Netherlands is almost frenetically quarantined off from academic and art-historical discourse. It is difficult to get pop-cultural articles published in high-brow publications. Last year, a literary magazine refused my essay on the ‘Lee’s piece’ in the Lijnbaan in Rotterdam, and six years ago the editors of an art publication refused an architectural analysis of Batman’s Gotham City. The reasons were evident: graffiti has nothing to do with poetry and comics are totally estranged from art and architecture. Pop culture is associated with entertainment and vulgar amusement, not with architecture, art and other expressions of high culture.

This is a misconception. Pop culture has deeply influenced the cultural life of the twentieth century – not only since the sixties but also well before the Second World War. Remaining within the framework of architecture: from 1923 to 1933, the Bauhaus had its own large jazz band, and regarded jazz as the most important cultural innovation in all the arts. The Bauhaus had its own artistic and intellectual interpretation of the ‘Revue Nègre’ – which was popular in that period. In 1927, Adolf Loos designed, at no cost, a house for Josephine Baker, the greatest pop star of the twenties and thirties – comparable to Madonna nowadays. Alexander Calder designed his mobiles with Baker’s marvellous, swaying and continually ‘bubbling’ bottom. Le Corbusier was obsessed by her to an even greater extent, and once dressed up as this black artiste during a costumed ball – dressed in a skirt with feathers on his bottom and with a blackened face. On the other hand, Josephine Baker was taken seriously by art critics. Her definition of modern art was: ‘Art is an elastic sort of love – maybe even a little too elastic’. In *Mediapolis*, Schuilenburg and De Jong describe a design by Le Corbusier dating from 1946, which had the shape of a cruise ship. It may have been coincidence, but Le Corbusier became friends with Baker on a cruise ship, and it was on a cruise ship that he attended the costumed ball mentioned. The longing to generate a relationship between apparently dissimilar and random occurrences – that is pop culture.

Pop culture is necessary in the establishment of 'hipness'. It is not art or the architecture that determines what is hip, but pop culture. And it is exactly this 'hipness' that is, as John Leland claims in his fabulous study entitled *Hip: The History* (2004), probably the most important ingredient of twentieth-century culture. Hip is linked to mass media and globalization, to the African diaspora, to the influence of black culture in global pop culture, to the discovery of America as a cultural movement – as the supplier of jazz, cartoons, film, and bodies in motion. Pop culture, as Brian Eno maintained, is the admission of Africa to our global consciousness. His statement clarifies the significance of jazz and Josephine Baker to the art and architecture of Europe. It also explains Adorno's essays directed against jazz and the 'negritization' of our culture. In Adorno's wake, Peter Sloterdijk also turns against pop culture, which he regards as a degenerate form of globalization. But strangely enough, this aspect is scarcely dealt with in *Mediapolis*, although the authors declare themselves to be firm fans of this German philosopher. In their fight against pop culture, the Nazis decided to destroy jazz. They claimed that jazz was primarily a lifestyle, an attitude. The integration of 'the rhythmic accents of negroes and Jews', as they defined pop culture, would lead to the perversion of Arian, European art and culture. Their attack on pop culture was the prelude to the period of 'Entartete Kunst'.

Studio Popcorn also owes its existence to 'hipness'. Six years ago, the group first came to prominence in a series of actions protesting against the withdrawal of Fashion TV from the Rotterdam cable network. Fashion TV, as the flyers maintained, provided beautiful women and hip music 24 hours a day – an intercultural climax in our desiccated television landscape. The Studio also developed into the deejay collective Strelka, which imported Drum & Bass, Grime, and Dubstep from London into our cities. The process was not bereft of reflection: a stimulating oeuvre gradually accumulated on their website, presenting the contours of what we now have in front of us as *Mediapolis*: a contemplation and experience of metropolitan life from the singular perspective of pop modernism and pop philosophy. Attention is also devoted to games (*The militarization of life*), the attic room (*The bankruptcy of the street*), architecture (*Urban Container*), music (*The audio-hallucinatory spheres of the city*), collective thinking (*From Genius to Scenius*), and global metropolitanism (*Pop-Up Cities*).

I can only find one example in the Netherlands of this type of radical and conceptual writing: the writers' collective *Bilwet*, which performed pioneering work in the eighties and nineties in the context of media theory, with their crazy, intriguing books such as *Bewegingsleer* (Kinetics, 1990), *Media Archief* (1992) and *De Datadandy* (The Data Dandy, 1994). Here, Bilwet – an acronym for *Beweging voor Illegale Wetenschappen* (Movement for Illegal Sciences) – laid the foundations for an 'illegal' view of science. Bilwet elucidated this standpoint in an interview I held with them at the end of the nineties: 'Theory means you have to think further. You have to break with academic tradition and develop your own style. Academic exercises miss vitality. You must want to be a part of what you are describing. Many authors are not engaged. We apply negative thinking and use non-constructive criticism. Our writings take place outside the academy – our engagement is D-I-Y culture. That connects us to political movements such as the squatters' movement.'

The terms applied in *Mediapolis* also betray conceptual euphoria, a lust for life, the joy of play, and zap behaviour: ideas and concepts tumble over one another, notions

appear and vanish, theories condense and evaporate, and leitmotifs turn out to be loose ends without ties. Even more than Bilwet, the British writer Kodwo Eshun, who wrote the unsurpassed *More Brilliant Than The Sun. Adventures In Sonic Fiction* (1998), seems to be a guide and source of inspiration to the authors. But whereas Eshun has a firm grasp of the black guideline of electronic music and Afro-Futurism, Schuilenburg and De Jong occasionally appear to be swallowed up by the black hole they themselves have created. Their details and examples are stronger than their capacity for synthesis; their trips are more convincing than their conclusions; the concepts are richer in imagination than content; and their 'illegal' theories are often weakened by 'legal' academic exercises. And that is the rub: there is a little too much philosophy, and too little pop philosophy. There is too much post-modernism, too little pop modernism. Too much Foucault, Deleuze, Sloterdijk, and Appadurai, too little Burroughs, Bilwet, Eshun, and Leland.

Nowadays, there are examples a-plenty of theoretical pop culture. But the presentation of classics from this genre is not part of the authors' repertoire. Douglas Kahn, whose masterpiece *Noise, Water, Meat. A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999) would have been a welcome inclusion in *Mediapolis*, is an example in point. Or Stephen Duncombe's *Notes from Underground. Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (1997), which is a standard work that makes the advent of weblogs and audioblogs intelligible. Or *Skateboarding, Space and the City* (2001) in which the skateboarder and architectural historian Iain Borden adds motion, mobility and speed to our perception of architecture and urban planning. *Mediapolis* could have benefited not only from a bit more 'illegality', it also could have led more (Dutch) readers along the path of theoretical pop culture.

The fact that a different approach is viable is proven by Schuilenburg and De Jong themselves in Part 2: *Sonic Urbanity*. Here, the Bilwet principle steps into the foreground: to describe something, you have to be in it, you have to be a part of it. The authors are music lovers and have an enormous knowledge of present-day electronic music. For years they have been writing for the excellent Belgian musical magazine *Gonzo Circus*. I read this part with enormous pleasure. All the references here are particularly apt: Marcel Cobussen, Diederik Diederichsen, Brian Eno, Mark Dery, Paul Miller, Simon Reynolds, and Kodwo Eshun, to name but a few. Detroit, Afro-Futurism and 'Urban Culture' deservedly receive attention and the authors make it clear that pop culture on a large scale generates a dynamics of metropolitanism of which nineteenth-century urban planners and Utopians could only dream. It is unfortunate that architecture and music remain separate domains here, despite attempts to link the two via Sloterdijk's notions of 'spheres' and 'bells'. Perhaps pop philosophy could again have offered a solution. For example, the London architect and turntablist Janek Schaefer has been trying for years to construct architecture on the basis of sound. His layout of several spaces in the ICA in London, the 'Living' project (1999) – commissioned by Rem Koolhaas – was an example of this. During his performance in the NAI, a few years ago, Schaefer demonstrated how sound can create spaces and urbanity. And what about 'Sound Architecture', a programme that ran in Off Corso in Rotterdam for years?

But does this hypercriticism make *Mediapolis* a hopeless enterprise? Of course not. The many 'beats per minute' that Schuilenburg and De Jong present us with take us on an incredible trip that can only be compared to the hypnotic sounds of drum &

bass. At the end, you know more about military games than ever, more about 'urban' and Afro-Futurism that you ever wanted to know, and more about the importance of the 'scenius' for our digital culture than you could ever imagine. Stacking, tying together, plodding on, unravelling, and beginning all over again. That is *Mediapolis*. It is the realization that metropolitanism is not an entity, concept, moloch or physical reality; it is the recognition that urbanity is consistently produced afresh in various manifestations of pop culture. It reveals itself to us in mass media: in games, in clips, in film, in musical composition, etc. Pop culture is the mass medium *par excellence* that enables metropolitanism. I also find it inspiring that the static view of 'the city' is abandoned in favour of experiences of urbanity.

I share the authors' idea that metropolitanism requires a new theory – preferable on the basis of pop philosophy. Unfortunately, this new theory is not unfolded, and after three chapters on virtual, sonic and nodal urbanity, we are totally groggy – as if we are sobering up after a drum & bass party with too many pills, too many decibels, and too much adrenaline. Perhaps this is the intention of *Mediapolis*: to demonstrate that global metropolitanism is conceptually elusive, and can only unfold itself in the experiences that pop culture offers. Urbanity is thus a singular phenomenon that we have to interpret as being occasionally virtual, occasionally sonic and occasionally nodal.

Accordingly, *Mediapolis* is certainly a starting signal for a follow-on study. Three options seem obvious. The book contains such a tidal wave of new concepts that each concept lends itself for in-depth study. *Mediapolis* could then become a series in which authors are invited to explore the pop-cultural aspects of metropolitanism. Or the book is a stimulus to a personal development of the concepts, in which the tempo depends on the beats per minute chosen, and the form depends on the ambience in which the writer immerses himself/herself. In the latter case, the focus should not lie on metropolitanism as a philosophical, sociological, or anthropological model, but rather as an 'illegal science', of which the researcher, to quote Bilwet once again 'has to be a part'. A third option consists of a combination of both points of view – an option that the authors chose but which may have proven too much for them. They themselves are also aware of this. To them, *Mediapolis* was a first exploration, or, as they write in the Postscript: 'The book offers a bird's-eye view of the nature of urban pop culture and the role it plays in our concept of the city. This is not a clear, unambiguous relationship.' A bird's-eye view is rather quick and transient. In my opinion, the tempo could be reduced somewhat and there could be a greater concentration on specific case studies or sub-aspects of urbanity. Perhaps, just possibly, the contours of a new pop theory on urbanity would then become visible. Until then, we read *Mediapolis* in total absorption and wait – in line with common pop-cultural tradition – for the sequel.