

MEDIAPOLIS

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Popular Culture and the City

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Introduction

The bottom of our money bag is in sight and problems are piling up. Sure, our financial experts did warn us. Lending large sums of money against exaggerated interest rates – that had to go wrong. But the city leaves us no other option. Our debts can only be paid if the city continues to grow. And new residents can only be attracted if there are facilities such as electricity, water, motorways, and adequate public transport. Moreover, the citizens are not particularly keen about an increase in municipal taxes. What are those financial fusspots complaining about? After all, in the current global economy, everything depends on population growth and the advent of new companies. Are they fully aware that those who do not invest will fall behind in the march of civilization? Only daring growth scenarios, inventiveness, the necessary nerve, skilled personnel, and lots of luck can lay down a breeding ground from which the city can evolve. Impressive bridges and parks, eye-catching skyscrapers and striking museums – that is what we want. It would be better if our advisors would formulate plans to generate the necessary income. It actually began to go wrong with the construction of the new seaport. And it was completely out of order when we discovered that it is almost impossible to construct roads and railway lines through the hilly landscape to the harbour. We now have a marvellous harbour but no hinterland. There is a baseball stadium able to accommodate 80,000 fans. Unfortunately, the stadium lies in a run-down neighbourhood where crime is the favourite sport of the people. But be fair! Fire stations, police

stations and hospitals are nothing compared to skyscrapers and modern topsport arenas. The degeneration of the public space and the use of municipal funds for capital-devouring mega-projects have turned the city into a ghost town. People are leaving in droves, heading for other cities. Bankruptcy of the city seems inevitable. We shall soon lose our job as Mayor.

Fortunately, the scenario described above remains limited to the pixels on our computer screens. The drama is a part of the game *SimCity 4* created by Electronic Arts (2003). The starting points of modern urban design have become algorithms in a game that evokes a true Faustian feeling among the players. Although the competence to change the city radically is far more extensive than that of 'real' mayors in New York and Berlin, the activities in the virtual environment of *Sim-City* are unmistakably related to events in physical space. *Sim-City* allows us to enter the minds of the urban designers and architects such as Baron Haussmann and Le Corbusier. We experience what the city architect Robert Moses must have felt when he constructed his parkways in New York in the 1930s and various neighbourhoods had to be obliterated to create the new metropolis. His motto was: '*When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis you have to hack your way through with a meat axe.*'¹

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We are surrounded by the sounds and images of pop culture. The popular media have the world in a tight grip, the virtual representation of the city is one form of expression of this. In this context, the Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai speaks of 'mediascapes'. Mediascapes refer to the extremely diverse media (newspapers, television, internet, films, etc.) that produce, disseminate and process information, and to the force of the images they create.² If we only look at games on internet, the influence of popular culture becomes crystal-clear. Around six million people pay contribution to gain access to the parallel worlds of online games such as *Lineage II* (NCsoft, 2004) and *World of Warcraft* (Electronic Arts, 1994).³ In these synthetic environments, imagination is a collective and social happening. Elves, dragons and sinister alter egos fight for a place in the realm of Azeroth. Magic swords, shields and special powers are stolen here. People kill players and group together to earn money in order to buy items such as weapons and clothing, which are necessary to survive. Once imagination has taken over, it not only offers an escape from the daily

grind but also functions as a powerful fuel for new forms of communal action. Absorbed by their virtual characters, players marry online and offline. 'Real' people earn a month's income with the sale of virtual objects, and players turn out to be the architects of the digital environment in which they hang around for hours every day. Is it necessary to state that popular culture is more than trivial or banal entertainment? Just as in 'normal' life, the mediascapes also have their exceptional forms of social traffic and collective codes of conduct, powerful economies flourish, and there is a mixture of regulation and mutual conflict management.

A POP PHILOSOPHY OF THE POLIS

Expressions of popular culture fit into the electronic globalization that the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk regards as the third stage of the globalization process. In his study *Sphären* (Spheres) Sloterdijk speaks of a multiple globalization. Beginning in Greek Antiquity with the charting of the cosmos, it took on a territorial guise with the voyage of Columbus to America in 1492, and it now assumes the form of a digital globalization. To many, this last process contains a magical promise. However, the sociologist Vincent Mosco warns that expectations of new media, such as internet, consistently lead to the same myths.⁴ Every introduction of a medium evokes a phase of euphoria, a hymn to the unprecedented possibilities that this technology has in store for the world. No medium whatsoever can bring this promise to fruition. Nevertheless, an analysis of the influence of popular culture cannot afford to ignore the role of technology.

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For several years, game-technology has been an integral component of various practices. For example, it is used by a new generation of spatial planners and urban designers for the co-ordination and planning of large-scale urban areas.⁵ But the socialization of the technology of pop culture has not remained limited to our urban planning. Well-known games are deployed by military forces in various countries to train soldiers for 'real' warfare.

The representation of popular culture exercises an indelible and not-to-be-underestimated influence on everyday life. This observation is a good reason to examine our physical environment from a different viewpoint. We take as our starting point the virtual and son-

ic environments of popular media such as games and electronic music. How does this popular culture influence everyday reality? An increasing number of games, including well-known games such as *America's Army* (U.S. Army, 2002) and *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 2005), are largely set in an urban environment. In that context, the players learn to survive collectively, build up a career in the underworld, or live in a neighbourhood 'where there is always plenty going on and everything depends on your reputation'. Taking pop culture seriously raises the issue of whether or not we also learn to handle the dangers present in the public space of the physical city better by playing First Person Shooter games. In addition, there are the sounds and rhythms of pop music, which stimulate people worldwide to converge around all kinds of musical genres with their own codes, clothes, and gestures.

12] We use the term 'pop philosophy' to refer to the approach that uses popular media as material to analyse the contours of our everyday environment. This philosophy opens a playful space in the margins of the primarily academically tinted discourse of the city. In *Mediapolis*, this takes place by investigating the representation of urban space in pop culture. What does urban reality look like in those virtual and sonic environments and how does this affect our physical reality?

The representation of urban space in popular media produces many examples worth noting. Almost everyone will be familiar with Steven Spielberg's staging of the cyber city in the film *Minority Report* (2002). Three years prior to beginning the production of this film, Spielberg invited sixteen specialists, including William Mitchell who was the author of *City of Bits*, and Peter Calthorpe, an urban theorist, to think about the future of the city. The film unmistakably shows that popular culture in the past few decades has offered increasingly complex images, information and interpretations of all kinds of social developments. Accordingly, the film forms the proof that a popular medium can also function as an information carrier of our culture. But which urban life actually goes on in the realm of pop culture? Which rules and regulations apply there and which punishments are imposed if the rules are violated?

In order to answer these questions, we appeal in this book to the various meanings of the world *polis*. Besides the territorial determination of the city and its surroundings, the concept also refers to a religious and political unit (*omonoia* [Gr.], *concordia* [Lat]). In this

way, the *polis* embodies the living space of a group of people who are linked by means of their origins, beliefs, and political convictions. But what is the meaning of *polis* in a world that is occupied by the images and information of popular culture, a world in which the city plays an increasingly important role?

DROPPING SCIENCE

Hardly a day goes by that we don't watch a film, play a game, or listen to pop music. The presence of these media not only forms a gauge for the significance and value of current events, they also display continual movement between various dimensions, such as from the virtual to the real and from the real to the virtual. This book aligns itself with this phenomenon by using popular culture as a springboard for thinking about the changes that are taking place in our daily lives. The first part of this book, *Virtual Urbanity*, demonstrates that the struggle for public space takes place in an arena that is embedded in virtuality. This situation offers creative opportunities but can also have repressive consequences. If we look at the current culture of security, we observe the increasing militarization of public space. A military control net has been thrown across the city and the mesh is being drawn tighter and tighter, leading to an altered experience of one's own identity as well as the installation of a specific regime of rules and sanctions. Renowned war games such as *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* (THQ, 2004) which are played worldwide, represent these radical changes better than the latest police report or academic manuscripts. These games indicate how the militarization of life has become the most important input of a culture that is oriented toward security. These same war games describe how architecture and public space manifest themselves in a society that has been engaged in transforming itself from a structure in which everything depended on discipline to one in which 'control' is currently the key word. In a control culture, the separate spaces once inhabited by the institutions of the disciplinary society have been bundled together to accommodate current social functions such as shopping, living, work, and education. The roots of this architecture lie both in the *company town* of the industrial era and in the *compound* of internationally operating enterprises. This architecture manifests itself in its most mod-

ern form in Asian cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing, where *Urban Containers* rise at infrastructural nodes.

The first part of *Mediapolis* ends with new forms of resistance as seen in Arabic war games. The notion of resistance is always connected to activities on the streets. But Arabic games turn out not only to contain hostility-based identities, they also give the players a communal identity so that they can rebel in a virtual space against the dominance of Israel and the United States.

In the second part, *Sonic Urbanity*, we observe that one must distinguish various spaces in order to genuinely understand the process of urbanization. For this reason we introduce 'sonic thinking' in relation to the city. Since we seem to be convinced that right-minded people first look and then listen, sound is more often experienced as being a source of nuisance. The concepts of Peter Sloterdijk offer a starting point for a positive approach to sound. Sound creates large interior spatialities that are not immediately and permanently determined. The 'Techno' electronic dance music from Detroit and the 'Urban' mediagenic youth culture demonstrate that our physical environment can evaporate in an audiovisual sphere of meanings. In this ephemeral situation, the city can be actualized in an unannounced and unexpected way. In creating a sonic spatiality, popular music proves that sound also has political significance, in other words, it is engaged with the design of life. A sonic spatiality contains both the spatial and the social processes that accompany sound. People are mutually connected in a sonic spatiality worldwide, and enter into social relationships and contacts. This is why the technique of sampling is brought into association with a line of flight or an 'away from here' attitude for spread-out communities who converge around the sounds and beat rates of various music styles.

In the third part, *Nodal Urbanity*, we return to the virtual world to describe a radical-democratic form of productive co-operation generated in that environment. What happens when we take the production of many as a starting point, rather than that of the ingenious soloist? With the introduction of the concept of 'scenius', this last part describes the possibilities of giving shape to a virtual environment with the help of an interactive strategy of 'many-to-many'. One of the most important features of the scenius is the interaction between the initiators, the fans and the users who gather around a shared interest or specific goal. The interaction between these three parties is

the driving force behind this unique model. Can the scenius also be deployed in the design of the physical environment of the city, with buildings, streets and squares?

To unravel the complexity of urban space and to obtain a better understanding of the diversity of ideas in pop culture, we conclude *Mediapolis* with a description of four mutually interacting processes that crisscross urban space: virtuality, interactivity, connectivity, and multimediality. We refer to the form in which the convergence of these processes is given shape as 'nodal urbanity'. It is the name for a pulsating urban life which cannot be further defined in purely physical terms. In other words, the geographical space of the city must be regarded as an open field or as a medial infrastructure that can constantly actualize itself.

BUT WHERE DO THOSE CITIES COME FROM?

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Studying popular media offers a perfect excuse for roaming around in new worlds, images, music, and 'grand narratives'. Is there anything more pleasant than spending a weekend in *Liberty City* in *Grand Theft Auto* or dancing to the latest sounds from London? Nonetheless, this book does not wish to be seen as an attempt to make well-known theories about our environment accessible to a wide public by illustrating them with attractive examples from popular culture. The basic idea of *Mediapolis* is that the popular media environments, in which technical, cultural and economic changes join in a unique way, offer an opportunity to approach our living environment from a different angle. The information, ideas and opinions of pop culture are connected to actuality by means of the question concerning our cultural and political situation. We wish to understand what is happening in virtual and sonic environments and, if other concepts come to the fore or if deviating futures are displayed, we can at least try to use those ideas and vistas as tools for thinking about the dynamics and potential of our direct environment. That is why the words of the Italian futurist Antonio Sant'Elia in his *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture* (1914) remain topical: 'Every generation must build its own city.'