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CHANGING POPULAR CULTURE IN RELATION TO URBAN SPACE

Review of: Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg (2006) *Mediapolis: Populaire cultuur en de stad*. Rotterdam: 010, 240 p., € 24.50.

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In their book *Mediapolis: Populaire cultuur en de stad* Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg aim at describing changes in our popular culture in relation to urban space. Theoretically based on postmodern philosophers such as Foucault, Deleuze, Zizek and others, their own observations and the detailed description of many other examples, de Jong and Schuilenburg paint a picture of a changing urban culture.

Three main case studies are used: the militarization of our cities, urban soundscapes, and the development of a scenius.

The militarization of the cities discusses the architectural structure of digital games such as *American Army*, in which the military action is situated in cities. Digital games such as *American Army* are not simply another first-person-shooter on the market but they combine the playful experience of a war situation with an educational purpose. *American Army* is a game that was developed for the army as a simulation of different experiences soldiers might encounter on the battlefield. While digital games train players to concentrate on and interpret visual

impressions rapidly, even though they are confronted with an often chaotic environment, they force them to adapt to rules inherent in the game at the same time. Rules in *American Army* can be described as “never shoot a team member”, “never shoot a civilian”, “train your skills and be precise”, “cooperate with your group”, “follow orders given by a leader/officer” but also: “gain intercultural knowledge”. These are rules that are not only valid in the game environment but in the army as well. Beside that, players of the game can be promoted when they improve their skills, as a soldier can be promoted after successfully finishing his training. A major change in war strategies can be observed, which has led to the perception of cities as battlefields. Opposite to battles that took place outside of cities, where a huge number of soldiers were needed to have a chance to fight the enemy, the situation in a city is different. Smaller and specialized groups of soldiers may not simply shoot anything that moves but have to distinguish carefully between those who have to be fought and those who are harmless civilians and have to be protected. The city is perceived in such a situation not as a safe place to live, but as an endangered environment that has to be controlled. The experience of cities as targets for military actions from the inside – inhabitants committing suicide bombing, terrorist attacks in public places such as train stations – have led to the use of more and more controlling surveillance technology in the cities. The authors mention the example of London, where an area of 21 km² is completely controlled by video cameras. The relation between those virtual spaces of digital games and real architectural urban spaces is the central topic. As control and surveillance are important in a game, they are nowadays also omnipresent in our cities.

Different forms of resistance can be observed to those practices. As a reaction to this development movements such as “reclaim the streets”, “culture jamming”, but also “Hikikomori”, are described. “Reclaim the streets” is a movement of young people who organize illegal parties on public places, such as motorways or bridges, and thereby hinder the traffic and take over control. “Culture jamming” is a critique of consumerism and has led to ironic transformations of advertisement campaigns, using billboards for graffiti as e.g. “My ad is no ad”. “Hikikomori” is a resistance of young people who do not want to be a part of this new control society.

Therefore they retreat to their private rooms, not going out anymore and communicating with others only via the Internet using chat programs and online games.

All those forms of resistance are a creation of a shared social identity organized and supported by virtual communities.

The topic of communities is also central in the other two case studies. Soundscapes are an example of how popular music such as ‘techno’ and ‘house’ is explicitly described by their composers as urban. They are not specifically related to city spaces, which the term soundscape usually would stand for, but the concept is used here more to describe the development of youth cultures in the context of urban development. Not only music, but also fashion and specific urban sports together are forms of expression of different youth cultures. The authors describe this as mediascapes of popular culture. Music lies at the basis of “sound communities”. For example, young people who like techno tend to buy the fashion they are wearing at their techno parties in specific shops. Specific brands design clothes for this sound community. By wearing those clothes people express their belonging to this specific community. The interest in a specific musical style creates identity and the feeling of belonging to those youth cultures. Space is not a concrete geographical space here, but a rhythm and speed which leads to bodily reactions of the audience. The influence of music on our bodies’ reactions is named “spatial” by de Jong and Schuilenburg. The authors describe sound “as a proto-architectonic adventure” (2006: 113).

The last case study from genius to scenius discusses the change in the act of creation of art or any other innovation. The term “genius” refers to an individual who has an extraordinary talent to create something new and surprising. This concept has been criticized a lot already in the 20th century as in most cases it is not an individual but a group which works together with the goal to create something new and original. The product is then dependent on the interaction of many elements, for example on communication and information and not just on an individual. The term “scenius” has been introduced by the authors to refer to the collective form of the “genius”. This example relates back to the discussion of digital

games, as in game design it is always a group of people working together, each with a specialized task. However, this process is not finished when a game is published, as players of a game develop modifications which are published online and sometimes even integrated into the game by the game company. In the case of online games, the game is never a finished product but will be modified by the release of additional game material (the so called patches) and by modifications made by players. This example shows the development from a creation by an individual, to a group of people that creates a finished product for the consumer, to a group of people producing an object that is dynamic and unfinished and can be modified.

While the first case study is concretely related to geographical space and architecture the second and third case studies use space in an “immaterial” way. The developments described in *Mediascapes* are all seen in relation to changes in urban culture, however, and are less convincing in the second and third cases. The focus seems to be on the city, as the subtitle of the book explicitly mentions the city as research object. The representation of the city in virtual spaces and new architecture, and its relation to control society in the first chapter, to a more abstract use of the “urban” in youth culture, is a line the reader can follow. Why the city or the urban plays a role in the development from genius to scenius stays unclear.

The developments analyzed by de Jong and Schuilenburg could be described with a different focus, a focus on technological changes. The central topics in all three case studies are: (1) the development of virtual communities as a possibility of resistance against the control society; (2) the development of virtual communities as an option for identity construction and a feeling of belonging that is based on shared interest and not on geographically-shared space. This development is supported by technologies such as the internet and which is especially increasing since the advent of web 2.0 (which is not mentioned in this book) and the use of mobile technology such as mobile phones. This development has been described by Henry Jenkins (2006) as convergence culture, who suggested a different approach to describe those phenomena than those of de Jong and Schuilenburg.

Convergence makes media culture popular, for it is the people who actively appreciate and use it. The major trends of this cultural transformation are media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006: 2). According to media theorist Henry Jenkins, a “convergence is characterized by the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins 2006: 2). Collective intelligence aims at describing processes named the “scenius” by de Jong and Schuilenburg. These processes are illustrated by platforms such as Wikipedia or recommendation/evaluation systems like product-related discussion forums. These platforms enable people to create large pools of common knowledge and expertise, following an “everyone-knows-somethingprinciple”. Participatory culture describes a new way of thinking, one that no longer contrasts the roles of producer and consumer but rather unites both as participants. Web 2.0 is understood as a new potential for subversion, and democratisation e.g. of cultural and social access (Jenkins 2006, Goode 2005, Castells 2001).

While Jenkins focuses his analysis on cultural changes since the use of web 2.0, de Jong and Schuilenburg give important historical background information for their case studies, which is the strength of their publication. The examples de Jong and Schuilenburg have chosen are described and analyzed in detail. This book is a collection of examples from popular culture, and it is a treasure that gives insights into the cultural changes we are facing nowadays.

References

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