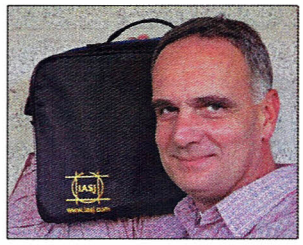

Popification - part two

In the last IASJ Newsletter I wrote about popification, the state of culture we are in. As I see it we are living in a popified world, an informal, superficial, buzz-dominated, fashionable, "life-stylish" world with no real style of life. Popification is the transformation from the old system of classes into a flat world with just one class. There is no high brow or low brow anymore but only "nobrow". John Seabrook wrote a book called "N©brow, the Culture of the Marketing and the Marketing of Culture". His point is that in the last ten years modern marketing has taken over from the chain of production-distribution-consumption of cultural goods and services. After reading the book I think I should write my self-invented word "popification" as "p©pification" since branding is the main tool in the popified world.

After I wrote my article on popification I wondered if I had not gone too far. Describing what I think is popification is one thing but in my article in the last IASJ Newsletter I went further by stating that jazz and jazz education offer one of the very few possibilities to escape the popified world. Did I really go too far?

Next thing I know, it's David Liebman on the phone, checking a few things about the next IASJ Jazz Meeting 2006 in Kentucky, USA. He continues: "Walter, this article on popification...." A long pause followed. Did he or did he not like it? Normally he reads the newsletter before it is printed but this time my colleague Rachel Gould had done the proofreading. After the long pause Liebman continues: "It's great, really great. It is the best thing I have read in years on the state of culture we are living in. Send me a copy for my own newsletter."

Receiving a compliment from the Artistic Director David Liebman is nice but receiving hard proof of being right on popification is at least as nice. This hard proof came not long after I had talked to Dave Liebman. Rembrandt van Rijn, the most famous Dutch painter ever, was born four hundred years ago in Leiden, not far from where I live now. The year 2006 in The Netherlands is the Rembrandt year. His painting and drawing are considered to be the greatest artifacts of western civilization. There is not so much known of his life. He became rich and famous, went bankrupt from too much collecting but was again doing reasonably well financially by the end of his life. He married a couple of times. Rembrandt painted things as they were with his fabulous technique. His paintings and drawings are now unaffordable. His most famous painting is The Night Guard, a large painting which fills a museum wall. If you see it once it will leave an everlasting impression.

Alas, Rembrandt van Rijn is now completely popified. Four hundred years after he was born, there are exhibitions of his works but there are also Rembrandt mugs, pencils and t-shirts for sale, there are new Rembrandt biographies, there are the Rembrandt city walks, and the shop on the corner of my street is selling Rembrandt van Rijn chocolates, a product unknown in his day. On top of it all there is Rembrandt ... the musical! After one season in The Netherlands the musical will be exported to Broadway, New York. This is popification to the hilt: Rembrandt van Rijn, singing, acting and tap dancing on stage. Some producers did some educated guessing about what could have happened in Rembrandt's life and turned it into shallow entertainment. Facts are simplified, violated and interpreted wrongly forever for the sake of commercial success. His bankruptcy is great drama, his second marriage even more so. Will we learn something new about the master painter Rembrandt van Rijn? No, we will be entertained, amused and perhaps be allowed to see parts of some of his paintings and we will live through the entire popified Rembrandt experience. No ethical questions are asked about the branding of Rembrandt, not even in the always-so-critical Netherlands. It is simply unavoidable, inescapable.

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