

## A book review of *Londyn 1967 [London 1967]* by Piotr Szarota

In 2011 Will Hermes' one of a kind, something more than only a cultural book, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever* was published, probably setting for the next years a desirable model of chronicling invaluable moments in the history of music (Hermes, 2011). Hermes' work aroused my interest in the artistic blossoming of New York City in the mid-1970s and encouraged me to delve into the range of major styles of modern music which were reinvented then — not only for my pleasure as a fan of this type of art, enjoying spending free time with the music player or turntable, but also from the point of view of a student in cultural studies. Paradoxically, although *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire* focuses only on the short period between 1973-1978 during which revolutionary forms of popular music both defined New York and were defined by the city, it opened before me wider than ever possibilities for musical research, as the author possesses the gift of the matchless presenting of surprising ways in which distinct, in the popular perception not going hand in hand, styles were intersecting. New York of the 1973-1978 epoch means salsa, hip-hop, jazz, classical, rock, dance music and so on, and, what Hermes helps us realize, without any of these components the real image of the New York scene loses its complicated vitality. Remembering about it, I opened the work *Londyn 1967 [London 1967]* by psychologist Piotr Szarota – a book which I incoincidentally wanted to read immediately after studying *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*. Not because I was under the impression, in many respects legitimate, that with the passing, not always in glory, of the 20th century into history, more often the 1960s than 1970s are viewed as the most crucial decade, but rather because of my appreciation of works not avoiding a very detailed analysis – an appreciation that is one of the benefits of my reading *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*.

One does not need to convince anyone that it is hard to find a decade that we look at through more rose-tinted lenses than the Sixties. Szarota, describing how, fueled by the power of youth, consumerism and mass media, London evolved into the capital of (pop) culture, luring cosmopolitan aristocracy of artists of various professions, reminds about two opposing ideas of 1960s London – the one of an absolute revolution and a change in the order of things and the

other of a radical and conservative politics, but the second of those faces seems to sink into the shadows in the background of the proposed city image. Szarota's London is still dominated mainly by youth and protest, a new bohemia of rockstars, filmmakers and trendsetters, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andy Warhol, Monty Python, music clubs, theaters, artistic and intellectual storms, free love and LSD which "would make the world a better place" (DeGroot, 2008, p. 208). Of course, Szarota gives us some notion, impression of what London used to be, and the sensational language, rumors and speculations which support his representation of the city cause that even somebody who knows almost all presented stories by heart can be sucked into the vortex of the tale. Even though some descriptions of the heroes' peripeteia, as those cited below, refer to our "lowest" interests: "there is no doubt that in 1967 Marianne Faithfull was no longer a virgin"; "Memories of the singer suggest that she betrayed her husband from the beginning" (Szarota, 2016, p. 75). Source materials used by the author, such as biographies, interviews, letters, literary essays or scientific works, are easily available – it is not a complaint, it cannot be required of anyone who wants to write about The Beatles to make an appointment with McCartney or to make extensive use of private archives of hardly accessible London underground brochures. Yet an accusation is the fact that the author rarely affixes footnotes to quotes. In many cases the reader can deduce from the content whose words are quoted, but because in the bibliography are sometimes several books by the same author, that inquisitiveness does not always bring reliable effects. Similarly, readers can wonder whether the author uses existing translations or translates passages from the English versions of publications himself. I am skeptical about the conceptual suspension of the book, the more that on the one hand we are dealing with an erratic academic workshop (footnotes, citations), on the other with sometimes very long, multiple, complex sentences. The problem is also the very organization of *Londyn 1967*'s content, that is, the division of the projected history into the twelve months of the year – at times the narrative is adjusted to the established concept a little artificially and if we did not know about the division adopted by the author, if the markings of the months disappeared from the pages, the (alleged) chronology helping to organize the described events would not be obvious at all. Furthermore, at the beginning of the book the author placed the names of several dozen of his characters to which he assigned short biographical notes. However, this is only a selection from a much larger range of the figures filling *Londyn 1967* whose purposefulness is not apparent to me, the more that the index at the end of the book covers all persons appearing in the text.

London of the 1960s is an era of such extraordinary social and cultural revolutions that in order to profoundly depict broken down barriers and established new ones, proclamations of

liberties and the eruption of the originative power of that whole decade, there have recently been produced works looking at London's arts, lusts, beliefs and so forth from various perspectives and from the point of view of diverse events (to mention only those books that do not appear in the extensive bibliography of *Londyn 1967*: Perry, 2002; Metzger, 2012; Levy, 2012; Harris, O'Brien Castro, 2014; Aldgate, Chapman, Marwick, 2000; Donnelly, 2014; DeGroot, 2008; Groes, 2016; Hoefflerle, 2013; Thompson, 2008; Walker, 2005; Whiticker, 2014; Collins, 2007). Their authors sometimes give vent to cultural imagination and mythmaking, as Szarota, sometimes offer their personal perspective from the time when they lived in London or provide nuanced scientific monographies. Being aware of the immense number of publications which have appeared in recent years highlighting the significance of the Swinging Sixties and that many of them are London-centric in their scope, I want to believe that *Londyn 1967* is a culmination of Szarota's long-standing interest in investigating and conceiving the cultural geographies of the 1960s. So I am not able to explain why the author writes as if for beginners, but on the other hand he does not always feel obliged to sum up the characters' importance or events' reasons and origins. One occurrence chases another, one piece of information chases another, and some parts of this London consist only of names and biographical scraps – effective, but as if drifting in the air. The author shows, first of all, how the fates of different characters, changing like a kaleidoscope, intertwined with each other, but the city is often lost, such as we can be, amongst these forms of its representation. Thus even a reader familiar with the subject, not to mention one who is just beginning the exploration of the cultural, social or economic reality of London in the sixties, can face profound troubles, for example, with separating “facts” which exist only as complemented by sentiment or imagination elements of legends, from those which had influence on the fate of a given society. Reading, I was expecting some conclusions, the stance of the author, thus my other slight disappointment rests on the lack of concluding words – the book ends abruptly. Taking this into account, unfortunately, the words of the reviewer of Szarota's book, posted on the cover of *Londyn 1967*, sound rather unfavorable and contrary to the intentions of the specialist, Wojciech J. Burszta, giving the recommendation: “Piotr Szarota very discreetly presents his own competence as a psychologist and researcher of customs, allowing his characters to speak for themselves and suggesting readers further clues for interpreting the then reality. He tells us: ‘A lot went on!’”.

Is *Londyn 1967* a valuable addition to the increasing body of literature on Britain in the sixties? A genealogy, just as this one, of Swinging London was definitely needed in Poland. The author briefly explains why: “The Iron Curtain and a pervasive censorship meant that only

fragments of information reached Poland. Few knew what was really going on. Most of the then Polish youth, people today already in their sixties, remember those times mainly as a powerful eruption of new trends in youth music, because – among other things – thanks to the Scout Broadcasting Station and Radio Trójka one could become acquainted with it. We all recall what a great event the concert by the Rolling Stones in Warsaw’s Congress Hall in 1967 was. It does not change the fact, however, that the image of those years has remained very one-sided in Poland” (Wróblewski, 2016, p. 5). Without doubt I could recommend this book as an introductory, longer essay for those who are just beginning to discover the period or those who “want to experience it once again”, fit their own memories to histories of other people and learn something about the Poles who had contributed to the mental and material transformation of the city (such as Roman Polański, Stefan Themerson, Jerzy Pietrkiewicz or Barbara Hulanicki). *Londyn 1967* seems to first of all fulfill the recently growing expectation to explore “our” influences in places all over the world (Krystyna Kaplan in her book *Londyn w czasach Sherlocka Holmesa/London in the days of Sherlock Holmes*, issued at the same time as *Londyn 1967*, also writes about Poles, in this case those who visited the rich capital of the British Empire; Kaplan, 2016) and the never ending need to represent Swinging London at least a little in an anecdotal and memoir mode. “All the time I had to remember that my story would also be read by people for whom the Sixties means many beautiful, personal experiences, that there is still a generation which claims to have grown up on the Beatles. I admit, moreover, that I also have a very personal relationship with Swinging London” (Wróblewski, 2016, p. 5) – Szarota is not afraid to acknowledge openly that the Sixties’ mythologies are a vital cause of our interest in and a constituent in our understanding of the decade. The hippie cover of the book is certainly not a harbinger of providing freshness to an overview of this tumultuous time, but in the end we are pleased with that hippie graphic and spirit.

The book of the Polish author caught my attention mainly because its title promises that only one year in London’s history is deeply analyzed, which seems very attractive for anyone seeing benefits of the method used by Hermes. I hope, however, that in the future there will appear a work written in Polish (maybe even by the author of *Londyn 1967*) or translated, capturing the life of London as the product of a convoluted, full of paradoxes cultural front, equally vivid, but resigning on some level from a newspaper tone and trying to challenge readers rather than appease their longings.

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