

The Global Sixties

A Cultural History

Geert Buelens

An extract

Original title De jaren zestig
Publisher Ambo Anthos, 2018

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Andy Brown

© Geert Buelens/Andy Brown/Ambo Anthos/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

Synopsis

Pitch

A unique cultural history of the 1960s as a global phenomenon, alternating between thematic and chronological accounts of the ways in which great geopolitical and cultural developments interlock and the origins of culture and value patterns which remain sources of inspiration and controversy today.

Focus

The canon of sixties culture is subject to little discussion: the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andy Warhol, the miniskirt will all appear on most lists, perhaps supplemented with James Bond, *Star Trek* or John Coltrane. The focus on these landmarks, however, has produced a rather one-sided image of the decade. Phenomena from mainstream culture such as *West Side Story*, *Cleopatra*, *The Sound of Music*, Brigitte Bardot, Barbra Streisand, West and East German westerns and the twist and bossa nova crazes are just as important for a proper understanding of the period. And what about non-white artists and writers like Miriam Makeba, Ray Charles, James Baldwin, Aretha Franklin, Ousmane Sembène, Nina Simone, James Brown, and Gilberto Gil?

This book frames the 1960s as a pivotal moment in the globalisation of culture, pushed forwards by the Cold War, decolonisation, the impact of satellites, transistor radios and television and the development of a true international youth culture. The fast rise in levels of education and the cultural consumption pattern of the baby boomers not only enable someone like Bob Dylan to become “the voice of a generation”, but also make the so-called art house films of Godard, Bergman and Antonioni reference points in discussions as to where the world is going. Accelerated decolonisation gives rise to a cultural self-awareness in parts of the world which have always primarily been outlets for popular culture but which now suddenly become vital in determining that culture. Where the 1920s saw the rise of a black elite culture in which colonial and American authors found one another, now a global black pop culture comes into being in which artists from Africa and the US not only influence one another but increasingly also reach a mass audience.

This book deals with the usual counterculture suspects and the Flower Power generation, as well as the sensitivities and taste of what American President Nixon called the Silent Majority. It takes into

account the work of artists from Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia, which no longer receives much interest today (Yevgeny Yevtushenko), or which only conquered the world later on (Fela Kuti, Umm Kulthum, Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso's Brazilian *Tropicalia* movement, Astor Piazzolla and the early films of Nagisa Oshima and Jamie Uys).

The sixties are characterised as an era of extraordinary hope and energy, the result of demographic factors, economic developments and geopolitical upheaval (accelerated decolonisation); theoretical discourses such as anticolonialism or the idea of the global village were instrumental in creating the 60s spirit, whereas others (e.g. post-structuralism) aimed at questioning some of its assumptions.

In the final analysis the book describes how artists in the West increasingly break with the moral and spiritual emptiness of their individualistic consumer culture, while in the East people try to make space for the individual with his or her own private preoccupations alongside the obligatory collective culture. The Cold War forces all camps to reflect on the central question of what they stand for ideologically and culturally. The answer is rarely unambiguous. In Western-oriented areas such as South Africa and Latin America consumerism and capitalism do not necessarily lead to cultural freedom and even in Western Europe and the US freedom of expression is continually curbed for political, moral or religious reasons. The Communist Bloc seems to stand for equality and peace, but almost never succeeds in disguising the authoritarian character behind these slogans and values. Third World countries which in the meantime try to trace their own path almost without exception become playthings for their former colonizers and the two power blocks.

Scope

The book is written from a Western/European perspective, but covers more or less the entire world, from the countries of the former Eastern Bloc to Latin America, Africa and Asia. The selection of material makes no distinction between high and low culture; pop music, comic books, musicals and fashion belong here as much as novels and paintings. Music and film are relatively central, because they appear to have the strongest claim on culture and the public debate in the sixties.

Structure

Alternating between thematic chapters and chapters providing an overview of each year, with added lists of high-profile, illustrative, wrongly forgotten or otherwise special songs, films, books, works of art etc.

Main characters

The story is told by places (Brasília, Sharpeville, Berlin, Paris, Havana, Chicago...), films, photos, songs, novels, poems, works of art and items of clothing.

Sources

The book is based in part on the analysis of over eight hundred films from 40 countries, more than 100 hours of contemporary television, dozens of literary works, thousands of hours of pop, jazz and classical music, along with popular magazines and newspapers from Africa, Europe, Latin America, Asia and the United States. The book also makes extensive use of and is supported by specialist academic literature.

Comparisons

No existing book unlocks the artistic and cultural developments of the sixties for the reader on a global scale. Hundreds of books have been written about the sixties, but they generally address only one country or a small group (Arthur Marwick's *The Sixties* is restricted to the UK, France, Italy and the US) or one year (often 1968, as in Kurlansky's *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*), one genre (*Changing times: music and politics in 1964* by Millward or the many books about *Nouvelle Vague*); others tackle only Western counterculture via rock music (Peter Doggett, *There's a Riot Going On*, or the recent *West Germany and the global sixties: the anti-authoritarian revolt, 1962-1978* by Timothy Brown) or only incidentally address art and culture in a narrative focused mainly on politics, diplomacy or social developments (DeGroot's *The 60s unplugged: a kaleidoscopic history of a disorderly decade* and Suri's *Power and protest: global revolution and the rise of detente*) or on (Western) culture in its broadest sense (*Die 1960er Jahre: Versuch einer mentalitätsgeschichtlichen Gesamtschau* by Welti published in 1999).

In terms of scope and tone the book is comparable to *Postwar* by Tony Judt – academically sound, but written for a broad readership; based on a large number of very diverse sources; panoramic while at the same time exhibiting the ambition to develop a clear vision on the subject. In common with Doggett's book mentioned above, this book contains chapters on the different years (although Doggett goes from 1965 to 1972) and interlinks analysis with anecdote. The way in which cultural, social and political issues are related is comparable with the work of Simon Schama (*The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*), Alex Ross (*The Rest is Noise. Listening to the 20th Century*) or Philipp Blom (*The Vertigo Years. Europe, 1900-1914*).

Marketing

The book is promoted in collaboration with the Brussels based cultural organisation deBuren, Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Museum L (Louvain), and movie theatres across Belgium and the Netherlands.

Target market

The book will be excellent for members of the baby boom generation curious to read the story of their own generation written by someone too young to have experienced it in person, and young people who want to know the background of so many artistic milestones, who will also benefit from lists providing hundreds of hours of fun on Spotify, Netflix, AmazonPrime, YouTube etc. Further, Buelens combines his easy narrative tone with a strong academic basis, making the book accessible for a broader scientific audience.

Chapter Overview

Introduction

The topical events of the sixties and their current relevance

The past

- How did people look back on the sixties at the end of the decade?

- What past events were people focused on in the sixties themselves: dealing with WWII and the Holocaust, and Bible films and Westerns as allegories for the present day

1960

- The official inauguration of Brasília as 'Capital of Hope'
- Decolonization and the 'Year of Africa'
- Sharpeville massacre
- Beatniks, Blousons Noir and Halbstarken
- *La Dolce Vita* and the superficiality of mass and consumer culture

Hope

- Hippies
- Moon landing & science
- Changing the world together
- "We Shall Overcome" and other forms of collective singing
- The Third World and Cuba & Israel as new beginnings
- Rising living standards
- Liberation theology

1961

- Gagarin vs the building of the Wall and the two Germanies
- Fear of the Bomb
- Rock culture in France & South Africa
- Migration and racism in France, *West Side Story*, the Freedom Riders
- Castro and the artists and intellectuals
- Artistic thaw in China and the rest of the Communist Bloc?

Faith

- The sixties as a religious decade, despite secularization;
- Singing nun and priests;
- Religious controversies (Beatles 'more popular than Jesus'); Vatican Council; Indian gurus; Jesus freaks;
- Maoism;

1962

- Segregation and desegregation in South African and US culture
- The Cuban missile crisis
- The twist and bossa nova crazes
- The end of the Algerian war

Love

- How widespread is the sexual revolution? Sexism/Machismo
- Marriage in the age of adultery and the commune
- Love in the communist world
- The Swedish example
- Emancipation of homosexuality
- Love and racism
- Sexploitation
- All You Need is Love

1963

- Assassination of JFK
- Art and literature in the Soviet Union; Sino-Soviet split
- The Folk boom
- Publications and Entertainment Act in South Africa
- Discussion in the East and West on the future and freedom of the novel

House

- Globalisation – how ubiquitous are the English language and Anglo-American pop culture?
- The United States as the world's new artistic centre
- Non-American film cultures
- African debates on authenticity, national culture and modernity
- Global breakthrough of modernist architecture, design and city planning
- Alienation
- Decolonization and the lingering impact of the West
- Ecology as a cultural and political movement

1964

- The Beatles conquer the world – the whole world?
- Beatlemania from Prague to Havana
- Goldwater and conservative culture
- Escalation of Vietnam war; Berkeley students

Pop

- The Golden Era of pop music
- Jazz & Pop
- Celebrity culture (Bardot and Monroe)
- Fashion, colours, freedom
- Fashion in the communist world
- Pop in Latin America, Africa and Asia
- Pop Art; pop literature

1965

- Censorship all around the world
- End of the cultural thaw in the Communist world (arrest of Sinyavsky & Daniel in the Soviet Union; *Kahlschlag Plenum* in GDR)
- Assassination of Malcolm X; Black Arts; Watts riot/revolt
- Brazilian culture after the military coup
- Indonesia: coup, genocide, culture
- Grants for the arts & artists

Work

- The birth of slacker culture (*The Big Lebowski*)? Why work?
- Working for Socialism
- Working for Capitalism
- Agrarian life
- Bureaucracy
- Automation, racism and sexism on the work floor
- Works of art; art as a career

1966

- The first Festival of Black Arts in Dakar
- Black Power
- Cultural Revolution in China

Play

- From *Hara-Kiri* to *Charlie Hebdo*
- Homo Ludens
- Looking at the play of others (sports watching; sports and politics)
- Literature, the theatre and the arts (Oulipo; free jazz & free improvisation; classical music; the blues; poetry; high & low culture; Fluxus; happenings; Brook/Grotowski/Boal/Living Theatre)
- Playful culture of Communist Europe

1967

- Six Days War – impact on the world and on Arab culture
- Greece
- Summer of Love, psychedelic drugs in the West
- Summer of Love in Communist Europe
- Racial issues in South Africa and the United States

Power

- Protest songs, protest singers
- Challenging authorities and the status quo
- The power of a new generation
- Anti-authoritarian counter-culture vs the Silent Majority
- Black Power as a global force; African American culture
- Second wave Feminism
- Colonialism, neo-colonialism and anti-colonialism

1968

- Global 68
- LBJ, MLK, RFK & Nixon
- Revolution, in the name of Marx, Mao or Che
- A new class struggle: students and workers unite
- International voices on *mai* 68
- *Mai* 68 and the arts
- The Palestinian question
- The end of the Prague Spring
- The massacre of Mexico-City
- Tropicália in Brazil
- The revolution on display

Violence

- Terrorism
- Violence is cool (*Bonnie and Clyde* etc)
- State-sponsored violence; Vietnam
- Symbolic violence
- Violence as cultural criticism

1969

- Pan-African Festival in Algiers; Black Panthers in Algeria
- post-Tropicália
- White protest in South Africa
- 69 - *Année erotique*
- Country cool
- East meets West in Shiraz-Persepolis
- Institutional criticism in the arts
- Woodstock; Manson; Altamont

Knowledge

- Thalidomide-crisis
- Scientific triumphalism; space age
- TV-age
- Books, information, knowledge
- Documentary art: literature, film, photography
- Offshore radio, little magazines
- The power and message of advertising
- Museums of Modern Art
- Computerworld; cybernetics
- Paranoia

1970

- Isle of Wight; crisis of the counter culture
- Silent Majorities; Elvis and Nixon;
- Beatles break-up
- Female activists (Yoko Ono; Leila Khaled; Angela Davis; Ulrike Meinhof; Bernadette Devlin)
- Cambodia
- Osaka 70; Mishima's suicide
- Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* and the end of the Sixties Future
- The return of utopia
- Back to the future; cult of youth
- Toffler and futurology
- Science fiction and the cold war
- A time of hope

+ Acknowledgments / Notes / Bibliography / Index

+ ca 100 lists (e.g. '10 films about the Holocaust', 'A decade of religion and faith in literature', '10 films about architecture, living and city planning', '10 forms of Beatlemania', 'Pop art in 10 stages', '10 songs about work', '10 additions to the theatre repertoire', '10 icons of protest music', '10 feminist moments in the arts' and '10 times computers in literature and the arts')

Press on *The Global Sixties*

‘There can be no doubt that with *The Sixties* Buelens has written one of the most important books of 2018.’ – ★★★★★ *Het Nieuwsblad*

‘Buelens’ retrospective is never nostalgic. The cultural and political developments he recounts are immediately accompanied by sober commentary. Often, readers will learn of things they have never heard of before. Pity the bookstore that lacks this book.’ – ★★★★★ *HUMO*

‘A definitive work.’ – *Trouw*

‘Buelens draws historical parallels and explodes false assumptions. An upbeat book about the optimistic sixties with a sombre message.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘In his extremely readable book he links the social and geopolitical developments of the sixties to the birth of popular culture.’ – *De Tijd*