From the Profane to the Sacred: Jimi Hendrix and the Sixties Counterculture as official British Heritage

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Recommended Citation
Jones, Peter, From the Profane to the Sacred: Jimi Hendrix and the Sixties Counterculture as official British Heritage, Counterculture Studies, 3(1), 2020.

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Abstract
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Keywords
British counterculture, heritagization, Jimi Hendrix, OZ, residual culture
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Counterculture as official British Heritage

Peter Jones, United Kingdom

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This paper looks at the recent trend of recasting the 1960s counterculture as official British heritage. It is argued this is due to cultural shifts in the British heritage sector, economic factors and a repurposing of the past to suit the present. The focus will be on the Handel & Hendrix in London museum as it evinces this remaking and the role of United Kingdom (UK) public bodies concerned with heritage, as well as the heritagization processes and particular conditions that enabled the rock star Jimi Hendrix and, by extension, aspects of the counterculture to be designated as official heritage. The implications of this ‘elevation’ will be discussed in relation to how the counterculture is currently represented. Raymond Williams’ concepts of the selective tradition and dominant, residual and emergent cultural elements are drawn upon in order to support the discussion.

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British Counterculture, Heritagization, Jimi Hendrix, OZ, Residual Culture
Introduction

Once perceived as a threat to order resulting in a moral panic and punitive measures by the state, as with the 1971 prosecution of the editors of the underground publication *OZ* for obscenity, the British counterculture after a period of relative neglect has found a place in contemporary culture as official heritage (i.e., that defined by governmental bodies and formally recognized organizations). Even though history has made much of the remains of Sixties counterculture non-toxic, this rebranding tends to involve the more innocuous and marketable elements of the counterculture such as popular music. One could not imagine Britain’s homegrown countercultural terrorist group the Angry Brigade being sanctioned as official heritage.

Rather than regarding heritage as amounting to things that have inherent significance, the premise here is that ‘heritage’ is a social construct and the product of heritagization; namely, predominantly top-down practices concerned with defining heritage and the assigning of value, meaning and identity. This has been termed ‘the authorized heritage discourse’ and encompasses social and economic imperatives, and the maintenance of sanctioned narratives about the past and national identity as well as prevailing power structures (Smith 2006). Heritagization is essentially repurposing the past to suit the needs of the present. It will be argued that this is the case with the 1960s counterculture.

Before we discuss how a black American rock musician became official British heritage, we shall first briefly look at how other manifestations of the counterculture have been constructed as such: the Beatles’ Abbey Road zebra crossing, London’s Roundhouse and the Felix Dennis *OZ* archive. The aim is to evince the heritagization of
various aspects of the counterculture and to introduce some of the key agents such as English Heritage and ‘consecrating’ processes or tools like ‘listing’, whereby what was once deemed profane has now become sacred.

**Heritagizing the Counterculture**

Stiefel notes that relatively recently there has been a trend for memorializing and preserving the built environments, material culture and the intangible cultural heritage associated with the Sixties counterculture. Stiefel cites the ‘listing’ in 2010 of London’s Abbey Road zebra crossing that featured on the front cover of *Abbey Road* (1969), the last recorded Beatles album (2019, p. 9). Being listed means it is deemed historically and culturally significant by English Heritage (since 2015 known as Historic England), a public body that registers and protects historic environments under the auspices of the British Government. The crossing is a site of pilgrimage for Beatles fans worldwide. It even has its own live streaming webcam. Yet, whilst acknowledging its global draw, official recognition of the crossing had a nationalistic dimension with it being seen as something uniquely British. At the time of the listing, the Government’s Minister for Tourism and Heritage remarked that the crossing was ‘part of our heritage’ (BBC 2010 n.p.). Indeed, heritagization in Britain is often a nationalistic enterprise, particularly if it concerns the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1960s.

In living memory of baby boomers and in a country rather obsessed with its past, the era, like the Second World War in Britain, is deeply mythologized and a national touchstone. The view of the 1960s is dominated by the popular nostalgic Swinging Sixties narrative:
‘For a few evanescent years it all came together: youth, pop
music, fashion, celebrity, satire, crime, fine art, sexuality,
scandal, theatre, cinema, drugs and media’ (Levy 2003, p. 6).

On much of the political Right, the Swinging Sixties are seen as a period of moral and societal decline and the counterculture a threat to civilisation. Conservative moral crusader Mary Whitehouse declared that:

‘[T]he whole “pop” scene with its emphasis on the “counter-
culture”, has done more than anything to destroy the manners
and morals upon Western society has been based’ (Whitehouse
1977, p. 38.).

Yet, such views only serve to bolster the era’s mythic status. In general, it is seen as a high point in British post-war society, especially in terms of its youth culture and is a perennial part of the country’s image. For instance, music by the Beatles, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones were part of the soundtrack of the 2012 London Olympic Games.

The resurrection of London’s cavernous Roundhouse, which was a key place in the history of the Sixties underground in Britain, can be seen as another instance of heritagizing the counterculture. Originally a nineteenth century railway works, in 1964 it opened as an avant-garde arts centre and quickly became a renowned counterculture hub. Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix and Jefferson Airplane all played there. The famous all-night launch party or rather ‘Happening’ for what would become London’s foremost counterculture rag International Times took place there in 1966. A year later, the venue hosted the seminal Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation featuring such countercultural luminaries as Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, existential psychiatrist R.D.
Laing and neo-Marxian guru Herbert Marcuse. The radical nature of the event and its impact cannot be over stressed. One of its organizers, David Cooper recalled its aim: ‘At the Congress we were concerned with new ways in which intellectuals might act to change the word’ (1968, p.11) and it did have a galvanizing effect:

‘[M]any young people actually took to living in the Roundhouse and then took their seminars out into local pubs, cafés and public places’ (Cooper, 1968, p. 10).

Indeed, the Roundhouse became synonymous with the counterculture. Its bête noire British police officer Norman Pilcher, infamous for arresting countercultural celebrities like Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, purportedly stated: ‘We intend to stamp out the Roundhouse and everything it stands for’ (Miles 2016, p. 112).

After falling into disrepair for many years, thanks to funding from two public bodies - Arts Council England which supports culture and creativity and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), the country’s largest funder of heritage, along with private support totalling £30 million - an extensively re-vamped Roundhouse opened in 2006 as a performing arts venue and creative centre to help disadvantaged youth (Roundhouse, p. 4). In its marketing the new Roundhouse makes much of its counterculture heritage. The International Times launch and the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation feature prominently as does its popular music history, all of which gives it a hip lineage and brand identity in its new incarnation.

More ephemeral aspects of the British counterculture have also been officially endorsed and saved for the nation. In 2017, the largely government funded Victoria &
Albert Museum (V&A) which specializes in art and design, and whose remit is the protection and promotion of the country’s heritage, purchased the Felix Dennis OZ archive. A founder and co-editor of OZ magazine, Dennis was an avid collector of counterculture material as the V&A’s acquisition shows:

‘The Felix Dennis OZ archive is vast and occupies over 50 boxes with a variety of material. This spans a full run of the magazine; page mock-ups detailing printing instructions; articles and artwork; fan mail and hate mail; subscriptions; business papers; documents relating to the obscenity trial; paintings; photographs; posters and Felix’s personal library’ (Offord 2017, n.p.).

During the 1960s and 1970s such material was subject to surveillance and censure by the authorities. In later years, outside of academic and aficionado circles, it had ‘largely been neglected or undervalued’ (Gadgil 2017, n.p.). Now, countercultural material such as the OZ archive is deemed to be of cultural significance and worth preserving. It is currently being catalogued and digitized by the V&A and includes the full run of the UK edition of OZ magazine (one might note here the first online OZ archive was set up by the University of Wollongong and has both the Sydney 1963-69 and London 1967-73 editions, and a synopsis of each issue). In a 2017 press release, the museum called the archive a chronicle of ‘one of the most politically and socially revolutionary periods in world history’ (V&A 2017, n.p.). Yet despite its international aspect, like the Abbey Road crossing, the archive is also viewed as something particular to post-war British culture:
‘This material deserves to be preserved at the V&A because the magazine and eventual legal battle over OZ represented a much broader and fundamental shift in British society in the 1960s. It raised the question: should, or even, could ‘The Establishment’ dictate what ordinary people saw, read and thought ...’ (V&A 2017, n.p.).

The Art Fund, a major British fundraising charity that usually concerns itself with fine art and the decorative arts, who helped the V&A purchase the OZ archive concurred:

‘Trustees agreed that this was a very important archive, which opened a window on to an extraordinary moment in British history, and was a vibrant example of visual culture from the 1960s’ (Saul 2021, n.p.).

Yet there is the problem with seeing the OZ archive or for that matter any other material as being an authoritative window on the past. Phil Cohen warns:

‘[It] does not mean this kind of material should be assigned privileged evidential status or be exempted from critique. Ephemera, by definition, are produced in the heat of the moment, but this does not make such material more authentic as an expression of political attitude or opinion than more considered statements, merely more difficult to collect and interpret’ (2018, p. 18).

Moreover, the act of consigning material, especially that which is agitational, to an archive entails displacement and ‘symbolic death’: ‘The passion accompanying actual
events, the sound and the fury of the battle, become subdued into the institutional hush of the reading room’ (Cohen, 2018, p. 24).

However, the acquisition of the Felix Dennis OZ archive was not the first instance of counterculture coming in from the cold. Earlier in 2016, the V&A hosted the blockbuster exhibition *You say you want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966-1970*, another instance of the era’s mythic power and the heritagization and recuperation of the Counterculture. Essentially a commemoration of the Sixties youth rebellion, this extensive show presented the era as one of ‘revolution’ in popular culture especially rock music, politics, consumerism and technology. The counterculture was represented variously (and uncritically) by the fad for Eastern mysticism, the Black Panther party, second wave feminists, the gay and civil rights movements, anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and figures like LSD proselytizer Timothy Leary and John Lennon. In 2019, the V&A exhibition travelled to Melbourne, Australia, under the title *Revolutions: Records and Rebels*. As in London, it was very successful both critically and in terms of visitor figures. Its wide appeal probably can be attributed largely to the fact that the exhibition largely conformed to the hegemonic Swinging Sixties narrative and the well-known developments in America and UK. As one commentator observed:

‘It’s generally a well-trodden path conforming to the popular nostalgic view of the period with its clichés and tropes like Swinging London, The Beatles, sexual freedom, psychedelia, Andy Warhol and hippies, and of course 1970 marking the supposed start of “the Fall” - disillusion and cultural decline’ (Jones 2016, p. 261).
Yet, its down under manifestation made apparent both the global spread of the youth revolt and local variants making for a richer and more inclusive narrative. Australian phenomenon in Melbourne included the iconic 1960s fashion designer Prue Acton, the Sunbury rock festival (often dubbed the ‘Aussie Woodstock’) and the political watershed of the 1967 Referendum that led to indigenous peoples being officially recognized as Australian citizens.

We will now turn to the Handel & Hendrix in London museum to provide a more detailed picture of the heritagization of the counterculture and its effects by looking at the rebranding of a countercultural icon. First, however, it is perhaps worth being briefly reminded of Hendrix’s impact on Britain some fifty years ago and his countercultural credentials as, like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, he spanned both mainstream culture and the counterculture.

**Jimi Hendrix and Britain**

Jimi Hendrix had arrived in Britain in 1966 and soon became venerated in popular music circles. Eric Clapton, guitarist for Sixties super-group Cream recalled that Hendrix left British musicians feeling both devastated and astonished:

‘We went off to America to record *Disraeli Gears*, which I thought was an incredibly good album. And when we got back no-one was interested because *Are You Experienced* [Hendrix’s debut album] had come out and wiped everybody out, including us. Jimi had it sewn up. I was in awe of him’ (NME Gold 2018, p. 56).
The mainstream media quickly picked up on Hendrix. He appeared on BBC’s television’s high-rating pop music show *Top of the Pops* and somewhat incongruously on family-oriented so-called light entertainment programs. Even the usually stuffy broadsheet *The Times* reported on Hendrix, noting that he more than matched the hype:

‘With his extravagant clothes and freaked-out hair, he plays the sexually aggressive pop role with effortless superiority; on stage, he plunges into an amplified maelstrom of blues and anguished electronic backlash, and twists, rolls and shakes with his guitar’ (Anon 1970, p. 6).

Hendrix also enthralled the counterculture and became one of its icons. His potent sex appeal, outlandish dress and ethnicity particularly appealed to a largely white British counterculture. Moreover, Hendrix’s music and seemingly happily racially-integrated group were iconoclastic, and deemed to have a radical political edge exemplified by his dissonant version of America’s national anthem *The Star-Spangled Banner* at Woodstock. Indeed, some see Hendrix as having made ‘some of the most quintessential countercultural music’ and Hendrix himself as a ‘*quintessential* countercultural personality’ (Kramer 2017, n.p.). Features on him and reviews of his music regularly appeared in the underground press as did adverts for gigs and record releases compounding his countercultural kudos. As with other underground pin-ups like Che Guevara, counterculture imagery also helped to foster Hendrix’s iconic status. Arguably the most notable was the 1967 psychedelic poster of him as guitar hero in full flight by Martin Sharp, graphic designer for *OZ*. According to one observer at the time, the poster ‘could be found in virtually every student pad in London’ (Miles 2017, p. 214).
In 1970 Hendrix fatally overdosed on sleeping pills. His demise was a cultural trauma not just for musicians and mainstream fans but also for the counterculture. *International Times* ran a large front page image of Hendrix with the stark epitaph headline: ‘JIMI HENDRIX BORN SEATTLE 1945 *(sic)* DIED LONDON 1970’ (International Times 1970). His passing seemed to be a watershed which, along with the break-up of the Beatles earlier in the year, signalled the end of the Sixties dream. A contemporary recalled: ‘The 60s ended for me in 1970 when they announced on radio that Jimi Hendrix was dead’ (Green 1988, p. 310). Others were more prescient about the aftermath. In an extraordinary obituary for *OZ*, Germaine Greer wrote:

‘Hendrix is dead, a heap of offal in a morgue, a heap of electronic paraphernalia for future marketing, and a bunch of hip biographies’ (Greer 1970, p. 8).

Indeed, thanks to the media, pan-generation fandom and popular music tourism, Hendrix has an afterlife. Like the Beatles, he continues to be a presence in the cultural landscape and one so iconic as able to be spoofed. A recent British television series had him encountering the ghost of the Baroque composer George Frideric Handel (Hendrix & Handel 2020). Hendrix, rumours had it, claimed to have seen the German’s spirit in his apartment. This probably apocryphal story brings us to the Handel & Hendrix in London museum.

**Handel & Hendrix in London Museum**

Part of two Georgian terrace town houses in Mayfair, one of London’s most exclusive districts, the museum consists of Hendrix’s apartment where he lived intermittently
during 1968-69 with partner Katy Etchingham and the adjacent residence of Handel. What was originally the Handel House Museum was inaugurated in 2001 and the Hendrix component opened in 2016 with the joint attraction rebranded as Handel & Hendrix in London. The yoking together of two figures over two hundred years apart does seem audacious and not to mention ahistorical, evoking as Philip Norman, a recent biographer of Hendrix, wittily put it:

‘… a double-act of Afro hair and shoulder-length periwig, knee-breeches and crushed velvet flairs, a combustible guitar and Water Music’ (2020, p. 335).

The project was realized due to a £1.2 million grant awarded in 2014 by the NLHF. Supplemented by private funding, it was used to restore Hendrix’s old apartment and set up a museum with educational facilities (Doherty, 2014 n.p.). In their NLHF grant application the Handel House Museum emphasized Hendrix’s importance as heritage and his place in British culture:

‘Jimi Hendrix was one of the most important figures in the history of British rock music and the reinstatement of the Hendrix flat will make it the principal location for learning about the musical heritage of Jimi Hendrix, his influence in the UK and social and cultural life in London in the 1960s’ (North 2021, n.p.).

In turn, the NLHF recognized the ‘historic connection between rock and the baroque’ despite the fact it was just coincidence that Hendrix was Handel’s ‘neighbour’ (Heritage Lottery Heritage Fund 2014, n.p.). Initially Hendrix was unaware he was living next
door to where Handel once lived, although he went on to claim that it inspired him musically and that he did own copies of the composer’s music.

Yet, Hendrix was not alone in his interest in classical music. It was certainly a feature of Sixties popular music especially progressive rock. Experimentation and an openness and eclecticism marked the era along with a willingness to challenge cultural divisions. Groups like The Nice freely appropriated the classics and others like Deep Purple worked with full-blown orchestras. Handel’s contemporary J. S. Bach, in particular, was widely drawn upon. Hendrix had a record of Bach’s harpsichord music, influences can be seen in The Beatles and perhaps the most dramatic homage was in the well-known languid organ opening of Procol Harum’s 1967 hit *A Whiter Shade of Pale* (Elie 2012). Nevertheless, the concern with classical music was also about seeking cultural validation and cachet through association with high culture.

Further connections are made between Handel and Hendrix; both being described as virtuoso musicians and émigrés yet they were hardly political or self-exiles. The links, however tenuous, to Handel (and by extension traditional high culture i.e., established heritage) were used to establish kinship between the disparate figures. This, along with support from cultural authorities such as the NLHF, served to legitimatize and ‘consecrate’ Hendrix and thus elevate the rock musician into the lofty realm of official British heritage (and the Western music canon). As Bourdieu notes:

‘Cultural consecration does indeed confer on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation’ (1998, p. 436).
Such consecration also serves to maintain the primacy of high culture and the status quo. What is more, even before becoming museums, the eighteenth century buildings had been listed; Handel’s home in 1958 and the adjacent building in 1976. The Handel House Museum used this to add credence to its NLHF grant application flagging up the site’s listed status and asserting that the American musician was fundamental to its historical importance:

‘Hendrix is a vital and fascinating element of the heritage of the buildings’ (North 2021, n.p.).

**Heritagization and Blue Plaques**

The process of Hendrix becoming official British heritage can be traced back to 1997 when his apartment building was given a commemorative ‘Blue Plaque’ which carried the inscription:


Blue plaques are awarded by English Heritage to celebrate places which have a strong connection to where notable individuals lived and worked. Although the best-known scheme, it is one of many in the UK both formal and informal. Proposals for plaques can be submitted by the public and are vetted by English Heritage. The nomination of Hendrix’s home was apparently initiated by Kathy Etchingham to commemorate his brief sojourn in Mayfair. Handel’s home had been memorialized by plaques since 1870. Yet, at the time, the decision to mark Hendrix’s residence was not without controversy and revealed disagreement over what constituted heritage even when officially
endorsed. Some members of English Heritage resigned in protest, believing Hendrix to have little cultural significance and of dubious moral character, especially in regard to his drug use (Roberts and Cohen 2014).

Despite such controversies, commemorative plaques have mushroomed and become more wide-ranging and populist in recent years, though at present very few London Blue Plaques celebrate women. Indeed, another Sixties popular music and counterculture poster boy has been honoured in the same way - John Lennon. His childhood home in Liverpool, in the care of the eminent charity the National Trust best known for administering stately homes, was awarded a plaque in 2000, as was one of his London residences in 2012. Plaques have also been used to make cultural and ethnic diversity more visible in line with official ideals of inclusivity, social cohesion and multiculturalism. The London residence of Jamaican Reggae star Bob Marley was given a plaque in 2019. The growth of plagues is also representative of major shifts in the British heritage sector. It has much wider purview than before and aims to be more inclusive and egalitarian. Greater attention is now paid to the recent past and the forms of popular culture (viz., the V&A hosted a major Pink Floyd retrospective in 2017) as well as the cultures of subaltern groups. For example, London’s Black Cultural Archives dedicated to Black heritage opened in 2014 with substantial support from the NLHF.

But plaques along with new museums are not only about commemoration and diversity. They also aid the commercialization through cultural validation and categorisation. Heritage in Britain is viewed as a social and fiscal asset, and deeply embedded in the country’s cultural and economic landscape. Cowell notes that “the social and economic significance of heritage is increasingly recognized by academics,
commentators, lobby groups and policy makers’ (2008, p. 15). Moreover, public bodies concerned with heritage are under increasing pressure to gain private funding. Some now view the Blue Plaque scheme as largely a marketing tool for English Heritage and other vested interests. The Handel and Hendrix plaques are trumpeted as ‘one of the most famous pairings of blue plaques in London’ (English Heritage, n.d., n.p.). Plaques and heritage are also connected to place branding, urban regeneration and cultural tourism especially popular music tourism, which have all expanded significantly. Cohen and Roberts note that:

‘Over the past three decades, official and commercial interests in popular music heritage and tourism have grown in the UK and beyond, evident in the proliferation of monuments and plaque schemes, tours and trails, maps and museums connected to a broad range of styles, from jazz to techno’ (2014, pp. 36-37).

Indeed, one can take the Experiencing Hendrix in London Tour (www.londonrocktour.com).

**Counterculture as Residual Culture Heritage**

The heritagization of the 1960s counterculture in Britain is more than just baby boomer nostalgia. It is a complex discourse and only a few salient features can be delineated here. Nor is it static, being subject to diverse and changing conditions and imperatives - cultural, economic and political. As we have seen, heritagization is discriminatory and involves various consecrating agents. Raymond Williams’ concept of the ‘selective
tradition’ (i.e., dominant accounts of the past generated by official bodies like the state and media) is useful here. He writes:

‘From a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded’ (1980, p. 436).

Heritagization operates like the ‘selective tradition’ and like the latter employs such devices as ‘reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion’ (Williams 1977, p. 123). The inoffensive and monetizable aspects of the counterculture become official British heritage while the indigestible elements are marginalized or suppressed. For instance, in 2000 a proposal for an exhibition of 1960s underground publications at London’s British Library was purportedly pulled due to political concerns (Gosling 2020, n.p.).

Although recognition and patronage, albeit selective, by cultural authorities does mean the preserving of the remains of the counterculture for future generations, it also arguably entails subsumption and loss of specificity and alterity (1970s punk rock has suffered a similar fate). The Roundhouse’s radical past has not put off global corporations. Quite the opposite - the likes of Apple, Huawei and Virgin have all used it to promote their businesses. For those wanting a left-field or edgy image, the Roundhouse is a good choice. What was ephemeral materiel in a war against orthodoxy and a repressive Establishment, the OZ archive is naively seen as a definitive insider chronicle of the period as well as groovy graphic design and relics that need to be preserved. As to Hendrix, as Greer predicted he has an afterlife canonized as a timeless
maestro supposedly on par with Handel and a stop on the popular music tourist trail. However, this is a gloomy and rudimentary prognosis. Drawing on Williams’ notion of a ‘residual culture’, one could argue that even in attenuated forms such as official heritage, the counterculture might be seen to still have some other import and function in the present. Williams asserts that there are various dynamic elements in a culture; the ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’ which are in an interrelationship that drives societal change. The dominant here we can conceive of as the mainstream. The emergent and residual are both defined by their relation to the dominant. Emergent elements are characterized by ‘new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships...’ and can be a new phase of the dominant culture and/or developments which are alternative or oppositional to it (Williams 1977, p. 123). The militant aspects of the counterculture can be seen as an oppositional emergent culture, while its less threatening manifestations like its fashion and music industries an alternative emergent form.

If we accept that the movement had petered out by the early 1970s, it can be regarded as constituting a residual culture. For Williams, though formed in the past, the beliefs, experiences and practices of a residual culture are still remembered and are far from dormant. In fact, they are ‘an effective element of the present’ (1977, p. 122). They still resonate, are seen as germane and inform the present. Arguably today’s concern with identity politics and militant ecology groups like Extinction Rebellion are, in part, a legacy of the counterculture. Although largely incorporated into the dominant culture within a residual culture, there are to varying degrees enduring alternative and/or oppositional elements (as well as the archaic). With this in mind, we might give a more optimistic diagnosis of even a counterculture cast as official British heritage. Like any
cultural form it is open to appropriation, reframing and reinterpretation; if you will, a kind of counter-heritagization. But this would not be about restoring the counterculture to an imagined pre-lapsarian condition, but critically engaging with it and seeing its real legacy and value as Hannon puts it, perhaps in being ‘a reservoir of radical traditions and as a vector for reimaginings and future solidarities’ (2016, p. 56).

Bibliography


