

## BOOK REVIEW

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**MUSIC AND ITS INTERCULTURAL DIMENSIONS:  
A REVIEW OF THE BOOK *NA STYKACH ISKRZY:  
LITERACKIE KONTEKSTY ROCKA*  
[ENG: SPARKS AT THE POINTS OF CONTACT:  
LITERARY CONTEXTS OF ROCK MUSIC] (2023)  
BY SŁAWOMIR KUŹNICKI PUBLISHED BY  
WYDAWNICTWO UNIWERSYTETU OPOLSKIEGO**

It is not easy to talk about art without considering the contexts in which it was created: cultural, social, political, or national. Edward Said, a theoretician of literature and culture, presents a perspective in the contextualist approach, remarking that a human being is somehow forced to actively “be” in the world. An individual connected to the world on numerous levels, even at the cognitive level, cannot separate themselves from it and the contexts that permeate all spheres of their life. This perspective is presented in the latest book by Sławomir Kuźnicki, a Polish Doctor of literary studies, an English philologist and a literary critic associated with the University of Opole. Kuźnicki is also a poet and translator. His research interests are connected with the topics like gender, feminism, rock studies, science fiction, dystopia, and utopia. The book *Na stykach iskrzy: literackie konteksty rocka* (2023) [ENG: Sparks at the Points of Contact: Literary Contexts of Rock Music] points out the intersections of music and literature in an intercultural manner. At the same time, he does not avoid personal perspective as he writes directly about the unique significance of music in his life. He states that it was an inspiration to publish this book. The author notes that music

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does not have to be only an act of passive and semi-conscious listening, but also of contemplating the meanings and understanding these meanings: in the lyrical, melodic, and symbolic layers. The book is divided into two parts: in the first, the author describes chosen case studies of rock music correlating with the literature, and in the second, he illustrates the broader cultural and intercultural context of the considerations. The author situates the book at the intersection of the sacrum and the profane: a material and spiritual experience. On the one hand, there are the topics of gender, sexuality, and social norms. On the other hand, he covers some existential issues such as an individual's place in the world, religion, and identity.

The first part features six specific cases of musical artists and bands, and the second part features another six. Most of them concern artists from English-speaking countries: primarily the US and the UK, but also Australia and Canada, which can be explained by the author's educational profile and interests. However, one of the subchapters concerns the case of a Polish artist, which is a fresh element among the works written in English. In the first part of the book, Sławomir Kuźnicki writes about artists and bands such as David Bowie, Nick Cave, Lou Reed, P. J. Harvey, Maciej Maleńczuk, and Michael Gira. The second part features names such as Prince, Queen, The Beatles, Nine Inch Nails, Nina Simone, and Peaches.

In his book, Sławomir Kuźnicki dedicates the first subchapter to David Bowie, who appears in the context of the artist's fascination with dystopian concepts, as well as science fiction motifs, which are also important motifs for him. The author also describes Nick Cave's latest pieces (2016–2019), dedicated to his personal tragedy – the tragic death of his son. The artist's music on his new albums is confessional, deeply personal, and poetic. Kuźnicki tries to prove with this example that rock music can be perceived in terms of poetry. An artist Lou Reed is discussed in the context of his 2011 album named "Lulu," which he created with the heavy metal band Metallica. It features reinterpretations of German novelist Frank Wedekind's dramas, but also the politics of sexual transgression and shock. The music genre of rock is a space in which, similarly to literature, one can express rebellion against all norms: social, political, and cultural. Music in this sense becomes a tool for constructing the identity of a revolutionist. It is similar to the case of the British artist known as P. J. Harvey. Her musical work contains a clear socio-political context, but also an appreciation for

the fields of aesthetics and photography. P. J. Harvey's band does not avoid commenting on the reality and nonconformist attitudes.

The only described case of an artist from outside the Anglo-Saxon cultural circle is Maciej Maleńczuk. The controversial Pole seems to be influenced by the work of the 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson. In his lyrics, Maleńczuk undertakes to translate her poems in opposition to the classic and most widely known Polish translation by Stanisław Barańczak. The intercultural context of mixing the East and West and their external opposition allows the reader to notice the titular "sparks at the points of contact" in the work of the lonesome Dickinson and the eccentric Maleńczuk.

Michael Gira, the leader of the band Swans, described in the next subchapter is also a literary author – he is not only a musician but also a writer of short novels. In his musical career, he refers to the sphere of the sacrum, spirituality, and metaphysics, but also religion as a powerful social institution. His main inspiration is the poetry of the English artist William Blake, which is understandable, because this poet of the Romantic period covers multiple biblical motifs, also considering himself a mystic. The example of Michael Gira is the last described by the Polish researcher in the first part of the book, devoted specifically to the literary context. The second part of Sławomir Kuźnicki's book concerns a broader cultural context, including the non-literary one.

The first personality, whose work is analyzed, is Prince, who was inspired by the utopian visions and doctrines of Jehovah's Witnesses. Kuźnicki also studies the case of one of the most recognizable bands in the world: Queen, as their work was influenced by the visual arts, such as the fairy-tale paintings of the 19th-century English artist Richard Dadd. Queen's work is also galvanized by the unique style presented in the fantastical graphics of the French artist Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard, known as the Grandville.

Another described case of an English band is The Beatles, whose music became a sort of inspiration for the ferocious ideology of the American criminal Charles Manson. The leader of the religious group called "Family," known for killing actress Sharon Tate and others in 1969, emphasized in his words an interest in The Beatles' "White Album" album from 1968. Manson also used references to the biblical Apocalypse of St. John and the alleged ethnic war in his murderous philosophy. A few decades later, at the end of the 1980s, was the beginning of the existence of the band Nine Inch Nails. Interestingly, their music is inspired by the figure of Charles Manson.

The next case described by Sławomir Kuźnicki concerns a completely different manifestation of ideology. Nina Simone was a singer and songwriter performing on the peripheries of jazz, soul, and blues in the second half of the 20th century. Simone is perceived as an important figure of the Civil Rights Movement, which developed in the 1950s. The social movement opposed racial segregation and social injustices, for instance on the subject of gender. Simone, as a black female musician, was vulnerable standing in an intersectional position to the politics pursued by the USA at the time. In her career, she recorded many songs with a political tone, which were a response to both current events and general social injustice.

Nina Simone became the inspiration for a Canadian artist known as Peaches. The name "Peaches" appears in Simone's song "Four Women." The song addresses the topic of social injustice and stereotypes about African American women in American society. Merrill Beth Nisker, who took her pseudonym from this song, covers gender and feminist themes in her artwork. She criticizes male misogyny and common patterns regarding gender roles. During her performances, Peaches is not afraid to shock and blur the boundaries between the masculine and feminine. The bisexual artist sings about hypersexuality and queerness. Peaches refers here to the concept of "heterosexuality" proposed by Amy Shields Dobson, which refers to the model of femininity affirmed in a world that depends on the heterosexual matrix.

Rock music is described by Sławomir Kuźnicki as a form of narration about the world and its issues in the physical and metaphysical dimensions. Both literature and other forms of artistic expression have influenced and still influence the development of this genre of music. Intertextuality in the cases analyzed by the author also has a powerful intercultural dimension. The famous bands and artists he analyzes get humongous masses of listeners around the world. One of the reasons for that could be the universality of the lingua franca – English, which is so popular and natural that it stands above ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, or national boundaries. The author argues that rock music exceeds the boundaries of particular fields of art, and at the same time is widely accessible to diverse groups of recipients: it presents ideas, philosophies, and motifs that can become an inspiration for listeners from different cultural circles, which seemingly have nothing in common.

Sławomir Kuźnicki conducts the narrative as deeply inspirational storytelling and describes the background of the creation of presented artworks,

and their history. He indicates both the successes and failures that affected the artists and bands. There are also multiple references to other cultural texts from all over the world, making the whole book more understandable in terms of discussed topics for the reader. Even if the chosen artist or band could be unfamiliar to the recipient, they have an opportunity to apprehend them which is possible due to a wide range of references to classical and popular contemporary works. These are used as a thematic point of reference helping the reader extraordinarily. The author tries to indicate and prove that rock songs lyrics are not a worse sort of literature and culture in general. These are not opposed to so-called high culture and their meaning should not be oversimplified. The book is practical and illustrative as it focuses on specific problems, artists, and studies. It is written in an accessible language understandable both to a professional with a specific academic background in culture and music, as well as to a more unprofessional enthusiast of these fields. The author, who has a proficient academic education, undertakes to translate actual musical texts and demonstrates his interpretations using them. However, he also provides the original English version of specific fragments in the footnotes.

The book is published only in Polish, but the inclusion of English texts may be particularly valuable for Polish people speaking English and may wish to compare the translation with the original work. The book is rich in additional bibliography and references to academic literature, translations, and the author's reflections, which supplement the given issues. The matter of subjectivity presented in the book can be understood in a dualistic way. Because of that, the author seems to be closer to the recipient, shortens the distance, and appears more accessible, which may encourage them to read. On the other hand, private references can be perceived as crossing the boundary of some kind of sacred scientific neutrality. At this point, the question should be asked: is it possible for an academic work to exist in isolation from the various contexts? The book *Na stykach iskrzy: literackie konteksty rocka* (2023) convinces that it cannot.