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JOINT PhD THESIS

A STUDY OF THE CITY IN LARS SAABYE CHRISTENSEN'S *BEATLES* TRILOGY

-ABSTRACT-

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Keywords: place, space, the sense of place, the senses, mapping, Oslo, Lars Saabye Christensen, walking, memory, remembering, literary cartography, the city, urban literature, the Beatles.

The present thesis started off from a simple question: What is the role of the city in Lars Saabye Christensen *Beatles* trilogy? By answering this question, the intention was to get a better grasp of the novels in question and open up literature to advances made in humanistic geography and urban studies. The corpus selected for research consists of three novels that together form a trilogy and tell the story of Kim Karlsen and his friends, in the city of Oslo: *Beatles*, *Bly [Lead]*, *Bisettelsen [The Funeral]*.

Lars Saabye Christensen is a contemporary Norwegian writer born in Oslo in 1953 and often named an Oslo-author since beyond his personal roots the city is pervasive throughout his writing. My research was designed to look beyond this label and find how the city infiltrates the text and how the narrative interacts with the urban scene. The initial hypothesis was that the city's role is multi-faceted, it is the backbone of the narrative thread while also being constructed through narrative. As the narrative and the city are being constructed, the stories are anchored on the city's map and will be revisited as the city is also remembered, thus becoming a mnemonic aid. In understanding the role of the city, the analysis was mainly focused on the fictional Oslo created in his novels, a city closely related to the real Oslo, however, the scope of the research did not include looking specifically at how much of the real city made its way into the books, whether there are any gaps in mapping it or whether any elements have been distorted or recreated in writing. This could be an interesting project to be pursued in the future though, but the scope of this thesis could not include it.

The broader theoretical framework consists of findings made within The Spatial Turn in the humanities, which advocated for due attention to be given to space and spatiality in general, by reaching a balance between time and space, as the former had dominated theoretical approaches for centuries. The key concept that influenced my research is place, the form of space that is meaningful and loaded with stories and memory. In order to understand the role of the city in Lars Saabye Christensen's trilogy, it was necessary to look at how the places mapped through the

narrative thread may reveal new ways of interpreting the text. Place was defined primarily through advances made in humanistic geography and the writings of Edward Casey or Yi-Fu Tuan, for example. Further, other important tools used to answer the research question are: mapping, literary cartography, the senses and the sense of place, walking, place-memory and processes related to memory.

The thesis includes 5 main chapters, plus a general introduction and final conclusions. The approach was to start off from theoretical aspects and then turn to close readings of the novel, while making this transition as smooth as possible. Besides the main introduction to the research topic, each chapter contains its own introduction for an easier reading experience and in order to clarify the goals set for each. Moreover, preliminary conclusions have been added at the end of each chapter but also within the chapters whenever the need to reiterate the findings became necessary. The thesis also contains an annex with an interview given by Lars Saabye Christensen in connection to my research project which reasserts the importance of the city in his writing and provides some useful insights on Christensen's take on place and memory.

The **general introduction** sets out to clarify the research topic and outlines the directions to be followed throughout the thesis, together with introducing some of the theories and concepts that will be used in order to find answers for the hypotheses chosen. Further, an argument is given for the choice of studying the city mainly through the lens provided by the concept of place as well as why looking at narrative as a form of mapping could be a useful approach. Also, a brief outline of each chapter is included in order to provide the readers with a map of the thesis and a preview on its structure.

The **first chapter**, entitled "Theoretical Framework" has as its main purpose to introduce and define the concepts and theories that will be used in the close readings of the novels. When writing on the city, an incredibly complex topic, the critical and theoretical studies available are extremely varied and numerous. A careful selection had to be made as to what should be included in order to strengthen my arguments and help when testing out the hypotheses set for this thesis. The theoretical chapter begins with a section dedicated to the Spatial Turn and its aim is to explain how it led to renewed interest in matters of spatiality in the field of humanities. The presentation includes the findings of some of the fundamental thinkers that supported this turn and who advocated for the need to find a balance when discussing time and space or history and geography.

Following the discussion on the Spatial Turn, the theoretical chapter contains 3 main sections on the city, memory, and place. The section dedicated to the city begins with an introduction to the type of literature which may be aligned to the “writing the city” genre. By no means intended to be an all-encompassing review of the theoreticians involved with the urban given the tremendous amount of writings involved with the city in general or with the city in literature, this section presents some of the approaches taken to literary texts that are built on the urban scene. Besides writing the city, the processes of mapping and walking the city were also introduced as central to the way the city is revealed in the trilogy. Narrative is very much similar to mapping and telling a story resembles the drawing of a map, operating with symbols and requiring the participation of the reader to decipher it. Further, walking as a spatial practice becomes key when it comes to writing, mapping and remembering the city. As far as memory is concerned, the theoretical chapter includes a section dedicated to this process and is focused on showing how memory is inherently spatial. Edward Casey’s place-memory is one of the main concepts introduced here. Further, the theoretical chapter closes with a section dedicated to the key concept used in this research: place. It reiterates some of the ideas put forward all throughout the chapter in what concerns place, but also introduces the sense of place and the senses as central elements.

The second chapter, entitled “Lars Saabye Christensen’s Writing” functions as a transition from the theoretical framework to the close readings of the novels, and intends to give an introduction to the writer’s work. Though not all-encompassing, this introduction focuses on those elements that support and enhance the research topic of this thesis. Following a brief discussion around the writer’s position in Norwegian literature, separate sections are dedicated to analyzing fragments from his poetry collections and short stories. The intended result was to reinforce the importance of the city in his writing as well as enrich the arguments that will be made based on the trilogy. The topics of memory, narrative as a form of mapping or the strong connection to places were analyzed.

Following the first two chapters, each of the following ones deals specifically with the novels of the trilogy. Even if the choice was made to dedicate separate chapters to each, the novels will be treated in a comparative manner, going back and forth between the three texts.

The third chapter, dedicated to the novel *Beatles*, is also the longest and it begins with a general introduction to the novel. It then follows three different threads, looking at the role of music, closely analyzing the first chapter of the novel, and then looking at the processes unfolding on the city's scene, plus the meaningful places created as a result. For a novel so deeply indebted to music, this aspect could not be ignored and my analysis looks at how music interferes with the text. The role of music in this novel could have been a complex enough research topic in itself, however, the analysis focuses on those elements that are closely related to the research topic of this thesis, specifically looking at how music contributes to shaping the city and at how it is also intimately connected to memory. While analyzing the novel, it became clear that the first chapter is the key to its understanding and it is actually a condensed version of it. Due attention was given to this first chapter as the place where the map of the city is drawn and the characters are introduced. It was also noticed that there is often a double meaning included as the optimistic and effervescent story of youth is shadowed by dark signs and disrupted. Further, looking at the novel overall, mapping, walking, and remembering the city were placed under scrutiny, always looking at how these processes influence the narrative thread and its rhythm. As a result of these processes, meaningful places are created on the city's map and some of these places were taken a closer look at.

The fourth chapter of the thesis is dedicated to the novel *Bly [Lead]* and it also begins with an introduction to the novel, which clarifies the symbolism of its title and announces friendship as one of its main themes. Music is no longer as pervasive as in the first novel of the trilogy but it still plays its role in setting the scene and describing the city, so a short section will be dedicated to music as well. In what concerns mapping, walking, and remembering the city, the focus is first of all on how the map of the city drawn in *Beatles* is revisited as the layers of the city are made visible. Walking the city is still a fundamental practice though it now happens more often for the city to be viewed from above.

The fifth chapter tackles the third novel of the trilogy, *Bissettelsen [The Funeral]*, a literary work that comes to challenge the structure of the first two novels and begins by introducing the now adult Kim Karlsen, who lost his memory and sets out on a long journey towards home. Remembering is now replaced by forgetting and trauma while the main character undertakes a magical tour towards death. However, remembering the city is still key, but it is now mainly the

readers that revisit its map and the meaningful places created in the first two novels. The story narrated in *Beatles* is also now challenged by a hidden manuscript containing those events that were removed from the narrative and suppressed, thus, also shedding light on all the dark signs that were mentioned when analyzing *Beatles*.

The final conclusions are intended to clarify the results of this research and how the initial hypotheses were tested. Looking to show how the city infiltrates the text at different levels, the research demonstrated that the city is the backbone of the narrative thread and while stories are woven on its fabric, the fictional city itself is constructed. During these processes, memories are anchored on the city's map and stored in meaningful places. Thus, the city becomes a mnemonic aid and remembering is triggered by revisiting the city's map.