MERIDIAN CRITIC No. 1 / 2015 (Volume 24)

Memory and Identity Building Strategies: The Role of Clothing in Lars Saabye Christensen's *Beatles*

Andra-Lucia RUS
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania

Abstract: This paper aims at analysing how memory and identity are forged in the novel *Beatles*, written by the Norwegian author Lars Saabye Christensen in 1984. Special attention will be given to the role of clothing for the act of walking and the use of music, two main strategies at work in this novel. Beatles is a text deeply engaged with remembering and mapping the city while also being an initiation story narrated on the background of Oslo and the Beatlemania that spread through the 60s. Clothing becomes important in two ways. Firstly, in connection to the spatial practice of walking the city as shoes become symbolic for this act. Secondly, the cultural revolution that manifested itself during these years was very much concerned with breaking away from established norms, a direction visible also in clothing style and hair length, for example. These two aspects will be examined throughout this paper and set against other themes in the novel.
Keywords: memory, identity, the city, clothing, walking, The Beatles.

Introduction

Lars Saabye Christensen is a contemporary Norwegian writer, born in 1953 in Oslo. He is very popular both in Norway and abroad, mainly known for his novels, translated in several languages, including Romanian in the case of *Beatles, The Half Brother* or *Herman*. The current analysis stems from a larger doctoral research project on the role of the city in Christensen's work, where the main processes of writing, mapping, remembering and walking the city are examined in order to find the interferences between the text and the urban. All these processes also lead to the building of identity and memory, consequently, this paper will look at this matter using the lens of clothing and how it is employed.

Beatles was published in 1984 and it became the book of a generation in Norway, so it still continues to be the book Lars Saabye Christensen is most

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

popularly known for. It also constituted a breakthrough for the author's writing career. The novel tells the story of 4 young Norwegian boys (Kim, Ola, Seb and Gunnar) growing up on the streets of Oslo in the 1960s, struggling to define their identity and define their relation with adults and society while each of them secretly takes up the identity of one of The Beatles members. Therefore, it can be included in the larger tradition of the Bildungsroman and presents several characteristics that can award it this status. Norway itself was at the time going through a period of change and this is also very well reflected through the novel. Though not being the main purpose of the book, at least not overtly, the spirit of the age is very well documented with several references to important events of the decade, especially in relation to music and the Cultural Revolution that took place at the time. Being a novel so much embedded in the city of Oslo, it reveals a series of elements that characterized life in the city during those years and in doing so, it provides support for the life stories of our characters. The act of walking is the main strategy used by the group in negotiating their identities and being outside on the city streets is primarily an act of freedom set against the atmosphere of home or school.

The novel is a first person narration, from the perspective of one of the four main characters, Kim Karlsen, and it covers a timespan of seven years, starting with the spring of 1965 and ending in the autumn of 1972. The rhythm of the narrative is set by the passing of the seasons, the release of new Beatles singles or albums and by the interaction of the main characters with the city. Narrated in retrospect, a feeling of nostalgia may sometimes be sensed and, of course, a certain amount of subjectivity. The title of the novel itself sets forward one of the main themes of the book: music. Taking after the Liverpool band that forever changed the history of music, the music-text interferences abound in the novel. Since Beatlemania extended to more than just music and encompassed several aspects or youth culture, including a certain a way of dressing and hairstyle, these aspects are well captured in the novels and contribute to a better understanding of the themes it deals with.

Going forward, the main body of this paper will follow a twofold analysis, beginning with the act of walking and the symbolism of shoes in the dynamics of the characters' interaction with the city. Then, music will be placed under focus and how the identification with their idols contributed to the shaping of identity in the case of the four boys.

Walking and Shoes

One of the most common ways of exploring and mapping the city depicted in fiction is the act of walking, a spatial practice that has been examined theoretically by, among others, Michel de Certeau or Philipa Matos Wunderlich. It allows for the city to be experienced directly while getting immersed in all aspects of everyday urban life. In itself, walking is one of the most basic forms of

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

movement, an act that humans do almost unconsciously and that allows for a direct and bodily immersion in places. Different types of walking may be differentiated depending on whether they have a purpose or are purposeless or on whether the walker is also open to perception or not so much involved or interested in the outside world. Philipa Matos Wunderlich analyzes the action of walking in her article "Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space" by giving one definition of walking using the following words:

> With one foot-after-the other, we flow continuously and rhythmically while traversing urban place. Walking is an experience we are not conscious of, ignoring its potential as an aesthetic, creative or simply insightful practice. It is while walking that we sensorially and reflectively interact with the urban environment, firming up our relationship with urban places. Walking practices and 'senses of (or for) place' are fundamentally related, the former affecting the latter and vice versa. Furthermore, walking and 'walkscapes' are rhythmical. While 'walking' in the city, we perform in space-time, becoming immersed in temporal continuums of social everyday life activities fused with spatial and natural rhythmical events. (Matos-Wunderlich, 2008, p. 126)

The author further dwells on how walking as a way of experiencing the city is multisensory, it engages all senses and there is nothing to mediate the contact with urban places. Another idea supported by the author is that it is easy to overlook the effects and power of walking when it comes to the urban and identity, an act that is spatial, sensorial and reflective at the same time. The strength of walking may also be found in the way it firms up human relationships with urban places and this is very well accounted for in *Beatles*, where places have a huge role in the initiation and memory building projects of the characters. Further, Michel De Certeau is another theoretician that gave attention to the act of walking and he argues that there are two facets of the experiencer in the city, that is voyeurs and walkers. The voyeurs keep distance from the city and are consequently in a good position to read its space. Walkers, on the other hand, are "possessed" by it:

> They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. (De Certeau, 2002, p. 384)

An important element when discussing walkers is the significance of footsteps and traces and in order to illustrate this, some examples from *Beatles* will be provided in the following paragraphs. This selection will reinforce the role played by walking,

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

shoes and footsteps in the economy of the novel, influencing both the narrative rhythm and the technique employed.

The novel *Beatles* is narrated using the retrospective technique and the opening page presents the narrator in a summer house during autumn, from where he plunges into the past in order to tell his story. The cue that primarily sets free the process of remembering is the sound of shingle under their shoes. This is the element that facilitates the transfer between the present time of the narration and the events narrated:

> And although I don't think about it, the reel behind my eyes stops at a particular frame, I hold it for a few seconds, freeze it, then let it roll, for I am all-powerful. I give it voices, sound, smell and light. I can clearly hear the shingle crunching beneath our shoes as we traipse across Vestkanttorget… (*Beatles*, p. 3)

Christensen's main characters are often included in the typology of *the stumbling hero* which at the same time expresses their difficulties at adjusting to society, but also the fact that they are so often on the move. Right from the beginning, the events are placed in Vestkanttorget and related to the idea of walking and footsteps, reasserting the centrality of these events for the novel and the characters' initiation story.

With walking being such a central activity in the novel, footsteps and shoes are recurrent images. For example, in the novel's opening chapter, when the boys steal a car sign and then all head home, Kim contemplates his worn out shoes and looks forward to getting a new pair, now that spring has arrived. As mentioned in the theoretical introduction to the concept of place and how one is created, the repeated contact with one through everyday activities is a very efficient practice. This is now signalled through the worn out shoes that represent a long history of moving around the city:

> I joined John. We were going the same way, down Løvenskioldsgate, George and Ringo trudged off to Solli plass. Neither of us said a word. Sand from the previous winter crunched under our shoes and there was congealed dog shit all over the pavement. They were sure signs of spring even though it was still cold and dark, only mid-April. I gazed down at my shoes and was happy that Mum promised me a new pair in May, the ones I was wearing now looked more like heavy sky boots and they were a lead weight. (*Beatles*, p. 5)

One other instance when the city is experienced by walking is the evening when Ola disappears and the boys set out to find him, in a quest that will take them through all the familiar places they could think of to find their friend:

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

> We shot down the stairs and looked for footprints in the fresh snow. Ola's overshoe with diagonal stripes on the sole pointed in the direction of Drammensveien, but there all the tracks vanished. (*Beatles*, p. 137)

This is how their search starts, threatened by the fall of snow which can cover everything and erases traces. This might also be perceived as metaphorical since snow does have the power to transform landscape and city places so that they look completely different and unfamiliar as most usual colors and signs disappear under it. The journey continues, though:

> We had to start our search again. We went down to Mogga Park, not a sign of Ola, continued up to Bygdøy Allé, snow began to fall, now the last of Ola's boot prints would be obliterated for ever. (*Beatles*, p. 137)

Using the boot prints, the boys navigate through the city in order to find their friend before all traces vanish under the snow and this quest shows how walking and traces left by shoes influence their life once again.

The Beatles and Identity

The Beatles have marked a turning point in the history of music and have given rise to a cultural revolution that extended across the globe. Unsurprisingly, their success has brought about a series of books, documentaries or analysis. Lars Saabye Christensen's approach to this topic is a different one. Though not writing a book about The Beatles, the author manages to convey a great deal about the history of the band by reflecting on how it affects the destiny of the four main characters. In this respect, it becomes necessary for anyone looking to analyze Christensen's novels to also look at the history of the Beatles and the impact they had on society. One of the main researchers that focused on the life and music of the Beatles is Chris Ingham and his *Rough Guide to the Beatles* offers an excellent introduction to the life and music of this world acclaimed band, while also looking at their impact for the history of music. His introduction begins in the following manner:

> Generation after generation of pop group, guitar band and singer-songwriter remain in thrall and indebted to The Beatles' achievements, while very few approach their ingenuity, stylistic dexterity and – this is sometimes overlooked – their instinctive musical technique. Then, even if they do, they're often accused of being Beatles-esque, as if that were a bad thing. (Ingham, 2003, p. iv.)

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

The phenomenon known as Beatlemania started around 1963 while the band was pursuing a busy schedule of concerts, recording sessions, radio and TV appearances. In 1964, they went ahead and also conquered the American scene and released well known singles, such as "Can't buy me love" or "I feel fine". The novel *Beatles* begins with an opening chapter entitled "I feel fine" and then each chapter follows the evolution of singles and albums released by the band or, as it happens in the last chapters, songs released by the four band members during their solo careers. In this respect, it is very enlightening to look at the characteristic of each release made by the Beatles, not only at the music itself but also at the impact it had on society and people. The year 1965 marked a major turning point for the Fab Four as they started experimenting with drugs and spent more time on creating more profound and meaningful lyrics. Concerts around the world followed throughout 1966 and the band became extremely famous, maybe a bit too famous for what they could handle and the album "Revolver" set again a new direction in their music. The years 1967-1968 came to be known as the studio years, resulting in the release of "Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." Even if music is not the main topic of this research, the focus being on spatiality, memory and narrative, one cannot ignore the topic of music when analyzing the novel *Beatles*. Music is the foundation of the novel, influencing its structure, character and identity construction or the general atmosphere conveyed.

The sixties were a period of upheaval and unrest all around the world, dominated by left-wing radical movements, student protests, pacifism or a certain kind of music with representatives such as the Beatles, Bob Dylan or the Doors. Norway was of course no exception; however, the movement was mostly characterized by peacefulness. Many of the events that marked this period in Norwegian history are mirrored in Lars Saabye Christensen's novels *Beatles* and *Bly*: the rise of an underground culture, protests against the war in Vietnam or left-wing radicalization in the form of Maoism. Tor Egil Førland, professor at the Department of Archeology, Conservation and History in Oslo, has dedicated a series of studies to the 60s in Norway and, though the year 1968 is central when discussing this topic, he sees the beginning of this period as 1964 with the establishment of the radical publishing house Pax and Club 7, a bohemian meeting place in Oslo. However, 1965 is the year that truly marks the start of a new cultural era. According to Førland, the main elements that characterize the 60s in Norway are, as already mentioned, the student protests and Vietnam protests, Maoism and of course, the countercultural movement which he describes as follows:

> The third major element of '1968' in Norway is the countercultural movement, in which I include alternative life styles that broke with established norms. Long hair and beards for men, jeans and no bras for women were physical expressions of a 'revolution in the head' that often

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

> involved communal living, more open sex relations, experiments with cannabis and other drugs and of course rock 'n' roll. (Førland, 2008, p. 385)

This lifestyle that broke with the norms manifests itself through clothing also, including the very symbolic long hair for men. The signs of these expressions are already visible in the beginning of the novel, when Kim arrives home after having met with his friends and is being met by his mother who asks whether he really needs to have all those posters on the walls and urges him to cut his hair: "'You need a haircut,' she said. 'It'll soon be over your ears.'" (*Beatles*, p. 9) This type of generational differences will reappear throughout the novel, especially as the boys move away from childhood to youth and feel the need to break away from the authority of family, religion and society. The posters Kim keeps on the walls of his room are representative of the soundtrack that dominates his life and shapes his identity, with Beatles at the centre:

> On the walls around me were pictures of faces that also sang, but not a sound emerged, the guitars and drums were silent. The Rolling Stones, The Animals, The Dave Clark Five, The Hollies, The Beatles. The Beatles. Pictures of The Beatles. (*Beatles*, pp. 10-11)

These are incipient signs of a revolution that was beginning to take place in the life of the four boys and in Norwegian society. To begin with, the gap between generations and the acts of rebellion are rather innocent and common, however, as the years will pass, these acts will become more serious, sometimes with political overtones or abrupt separations from family life. The conflict continues and Kim's parents keep on insisting he cuts his hair, however, the haircut became such an important part of his identity and a symbol of belonging to a group that he refuses despite the pressure imposed:

> Mum and Dad would not give up. They wanted me to take down the pictures. I refused. They wanted me to have a haircut. I refused. Had had a haircut for the first and last time before we went to the theatre. (*Beatles*, p. 217)

The theatre here is seen in contrast to the music of The Beatles and the long hair that symbolizes the revolt against the traditional family and society.

Music is not only important in the shaping of inner identity, but also in the shaping of a person's social identity, influencing both personal and public space. Even Ruud stresses the importance of musical idols, especially during puberty when identity formation resembles a play with different masks: "Stories about idols and identification illustrate a central feature of social puberty, namely the importance of the playful testing of roles and identities." (2013, p. 150, my

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

translation) The novel *Beatles* is the perfect example of such role playing in relation to musical idols and, once again, clothing has a significant role as posters or album covers show The Beatles wearing clothes and hair style that will become so representative for the age. The four boys are identifying themselves with the members of the band and this role play will come to have a tremendous impact on their identities. Listening to a certain type of music is very often young people's way to differentiate themselves from other generations; to protest against different aspects in society but also to affirm their adherence to a certain group within their generation. Ruud, as a researcher and practitioner of music therapy has looked at this matter and concludes:

> As discussed several times, music becomes particularly important in the years of youth with regards to formulating an independent cultural platform, an alternate identity draft characterized by their own experience of life. The role confusion that characterizes the years of youth and that Erikson earlier pointed, can be read through the stories about music and idol worship, opposition, refinement and group formation that happens in relation to music. (2013, p. 260, my translation)

Belonging to a certain group is not only manifested through listening to a particular music type but also through how a person chooses to dress and the two usually go hand in hand. The four young boys from Oslo have their own dreams of forming a band and becoming just as famous at their idols. "The Snafus" is their collective project and it guides many of their actions, even if they do not actually have any musical training. Needless to say, they will not become famous; however, the importance of being part of this project is tremendous for their initiation and formation. One of the closest moments they reach to playing on stage occurs in Chapter 4, "Rubber Soul", dedicated to autumn/winter 65/66. While walking on Thomas Heftyes Street, humming Norwegian Wood and contemplating the future of The Snafus, they suddenly can hear music coming from a garage. Again, this is a classic image of youth underground culture and the general atmosphere that dominated the 60's and that owed so much of its mood to music. The band rehearsing in the garage is called Snowflakes and they are preparing for a concert at Vestheim School the same night, being described in the following manner:

> We peeped in and there stood everything we had dreamt of, electric guitars, microphones, big drums, amplifiers and loads of cables criss-crossing the stone floor. The musicians had red jackets, hair covering their forehead and ears and were at least twenty years old. (*Beatles*, p. 128)

The boys are of course impressed to see so much musical equipment, so Seb suddenly asks whether they can play a song as well, and they decide to play

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

Norwegian Wood. The description of their performance resembles very much an attempt at imitating the type of performance that made the Beatles so famous. In many ways, it is reckoned that the Beatles came first and foremost to be so popular due to the way they performed and behaved on stage and due to the images they created as part of a sort of marketing project. The scene in the novel is presented with a taste of warm irony:

> We tried, but we never found the melody. And then we were back at square one. Our stomachs vibrated, we should at least have been wearing a kidney belt, we jumped around, I lay on the floor, screaming wildly, Ola's bass drum was kicking like crazy, Seb was plucking the strings so that it sounded like forty sitars and ten randy cats and Gunnar was striking firm chords to keep the whole thing more or less together. (*Beatles*, p. 130)

Their image of the performance contrasts a great deal with the reality of the moment, they feel they resemble the Twist and Shout performance while the girls are ecstatic: "'Just like in the Cavern!' Seb yelled." (*Beatles*, p. 130) Actually, their performance is met with laughter by everyone around and they leave by thinking how much better than The Snowflakes they could be if only they had such a place to rehearse. They then attend a concert by The Snowflakes and the atmosphere at the event is one of revolt and youth effervescence, while clothing is an essential item that marks their identities:

> Girls in wide dresses, girls in tight dresses, tall girls with their hair up and black eyes and thins shoes, standing still. And the boys in shiny suits, the *gymnas* students, some wearing Beatle jackets, and we stood there in blazers, starched shirts and knitted ties, feeling pre-shrunk. (*Beatles*, p. 133)

The boys admire the clothing of the older boys with their suites and jackets while realizing they do not fit in the group identity they hope to reach as their clother are far away from what would be considered as suitable for fans of The Beatles or other similar bands popular at the time. Their reaction to this situation is once again marked by a symbolic act in connection to clothing, as they decide to remove their ties:

> Girls had lined the wall bars and the atmosphere was beginning to pick up. We went to the toilet, taking off our ties on the way, and the toilet was just crowded. (*Beatles*, p. 134)

This act may be seen as an act of rebellion as they free themselves from a form of control and attempt to fit in with the others.

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

The way they look up to The Beatles or The Snowflakes may also be noticed when it comes to Gunnar's older brother, Stig, who rebels against his family and is very active in different counter-cultural movements emerging in Oslo at the time. At one point, as the four boys are all at Gunnar's place, they overhear a fight between Stig and his father, concerning, once again, the length of the hair. Stig's answer to his father marks the younger boys: "'Relax', said Stig. 'Jesus had long hair, too.'" (*Beatles*, p. 214) The way Stig defies his father is the ultimate manifestation of youth rebellion, defending his choice of wearing his hair long by a reference to Jesus and religion. Through this reply, he stands up against family, society and religion. The boys then notice the way Stig is dressed as well:

> He had his hair well down over his ears and the fringe combed to the side so that it reached his cheek. And he was wearing a leather jacket, suede boots and striped flares. Stood with a grin on his face and was in control of the situation. (*Beatles*, p. 214)

While Kim gets into conflicts with his parents for having his hair close to being over his ears, in the case of Stig, the length of hair is longer and has symbolically crossed that limit. The length of his hair, corroborated with his clothing, make him appear as if he is in control of the situation, showing how clothing has the role of marking one's identity and relationship with others, especially in the case of young people. These selected examples from the novel *Beatles* aimed at showing how music and cultural movements also guide the choice of clothing style while all these together work at building identities.

Conclusion

As clarified from the introduction, this paper aimed at illustrating the role played by clothing in Lars Saabye Christensen's novel *Beatles*. The analysis followed two different threads and provided two ways of approaching this topic. Firstly, clothing was seen from a more metaphorical perspective, as shoes and footsteps were examined in connection to the act of walking, a spatial practice that allows for the exploration of the urban scene, while also contributing to the building of identity and memory. Secondly, clothing and hair style, in connection to the cultural movements of the 60s, are also well represented in the novel in connection to identity, both personal and collective. Listening to a particular type of music and adopting a certain style of dressing with long hair for men are ways to assert one's belonging to a certain group and to rebel against tradition as represented by family, society and religion. The novel *Beatles* is overall a story of initiation and problematizes matters connecting to writing, mapping and remembering the city while also engaging profoundly with questions of identity. One way of examining identity and memory formation is to look at the way clothing plays its part, which

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)

was the purpose of this paper and the analysis shed light on these topics using this particular lens for reading the text.

Bibliography

Christensen, Lars Saabye, 2009, *Beatles,* translated by Don Bartlett, London, Arcadia Books.
De Certeau, Michel, 2002, "Walking in the City", in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (eds.), 2002, *The Blackwell City Reader*, Malden, Blackwell Publishers, pp. 383-392.
Førland, Egil, 2008, "1968' in Norway: Piecemeal, peaceful and postmodern", in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 33, no. 4, December 2008, pp. 382-394.
Ingham, Chris, 2003, *The Rough Guide to The Beatles*, London, Rough Guides Ltd..
Matos-Wunderlich, Philipa, 2008, "Walking and Rhythmicity. Sensing Urban Space", in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2008, 13:1, pp. 125-139.
Ruud, Even, 2013, *Musikk og identitet*, Oslo, Universitets Forlaget.

BDD-A21041 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:51:45 UTC)