

Christian Lenz



GEOGRAPHIES OF LOVE

The Cultural Spaces
of Romance in
Chick- and Ladlit



From:

Christian Lenz

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The Cultural Spaces of Romance in Chick- and Ladlit

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»Geographies of Love« is the first study to explore the cultural lifeworlds of British, Fromtralian and Indian chick- and ladlit characters. Offering unique case studies including »Bridget Jones's Diary«, »About a Boy« and »Almost Single«, the book explores how women and men search for love and how they commit themselves to romances in specific spaces and places: the home and the office as well as shops, clubs and bars. This cross-disciplinary study provides scholars, students and keen readers with multiple points of access and easily-relatable situations. It applies the complex phenomenon of cultural geographies within the field of literary studies and sheds new light on a most passionate feeling.

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Spaces of Love

Love makes you see a place differently.

ANNE MICHAELS *FUGITIVE PIECES*

It is Friday, 19 April 2013, close to midnight: “What am I doing? What am I doing? Why did I start all this? Why didn’t I stay as I was?” (Fielding 2013: 25) Bridget Jones is back. Seventeen years after Helen Fielding’s series started and seventeen years after *Bridget Jones’s Diary* gave a global phenomenon a figurehead. Now, in 2013, Bridget has become older, a mother and a widow. It is safe to say that the eagerly awaited third novel about the famous Singleton was not what readers expected, mainly, because she is no longer what she used to be: “I literally *was* Bridget Jones but this character isn’t like me now and that is an outrage.” (Freeman 2013, original emphasis; cf. Patterson 2013) It is interesting to note that the same year, another, albeit lesser known novel was granted a sequel: Mike Gayle revisits his character Matt Beckford, and he chronicles the protagonist’s days before and after *Turning Forty*. Just like Bridget’s, Matt’s life has also not turned out the way he planned: he is divorced, unemployed and has to move back in with his parents.

These two novels as well as the further development of their two protagonists mark a distinct cut in literary history: *Bridget Jones: Mad about The Boy* and *Turning Forty* could be considered testimonies to the end of two genres that had their heyday in the 1990s – chick- and ladlit (cf. Day and Perry 2011, Showalter 2002: 76); ‘could’ but not ‘can’. Fielding’s latest novel is a case in point:

In all my time in publishing I have never experienced such a palpable sense of excitement and anticipation from colleagues, booksellers and friends and family as I have with the return of Bridget Jones in *Mad About The Boy* [sic]. It has been phenomenal, as are the sales we have seen to date. This is only the beginning. (Drake-Lee, qtd. in Page 2013)

It appears that fans of the novel's earlier instalments are just as eager to read the last book in the series¹; that neither fans nor critics seem to like the novel is a different matter. Mike Gayle's novel seems to fare better with many readers considering it a good novel, whose ending is not as satisfying as the beginning (cf. *Goodreads* 2013). Regarding the aforementioned cut, however, the novels mark the transition from chick- and ladlit novels, respectively, to more grown-up territory. They are no longer concerned with problems that other chick- and ladlit characters have to face – except the search for love. This feature is the driving force behind the protagonists' actions in the two genres and their stories revolve around the 'hunt' for the perfect partner to spend their life with.

According to the Bible, when God created the world and “saw every thing that he had made, [he thought] *it was* very good.” (Genesis 1: 31, original emphasis) But when he made Adam and beheld him in his Garden of Eden, he decided that “[*i*]t is not good that the man should be alone” (ibid.: 2: 18, original emphasis). It appears that humans, as biological and social beings, are not meant to live on their own, because “[i]solation can [...] be unbearably stressful for people” (Klinenberg 2013: 2). Scholars have different opinions as to why human beings live, for example, in family units or collectives but they tend to agree on the following: “Human societies, at all times and places, have organized themselves around the will to live with others, not alone.” (Ibid.: 3)

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century and “at the global level[,] the number of people living alone is skyrocketing, having risen from about 153 million in 1996 to 202 million in 2006 – a 33 percent increase in a single decade.” (Ibid.: 10) However, despite the fact that nowadays people have the advantage of freedom, flexibility and personal choice (cf. ibid.: 13), which is distinctly favoured by living on one's own, people are longing for a partner to share their lives with. Dating websites are a good indicator as they are booming across the globe and this suggests that romance is still very much on the singles' minds. Especially in large metropolitan areas, to which many young professionals have relocated, there is a steady demand and supply of single men and women.

These trends have been mirrored in numerous texts in many different media, but it is especially in two genres that young urban singles searching for their perfect partners are depicted: chick- and ladlit. Generally associated with British authors Helen Fielding and Nick Hornby, many countries have produced their own national variations of the rather standardised formula. These novels depict modern twenty- to thirty-somethings and their professional careers. But, most importantly, they always feature a romance plot that is the central motor of the story and the charac-

1 Unfortunately, sales figures for Gayle's novel were unavailable.

ters' lives. The stories are very often humorous, involve a lot of misunderstandings and depict a fair amount of 'will-s/he-won't-s/he'.

Due to their similar structure, chick- and ladlit novels are often considered as two sides of the same story, the female and the male side, respectively, but this is a misconception: despite their many similarities, the two genres come from different (socio-cultural) backgrounds and the characters depicted do not experience the same development – if there is any, actually. However, it is the ending that can be considered the same for the characters aspire to a happily ever after as expressed by the loving union with their perfect partner. In the following, I will argue that the two genres are indeed similar but not for the reasons that are popularly accepted.

So far, a larger comparative study between chick- and ladlit has not been undertaken, only shorter scholarly essays have been concerned with such an endeavour as, for example by Kate Dorney (2004) and Katharine Cockin (2007). Some critics have devoted themselves to analysing specific aspects of the novels but they tend to only look at the categories of consumption or construction of gender identities. However – and this is a very important point to make – this book is neither a study of gender issues nor is it primarily concerned with gender roles. It is easy to just follow the obvious route and analyse discourses of femininity and masculinity with a subject like chick- and ladlit, even in a geographical discourse: the hierarchical structures within the workplace, the role of shopping for female protagonists or the possible sexism of laddish behaviour. I decidedly claim that the protagonists behave uniformly when it comes to the geographies of their search for love. Therefore, I will approach both genres equally to gain new insights into the usage of space and place. I will comment on hierarchical structures in the workplace, but in terms of how the offices are ordered and organised and how each individual workspace is structured and laid out. In this book, I will look at shopping tours by both female and male protagonists, where they shop, and what those goods can disclose about their ideas, about themselves and their partners. The topic of cultural geography presents an opportunity to find out what links the protagonists of chick- and ladlit, their problems of modern life and opportunities which might present themselves to them. All this will be achieved by focusing on space and will inevitably touch upon gender issues, which, however, will never be the primary and sole focus. There will be remarks which point into the direction of gender-related questions and concerns but only in order to delve deeper into issues of cultural geography.

Until now, very little comparative research between the two genres has been done, and an extensive academic investigation into chick- and ladlit on a global level has not been undertaken at all. Some scholars have recognised ethnic and global varieties of chicklit (e.g. Donadio 2006, Ferriss and Young 2006a: 5-6, Peitz 2009: 29 and Pérez-Serrano 2009) and some have connected Indian to Western

ladlit (Iqbal Viswamohan 2013a), but this book is the first comparative study of the various national varieties of the two genres. By adding a transnational dimension to the comparison of chick- and ladlit, it provides the first study to look at a phenomenon which has spanned the globe and created an international literary sensation.

But just like the gender constructions are taking a less pronounced role here, the different nationalities of the novels, authors and protagonists are not a primary issue either. The cultural and literary heritage is mostly British, due to the intertwined past of the novels' countries of origin, but as a result of the globalised market it can be assumed that other nations took up the 'ready-made' product and spiced it up with local phrases and reference points. The formula itself remains largely untouched, testifying to the universal appeal of the concept, which, by now, is divorced from the cultural genesis. This explains why concepts are taken up – especially in the Indian and Aboriginal varieties of the novels – that might not have originated in the countries without the presupposed success of Western chick- and ladlit novels. Although some of the books are peppered with Hindi and Aboriginal terms but very rarely whole phrases, they are written in English, favouring and supporting international sales to the diaspora as well as home markets. Especially for the latter, reading these novels, which are clearly inspired by successful novels such as Helen Fielding's or Nick Hornby's, the "This is Me!" response grants them internationality and might enable readers to feel part of the large international community of aficionados.

A third original aspect of this book, in addition to an extensive comparative study of international novels of the two genres, is that it concerns itself with a geographical focus. This is the first work that applies a cultural geography approach to chick- and ladlit novels, and furthermore acknowledges the inherent spatial qualities outside of geographical contexts as well as the spatial turn² in cultural studies (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2007, Dünne 2010, Hess-Lüttich 2012, Winkler, Seifert and Detering 2012). Moreover, by not focusing exclusively on one geographical aspect in novels (cf. Röhl 2002), it presents a more diverse and significant contribution to the topic.

It has been observed that, "[a]s a literary form, the novel is inherently geographical." (Daniels and Rycroft 1993: 460; cf. Röhl 2002: 6) Readers seem to expect from a novel that it is set in a location readers can identify as being similar to, if not the same as their own (cf. Dünne 2010: 7): by mapping a world, which can happen both scientifically and literarily, the author creates lifeworlds. These are

2 According to Winkler, Seifert and Detering, the term 'spatial turn' is attributed to Edward Soja as well as Fredric Jameson (cf. 2012: 254, 262; cf. Bachmann-Medick 2007: 284, 290-291).

constructed, socially produced spaces that present the “illusion of transparency” as Henri Lefebvre calls it: “Comprehension is [...] supposed, without meeting any insurmountable obstacles, to conduct what is perceived [...]. The presumption is that an encrypted reality becomes readily decipherable thanks to the intervention first of speech and then of writing.” (1991: 28) People believe the words they read – or write, or speak – to have the properties to (re)create space(s) in a way that mirrors reality and thus they believe the wor(l)ds to be true. This, then, blends with Lefebvre’s concept of the “illusion of reality”:

In the course of any reading, imaginary and the symbolic dimensions, the landscape and the horizon which line the reader’s path, are all taken as ‘real’, because the *true* characteristics of the text – its signifying form as much as its symbolic content – are a blank page to the *naïf* in his unconsciousness. (Ibid.: 29, original emphasis)

Lefebvre concludes “that (social) space is a (social) product.” (Ibid.: 26, 30) Being a social product means that space can be considered to be a topology, a space constituted of locational relations (*Lagerelationen*), as space between bodies of any kind (cf. Dünne 2010: 6): “In other words, [...] space [is exposed] as a sign system filled with meaning upon which social reality is constructed.” (Hess-Lüttich 2012: 8) Jurij Lotman suggests that only through language or acts of speech is reality constructed and he goes on to claim that any piece of art, in this case literature, is a secondary modelling system that indeed creates spaces – without language there would be no space (cf. 1972: 22-25): space is the very element of the (literary) artwork (cf. Mehigan and Corkhill 2013: 15). Lotman writes that each multidimensional world is compressed into the less-dimensional container of art, in which many signifiers, codes or points of reference might be lost due to the density – or in some cases brevity – of the piece of art the creator and audience, respectively, is able to gather: if a building is described, the authors have to be selective in their description, thus necessarily omitting or altering the reality for their text, reconstructing the pieces of information in their own words. The readers, in a next step, have to reassemble these pieces via the linguistic and semiotic signs to form the world anew in their imaginations. Readers are therefore in the hands of the author via the narrator but the construction of their worlds “allows for conclusions concerning respective effective social standards and cultural values” (Hess-Lüttich 2012: 7). And, of course, the readers, when they create the world from the words in the text, will match the authors’ pieces of information with the ones stored in their memories and they will use them as the foundation to build their worlds upon. Already, this notion of space hints at a very artistic connotation and texts become an interface between various experiences and imaginations. Moreover, it points towards a plural of geographies, not one universal geography.

In this book, I follow the ideas proposed by Edward Soja in his seminal work *Thirdspace*, namely that there is an “inherent spatiality of everything [...], with human geographers [...] as critical analysts of the human condition.” (2007: 264) His concept of the lived space, which he calls “Thirdspace” (ibid.: 265), complements the perceived space (“Firstspace” or the cartographical perspective) and the conceived space (“Secondspace” or topographical perspective) (cf. Soja 1996: 65, 2007: 265-266): “Thirdspace [is] the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood” (Soja 1996: 56; cf. Winkler, Seifert and Detering 2012: 262-263).

Soja furthers the ideas of Lefebvre, whose spatial practice and representation of space (cf. Lefebvre 1991: 33) he deemed somewhat dualist and reductionist (cf. Soja: 2007: 265). Lefebvre appears to have sought “to break out from the constraining Big Dichotomy by introducing an-Other” (ibid.: 268) and Soja’s Thirdspace is “a starting point for new and different explorations that can move beyond the ‘third term’ [Lefebvre’s ‘an-Other’; C.L.] in a constant search for other spaces” (ibid.: 269-270). The Thirdspace in Soja’s definition unites in itself “subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, [...] structure and agency, consciousness and the unconscious, [...] everyday life and unending history.” (Soja 1996: 56-57) Moreover, “[t]hey are the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation” (Ibid.: 68) and

[i]n this sense, Thirdspace (as Lived Space) is simultaneously (1) a distinctive way of looking at, interpreting, and acting to change the spatiality of human life [...]; (2) an integral, often neglected, part of the trialectics of spatiality, inherently no better or worse than Firstspace or Secondspace approaches to geographical knowledge; (3) the most encompassing spatial perspective, comparable in scope to the richest forms of the historical and sociological imaginations (Soja 2007: 269).

Soja deems especially cultural studies to have spawned “the most creative explorations of Thirdspace, and hence the most accomplished expansions in the scope of the geographical imagination” (ibid.: 270), because they are inseparably connected to art, science and philosophy (cf. Mehigan and Corkhill 2013: 7). This argument is supported by the claim that “[g]eography, of course, has traditionally been the discipline without exclusive source material, engaged in a ‘borrowing’ exercise” (Pocock 1981: 9). Citing, for example, bell hooks as a venerable inspiration, Soja writes that cultural studies, when engaging with (cultural) geography, can “create ‘Other’ spaces that are radically open and openly radicalized, that are simultaneously material-and-metaphorical, real-and-imagined, concretely grounded in spatial

practices yet also represented in literary and aesthetic imagery, imaginative recombinations, epistemological insight, and so much more.” (2007: 272) In Soja’s opinion, disciplines such as gender studies, postcolonial studies or political studies enrich and stimulate geography and account for a truly *cultural* geography.

That (cultural) geography and literature share an intimate connection has been acknowledged by various (humanist) geographers: “We should not see geography and literature as two different orders of knowledge (one imaginative and one factual) but rather as a field of textual genres” (Crang 1998: 58). This way, the worldliness of literary texts, with their “biographical, economic, institutional [and] geographical contexts”, are realised as intertwined with the imaginativeness of geographical texts, “the images [writers] express and in the way they construct, through modes of writing or composition – however empirically – particular and partial views of the world.” (Daniels and Rycroft 1993: 461; cf. Pocock 1981: 12, 15) By considering the bond between literature and geography, “[a]n artist’s imagination and sensitivity towards human attitudes, values, and perceptions, as well as his [and her] ability to filter the essence of our relations with nature [and the built environment] help us understand our interactions with the landscape, its cultural value, and our deep roots in the environment.” (Lando 1996: 6) This argument supports the idea of the literary text as the interface between geographies, be they real, experienced or imagined. It also shows that each (literary) text is inherently geographical for a narrative must *take place somewhere* and despite not always being directly visible or obvious, a spatial dimension cannot be absent. Because a “literary product is an expression of [a] group’s social structure and cultural texture as influenced by its territorial consciousness, and [its] genesis and development of any concept of territory or landscape” (ibid.: 8), a literary text carries meaning: the environment, be it natural or urban, becomes an intermediary and helps to disclose societies’ attitudes and values (cf. ibid.). Moreover, “[g]eography and literature are both writings about places and spaces. They are both processes of *signification*, that is, processes of making place meaningful in a social medium.” (Crang 1998: 44, original emphasis; cf. Lando 1996: 6) It appears logical to assume that “it is only through ‘geography and literature’ that the soul of a country and its people becomes *really accessible*.” (Lando 1996: 7, emphasis added) Especially the novel appears to favour geographical components because it is characterised by the actions and developments at the stories’ cores. For the progress of the novel, the author needs one or more spaces of action in which the events can be situated (cf. Röhl 2002: 6). The spaces described in novels are always subjective and the characters living, performing and operating in locales will consequentially (try to) turn them into places (cf. ibid.: 7). It appears that a (cultural) geographical approach to chick- and ladlit is a most suitable indicator as to their protagonists’ ideas, attitudes, fears and hopes, but also as to how they have been shaped by their respective cultures and societies.

The book is structured into two parts: the introductory chapters into the topics of chick- and ladlit as well as into cultural geography depict the current state of research and the second, larger part consists of the analyses of a corpus of various chick- and ladlit novels from England, Australia and India. Following these introductory words, the second chapter considers the geneses of the two genres of chick- and ladlit, the literary and cultural influences that favoured and furthered the production of these novels and turned them into a global phenomenon. Starting with chicklit, the roots of the genre are disclosed – from early romances, through mass-produced fantasies to the notion of romantic fiction in general. Using ideas of post-modern intertextuality, a working definition is provided and the stereotypical chicklit heroine is introduced. This section is followed by an examination of ladlit, which can look back on the redefinition of masculinity and the advent of laddish magazines such as *Loaded*. Although the novels' origins are similar, they are not identical and the much-proclaimed sameness is not as obvious as some critics suggest. Yet, I claim that the various novels are indeed very alike in their usage of spaces and places and it will be one focus of the book to prove this claim. The last part of the first chapter presents a structuralist model for a standard chick- and ladlit plot as well as major building blocks and stereotypical characters, which serve as blueprint for the analyses.

The third chapter introduces theories from the wide field of cultural geography that provide the basis for the analyses. After a short history of the discipline, various influential concepts are in the focus: first and foremost, the notion of space and place is explained and complemented by concepts such as Foucault's heterotopia, Gilles and Deleuze's striated and smooth spaces, wayfinding and the Actor-Network-Theory, to name but four important theories. As the characters in chick- and ladlit prefer an urban setting for their adventures, the term 'territory' is defined and the (spatial) processes that are important to learn within such a space. Of course, the theories selected and presented in the third chapter only make for a fraction of the possibilities that cultural geography has to offer. I have opted for a rather eclectic mix so as to not privilege one theory over any other. Moreover, I aim to show that theories from cultural geography can be combined quite rewardingly and thus promote the application of cultural geography to literary texts. The last part of the theoretical basis establishes a rhizomatic construction that encompasses the independent ideas used here. Through a structuralist framework the ideas are harnessed and directed towards the investigation of the cultural spaces in chick- and ladlit. In addition to proving the claim that chick- and ladlit characters use space in a similar fashion, the following analyses prove that spatial compatibility foreshadows the characters' successes or failures in their romantic endeavours. It is the starting point of the geographical exploration into one of the most fascinating, yet largely ignored genres of the late twentieth, early twenty-first century.

The analyses themselves are organised into three sections, which account for the three major anchor-points in a person's life: the home, the workspace and spaces of leisure. These analytical chapters will all emphasise the characters' relationships to spaces and places in a specific geographical context. As many protagonists visit and occupy more than one place in their respective novels, there will be many cross-references, which testify to the close bonds that exist between (fictitious) people and their spaces. Nonetheless, due to repetitive structures and contents, not all novels can be discussed in detail. But what is analysed in the consecutive chapters is almost indiscriminately applicable to all novels that can be classified as chick- or ladlit.

The fourth chapter, then, focuses on the characters' abodes, their homes. First, the concept of 'home' is considered, taking into account other disciplines such as psychology or sociology. Next, the construction of the protagonists' homes is at the centre of attention. The analysis considers the rooms the home is comprised of as well as the identities they support. The home can be a retreat from the world or a place of loneliness; however, it always mirrors its occupant. Consequently, the homes of the respective partners likewise signify their compatibility with the protagonists – or, in some cases, their incompatibility. Within this context, an important feature to establish a feeling of home is the urban family, a group of friends that is as closely-knit as a biological family. Advantages and drawbacks of the urban family are presented before the last subchapters explore the home as a repository for nostalgia and memories and the hotel as temporary form of the home, respectively.

These findings are followed by the analysis of workspaces and workplaces. After the introduction of important features of these locations, the analyses distinguish between open-plan offices and enclosed, private offices. What unites them, ultimately, is the notion of the prison. Characters do not feel comfortable in these spaces and are therefore going to abandon them in order to be free to find their perfect partners. A prominent part of this chapter is dedicated to Indian workplaces, for Indian chick- and ladlit novels are conspicuously concerned with their protagonists' working lives. The various working spaces include both open-plan and enclosed offices but are further complemented by professions outside offices as well as the office-cum-home. To conclude this chapter, the Indian practice of arranged marriages is taken into consideration and is regarded as a business transaction, hence turning the private home into a business space.

Having dealt with the most important anchor-points in chick- and ladlit, the sixth and final chapter is about spaces of leisure. It is subdivided into three parts: the first is comprised of spaces of consumption and the identities that can be assembled via products or even bought like commodities. Employing the notion of the *habitus*, it will be emphasised that characters buy (into) a certain lifestyle and try to

create a space in which they can become a product for their perfect partners to consume. This idea leads to the second part, the spaces of clubs and parties. Looking at how the carnivalesque and the spectacle are created in liminal spaces, the club proves to be a more limiting territory than the party but both spaces are united in the fact that they must be left if the single wants to become part of a couple, as only this form of living represents and resides in the normative centre. The last part of this chapter investigates leisure spaces such as bars, pubs, cafés and restaurants. They are characterised by their neutrality, which means that they can be accessed by everyone. This in turn presents both advantages and problems as the characters have to find out.

The conclusion of this book summarises the argument and revisits the hypotheses that chick- and ladlit are very alike in their usage of space and that according to these narratives only spatial compatibility will guarantee a lasting love relationship. Furthermore, it regards the genres from a critical point of view and evaluates the idea of understanding 'love' as a commodity.