

Alexandra Zervou

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8044-7306>

zervoua@uoc.gr

Vassiliki Vasiloudi

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9647-9586>

vasiloudi@uoc.gr

Department of Primary Education, University of Crete, Rethymno, Greece

Nostalgia, Diaspora, Memory and History in Peter Sís's Picturebooks

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Nostalgia as a deep yearning for the past but also as a unique aesthetic modality has generated over time a diverse body of literary works that deal with memory, history and diaspora. Nostalgia both as a literary trope but also as an impetus for literary production finds its expression in a number of picturebooks created by Czech-born American artist Peter Sís. This paper looks primarily into *The Three Golden Keys* (1994) and *The Wall* (2007) as sites where Sís explores what it means to revisit through the lens of nostalgia one's own past, especially a past inscribed in the turbulent era of the Cold War and associated with the historic city of Prague. The study examines how nostalgia and counter-nostalgia work in these picturebooks so as to preserve vestiges of cultural memory and criticise totalitarianism in an attempt to bequeath a legacy to the generations to come. It further explores the narrative and pictorial techniques the artist employs in his attempt to represent nostalgia, memory and history as constituent elements of a cosmopolitan identity.

Keywords: nostalgia, childhood, diaspora, history, memory, picturebooks, Peter Sís

“For lack of a natural memory, I make one of paper.”

Michel Montaigne (2003: 1021)

Nostalgia as a notion and feeling informs much literature written both for adults and children and it is most commonly evoked in various modes of life-writing (Smith and Watson 2001: 3). Writing on his childhood in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (2006),

Walter Benjamin highlights that it is “images of childhood that are most apt to waken homesickness in exile” (2006: 37), thus bringing forward the association of nostalgia with childhood. Whether in exile or not, childhood has been granted the status of a sacred locus, to which many authors have paid tribute. Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958/2005), Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Words* (1963/1981), Michel Tournier’s *Le Vent Paraclet* (1977), Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003/2006), or Alki Zei’s *Με Μολύβι Φάμπερ Νούμερο Δύο* [*Me Molivi Faber Numero Dyo* = With a no. 2 Faber Pencil] (2013) exemplify the impact the formative years of one’s own childhood have on the shaping of subjectivity as the past self is revisited through the lens of nostalgia in various forms of self-referential writing.¹ Following much trodden paths, Sís succeeds in elevating his childhood recollections to vignettes of a visual saga that spans across many of his semi-autobiographical picturebooks.²

“Are you a settler, Dad?” This was the trigger question his two young children posed to renowned artist Peter Sís which led to what has become his iconic, though contested, picturebook (Schrijvers 2014: 154) *The Wall: Growing Behind the Iron Curtain*, as the author testifies in the “Afterword” to his book (Sís 2007: n.p.). Herein, walking down memory lane, revisiting his long-left-behind childhood and youth in Communist Czechoslovakia takes centre stage. It is memory, nostalgia and childhood which are at work at the heart of most of his picturebooks, most prominently in *The Three Golden Keys* (1994) and *The Wall* (2007) (Fig. 1a, b), and more subtly in *Tibet through the Red Box* (1998), *Madlenka* (2000), *Robinson Crusoe* (2017) and *Nicky and Vera: A Quiet Hero of the Holocaust and the Children He Rescued* (2021).³

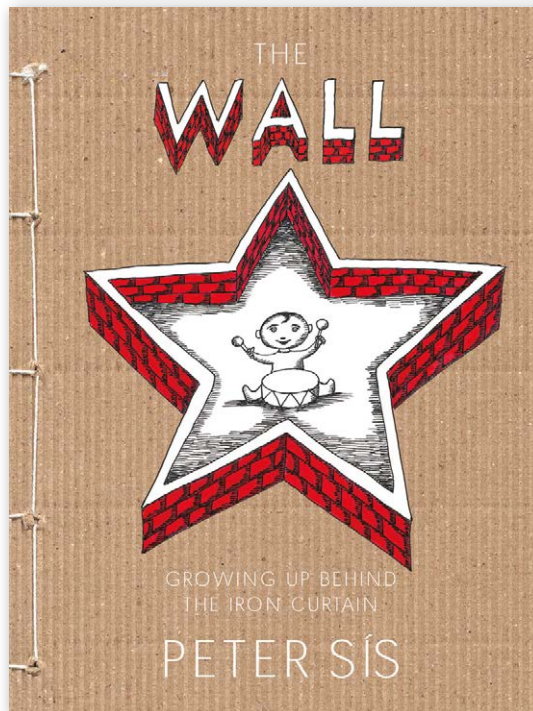
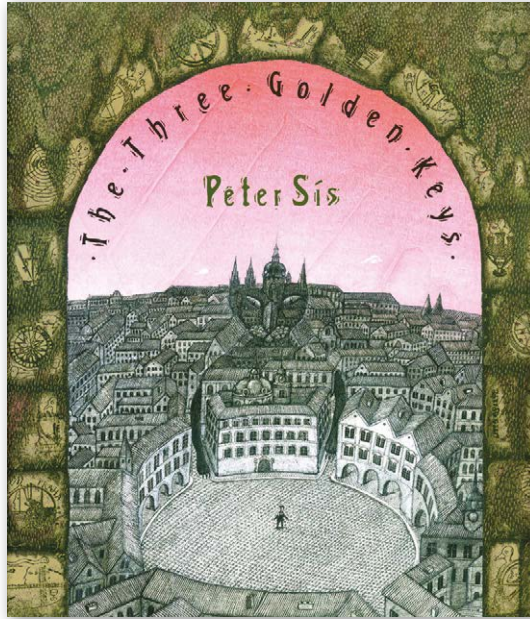
In much of his impressive oeuvre, personal and collective memory, history and nostalgia become the driving motives to revisit and unravel past experiences and traumas not only as a self-healing act but also as evidence and a model of a fulfilling life as a citizen of the world that Sís was to become. History and nostalgia seep through much of his work and form the backdrop against which his complex insightful visual and narrative ensembles unfold. Vignettes from his personal life where the grand historical narrative intersects with and impacts on personal history, crucial historical events or even extended historical periods have been carefully crafted into the canvas on which he interweaves his highly complex visual narratives.

This paper looks primarily into *The Three Golden Keys* and *The Wall* as autofictional sites where Sís explores what it means to revisit through the lens of nostalgia one’s own past, especially a past inscribed in the turbulent era of the Cold War and associated with Prague, a historic city, which has undergone sweeping changes across time. These two picturebooks exemplify the dual nature of nostalgia – an emotional engagement

¹ Autobiography, memoir and autofiction are the most common forms of self-referential writing, often evoked and informed by nostalgia.

² We could treat his picturebooks that take on an autobiographical slant as a saga; that is, *The Three Golden Keys*, *The Wall*, *Tibet through the Red Box*, *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Madlenka* series.

³ In general, his picturebooks thematise mainly flights from and/or returns home.



© Peter Sís, *The Three Golden Keys*, 1994 © Peter Sís, *The Wall*, 2007

Fig. 1a, b: Front covers of *The Three Golden Keys* (Sís 1994) and *The Wall* (Sís 2007)
Sl. 1a, b: Prednje strane korica slikovnica *The Three Golden Keys* [Tri zlatna ključa] (Sís 1994) i *The Wall* [Zid] (Sís 2007)

with the past with both negative and positive connotations – which turns them into planes from which to argue about the impact of “topos” on the formation of identity. This study examines how memory, personal and public history, as well as nostalgia play into the creation of these picturebooks, along with the function of nostalgia as a retrieval mechanism of memories of a “lost” country, as Sís humorously likes to refer in interviews to his home country, former Czechoslovakia; it further focuses on a sense of mission to bequeath a legacy for the generations to come. In particular, we look into both the narrative and pictorial techniques Sís employs in these two picturebooks in his attempt to weld nostalgia, memory and history.

Generic considerations and nostalgia

The two picturebooks discussed here as nostalgic texts defy generic classification. In many contemporary studies, nostalgia is often associated with memory and history, an affinity hinted at by Svetlana Boym when she argues that “[nostalgia] could be [...] the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (2001: 8). Although the picturebooks under study thematise nostalgia and history, with multifarious references and allusions to specific historical places, figures, events, and distinctly recognisable historical periods, they cannot be classified as purely historical picturebooks. The first-person narration and the rich explanatory peritexts in the form of the writer's *apologia* drive potential readers towards a reading much informed by Peter Sís's extraordinary biography and therefore defy their classification solely as historical works.

Their historical leanings notwithstanding, *The Three Golden Keys* and *The Wall* also display close affinities with memoir and autobiography in as far as “the memoir situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant” while autobiography revolves “around an ‘I’ that explores its assumed interiority” (Smith and Watson 2001: 198). Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer has also highlighted this generic confusion over Sís's oeuvre when discussing his *Tibet* as a “hybrid form, neither pure autobiography nor biography but a mixture of both, and history as well” (2010: 207). In the same vein, Helma Van Lierop-Debrauwer, writing on the generic hybridity of picturebooks, aptly points out that “*The Wall* is not only an autobiography but also a graphic memoir, as it touches upon the history of Eastern Europe during the Cold War” (2018: 83).

In light of the above, it might prove more insightful to introduce the term “autofiction”, for the ensembles Sís creates are neither purely factual nor fictional, but balanced on the cusp of the fiction/non-fiction divide (Apol et al 2002: 430) and highly self-referential. The term autofiction, though disputed by many contemporary critics, has become “a discursive model for discussing narratives in which fiction and autobiographical writing are mingled” (Gronemann 2019: 242). In the case of the picturebooks under discussion, autofiction takes on a function that sets up a mythology of the inner self; at the same time, the fantasy trope in tandem with the memories, even memories of the readings, and the cross-cultural references, implicate nostalgia

in this self-mythologising process which renders nostalgia not only as a feeling but also as a mode of literary creativity (Colonna 2004). If in autofiction there is a constant blurring between the fictional and the referential authorial figure, a constant oscillation between invention and veracity (Cooke 2005), then *The Three Golden Keys* and *The Wall* fit this definition. In this regard, seen from a vantage point that prioritises the author's premise, these two works can be perceived as examples of autofiction defined as a form of life-writing. On the other hand, given that they sit comfortably at the intersection of personal, family, national and international history, as this study will hopefully elucidate, these picturebooks can be read as examples of a hybrid historical mode, which borrows and inextricably blends elements from the autobiography, the memoir and the historical narrative.

This theoretical discussion about genre can be further pursued if we take into account the diasporic identity of Sís who seeks to explore the constitutive elements of his current identity by means of his art. In their attempt to define what constitutes a diasporic text, Michelle Martin and Breanna J. McDaniel argue about the centrality of *sankofa*, a Ghanaian word which means “to go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful” (2021: 54), adding that “writers of diasporic texts tap into their knowledge and experience of the history, culture, language, stories, and sensibilities of the culture about which they are writing and to which they belong” (56), thus foregrounding certain sensibilities of diasporic texts. In this regard, Sís's oeuvre falls within the definition of diasporic writing as well. However inconclusive the venture to pinpoint the generic nature of his work might be, nostalgia often seems to be the overarching premise in most of his picturebooks which, to a greater or lesser extent, dwell on past personal and collective experiences.

Living in the diaspora often becomes an incentive, a reason, a plane from which to initiate a homecoming, in certain cases not a real one but one achieved in narrative terms, invested with nostalgia, either reflective or restorative (Boym 2001: 18). In members of diasporic communities, nostalgia is then an imaginary, emotional, inward movement which takes on both a spatial and a temporal dimension; the nostalgic inner self moves towards the homeland left behind, revealing what this space has come to signify at present. In this sense, nostalgia functions as a signification mode in as much as the nostalgic subject revisits through memory and explores their past, the past self, the homeland, their childhood, favourite places, beloved persons, smells, traditions, objects, notwithstanding their deliberate or unconscious distortion.

Drawing on Frederic Jameson's “nostalgia mode” (1991: 20), in her study *Media and Nostalgia. Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, Katharina Niemeyer argues that “nostalgia could be described as a liminal, ambiguous phenomenon that migrates into deep emotional and psychological structures as well as into larger cultural, social, economic and political ones” (2014: 6). She also hints at the “doubleness” of nostalgia: “[nostalgia] very often expresses or hints at something more profound, as it deals with positive or negative relations to time and space” (2). Questioning the “purity” of nostalgia, Sara R. Horowitz argues for the kinship between nostalgia and trauma:

“nostalgia shares certain gestures with deep trauma: a sense of rupture and radical discontinuity, the impossibility of a ‘cure’, irretrievable loss, incomplete mourning. Since trauma resembles nostalgia in these senses, there is a slippage between the two” (2010: 49).

It is this conflation of nostalgia and trauma that *The Three Golden Keys* and *The Wall* come to exemplify, respectively. In *The Three Golden Keys*, nostalgia is explored as a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed... [as] a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym 2007: 7). On the other hand, nostalgia in *The Wall* is rather signified as a bittersweet emotion experienced by the subject while critically reflecting on the turbulent past of his homeland. In this latter case, it seems more appropriate to opt for the term “anti-nostalgia” or better “counter-nostalgia”, that is, “nostalgia with a critical edge in which home is seen as fragmented” (Ladino as quoted in Salmose and Sandberg 2022: 201). As Boym suggests, restorative and reflective nostalgia “survive only in a long-distance relationship”, a condition that Sís's books examined here meet in that the artist seems to “be divided between here and there, now and back then, home and abroad, everyday and dreamlike life” (2001: 10). Having chosen voluntary exile in the USA over a stifling regime, Sís joined the chorus of Diaspora writers who have fruitfully turned their past into an inexhaustive source of inspiration and literary creativity.

Nostalgia in *The Three Golden Keys* and *The Wall*

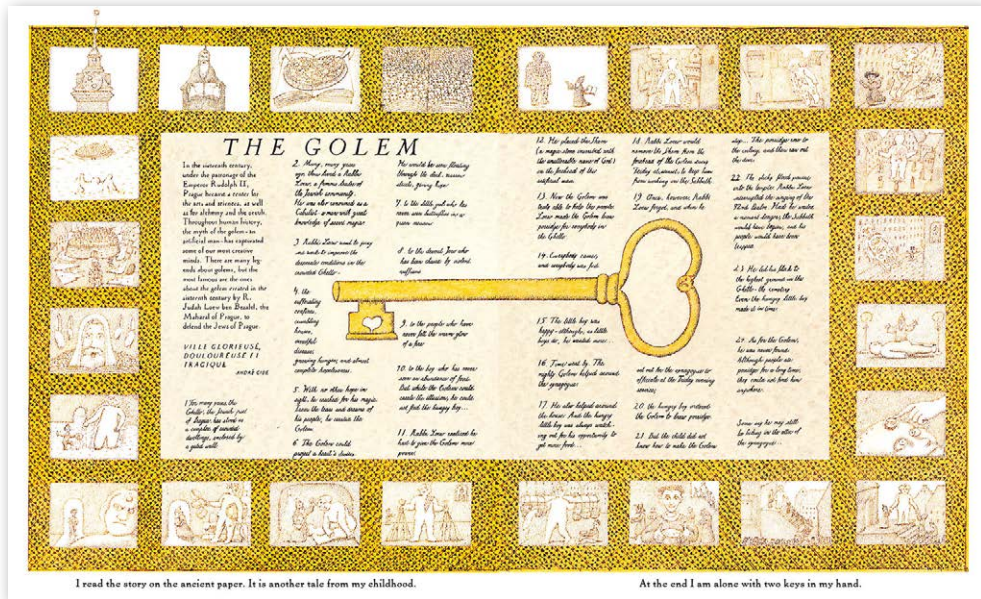
Writing on nostalgia, in her influential monograph *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym suggests that “a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home *at once*” [my emphasis] (2001: 75), alluding to the simultaneous experience of both restorative nostalgia as an attempt to restore an idealised version of the past, and reflective nostalgia as nostalgia with a critical edge which questions the past. This duality of nostalgia, or better their overlapping quality (Salmose and Sandberg 2022: 199), is explored in the case of the two picturebooks under consideration. Homesickness and nostalgia are the key to unlocking the text in *The Three Golden Keys* whereas counter-nostalgia as a complex feeling of both longing for and aversion to certain facets of the past – namely the harsh ideological regime imposed by Soviets on Czechoslovakia – is the key to interpreting *The Wall*. Yet, both nostalgia and counter-nostalgia in Sís are not solely about the past; under their veneer, his works are present- and future-oriented as can be inferred by the letter he addresses to his daughter Madlenka in the opening of *The Three Golden Keys* as well as by the afterword at the end of *The Wall*: “Sweet little round daughter with beautiful eyes and constant smile. By the time you can make sense of this note it will be the 21st century. You were born in New York, in the New World, and surely you will be wondering one day where your father came from. This book explains just that” (Sís 1994: n.p.) or “Now when my American family goes to visit my Czech family in the colourful city of Prague, it is hard to convince them it was ever a dark place full of fear, suspicion and lies. I find it difficult to explain my childhood” (Sís 2007: n.p.).

In both these works, as in others as well, *Tibet Through the Red Box* and *Madlenka* are cases in point, the artist longs for and seeks to reclaim not his transformed subjectivity, due to the passage of time, but those elements that have proven to be constituents of his current cosmopolitan identity. He longs for cosmopolitan Prague, not for Communist Prague, he longs for the legends, the music, the poetry, the literature, the drawings that made him the citizen of the world he is today. If *The Three Golden Keys* suggests that the Prague of his childhood is his *locus amoenus*, a symbolic, idealised space, forever present, the same city in *The Wall* becomes a *locus horridus* due to the stifling ideological dictatorship imposed by the Soviets and experienced by the artist in his childhood and youth.

Already at the opening of *The Three Golden Keys*, in the letter he addresses to his American born young daughter, the artist implicitly sets up some binaries: father – daughter, there (the old country) – here (the new country), the old (communist) world – the new (free) world, then (the 20th century) – now (the new millennium); not so much to stress difference as to stress connectedness, origins lost in the hazy memories of the foreign country that the past is. The artist undertakes this quest in search of origins and revisits his home city to reclaim and convey a sense of origins to his daughter, to provide her with the keys to enter her father's legacy: “I could give you dates, I could give you history, but only you will decide if you want to know” (Sís 1994: n.p.).

Inscribed within this letter, the quote from the Prague-born poet Rainer Maria Rilke is all but accidental: like Rilke, Sís spent his formative years in Prague. Like the famous poet who wrote on the Prague of his youth in his work *Two Stories of Prague* (1994), Sís scripts *his* Prague in *The Three Golden Keys*. Like Rilke, the cosmopolitan poet, Sís promotes cosmopolitanism in his works. The intertextual references to writers that one way or another relate to Prague as well as his embracing of three well-known legends function as a reminder and irrefutable proof of Prague's transnational cultural past. Prague in Sís is not only a Czech city but home to different ethnic and cultural communities such as German Bohemians, Jews, and Czech Bohemians.

In his much-quoted monograph *Les Géo-graphismes de Peter Sís* (2015), Christophe Meunier, himself a professor of Geography in the École Normale, interested in the multidimensional approach of the landscape, calls Sís “voyageur en images” (17) and “géographiste” (288), one who is interested in the simultaneous analysis of the spatial and the cultural. Commending the multicultural aspects of the artist's picturebooks, Meunier goes as far as to characterise him, rather sophisticatedly, as a “perturbateur de frontières” (269), one who conflates borders. He also highlights the fact that most of Sís's heroes are *pégrins*, namely travellers-pilgrims to cities with a long history, memories and culture (24). In this light, Prague as the mythical city of Sís's passage to adulthood with its historical landmarks becomes for him both the setting and the point of departure for his pilgrimage, that is, his inner journey (“itinéraire intérieur”).



© Peter Sis, *The Three Golden Keys*, 1994

Fig. 2: The legend of the golem in *The Three Golden Keys* (Sís 1994)

Sl. 2: Legenda o golemu u slikovnici *The Three Golden Keys* [Tri zlatna ključa] (Sís 1994)

Woven into the main narrative fabric are three legends which become the keys for the artist “to unlock the mysteries of Prague and of his own heritage” (Latham 2000: 183): first, the legend of the knight Bruncvik, an adventurer in foreign lands, whose statue stands on Charles Bridge, brandishing a sword, who, if need be, will defeat the enemies of Bohemia; second, the legend of the golem (Fig. 2) and its references to renowned Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezabel and to the city’s Jewish ghetto and synagogue which form part of Prague’s collective Jewish memory (Borges and Guerrero 1974: 71–73);⁴ and last comes the legend of Master Hanus, the clockmaker of the famous Astronomical Clock which to this day stands in the Old Town Square of Prague.

These legends are preceded by quotes from famous Prague-related authors and poets. The legend of Prince Bruncvick bears a quote from Konstantin Biebl (1898–1951), the famous well-travelled Czech poet and writer. Sís’s rich intertextual repertoire includes André Gide’s reference to Prague in his journals (1889–1939) where he calls Prague “a glorious, painful and tragic city” (1951: 1214–1215),⁵ and a reference to Albert Camus’s 1937 essay “La mort dans l’âme” [Death in the Soul] (1958) first published in his collection of essays *L’Envers et l’Endroit* [The Wrong Side and the Right Side]. Both these references stand not only as a reminder of the city’s avant-garde glorious

⁴ See also the famous novel *Golem* written by the Austrian-born author Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932), who himself spent many years of his life in Prague and depicted Prague in many of his works.

⁵ More specifically, see the entries Prague, 5 août 1934 and Prague, 15 août 1934.

past but also as an indirect reference to the artist as a traveller, a modern *flâneur*, a cosmopolitan figure. Such highly allusive references construct Prague not only “as a repository of old myths and legends” but also as “the spiritual home of the cosmopolitan artist” (Thomas 2010: 111–112). The visual rendition of Sís’s quests to acquire the three keys to his home city of Prague includes also visual references to Italian mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo who served the Habsburg rulers in Prague. Inscribed in his pictures are visual references to Franz Kafka, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Tycho de Brahe, the Danish luminary astronomer, and renowned scientists and authors who connected their fortunes and lives with cosmopolitan multicultural Prague (Kundera 2023: 48–65).

Sís succeeds in connecting Prague’s mythology with his personal mythology by combining vestiges of culture and space. References to customs, such as the carp traditionally consumed at Christmas time, bought and kept in the bathtub days before Christmas, the Czech version of Saint Nickolas accompanied by a devil and an angel, Czech Easter lamb cake, the tradition of the maypole, abound in *The Three Golden Keys* and serve as indirect allusions to Czech cultural tradition. Prague’s topography is also crucial to Sís’s reminiscences: the castle, the famous Charles Bridge, the River Vltava that crosses Prague, the Synagogue, the Astronomical Clock, the National Library of Prague, famous statues such as that of the knight Brunsvik, or the twenty-seven crosses standing on the Old Town Square, an eloquent testimony to the old religious hatred between Protestant and Catholics, are all landmarks of Prague’s cultural geography revived by his nostalgic return narrative under the title *The Three Golden Keys*. As was the case with the references to eminent figures, these landmarks are also inextricably linked with the diverse history of Prague which, thanks to Sís’s nostalgic artistry, acquires a mythical status and calls the reader – both his daughter and the implied reader – to try to unlock the city’s mysteries. In this respect, the picturebook itself becomes, so to speak, the golden key to unlock Prague as a city of art, intellect, diversity, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism.

In relation to topography, the artist, as in many of his other picturebooks, uses maps of Prague which are more than cartographic ventures. Meunier comments on the use of maps by Sís in his *Madlenka* and observes that he offers a comprehensive and exemplary world vision where geography, history, narrative and image intersect. Meunier makes the distinction between a geographical map and topogram. The topogram of Prague is not just a map of a place, but it rather represents an imaginary universe which also implies and recalls representations of places of culture and lived historical experience (2011: 91; 2014; 2015: 36).⁶ Sís’s work, Meunier further observes, abounds in maps and topograms, but rarely does a photographic representation of a real landscape appear. Zara Rix concurs in that she argues that his maps are highly “narrative” and “emotive” rather than quantitative and “they emphasise cultural beliefs [...] [and] provide visual landscapes for transnational engagements” (2016: 271–272).

⁶ The term “topogram” is borrowed from the historian Frances Amelia Yates (1966).

If *The Three Golden Keys* through the evocation of nostalgia and the employment of a plethora of intertextual, intervisual and intercultural allusions becomes a palimpsest of cosmopolitan life, *The Wall*, through counter-nostalgia, deploying a detailed documentary process, seeks to inscribe in the collective memory the trials and tribulations of living under a regime that aimed to stifle freedom of thought and suppress civil liberties. In *The Wall*, Prague as the city of the artist's youth is not the much longed-for home of *The Three Golden Keys* but rather a hostile terrain, exemplifying what Hirsch characterises as "ambivalent nostalgia/negative memory" (Hirsch and Spitzer 2002: 257); "Now when my American family goes to visit my Czech family in the colorful city of Prague, it is hard to convince them it was ever a dark place full of fear, suspicion and lies" (Sís 2007: n.p.). Sís hints at the censorship which dominated public life and stifled freedom of speech and thought. Indeed, in one of his articles, he confessed: "I was born into censorship. I was born into the Communist totalitarian system, but I did not know it as a child. [...] We were brought up and brainwashed in a split between the public and the private" (2009: 42), thus pointing at dualisms as an important part of his life.

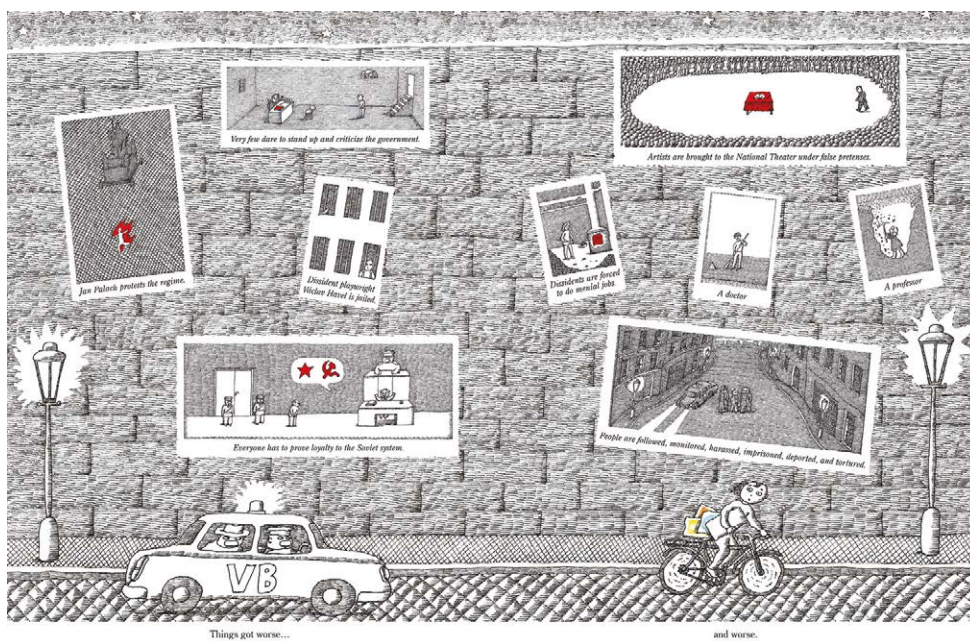
Seen in this light, counter-nostalgia borders on Boym's reflective nostalgia "which can exert a shaping influence on the present, as it opens up possibilities, cultivating our awareness of alternative modes of being and courses of action" (Wesseling 2018: 3). In *The Wall*, Sís does not shy away from documenting life behind the Iron Curtain, no matter what the responses of his contemporaries might be.⁷ A young boy at first, who cannot understand that he is being brainwashed, and a young man later, in a family that is progressive, artistic and cosmopolitan, he turns his art into a means of shielding the inner self against the regime, which he characterises as a "totalitarian dictatorship" in the prologue to *The Wall* (2007: n.p.), but also into a means of the regime's silent subversion. In this respect, his art becomes a vehicle of resilience but also of resistance towards totalitarianism and uniformity.

The Wall, documentary in form, with its "scrapbook arrangement suggests the imperfect, fragmented, piecemeal process of remembrance" (de Rijke 2023: 172). By combining "documentary collage, documentary transcription and documentary transposition" (James 2020: 28–29) with personal responses to everyday life in Iron Curtain Czechoslovakia, as monitored in Sís's journals at the time, along with photos and contemporary memorabilia, the artist succeeds in allowing the reader/holder glimpses into vignettes of his life in Communist Prague. Indeed, *The Wall* chronicles Sís's life behind the Iron Curtain and the various avenues he pursued to liberate himself from the impersonal totalitarian regime that promoted uniformity and conformity.

The sheer volume of biographical and historical information that abounds in *The Wall* brings us back to the issue of genre discussed at the opening of this study, testifying to the generic confusion ascribed to the richness of his textual and visual narrative, rendering this picturebook a hybrid crossover work of art and literature. Indeed, it has been labelled as "autobiographical picturebook" (Schrijvers 2014: 123; Lushchevska 2015: 22), "crossover picturebook" (Schrijves 2014: 121) and "graphic memoir" (Hall

⁷ For the responses of some of Sís's Slovakian contemporaries, see Marloes Schrijvers (2014).

2018: 21). Personal testimony about his youth in communist Czechoslovakia is mingled throughout with information about momentous traumatic events in the long history of the Cold War, such as the erection of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the most traumatic event of his youth as it violently disrupted the Prague Spring: “August 21, 1968. 500,000 troops from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary and Poland invade Czechoslovakia. [...] The Czech progressive government is sent to Moscow for ‘reeducation’” (Sís 2007: n.p.). The repercussions of the Soviet invasion are graphically illustrated, aptly depicting the impact of the historical juncture at the level of personal life (Fig. 3): constant surveillance in the form of the visually eloquent pig figures, the idol worship of Soviet leaders, public manifestations of total loyalty to the Soviet regime, uniform education, brainwashing, compulsory enrolment in the young Pioneers.



© Peter Sís, *The Wall*, 2007

Fig. 3: Life after the invasion of Soviets in Prague, *The Wall* (Sís 2007)

Sl. 3: Život u Pragu poslije sovjetske invazije u slikovnici *The Wall* [Zid] (Sís 2007)

A historical turning point, given much prominence in *The Wall* in terms of graphic details, is the Prague Spring associated with renowned politician Alexander Dubček, who promoted “Socialism with a human face”, depicted in a photo addressing the crowds. In a double-spread, full of colour, in contrast to most of the double-spreads of the picturebook, which are in black and white, save the red to denote all things Soviet-derived, the artist shows how politics impacted life for the better and allowed for the introduction of a new cultural ethos: beat poetry, rock music, free travel abroad, new

dress codes, freedom of expression, and the promotion of the arts at large. However short-lived, the Prague Spring, along with dissident public figures such as the politicians Alexander Dubček, Václav Havel and student Jan Palach, who immolated himself to protest against the tighter control the Soviet Union imposed on Czechoslovakia following the invasion of the Soviet tanks in Prague, paved the way for dreaming of life in the free World which in the picturebook is the West, or, better, an American version of the West.⁸



© Peter Sis, *The Wall*, 2007

Fig. 4: The Prague Spring, *The Wall* (Sis 2007)
Sl. 4: Praško proljeće u slikovnici *The Wall* [Zid] (Sis 2007)

This double-spread (Fig. 4), as well as the entries of the young artist's journals, evoke nostalgia for the promising chances the approach with the West held for transcultural exchanges but also deep trauma for the chances lost forever: "May 1965. Allen Ginsberg, the American beat poet comes to Prague. Students make him our Kral Majales (King of May). Then the secret police accuse him of subversion and deport him" (Sis 2007: n.p.), or "Summer 1966. I'm trying to let my hair grow [...] February 1967. My father makes me get a haircut. *I paint people with long hair*" [my emphasis] (2007: n.p.).

⁸ It should not elude us that Sis constructs the West as the Promised Land, without criticising its own downsides. Is it because he attempts to reconstruct the West as an adult the way he perceived it as a young non-conformist, namely an idealised version of the West, despite being now aware of its shortcomings, or does he do so because he operates from within this dominant cultural system?

It could be argued that in *The Wall* nostalgia verges at points on trauma since “nostalgia and trauma operate from the same liminal space between memory and forgetting, ... [and] they are often similarly rooted in the experience of war, and more particularly, the experience of surviving war” (Hemmings qtd in Salmose and Sandberg 2022: 200). War in *The Wall* is not only spatial but also cultural as well as intellectual: it is fought not only for dominance over space but most crucially over minds and cultural ethos. By evoking nostalgia for such a turbulent era and exploring traumatic memories, the artist puts forward a model for contemporary youth: to fight for one’s own ideals, to promote transnational and transcultural values, to become a citizen of the world that allows transnational mobility not only of people but also of cultural ideals. Seen in this light, nostalgia in *The Wall* is “not only a symptomatic state of mind, but also a way of shaping and directing historical consciousness” (Atia and Davies 2010: 182).

Historical concepts such as the Cold War, Communism, and materials that count as primary historical sources, such as photos, journals, and posters, skilfully embedded in the images, citations to prominent historical figures and major historical events make *The Wall* a hybrid picturebook that can be read both as a sample of historical and life writing. The assemblage documentary process employed by the artist which is a complex “synthesis of mementos, and personal recollections, historical documents and family relics” (James 2020: 31) grants the reader access to the artist’s archive of memory which on the pretext of counter-nostalgia becomes a political statement of fighting for freedom on all fronts but also an explanation of his becoming the person he is today. Thus, counter-nostalgia in *The Wall* takes on a strong political slant and becomes a critique of the Communist regime, serving as a plane from which Sís traces the course of his life and art from Communist Czechoslovakia to New York.⁹

Inconclusive thoughts

By constantly “shifting between macro- and microcosmos” (O’Sullivan and Immel 2017: 4), the two picturebooks under discussion work complementarily to create a life narrative not as an exemplary life for readers to emulate but as a tribute to transcultural memory and cosmopolitan conscience. Therefore, nostalgia and counter-nostalgia serve as the pretext to revisit the old country’s past, at times turbulent and traumatic, so as to render it part of a transcultural memory at the turn of the new millennium. With borders dissolved and fences raised to date, Sís’s works seem to suggest optimistically that life and self-determination will always triumph in the end. In particular, Sís’s counter-nostalgia becomes a “prompt to politically subversive commemoration” (Atia and Davis 2010: 182), a reminder that Prague was not only a cosmopolitan city but “also a dark place full of fear, suspicion and lies” (Sís 2007: n.p.). Thus, both nostalgia and counter-nostalgia construct Prague as the foundation of his personal mythology, of this extraordinary “auto-bio-geo-graphy”¹⁰ or “geo-biography” (Hall 2018: 21), exemplifying

⁹ For the political uses of nostalgia, see Yannicopoulou (2023) and Luca (2022).

¹⁰ I draw the term “auto-bio-geography” from Antigone Vlavianou, the editor of Giorgos Ioannou’s *To Katochikó Hμερολόγιο* [To Katochiko Imerologio = The Occupation Diary] (2000).

how identity is intimately linked with the exploration of the spaces where that identity is formed (Cantavella 2017: 39), resulting in the “spatialization of identity” (Casonato 2020: 57).

Not only do such works serve as channels for explorations of one’s own identity at a very personal level, posing questions about the role nostalgia and counter-nostalgia play in the formation of fluid diasporic identities, but they also invite potential readers to contemplate what it means to be living in the Diaspora – “divided” between here and there, between now and then; they further showcase how nostalgia and counter-nostalgia offer at times powerful incentives for creative art that transforms the legacy of one’s own past into transcultural memory for the generations to come. The two picturebooks under study exemplify clearly how Sís succeeds in synthesising the narrative with the visual, the personal with the collective, the past with the present, and nostalgia with counter-nostalgia, thus offering complex and multilevel ensembles that invite open readings from adults and young readers alike.

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Alexandra Zervou

Vassiliki Vassiloudi

Odjel za razrednu nastavu, Sveučilište na Kreti, Rethymno, Grčka

Nostalgija, dijaspora, sjećanje i povijest u slikovnicama Petera Sísa

Nostalgija je, kao duboka čežnja za prošlošću, ali i kao jedinstveni estetski modalitet, potaknula nastanak raznolika korpusa književnih djela koja se bave sjećanjem, poviješću i dijasporom. Kao književni trop, ali i kao poticaj za književnu produkciju, nostalgija nalazi svoj izraz u brojnim slikovnicama češko-američkoga umjetnika Petera Sísa. U ovom se radu proučavaju djela *The Three Golden Keys* [Tri zlatna ključa] (1994) i *The Wall* [Zid] (2007), u kojima Sísa istražuje što znači ponovno proživjeti vlastitu prošlost kroz prizmu nostalgije, a naročito prošlost ukorijenjenu u turbulentnom razdoblju Hladnoga rata povezanu s povijesnim gradom Pragom. Nadalje, ispituje se kako nostalgija i protunostalgija djeluju u navedenim slikovnicama kako bi očuvale tragove kulturnoga sjećanja i kritizirale totalitarizam u nastojanju da ostave nasljeđe budućim generacijama. Također, istražuju se pripovjedne i slikovne tehnike kojima se autor koristi u svojem nastojanju da predstavi nostalgiju, sjećanje i povijest kao sastavnice kozmopolitskoga identiteta.

Ključne riječi: nostalgija, djetinjstvo, dijaspora, povijest, sjećanje, slikovnice, Peter Sísa