



Picture Window

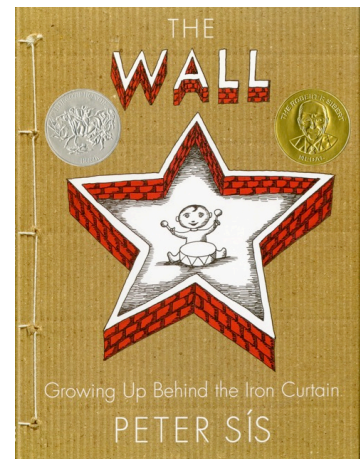
Peter Sis and The Geography of the Body: Body Image and Movement Metaphors as the Manipulation of Identity in *The Wall*

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The Wall is a graphic memoir for children authored by Caldecott winner Peter Sis. In this complex picture book, he describes growing up behind the Iron Curtain in a method understandable to children, but he also conveys something intimate about himself and his artistic journey to free expression. With few words used more as labels than story, he relies upon visual form and medium to share his narrative. A children's book described in a *New York Times* book review as "word-and-picture montage[s] consisting of a spare, fable-like narrative, introductory and closing notes, a historical timeline, diary excerpts, childhood drawings, family photos and, at the center of it all, a sequence of playful but intense pen-line drawings . . . arrayed in storyboard panels", initial reviews of the book fail to mention the narrative significance of maps despite the visual centrality of this form to the progression of Sis's illustrated history. Interestingly, the pictures reveal a geographic motif, the mapping of identity onto space and places of his lived experience. He couples this geographic metaphor with representations linked to an embodied, visceral reality. Through color coded representations of place Sis creates a social, geobiography that depicts ideology competing alongside the lens of the body; art is representational of a desire for freedom of expression juxtaposed against the conformity and constraint that map out the boundaries he continuously struggled against as an artist and individual growing up within a tyrannical regime. Sis's seemingly simplistic picture book offers new revelations about metaphor and embodied subjectivity.



Sis reinforces the thematic importance of red in picture that are a range of different styles of maps. This theme is a visual tool that illustrates how communism shaped and constrained his social development. Readers locate Sis on each page by finding splashes of color (usually blue or yellow) in drawings his character holds. His art is representational of a desire for freedom of expression juxtaposed against the conformity and constraint that map out boundaries he continuously struggles against to find a voice despite political oppression. In this way, Sis's mode of expression (his art) is a visual challenge that fluctuates in intensity over the course of the narrative as the red spaces begin to confiscate more and more real estate on the page and in the life of the artist. This visual challenge demonstrates ideology competing alongside the physical space that Sis inhabits. His metaphor offers new revelations about embodied subjectivity.



Cognitive psychologists and cognitive linguists suggest the brain exists in a constant state of flux that includes a never-ending cycle of interpretation of and adaptation to stimuli (cultural, spatial, etc.) that impact literary and artistic representations (see Bruner; Gibbs; Lakoff and Johnson; and Winner). Not only the body, but the space in which the body is depicted in literature, for example, is demonstrative of several embodied metaphors. For instance, in *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*, Raymond Gibbs notes the linguistic link to a subsystem of metaphors that act on the mind as a body or "the mapping of the body onto the mind" (96). He explains that "there are four extensive special cases . . . [where] thinking is understood as four different kinds of physical functioning: moving, perceiving, manipulating objects, and eating" (97). Additionally, the category of thinking as moving includes multiple conceptual blends of the primary metaphor including IDEAS ARE LOCATIONS, BEING UNABLE TO THINK IS BEING UNABLE TO MOVE, A LINE OF THOUGHT IS A PATH, and THINKING ABOUT X IS MOVING IN THE AREA AROUND X, cognitive metaphors identified by cognitivists with all-caps that suggest their unconscious significance (Gibbs 97).

Gibbs' study of movement and embodied identity recognizes sensory perception as agency and places emphasis upon "kinesthetic action in theoretical accounts of how people perceive, learn, think, experience emotions and consciousness, and use language" (3). He notes that it is people's bodies in action that shape language and thought since both functions rely on constant sensory interaction and perception with the environment (Gibbs 5). Of these kinesthetic, highly embodied metaphors for thought as movement, two are of interest: ideas as physical locations where following a line of thought parallels a specific, materially manifested path, and thinking about something entails moving in the space around where these ideas center, in other words, destination as identity (Gibbs 5-6). And of course, these two embodied metaphors also suggest an inverse in that prohibiting movement/agency also controls or contains the active development of identity.

These intuitive metaphoric systems that revolve around movement and place, the body and identity, also give the visual elements of *The Wall* a deeper meaning and universal quality. His memoir is more than the depiction of life in a highly oppressive regime with its stifling impact on the creative development of an artist. Sis's book is indicative of a shared perceptual language of sensory experience for all people. He structures the images according to several of the primary embodied metaphors of thought as movement, depicting the cognitive link between kinesthetic experience and identity construction. Likewise, he utilizes a pictorial geography of thought and culture. His emphasis upon maps as an introduction and conclusion for his personal narrative (he situates his location on a map of the world divided between Communist [Red] countries and all others as the end papers of the book) is indicative of how the socio-cultural environment shapes the subjectivity of an individual, especially a child.

The notion of geography is more problematic from an embodied perspective, however. David Seamon developed a framework focused on three aspects of the body in relation to space to engage in a geographical understanding of the body in *A Geography of the Life World*. Termed the "triad of environmental experience," Seamon's model included: 1) an emphasis on how an individual routinely moves through space in his everyday life, 2) an emphasis on how, and we might add where, individual bodies find a place to rest, and 3) an emphasis on the interactions of bodies with environmental phenomena including animate and inanimate stimuli (Hubbard et.al. 101-102). Seamon's model also adds interesting insight into the depictions of space and place according to the embodied representations of Sis's experience. Furthermore, this analysis is particularly valuable as it correlates to the author's depiction of identity and artistic becoming through the form of geographic representation (maps) in particular. As Gibbs research reminds us, the imagistic path that Sis portrays *is* the voyage his thought takes: IDEAS ARE LOCATIONS and A LINE OF THOUGHT IS A PATH. These metaphors are more concrete than one might, at first, realize. Sis did, in fact, walk the streets of Russia. He did, in fact, pedal a bike down the brick roads, hide in basements to play music, and create art as his picture book illustrates. These activities are the physical, perceptually realized realities and experiences that find a metaphoric link to the ideological through cultural manifestations such as maps and the ways people manipulate the environment they occupy. A map is a social representation of sensory perception and memory. The embodied experiences and metaphors are



what Sis sets down for posterity in *The Wall*, mapping out an artist's response to oppression through visual and cognitive metaphor.

Let us return, then, to the narrative and the graphic representations of Sis's personal history in response to Seamon's framework. The first two categories are significant as most of the illustrations portray Sis as either at home or on the way to some other location (in locomotion). Cultural geographers Hubbard et.al. argue that since "we do not have to think about the way we move through space and interact physically with our surroundings as our body feels its way . . . the relation of a subject to the world is seen to be revealed in the purposive movements of the body—the body itself becomes the locus of intentionality" (102). Here, two things become increasingly significant. First, Sis never depicts himself truly at rest in his picture book. In almost every illustration, he depicts his art as an extension of his body through a paintbrush or pencil and his thoughts as kinesthetically constructing/interacting with the people and places that similarly work to construct his subjectivity. Second, in moments when Sis is not apparently in flux (actively moving from one location to another) he is depicted amidst or among groups of people, sometimes large masses of people that construct a human border in which his ideas are either lost or consumed by a sea of likeminded red, or reinforced as opposition to the red through the emergence of small splashes of blue, green, yellow, etc. In either case, the individual as a part of a collective culture serves to reinforce the notion that he is not constructed by places and ideas alone, but by the people that respond in multiple and various ways to those places and ideas within the limitation of place as organized through institutional control—in this case, communism and communist ideals as implemented by a string of violent dictators. Personal geography is a group construction, and subjectivity a process of socialization as much individuation.



The significance of social forces to individual subjectivity might therefore be considered a more general motif to Sis who creates various abstract forms of maps as representations of the people and ideas that shaped his early development. One noticeable example is a large-scale depiction of Stalin, Lenin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev constituting landmasses and merging with notable locations such as the Kremlin. The scale and style of the drawings coupled with a small compass at the bottom left-hand corner suggest the illustration is a map, continuing the geographic metaphor even though the two-page spread ironically lacks any type of border. The lines on the pages appear as indicative of the contours of a topographical map. The United States Department of the Interior describes topographical maps as "include[ing] symbols that represent such features as streets, buildings, streams, and vegetations, [and] these symbols are constantly refined to better relate to the features they represent" (U.S. Dept. of the Interior par. 5). Sis illustrates several of these thematic features, and the more noticeable symbols are entirely man-made such as tanks, missiles, or buildings. Furthermore, "densely built-up" or cultivated areas are often depicted with

either the color gray or red. The symbols and details of Sis's illustration are social and cultural in nature. And interestingly, the gray background that contrasts the ideological geography of the Communist movement, the "densely constructed" area of red, is penned in a style that resembles areas described as "inundated" as a topographical symbol (Dept. of Int. par. 5). The map might be read as a very specific representation of the IDEAS ARE PLACE conceptual subsystem of the THOUGHT IS MOVEMENT metaphor.

The illustrations also create a sense of sweeping movement through line and the directional gazes of the political leaders, demonstrating the intellectual and material sweep of Communism and continuing the metaphor for movement. The red area bears down on the tiny image of Sis, a small, solitary figure. Alongside this is a textual notation that reads "This was the time of the brainwashing."



Significantly, the momentum of ideologies constructing the space that Sis occupies also construct the available flow of movement that he might take in response to those people, places, and ideas. In "My Life with Censorship" Sis further expounds on his experiences as an artist behind the Iron Curtain relating a startling assignment designing a record sleeve.

"When I brought in a painting of different characters from different songs dancing on a field (influenced by "Yellow Submarine"), it was rejected by the art director right away as looking "too western, too decadent." So, I tried again, this time painting a green field, with a country airport and a windsock in the wind.

'Did you check which side the wind is supposed to blow from?' asked the art director. I laughed. I thought it was a joke. Not so!

'It is politically and ideologically very important,' said the art director."
(Sis, *The Wall* 44)

The visual link between *movement* and ideology is a highly effective example of the embodied metaphors that regularly manifest in the way people think and speak. It is this embodied language that linguists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists trace back to a shared perceptual experience of what it means to be human.

The social nature of personal development remains the geographic thread that runs through the Narrative of *The Wall*; but recent geographic research suggests that "the motivation of people to become involved activities or practices in particular places is intimately connected to their own body image Such assertions have emphasized the importance of the body as a locus for identities of all kinds (e.g., gendered, racialized, sexualized, disabled), as well as highlighting the potential for people to change the meaning of their bodies through the use of make-up, clothing, dieting, working out, prosthetics, implants or even plastic surgery" (Hubbard et.al. 97). According to critical geographic theory, the second borderless two-page spread to appear also might be read as a map of sorts. It is a map of the body as opposed to the spaces surrounding it—along the lines of THINKING ABOUT X IS MOVING IN THE AREA AROUND X (Gibbs 92). Here again, color plays a significant role in relating ideology. This time an effusion of color--red, blue, yellow, green, and more-- signifies freedom of artistic expression, and once again the paintbrush is marked as an extension of Sis. He dances freely at the center of a highly decadent Western demonstration of music and popular culture entertainment with textual signifiers such as "Harlem Globetrotters, film, art, poetry, The Beatles, and Allen Ginsberg." Notably, "travel" also appears indicating that the restriction of movement placed on people behind the iron curtain was a *recognizable* constraint to the development of Sis's self-constructed subjectivity. Sis felt *mapped* in.

The map that appears in this instance is unusual since it is a map of ideology depicted through concrete cultural images from the West. These images, as depicted, seem more real than Sis himself, who is the only image on the map to appear *without color*. To Sis, it appears the symbols of Western freedom were more real than the reality of his embodied experience at this time, as restricted as he was. And he clearly attempts to control those ideas and map them into the space that he occupies within his mind. Recall that Sis holds a paintbrush and paper in this illustration, also suggesting that he is the hand that draws *this* ideological map. This second, large-scale map demonstrates that the body as a "locus of intentionality" as Hubbard et. al. describes it, does not simply refer to the ways in which we move the body in space, but the image of the body a person constructs as a representation of the self (i.e. clothes, piercings, hair styles, etc.). As Sis enters adolescence and young adulthood, he takes this to heart, and actively rebels within the space he occupies by manipulating that which he has the most control over, his appearance.

Gibbs also refers to this in his discussion of embodied metaphors explaining that the perception of the body by the individual is always viewed through the lens of culture. For this reason, an embodied language is constituted not just through a body schema, the physical, biological realities/limitations of the body, but through body image as well. Body schema "is the way in which the body actively integrates its posture and position in the environment" (Gibbs 29). But Jerome Feldman's model of

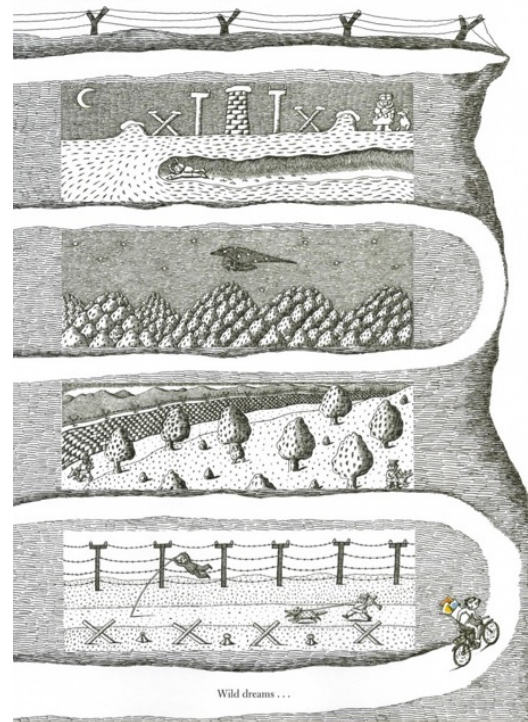


neural computation describes proprioceptive positioning (2006), what Gibbs calls the kinesthetic process of sensory perception (37) and does not only include the mental mapping of achieving balance to stand upright, walk, etc., it includes the integration of emotional and social response or interpretation of an environment to situate the self in the cultural space as well. As Feldman reminds us, language and thought are productive allowing us to act as necessary in novel or unexpected situations through this metaphorically interpretive process (9). This includes issues of enacting one's subject position and preserving the physical and emotional safety of the self by maintaining a coherent body image and schema, the creation of the individual in response to social pressures. Adjusting situate oneself into a new or changing place is one aspect of this.

That the body actively situates itself in culture, amidst systems of metaphors and ideas, is noteworthy in view of the final map that appears in *The Wall*. Also, a borderless two-page spread, but more typical as far as geographic representation, it might be described as a thematic map, or a "map that emphasizes a particular theme or special topic . . . items on a thematic map are simply used as reference points to enhance one's understanding of the map's theme

and purpose" (Briney 2011 par. 1-3). Thematic maps retain coastline features and political features as a base, including lines of longitude and latitude, land features like mountains, streams and rivers, and color to differentiate different environmental features, as is the case with Sis's thematic map, a contrast between Western and Communist features. The features he writes signify characteristics of the two opposing ideologies as he experiences them. Sis rides on a flying bike with wings of colorful artistic representations, presumably of his creation, across the boundary of the wall towards the West. Here again, the flow of movement is a move to embrace one identity through place over another, a purposeful situation of self as A LINE OF THOUGHT IS A PATH.

According to the critical geographic theory of bodily mapping, and embodied constructs of language, *The Wall* is a map of both traditional and non-traditional subjectivity development as represented through image-based metaphors. The illustrations make use of traditional styles and features of maps, the pen-line drawings, use of color, and place as a two-dimensional representation of space and personal location/situatedness. At the same time, Sis creates an elaborate ideological or cultural geography as well. The memoir is a representation of the *path and process* of development Sis follows to acceptance of self as he struggled against borders that restricted and constrained his early subjectivity. The visual form takes shape as a personal geography that follows his trajectory towards an empowered subjectivity of movement. Sis's picture book is a powerful illustration of the movement metaphor THOUGHT IS A PATH, a way out of oppression to freedom in this instance (Gibbs 12). This metaphor leads me to the final and most important conclusion that we may draw from *The Wall*; it is a fascinating representation of cognitive metaphors and how our deeply ingrained perceptions are controlled by the physical world, our bodies, and the spaces we inhabit. Representations like this may have larger, more problematic implications. *The Wall* demonstrates purposeful manipulations of the spaces we inhabit to control subjectivity, but deeply unconscious concepts may also limit subjectivity development. Several different cognitive metaphors constrain and map out the ways we think. An important step after acknowledging this should be an attempt to understand how social classifications like race, age, or even disability may impact a group's ability, or *inability*, to access certain unconscious metaphors over others.





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