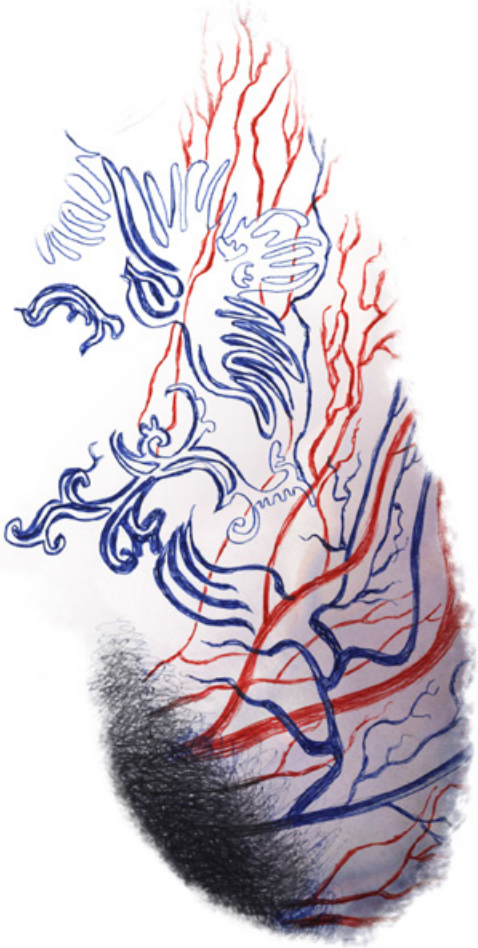
AN EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATION OF UPGRADED GODS

Lena Panaita



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Lena Panaita

First submitted as a thesis in New Zealand 2018

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

LENA PANAITA 7 February 2018

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LENA PANAITA 7 February 2018

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Finally to my beloved Grandmother, Father and Mother … this book is dedicated to you, for I know "Жизнь прожить не поле перейти,"which might be translated as "A life lived is not a field crossed." This Russian proverb suggests that one's life is an arduous journey that will not be a straight walk through an empty, flat field. The proverb refers to the complexity of life and its hidden challenges and hardships. While the wisdom embodied in the saying warns us of trials and the necessity of patience and perseverance, it also talks about the respect that we need to have for the people who have gone on this journey and managed not to lose their integrity on the way. I know this wasn't an easy journey for you either, and I'm immensely respectful of the lives you have lived and grateful for the life that you have given to me.

ABSTRACT

This research activates an autoethnographic methodology to write, design and illustrate a graphic novel that considers themes of identity, theology (ideology + belief), and obedience. The research asks, "How might the graphic novel as a form of autobiography function to communicate tensions between freedom and love, and the constrictions of Russian communist society just prior to and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991?"

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This project grew out of personal experience and in turn it reflects upon it. It is an account of a remembered life and transitions made in a world that constrained and confused me. The graphic novel Upgraded Gods seeks to make sense of a childhood and early adolescence that developed through a Russian society that was moving from the absolutism of Soviet ideals to a more flexible, but confusing environment where doubt, insight, cynicism and curiosity shaped my development as a woman and an artist.

The study employs an autoethnographic inquiry to develop a graphic novel where lived experience is drawn upon to explain the conditions of a society at a certain time. The study, as a practice led artistic inquiry, reflects on propaganda, ideology and belief, obedience, corruption and identity. The work is formatted as a 64 page graphic novel[1] contextualised by this exegesis.

The rational and significance of the research

The rationale for this thesis is two-fold.

First, given the paucity of women's narratives of childhood emanating from Russia in the 1990s, the study offers a distinctive insight into both identity development and environment. This is arguably important because such narratives may help us to understand the human condition within accounts of political change.

1 Upgraded Gods is the first part of a proposed, three part novel that will become the core of a proposed PhD inquiry into multimodal narration. However, in this thesis Upgraded Gods is formatted as a print narrative.

The second rationale relates to the need to address a historic paucity of women's narratives within the media form of the graphic novel. While this situation is now changing (see 3:2), for many years the graphic novel was the domain of men and accounts of women were constructed by them. However, more recently women author/illustrators have begun to colonise the field and significantly there are increasing instances of non-Western women's stories that provide insight into the impact of social control and agency upon them. If we are to preserve alternative accounts of history, novels such as Upgraded Gods are important. This is arguably useful when they are formatted in media forms that extend the limitations of the written word into interfaces of text and image, that make accessible very rich and nuanced narrations of lived experience.

The thesis makes three significant contributions to knowledge.

First, the study demonstrates how autoethnography can operate beyond the potentials of the written word and may be extended across media, including writing, illustration and design.

Second, Upgraded Gods contributes to a small number of emerging graphic novels[2] that employ intra-diegetic and extra-diegetic devices within their narrative structure. Thus, the novel demonstrates how a protagonist can appear visually as an insightful child and concurrently as a critical adult commentator.

Finally, Upgraded Gods contributes to a small corpus of women's autobiographical stories that document experiences in Russia at the time of the fall of the USSR.[3] In doing this, it substitutes the use of major historical events as narrative backdrops, for personal and subjective reflection on very ordinary episodes. This approach operates as a method for giving a voice to the "history of the ordinary".

The structure of the exegesis

The exegesis is divided into four chapters. The first is preceded by this introduction. Chapter 1 presents a positioning of the researcher. Here I explain the reason I have undertaken the project and my professional and academic background that led to the thesis.

Chapter 2 discusses a blend between autoethnographic and heuristic inquiry that constitutes the research design employed in the study.

Chapter 3 provides a review of contextual knowledge and considers two areas: the evolution of the graphic novel as a media form and women's autobiographical writing; its development and expansion.

The final chapter provides a critical commentary on the work and is divided into two parts. In the first I discuss the five themes that permeate the novel (identity, ideology and belief, obedience, corruption and propaganda). In the second, I address certain aesthetic and narrative features of the novel, including its linear and chronological narrative, and the use of intra-diegetic dialogue and extra-diegetic commentary.

The design of this exegesis has drawn its inspiration from Samizdat books. Chapter headings are hand-typed, then scanned into the document. The design alludes to a distinctive aesthetic where type is decayed, where colour is limited to black and red, and the stability of text is uneven.

2 *The Complete Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi, 2009) is probably the most well-known.

3 There is only one graphic novelist (Anya Ulinich) who I have been able to locate. She briefly discusses this period in Russian history in her graphic novels *Petropolis* (2007) and *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* (2014).

CHAPTER: 1

Positioning the Researcher

CHAPTER: 1

Positioning the Researcher

This chapter provides a brief personal history and context for the study. It briefly traces formative events and perceptions in my life and thus positions me ideologically and personally in relation to the research topic.

1:1 CONSTRAINT AND TRANSITION

I was born in a country that no longer exists. However, its spores are still implanted under the skin of generations of former Soviet Union citizens … the Comrades (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.
Photograph (circa. 1984) showing a squad of pilots, together with their children, before an official parade. I am the first child from the left and my father is standing behind me. The photograph was torn apart by my mother for reasons I couldn't fully understand.

My family lived in Krasnodar, a city located on the far south-west of the Russian Federation. I grew up in a Soviet apartment block with two parents (Figure 2), a brother,[4] and my grandmother (Figure 3).

Almost a decade after the Soviet Union ceased to exist I was completing a design project at the Krasnodar State University of Culture & Art. I was looking through scores of posters and taglines that had been intended to make Soviet citizens believe in the approaching international triumph of communism … a dream we were assured would become manifest in the near future. While we waited, what was required was a genuine trust in the inevitability and a focused effort to make it happen a few years earlier than what was planned.

The posters I was looking at were predominantly red (Figure 4). Ubiquitous in their original distribution, they showed a world filled with the happy, healthy, inspired and excited citizens of a young progressive society. The heroes of this Soviet nation were painted and sculpted in monumental sizes, displayed in schools, universities, culture clubs, cinemas, work places, hospitals and holiday destinations. There was nowhere you could avoid them.

Communism was a mass religion, a new opiate,[5] and for this reason other religions were forbidden and adherents punished by expulsion from the party.

But then, by the late 1990s after the Soviet Union had dissolved, this pervasive propaganda became a joke; droll content for a dark, intertextual kind of comedy. Pseudo-propagandistic design became fashionable and new brands parodied the aesthetic.

Although I enjoyed working with this emerging irreverence (Figure 5), when I looked through the piles of posters in archives and libraries they still intimidated me. It was as if they were still a reality, as if the Soviet power was just in a hiatus … waiting to come back. Accrued memory tormented me.

FIGURE 2.
My mother and father's 25th Wedding anniversary (circa. 1984). I am in the foreground. This photograph was taken just before my father's death on 27 October 1984.

FIGURE 3.
My grandmother and me (1981). This is the period when the graphic novel opens.

4 I don't mention my brother in the novel because we were born 16 years apart. When I was growing up, he lived in a different city.

5 I refer obliquely here to Karl Marx who paradoxically stated, "*Religion* is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1976, p. 244).

FIGURE 4.

Indicative Soviet posters of the period.

Left to right: Kibardin G. V. (1938). Parade of Athletes. (Written on the flag: "Greetings to our dear Stalin!", beneath: "The physical culture parade is a mighty demonstration of Soviet nation's power and invincibility!").

Kokorekin A. A. (circa. 1951). Be ready to fight for Lenin-Stalin's ideas!

Golub, P. S. (1951). "Do not talk on the phone [carelessly]. A spy could be listening." This propaganda poster shows an NKVD officer hanging up the phone of a soldier.

1:2 FAMILY SECRETS

When I was a child my father was a pilot (Figure 6). Because he could travel, I was an exception to other children. At this time there were strict limitations placed on Soviet citizens especially in relation to communication with the Western world.

We lived behind an Iron Curtain. My father and the few people I knew who were allowed to operate outside of Russia were rigorously checked by the First department of the KGB. At this time people arrested for illegal border crossings were sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. We knew little about this because both successful and unsuccessful escapes were largely kept secret. Travelling abroad was restricted to a bare minimum because contact was seen as a potential ideological challenge. To avoid undue influence from the evils of capitalism, and ensure a singular soviet ideology, we were only fed information through the highly censored (and propagandistic) media. However,

---

FIGURE 5.

An example of my pseudo-propagandistic design work (2001). The design was for a vodka brand called "Russian Kaleidoscope". The treatment involved collaging and recontextualising Soviet propaganda posters.

for me and many other Soviet people this worked paradoxically because I recall a huge, if covert, craving for knowledge and "truth". *Samizdat* (self-published) books circulated from hand to hand, even though they were forbidden. (For reading or distributing these publications a person could be sentenced to up to 7 years in prison). In my home, such books were carefully hidden. Unexpectedly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a crisis in the publishing industry. These books, that had once been illegal and in high demand, were published, but people were no longer interested in reading them. The populace had become more concerned with how to earn money, to build successful businesses and afford a better life.

1:3 AFTER THE FALL

Living in the post USSR and seeing changes in my society and the effect of long-awaited freedom was disappointing. Criminal wars began tearing the country apart. These were accompanied by bureaucratic corruption and an unstable economy. The intellectual class (*the Intelligenti*) found ourselves pushed to the fringes of society. The power of money and consumption had rapidly become the new Russian gods.

I never felt I quite belonged to the Soviet world that inflicted so many restrictions on human interaction. Perhaps I was an anomaly because many former Soviet citizens still miss the collapsed USSR. From early childhood, consciously or not, I realise that I was looking for an escape from it; I was seeking a way to be beyond the control of the Soviet apparatus. I thought I might find it in art, because when I drew, the whole world would disappear around me. It turned out that I was wrong. I learned that artists were an integral part of the governing ideological mechanism. They were the fuel of the propaganda factories … and those who didn't want to be part of the phenomenon were dismissed from art organisations. Because they were obliged to have a job, most of them worked as janitors, stokers or night watchmen. They became the pariahs of a persecuting society and were labelled as social parasites.

FIGURE 6.
My father and mother (circa. 1982). My father is in his pilot's uniform. It was taken when they visited my brother in the city of Oryol, south-west of Moscow.

1:4 ART AND ADVERTISING

I began my classical Russian Art education at 9. I studied for 4 years in the Krasnodar Art school #4, then I spent another 4 years at the Krasnodar Art College (Figure 7). This was followed by 6 years in the Krasnodar University which was later renamed the Academy of Culture & Art. After the collapse of the Soviet Union it was perhaps inevitable that I would move towards design and advertising, because in the new mercantile ideology, there was no place for "art" anymore. Advertising was a developing business that during the Soviet era hadn't existed. There had been no need for it because there were no product or service options to choose from.

Emerging Russian advertising took the new country by storm. Campaigns were crammed with misleading information and half naked women, promoting everything from roof repair to cubes of chicken stock (Figure 8). The newly formed clients dictated what was *de rigueur.*

What also surfaced at this time were the effects of campaigns that targeted people's sense of self-esteem. On reflection, I think Russians emerging from the Soviet culture were very vulnerable to this. The pernicious selling of identity off the back of commodities hit them in a relatively undefended state. However, from childhood the immunity against Soviet propaganda had been covertly instilled in me, so I quickly recognised the gendering and sexualising of commodities as just another type of indoctrination. This meant that to a certain extent, I was able to stand back and watch what was happening, however I found myself implicated in and distressed by the process.

FIGURE 7.
Training in drawing at the Krasnodar Art College (circa. 1994).

FIGURE 8.
Billboards (circa. 1997-2005). They advertise respectively; real estate, tyre fitting, internet services and a local carwash.

1:5 NEW ZEALAND

I left Russia when I realised that my future in this emerging country was unpromising. I wanted to grow, even though I didn't have a hint of what direction I needed to take. As a consequence, I decided to further my education in an ideologically and perhaps pedagogically different world. While still in Russia I applied for postgraduate study at AUT University in New Zealand.

After completing an honours degree that considered relationships between crises of identity and commodity fetishism, I began working in a New Zealand advertising agency. This felt like travelling forward in time. I secured a position with Whybin/TBWA where I was employed for 5 years, initially as a designer and illustrator, and later as a creative. Currently I work for Augusto, – an advertising and production company. In this new world, I encountered a significant difference in advertising culture. In 2016 New Zealand was ranked in advertising as the 6th most awarded nation in the world, with two New Zealand agencies, Colenso BBDO (Auckland) and Y&R New Zealand (Auckland), taking the 2nd and 3rd places respectively.[6]

Although professionally I commit myself to the realm of advertising (I consider it to offer an insight into commercial ideology), I carry an enduring fascination with more subtle, profound narratives. I am interested in how we might use the tools of design to communicate the deeper complexities of the human condition. By retrospectively discussing and trying to understand my formative experiences in Russia, I have engaged in a research project that utilises autobiography through the writing, illustration and design of a graphic novel. Perhaps because of the *Samizdat*; the hidden books that haunted my childhood, I am interested in the outsider's truth and the secret worlds that have been hitherto unspoken.

In this thesis project I give "voice" to a child's perception of a world in retrospect. This is as much an emotional as it is an artistic challenge but through it I seek to shed light on a complex, political, time constrained, social situation through the lens of the personal. In so doing perhaps I seek to touch the thinking of the Nigerian poet Ben Okri (1997, p.114) who once said:

> Stories do not belong to eternity
> They belong to time,
> And out of time they grow,
> And it is through lives that touch the bedrock
> Of suffering and the fire of the soul,
> It is through lives and in time,
> That stories relived and redreamed
> … become timeless.

6 See Campaign Brief: "The Gunn Report 2016: Colenso BBDO ranked #2 agency in the world, Y&R New Zealand equal #3; New Zealand ranked #6 country in the world; BBDO ranked #1 network for 11th year in a row" http://www.campaignbrief.co.nz/2017/02/the-gunn-report-2016-colenso-b.html

CHAPTER: 2

Research Design

CHAPTER: 2

Research Design

2:1 OVERVIEW

Having positioned myself in relation to the thesis project, it is useful to consider the research design underpinning it. The project may be understood as an artistic inquiry[7] emanating from a postpositivist paradigm. In explicating the research I employ an autoethnographic methodology supported by certain heuristic approaches to creative ideation and processing. Within this, I use six distinct methods to gather data and develop iterations of the work.

2:2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is an interpretative philosophical framework that uses "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17). It defines the role of the researcher and how research will be conducted.

The position I take with this research project may be broadly understood as postpositivist. This is because my position is subjective, and as the researcher, I believe that there can be multiple meanings and ways of understanding. A postpositivist paradigm does not presuppose a single truth but rather, it suggests that perception of the world changes through the filter of individuals' experiences and values.

Fischer suggests that a postpositivist approach is "grounded in the idea that reality exists, but can never be fully understood or explained,

7 By artistic inquiry I refer to a form of research where "the development of knowledge enhancement is based on the artist performing and reflecting on their work using knowledge they have acquired and therefore researched" (Klein, 2010, para. 13). Within this, Klein notes it is not the art *itself* that is research (i.e. in this instance, the graphic novel) but rather, the critical, evolutionary process underpinning its development.

given both the multiplicity of causes and effects and the problem of social meaning" (Fischer, 2004, p. 211).[8] Wildemuth maintains that such an approach advocates "methodological pluralism and is based on the assumption that the method to be applied in a particular study should be selected based on the research question being addressed" (Wildemuth, 1993, p. 450). Lapid (1989, p. 239) extends this observation stating that "post-positivism is not a unitary philosophical platform", but rather an umbrella for often loosely related approaches that can be assembled in a common ground.

2:3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology may be understood as the overarching "systematic way to solve a problem" (Rajasekar, Philominathan & Chinnathambi, 2006, p. 5). In a coherent research design, the methodology should extend as a logical extension of the research paradigm.

In this project I used an autoethnographic approach supported by heuristic inquiry.

Autoethnography is a methodology that combines characteristics of ethnography and autobiography. It explores personal experiences and interactions with others, using self-reflection and narration to understand wider cultural, historical, political or social conditions. Anderson argues that the purpose of such an approach is:

> ... not simply to document personal experience, to provide an "insider's perspective," or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic … is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. (Anderson, 2006, pp. 386-87)

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 744) note that in autoethnography, "the mode of storytelling is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature."

In this thesis I used my life story in the USSR (and later in Russia), between 1980 and the early years of the new century, to recall and express distinctive experiences. Within the research, I sought to provide insight into the behaviour of people of the time and to reflect upon the social conditions that surrounded this. While I don't claim that this creatively processed data is transferable, it offers an insight and a contribution to understanding of social phenomena. As autoethnographical research, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) note, the inquiry displays "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural." As such, I ask the reader "to feel the truth of [my narrative] and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually" (ibid., p. 745).[9]

8 This attitude to research may be contrasted to objective, rationalistic or positivist approaches. These paradigms have been subjected to increased criticism because of their inability "to advance adequately our knowledge of what constitutes human action and activities" (Sandberg & Targama, 2007, pp. 26-27). See also Prasad and Prasad, 2003.

9 Thus, the design of the story as artistic research is highly subjective. Ellis and Bochner acknowledge that:

> if you turn a story told into a story analyzed … you sacrifice the story at the altar of traditional sociological rigor. You transform the story into another language, the language of generalization and analysis, and thus you lose the very qualities that make a story a story" (2006, p. 440). In this project, the story design must navigate a distinctive path; the generation of an autobiographical, artistic text that resonates as a creative "telling" and, more broadly, a consideration of social experience and the context in which it occurred.

Although the work may be broadly seen as autoethnographic, in processing data creatively and synthesising this into an artistic text, I employed heuristic enquiry. Douglass and Moustakas, (1985, p. 40) describe heuristic research as an approach that constitutes:

> … a search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience. It requires a subjective process of reflecting, exploring, sifting, and elucidating the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Its ultimate purpose is to cast light on a focused problem, question or theme.

Broadly, heuristic inquiry is a questioning-based approach to problem solving and it can be used when no formula to a given problem exists. It employs questioning, informed guesswork, reflection and pattern finding to enable the researcher to sense her way forward. In my approach I asked emerging data[10] questions from a "multiple variation of perspectives" (Kleining & Witt, 2000, p. 3). By this I mean, I considered multiple approaches as a way of increasing the chances of discovery and pattern finding in my work. This approach is deeply subjective because I am "sensing my way through" memories and creating a process that may help to understand my personal experience, the conditions that gave rise to it and the communicative potentials of my artistic orchestration of elements.

10 While in many forms of scientific research data is generally seen as externally gathered, in an artistic inquiry it is also generated within the work. This is partly because, as Griffiths notes, "the person creating, responding to, working on, developing or evaluating performances, artifacts and practices is central to those activities" (2010, p. 185). Thus data transforms within the work and is critically evaluated, then transformed again as it is artistically processed.

11 Methods may be described as "the techniques or processes we use to conduct our research" (Kinash, 2006, p. 3).

2:4 RESEARCH METHODS

In the research I employed seven methods[11] that enabled me to create, reflect upon and refine the story design. Although these methods will be discussed as discrete approaches, they generally function in a dynamic manner such that my thinking moves between processes, utilising their potentials synergistically. The primary methods are:

- Researching archived media
- Studying narrative design
- The use of a flow journal
- Беседа
- Road mapping
- Sketching thumbnail spreads
- Character drawing.

Researching archived media

Because it is necessary to creatively process the narrative content and context of my novel, I gathered data from a range of sources, including family photographs. These helped me to consider clothing, expressions, artefacts and environments. For broader contextual data I studied documentaries, films, online image banks, journals, and photographs that offer historical explanations or emotional expression of the period in which the novel is situated.

Generally, I collected images into "assemblies" that I pinned up in my studio or paste on to sheets. Collectively they function as a realm of immersion through which processes of ideation and development flow (Figure 9).

Studying narrative design

Although from a young age I have been fascinated by narrative, I had never written a graphic novel before. Accordingly, at the outset of the project I enrolled in writing workshops and I read extensively in the areas of narratology[12] and story design.[13]

I studied books on creative writing, screenplay development and narrative structure. I also attended diverse workshops for writers and directors.[14] I then began critically applying some of the thinking

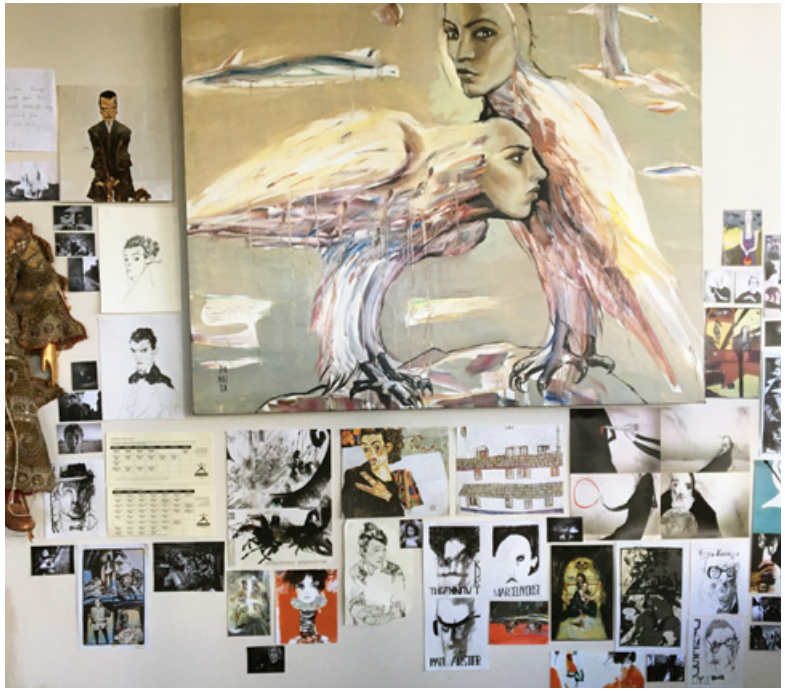

FIGURE 9.
Assembly wall in my studio (2016).

12 Narratology is the study of narrative and narrative structure. Although its theoretical trajectory may be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, its modern concerns were largely shaped by the Russian formalists, beginning with Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). Broadly narratology sees a distinction between fabula and *sujet*, or story - as "a sequence of actions or events conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse and *discourse*, the discursive presentation or narration of events"(Culler, 2001, p. 189).

13 Story design is a more recent term emanating from illustration theory. It describes a "generative process for giving expression to experience where the creative practitioner is engaged in a process of combining image and text into narrative artefacts" (Ings, 2016, p. 130). See also Danko (2006) and Estrella and Forinash (2007).

14 The classes included:
Screenwriting Masterclass with Cate Shortland (Australian screenwriter and director) – *Image and the Subconscious.* (24 September 2016, The Big Screen Symposium, Business School, the University of Auckland).
In Conversation with Jonathan Raymond (American screenwriter) – *Wildness, Control and Collaboration*. (24 September 2016, The Big Screen Symposium, Business School, the University of Auckland).
Directing Masterclass with Tony Krawitz – *Intimacy with the World of Your Story.* (25 September 2016, The Big Screen Symposium, Business School, the University of Auckland).
Storytelling for the Future with Opeyemi Olukemi. (25 September 2016, The Big Screen Symposium, Business School, the University of Auckland)
Workshop, Draw Your Own Comics with Liam Bowen and Sergio Cornaga from Team 3000 Press. (30 July 2016, Central City Library, Auckland)

FIGURE 10.
A selection of my flow journals (2016-2017).

gathered to the generation of my work. Techniques and methods that I found useful were:

- Allowing myself to dream, letting my mind roam
- Asking questions that might help the story develop
- Watching for the moments in existing narratives that moved me, identifying them and reflecting on their potential.
- Having discussions with other writers, as well as with other people, related to the world of my novel.
- Critically reading beautifully written and poorly written books to identify effective and ineffective structures, devices and stylistic approaches.

The flow journal

From the outset of the project I kept what might be described as a "flow journal". I use the term in reference to the writing of Mihaly Csikszentmihályi (1990). In positive psychology "flow" describes a mental, operational state where a thinker performing an activity is fully immersed in an energised focus on the process of the activity.

Such a journal is not simply an archive of thinking; it operates as a vehicle where I am "involved in an activity with a clear set of goals and progress that adds direction and structure to the task." The task at hand has clear and immediate feedback because I am working within a moving thinking process. This flow of narrative and image ideation and refinement helps me to "negotiate any changing demands and allows [me] to adjust [my] performance to maintain the flow state"

(Csikszentmihályi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005, pp. 598–698).

The aim of the journal was to collect and archive and process insights, ideas and memories (as both images and text) that surfaced while I was writing my way into the story (Figure 10).

In terms of flow, I became aware early in the research that closing myself in a room like a hermit was relatively unproductive. My mind simply went blank. For me there appears to be a connection between walking, flow and ideation.[15] By this I mean, when I walk around the city while listening to an audio book,[16] my thinking process is opened, such that I am still affected slightly by communications and interactions with others, while I am concurrently stimulated by the narrative to which I am listening. Within this process of dual stimulation my own ideas and reflections on my personal story spring into existence and I stop periodically to enter them into my flow journal. These entries are later reviewed and elements organised into a narrative structure.

Беседа

Another method I employed may be best described using the Russian term Беседа (Beseda). This method uses a form of conversation, specifically with Russian people who lived at the time of the narrative. Беседа is shaped not only by language and shared experience but also by distinctively Russian cultural nuances and protocols. Implicit within Беседа are layers of meaning and reference that often trigger emotions and trajectories into other lines of thinking. This method of conversing in my native tongue with other Russians helped me to gain a more visceral understanding of the time in which I lived (given that certain memories and associations were tenuous because I was a child). The method also provided insight into ideas underlying particular social constructs that I had taken for granted at the time.

The approach was not a formal interview but rather a flow of listening and reflective questioning.

Road mapping

A fifth method used in the development of the story was the construction and navigation of a multilayered roadmap. By this I mean potential trajectories through my autobiographical memories were, over time, ordered and reordered with different emphases and connections in the pursuit of a coherent narrative.

Initially I wrote the story as a sequence of recalled, linear episodes. However it quickly grew to enormous proportions and I lost my way within it. So I pulled back from the story and drafted a layered "road map" that utilised a system of questions.

15 Interestingly Tim Ingold has written extensively on this topic (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Ingold, 2011; Janowski & Ingold, 2012). His recent writing is concerned with environmental perception and skilled practice, specifically with how artists engage relationally with environments, with a focus on the growth of embodied perception and walking.

16 I listen (as a writer) to audio books on writing, but also to other fiction and nonfiction books.

At each potential turning in the narrative I asked of each episode:

- What is this moment really about?[17]
- Why am I putting this into the novel? (What is the purpose of this episode?)
- What exactly is happening in the episode?

Millman and Prasada (2013) advise that "every creative work comes together in layers" and a writer "needs to reconceive the earliest draft as forming the first material layer of [her] story. That layer will dissolve into each additional layer, itself a reflection of another round of major craft decisions" (pp. 101-102). By using this technique, I was able to distance myself from the lived experience of the autobiographical content and see the bigger picture, combining and rearranging the episodes in incrementally refined layers that increasingly created stronger impact and a more coherent structure. This narrative design was now concerned with pace, emphasis, thematic connection, dramatic arc and perspective.

17 McKee (2006), in his discussion of writing for screen, notes that a narrative episode should show us, rather than tell us the plot point. He suggests that the writer separates the scene text, - "what we see and hear, what is said and done", from its subtext, "real thoughts and feelings, conscious and unconscious, that live under what is said and done". As McKee vernacularly notes in his book on the principals of screenwriting "if the scene is about what the scene is about you're in deep shit." (ibid.).

Sketching thumbnail spreads

In developing a spreads' structure, I used thumbnail sketching. This enabled me to work out the rhythm of the pages (developing page layouts and trying to get the pace right) and also find the narrative emphasis of the work. I first began by loosely sketching a double page spread, establishing initial emphases within the narrative, deciding what was to be told by the picture and what would be communicated with writing. During this phase I also experimented with the potential placement of characters within the composition (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11.
Thumbnail sketching (2016). Thumbnail spreads developed while designing the spread about the stuffed Lenin.

From this initial layout I created a pencil draft of the spread, ensuring that there was a balance between frames and designing them so compositionally they worked well in relation to one another. At this point I also placed initial dialogue in a Photoshop scan to ensure that both the narrative and visual flow were working (Figure 12). During this process I elevated certain characters or events to higher or lower levels of emphasis within the hierarchy of the composition.[18]

Character drawing

In the next phase I drew the final images. These were later scanned and combined in Photoshop with a range of digital textures.

To create emotional impact in the images I employed two different approaches. In the first, I focused on developing characters. To create high levels of emotional (Figure 13) or historical authenticity, I used both photographic and video stills as reference material. From these sources I drew multiple sketches of the same character from different angles with different emotional qualities (Figure 14). Some of these images appeared in the final spreads if they appeared to work effectively.

The second approach was used for developing supporting images. For these I employed a much lighter, less resolved approach that was sometimes almost childlike in its rendering. This light, sketchy technique enabled me to focus the reader on specific elements within any spread, so they would not be distracted by superfluous detail. However, in achieving this lightness I often redrew the same frames multiple times until I produced an image with which I was satisfied. By using this lighter rendering style I was able to emphasise fluidity and movement within the composition. When I selected a lightly sketched image for the final composition I did not choose one based on flawlessness, but rather I used renderings that had a strong sense of character (Figure 15).

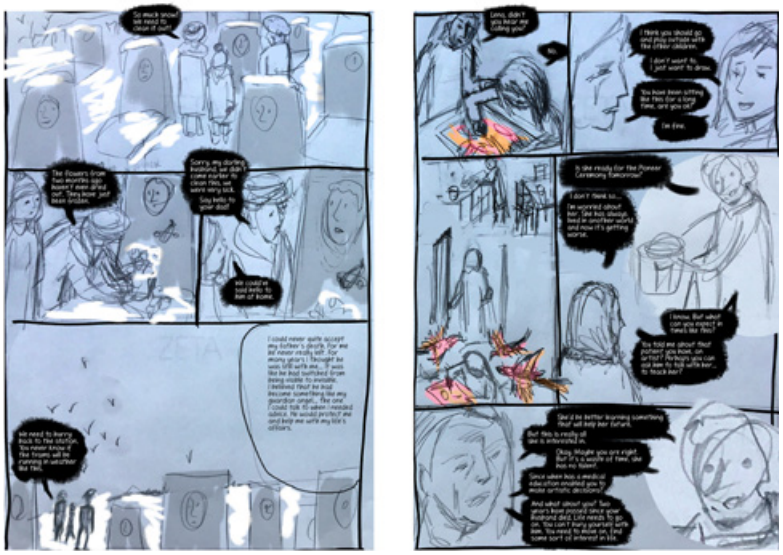

FIGURE 12.
Pencil draft of a double page spread (2016).

18 Dominant elements are often larger in scale and tend to be rendered more like drawings than sketches (because this allows me to use more detail).

FIGURE 13.
Character development [Grandmother] (2017).

2:5 CRITIQUE OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Advantages of the research design

The research design developed for the thesis had several advantages. Firstly, because I was uncovering and redesigning lived experience, it offered a high level of flexibility that enabled me to adapt and experiment responsively to immerging ideas and opportunities within the story design process. Through this, associations and memories could be connected into unexpected and narratively coherent patterns.

Secondly, because both autoethnography and heuristic inquiry position the self as central, the approach had the potential to heighten my "self-consciousness" and this, if carefully used, helped in a healing process. This is partly because in designing a story of one's lived experience, one is working within both the subjective (what is recorded and felt) and the objective (critical decisions around what devices communicate these ideas effectively).[19]

Thirdly, as Russel (1999) has argued, it is through autobiographical approaches that marginalised individuals who might traditionally have been the exotic subject of more conventional ethnographies are

19 For example, when writing and drawing in my flow journals emotionally difficult memories would surface. Interestingly, as they took form, I discovered that what had been carried in my life as traumatic experiences often lost its power over me, its destructiveness somehow dissolving through the process of recording (sometimes leaving me wondering why such a painful memory had become something I had avoided recollecting for years). Danticat, in discussing this phenomenon in autobiographical writing, suggests that "after a while in the process, you have some distance and you start thinking of it as *a* story, not as *your* story… It was a personal grief, but no longer personal… [It's] something that has not just happened to me, but something that's happened in the world" (Cited in Brooks, 2017, p.123).

able to tell their own stories (p. 3). When their narration "transcends the self and engages in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2008, p. 43), this form of research is capable of broadening how we perceive historical narratives. For a researcher this can be a very enriching experience because one's ordinary life is empowered and understood as making a contribution to cultural discourse in a public domain.

Finally, on a practical level, because the research was developed over two years, I had a longer time for gestation and reflection than I would have been afforded in a commercial, non-heuristically navigated context. The research design enabled me to draw on diverse interior and exterior influences and consider creative synergies between them without feeling forced to make an immediate decision as to the outcome.

FIGURE 14.
Character development [Shop Assistant] (2017). It is based on archive images of a shop assistant during the Soviet era.

Challenges of the research design

However, despite these advantages, autoethnographic research can also pose distinct challenges. Although Behar (1997), Eriksson (2010) and Ryang (2000) all argue that vulnerability can add authority to autobiographic inquiries, Ellis and Bochner (2000), Tolich (2010) and Ings (2014) note that self-narration can be a painful process for which a researcher must be prepared. Having a full-time job, a daughter and other demanding life duties and responsibilities, twice forced me to take leave from study. In the end this became advantageous because the time out refocused me away from some of the grief and difficulty involved in recalling incidents. I

FIGURE 15.
Light sketches of a conversation between Zoya's father and an old woman (2017). Often in these rapidly rendered sketches, proportions are skewed and twisted. I have found that this approach allows very little graphic information to function with relatively high emotional impact.

concurrently found reading Brook's *Writing Hard Stories* (2017) very helpful. In this work she interviewed 18 successful memoir writers. In the interviews, she unpacked how the writers survived being traumatised in the process of writing their stories. The book was helpful because, in reading lived experiences of writing the autobiographic, I discovered that the emotional challenges I encountered were arguably a normal consequence of such research.

The other significant challenge concerned the issue of representation. Delamont (2007) argues that placing outcomes of autobiographic research in the public domain can be problematic because readers will automatically read such research:

> … as an authentic, and therefore 'true' account of the writer's life, and therefore the other actors will be, whatever disclaimers, or statements about fictions … identifiable and identified. (para. 4)

In Upgraded Gods I have told my story but also that of my mother, father, neighbours and friends. As characters, these people have become unknowing participants and appear as subjectively framed in my non-neutrally constructed representation (Ings, 2014). In navigating this issue I have employed what Ellis (2007) describes as relational ethics. Here, the researcher must "recognize and value mutual respect, dignity and the connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live" (p. 4).

Thus, although I have integrated certain difficult episodes in my work, I have not included anything that would render a person politically or personally unsafe or cause unwarranted suffering.

In other instances, I have rendered characters like the artist unrecognisable. Finally, I also chose to change the names of all characters including myself.[20]

I am also aware that as the writer I am vulnerable to judgment. Although in academic contexts Morse (2002) recommends that the autobiographer consider adopting a *nom de plume*, in an M.Phil. thesis this is not a feasible option, because the scholarship made evident through the research can no longer be directly (or professionally) attributable to me as the academic/writer/designer. In considering this issue I have had to come to terms with the now public nature of my narrative and the fact that what was private will now become part of my lived persona.

2:6 SUMMARY

The research design for this thesis project was constructed to enable high levels of flexibility and responsiveness to autobiographical material that needed to be crafted into a cohesive narrative. Emanating from a postpositivist paradigm, the design emphasised processes of reflection and experimentation that engaged heuristic approaches activated through diverse approaches to data gathering (archive research, and *Беседа* as a form of culturally focused discussion). It processed emerging data through flow journals, layered road mapping and the design of thumbnail spreads. These were resourced by engaging with studies in narrative design and processes of immersive drawing, that allowed me to consider structural and aesthetic emphases in the work.

Having now discussed the research design underpinning the project it is useful to consider a review of the knowledge impacting on the inquiry.

20 I am called Zoya in the novel. Having noted this, I understand it is impossible to hide similarities between me and the protagonist. My purpose has been to utilise life experience as a building material for the story. In this regard, the novel is not purely autobiographical, because certain episodes and characters have been combined from different events and people. In this regard I am reminded of McKee (2006) who suggests that a "story is metaphor for life and life is lived in time."

C H A P T E R : 3

Review of Contextual Knowledge

CHAPTER: 3

Review of Contextual Knowledge

This chapter offers a discussion of contextual knowledge impacting on the research. In reviewing influences on the inquiry, it considers two areas: the graphic novel as a media form and the evolution of women's autobiography within the media form.

3:1 THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Contestation

There is still considerable debate over what constitutes a graphic novel and how it might be differentiated from a comic. Kukkonen (2013) suggests the term "graphic novel" was used initially to describe Will Eisner's *A Contract With God (1978)*. However, Stein states that the terms "comic" and "graphic narrative" have, and continue to be, frequently used synonymously (2015). Kukkonen argues that a graphic novel comprises "interwoven short stories that are published in their entirety as a graphic novel (and not as a set of comic books)." She notes that "many comics will be sold under the label 'graphic novel' even if they are technically trade paperbacks" (2013, p. 84). In contrast, Chute prefers not to use the term graphic novel at all and substitutes it with "graphic narrative," defining this as "a book-length work in the medium of comics" (2008, p. 453). She proposes this definition because she claims that "the most riveting comic texts coming out right now … are not novels at all" (Chute, 2010, p. 3).

Origin

What we do know is that the term graphic novel has a relatively pragmatic origin. Murray (2011, para. 1) maintains that the name was a marketing ploy designed to provide comics with a better image in large bookstores, and Stein says that "it was not so much the production of comic books but rather the act of calling them 'graphic novels' that created [the] new genre of literature" (2015, p. 390). This, he suggests, enabled the narratives to "efficiently compete with other storytelling media, such as cinema and television films." (ibid.).

Interestingly, Baetens and Frey (2015) suggest that in the early years many comic artists were opposed to the term graphic novel, including the creator of *Maus*, Art Spiegelman, and Allan Moore, the screenwriter of *Watchmen*, who stated, "The problem is that 'graphic novel' just came to mean an 'expensive comic book'… it doesn't really matter much what they're called but it's not a term that I'm very comfortable with" (cited in Baetens & Frey, 2015, pp. 1-2). Conversely, Weiner (2012) suggests that the term graphic novel was used to demarcate a more adult oriented readership that was concerned with "serious" topics beyond the concerns of superhero fiction.

Tychinski (2017) suggests that in 1978 the first original mass market trade paperback graphic novel, Lee and Kirby's *The Silver Surfer,* was published by Marvel Comics. In the same year Eclipse Comics released McGregor and Gulacy's *Sabre.* Following the success of these works, Eisner produced *A Contract with God,* originally published in 1978. This was the first creator-owned series to receive mass market distribution in mainstream bookstores.

By 1985 Tychinski notes that, with the publication of Moore and Gibbons' *The Watchmen*, originally published as separate comic books between 1986 and 1987, graphic novels extended from single narratives to include collective "limited series", which were designed to last a finite number of issues. However, it wasn't until 1986 when Spiegelman's *Maus: A survivor's tale*, published between 1980 and 1991, that the graphic novel began to gain significant status as a literary form. Spiegelman's biography of his father's experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and did much to elevate the media form in the eyes of the general public. Literary acclaim also accompanied graphic novels like Gaiman's *The Sandman,* which appeared as separate comic books between 1989 and 1996, with its appearance on the 2009 New York Times Best Seller List.[21]

21 Other graphic novels that have featured on this list include *Maus,* being ranked at No. 7, and *Watchmen,* being ranked at No. 13. Related literary acclaim was also afforded to *The Sandman* which was one of five graphic novels to feature on Entertainment Weekly's "100 best reads from 1983 to 2008", being ranked at No. 46. (See http://thegreatestbooks.org/lists/49).

Precursors

Predating debates over the status and nature of the graphic novel, was the appearance of the comic as a media form. McCloud (1993), referencing the satiric picture stories *The Adventures Of Obadiah Oldbuck* (1842), suggests that Rodolphe Toffler might be considered to be the "father" of the media form. However, he concedes that comics may arguably predate Toffler's publications, noting that visual storytelling may be traced back to a pre-Columbian picture manuscript discovered circa. 1519, the 1066 Bayeux Tapestry, and ancient Egyptian inscriptions on the tomb of Menna in 1300 B.C.

Contesting this, Duncan, Smith and Levitz believe that William Hogarth (1697-1764) "laid the foundations for popularizing sequential art" (2015, p. 20). However, one might argue that medieval religious iconography, paintings, frescos, stained glass windows, and bas-reliefs were also image-led narrative devices. Indeed, Pope Gregory the Great in 600 A.D. said:

> Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls [of churches] what they cannot read in books (*codicibus*). What writing (*scriptura*) does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it. Thus, especially for the nations (*gentibus*), a picture takes the place of reading. … Therefore you ought not to have broken that which was placed in the church not in order to be adored but solely in order to instruct the minds of the ignorant. (Cited in Hoche, 2015, p. 69)

Hoche notes that Pope Gregory's elevation of the picture became a foundation for the role of illustrated narrative in Christianity. This was "because the depiction of sacred events and saintly persons were useful for converting pagans and teaching newly converted Christians, both of whom were probably illiterate." Pope Gregory argued that such texts, "activate emotions which, when properly channelled, lead the faithful toward contemplation of God" (ibid., p. 70). It was these images and the narratives they communicated that became known as the "bible of the illiterate" or the "poor man's bible", and led to a cultural association in later centuries between image-led narrative and the under educated or illiterate.

However, Hoche argues that in medieval times image-led narrative was ascendant. Indeed, Pope Gregory stated:

> … pictures seem to move the soul more than texts. Through pictures certain deeds are placed before the eyes, and they seem to be happening in the present time, but with texts, the deeds seem to be only a story heard, which moves the soul less, when the thing is recalled by the memory. For this reason we do not show as much reverence towards books as we do to images and pictures. (Cited in Hoche, 2015, p. 72)

The contemporary role and format of the graphic novel

Despite anxieties surrounding image-led narratives as they appear in comics, Stein suggests that the graphic novel has become "an important form to tell stories from foreign countries, to report about political structures and crises, about wars and other catastrophes, about totalitarianism, political suppression and the suffering of entire peoples as well as of individuals"[22] (2015, p. 394). He argues that "the graphic novel is now broadly accepted in the circle of 'respected' literary art forms" and has become elevated above the status of "fast food for readers" (ibid.). Today, he observes, graphic novels are "collected by libraries, having been rejected in former times as a consumer item that did not require preservation and long-term distribution" (ibid. p. 391).

Recently a distinctive development in the graphic novel is its morphing into a new media form that has begun to engage with the potentials of interactive graphic novels that are being created for online platforms.[23] Here, Stein suggests, traditional word and image interactions, customary subjects, themes and plots are undergoing a protean shift. The engagement with interactive storytelling employs technology to enhance our perception of the narrative, adding music and voice as a substitute for written text. The innovations of this mode of storytelling allow for collaborative interactive features within the novel and social connections and discourse emanating from it.[24]

22 My novel Upgraded Gods forms part of this concern. In this regard it is relatable to work like Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003); Guibert's *The Photographer* (2009); Sowa's *Marzi* (2011); Samanci's *Dare to Disappoint* (2015), and Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), because it is concerned with socio-cultural insight and it activates this through autobiographical narrative.

23 Examples of this form of graphic novel include:
Le's (2015) *The Boat* http://www.sbs.com.au/theboat/
Schiedon's (2015) *Land of the Magic Flute* http://www.landofthemagicflute.com/
Orwell and Lidster's (2017) *Tell me your Secrets* http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z3b77hv

24 As I move this research into a PhD study in 2018, the second two episodes of the story will explore the potentials of Virtual Reality. In an episode in Zoya's story where she gives birth to her daughter and experiences a near death experience, I will use the immersive potentials of this medium to communicate the nebulous and almost esoteric nature of dying and recovery. This is because VR offers narrative facilities that reach beyond the potentials of text and image on a printed page, affording the designer room to explore the possibilities of both interactivity and immersion.

3:2 THE GRAPHIC NOVEL AS WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Given the nature of Upgraded Gods, it is useful to consider the development of women's autobiography in relation to the graphic novel as a media form. Although at a cursory glance women do not appear to have had a significant influence on the development of the graphic novel, a careful unpacking reveals a significant and increasing contribution, especially since the start of the 21st century.

Development

Refaie (2012) suggests that autobiography as a distinct literary genre was initially recognised in the 18th century, but the term was reserved for texts by men like Saint Augustine, Rousseau and Wordsworth (Refaie, 2012, p. 15) However, social, cultural and technological[25] changes of the late 1960s and early '70s shifted the parameters of what autobiography might encompass (ibid.).[26] This meant that:

> … anyone's life story could now lay claim to being equally worthy and intrinsically interesting. Autobiography thus gradually became an important tool by which marginalized individuals of all descriptions could make their voices heard and claim validity for their unique experiences in the world.

That meant also an expansion into all types of autobiographical writing: letters, diaries, confessions, travel writing, genealogy, autoethnography, video self-narratives (ibid.).

In this period, women's narrations of self-experience may be evidenced in the underground comics movement. In the 1970s underground comics were largely male dominated. Refaie notes that "women had traditionally been excluded from the English language comics industry, with titles, even those explicitly directed at young girls, written and drawn almost exclusively by males" (ibid. p. 31).

She also notes that it was in the underground comic movement that far more women became involved. Here "Female comix creators … such as Aline Kominsky and Phoebe Gloeckner used the comic medium to discuss the messy, intimate details of their everyday lives" (ibid., pp. 38-39).[27]

25 The significant technological change was the increasing democratisation of print such that underground comic artists could afford to independently print and distribute their ideas without the cultural screening that dominant publishing houses had traditionally instituted under the 1954 Comics Code Authority (Estren, 1987).

26 Felski (1989) argues that feminist autobiographies of this period created "a counter-public sphere … that both interrogated and affirmed gendered subjectivity" (p. 121). Watson (1989) suggest that by extension, the period gave "voice to oppressed identities and against a misapplied concept of decolonisation" (p. 400). This saw women's autobiographical writing used to position marginalised, self-experienced narratives associated with ethnicity, sexuality and the intimate, into mainstream consciousness.

27 Other women comix artists associated with the 1973 Berkley Comix Convention and the voicing of feminist ideologies included Patricia Moodian, Trina Robbins, Shelby Lee Marrs, Sharon Rudahl, Chin Lively and Joyce Sutton. In addition to these women artists, Sharon Flenniken, Michele Brand, Laura Fountain, Aline Kominsky, Karen Marie Haskell and Janet Wolf-Stansky were contributors to publications like *Wimmen's Comix #1* (1972) (Estren, 1987, p. 263; p. 272).

Golomb (2013) suggests that during this period, the foci of sequential comic narrative by women:

> … were by and large feminist self-actualization and sexuality. Many of the artists were consciously reacting to the overwhelmingly male-dominated world of underground comix. There was a high degree of shock value in these early works. As time went on the comics still tended towards the autobiographical, but storytelling gained importance. (p. 28)

Refaie notes that during the 1970s women novelists were also creating highly reflective feminist works, based on their personal experience.

In this century, with the move of the graphic novel into a prominent position in mainstream publishing, Golomb (2013) notes that the media form has become an important opportunity for women author/designers. She observes that, "Most of the women creating comics today are still doing so from a woman's point of view" (2013, p. 21), but their target audience is increasingly more universal. As the number of women graphic novelists increases, Chute (2010) argues that they continue a process of claiming the right to visual and verbal representation of women and challenging cultural traditions of what a woman needs to be to meet the requirements of society.[28] She justifies her assertion by noting that, "Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), both of which are best sellers, are possibly the two biggest literary graphic narratives since Art Spiegelman's world-famous *Maus*." (Chute, 2010, p. 1).

28 Chute lists over 20 names of contemporary, published women authors working with the media form of the graphic novel.

3:3 CONTEXTUAL PRACTICE

Given the place of women's autobiographical writing in the development of comics and graphic novels, it is useful to consider four texts that have impacted on the manner in which I have considered my work.

The graphic novels are chronologically arranged. They are all written by women, they are based on autobiographical content, in them the protagonist experiences some form of traumatic life experience, and the creator is both the author and illustrator.[29]

Persepolis 2003

(Marjane Satrapi)

The first part of *Persepolis* tells the story of Satrapi's childhood and coming of age in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and the war with Iraq. The narrative not only offers an insight into Persian history and the political circumstances, but also helps us understand a culture that we might otherwise have little access to. In her work we encounter contradictions between private and public life and a young woman's pursuit of freedom and involvement in public demonstrations that were forcibly dispersed by the state army. We follow a story told by an intelligent and outspoken child, who adds spontaneity and humour to the narrative. It is these devices that operate as agents in our identification with her and her plight.

29 These are all features of my autobiographical novel.

When asked in an interview why she wrote the novel Satrapi said:

> From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about Life in Iran to my friends. We'd see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn't represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, "No, it's not like that there." I've been justifying why it isn't negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years. How strange when it isn't something I did or chose to be?... That is why I wanted people in other countries to read Persepolis, to see that I grew up just as other children do. (Why I Wrote Persepolis, 2003, p. 10)

The second part of Satrapi's story opens with her studying in Vienna where her parents sent her to protect her from her outspokenness that had become politically dangerous. Here she tells about her adolescent, financial and personal struggles and most significantly about the alienation she experienced in this new culture.[30] (This is something I can personally relate to and Satrapi's graphic novel documents many parallels with my own life and experience.)

Homesick, she eventually returns to Iran, only to find that the years abroad have changed her dramatically into a new person while her country has transformed in a direction she was not able to accept.

Satrapi's graphic style uses simple black and white illustration that avoids cross-hatching or deep levels of perspective. The technique lends an austere directness to her narrative that reinforces both

30 Satrapi later wrote *Embroderies* (2008), *Chicken with Plums* (2009), and other books. An animation based on *Persepolis*, co-directed by Satrapi & Paronnaud (2007) was the winner of the 2007 Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize.

the harshness of the worlds she occupies and the directness of her insight. Such a technique McCloud (1993) suggests creates a sense of universality because the simpler the image "… the more people it could be said to describe." Thus the reader sees in such illustration, not a face of another person but potentially their own (McCloud, 1993, pp. 29-37).

Fun Home 2006

(Alison Bechdel)

Alison Bechdel calls her novel *Fun Home* a "tragicomic". With fierce humour she relates a heartbreaking story of her life and her relationship with her father. Set in a ramshackle mansion that holds dark secrets, we observe her third generation family funeral business, her father's relationships with his male students and a family babysitter, and her coming out as a lesbian in late adolescence.[31]

Structurally, Bechdel's novel moves between past and present, incrementally revealing layers of secrets and her eventual understanding retrospectively through the eyes of an adult. Bechdel, who took seven years to complete the novel, confronted the ethical tensions facing many autobiographical writers who wrestle with "the right to tell" about the lives of other participants in her narrative (See Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Ellis, 2007; Ings, 2014; Tolich, 2010). She says, "It was a story I didn't think for a long time that I could tell because it revealed so much about my family" (Flagg, 2007, p. 40).[32]

Bechdel's second book *Are you my Mother?* is about her relationship with her emotionally distant mother, during the time she was creating *Fun Home*. Although the book is similarly autobiographical, Golomb (2013) notes that much of it is concerned with a psychoanalysis of the author/designer's mental state during this period.

Bechdel's graphic style is very different to Satrapi's, even if it is still very simple. The narrative is rendered in pen and ink with (generally bluish) watercolour washes that are used to create mid-tones or suggest atmosphere. At times she also uses silhouette to counterpoint the delicate detail of foregrounded elements. Lightman (2014) describes Bechdel's style as mimetic, explaining that as an illustrator she sought comparatively "realistic" illustrations. To create these she "photographed herself in every pose of her characters" and then "traced directly over the photos" (Lightman, 2014, p. 118).

31 *Fun Home* was turned into a Tony Award winning Broadway musical that received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Parreñas suggests that even though we were able to encounter Bechdel's creation in new media, "the book had more ambivalence when it came to her father… [and] there is no song for discovering masturbation or masturbating to Anais Nin's Delta of Venus. Likewise, there are no songs for watching polluted sunsets, forests converted into strip mines nor toxic creeks" (Parreñas, 2015, p. 26).

32 This is an issue I also face and it is discussed in some detail in the next chapter.

Cancer Vixen 2006

(Marisa Acocella Marchetto)

Marisa Acocella Marchetto's[33] autobiography is about breast cancer. She relates the paradoxically humorous story of her eleven month battle with illness, facing not only the frightening diagnosis but also the life challenges at work and in her personal life. Marchetto uses humour in very distinctive ways to deal with the nature and implications of cancer for a seemingly successful New York woman. While Upgraded Gods doesn't contain her level of humour, I use, in instances, small incursions of levity to draw attention to a social nuance or character (see Figure 42).

Marchetto's style of illustration is very bright and cartoon-like, but she also integrates photographs into her work as a way of adding verification to her narrative. Pedri observes that while memoir and other non-fiction genres "set out to communicate truthfully through self-representation an identity and a life", it's not the same for a graphic memoir that:

> … tells life stories with the aid of cartoon images. [This is because] images are notorious for not being able to hide their handcrafted quality … [Thus] the graphic memoir's relationship to reality is somewhat removed from the type of objective facticity of verbal memoirs, [accordingly] the communication of truth in graphic memoir is openly caught up in the cartoon image's constructed and interpretative quality. Cartooning, in other words, renders overt the inevitable subjective register of self-representation. (Pedri, 2012, p. 248)

Pedri discusses in *Cancer Vixen* how this insertion of photographs productively parallels and adds frisson to the novel. For example, when we see a photo of the protagonist's wedding we "are taken aback by how incongruent it is with the cartoon renditions"; in them the groom is wearing the same orange colour jacket, his trademark through the novel, but he "does not exude the energy and charisma he does in the cartoon renditions" (Pedri, 2012, p. 259). Using examples like this, she argues that often illustrations are better equipped at portraying a greater truth than photographic records of an event.[34]

Pretending is Lying 2007

(Dominique Goblet)

Pretending is Lying is a memoir where the author-protagonist reviews her relationships with her partner, her daughter and her parents,

33 Marchetto is a New York cartoonist and contributor to publications like New Yorker, The New York Times, Glamour, and O, The Oprah Magazine. She has also written and illustrated *Just Who the Hell Is SHE, Anyway?* (1993) and *Ann Tenna* (2015).

34 Pedri states:

> Given the ubiquity of the cartoon drawings and the fact that the photograph's meaning is subject to the context in which it is reproduced (that is, the cartoon universe), the photograph's privileged evidential status as a "visual transcription" or a mirror of reality becomes suspect. Despite or, rather, because of the constructed nature of cartoon images, they are better equipped than the photographic image to betray a more engaged, complete sense of our protagonist and her husband, a truth about them that may be Marisa's personal truth, but that is nonetheless the truth that memoir ascribes to. (Pedri, 2012, p. 259)

relooking at dysfunctional parentship, ambivalent love and childhood drama. Unlike the preceding graphic novels, Goblet's graphic novel is a mix of fiction and autobiography.[35] Like Marchetto, Goblet uses humour to deal with a difficult life situation. Heti, in her review of the novel, notes "she distinguishes herself from memoirists who insist that their past pains are so awful … She does not treasure her wounds as the pulsating source of her identity" (Heti, 2017, para. 3).

Stylistically Goblet's striking juxtaposition of handwritten text and images rendered in charcoal, ink, oil and other media, renegotiate many comic conventions; word balloons disappear, style morphs dramatically and characters change and become almost unrecognisable. In a technique reminiscent of Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman,* originally published between 1761 and 1767, where he left blank spaces in the narrative, Goblet also suddenly breaks her story with empty pages or with drawings of gloomy industrial landscapes. These disruptions are not only used to create emotional resonance in the work, but also serve to provide the storyline with breathing space, allowing the reader time to reflect upon the narrative.

35 This novel had a long gestation with Goblet, a Belgian painter and sculptor, beginning the work in 1995 and completing it 12 years later. During this period she also worked on other projects including graphic narratives *Portraits crachès* (1997), *Souvenir d'une journee parfaite* (2002), Les *hommes-loups* (2010), *Plus si entente* (2014).

3:4 SUMMARY

Given the practice-led nature of this thesis, a review of knowledge functions in a different manner to the literature review that often precedes a traditional research inquiry. This is because in artistic research that generates an artefact through iterative stages of experiment and reflection, theory is "called to" the inquiry as it progresses. Thus, as the practice proceeds it uses existing knowledge to challenge, verify or inspire. Given this situation it is impossible to map the plethora of subtle influences very diverse theory has had on my practice. This said, this chapter has established a brief contextual scope of knowledge relating to the graphic novel. It has then focused in on this through a discussion of the evolution and nature of women's autobiography within the media form, with emphasis on four contemporary author/designers who have dealt in different ways with traumatic self-experience.

CHAPTER: 4

Critical Commentary

CHAPTER: 4

Critical Commentary

This chapter offers a critical commentary on Upgraded Gods. It is divided into two parts. The first section considers significant themes permeating this first episode of the novel and the second unpacks aesthetic and narrative features of the work.

4:1 THEMATIC FEATURES

There are five specific themes that weave through the narrative and warrant discussion. They are identity, ideology and belief, obedience, corruption and propaganda.

Identity

Although Upgraded Gods is the story of a girl who was born in Russia and heavily shaped by the communist political system, it's not limited to a narrow autobiography. The novel also comments on diverse cultural and political aspects of the society of the time and how they impacted on attitudes and situations around the characters. In the work we encounter features of Soviet Russian society through the lens of the intimate. By this I mean an extra-diegetic narrator (the protagonist's older self as the author) offers insights into the events that are occurring.

Zoya, the child protagonist, has an identity that is partially shaped by her grandmother, her mother, the artist, and her boyfriend. It is also affected by specific circumstances; for example, the death of her father and her initial failure to pass the examinations that would gain her entry into art school. In the beginning of the book Zoya exists

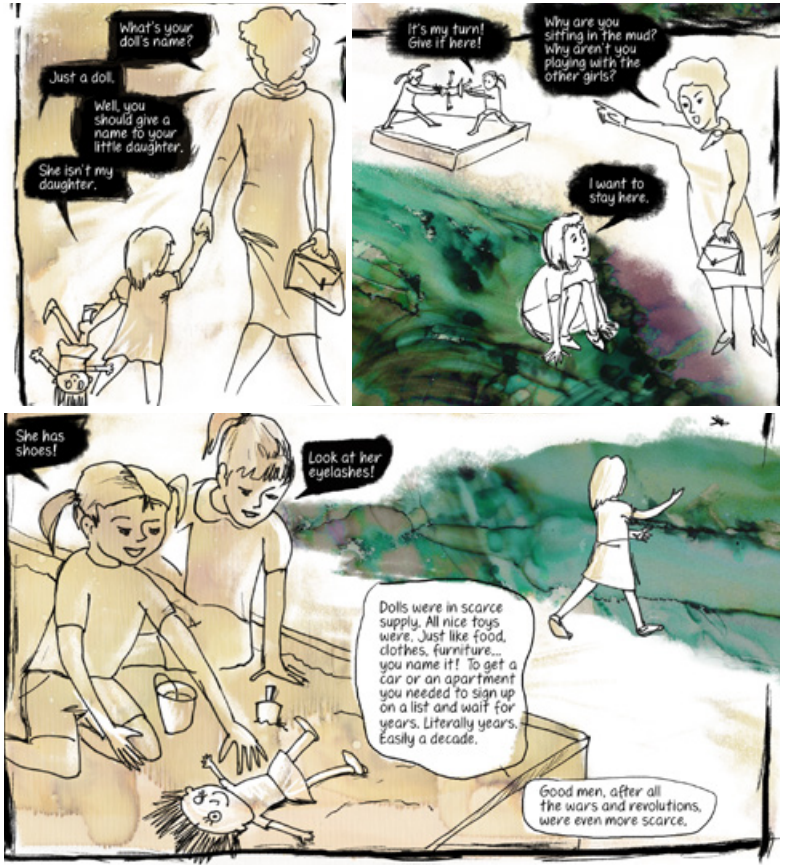

FIGURE 16.
Zoya's identity and egocentricity [Playground].

in a relatively discrete, egocentric[36] world. She is not interested in socialising with other children and she does not engage in socially sanctioned fantasising normally associated with little girls (Figure 16).

Zoya rebels when she is forced to do what she doesn't feel aligned with, and we see her attempting to escape from conditioning. This often results in admonishing either from her mother, neighbours or teachers (Figure 17).

Later in the novel we see the child learning to adapt to her environment and adopt an identity that will gain her more acceptance. Thus, in adolescence she makes decisions based on reason, rather than feelings (Figure 18). Although I have not based her identity formally on Piaget's formal operational stage[37] we see Zoya develop the ability to think about abstract concepts, and show logical thought and deductive reasoning. In terms of an emerging identity, she is understanding and questioning her social context. Accordingly, she reveals an interest in how painting communicates and plans strategically to prioritise art above more institutionally sanctioned undertakings (like appeasing the values of her elders and prioritising her engagement with the choir).

36 By egocentric I refer to the child's inability to untangle subjective schemas from objective reality, and her inability to understand or assume perspectives other than her own (Anderman & Anderman, 2009, pp. 355–357). Zoya 's egocentricism however is not narcisstic because although she is the centre of attention in her world, she does not receive gratification through self-admiration. The phenomenon of egocentrism in Zoya's identity draws partly on Piaget's argument that "an egocentric child assumes that other people see, hear, and feel exactly the same as the child does" (Piaget cited in Strickland, 2001, pp. 49-50).

37 This is Piaget's fourth phase in his theory of cognitive development and it is normally associated with children between the ages of 12 and adulthood. In this phase, a child demonstrates the ability to think about abstract concepts and to plan systematically towards certain goals (Piaget, 1983).

FIGURE 17.
Single page spread demonstrating identity conditioning at school.

FIGURE 18.
A single page spread illustrating how the "logical" becomes a more acceptable choice than one that is determined emotionally.

Ideology and belief

At the time the novel is set, there was a complex tension in many ordinary Russian families. This occurred in an ideological conflict between State sanctioned atheism and the elevation of Soviet leaders to the position of immortal figures (Figures 19 and 20).

As early as 1936, in Soviet journalism, Joseph Stalin had become referred to as the Father of Nations.[38] This elevation of Stalin to a godlike figure (or in my terms an "Upgraded God") was evidence of Soviet propaganda incorporating religious attributes and ceremonies into the cult of political personality. Thus, the title of "Father" came to be associated with Stalin, as opposed to the Tsar and Russian Orthodox priests. Bonnell (1999, p. 165) notes that this strategically formed, "cult of divine personality also adopted the Christian traditions of procession and devotion to icons through the use of Stalinist parades and effigies." She argues that by reapplying aspects of religion to the cult of divine personality, the state sought to shift devotion away from the church and replace old frameworks of divine rule with the agency and aspiration of political leaders.

Although state atheism was replaced with the cult of Soviet leadership, inside many families like mine, older, pre-Soviet traditions existed in secret. The phenomenon is illustrated narratively in the episode about the Christmas tree (Figure 21).

38 See https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/dic_wingwords/3446/%d0%9e%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%86

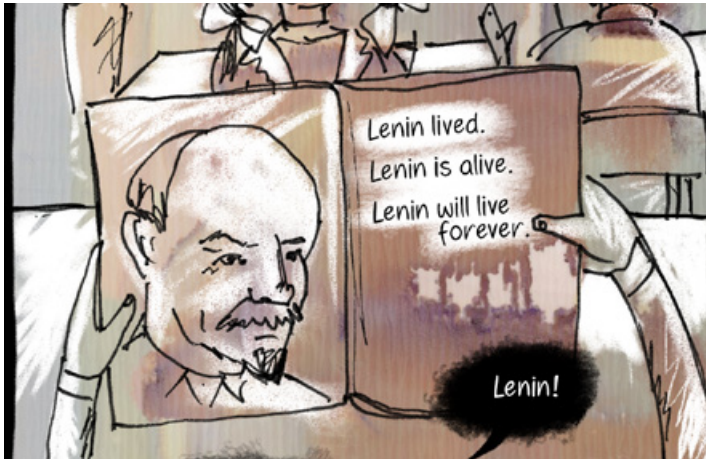

FIGURE 19.
Schoolbook propaganda. This illustration refers to a phrase that appeared on the opening page of my first schoolbooks. It was reinforced by other portraits, slogans and propaganda posters that were prominently displayed in schools and organisations at the time. In every class room across Russia there hung a portrait of Lenin. (Before 1953 there was also a portrait of Stalin, but then his personality cult was criticised and denounced and all related propaganda was removed.

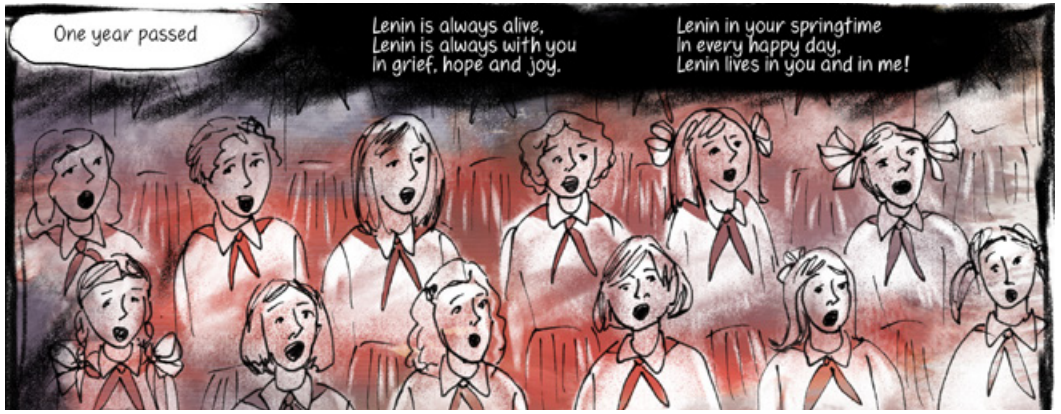

FIGURE 20.
Propaganda in the school choir. The lines here are taken from the song "Lenin is Always With You". This was one of the songs that was taught in the choir in which I was involuntarily enrolled. As a part of the propaganda system, the children's choir travelled to different public events and concerts performing songs that specifically reflected sanctioned government ideas or focused on the happy childhood and life in the Soviet Union.

FIGURE 22.
My grandmother's traditional teachings. She is suggesting that I call on a traditional concept of God as an enabler.

FIGURE 24.
My grandmother cautioning me on the need for secrecy.

In the novel's next episodes we see how tensions between my mother, who grew up on Soviet atheistic teachings, clash with those of my grandmother. (Compare Figures 22 and 23).

Thus, Christianity during my childhood was understood as socially dangerous. However, anxieties about traditional Russian theology and its deep roots into cultural identity had origins that predated my birth. Prior to the 1917 Revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church had been inextricably connected to national governance and it enjoyed and exercised official status. However, after the revolution Ramet (1993) notes:

> … the USSR became the first state to have as one objective of its official ideology, the elimination of existing religion, and the prevention of future implanting of religious belief, with the goal of establishing state atheism (*gosateizm*). (Ramet, 1993, p. 4)

In the novel we encounter the vestiges of old beliefs (and associated cultural traditions) and an acquiescence to Soviet ideals. So, in the dialogue below (Figure 24), we see my grandmother reluctantly agreeing with my mother's insistence that any reference to Christianity is treated with secrecy.

FIGURE 21.
New Year celebration. The tradition of decorating a tree in winter, along with giving presents and celebrating, was too strong to be just removed from the society so, instead, festivities were refocused on to New Year celebrations. Thus, if people wanted to celebrate Christmas in secret, no-one would suspect because the pine had been reframed as a New Year Tree and was already inside the house.

FIGURE 23.
My mother's teaching of atheistics. An episode illustrating my mother's reaction to praying and her fear about the implications. My grandmother was born in 1914, two years before the 1917 revolution. Considering that propaganda just after the revolution had not become as pervasive as it was later, my grandmother was brought up with a mixture of Christian and Pagan traditions. I remember her telling me stories about how as a child she celebrated Christmas by singing carols and reading fortunes for people's future lives by looking into two mirrors that were placed opposite each other. However, my mother grew up under Stalin's regime (she was 15 when Stalin died), so she was heavily influenced by the propaganda deployed by the "Father of Nations". She was schooled as an atheist and was terrorised by the "all-seeing" eye of Stalin. When I went to school, although propaganda was still ubiquitous, the 20 million people who were executed for standing against Stalin's regime were rarely mentioned. Accordingly, I didn't experience the same level of anxiety my mother suffered.

Later in the novel, an extra-diegetic interlude examines the reason for my grandmother's persistent belief in older traditions and their associations with pre-Soviet beliefs (Figure 25).

This ongoing tension between atheist belief and anxieties around certain traditions that had lost their origins and meaning is discussed in the spread about my father's funeral (Figures 26 and 27).

Tensions surrounding the state sanctioned belief that Soviet citizens were mortal, co-existed paradoxically with the idea that Soviet leaders and policies were immortal. In his *Encyclopaedia of Soviet Life*, Zemtsov (2017) discusses the concept of immortalism, noting that:

> … the religious idea of the immortality of God and the soul [were] diverted by Soviet propaganda for use as an attribute of the communist party and its policies. By implication the latter were also uniquely infallible …. [but] no attempt was made to demonstrate on what foundations the quality of immortality (*bessermertie*) rested, nor to show how immortality could express itself in practice. Arguments were replaced with illogical slogans or axioms like 'The party's ideas are immortal because they are true!' or 'Lenin's name is immortal'. Such assertions were supposed to be self-evident and accepted accordingly. (2017, p. 157)[39]

39 Significantly, after the removal of "immortal" status from Stalin, Zemtsov suggests that Soviet leaders became more circumspect about assigning immortality as an attribute to leaders. Certainly, some of Khrushchev's ideas that had been lauded as having perpetual validity were later acknowledged as wrong and, after his fall, the idea of immortality tended to be more commonly aligned with the founders of communism like Lenin, Marx and Engels (Zemtsov, 2017).

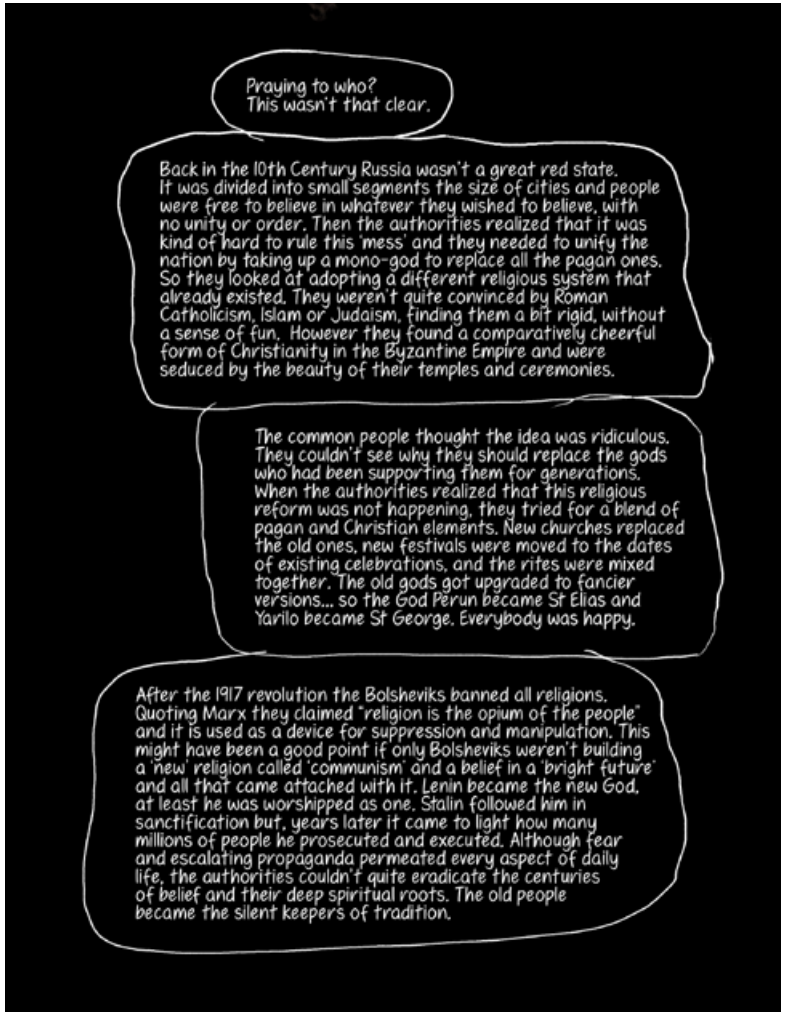

FIGURE 25.
Extra-diegetic explanation of the history of belief, change and continuance.

FIGURE 26.
Pagan ritual [1].

FIGURE 27.
Pagan ritual [2]. Even today, the ritual is still largely an enigma and people ascribe different meanings to it. It has always surprised me how Russian healers will combine something seemingly pagan (for instance, a brew of mixed herbs that needs to be taken in a particular place like an open field) and time (for example, just before the first ray of light) with Christian worship.

Obedience

The third theme permeating the novel is one of obedience. It first surfaces in a conversation about a parade, when my mother shows concern about official perception of nonattendance, but she is reminded by her friend about the manner in which corruption works inside Russian society (Figure 28).

Later I extend the idea of fear and obedience (as a state phenomenon) in an episode in the kitchen when we are introduced to anxieties surrounding professional promotion and value (Figure 29).[40]

The notion of familial disobedience is also touched upon in my grandmother's recounting of executions in the times of Joseph Stalin (Figure 30).

How people responded to a culture of obedience and reporting is also illustrated in my recollection of a school teacher who reacts with fear in a situation where multiple levels of reporting could have had significant professional and personal implications (Figure 31), including being arrested and imprisoned.

40 I do however refer to the self-monitoring nature of an "obedient" society in incidents like Zoya being chastised by a neighbor. It was common in Russian society when I was growing up, for neighbours to smack the children of other parents and to complain about their disobedience as an offense against the community.

FIGURE 28.

Conversation between my mother and a neighbour.

FIGURE 29.

Discussion illustrating social anxiety.

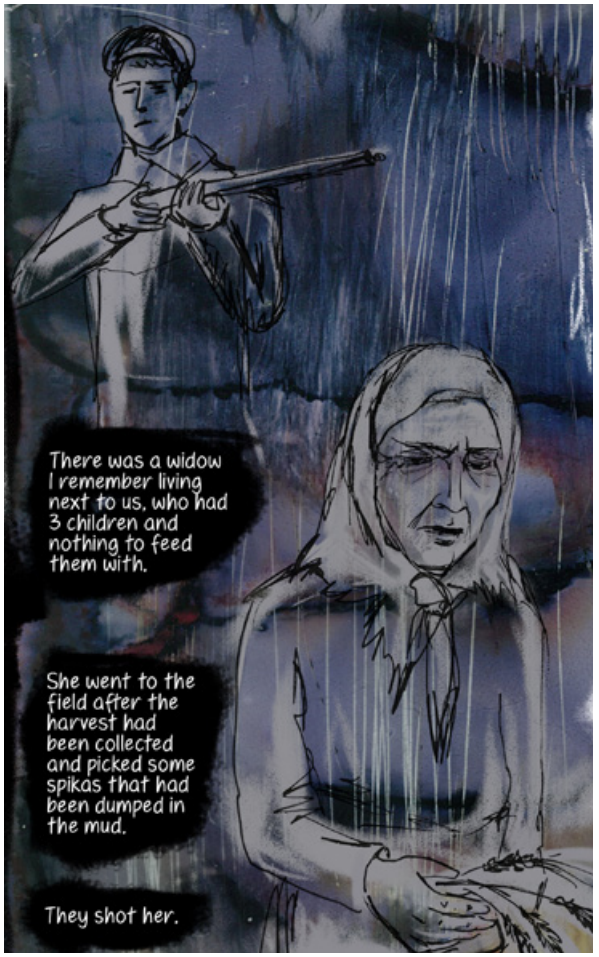

FIGURE 30.

My grandmother's story. She was never a communist and despite having experienced significant hardship, she didn't appear to be affected by mass fear.

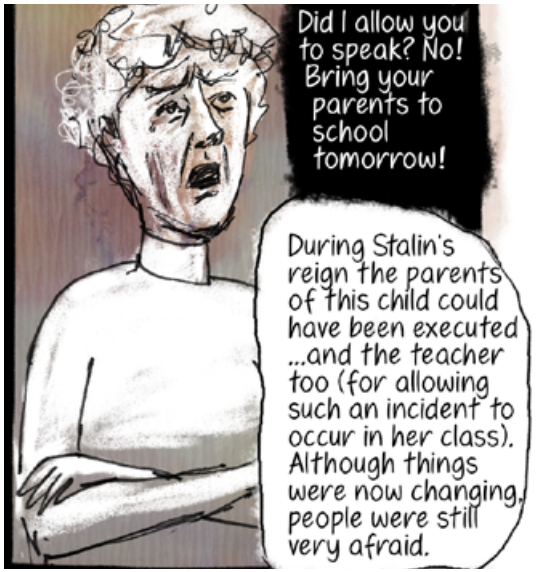

FIGURE 31.

Illustration of an anxious teacher. When I was growing up, gradually it was becoming less dangerous to challenge Soviet ideology. However, many older people were still frightened because they knew there was no guarantee that a punitive culture would not return. In addition, all large organisations had secret police agents in their staff who worked undercover. In smaller organisations the KGB would *verbovat* (recruit) other people to *donosit* (report - or the more common slang word *stuchat* meaning to knock) on other people. So even during my childhood, the KGB network still permeated society. People were aware that KGB reporters were everywhere and they knew that they needed to be very discreet, only speaking about political subjects to the close friends who they trusted. The biggest danger was not actually what was said, but how it was interpreted. People were always anxious that what was repeated might be given a damaging slant. There were many accounts of such punishments, sometimes for very minor infringements. In the Stalin era, there are records of individuals being imprisoned in a Gulag for up to 25 years, simply for telling a joke about a Communist Party official. (See http://gulaghistory.org/nps/onlineexhibit/stalin/crimes.php)

As a counterpoint to the pervading emphasis on obedience and reporting I have included aspects of Zoya's relationship with the artist,[41] who was willing to offer some kind of explanation or overview of how and why people had to live by State sanctioned rules. He taught Zoya that she needed to exercise wisdom (in addition to caution) and to survive such a system she had to discover how to adjust her behaviour strategically (Figure 32).

Accordingly, we see in his episode, a professional, state-approved artist who painted propaganda that he despised, but concurrently discussed with me how it functioned.

However, perhaps the most graphic episode relating to obedience and reporting in the novel relates to the forbidden books that my father secreted in our house (Figure 33). These samizdat (самиздат) moved through society despite the serious danger of readers being prosecuted for possession or distribution. The issue of disobedience and its cost in relation to these books is poignantly summed up by the writer Vladimir Bukovsky who said, "Samizdat: I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself" (Bukovski, 1979, p.141).[42]

41 In the novel, the artist is a composite of different people who mentored me at different times. The character personifies a combination of wise lessons that I was being taught discreetly.

42 Stelmakh (2001) explains that samizdat were generally associated with dissidence within the Russian intelligentsia and most of these texts were directed toward an educated elite. Although circulation of samizdat was relatively low (at around 200,000 readers on average), many of the people reading them held positions of cultural power and authority.

FIGURE 32.
The artist's cautioning. The intelligentsia was never really threatened by its status in Russia but, as critical thinkers who did not accept much of the rhetoric and actions of the government, they were in danger because the secret police could arrest them for voicing dissent publicly. For an artist who wouldn't create propaganda there was no place in Russian society at the time. Such dissenters would normally be relegated to very low paid, rudimentary jobs like being a stoker or gatekeeper. Because no-one in the Soviet Union was allowed not to work, they might alternatively be imprisoned for *tuneyadstvo* (parasitism on society). Despite this, there were still people who publicly argued against the state. (See: http://russia-ic.com/culture_art/museums/3349/#.WlwJWZP1XUI).

Samizdat copies of novels like Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipeligo*, essays like Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, and periodicals like *A Chronicle of Current Events*,[43] were often made using carbon paper in a typewriter (or placed behind hand transcriptions). At a more organised level Komaromi (2004), notes that printers sometimes clandestinely worked at night to make multiple copies, so that books could be printed on semiprofessional presses. However, she says that before glasnost, the practice was very dangerous, because printing presses, and even typewriters in offices, were under the control of the KGB and "reference printouts" for these machines were stored for subsequent identification purposes, if samizdat output was discovered.

43 This journal dedicated to the documentation of human rights abuse, systematically recorded information about events in the USSR for over 15 years from April 1968 until December 1982. In total 65 issues were published, all but two appearing in English translation. An archive of these publications between 1968 and 1969 can be found in Reddaway (1972).

FIGURE 33.

Discovery of Samizdat books. Generally, these books didn't remain in one person's hands for very long; they were passed around as many people wanted to read them. Samizdat became a powerful agency for underground education and their popularity was so high that there were often jokes made about that.

Corruption

The idea of corruption also permeates the novel, and because it was ubiquitous, it emerges mostly in small comments and asides. I have illustrated it by an incident in a shop my mother and I visited that was supposed to be full of produce, but its contents were largely false display.[44] In truth, the facility of plenty was reserved largely for citizens who were well connected (Figures 34 and 35).

The theme also surfaces on a more intimate level when I am unable to enter art school because of corruption in the examination process (Figure 36). Education, like many spheres in Russian society during my childhood, was permeated by the exercising of privilege.

It was known in education that certain people with connections could pass examinations even if they barely attended school. A teacher would just get a call from someone above them and be told to let the student pass. If the teacher refused to comply they could lose their job, especially if they held a prestigious position. As a result, many prestigious positions were occupied by people who were not competent and had been appointed because they were compliant in the hands of the KGB. It was very hard for teachers, or any other ethical professional, to function effectively in such a society.

44 Interestingly Meek (2010) in his review of Francis Sufford's book *Red Plenty*, offers a structural reason for variations in provision in Russia at the time of the novel. He notes that, "Each spring, factories would guess the quantities of goods and materials they were going to need the following year, and order them; only in summer would the state planning committee Gosplan, tell them what they were supposed to produce, and how much" (2010, para. 11).

FIGURE 35.
Corruption in a shop. Section of an illustration explaining how obtainability operated beyond the claims of equity. In the world in which I grew up, availability of "essentials" often varied according to one's political connections.

FIGURE 34.
Narrative segments detailing corruption and public discussion.

FIGURE 36.
Corruption at Art school.

Propaganda

Interfacing with corruption in the novel is the agency of propaganda. This theme surfaces in diverse contexts including school, the choir, the parade and the production of state commissioned art (Figures 20, 37, 38).

The depicted world of Upgraded Gods feeds upon, but is often undernourished by, the idea that there is a state enabled equality that operates for the common good. In the novel we encounter a clash between what is imposed and what is real, what is said and what is lived.

Martin (1929) has noted that:

> One of the serious results of propaganda is that it has caused the public to think that education and propaganda are the same thing, and thus to make an ignorant multitude believe it is being educated when it is only being manipulated. Education aims at independence of judgment. Propaganda offers ready-made opinions for the unthinking herd. (Martin, 1929, p. 145)

While his assertion may be partly true and some parts of Russian society might be described as an "unthinking herd", the idea doesn't represent the full picture. There were many people who might arguably be called "servants of the regime", who did not embrace the system fully but used it to their advantage, thus building the structure of corruption. But, there were also individuals who critiqued the imposed doctrine. A minority of these men and women even protested publicly, fully aware that in so doing they were putting their lives on the line. In the novel, I give voice to the mundane cynicism that permeated my childhood. This was my most common experience … State sanctioned narrative and public disbelief.

Having now discussed significant themes running through the novel, it is useful to comment on narrative and aesthetic features within the work.

FIGURE 37.
Propaganda in a parade.

FIGURE 38.
Propaganda at school.

4:2 NARRATIVE AND ARTISTIC FEATURES

Narrative structure and voice

Upgraded Gods is essentially a linear, chronological sequence of events that document changes in my life and attitude between 1980 and 1997. It follows a single protagonist who is influenced by a diverse range of characters and situations.

Beyond the customary use of speech bubbles for dialogue, within the novel's narrative I also employ an extra-diegetic[45] paradox where a narrator is at once both innocent and perceptive. To achieve this, I employ two devices that interact with each other; reversed out text in black paragraph boxes and a running commentary provided in white bubbles (Figure 39). This approach enables us to understand Zoya as an innocent child who at times is able to see more deeply into life than adults believe she should be able to. To create this paradox the narration is split between the child who never speaks directly to us (but we hear speaking to other characters), and her extra-diegetic, older, commentator's voice that offers perceptive insights into situations she encounters. Through this sometimes cynical narration, we also learn about historical or cultural details that might otherwise be unknown.

Conventionally, extra-diegetic commentary serves a secondary position in graphic novels, but in Upgraded Gods I often afford it dominance so it is able to provide substantial information regarding history and customs without adversely altering the emotional trajectories of the story's characters (see Figure 27).

Vernacular speech and humour

Because the narrative of my childhood is potentially dark, I have employed two devices that heighten warmth in the story. The first is vernacular commentary. In the novel we are not spoken to in a formal register. Extra-diegetic narration is composed as playful, communicating information in a manner similar to conversational speech. Related to this is my employment of light (if sometimes sardonic) humour designed to lift heavy moments as well as render potentially tedious historical background information more entertaining.

4:3 AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

Illustrative style

Upgraded Gods has a distinctive visual voice. The approach I have adopted is idiosyncratic because I wanted to reference the protagonist's concern with artistic rendering, and sketch form provides a reference to the formative nature of her life (a work in progress that is finding its identity). The loosely sketched approach also affords a flexible method of generating high levels of emotion, giving me considerable room to move across a spectrum of resolution in how elements are portrayed. Within this, the illustrative style may be seen as oscillating between sketching, drawing and painting, and I am able to operate responsively to emotion within this spectrum.

45 The terms intra and extra-diegetic are borrowed from Genette's (1980) discussion of narrative position. Intra-diegetic refers to events that are narrated from *inside* the world of the story (for instance actions that characters see and speech that they hear) and extra-diegetic refers to information that is narrated from outside (for example the commentary that in Upgraded Gods is from an older, more informed version of the protagonist).

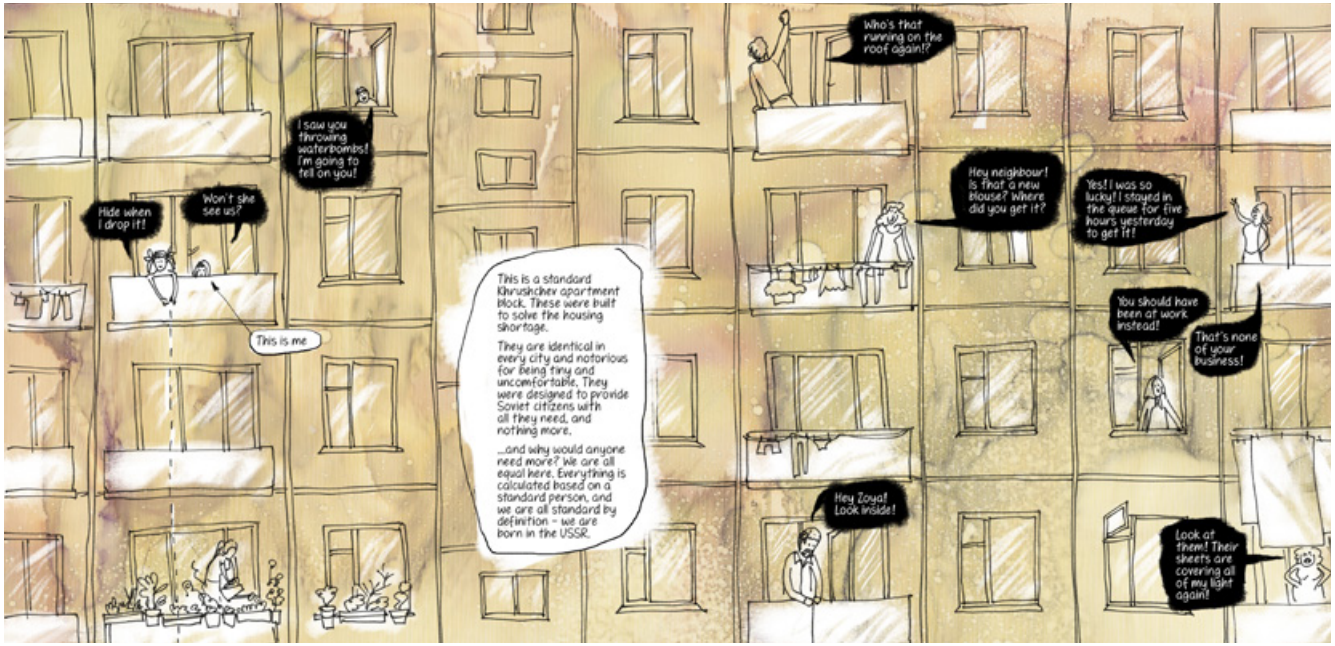

FIGURE 39.
An example of dual system of narration with intra-diegetic character speech and an extra-diegetic protagonist's commentary.

FIGURE 40.
An example of accentuated colour in a desaturated colour scheme.

The pictorial style also has a childlike quality. At times the illustrations feel like something potentially drawn by a young girl, but surfacing through this are levels of sophisticated rendering. The paradox this creates has been designed to reinforce the dichotomy between a naïve child protagonist and an older, informed and perceptive narrator.

Colour

Upgraded Gods uses a relatively complex colour palette. Broadly, I have pitched most of the narrative inside a relatively desaturated field that contains splashes of bright colour accent. Generally, accentuated colour is used to draw attention to details that are important in the story (Figure 40).

However, I also use lighter and darker colour ranges respectively to support more playful or sombre moments of the novel (Figure 41).

FIGURE 41.
An example of contrasting darker and lighter colour ranges.

Within the page's assembled elements, I employ an eraser tool to remove parts of the texture and thus highlight details. As an extension of this, I use a black brush to create borders for the frames and speech bubbles that will contain commentary or speech. This device not only adds impact, but is also used in parts of the novel to heighten a sense of foreboding or mystery.

Summary

To write a critical commentary on a graphic novel is a challenging undertaking given the limited word count afforded an exegesis. Therefore, in this chapter I have discussed only the most significant thematic features of the narrative including changes in identity, tensions between state and leader "immortality", and sanctioned atheism. Following this discussion, I have unpacked how the related themes of obedience, corruption and propaganda operate within the narrative.

The second part of the chapter has considered significant narrative and aesthetic features in the work. Firstly, I examined its narrative structure and discourse, with a consideration of intra and extra-diegetic approaches in the same story and the role of vernacular speech and humour in "warming" an otherwise difficult accounting of a childhood in socially problematic circumstances.

Finally, I have provided a brief discussion of the illustrative style, concluding with a brief outline of the manner in which colour is used to create emotional tone and accent.

CHAPTER: 5

Conclusion

CHAPTER: 5

Conclusion

5:1 OVERVIEW

This thesis asked, "How might the graphic novel as a form of autobiography function to communicate tensions between freedom and love, and the constrictions of Russian communist society just prior to and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991?" In addressing the question, I have created a narrative that considers themes of identity, ideology and belief, obedience, corruption and propaganda.

Ben Okri (1997, p. 119), once said:

> It is in the creation of a story
> The lifting of a story into the realms of Art
> It is in this that the higher realms of creativity reside.

When I embarked on an artistic thesis I was seeking a way of bringing a breadth of thinking modes (in addition to writing) to the potential of autoethnography. What you have before you is the result … two books: a graphic novel and an exegesis. The research draws on the subjective to explain something wider. It documents its thinking in ways that are not always clean and compact but reflect the most honest way I can account for the journey of my research.

Upgrade Gods communicates tensions between freedom and love, and the constrictions of Russian communist society by designing a performed and commentated narrative that integrates naive and sophisticated illustration and language to create paradoxical episodes where what occurs on one level is explained or discovered on another.

5:2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

The thesis makes three distinctive contributions to the field.

Firstly, it contributes to a growing body of autobiographic graphic novels written by women about their lives and the cultural contexts inside which they have unfolded.

Thus, the study discusses the self and the society where the self has lived. In this regard, it may be seen in the context of work like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*, Dominique Goblet's *Pretending is Lying*, and (in terms of Russian women's graphic novels) Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis* and *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*.

Secondly, the thesis extends the nature of graphic novel autobiography into autoethnographic inquiry because, in the study, the author uses self-reflection and writing to explore her personal experience and connect this to wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings (Ellis, 2004; Maréchal, 2010). In addition, the study extends autoethnography's normal engagement with the written word into a wider creative consideration of media, spatial arrangement and narrative design.

Finally, the study provides an example of how autoethnographic accounting can utilise narrative devices like juxtaposed intra-diegetic (the child) and extra-diegetic (the commentator) voices to offer concurrent, episodic description and postepisodic analysis.

5:3 FURTHER RESEARCH

This novel represents the first step in a greater project that I intend to take into a PhD. Upgraded Gods may be understood as a print based experiment based on autobiographical experiences from my childhood. In further research, I plan to extend the story through two more narrative phases that deal with my neardeath experience (NDE) after the birth of my child, and the situations I faced when I emigrated from Russia to New Zealand with a changed psyche. The second of these three phases of the narrative will be designed as a Virtual Reality immersion and the overall graphic novel will be designed as a multimodal text.

In terms of theoretical research, I am writing an article for the *Journal of Artistic Research* [JAR][46] that discusses the relationship between the graphic novel as a media form and how it can function as a form of autoethnographic text. JAR publishes three issues per year and its format enables "authors to combine text, image, film, and audio material on expandable web pages, challenging the dominance of writing in traditional academic research". Accordingly, I should be able to demonstrate with sections of Upgraded Gods, how an autoethnographic inquiry can be enriched through expansions of media, spatial arrangement and narrative design.

46 The Journal for Artistic Research (JAR) is an international, online, Open Access and peer-reviewed journal that reviews and disseminates artistic research from diverse disciplines. http://www.jar-online.net/

5:4 ... SO IN CLOSING

The idea for this project came from a Near Death Experience that occurred after I gave birth to my daughter in a Russian hospital 14 years ago. This event had a profound impact on me. It challenged my beliefs and changed the way I saw life. I found myself on a quest to understand and communicate. Although I have tried to make sense of the event and the childhood and culture that preceded it, I found that my paintings couldn't convey important narrative elements. Because communication design is a device for generating meaning I attempted to apply narratives of my life to its potentials.

Autoethnography I have realised has challenging consequences because one can publicly expose one's life in fundamental ways. I lived with the decision to undertake the thesis for a year before I realised that if I didn't do it I would regret it for the rest of my life. However, I wanted to do more than design a story, I wanted to use the process of design to "understand" it.

Thus, this thesis is the first part of a very long journey. It has enabled me to find a voice that is both visual and written, that can deal with both pain and humour. It also enabled me to comprehend and narrate what is sometimes difficult to understand. It has challenged me to think about my responsibility when I write autobiographically because people I love are implicated in what I create.

The journey has been difficult, not only emotionally but also physically, because it has involved 24 months of long nights and countless weekends (while managing motherhood and a fulltime job).

So, at the end of this thesis I'll leave you with a beginning. The beginning of my journey that will now go on for years. I know that ahead are more questions, but I am confident that I have found an authentic voice that will allow me to creatively expand the potentials of storytelling and touch something of the essence of lived experience.

In the end, I remind myself that I have crafted a story that I wanted to tell and if I lose face on this journey, then it is better than losing myself in silence.

Elena Panaita December 12, 2018.

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