

# TRAUMA TO TYRANNY



ELENA PANAITA

# TRAUMA TO TYRANNY: THE COMIC BOOK AS A COUNTERPOINT TO COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL NARCISSISM

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Apparat 20pt (Headings) / Apparat 14pt (Subheadings) / Apparat 10.5pt (Body text) / 8pt (Captions and footnotes)

## DEDICATION

To those who will not be tamed.

This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology  
in fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

This practice-led thesis investigates how the design of a comic book might serve as a device for critiquing a socio-political construct.

The thesis considers ways in which autobiographical, visual storytelling can be used to translate complex theoretical concepts into emotionally resonant narratives that expand the reach of academic discourse, so it becomes accessible to a wider audience.

Methodologically, the study integrates autoethnographical research with heuristic inquiry, using contextual reading and self-reflection to examine personal, social, political, historical, and cultural conditions.

The significance of the study lies in the use of comic book design to advance discussions on the impact of childhood and intergenerational trauma on the formation of psychological disorders (including the development of individual and collective narcissism), and the shaping of authoritarian family and societal structures. In doing so, the study highlights how unprocessed trauma can perpetuate cycles of abuse and authoritarianism, where fear, control, and denial become devices of manipulation.

In the context of global authoritarianism and the suppression of marginalised voices, the comic book *Upgraded Gods* makes evident the importance of resistance and provides insight into a struggle to reclaim personal agency, truth, and freedom. As such it offers an independent, subjective counter-narrative that confronts controlling rhetoric and fragmented collective memory.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my deepest gratitude to my primary supervisor, Professor Welby Ings, whose guidance has carried me through this challenging and often uncertain journey. He was the first person I reached out to in New Zealand when I applied for postgraduate study in 2008, and since then, he has been a source of unwavering support. He is an extraordinary creator and thinker, and I am deeply grateful for his mentorship and the impact he has had on both this work and my own growth as a researcher and artist. Through every challenge, he has offered insight, encouragement, and a deep well of knowledge and wisdom, helping me navigate obstacles that once seemed insurmountable. His belief in this project made it possible.

I feel fortunate to have had Dr Stefan Marks as my secondary supervisor. His immense expertise in immersive 3D virtual environments, passion for innovation in exploring the potential of VR storytelling, and deep reflection on the uneasy subject of my comic book made him an invaluable mentor.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Auckland University of Technology for granting me the Vice Chancellor's Scholarship, which gave me the financial support needed to undertake this research. My appreciation also extends to the staff of the Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies and the AUT School of Art and Design for their guidance and support throughout this process.

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I could not have done this without my partner, Matt Forsyth, whose support throughout this journey has been immeasurable emotionally, psychologically, and materially. It is rare and invaluable when someone truly has your back, and when you don't need to be afraid to be yourself. Through the struggles of these years, he has stood beside me, holding my hand when I faltered, believing in me when I struggled to believe in myself. I am endlessly grateful.

I would also like to thank Sofia Kotelevskaya, for being not only my daughter but also my friend. Her help and support on my journey have been immeasurable. Watching her grow into the person she is today has been one of my greatest joys.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my dearest friend, Nicky O'Connor, whose talents, skills, and care have helped me manage the physical toll this journey has taken. I call her a magician, as her craniosacral therapy has been miraculous in keeping me functioning.

I also want to thank my doctor, Andrew Wong, for taking my health concerns seriously and helping me to find solutions. I am also grateful to my physiotherapist, Debbie Sumner, for her physical and emotional support as I worked through back problems during the completion of the study.

Finally, I wish to honour my grandmother, father, and mother. Their lives were not 'a walk in the park', and I carry immense reverence for the journeys they navigated during some of the darkest times in Russian history. I am grateful for the life they gave me and for the lessons, both painful and profound in different ways, that have shaped who I am today.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/what-is-fair-use/>

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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 (except where explicitly acknowledged), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Elena Panaita, 18 November 2025

## INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY DECLARATION

The author/designer asserts the intellectual and moral copyright of the creative work (the comic book *Upgraded Gods*). All rights of the owner of the work are reserved. However, both the exegesis and comic book in all of their formats are protected by copyright. Any manner of exhibition and diffusion, copying, resetting, or editing, constitutes an infringement of copyright unless previously written consent of the copyright owner thereto has been obtained.

On 21 March 2025 the comic book (as a proof of concept) was afforded a temporary embargo of 36 months by the Auckland University of Technology Graduate Research School. This affords an author time to seek publishers, because the creative text will not be accessible online.

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<sup>2</sup> Online access to a manuscript can compromise opportunities for commercial development and release.

Elena Panaita, 18 November 2025

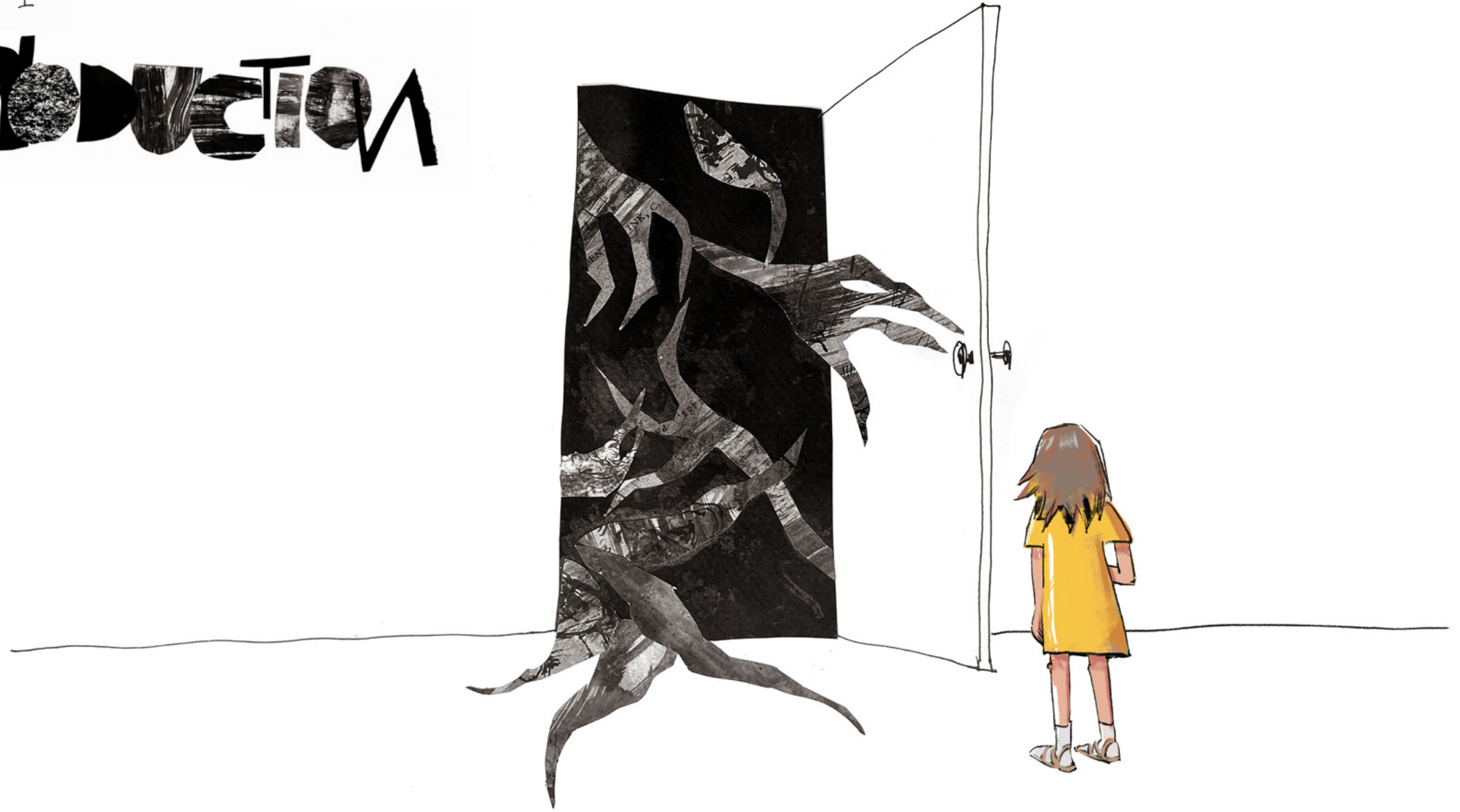
## ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENTS

Given that this project was a form of autobiography that involved a critically reflective encounter with the self and no other human participants were interviewed, it was unnecessary to gain ethical approval for the research.

However, given the nature of the project, I was cognisant of the challenges posed by self-study (Behar, 1997; Ellis, 2007; Ings, 2013; Tolich, 2010). This is because my Master of Philosophy thesis (2018) employed a similar methodology. Accordingly, I worked closely with my supervisors and health professionals, remaining attentive to issues of safety, critical discretion, and impact, as the study developed.

CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION



## OVERVIEW

The thesis considers the comic book as a space where personal experience intersects with broader socio-political critique. Using artistic practice, critical reflection, and theoretical analysis, the study investigates how a comic book (*Upgraded Gods*) might serve as a medium for exploring how individual trauma and collective history intertwine, shaping both personal identity and societal structures in the process.

Specifically, *Upgraded Gods* considers how a visual narrative that weaves autobiographical elements with historical and social critique can be employed to translate abstract political and psychological concepts into accessible, emotionally resonant experiences. In so doing it demonstrates how such an approach to literature can draw attention to larger systemic analyses.

As the comic-book narrative developed over ten years, it remained responsive to contemporary socio-political shifts, capturing their impact through storytelling. The process demonstrates how artistic practice can be both a reflection of reality and an active site of engagement and critique.

By employing a range of visual storytelling devices, the comic becomes a space where multiple viewpoints can coexist and often contradict one another. Weaving through this environment is an autobiographical trajectory inside which systemic issues are interrogated.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The thesis addresses two interconnected questions:

- 1 What is the potential for personal experience, conveyed through a comic book, to illuminate and make accessible a consideration of social issues and the long-term effects of trauma within society?
- 2 How might a comic book constitute a form of social resistance as a counter-narrative to oppressive intra-personal, social, and political regimes, by navigating the potentials of image, narrative, characterisation, and cultural reflection?

The thesis has engaged in a dynamic interplay between research into psychology and political science, evolving social circumstances, and the design of a comic book. As the work developed, each element informed and influenced the others in sometimes unpredictable ways (see the thesis journey map, Figure 4.1). This fluidity underscores the protean relationship between artistic practice and evolving political reality.

## RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

### RATIONALE

This study utilises the comic book as a medium to explore the relationship between trauma, narcissism, and authoritarianism within the context of contemporary Russian society.

Comic books and graphic novels have long been powerful tools for political critique, with works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1973–1991/2003), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003–2004/2007), and John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell's *March* trilogy (2013–2016) demonstrating their capacity to engage with historical trauma, authoritarianism, war, and social injustice in visually impactful and accessible ways.

In authoritarian regimes, where state-controlled rhetoric distorts historical truth and suppresses dissent, art can become a crucial form of resistance. Knopf (2021) notes that art and literature have a long history of addressing such conditions and they adapt their forms to enhance accessibility and understanding.

*Upgraded Gods* builds on this tradition.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The comic book and exegesis (as components of the thesis) propose five contributions to knowledge.

First, the thesis makes an original contribution by examining the relationship between trauma and narcissism through autobiographical comic book narration. In doing so, it extends existing understandings by showing how trauma is not only an individual or collective psychological condition, but also a shaping force in relational and socio-political dynamics that perpetuate cycles of abuse and authoritarianism. This contribution broadens current discourse by integrating personal narrative, visual form, and critical analysis to illuminate how narcissistic patterns operate across both intimate and collective contexts.

Second, *Upgraded Gods* demonstrates ways in which autobiographical narration can be used to examine the impact of trauma on individuals and societies. By interweaving lived experiences, historical analysis, and political commentary, the comic provides an independent counter-narrative that challenges state-controlled rhetoric and fragmented collective memory. In political regimes where dissenting voices are suppressed and narcissistic leaders manipulate information to maintain power, art can function as an act of resistance that elevates marginalised voices and challenges sanctioned historical constructs. As such, the study contributes to the growing body of comic book and graphic novel design by authors like Bui (2017), Delisle (2003/2007), Guibert (2003/2009), Lewis et al. (2013–2016), Nakazawa (1973/2004), Sacco (1996/2001), Spiegelman (1973–1991/2003), and Tran (2011), who use these media forms to connect personal experience to wider social analysis. *Upgraded Gods* extends these approaches by linking

autobiographical trauma narratives to the analysis of narcissism and authoritarian power. In so doing, the comic highlights how personal experience can be used, not only to represent trauma, but also critically examine its role in shaping political and social structures.

Third, the study contributes to a growing body of work by female authors who use the comic-book form to challenge dominant narratives, document personal and collective histories, and explore experiences of identity, trauma, oppression, and resistance (Abirached, 2008/2014; Bechdel, 2006; Grebennik, 2024; Hughes, 2020; Katin, 2006; Marchetto, 2006; Mardou, 2024; Samanci, 2015; Satrapi, 2003–2004/2007; Una, 2015). As the suppression of women accelerates in parts of the world,<sup>3</sup> the thesis contributes to women's narratives of resistance by offering insight into the struggle for equality and justice.

Finally, the project demonstrates how a comic book can translate complex theoretical concepts into accessible, emotionally resonant narratives, extending beyond traditional academic frameworks to engage wider audiences.

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<sup>3</sup> I refer here to countries such as Russia, the United States, and Afghanistan. From 2017, Russia decriminalised 'moderate' domestic violence against women and children, defining 'moderate violence' as acts that do not break bones or cause concussion (Schifrin, 2017; Roache, 2018; Magnay, 2021). In 2022 the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, "the constitutionally protected right to access abortion," leaving "approximately 22 million women and girls" without access or with heavily restricted access to abortion (Human Rights Watch, 2023, para. 1), with South Carolina going as far as requiring the death penalty for abortion (Kluchin, 2023). Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, it has restricted Afghan women and girls' access to education, reproductive rights, maternal health care, and most professions. Women are forbidden to be in public spaces, "unless absolutely necessary," even wearing a full-body covering, "which leaves only a mesh screen for vision," and law requires that they not talk to other women outside their immediate family (UN Women, 2024, para. 20).

## DEFINITIONS OF KEY WORDS USED IN THE EXEGESIS

Recognising that definitions can vary across different contexts, I provide here clarifications for seven concepts that are significant to the study:

### COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

There has been ongoing debate over whether the term 'graphic novel' should be distinguished from a 'comic book' (Baetens & Frey, 2015; Kukkonen, 2013; Murray, 2018; Schmitz-Emans, 2015; Weiner, 2012). However, other scholars acknowledge that the distinction is often arbitrary or shaped by marketing strategies intended to elevate the medium's perceived status (Dong, 2012; Schmitz-Emans, 2015). Given this fluidity, in this thesis I refer to my work as a comic book, because it embraces humour as a vehicle to explore serious, complex social themes. The use of the comedic as a form of dark commentary has significant precedents in literary works that have been described by their authors as 'comics' rather than graphic novels.

### CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

Childhood trauma refers to any distressing or harmful experience during a child's formative years that deeply affects their emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing. These experiences can include abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, losing a parent, or enduring bullying (Levine, 2008, Maté & Maté, 2022). Trauma often disrupts a child's sense of safety, security, and trust, leaving emotional scars that influence an individual's view of themselves and others, shaping their worldview and distorting their aspirations. Left untreated, it can

lead to a lifelong 'survival mode' mindset, which affects relationships, and physical and mental health (Campbell, 2022; Dye, 2020; Freyd, 1994). Emotional abuse and neglect are particularly harmful, as they can go unnoticed and have lasting effects on a child's wellbeing and development (Dye, 2020; Myers et al., 2002).

### COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Collective trauma refers to the lasting psychological, emotional, and social effects of large-scale harm experienced by groups who share identity, history, or circumstance. Hübl and Jordan Avritt (2020) suggest that it involves layers of unprocessed trauma, including intergenerational trauma and historical trauma. J. C. Alexander (2004) and Muldoon et al. (2021) argue that such trauma is socially constructed, deeply tied to power and group identity, and often continues to shape how people understand themselves and the world in which they live.

### TRUE SELF AND FALSE SELF

When using these terms I am drawing on Winnicott's (1994) construct, in which the 'True Self' represents an individual's authentic identity (encompassing their real emotions, desires, and needs). Conversely, the 'False Self' describes a defence mechanism that is formed when a child adapts to an environment in which their emotional needs are not met (or recognised), particularly when a primary caregiver cannot respond empathetically to their expression. In such cases, the child conforms to the caregiver's emotional

demands and suppresses their own needs in order to maintain the relationship on which their survival depends. Winnicott argues that over time, the False Self can replace the True Self, causing an individual to feel inauthentic, disconnected, and unable to access their genuine emotions. Alice Miller (1997) suggests that the impact of this adaptation often persists into adulthood, manifesting in coping mechanisms such as denial, dissociation, or addiction, as the person struggles to survive the emotional neglect they experienced in childhood.

## NARCISSISM

Narcissism refers to a complex and multifaceted personality trait that manifests in two forms: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Both share a core need for validation, a fragile self-esteem, sensitivity to criticism, distrust and devaluation of others, and lack of empathy. This makes it difficult for narcissists to experience love or form empathetic relationships (Pincus et al., 2014; Miller, Back et al., 2021). While both types of narcissism share a common root, they manifest in distinct ways depending on the individual's life experiences and underlying psychological factors. Grandiose narcissism is characterised by arrogance, aggression, inflated self-importance, a desire for admiration, entitlement, and exhibitionistic behaviour (Yang et al., 2018; Michell, 1989). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is marked by insecurity, defensiveness, and narcissistic rage (Pincus et al., 2014; Miller, Lynam et al., 2017).

## COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM

Collective narcissism emerges when members of a group, often driven by a sense of insecurity or frustration, idealise their collective

identity and seek external validation to bolster their self-esteem and inflate their sense of superiority and entitlement (Bushman & Thomaes, 2011; Covington, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Kernberg, 2020; MacDonald, 2014; A. Miller, 1997). Covington (2018) notes that social, political, and economic instability can fuel this condition, driving groups to seek a leader who can embody and strengthen their collective identity. Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) suggest that such groups become emotionally dependent on affirmations that sustain their inflated self-image. Their belief in inherent goodness gradually turns into denial of reality, fostered by leadership that manipulates historical continuity, replacing it with a reimagined past, "in which unpleasant and threatening aspects of reality are denied" (Kernberg, 2020, p. 10).

## PROOF OF CONCEPT

In this thesis, proof of concept refers to the designed comic book, *Upgraded Gods*, which is developed to demonstrate the author/director/designer's vision. Gills and Pratt (2023) define a proof of concept (POC) as "a demonstration of a product in which work is focused on determining whether an idea can be turned into a reality. The POC tests whether the idea is feasible and viable" (para. 1).

*Upgraded Gods* takes the form of a fully structured 319-page narrative containing a full storyline and examples of realised illustrative treatment. The work is designed to offer a clear indication to publishers and distributors of the potential for a final, funded iteration.

## THE NATURE OF THE RESEARCH PRACTICE

This thesis employs two interconnected components: an autoethnographical narrative and a written exegesis.

The autoethnographical narrative is presented as a 319-page proof-of-concept comic, in which the visual treatment is presented either as finished artworks (pp. 1–53) or as blocked-out compositions (pp. 54–319).<sup>4</sup> The near-death experience is presented as a print narrative that has the potential for future VR reconstruction.

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See Figure 4.7.

## THE CONCEPT OF *UPGRADED GODS*

The title *Upgraded Gods* reflects the human propensity to elevate leaders to the status of gods, worship them, and later discard them when they no longer fulfil collective fantasies. This pattern is particularly visible during periods of economic inequality or political and social turmoil, when large groups experience fear, humiliation, and powerlessness. In such conditions, individuals may turn to a leader who promises a return to greatness, offering a sense of superiority, protection against perceived threats, and a compelling narrative of belonging to a greater cause (Covington, 2018). However, the central concern of this research is not the leaders themselves, but the psychological and social conditions that give rise to large-group movements and generate the need for such figures. The thesis argues that unprocessed trauma, especially when rooted in childhood or inherited across generations, can lead to suppression of the authentic self. This may manifest in a range of psychological disorders, including narcissistic tendencies (both individual and collective). Such individuals often exhibit a heightened need for external validation and seek psychological security through dominance, certainty, control, conformity, and the idealisation of leaders and the groups to which they belong.

*Upgraded Gods* explores this phenomenon by following the protagonist from her childhood in the Soviet Union, through the collapse of the USSR, and into her later life as an immigrant in New Zealand. Through this journey, the narrative examines how early traumatic experiences shape the psyche, and influence family systems and broader institutional, political, and social structures. Drawing on the author's lived experience, the comic situates personal trauma within a larger cultural narrative, illustrating how narcissism and unresolved trauma contribute to rising authoritarian tendencies (both in Russia and globally) and the investment in a god-like figure that is expected to be a solution to individuals' problems.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE EXEGESIS

The exegesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter One offers an overview of the document.

Chapter Two positions the researcher within the study. Here, I explain the reasons for undertaking this project, along with the personal and historical circumstances that shaped it.

Chapter Three provides a review of contextual knowledge and considers five areas: the definition of comic books and graphic novels and their evolution as a media form; depictions of war, politics, and resistance in comics; accounts of personal and collective trauma in comics; the evolution of women's comics as a form of resistance; and tensions inherent in defining autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, memoir, and 'truth'.

In Chapter Four I discuss the autoethnographic research design that is supported by heuristic approaches to inquiry.

Chapter Five provides a critical commentary on the work. Using narrative episodes from the comic, it explores conformity within society, the connection between childhood trauma and narcissism, relationships between collective narcissism and intergenerational trauma, and the rise of authoritarian political systems. The chapter concludes with an examination of how ideological control, propaganda, and systems of punishment and reward sustain authoritarian power.

Chapter Six concludes the exegesis by summarising its key ideas. It then discusses the study's contribution to knowledge, and the nature of further research that is emanating from the project. I then offer a brief personal reflection on the thesis journey and its impact.

CHAPTER 2



# POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

## CHILDHOOD IN THE USSR

I was born in the USSR in 1977. My father was an international pilot who later became a group commander, overseeing the operations and management of aviation units. He flew to Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>5</sup> My mother worked as an ophthalmologist (Figures 2.1–2.3).



**FIGURE 2.1**

My father with his aviation unit (circa 1984). The photograph shows a squad of pilots and their children photographed together before an official parade. I am the child with a balloon (first on the left) and my father is standing behind me. The photograph was torn by my mother for reasons unknown to me. Somehow the fate of this photograph feels like a metaphor for what happened with my life soon after it was taken.

<sup>5</sup> Living in the Soviet Union meant strict limits on communication and travel, with international trips restricted to prevent Western influence from threatening Soviet ideology. Those caught illegally crossing the border faced imprisonment for up to ten years, yet there were still people who risked their lives to escape by jumping off ships in the middle of the ocean or hijacking planes.



**FIGURE 2.2**

My family line on my mother's side (circa 1940). From the left: My grandmother, grandfather, great-grandmother (holding my mother) and great-grandfather. I don't know who the other child is.



**FIGURE 2.3**

My father, mother, and me in Laos (1980).

Growing up, I often questioned the order that life imposed on me, or I defended myself, innocently believing that truth would correct lies. Yet this behaviour often enraged my mother.<sup>6</sup> The resulting perception of threat, and my awareness of control and coercion, extended beyond the family unit and I began to perceive similar dynamics in broader societal structures. As a child, my first encounter with organisational control occurred inside the education system, where the government flooded the school curriculum with propaganda. In the USSR a similar dynamic played out on a larger scale, through the ideological imposition of 'Faith in the bright future of communism'.



**FIGURE 2.4**  
*To Communism! In one group toward a common goal!* (1963). From *Poster Plakat*, by E. S. Solovyev, poster, IzoGiz, <https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/to-communism-in-one-group-toward-a-common-goal-pp-123?src=categories/communist-culture>.

<sup>6</sup> Durvasula (2024) notes that in narcissistic family dynamics, truth-telling is unsafe, and any form of nonconformity, whether confrontational or silent, can trigger a narcissistic adult's rage.

## DEIFICATION

'Faith in the bright future of communism' ('Вера в светлое будущее коммунизма') embodied the USSR's ideological vision as a political religion, and it appeared in various forms as a slogan in Soviet propaganda (Figures 2.4–2.6).



**FIGURE 2.5**  
*Glory to the Soviet people, the builder of communism!* (1955). From *Poster Plakat*, by V. B. Koretskii, poster, IzoGiz, <https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/glory-to-the-soviet-people-the-builder-of-communism-pp-274?src=categories/communist-culture>.

Feldman (2011) argues that "political religions [are] a modern, totalitarian expression of sacralised 'ideocracy' [*sic*] — or put another way, 'dictatorship divinised'" (p. 687). He posits that political religions are not fundamentally different from traditional religions, because they are "functionally and phenomenologically religious," seeking to "inspire acts of ideological devotion" (Feldman, 2011, p. 687). Like theological religions, they possess a system of beliefs and practices, a godlike figure or deity,<sup>7</sup> and distinctions between the sacred and the

<sup>7</sup> Lenin's and Stalin's bodies were embalmed and publicly displayed after their deaths, in a building that resembled a pyramid. Carlile (2009) argues that this decision sought to deify Lenin's spirit, turning him into an omniscient saint of the revolution, while also referencing ancient Egyptian mummification traditions. (This further reinforced the ritualistic and symbolic significance of the leaders.)

forbidden. This phenomenon was reflected in a significant amount of media that surrounded my childhood, representing the figure of Lenin (Figure 2.7), and following him, Stalin (Figures 2.8).



**FIGURE 2.6**  
*Our Future — Communism!* (1950). From *Poster Plakat*, by P. Semenovich, poster, *Iskusstvo*, <https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/our-future-communism-pp-729?src=categories/communist-culture>.

Although Stalin was removed from this divinised position after his death,<sup>8</sup> in the 2000s Putin began a campaign of re-Stalinisation in Russia. This enabled him to establish a legacy of power, creating the new cult 'Putinism', which was an amalgamation of "imperial nationalism, religious fundamentalism, neo-medievalism, and Messianism" (Chkhaidze, 2024, para. 11).

<sup>8</sup> In 1956, three years after Joseph Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev delivered a report on Stalin's cult of personality (развенчание культа личности Сталина) at the 20th Congress of the CPSU (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). The report acknowledged the widespread lawlessness and the scale of past repressions (executions). It aimed to correct the distorted representations of Stalin in history, philosophy, economics, literature, and art. This initiative led to Stalin's complete removal from ideological contexts (History.RF, n.d.).



**FIGURE 2.7**  
*Lenin lived. Lenin lives. Lenin will live forever!* (1975). From *Poster Plakat*, by V. S. Ivanov, poster, *Plakat*, <https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/lenin-lived-lenin-lives-lenin-will-live-forever-pp-219?src=categories/lenin>.



**FIGURE 2.8**  
*Beloved Stalin — the people's happiness!* (1949). From *Poster Plakat*, by V. B. Koretskii, poster, *Iskusstvo*, <https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/posters/beloved-stalin-the-people-s-happiness-pp-019?src=categories/stalin>.

This early exposure to manipulation and deception shaped my understanding of power dynamics, control mechanisms, and ideological enforcement. I developed a survival instinct for recognising power structures and tactics such as brainwashing, scapegoating, gaslighting, blame shifting, fear, control, and the rewriting of reality to suit those in power (whether they were authority figures in my immediate environment or the government itself).

As I grew up, I developed an acute sensitivity to propaganda and ideological conditioning. This recognition was both intellectual and intuitive. For example, I could not watch Soviet films without perceiving their ideological underpinnings. These films were the only accessible entertainment in the country, and they were loved by the masses.

On reflection, I sometimes wonder if this awareness came from glimpses of another way of life. My childhood in the USSR was unusual because my father was an international pilot, and our apartment was filled with 'treasures' and 'tales' from the world beyond the Soviet border. These things were tangible proof that what we were told about how lucky we were to live in the USSR was contestable.

As a child, I recall having a desire to escape the ideological constraints of the Soviet system. I hoped that art might provide a means of liberation; a space to think and create. However, in the USSR, art was inextricably linked to propaganda. It was an instrument of ideological reinforcement rather than an autonomous mode of expression. But I sensed that art also held potential for more expansive thinking, so I began attending classes from the age of ten and from there I progressed to art college.



**FIGURE 2.9**  
Me at the age of seven with my father and mother (1984). This photograph was taken on my father and mother's 25th wedding anniversary, a few days before my father's death. I am around the same age as the child depicted at the beginning of the comic.



**FIGURE 2.10**  
Me at age four with my grandmother (1981).

## COLLAPSE AND RECONSTITUTION

Then, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and I found myself in a country undergoing rapid transformation, where the boundaries of possibility seemed to expand overnight. The notion of freedom appeared within reach. Being a teenager in a country where the future felt unwritten was electric.

However, this sense of optimism was not universally shared. For some, change represented the collapse of an empire that they owned. For others, it was a period of chaos, uncertainty, and lawlessness that saw the rise of what came to be known as организованная преступность (the Russian mafia). The competing forces that emerged in the aftermath of the collapse pulled the country in opposing directions, revealing deep fractures within Russian society. Unlike many who initially placed their hopes in the rise of Vladimir Putin (which came together with the resurgence of the KGB),<sup>9</sup> I had few illusions about his role.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The KGB, the Bolsheviks' secret police, has operated under many names — Cheka, OGPU, NKVD, MGB, KGB, FSB. Bateman (2016) notes that these reorganisations were "superficial and cosmetic" and "the structural model of Russia's secret police began not with the Bolshevik revolution but with the reign of Ivan the Terrible and his formation of the Oprichnina" in the 16th century (pp. 24, 26). The actions of the secret police did not only involve state terror, surveillance, suppression of dissidents, mass repression, torture, and executions. The KGB was also "a fused police-security-judicial network enjoying extralegal powers," which gained greater political importance than the Communist Party (Bateman, 2016, p. 31). In this exegesis, I refer to this organisation as the KGB, because this is the most widely recognised name in the West.

<sup>10</sup> Putin served as a KGB foreign intelligence officer for 15 years, including six years of service in Dresden, East Germany, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel (Ray, 2025).

In Russia, there is a saying:

Бывших КГБшников не бывает.

(There is no such thing as a former KGB agent.)

It was no secret that the criminal networks of the 1990s were being absorbed into the state apparatus. As bandits and their associates transitioned into government roles, the distinctions between organised crime and official governance became increasingly blurred. Running an advertising business in my late 20s gave me a first-hand glimpse of the dynamics. This experience reinforced my growing sense of anxiety about the future of Russia. Freedom became a priority, for me and my family. In pursuit of that freedom, I emigrated to New Zealand.

However, despite the contrast between my new environment and the one I had left behind, I was increasingly struck by an unsettling realisation: while Western societies operate with greater subtlety, they also exercise systems of manipulation. In the Soviet Union, control was enforced through ideology, propaganda, coercion, fear, and the promise of rewards for compliance.<sup>11</sup> In the West, similar influence is exercised through religion, the pressure to conform to social norms, consumerism, and pervasive advertising that is employed to induce a sense of personal inadequacy.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while the means may differ, the outcome is similar — an individual's actions are shaped by external forces.

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<sup>11</sup> Although since the collapse of the USSR the social influence of advertising has become discernible, when I left Russia in 2008 it had not yet become a prominent force.

<sup>12</sup> My Bachelor of Art & Design Honours dissertation (2009) reflected on these mechanisms, critiquing the commodification of the human body and the ways in which consumer-driven ideological conditioning functions as a more intricate, yet equally pervasive, form of propaganda. Through this research, I sought to examine how systems of influence (whether state imposed or market driven) shape individual perception and behaviour, ultimately affecting broader socio-political landscapes.

## NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Another influence on my research was a near-death experience<sup>13</sup> that occurred in 2004, following the birth of my daughter. Before that, I identified as an atheist, believing only in empirical facts. But the experience shattered my certainty, causing me to ask how an individual, while being fully unconscious for an extended period, could retain the capacity to see, think, observe, reflect, and comprehend things beyond her physical existence. It challenged conventional understandings of consciousness and led me on an extensive research journey,<sup>14</sup> and the near-death experience ultimately became the focus of my painterly practice (Figures 2.11–2.12).

In these works I wanted to capture the overwhelming, disorienting, and terrifying moment of returning to life after an NDE — awakening from what felt like timeless suspension in light into an unfamiliar existence, unsure of what kind of body I now inhabited or what kind of life awaited me. The process of painting became a means of understanding rather than interpreting the experience, because I allowed my unconscious mind to direct the action of work.

The near-death experience was also liberating, because it stripped away the imposed narratives about death that religion had monopolised. The experience felt direct, without dogma attached to it. It also became the focus of my Master of Philosophy thesis (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Biancoa et al. (2017) define a near-death experience as a profound subjective experience that happens in “an atypical state of consciousness occurring in a condition of apparent unconsciousness, usually related to a severe medical condition threatening the individual’s survival” (p. 562). A number of researchers have noted that these features include experiencing a bright light that permeates space; feeling happiness, peace, joy, and a sense of unconditional love; hearing unusual sounds; being in a tunnel; seeing deceased relatives or friends; experiencing a life review; having an out-of-body experience; and encountering a conscious return back into the body (Greyson, 2015; Kopel, 2019; Lommel, 2010; Long, 2010; Moody, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> This involved pursuing academic literature on the phenomenon (Biancoa et al., 2017; Greyson, 2015; Kopel, 2019; Lommel, 2010; Long, 2010; Moody, 1975/2015; Tassell-Matamua et al., 2017), and accounts of autobiographical experience (E. Alexander, 2012; Moorjani, 2012).



FIGURE 2.11  
*White bird* (2011).  
Painting, oil on  
canvas, 76 × 76 cm.



FIGURE 2.12  
*Sorrow* (2011). Painting, oil on canvas, 76 × 101.5 cm.

## MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY THESIS

This thesis was initially concerned with the design of an autobiographical comic book that documented my near-death experience. However, over time, the project expanded to explore the broader context of my life. I began to think about how the NDE affected my ability to understand my life, and how social and political constructions contributed to this. As the research progressed, I realised that my original vision was too ambitious to complete within the equivalent of one year of full-time study. My eventual submission was a 64-page comic book that I decided to expand into a PhD (Figures 2.13–2.14).



**FIGURE 2.13**  
*Death* (2017). This page from my MPhil comic illustrates my father's death. As this event has been reshaped and re-illustrated in *Upgraded Gods*, it now looks very different.



**FIGURE 2.14**  
*Propaganda* (2017). A double-page spread from my MPhil comic illustrating propaganda at school.

## POSITIONING THE DOCTORAL STUDY

In his novel *1984*, George Orwell (1952) examines the consequences of totalitarianism and repressive regimentation. He states, “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past” (p. 189). His observation makes me think about the role of documented knowledge (either as literature or archived information). I ask myself: Why is it that, throughout history, libraries and archives have been destroyed and information burned? What makes documentation so powerful that it becomes a threat to certain political or religious powers? The answer, I believe, lies in the knowledge documentation carries — knowledge potent enough that those in power fear it to the point of actioning its erasure.

Báez (2004/2008) argues that books are destroyed because they are “links to memory,” and he maintains that “there is no identity without memory” (p. 12). He argues that control over individuals or society can only be established by erasing memory. This is why “over the centuries, we’ve seen that when a group or nation attempts to subjugate another group or nation, the first thing they do is erase the traces of its memory in order to reconfigure its identity” (Báez, 2004/2008, p. 12). Ovenden (2020) makes a similar point when he says that destroying records is a way to “deny the truth and eradicate the past” (p. 4). By controlling or manipulating these resources, those in power can reshape history to align with their agenda.

However, when historical memory is destroyed by structures seeking to control a population, even a small document can reveal a wealth of information. I would like to share a historical example from my family.

I come from the Caucasus region of Russia. It is located in the mountains near the Black Sea and it is famous for its fertile soil and

warm weather. The region has a long and complex history.<sup>15</sup> Bruk et al. (2025, para. 26) note that “Caucasia was one of the most ancient centres of bronze working from the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE” and the region was mentioned in Greek mythology multiple times. Because, over the centuries, the Caucasus has been shaped by waves of migration and successive invasions, it has become an area of “extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity” with over 50 ethnic groups, and a greater variety of spoken languages “than in any other area of similar size in the world” (Bruk et al., 2025, para. 3). After the Caucasian War (1810–64), the region was subjugated by the Russian Empire.

Although I was born in a region with such rich history, I know very little about my father’s family line. I kept my maiden surname, Panaita, when I married, as it is my only connection to my ancestors. My grandmother told me that my grandfather was Greek, but in an effort to hide his Greek origin and avoid Stalin’s persecutions, the ending of his surname was slightly changed. This was necessary because a ‘purging of the Greeks’ in the Soviet Union began in 1937 and lasted for 13 years.<sup>16</sup> This initiative resulted in an estimated “death toll at a minimum of 20,000 to 50,000” out of the 300,000 who were “registered in the official Soviet census” by 1937 (Athens Bureau, 2021, paras 3, 7).

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<sup>15</sup> Bruk et al. (2025) note that the name Caucasus (Кавказ) came from the ancient Greek *Kaukasos*, which was a derivation from *Kaz-kaz*, the name given by Hittites, meaning people residing on the shore of the Black Sea.

<sup>16</sup> Dzhukha (2014) states that the directive was intended to clear the region of anti-Soviet, foreign, or dubious elements. Arrested Greeks were charged with espionage, counter-revolutionary activities, or participation in a conspiracy to overthrow the Soviet regime, and this resulted in their execution or imprisonment. Pohl (2000) notes that between 1937 and 1951 similar measures were applied to 13 ethnic groups and over two million people, with the true reason for their arrest being ethnic rather than political.

Ф о р м а    В. П.

БЕЗВОЗВРАТНЫХ ПОТЕРЬ РЯДОВОГО  
И СЕРЖАНТСКОГО СОСТАВА ПО ПИНСКОМУ  
ГОРВОЕНКОМАТУ ПИНСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ  
с 1941 г. по 1945 г.

1. Фамилия, имя и отчество Панайта Николай Иванович

2. Военное звание Рядовой

3. Должность Пулесничий

4. Партийность Пч.

5. Год рождения 1918

6. Какой местности уроженец д.п. Новороссииск

7. Каким РВК. призван в армию и когда Новороссииск  
Служил в 1939 году

8. Где и по какой причине были свидетель не  
нашелся  
не известно

9. Где и по какой причине были не известно

10. Кто разыскивает и его адрес Жена Панайта  
Раиса Леонтьевна, Пинск ул. Березань  
Вср.

\* 9 МАЯ 1949

Раскредено в соответствии с приказом Министра обороны РФ от 8 мая 2007 года N181 и/о раскредено архивных документов Красной Армии и Военно-Морского Флота за период Великой Отечественной войны 1941-1945 годов (с изменениями на 30 мая 2009 года)

**FIGURE 2.15**  
Certificate of irretrievable losses of soldiers and sergeants from 1941 to 1945 (1949). Selective translation: "Panaita Nikolay Ivanovich; born in 1918 in Novorossiysk; conscripted into the army in 1939; missing in action; being searched for by his wife Panaita Raisa Leontevna." The note under the document states: "Declassified in 2007 in accordance with the order — *On the declassification of archival documents of the Red Army and Navy for the period of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945*. From Memory of the People (Память Народа), by © Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, <https://pamyat-naroda.ru/>.

This certificate (Figure 2.15) is all I have that verifies the existence of my grandfather. The document was only declassified in 2007 and I found it some years after that. There are no photographs or memorabilia left to indicate my ancestor's existence. All connections to his relatives were lost during the war and Stalin's purges.<sup>17</sup> So, even though this document appears to contain very little material, it contains important information about my family. A small example lies the statement "missing in action". During Stalin's time, if a soldier's death was not officially registered, there was no proof that he was not a deserter. This 'non-registration' could cast a shadow over the entire family, affecting their trustworthiness by the state, with the 'official doubt' often influencing their access to education, career choices, and professional prospects. This statement explains why, at some points in his career, my father experienced obstacles for no apparent reason. This is depicted in an episode in my comic, where he talks to a friend (Figure 2.16).

However, there is a surprising anomaly in the document that relates to the date when my grandfather was drafted to serve in the war.

From early childhood, Russian people learn about the Great Patriotic War that was fought between 1941 and 1945.<sup>18</sup> The stories told in books and films, the marches and parades, and the memories of our relatives celebrate the heroism of the Russian nation and its role in saving the world from Nazi Germany. In the Russian historical narrative, World War I and World War II are never portrayed as memorable or significant, as they are seen as having little impact on Russia.

<sup>17</sup> Bushman and Thomaes (2011) state that Stalin's Great Purge, during which members of the Communist Party were "accused of sabotage, terrorism, or treachery," is "a euphemism for being imprisoned in labour camps, deported, or executed," and is therefore also referred to as the Great Terror, Red Terror, or Blood Terror (p. 319).

<sup>18</sup> This timeframe differs significantly from Western framings of World War II as being fought between 1 September 1939 and 2 September 1945.



**FIGURE 2.16** Double-page spread showing my father receiving advice from a friend regarding the obstacles he encounters in his pilot's career (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 34–35. (Final illustration)

My grandfather was 21 years old and newly married to my grandmother when he was conscripted into the army. I was told that he died in the first year of the war and never saw his son, my father, who was born in July 1939 (months after he left for war). Yet a question had always haunted me. If my father was born in 1939, he would have been two years old when the war began in 1941. Why, then, had he never seen his father? Was there a mistake in the dates? Or had my grandmother simply forgotten the details after enduring such a difficult time?

So when I saw on the certificate that my grandfather was conscripted into the army in 1939, I realised that there was more to the subject.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Nikiforov and Subkhankulov (2010) note that the events between the late 1930s and 1941 remain one of the most restrictive areas for historical research due to the classification of relevant documents.

The document led me to uncover a secret that the Soviet Union hid, and now Russia continues to hide: the Great Patriotic War was only part of World War II, beginning with Hitler's attack on Russia. For two years before that, Stalin and Hitler were in fact allies, and they had divided Europe into spheres of influence.<sup>20</sup>

It is disturbing, the extent to which historical narratives can be manipulated so they remain concealed from much of the population.<sup>21</sup> But when you grow up hearing the same narrative repeated multiple times, you have no reason to question it. This is why propaganda is so powerful. It's not that you don't realise you are being lied to, it's that you have no way of knowing how much of it is a lie. I see a parallel in Orwell's *1984*:

Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. I know, of course, that the past is falsified, but it would never be possible for me to prove it, even when I did the falsification myself. After the thing is done, no evidence ever remains. (1952, p. 118)

<sup>20</sup> In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which included two parts — one public, pledging non-aggression for ten years, and one secret, outlining their agreement for Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to divide spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, leading to their joint invasion and occupation of Poland in September 1939. This marked the beginning of World War II (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2023). There are also multiple records indicating that Stalin greatly admired Hitler and refused to believe he would break the pact, despite intelligence reports suggesting otherwise (Jackson, 2011; Lukacs, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Podrabinek (2015) explains that the Great Patriotic War and World War II were deliberately framed to appear as if they intersected or even coincided, taking place in the same years, countries, and with the same participants, yet Russian history presents them as two entirely separate conflicts. This framing also helped to portray the victory over Nazi Germany as a solely Russian triumph.

Russia's current regime continues to actively distort historical records of World War II, not only to distance itself from the country's former alliance with Nazi Germany but also to create a heroic, mythologised Soviet victory narrative. This narrative functions as a central ideological tool that is used to justify present-day political actions, including the war in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup>

I may never truly know my origin. The irony lies in the fact that while I am considered Russian everywhere abroad, in my homeland, Russia, I will always be a suspicious outsider because, with my olive skin and dark hair, I don't fit the typical Russian image.<sup>23</sup>

The power of even small fragments of knowledge is undeniable, for they have the ability to pose questions and uncover the truth. The stories that we craft and the ideas that we disseminate through them will always constitute a threat to those who seek to manipulate memory.

This thesis consciously steps into spaces where knowledge has been distorted. *Upgraded Gods* offers a critique of culture through the accounting of ordinary things, seen through a non-compliant lens. As a comic-book creator, I write from a relatively secure country that is not the land of my birth, while I watch the unfolding events on the news and through social media ... and I recognise the terrifying patterns of the past.

This comic book is my attempt to fight back and give voice to a theory of oppression.

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<sup>22</sup> This idea will be discussed further in Chapter Five: Critical commentary.

<sup>23</sup> Even though many ethnic groups in the Caucasus region share similar features, it's not uncommon to hear racist remarks from people who see themselves as 'more' Russian. The further you go into the Central Russia, the more intense this attitude becomes.

CHAPTER 3

# REVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE



## INTRODUCTION

In this review of contextual knowledge I explore literature related to:

- defining comic books and graphic novels;
- accounts of personal and collective trauma in comics;
- comics by women, about women; and
- autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, memoir, and 'truth'.<sup>24</sup>

While these topics are discussed separately, they often overlap. When reviewing these realms of literature, I also relate discussions to a selection of comic books and graphic novels.<sup>25</sup>

## COMICS ACROSS TIME AND CULTURES

Scholars of comic books and graphic novels debate their origins. Thus, McCloud (1993) questions whether Rodolphe Töpffer should be considered the 'father' of the medium, for his satirical picture story *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* (1842), or if we should look further back to pre-Columbian picture manuscripts such as the Mesoamerican Codices (circa 1519), the Bayeux Tapestry (1066), or Ancient Egyptian mortuary texts including tomb inscriptions from circa 1300 BC. Philipzig (2011) suggests that comics can be linked to prehistoric paintings by Paleolithic humans, such as those in the caves of Lascaux, France (circa 15,000 BC).

Earle (2021), however, notes that while some scholars trace sequential art back to cave paintings and petroglyphs, others use recognisable elements to demarcate comics as a form (such as panels that divide images). Similarly, Sabin (2001) argues that while visual storytelling can be traced back to ancient times, comics only became a 'mass

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<sup>24</sup> Although the thesis is concerned with the nature of individual and collective narcissism, literature related to this research is woven into the fabric of the critical commentary provided in Chapter Five.

<sup>25</sup> These books are highlighted because, like *Upgraded Gods*, they focus on personal stories that contain autobiographical elements. (In other words, the author is also a character in the story.) The narratives are also constructed as multi-layered storylines that unfold over an extended period of time.

medium' with the invention of the printing press in the Middle Ages. This allowed images to reach the public (rather than requiring the public to travel to the images).

Earle (2021) states that rich cultural traditions and unique techniques affected the gradual development of comics globally. Thus, Japanese comics developed as 'Manga', Franco-Belgian comics were known as 'Bandes Dessinées', in Italy they were described as 'Fumetti', in Spain as 'Historietas', and in Korea as 'Manhwa'. She suggests that comics as a form are ubiquitous, and "there is not a society or culture on the planet that has not developed its own type and style of Comics" (p. 7). Earle argues that "it is not simply that the West has disseminated the form into other parts of the world as a sort of cultural colonialism, but that this form truly has developed internationally" (ibid.).

Additionally, the history of comics is closely aligned with developments in printing, political commentary, literacy, and censorship. They are also shaped by cross-cultural interactions driven by colonialism, geopolitical conflicts and occupation.

Visual narratives have encountered considerable criticism throughout history. Sabin (2001) notes that when publications shifted towards humour and visual satire, comics came to be seen as a subversive voice. He suggests that at times this became risky, because artists used the medium to expose opinions about politicians or royalty that they could not safely express in writing. This resulted in "cartoonists being imprisoned, attacked or even assassinated for going too far" (Sabin, 2001, p. 12). Through the centuries, comics continued to attract criticism, as they were increasingly seen "not just as harmless railway literature, but as something more sinister"; a threat to literacy and ethics (Sabin, 2001, p. 19). The working-class popularity of comics fuelled class-based prejudice, with the publications often being dismissed as vulgar and culturally degrading because of their mass appeal. Earle (2021) discusses regulations<sup>26</sup> that were introduced in the US in 1954, when

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<sup>26</sup> Earle (2021) argues that this led to creation of Comics Magazine Association of America and the Comics Code Authority (CCA) that required the newsstands to sell only comics that had the CCA stamp.

a psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published his work *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham, she argues, saw comic books as a significant cause of juvenile delinquency. She notes that even though there has been no evidence of it, Wertham's work continues to influence the comics industry.

The dismissal of visual narratives is not a recent phenomenon and has taken different forms throughout the history of Christianity, with some figures supporting and others restricting their use. Hoche (2015) notes that Pope Gregory the Great (600 AD) recognised the power of illustrated narratives and allowed their use due to their effectiveness in converting pagans and educating an often illiterate population. However, according to Philipzig (2011), at certain times visual narratives were also suppressed by the Church as it sought to establish control over literacy and positioned the written word as the primary and most authoritative medium for doctrine and knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

The tension between visual and textual narratives continues to this day. However, the impact of visual storytelling remains as powerful now as it was in the past. As William Durand of Mende, a 13th-century bishop and liturgical scholar, observed:

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. (Durand of Mende, as cited in Thibodeau, 2007, p. 34)

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<sup>27</sup> This stance was reinforced by the Second Commandment's restriction on creating religious images. The conflict intensified in 726 AD, when Byzantine Emperor Leo III, who viewed icons as idolatrous, ordered the removal of all religious imagery from churches (Langer, 2022; Philipzig, 2011).

## DEMARCATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

The focus of this chapter is on the terms comic book and graphic novel within the Anglophone tradition.

There has been a considerable debate concerning the origin of graphic novels and how they might be differentiated from comics. Kukkonen (2013) argues that a graphic novel consists of an interconnected narrative published as a complete book rather than a set of chapters. She notes that the term 'graphic novel' was first used to describe Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* (1978/2006). However, Schmitz-Emans (2015) asserts that what led to the formation of the new genre was not the change in content, but rather the adoption of this new term, which allowed these works to compete effectively with more prestigious storytelling media. Weiner (2012) notes that the term 'graphic novel' was also used to distinguish works aimed at an adult readership. He argues that the differentiation was invented to demarcate 'serious' topics from superhero fiction. However, Earle (2017) notes that some people found the classification 'graphic novel' problematic, because the word 'graphic' can suggest content that includes violence or is sexually explicit, while the word 'novel' can imply fiction. Baetens and Frey (2015) note that other comic artists, including *Maus* creator Art Spiegelman and *Watchmen* writer Alan Moore, opposed the term 'graphic novel' for different reasons. Moore, for example, argued that the term was originally a marketing strategy used to repackage old comics and sell them as an "expensive comic book" (quoted in an interview by Kavanagh, 2000, para. 20). However, Dong (2012) observes that in the field of comics studies, terms such as 'graphic novel', 'comic book', 'sequential art', 'graphic narrative', and 'comics' are often used interchangeably. According to Dong, comics theorists such as Hatfield and Witek suggest that "the issue of terminology cannot be easily solved" (p. 10). Earle (2021) proposes that the graphic novel is not a synonym for comics but a distinct subgenre within the form. She argues that "all graphic novels are comics, but not all comics are graphic novels" (p. 18). Comics,

she suggests, is an umbrella term for various forms of narrative that combine visuals and text.

Given this conflicted discourse, I have chosen to refer to *Upgraded Gods* as a comic book. This is because (beyond the historical debates) I appreciate the irony embedded in the term 'comic' being a form of visual storytelling that carries connotations of humour and satire while having literary precedents that explore weighty or complex subjects.<sup>28</sup>

## DEPICTIONS OF WAR, POLITICS, AND RESISTANCE IN COMICS

Comics, regardless of nomenclature, have a long history of engagement with political and social issues. DiPaolo (2011) argues that while mass-culture products such as films, digital games, and comic books are still marketed as entertainment, the subjects they cover are more serious than is often assumed.

Knopf (2021) argues that the political influence of comics has increasingly become evident with independent investigative journalists and media and political communication scholars discussing how comics have become a battleground in the new culture wars that are shaping American politics and institutions.<sup>29</sup> Knopf proposes that even comics that focus entirely on the epic adventures of superheroes and supervillains are not as simple as they

may seem at first glance. She notes that by 2020, the White House had appeared in over 950 comic books, with superheroes acting as proxies for various political forces and ideals. She suggests that these characters act as moral symbols (serving as metaphors of good and evil, justice and injustice) that guide readers to recognise such forces in real life.

Schmitz-Emans (2015) observes that in the last three decades, there has been a discernible shift toward nonfiction and reportage in comics. She notes that despite lingering scepticism and stigma still attached to comic books and graphic novels in traditional literary circles, contemporary comics have moved well beyond their earlier status as 'fast food' entertainment, and they are increasingly accepted as 'respectable' literature. She argues that this evolution has allowed comics to become a platform for telling complex stories from across the globe, addressing themes such as totalitarianism, political oppression, war, personal and collective trauma, and humanitarian crises. As such, comics have begun giving voice to the suffering of individuals and communities. Prorokova and Tal (2018) note that the rise of politically engaged comics coincided with the War on Terror, which led many artists to use comics as a tool for investigative and political reportage. DiPaolo (2011) points out that comics are also serving as a voice for marginalised communities, covering issues related to reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, the death penalty, and climate change.

Romero-Jódar (2017) also notes that artists have increasingly used graphic novels to inquire into the psychology of both fictional and real-life individuals. In these works, characters are often affected by traumatising catastrophic events. He argues that recognition of the graphic novel as a legitimate literary form can be linked directly to the genre's increasing engagement with complex subject matter.

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<sup>28</sup> Significant among these is the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1973–91/2003), which examines the nature and plight of Holocaust survival.

<sup>29</sup> This is not a recent phenomenon, one of the earliest known political comic books is *Centennial Congress — 1876 Democratic House of Representatives*, by Cash Thomas (1876).

According to Chute (2017), the works of Spiegelman and Nakazawa, who in their books address harrowing events such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, helped to transform not only the comics industry and public perception of the medium, but also how creators conceptualise and represent traumatic memory. She argues that comics are well disposed to depict these subjects, because their hand-drawn and expressive nature is uniquely suited to the portrayal of emotional and psychological layers of trauma without sensationalising it or minimising its effects. Chute argues that this is especially true when it comes to comics that build on autobiographical accounts, because they feel more like an intimate sharing of personal trauma rather than the retelling of a discrete story. She also notes that illustrative (rather than photographic) depiction is capable of vividly capturing fragments of memory and rearranging them into a meaningful story.

There has been significant number of comics and graphic novels that have engaged with subjects such as war, politics, and resistance, including Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* (1973/2004); Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003–04/2007); Sacco's two works, *Palestine* (1996/2001) and *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003); Delisle's *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2003/2007); and Guibert's *The Photographer* (2003/2009).

In considering comics related to depictions of war, politics, and resistance, it is useful to examine two specific works: Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1973–91/2003), and Lewis et al.'s *March* trilogy (2013–16).

### *MAUS: A SURVIVOR'S TALE*, BY ART SPIEGELMAN (1973–91/2003)

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a raw, deeply personal, and multi-layered Holocaust narrative that serves as a reflection on intergenerational trauma, memory, survivor's guilt, and the struggle to understand one's own family. The comic presents a brutal portrait of a father–son relationship strained by both history and personality.

Told using a dual narrative, the story follows Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek, as he recounts his harrowing experiences as a Polish Jew during the Holocaust. Concurrently, it explores the son's complex relationship with his father at the time of writing. Vladek is not portrayed as a selfless hero, but as a resourceful yet flawed, miserly, hoarding, relentlessly pragmatic, and racist old man. As the son struggles to understand his difficult father, he questions whether Vladek's personality made him this way or if trauma shaped him into the man he became. These traits, frustrating as they are, may have also been what helped him survive. *Maus* examines the reality of trauma; suggesting that it does not necessarily ennoble a person but reshapes them in ways that are often difficult to live with.

The comic does not romanticise survival or provide a cathartic resolution, nor does it frame survival as a triumph. Instead, it shows it as messy, painful, and riddled with loss. In the comic, Spiegelman's therapist sums up the situation in a bitter observation (Figure 3.1):

It wasn't the best people who survived, nor did the best ones die. It was random! ... look at how many books have already been written about the Holocaust. What's the point? People haven't changed ... Maybe they need a newer, bigger Holocaust. (Spiegelman, 1973–91/2003, p. 205)



FIGURE 3.1 Spiegelman's conversation with the therapist. From *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman (1973–91/2003, p. 205).

*Maus* presents atrocity after atrocity with an almost casual brutality, forcing the audience to confront horror without embellishment. Only humour (often dark) offers some release from the tension. However, as Des Pres (1988/2022) notes, while 'humour heals', it also creates an even greater dissonance, as Holocaust etiquette dictates that the subject must be treated with seriousness and reverence ... as something sacred.

First published between 1980 and 1991 as chapters in the comic magazine *Raw*, *Maus* wasn't the first comic to address painful subjects. However, Chute (2022) argues that it revolutionised how historical memory, personal and collective trauma, and racial discrimination are discussed and portrayed globally. Translated into nearly 40 languages, *Maus* introduced a new visual and written language for confronting the unspeakable. Chute (2022) argues that Spiegelman's innovative use of comics

not only modelled definitively that in fact comics could be remarkably sophisticated, literate, and subtle, but also blew open about a thousand other clichés and pieties about art and representation, particularly in the expression of the darkest aspects of human history, and the testimony that results from it. (p. x)

Franklin (2011/2022) suggests that Spiegelman has been one of the most influential figures in changing how narratives about the Holocaust can be told. She argues that the success of *Maus* helped to redefine what a comic could be, paving the way for subsequent graphic novels that would also tackle challenging social and political subjects.

*MARCH* (TRILOGY), BY JOHN LEWIS, ANDREW AYDIN, AND NATE POWELL (2013–16)

The *March* trilogy is a memoir and a chronicle of the civil rights movement as seen through the eyes of Congressman John Lewis. It offers a detailed account of what civil rights activists endured in their non-violent protests such as sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and marches. The trilogy depicts the violence, threats, and bloodshed that activists faced. Like *Maus*, the story weaves past events with the present (specifically, the day of Obama's inauguration in 2008). This conflation offers a glimpse into how John Lewis might have felt when his lifelong hopes and efforts resulted in such a historic moment. In doing so, it reflects Chute's (2017) view that autobiographical comics are particularly well suited to conveying emotional and psychological depth, because their expressive, hand-drawn form enables an intimate sharing of personal trauma without sensationalising or diminishing its weight.

The book advocates for the power of nonviolent resistance and collective action, and it shows how these strategies were used by Lewis. Lewis recounts how he met Jim Lawson, a representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In 1957 the organisation published the comic book *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*, which illustrates the Montgomery bus boycott and provides a guide to nonviolent resistance. Lewis (Lewis et al., 2013) discusses how it moved him: "His words liberated me. I thought this is it ... This is the way out" (p. 78). The *March* trilogy exemplifies how comics constitute a platform that gives voice to the suffering of individuals and communities, while also functioning as a form of reportage of their actions (Schmitz-Emans, 2015).



FIGURE 3.2

The principles of nonviolent resistance. This page references the cover of the comic book *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. From *March: Book One*, by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell (2013, p. 76).

Each of the three books in the trilogy begins with a dedication: “To the past and future children of the movement” (Lewis et al., 2013–16, p. 1). This serves as a reminder that the struggle for equal rights and justice is not finished.

Like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell’s *March* trilogy, my work combines historical events with those in the author’s present world, and it draws on autobiographical authorship and overview to make sense of violence and injustice. Although stylistically different to these comics, narratively, *Upgraded Gods* also depicts intergenerational trauma, through the use of recollection and commentary. While in all three comics the author is politicised, the narrators avoid explicit proselytising. In addition, in each comic the narrative avoids offering a cathartic resolution; instead, the reader encounters personal portrayals of violence and injustice that act as records of trauma and its impact on society. Thus, all three works (through their autobiographical nature) become lenses for understanding the broader impact of state violence. Both *Maus* and *Upgraded Gods* paint a brutal portrait of society, punctuated with dark humour, while *March* resonates with my work because of its emphasis on action and resistance.

## ACCOUNTS OF PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN COMICS

The depiction of trauma has an extensive history in comics. Bellis (2019) and Freedman (2012) note that the slapstick humour that typified the newspaper comic strips (‘funnies’) of the 1920s was absurd and often dark. It was generally tragi-comic in nature.

Romero-Jódar (2017) notes that in the 1960s, underground ‘comix’ emerged as a reaction against mainstream censorship and strict editorial control.<sup>30</sup> Earle (2017) and Romero-Jódar (2017) observe that in these works, writers and illustrators were often focused on taboo subjects, including depictions of sex and violence, social ostracism, trauma, and challenges to social norms. Romero-Jódar (2017) argues that comix constituted a revolutionary movement that challenged censorship, and promoted political criticism and radical self-expression.

Romero-Jódar (2017) notes that as comix evolved through the late 1970s and into the 1980s, some artists began turning inward, using autobiographical narratives to explore their own psyches, illustrating mental struggles they were facing while showing the impact of trauma on individuals and society. This evolution gave rise to very personal narratives, or what Freedman (2012) describes as “painfully confessional work” (p. 385). She observes:

The mental, physical and historical violence depicted in these comics was different: it was based on autobiography or acts of witnessing, it was depicted in a way that did not glamorise violence or render it humorous. It was meant to hurt. (p. 385)

Leone (2018) suggests that these narratives took trauma, once hidden or swept under the carpet, and brought it into the light. Their pages began to amplify visually and verbally what was once defined by its silence, invisibility, and unspeakability. Romero-Jódar (2017)

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<sup>30</sup> Earle (2017) and Romero-Jódar (2017) note that the letter ‘x’ in ‘comix’ refers to the genre’s adult, ‘X-rated’ content.

suggests that in the 1980s, the field of trauma studies<sup>31</sup> provided a new framework through which trauma comics could be analysed and critically valued. Trauma studies recognised the iconic language that comics employed, realising that they could reflect traumatic experiences in a way that was impossible to represent in words. It was noted that these new creators of comics sought to transmit psychic trauma through a stream of consciousness, narrating intimate and traumatic experiences, and mimicking the “symptoms of traumatic neurosis” (Romero-Jódar, 2017, p. 22). Prorokova and Tal (2018) describe this language as a mosaic of words, images, colours, or blank spaces that mediate the space between the story and its observer, ultimately forming a narrative that conveys the chaos of traumatic experiences in a truthful and meaningful way.

Earle (2017) argues that because trauma is so intensely visual, purely verbal language struggles to express it, but imagery is capable of being more explicit. This, she notes, is especially noticeable in comic panels with no words, where the meaning is carried only by images. Earle (2017) argues that these silent panels create a disorienting effect, forcing the reader to rely on visual language to decode meaning through observation rather than narration. This, she maintains, forces the reader to experience the depicted trauma instead of reading about it. Earle claims that this is the reason why comic books and graphic novels are such a powerful medium for conveying what cannot be expressed in words. These silent frames, MacInnes (2018) argues, compel readers to pause, to experience the intended shock from what they see, to engage emotionally,

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<sup>31</sup> Romero-Jódar (2017) describes trauma studies as an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the United States to examine “the overwhelming presence of testimonial and autobiographical narratives with a strong traumatic component that seemed to have flooded every type of artistic expression” (p. 20). Initially focusing on the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, the field later widened to broader traumatic situations and considerations of their effect on individuals and society.

and then reflect, because they connect with the mental state of the protagonist.

Donovan and Ustundag (2017) note that a substantial body of qualitative research has identified visual narratives as powerful tools for portraying complex realities of individuals and marginalised communities. They suggest that such narratives are especially effective in conveying the complexity of trauma (specifically aspects of it that are often not apparent or are difficult to articulate in words). They note that the legal system often struggles to recognise and acknowledge the emotional and psychological effects of trauma that can lead to mental illness. They argue that, traditionally, cases of trauma are narrowed to visible, physical injuries, while invisible trauma is ignored or assumed to be the victim’s responsibility. They note that “scholars and social justice activists argue that symbolic and physical violence is systematically perpetuated by legal and other administrative systems as they fail to understand these aspects of trauma,” while graphic narratives, especially ones that are based on personal experiences, provide deeper understanding of trauma’s consequences, and highlight “the disproportionate physical, emotional and financial costs of survivorship” (Donovan & Ustundag, 2017, p. 223). They suggest that, consequently, graphic novels can lead to broader social recognition, justice, and support for survivors.

Romero-Jódar (2017) notes that comic books and graphic novels have been used as mediums for recollecting the pain and suffering not only of individuals, but also of communities. In a similar observation, Donovan and Ustundag (2017) argue that social justice work has demonstrated that “individual and collective traumatic experiences are shaped by various interconnected forms of violence and oppression,” and graphic narratives “have been at the forefront of linking individual and collective trauma as outcomes of broader social conditions and events” (pp. 223, 227).

In expressing the nature of trauma, *Upgraded Gods* explores the relationship between trauma and narcissism (both individual and collective),<sup>32</sup> and how these patterns shape family, society, and political systems.

### COMICS AS 'GRAPHIC MEDICINE'

Leone (2018) states that, in recent years, there has been increasing awareness and recognition among academics, physicians, mental health practitioners, therapists, social workers, media professionals, and patients of the potential of graphic narratives to support the treatment of health issues. He states that this is rather a surprising shift, because contemporary diagnostic medicine still relies on science and medications. However, the way graphic novels and comic books address psychosomatic effects of trauma and support the healing of the psychologically wounded is very different to traditional technologically advanced methods. Donovan and Ustundag (2017) note that healthcare professionals are increasingly turning towards graphic narratives to understand the complexities of health issues that their patients experience, as well as using comics as a tool to successfully communicate with them.

Earle (2017) explains that the classic trauma theory framework defines trauma as 'unrepresentable' and universal, where "the mind has no integrating coping mechanism and thus remains apart from the survivor's psychic functioning, recreating itself within the mind but independently of consciousness," while it continues to be relived through "compulsive images and sensations" (pp. 32, 37). She observes that, contrary to this view, the contemporary pluralistic

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<sup>32</sup> A discussion of the dynamics of individual and collective narcissism is discussed in Chapter Five.

approach to trauma frames it as a complex experience that doesn't follow "a simple matter of rupture and healing" (p. 38). While this contemporary approach aligns with a traditional view that traumatic experiences are extremely disorienting and disruptive, it argues that they are not unclaimable, and are instead shaped by individual and cultural context, and may change over time. In this context, Chute (2010) argues that the power of graphic narratives lies in how they challenge "conceptions of the unrepresentable that have become commonplace in the wake of deconstruction, especially in contemporary discourse about trauma" (p. 2). By extension, Freedman (2012) highlights the importance of transitioning pain into a material form, explaining that pain often frustrates and isolates because people cannot communicate their complex experiences using only words or images. Therefore, graphic narratives that combine words with images have a unique potential. She notes that "perhaps even more strikingly, [comics] can demonstrate the gulf between what can be told and what can be shown through a deliberate dissonance between the panel's narration and its visual content" (Freedman, 2012, p. 382).

Leone (2018) asserts that in cases of war-related injuries, while visible physical wounds often overshadow psychological trauma, the latter can continue to disrupt a person's life long after the body has healed. He claims that graphic narratives can promote healing by making these invisible wounds visible. Leone argues that recovery from trauma is not a return to how things used to be. Instead, it requires accepting the wounded past and reinterpreting it, in order to move forward.

Freedman (2012) notes that a growing body of interdisciplinary research has examined comics' contribution to the representation of physical and mental illness, individual and collective trauma, and

healing. This research led to a significant conference held in 2011 at the University of London that brought together artists, critics, and medical professionals to discuss and explore the comic's potential in the healing process. The event helped to popularise the phrase '*graphic medicine*', coined earlier by one of the organisers, Ian Williams. The term '*graphic medicine*' has since gained academic recognition. It describes comics that serve representational, therapeutic, and educational purposes. Williams (2015) notes that earlier scholars had already acknowledged the power of visual narrative in relation to medical conditions, with Gilman discussing the '*iconography of illness*', and Green and Myers referring to a phenomenon they described as '*graphic pathology*'. Williams (2015) argues that the

autobiographical comic is a type of symbolic creativity that helps form identity — a way to reconstruct the world, placing fragments of testimony into a meaningful narrative and physically reconstructing the damaged body. (p. 119)

Donovan and Ustundag (2017) argue that *graphic medicine* provides patients with alternative ways of understanding illness and medical experiences, which they can use to communicate more effectively with health practitioners. Squier (2015) adds that comic book "representations of medical treatment or the experiences of disability" allow the character to be portrayed as more than just their condition, thereby encouraging greater empathy toward their experience (p. 49).

There are numerous comic books and graphic novels that depict health issues. Small's *Stitches* (2009), Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* (2006), and Fies' *Mom's Cancer* (2006) focus on cancer; Farmer's *Special Exits* (2010) and Mackintosh's *Seeds* (2011) address death and dying; Linthout's *Years of the Elephant* (2009) explores suicide and

grief; Katie Green's *Lighter than My Shadow* (2013), Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* (2012), and Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales* (2011) consider mental illness; and Burrowes and Bertram-Powell's *The Courage to Be Me* (2014) and Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* discuss sexual abuse, courage, and self-compassion.

## COMICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

While there is a significant body of work that links comics to the voicing of trauma, there is also an associated body of work that extends this into examinations of how such trauma is remembered in the media form. Prorokova (2018) notes that societies have long paid attention to cultural artefacts of traumatic events, such as monuments, museums, and films, which help to shape collective memory. She argues that "a memory is a resurrection of a past event in the present" (in other words, a constructed presence through which events are actively remembered and become part of the present moment) (p. 190). Rather than being passive recollections, memories shape individual and collective identity, sometimes creating a haunting psychological presence. Prorokova (2018) states that "it is the memories that have control over the person and not vice versa" (p. 191). She suggests that collective trauma fractures communal identity, but when it is memorialised, lingering traumatic memories can be acknowledged as collective suffering through cultural artefacts that bridge the past, present, and future.

Because memories are deeply intertwined with both individual and collective identities, they are often the subject of manipulation by political and ideological forces. Romero-Jódar (2017) argues that memories are not neutral, and they are often constructed to serve

particular historical narratives. While the danger of manipulated historical memory will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five of this exegesis, it is useful to consider literature that examines how memory can also function as a counter-narrative. The role of counter-narratives may take diverse forms.

Of significance here is the work of the Russian human-rights organisation Memorial,<sup>33</sup> which has been working since 1987 to recover the memory of millions who were killed by the Soviet regime. This same group documents Putin's atrocities. Kravtsova and Omelchenko (2023) note that, over the years, Memorial has initiated the opening of numerous memorial museums and exhibitions across various Russian regions and former Soviet republics. Tchouikina (2023) notes that Memorial's exhibitions have often drawn from personal archives and family memories, presenting repression as a collective historical trauma that impacts not just the direct victims, but also their families and future generations. This collated material, while historical, also makes connections to contemporary society. However, Tchouikina also notes that although Memorial has always been resourceful, it has often failed to reach a broader audience, connecting only with the educated elite. Gessen (2018) also argues that, despite Memorial's extensive archival research and

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<sup>33</sup> Memorial [Мемориал], also known as the Memorial Society, is the oldest Russian human-rights organisation dedicated to the study and documentation of political repression (in both the former USSR and contemporary Russia). It promotes the moral and legal rehabilitation and commemoration of victims of Soviet political repression (International Memorial, n.d; Kravtsova & Omelchenko, 2023; Zavadski & Dubina, 2023). In 2021 the organisation was labelled a 'public threat' to society and accused of being a 'foreign agent' that undermines Russian historical memory by focusing "attention on Soviet crimes instead of highlighting a 'glorious past'" (Rainsford, 2021, para. 5). Adler (2025) states that the "Putin regime ordered the dissolution of the organisation in 2021," and the arrest of its director Oleg Orlov in 2024, who was "sentenced to 2.5 years in prison" but later "released into exile in a prisoner exchange" (pp. 1, 4). Despite this, Memorial continues its work both from exile and within Russia. The organisation was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

commemorative efforts, the organisation's work has been sporadic and lacking in a clear direction. Gessen maintains that the early Memorial activists believed that factual memory alone (including uncovered Soviet atrocities, execution sites and the identification of victims) would lead to a restoration of the nation's humanity and de-Communist Russia. Unlike other sites of state terror (including Riga, Berlin, Warsaw, and Budapest), where historical memory has been preserved in a conscious effort to create "critical distance by framing, encasing, or marking spaces to draw attention to their history," in Russia there was no agreement as to how such memory should be framed or interpreted<sup>34</sup> (Gessen, 2018, p. 154). Gessen notes that when a museum of state terror lacks narrative context, it risks being misinterpreted.

Graphic novels and comics have the potential to not only preserve suppressed or neglected historical memories (by bringing them to light as stories that can be disseminated in print or digital form), but also to offer interpretations of the trauma embedded within characters' memories. Chute (2016) argues that comics give history a physical presence, 'materialising' absent or erased stories through visual-verbal form that enables the transmission of traumatic experience. She suggests that comics offer unique narrative tools that reconfigure storytelling by mixing diverse styles and narrative modes, which become not merely aesthetic choices but also deliberate strategies.

Cutter and Schlund-Vials (2018) note that while conquerors shape historical narratives to suit their own purposes, conventional history can reinforce this perspective through "state-authorized narratives

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<sup>34</sup> Zavadski and Dubina (2023) observe that, although Soviet political repressions have been officially acknowledged in Russia, they remain excluded from the state's active memory due to the dominant patriotic narrative of victory in the Great Patriotic War, in which Stalin is presented as a national hero. This makes information about his terror policies politically inconvenient.

that eschew individual accounts and familial remembrances in favour of ‘large distinctions’ and strategic omissions” (p. 1). It is through the constructions of grand narratives that inconvenient personal narratives are marginalised. However, they argue that there are significant instances where multi-ethnic marginalised voices have used graphic narratives to reclaim memory and challenge dominant narratives by exposing forgotten or suppressed histories of exclusion, systemic oppression, and ethnoracial violence. Such narratives, they suggest, portray history as fluid, unstable, complex, and alive, while serving underrepresented communities and opening a dialogue for alternative views. Using Lewis et al.’s *March* trilogy (2013–16) as an example, Cutter and Schlund-Vials (2018) note that these narratives often blend personal memory and political events, showing a past that continues to resonate with the present.

Santos (2019) suggests that *graphic memories* do not necessarily oppose consensus memory, but aim to expand it by magnifying its gaps, inconsistencies, and oversights. He argues that political memory is never neutral, and consensus memory reinforces certain political truths and assertions from inherited records. He suggests that graphic narratives can encourage us to rethink how political and cultural forces shape historical narratives, and to reflect on our own part in maintaining or challenging them. Santos (2019) argues that comics do more than add missing parts to historical memory, they expose how history itself is constructed from selected fragments. As such, they invite readers to engage in a process of reassembling meaning from fragmented visuals and text, a process that mirrors how history itself is constructed. Chute (2010) also notes that comic frames appear as fragments, mirroring how we recollect past events, especially traumatic memories. She also observes that comics communicate in multiple layers, where words and visuals interact but never fully merge.

There are numerous comic books and graphic novels that address collective trauma and redefine people’s memory. For example, Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1973–91/2003) and Katin’s *We Are on Our Own* (2006) portray the survivors of the Holocaust; Sacco’s *The Fixer* (2003) shows the reality of Sarajevo’s war, and *Palestine* (1996/2001) depicts life under occupation in the Gaza Strip. Tran’s *Vietnamerica* (2011) examines the collective trauma of the Vietnam War; Stassen’s *Deogratias* (2006) depicts the Rwandan Genocide; Hughes’ *Displacement* (2020) and Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* (1946/2014) expose internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II; Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003–04/2007) portrays the Iranian Revolution and Iran–Iraq War; Lomasko’s *Other Russias* (2017) reports on collective trauma in Russia; Lewis et al.’s *March* trilogy (2013–16) and Hall and Martínez’s *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts* (2021) confront racial injustice and slavery in the United States of America.

These books serve as a reminder that the effects of trauma can persist across generations. They illustrate instances where comics have been employed as a form of resistance against racism, xenophobia, colonialism, imperialism, misogyny, homophobia, bigotry, and other forms of injustice. Hughes (2020), in her graphic novel *Displacement*, summarises the horror and power of collective traumatic memories:

The memories of community experiences stay with us and continue to affect our lives. The persecution of a marginalized group of people is never just one act of violence — it’s a condemnation of generations to come, who live with the ongoing consequences. We may suffer from these traumas, but we can also use them to help others and fight for justice in our own time. Memories are powerful things. (p. 277)

She also notes: “when we do not let trauma stay obscured but bring it up to the surface and remember it together — we can make sure it is not repeated” (p. 202).

In considering comics that use accounts of trauma to construct memory, it is useful to consider two specific works: Katin’s *We Are on Our Own* (2006) and Lomasko’s *Other Russias* (2017).

### WE ARE ON OUR OWN, BY MIRIAM KATIN (2006)

Miriam Katin’s *We Are on Our Own* is a poignant graphic memoir that serves as a tribute to the author’s courageous mother and the desperate measures she took to survive the Holocaust with her child. The story follows the couple fleeing from Nazi-occupied Budapest in 1944. The story is told from the perspectives of an adult and a little girl (who is still very young and too naive to understand the full extent of the atrocities surrounding her). Depicting both kindness and cruelty, Katin avoids demonising any nation or race. Instead, she portrays experiences as the personal choice of individuals, who are affected by the complexity of the war and Holocaust.

The book is not as multi-layered as *Maus*; it shows us glimpses of characters’ lives rather than offering a harrowing account of their experiences. In this respect, it aligns with Santos’ (2019) view that comics expose the fragmentary nature of historical memory, inviting readers to reconstruct meaning from scattered moments. As Chute (2010) explains, fragmented comic frames may mirror the way traumatic memories are recalled.

The book’s expressive pencil drawings give it an almost dreamlike feel that is combined with raw, unpolished emotion. The soft,

smudged faces and figures create a slightly ephemeral effect (like memories that might vanish at any moment). The recollections from the past are rendered in black and white, while the present-day scenes are depicted in colour. This device helps the reader endure the heartbreaking moments of the story, because the shifts to the present moment affirm that the characters survived. However, this link to the future of the family also addresses the intergenerational trauma caused by the war, hinting at how its effects are passed to the next generations and continue to shape the lives of survivors and their families. Accordingly, the work aligns with the observations of Donovan and Ustundag (2017) and Romero-Jóðar (2017), who note that graphic narratives often reflect both personal and collective trauma, revealing the broader systems of violence and oppression in which stories are embedded. It also reflects Prorokova’s (2018) argument that memories control individuals, actively shaping their present rather than simply being recollections of the past.

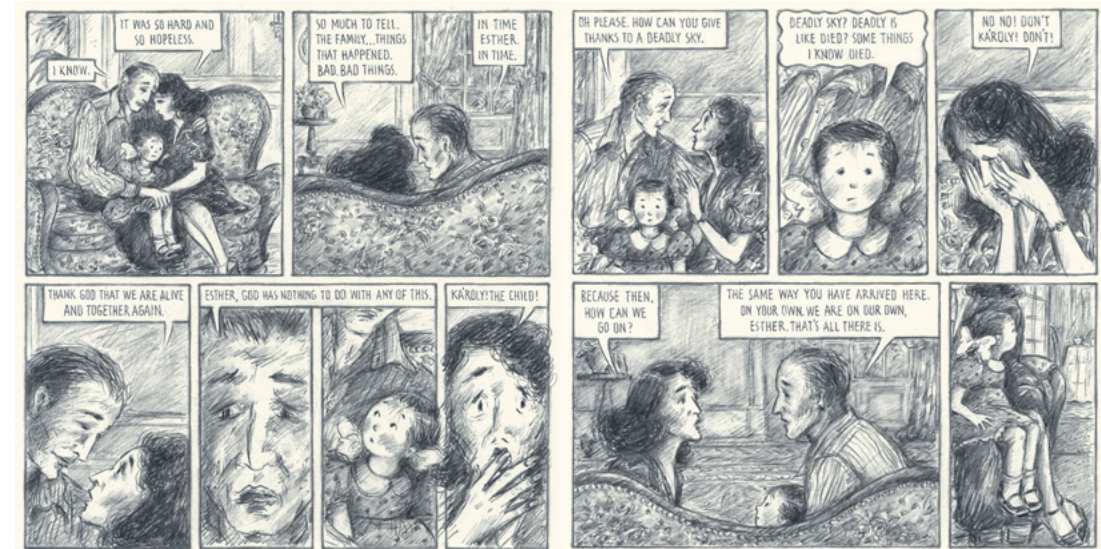


FIGURE 3.3 Struggles with faith. These pages illustrate the moment that is reflected in the book’s title. From *We Are on Our Own*, by Miriam Katin (2006, pp. 121–122).

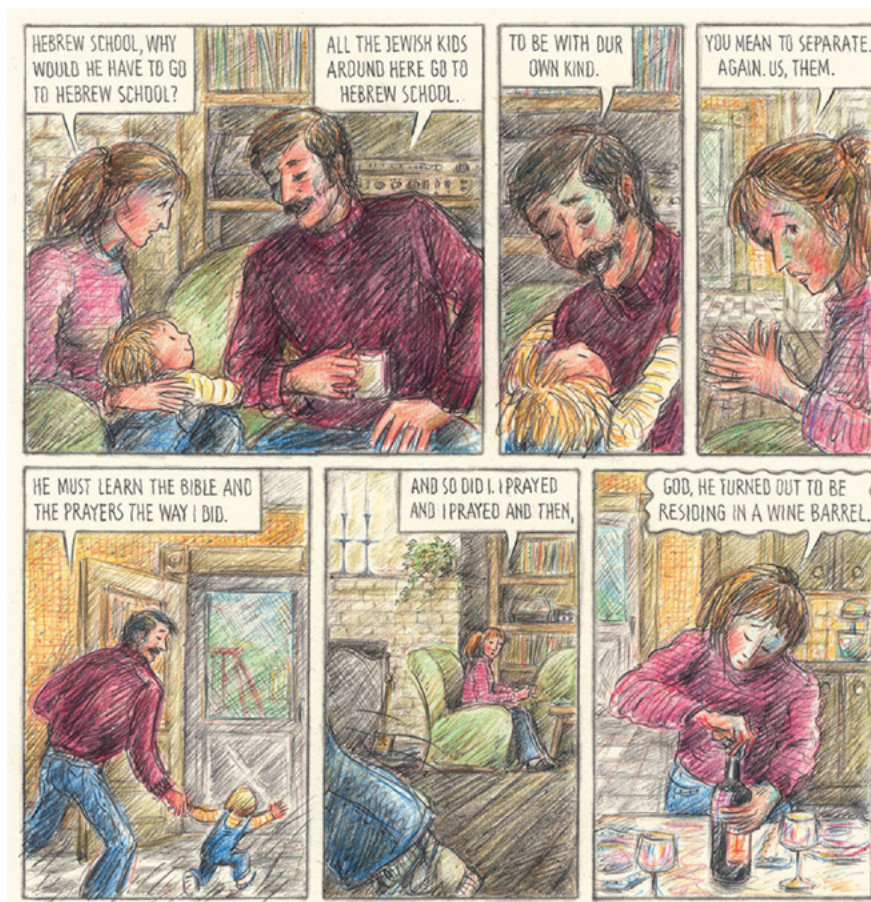


FIGURE 3.4 Questioning faith and belonging. From *We Are on Our Own*, by Miriam Katin (2006, p. 88).

In the book, Katin (as an adult) identifies with her father's atheism because she cannot comprehend how God could abandon people amidst the horrors of war and the Holocaust. The memoir questions faith and religion.<sup>35</sup> These issues (as internal conflicts faced by the characters) are explored throughout the work (Figure 3.3). The author also challenges her husband's insistence on a religious upbringing

<sup>35</sup> The title *We Are on Our Own* references this struggle.

for their son, recalling how her own prayers in childhood were met with silence. As a result, Katin struggles to connect with the Jewish community in the US. She questions the idea of the separation of Jews from other cultures, as she fears such divisions might once again become a threat (Figure 3.4).

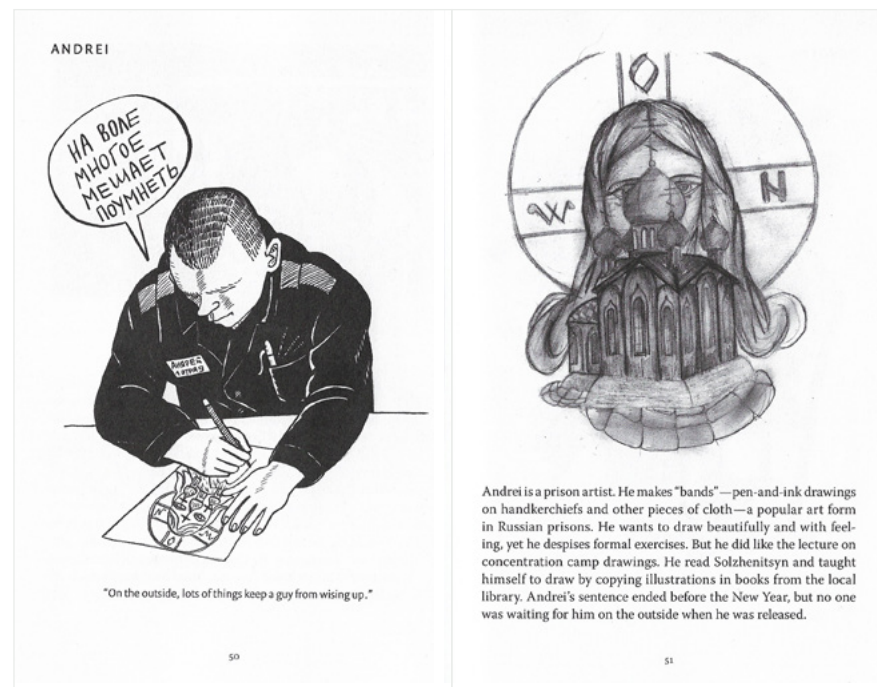
### OTHER RUSSIAS, BY VICTORIA LOMASKO (2017)

Victoria Lomasko's work examines a traumatised Russia, or what is called *бездёга* (a combination of hopelessness and despair). This word is commonly used to describe life in villages or less prosperous regions. *Other Russias* presents eight years (from 2008 to 2016) of graphic reportage on Russian society, with which Western audiences will be unfamiliar. During this period, protests were still possible; however, you sensed that there was no way to escape the current state of things. There was no future, no way out for people in these stories. As Lomasko (2017) describes it: "They have no way to 'move up' in life" (p. 7). People's lives seemed almost predetermined.

*Other Russias* is indicative of Santos' (2019) argument that *graphic memories* expand consensus memory by magnifying its gaps, inconsistencies, and oversights. To do this, the book is divided into two sections that relate to two groups of people, the 'Invisible' and the 'Angry'.

Lomasko argues that "the majority of the Russian populace is 'invisible' to itself and to the rest of the world" (p. 7). Through a combination of drawings and interviews, she documents a variety of marginalised lives: children in juvenile prisons, village teachers, members of the LGBTQ+ community, Kazakh slaves in Moscow,

truck drivers on strike, sex workers, migrants, and retired single women. In her second section, 'Angry', she portrays different types of activists and protesters at political rallies: nationalists, liberals, communists, and even members of the Orthodox Church. She also documents the endless trials that often follow these rallies, including the trial of Pussy Riot.



**FIGURE 3.5** A prison artist, Andrei. On the left is Lomasko's portrait of a prisoner, Andrei, on the right is Andrei's drawing. Lomasko visited juvenile prisons as a volunteer for the Centre for Prison Reform, giving drawing lessons to the inmates. From *Other Russias*, by Lomasko (2017, pp. 50–51).

The book's visual style is raw, expressive, and deliberately unpolished. The author explains that all the sketches were made during the interviews themselves, rather than from photographs or memory. The drawings feel unmediated, and they are paired with simple,

editorial writing that reinforces the immediacy and urgency of the work. Lomasko (2017) states that her art style is less influenced by classic comic traditions and more by

the practices of the 19th and 20th centuries — namely the albums produced by Russian soldiers, concentration camp inmates, and people who experienced the Nazi siege of Leningrad. In many cases, urgent work like this was the only kind of reporting that was done in these brutal conditions — these albums were the sole acts of witness. (p. 8)

Indicative of this illustrative style are historical images such as Figures 3.6 and 3.7, which depict life in the Gulag.<sup>36</sup> The power of these annotated images lies in how quickly they communicate what is happening. They stay with you. You cannot forget or unsee them, because they, as Earle (2017) notes, convey trauma in an explicit and intensely visual manner.

As Chute (2017) notes, autobiographical accounts of trauma carry significant power because they remove the passive spaces, enabling an intimate sharing that draws the reader into the emotional and psychological depth of the experience in ways that second-hand accounts often cannot. This, she suggests, immerses the reader in the immediacy of trauma rather than offering a detached retelling of a story. Similarly, Freedman (2012) argues that such works are "meant to hurt," because the approach confronts a reader with the raw immediacy of lived experience rather than presenting trauma as distant or abstract.

<sup>36</sup> The term 'Gulag' refers to a system of Soviet forced labour camps that operated primarily during Stalin's regime from the 1930s to the early 1950s. word 'Gulag' is "an acronym for *glavnoye upravleniye lagerey* — The Head Directorate of Camps" (Gessen, 2018, p. 94). The system was formed "in order to put incarcerated Soviet citizens to work," serving as a source of cheap labour for the state" (Gessen, 2018, p. 94).

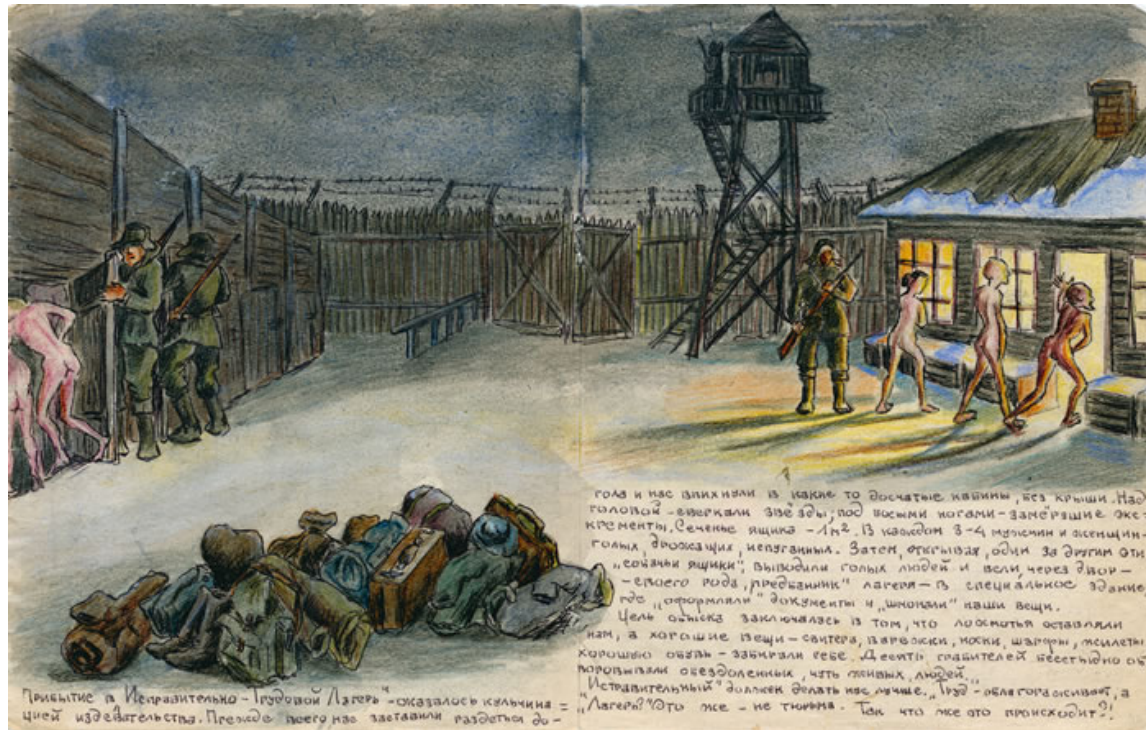


FIGURE 3.6

The arrival at the corrective labour camp. Drawing by a female Gulag prisoner Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia (circa 1964–70s). The handwritten text, translated by Deborah Hoffman, reads: “The arrival at the corrective labour camp turned out to be the culmination of the humiliation. First, we were made to strip naked and were shoved into some roofless enclosures made out of planks. Above our heads the stars twinkled; below our bare feet lay frozen excrement. An enclosure measured 3 square feet. Each held three to four naked, shivering, and frightened men and women. Then these ‘kennel cages’ were opened one after the other and the naked people were led across a courtyard — the camp version of a foyer — into a special building where our documents were ‘formulated’ and our things were ‘searched.’ The goal of the search was to leave us with rags, and to take the good things, sweaters, mittens, socks, scarves, vests, and good shoes for themselves. Ten thieves shamelessly fleeced these destitute and barely alive people. ‘Corrective’ is something that should make you better, and ‘labour’ ennoble you. But ‘camp’? A camp wasn’t a jail. So, then what on earth was going on?” From the online exhibition *GULAG: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom*, by the Gulag Museum of Perm and George Mason University (2006–21). <https://gulaghistory.org/nps/onlineexhibit/stalin/women.php.html>

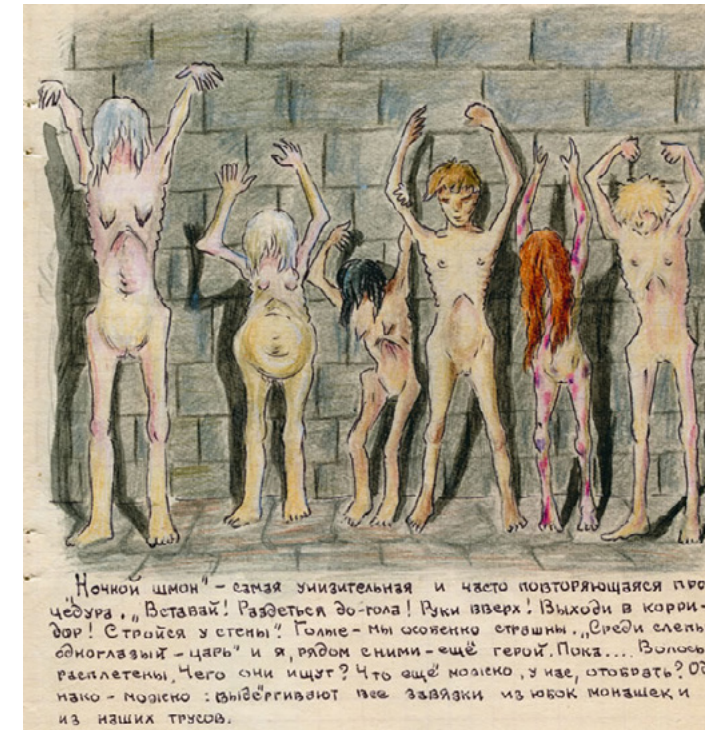


FIGURE 3.7

Night-time search. Drawing by a female Gulag prisoner, Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia (circa 1964–70s). The handwritten text, translated by Deborah Hoffman, reads: “The night search, the most degrading procedure, was frequently repeated. ‘Get up! Get undressed! Hands up! Out into the hall! Line up against the wall.’ Naked we were especially frightened. ‘Among the blind, the one-eyed is king,’ and next to them I was still a hero — for the time being. Our hair was undone. What were they looking for? What more could they take away from us? There was something. They pulled out all the ties that had been holding up the nuns’ skirts and our underwear.” From the online exhibition *GULAG: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom*, by the Gulag Museum of Perm and George Mason University (2006–21). <https://gulaghistory.org/nps/onlineexhibit/stalin/women.php.html>

*Other Russias* can be read as a form of visual autoethnography, because Lomasko inserts herself into the spaces she documents, not as a distant observer, but as a participant who is shaped by, and shapes, the context. Her presence in the narrative is subtle but consistent. The story explicitly reflects her personal views and perceptions.<sup>37</sup> Santos (2019) argues that political memory is never neutral, and the strength of *Other Russias* resides in its contesting of consensus memory that has reinforced political ‘truths’ and assertions.

Lomasko’s book opposes the official narrative promoted by Russian government propaganda. It shows the power of witnessing, reportage, and resistance through art. The author allows subjects, often silenced or ignored in mainstream narratives, whose stories never make it to the news, to speak in their own words, creating an intimate and empathetic portrayal of people living under increasingly authoritarian rule.

*Upgraded Gods* shares similarities with both Lomasko’s *Other Russias* and Katin’s *We Are on Our Own*, because all three works serve as records of their respective times. Although the stylistic approaches differ significantly, the three works engage in autobiographical storytelling that captures personal and historical moments. *Upgraded Gods* and *We Are on Our Own* both portray intimate personal stories that intertwine the past and present, while reflecting on relationships with faith. Both works present the perspective of an innocent, naïve child alongside that of adults (the latter being disillusioned, but often misguided by the societal, cultural, and political forces surrounding them). Both books also explore the fragmentation of memory, showing how past experiences are recalled in pieces and from different vantage points

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<sup>37</sup> For example, when drawing and interviewing sex workers, she notes that they were (to her surprise) quite protective of their personal space, a quality she lacked in her own relationships.

(Chute, 2010; Santos, 2019). *Upgraded Gods* resonates with *Other Russias*, because it also documents a counter-narrative to official state-sanctioned history (Chute, 2016; Cutter & Schlund-Vials, 2018; Romero-Jódar, 2017). Both works present a record of life that exposes truths about Russian society and its struggles, which the government seeks to suppress.

Having now considered discourses and work related to personal and collective trauma in comics, and examined how these works construct traumatic memory, it is useful to consider literature relating specifically to women authors who work within the genre of comic books.

## COMICS BY WOMEN, ABOUT WOMEN

This chapter’s discussion is largely centred on US comics. While it does not represent comics industries worldwide, it highlights trends and experiences within one of the largest and most influential comics markets.

Chute (2017) observes that in today’s graphic novels, female characters and authors have become prominent in the field. Independent comics, in particular, have introduced protagonists whose lives, challenges, and triumphs are explored in depth through both autobiographical and fictional storytelling. However, it has taken a long time to get to this point. Earle (2017) posits the existence of a glass ceiling in the comics world, citing advocacy group BD Égalité, which argued that while women are ‘tolerated’, they’re rarely given recognition. She critiques the male-dominated nature of both comic production and creation, noting that much is created *by* men, *about* men, and *for* men, and this makes it nearly impossible for female artists to be accepted equally.

Deckard (2018) notes that women have actually been “auteurs and creators since the very beginning of print comics,” playing a significant role in the evolution and innovation of the medium, although their efforts have often been overlooked or erased in mainstream comic-book histories that tend to focus solely on male creators.

Robbins (2013) explains that for decades before World War II, women’s role in the industry was not taken seriously by men and was limited to what can be called ‘girl stuff’ — comics that featured light-hearted content such as cute animals, kids, or carefree young pretty girls. However, Robbins (2013) notes that from 1940, as the US was preparing for war, comic-book publishers began hiring women. The artist Dale Messick<sup>38</sup> “was trespassing on male territory” with a first female action heroine, *Brenda Starr*, in 1940 (2013, p. 64). Her protagonist’s success paved the way for more female action characters, such as *Wonder Woman*, who appeared in 1941 and was created by a male team. In fact, Robbins (2013) notes that it took another 45 years before a woman was hired to professionally draw the iconic superhero. However, when the war ended, women were sent “back to the kitchen” or “encouraged to vacate their jobs in favour of the returning men” (Robbins, 2013, pp. 89–90). Deckard (2018) notes that although women made significant progress during WWII, men reclaimed the action comics space and women were pushed back into conventional roles and limited to genres such as cute or romantic comics. By 1974, only two women artists were still working professionally in the US comics industry. Deckard argues that this gender inequality was further institutionalised by “the all-male National Cartoonists Society (NCS), founded in 1946 in the US, which prohibited female members” despite a long history of female

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<sup>38</sup> Her pen name, Dale Messick, was a pseudonym for her real name, Dalia Messick. The ambiguity was designed to disguise the fact that she was a woman.

cartoonists dating back to 1901 (p. 3). Robbins (2013) notes that the reason given for the exclusion of women was, “if women were present at meetings of the prestigious group, the men would not be able to curse” (p. 96).

Unsurprisingly, such attitudes affected female representation in comics. Crawshaw (2018) argues that women characters were typically trapped in roles centred around romantic or domestic service, which reinforced traditional social roles and the social status quo. They were turned into stereotypes, such as a love interest, girlfriend, mother, wife, nag, or slut ... but not a hero. Crawshaw (2018) states that the objectified and hyper-sexualised representation of female bodies in comics, created to attract and entertain a hetero-masculine readership, conveys a very different message to women readers. It suggests that they must be beautiful to be seen. This reduces women to their physical appearance. Crawshaw also observes that women are often treated as expendable objects, who can be injured, raped, or killed to serve narratives aimed at men. Earle (2021) refers to this phenomenon as the ‘Women in Refrigerators’ trope, and refers to an instance when a “superhero Kyle Rayner returns home to find his girlfriend, Alex DeWitt, had been murdered and her disarticulated body is in the refrigerator” (p. 9). She observes that in superhero comics, women are often valued only “as catalyst for male action, rather than for anything to do with their own agency” (p. 10).

However, this situation began to change with the appearance of underground comics. Deckard (2018) notes that female comic artists were largely forced into the underground, as the mainstream was dominated by men. Chute (2010) notes that the rise of the underground comix movement intersected with second-wave feminism, creating a space for politically driven work by women. However, she notes that, unfortunately, misogyny still thrived in

underground comics. Women cartoonists responded to sexism by creating and publishing explicitly feminist content, depicting subjects that “the protagonist is afraid even to think through in private” (Chute, 2010, p. 18). Golomb (2013) traces the beginnings of the women’s underground comix movement to 1970 and the release of *It Ain’t Me Babe*, a 36-page anthology edited by Trina Robbins. This was the first all-women, feminist comic anthology in the US. The following years saw more women creators and other publications begin to surface, such as *Tits and Clits Comix #1*, *Girl Fight Comics #1*, and *Wimmen’s Comix*. Robbins (2013) reflects that the comics she and her peers created in the underground were radically different from the mainstream superhero theme. Deckard (2018) notes how underground creators such as Alice Kominsky-Crumb and Trina Robbins (the leaders of the Wimmen’s Comix Collective) redefined comics as a space for feminist expression, tackling topics such as menstruation and masturbation, rejecting the sexual objectification of women, and breaking societal taboos around the female body. Robbins (2013) observes that by the end of *Wimmen’s Comix’s* two-decade run, lesbian cartoonists had become very prominent, including Jennifer Camper, Diane diMassa, Alison Bechdel, and Paige Braddock (all of whom began publishing their own work). El Refaie (2012) notes that in the 1970s the women’s underground comics movement also facilitated the publication of work by female authors, including Aline Kominsky and Phoebe Gloeckner, who “used the comic medium to discuss the messy, intimate details of their everyday lives, including (in the case of Gloeckner) the effects of childhood sexual abuse on her adult relationships” (p. 39). Golomb (2013) argues that women’s comics in the 1970s were often focused on feminist empowerment and sexuality. She says:

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. (pp. 28–29)

This tendency towards autobiographical storytelling, in both male and female comics, helped to shape the genre of the graphic novel. Robbins (2013) maintains that the revolution started when Spiegelman’s *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, proving that comics could address themes beyond “adolescent power fantasies” (p. 159). However, Chute (2010) notes that the next “two biggest literary graphic narratives since Art Spiegelman’s world-famous *Maus*” were by women: Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003–04/2007) and Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006)” (p. 1).

Deckard (2018) argues that it was radical feminist work that laid the foundation for the development of ‘reality-based’ narratives, and this remains the most internationally recognised work by women. She observes that these autobiographical comics are deeply personal while also political, illustrating both the collective trauma of war and the individual traumas caused by sexualised violence or gender-based oppression. Earle (2017) also notes that many of the most beautiful and impactful works by women over the past 40 years have addressed deeply traumatic experiences. Chute (2010) observes that while trauma is central to this “innovative genre of life writing,” the authors do not allow trauma to define female identity; instead, their work aims to “erase the inscription of women in that space” (p. 2). She argues that these comics retrace and materially reimagine trauma, returning to past events to revisit, review, reinterpret, and re-picture. In doing so, they portray women not only as looked-at objects, but also as those actively doing the seeing, provoking the reader to reflect on how women are positioned in historical, cultural, and visual frameworks. Chute (2010) argues that comics

have become a place where women can truthfully and vividly depict life beyond societal illusions and stereotypes. She maintains that women's autobiographical comics also prompt the reader "to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterise trauma theory as well as our current censorship-driven culture in general" (p. 3). Interestingly, she proposes that this kind of female representation "eschews an obviously 'correct' feminist sexual politics," which may be why such work remains "distressingly underrecognized" in the rising field of literary comics (Chute, 2010, pp. 4–5). Because of this, paradoxically, these women comic creators have continued to face censorship, especially when they address subjects relating to women's sexuality or childhood trauma.

Derbel (2019) argues that contemporary censorship extends beyond overt acts such as banning books. She suggests that it is omnipresent, embedded in the very fabric of culture, society, and language. She argues that rather than a single authority enforcing censorship, society subtly shapes what is allowed to be said, heard, or seen, making unwanted voices invisible. Derbel proposes that feminist graphic narratives are especially vulnerable to being silenced or marginalised, because they confront cultural, social, and religious taboos. She describes these works as 'soft weapons', meaning they are seemingly non-threatening due to their comic form, yet they are powerfully subversive in how they challenge dominant narratives and resist control. As an example, Derbel uses Satrapi's *Persepolis*, which challenges the generalised image of Iranian women by portraying their complexity, resilience, and struggle for autonomy under oppressive regimes. This work, she says, offers a counter-narrative to both Western stereotypes and post-revolutionary censorship in Iran. Accordingly, it is not surprising that *Persepolis* was banned by the Iranian authorities.

Despite the challenges, women continue to claim the right to represent women visually and verbally, challenging cultural and societal concepts of what a woman should be to meet the requirements of society. Robbins (2013) states that while the comics industry still largely favours men, more women are creating comics. Golomb (2013) notes that although many female creators continue to write from a distinctly female perspective, women's graphic novels have become increasingly diverse in content and style, and their intended audience appears to be broader and more universal. Streeten (2018) observes that positioning graphic narratives as literature that addresses serious subjects has resulted in graphic narratives attracting a new audience, who are not part of the traditional comic readership. Niazi (2018) argues that self-driven projects by comic-book artists, graphic novelists, cartoonists, graphic journalists, and illustrators have played a leading role in expanding the medium's engagement with social issues, challenging dominant narratives to reshape public perception and opinion, and driving political change. She notes that when combined with ethnographic research, graphic narratives adapt personal stories into resources for advocacy and education.

Women comic artists have played a significant role in exploring personal and collective trauma, reclaiming historical memory through their work. Many of these graphic narratives not only document individual and collective experiences of suffering, but also reframe them within broader social and political contexts. Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002/2005), Davis's *You & a Bike & a Road* (2017), Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (2000), Abirached's *I Remember Beirut* (2008/2014), Samanci's *Dare to Disappoint: Growing up in Turkey* (2015), Wertz's *The Infinite Wait and Other Stories* (2012), and Mardou's *Past Tense: Facing Family Secrets and Finding Myself in Therapy* (2024) are indicative examples.

Given the impact of this work, it is useful to consider in more depth Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003–04/2007), because this was the first female comic that became a worldwide success, paving the way for so many others. As a parallel, I will also discuss Grebennik's most recent work, *War Diary* (2024).

### PERSEPOLIS, BY MARJANE SATRAPI (2003–04/2007)

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a graphic memoir that begins with her childhood in Iran. It documents how the secular rule of the Shah was overturned by the Iranian Revolution and replaced with religious fanaticism that waged war on freedom. Through Satrapi's work, we see the contradictions between private and public life, and what it means to be a young woman fighting for freedom in a country suppressed by the state army. The memoir offers insight into Persian traditions and history, as well as the political circumstances of the time. Satrapi employs a self-narrative to provide insights into a wider level of "cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2016, p. 43). She blends humour and sorrow through an exploration of identity, self-discovery, immigration, cultural displacement, loss, resistance, and freedom that comes at the cost of exile. The narrative is both personal and universal; it is more than an account of historical events related to Iran and Europe; rather, it is a reflection on the human condition of growing up in a repressive society.

The language used in the dialogues matches the age of Satrapi's character as the book progresses. At the beginning, we encounter an intelligent and outspoken girl who rebels against the new regime but is forced to practise subservience (Figure 3.8). However, she wasn't raised to be docile, so as she approaches her teenage years, she resists more openly. As a result, her parents (in an effort to protect her from the dangers of her outspokenness) send her to study in Europe. However, her time abroad is not an easy escape,

instead she encounters a different kind of struggle. She experiences homesickness, financial hardship, loneliness, and racism, feeling alienated in a foreign culture, caught in between two worlds, not fully belonging to either. She also comes to recognise that racism and oppressive ideologies exist everywhere, although they may take different forms.



FIGURE 3.8

Child protagonist. The page depicts the protagonist in her childhood, highlighting her wit and outspokenness in the context of Islamic tradition. From *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi (2003–04/2007, p. 6).

In *Persepolis* Satrapi also explores the conflicted feelings of a young woman who, upon returning to Iran, realises that her time abroad has changed her into a new person, while her home country has pursued an even more extreme fundamentalist trajectory. However, her adult identity is still formed by Iranian culture and by memories of growing up under authoritarian rule. This reflects Prorokova's (2018) argument that memories actively shape one's current experience, becoming part of the present moment. Satrapi's experiences in Europe, and the misconceptions she encountered from people who knew little about Iran, played a significant role in her decision to write the memoir. In 2003 she stated:

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. (Satrapi, 2003, pp.10–11)

Throughout the book, Satrapi addresses personal and collective trauma, as well as the link between them that is caused by broader systems of violence and oppression. (This connection is discussed by Donovan and Ustundag [2017].) Satrapi's narrative shows how her personal experiences (loss, fear, dislocation) are embedded in systems of gender oppression, religious control, and political violence. The trauma she portrays is not isolated, but systemic.

Satrapi's book uses simple, black-and-white illustrations that help to create a sense of universality in their visual language. Yet her images evoke deep emotion and empathy, while also helping the reader experience the oppression and struggles that the character endures. Her approach resonates with McCloud's (1993) argument that, in comics, the simpler the image "the more people it can be said to describe," because readers are more easily able to identify with the characters (p. 31).

## WAR DIARY, BY OLGA GREBENNIK (2024)

Olga Grebennik's *War Diary* is what the title suggests. The work documents events from 24 February 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine. It begins with the sounds of explosions at five in the morning, which the author initially mistakes for fireworks. It continues with a description of life in a basement, where the family hides with two children, sharing the space with their neighbours. Every day they hope it will stop and not become the new reality. After eight days, Grebennik decides to flee the country to save her children, leaving her husband behind.<sup>39</sup>

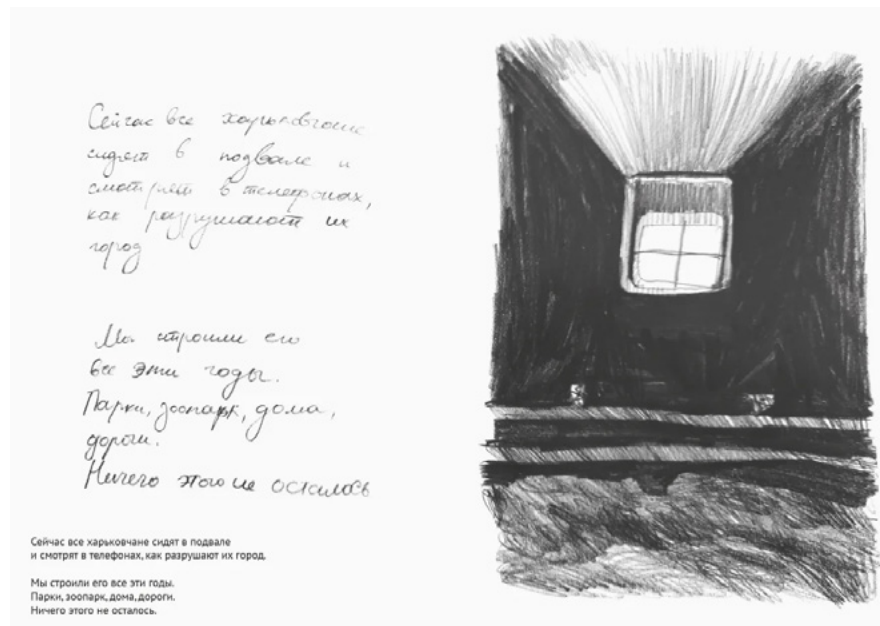
Grebennik did not plan to publish this diary while she was drawing. However, the work extended beyond personal memoir, becoming a historical document; a piece of collective history. Grebennik describes her sketchbook as a symbol of creation in the midst of destruction. She says:

The [sketchbook] practice had always helped me cope with my emotions. Only I didn't know that it would become a war diary. I believed that this nightmare would end in a few days. The drawing process became my only doorway into my inner world, while my outer world was bombed from the planes. I poured all my fears onto the paper. For a short moment this brought me relief. My sketchbook became the only motivation of going to the basement during attacks. I went there to draw a new sketch. In a world where everything was collapsing, I defied the war with creation, in order to survive. It was the straw I clung to with all my strength. (Grebennik, 2024, p. 6. Translated from the Russian by the researcher.)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Men were not allowed to leave, because martial law had been declared.

<sup>40</sup> According to the publisher, *War Diary* has been published in South Korea, Romania, Germany, Italy, Finland, Japan, and Taiwan. It has not yet been translated into English. <https://freedomletters.org/books/voennyi-dnevnik>

The way Grebennik uses sketching to document her war experiences in *War Diary* reflects what Freedman (2012) describes as turning pain into a material form. Sketching becomes a means of expressing complex inner experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken or misunderstood. The diary also illustrates Freedman’s argument that graphic narratives can reveal the gap between what can be articulated in words and what can be grasped through visual representation. In doing so, the book demonstrates Leone’s (2018) proposition that such narratives give form and visibility to ‘invisible’ psychological wounds (that are often ignored). Because of this they promote healing and recovery by bringing lived experience into perceptible view.



**FIGURE 3.9** In the basement. Text translation by the researcher: “Right now all Kharkiv residents are sitting in basements, watching on their phones how their city is being destroyed. We have been building it all these years. Parks, the zoo, houses, roads. None of this is left.” From *War Diary*, by Olga Grebennik (2024, pp. 54–55).



**FIGURE 3.10** Cave paintings. Text translation by the researcher: “We brought chalk to the basement. Now we almost have cave paintings. The children are drawing the world to the sounds of explosions.” From *War Diary*, by Olga Grebennik (2024, p. 66–67).

The diary format, with its fragmented recordings, expresses the chaos and uncertainty of a woman caught in a war zone, who needs to take care of her children as she faces the uncertain future as a refugee. Despite the horrors of war, her diary is a testament to the kindness of the people she encounters. It is permeated with the hope of seeing her relatives again.

The style of the graphic narrative is similar to Lomasko’s *Other Russias* (2017). Quick, unpolished sketches are accompanied by short descriptions, reporting events as they happen — with some work unfinished because of urgency. Niazi (2018) states that such visual narratives are rarely polished or focused on technical skills, because their material form often reflects their urgent and responsive nature.

Such visual narratives, like quick comics or zines, are produced rapidly because they are pressured by circumstances.

Grebennik's *War Diary*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and *Upgraded Gods* are all grounded in personal experience, and are written and illustrated by women who are also the protagonists. Each narrative offers insight into a distinctly female perspective on trauma, war conflict, displacement, and resistance. *Upgraded Gods* and *Persepolis* begin telling the story through the eyes of a child protagonist, allowing the reader to witness how the character's worldview either evolves or strengthens over time. Both works use humour to lighten the weight of difficult episodes. They also explore the experience of migration (showing how cultural differences shape perception and identity).

*Upgraded Gods* parallels *War Diary* in the documentation of the first month of the Russian–Ukrainian war, with both works serving as counter-narratives that challenge official Russian propaganda, and record suppressed memories, preserving personal truths that are often left out of official accounts (Chute, 2016; Romero-Jódar, 2017).

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTION, NON-FICTION, MEMOIR, AND 'TRUTH'

In describing *Upgraded Gods*, I use the term 'autoethnography', rather than 'memoir' or 'autobiography'.<sup>41</sup> In establishing this definition it is useful to consider literature that demarcates memoir from autobiography.

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<sup>41</sup> There is some confusion around the terms 'memoir', 'autobiography', and 'autoethnography', because they all evolve and develop with our world, and theorists debate the perimeters of distinction between them.

El Refaie (2012) notes that the autobiography became recognised as a literary genre in the 18th century, although such writing was reserved for men. However, the cultural, social, and technological transformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s reshaped the definition, allowing anyone's life story to be seen as worthy of publication. This led to autobiography evolving into a media form that enabled people from marginalised backgrounds to tell their stories and "claim validity for their unique experiences in the world" (El Refaie, 2012, p.15). This redefinition of the genre expanded to include various forms of autobiographical writing, including diaries, letters, genealogies, travel writing, and confessions.

However, establishing the origins of memoir, Rak (2004) notes, is less clear. She notes that the form existed at least a hundred years before the term 'autobiography' was coined, and memoirs may date back as early as the 5th century BCE to a literary form used by the Ionian Greeks. The term 'memoir' describes both a process of note-taking and a finished or unfinished literary product. Rak (2004) suggests that a memoir is writing that reflects on one's life in relation to other people or events, and it constitutes a historical record of the time in which one lived.

Lopez (2016) maintains that the difference between autobiography and memoir relates to the focus of the narrative. She proposes that a memoir focuses on an event or a period described from an author's point of view as a first-hand experience, while autobiography covers the span of a lifetime. Duncan et al. (2016) also suggest that (even though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably) an autobiography tends to describe a full life account, while a memoir deals with a particular event or moment in the author's past that has led to significant life-changing events or decisions. However, a contrary position is taken by Couser (2012), who argues that

until recently the difference was rather in reputation; memoir was considered to be of lesser status than autobiography, and it was often treated by critics as sub-literary, shallow, or marginal. Conversely, autobiography was assumed to be deeper and more canonical. However, he notes, these terms have recently been re-evaluated, and memoir is now considered to be a genre of art and prestige that has eclipsed autobiography in popularity.

Thus, an examination of these two terms reveals how much disagreement exists around their definitions. The issue becomes even more complicated when we delve into the question of 'truth', or how much of the story needs to be based on fact and how much can be shaped by the author's interpretation. This debate appears to relate to two positions: the first argues that memoir and autobiography must hold rigidly to the factual truth, while the second accepts that some fictionalisation in memoir (but not in autobiography) is expected. This may include changing names and events, reconstructing dialogue in the service of emotional truth, and allowing for creative license so long as the essence of the story remains honest.

Thus, Torgovnick (2021) states that memoirs are not required to strictly follow factual accuracy and tend to exclude details a biographer would typically include. In contrast, autobiographies usually strive for a comprehensive and historically accurate account of a person's life, from their ancestry through to their later years. She argues that an autobiography should be told with minimal artistic embellishment:

it would make little sense for an autobiographer to change names, hide identities, alter facts, or reconstruct dialogue; in some cases, such changes might even be scandalous. But memoirists hide identities, alter facts, and reconstruct dialogue all the time — within limits. Autobiographies are not

completely factual: writers often misremember or embellish to create a persona. But memoirists use the resources of fiction, the molding of a persona, as their stock in trade. (Torgovnick, 2021, para. 11)

Couser (2012) even argues that the modern novel surfaced as an 'imitation' of memoirs and that's why memoirs often resemble novels (sharing similar narrative techniques and devices). However, he says that while contemporary memoirs may include exaggerated or fabricated details, they differ from novels because they are rooted in the author's real-life experience (while novels generate an entirely self-contained fictional reality). Still, Couser cautions that "while utter fidelity to factual truth in memoir is not possible — and may not even be desirable — we also need to insist on some degree of veracity" (2012, p. 10). This, he maintains, is because we invest in different ways in fiction and non-fiction. Couser argues that even though we understand that characters in memoirs are shaped by the author, we also recognise them as representations of real people who can be harmed.

Worthington (2017) notes that memoirs have recently become more common than autobiographies. She believes this is because, unlike an autobiography, a memoir doesn't aim to retell an author's entire life. Instead, it focuses only on a particular aspect of it, which is crafted from a specific and personal perspective. She argues that "the memoir rises in popularity, not despite, but because of the increasing awareness that language does not merely convey meaning but constitutes it, and language does not merely depict reality but shapes our perceptions of it" (Worthington, 2017, p. 476).

However, DeBoer-Langworthy (2017) notes that this opinion was challenged in 2006, becoming a rigorous public and academic debate. The catalyst for this was the scandal around James Frey's

book *A Million Little Pieces* (2004). This work was originally published as a memoir, but was later recategorised as semi-fictional when many of the facts were revealed to be fabricated or significantly exaggerated.<sup>42</sup> Frey was condemned for being a liar and his bestselling book was taken off the shelves. Rak (2012) asserts that Frey's book opened a public debate that reached beyond the notion of a memoir, and it questioned the meaning of 'truth' in writing, politics, and contemporary society.<sup>43</sup>

Earle (2017) explains that literary hoaxes disturb us most deeply because we become emotionally attached to the narrative; discovering that it is deceptive can result in a sense of being betrayed.

Rak (2012) notes that, interestingly, many stories describing marginal life, suffering, and recovery, or survival from a trauma, are now published as memoirs. She questions why this trend exists and why it is important for the readers to know whether the book they are reading is a true story or a fictional construction. Worthington (2017) believes that the reason for the recent rise of the memoir's popularity is that 'truth' in narrative is becoming increasingly important for readers, especially the kind of 'truth' that reveals specific and highly personal experiences. He thinks that this proves

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<sup>42</sup> For example, it was proved that Frey only spent a few hours in jail, while he claimed he spent 87 days. Maggio (2018) believes that other tales from the memoir, which include the author's friendship with a mafia boss, his root canal being treated without painkillers, and the death of his rehabilitation companion Lilly, may never have happened.

<sup>43</sup> Rak (2012) found it ironic that it was a writer who was accused of betraying millions of people, not US President George W. Bush, who at the time declared war on Iraq based on a fictional threat. Tansley (2013) agrees that the vilification of Frey seemed to be disproportionate, when "policing the blurry boundaries between non/fiction selves is so complex" (p. 388).

that "whether we recognize it or not, we do not simply judge a text by the quality of its storytelling," and "authorial context is an important factor in determining the quality of a work" (p. 475). Lim (2009) suggests that memoir creates the autobiographical pact that works as a contract between the writer and reader. It implies that the author is sincere and true in their writing and the authenticity can be investigated and validated by witnesses and archival records.

Dahmen (2010) notes that memoirs often blur the line between fact and fiction, with the genre positioned on a 'slippery slope' from factual reporting to embellished storytelling, truth and falsity, where emotional truth can take precedence over factual accuracy. He also highlights the limitations of human memory, arguing that, while memoirs may be grounded in fact and even historical research, it's humanly impossible to precisely recall conversations or events from decades ago. He argues that truth is one of the oldest philosophical disputes and many philosophers believe that "the whole truth is simply unattainable; and therefore, wholly unknowable" (Dahmen, 2010, p. 117). Earle (2017) also argues that, because memory is inherently unreliable, it is impossible to produce a completely accurate account of any event, especially when it relates to something as personal and subjective as an individual's life story. She maintains that the primary goal of an autobiography is not an objective imparting of the truth, but rather finding ways to convey one's experience. Earle also notes that when it comes to writing about traumatic experiences, these accounts can add an additional layer of complexity. El Refaie (2012) also suggests that it is not possible to clearly separate fact from fiction in personal narratives because memory is inherently fragmented, and recounting one's life always requires choosing certain details and shaping them in a creative way.

Carden (2007) notes that scholars who work with life writing have been trying to negotiate the blurry line between truth and lies in non-fiction, because even though some facts are possible to confirm (especially those related to questions of 'who', 'where', and 'when') it is difficult to verify less objective information related to 'why' and 'how', as such information is open to interpretation. She suggests that writers might misrepresent things not only because they forget distant events or don't remember them clearly, but also because they perceive experience through the lens of their current life. Carden also argues that "some degree of fictionalization in life writing seems necessary, even desirable," because we as readers want to read a meaningful story and not a collection of facts about someone's life (Carden, 2007, p. 27). She states that the complexity of the memoir requires one to distinguish between 'types of truth', because historical truth, psychological truth, personal truth, or narrative truth all differ from each other and require different forms of accounting. She also argues that subjectivity in memoir goes beyond the author's interpretation of facts. Thus, she questions if there is, in fact, no reliable way for a writer to authentically represent their past experience. She extends this argument to suggest that "perhaps the claim to tell or even to know one's own story is to some degree a lie" (Carden, 2007, p. 27).

Vorster (2018) suggests that dramatisation and exaggeration, despite being deceptive, might be a means to create empathy-building moments for a reader that otherwise might not happen. In her discussion of stories that describe the trauma of war, she asks if it matters whether a story is absolutely true, when,

for a reader to understand, truly, the ultimate facts are not essential, because, in essence, the trauma of war is not within the realm of human understanding. Rather, the best way

to communicate a 'true war story' is to give the reader an opportunity to experience, as emotionally and viscerally as possible, the horror of that trauma. (Vorster, 2018, p. 180)

Rak (2012) observes that in defending the book *A Million Little Pieces*, both the author and the publisher asserted that although the facts were altered, the emotional truth was still there. The publisher argued that memoir writing is not like mathematics; it can and should be written as a novel, aiming for the 'higher' truth rather than being fixated on factual accuracy.

However, Snow (2015) argues that false memoir writing has ethical implications. As an example, she discusses the autobiographical novel *The Education of Little Tree* (Carter, 1976/2001), which narrates the author's boyhood with his Cherokee grandparents. However, it was later revealed that the writer didn't have any Native American ancestry and in fact was an active member of several white supremacist organisations (which included the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan). Snow (2015) suggests that the author 'romanticised' the depiction of the Cherokee and largely invented the Cherokee words used in the book. However, despite overwhelming evidence that the book was completely fabricated, it is still considered a classic work of literature. Earle (2017) discusses the even more unusual case of Wilkomirski, whose highly acclaimed memoir about surviving the Holocaust as a child was later revealed to be entirely fabricated. The shocking part, Earle notes, is that Wilkomirski seemed to genuinely believe this invented past. She suggests that his deep identification with survivors and his adoption of a Holocaust victim persona to cope with his own troubled childhood "is of more interest to scholars of traumatic identity than the narrative itself" (Earle, 2017, p. 19). Bollinger (2016), referring to the false memoir *Love and Consequences: A Memoir*

of *Hope and Survival*<sup>44</sup> (2008), argues that when an author of a fake memoir sets themselves up as a “spokesperson testifying on behalf of marginalized communities besieged by violence, more is at stake than a writer simply lying about her own life” (pp. 227–228). She warns that such authors misrepresent the culture they portray (from what seems to be a first-hand perspective), and this can be dangerously misleading, because a seemingly informed text can influence readers’ viewpoints of race, class, society, and politics.

## COMIC AND GRAPHIC MEMOIR

When it comes to ‘truth’ in comic books and graphic novels, things become even more complex. This is because images are not only representations of objects, characters, and settings, they also carry a great deal of the artist’s personality (including their stylistic choices and their personal perspective on what they depict). But even this explanation only scratches the surface. Scheel (1989/2022) states that Spiegelman’s comic book *Maus* stands apart from other Holocaust narratives because it begins with an extreme provocation: portraying Jews as mice and Nazis as cats — “the most undignified and inappropriate form imaginable to tell the world’s most terrible story” (p. 46). Pullman (2003/2022) also notes that *Maus* is extremely difficult to categorise, and he questions whether it should be considered a comic, a graphic novel, a biography, fiction, a literary, or a graphic work, or a combination of these forms.

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<sup>44</sup> In Margaret Seltzer’s book *Love and consequences: A memoir of hope and survival*, she claims that she is half white and half Native American, and she tells a story of how she grew up in a foster home before joining the Bloods gang in Los Angeles. The memoir was proven to be completely fictional. Seltzer is fully white and actually grew up in the San Fernando Valley with her biological parents.

Drewniak (2019) states that recent non-fiction representations of reality and identity, including autobiographies and memoirs, have been gathered under the label of *life writing* practices. Earle (2017) similarly notes that autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comics are often categorised as life writing or memoir, noting that the terms tend to blur the boundary between fact and fiction. She maintains that even though these works typically claim to represent autobiographical truth, the very concept of ‘autobiographical truth’ is deeply problematic, because such ‘truth’ doesn’t exist.

Chute (2010) asserts that although many artists deliberately emphasise the historical accuracy of their narratives, they often reject rigid classifications of non-fiction and fiction when telling stories about themselves. For this reason, comic artist Lynda Barry coined the term ‘autobifictionography’ to describe her book *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002/2005). In so doing, she was emphasising that fiction is a necessary tool for telling one’s personal story in a way that effectively connects with readers (Earle, 2017).

Due to the complexities of comics and graphic novels, and the expectations attached to them, many artists choose to state upfront whether their book is fiction, nonfiction, or a mix of both. Sometimes they also specify which parts have been creatively fictionalised. Keum Suk Gendry-Kim (2024) describes her graphic novel *Dog Days* as contemporary autofiction. Margaret Kimball (2021) defines her book *And Now I Spill the Family Secrets* as nonfiction. However, at her family’s request, she changed names and one character’s appearance. She also states that while the dialogue was drawn from memory and diaries, her aim was to reflect the essence of conversations rather than provide exact transcripts. Thus, although some events were reordered or time-compressed for narrative clarity, the core experiences remained true. Kiku Hughes (2020) explains

that her graphic novel *Displacement* blends fact, fiction, memory, and history, because there are gaps in her grandmother's story, which she never had the chance to hear first-hand. To fill these gaps, she relied on her own research. The novel is a useful example of how a greater emotional truth can be achieved through fiction. Hughes uses time travel as a narrative device to connect historical experience with the time of Trump's election. This is done to create a sense of déjà vu and highlight how history might repeat itself. The approach allows her to express her emotional distress, which has been shaped by both past and present events.

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Given these debates, I frame *Upgraded Gods* as a form of autoethnography. Adams, Ellis et al. (2017) define autoethnography as "a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')" (p. 1). They note that autoethnographies first appeared in the 1970s. They argue that autoethnographers view personal experience as something shaped by cultural and political norms. In such texts, researchers examine, through reflexivity (a rigorous form of self-reflection), how individual lives intersect with broader social forces. Here, the goal is to reveal how people navigate challenges, make decisions, and search for meaning. Autoethnography has become a recognised method across many academic fields.<sup>45</sup> Shoemaker (2013) notes that autoethnographic practices have been spreading across academic and cultural fields, sometimes taking the form of graphic novels, performance art,

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<sup>45</sup> For example, the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Adams, Holman Jones et al., 2016) features over 40 contributions from scholars in diverse areas such as anthropology, education, art, music, psychology, sociology, gender and women's studies, media studies, critical and cultural studies, among others.

poetry, music, digital storytelling, and other creative media, as well as citizen journalism and documentation of activism. She observes that the ever-widening circles of autoethnographic practice amplify diverse perspectives and encourage the development of new directions.

Ellis et al. (2011) state that autoethnography as a method challenges traditional research practices, framing research as an act rooted in political awareness, social justice, and ethical responsibility. They argue that autoethnography aims to explore and understand cultural experience through personal narrative, positioning research itself as a socially conscious and political act. Autoethnography values personal narrative, and embraces subjectivity, emotional insight, and the researcher's personal role in the research process (rather than ignoring or minimising these). Autoethnography also recognises that people from different backgrounds (including gender, race, class, sexuality, age, religion, education, and other factors) hold diverse perspectives.

Conventional research methods often reflect dominant cultural values, typically privileging white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, and Christian worldviews. When "following these conventions, a researcher not only disregards other ways of knowing but also implies that other ways are necessarily unsatisfactory and invalid" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275). In contrast, autoethnography broadens the scope of what counts as valid knowledge, acknowledging that identity shapes both the research process and its interpretations.

However, Delamont (2009) criticises autoethnographic work as inherently narcissistic, intellectually lazy, and ethically problematic, arguing that "the minutiae of the bodies, families or households of social scientists are not likely to provide analytic insights for social

science" (p. 60). She maintains that

autoethnographic self-obsession, such as my personal crises about my fieldwork as a greedy institution, intruding too much into my personal life, have no analytic mileage, and tell the readers nothing about fieldwork, ... or embodiment or habitus or anything of social scientific, pedagogic or educational interest. (Delamont, 2009, p. 56)

Writers such as Griffin (2019) acknowledge Delamont's criticism, but suggest that this critique does not apply when the narrative is approached with self-criticism and reflexivity (rather than self-aggrandisement). He argues that visual autoethnography disrupts traditional academic representation, particularly in journeys of self-understanding that are relational and fluid. By centring the researcher's personal experience, autoethnography, he suggests, offers a more accessible way to reflect the messy, lived reality of the research process, challenging the notion of the invisible, all-knowing researcher. He also notes that when such narratives are used as a source of visual biographical data and adopt a non-traditional and visually engaging format, they can make academic work more accessible and appealing to broader audiences.

Chang (2016) explains that while memoir and autoethnography both draw from deeply personal and often emotional experiences, the difference between the two forms lies in the depth of self-reflection and cultural analysis. Autoethnography goes beyond self-exposure by connecting personal stories to broader cultural, social, or political contexts. It seeks to investigate how personal experiences are shaped by, and reflect, larger societal structures. Chang (2016) argues that autoethnography has a significant advantage as a method, because researchers are studying their own experiences. This gives them immediate access to rich, in-depth material and a unique, intimate understanding of it. She suggests that autoethnography can lead

to self-healing and self-transformation, and it helps researchers better understand themselves and others through self-reflection, increased cultural awareness, and more effective, inclusive engagement with people from different backgrounds. In contrast to autoethnography, Chang (2016) argues that a memoir typically focuses on individual narrative and memory, often without engaging in critical reflection on how the writer's experiences intersect with wider cultural meanings. Without this analytical layer, she maintains, personal storytelling remains memoir or autobiography rather than autoethnography. Chang (2016) also warns of certain pitfalls in creating autoethnography, including focusing too narrowly on the self without considering others, overlooking ethical concerns when representing other people, relying only on personal memory, and focusing entirely on storytelling without including cultural analysis.

There are several examples of autoethnographic comics used as research tools. These works either replaced traditional research outputs or accompanied them (Aru, 2024; Blanch, 2017; Cettl, 2023; DeHart, 2020; Griffin, 2019; Meer & Muller, 2023; Yalçinkaya, 2022).<sup>46</sup>

Given this circumstance, it is useful to review two graphic novels that successfully apply autoethnographic methods to address relevant issues and engage an audience with the author's findings. The novels *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) and *Displacement* (2020), although narrating very different subjects, are both based on autobiographical experiences of women who address personal and intergenerational trauma and its broader impact on society. Accordingly, in the review I consider not only their use of autoethnographic methods, but also the way they portray trauma, women's experiences, and political and societal content.

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<sup>46</sup> In many such theses, the creative work, while discrete, also interfaces with exegetical discussion, and it is this fusion that typifies this study, enabling reflection and context to permeate both the comic and how it is critically contextualised.

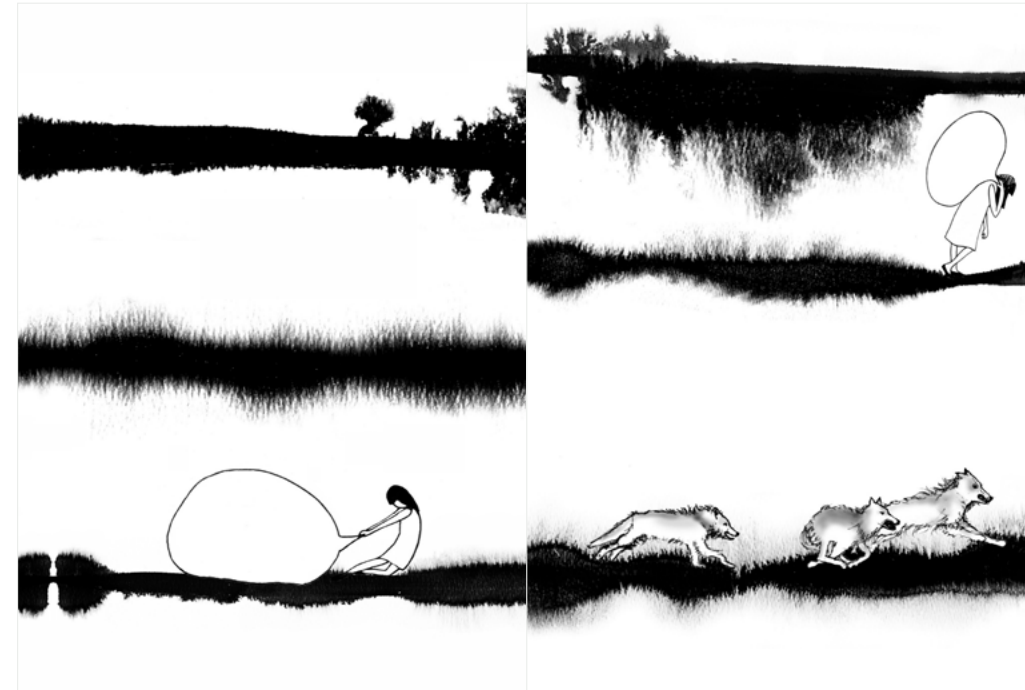
### *BECOMING UNBECOMING, BY UNA (2015)*

Una is the pen name of the author of *Becoming Unbecoming* (who prefers to conceal her identity). She is an artist, writer, and academic who tells a story that intertwines her experience of sexual assault at the age of ten and the violence committed at the time in Yorkshire, where she was born. She was only 12 years old when the story began. Over the next five years, the Yorkshire Ripper murdered at least 13 women and attempted to kill seven more, leaving “twenty-five children ... without a mother” (Una, 2015, p. 154).

The sexual assault Una experienced is not only a traumatic event but something that continues to shape her life. She lives in a constant state of fear and confusion, because society continues to blame and shame women for the violence committed against them. As a child, she does not understand what she has done wrong, and she is treated like a slut by her schoolmates. In her own words: “In order to survive, I internalised much of the unhelpful and contradictory nonsense that I heard, simply because I was a child. It has taken me a lifetime to be free of these ideas” (Una, 2015, p. 202).

Una’s story is permeated by a threat; that no matter what you do as a woman, you can still become a victim. There is no way to protect yourself from it. The book also shows how children become the ‘perfect victims’ of sexualised violence, and how their parents often choose to ignore, hide, deny, or forget what happened, blaming and shaming the child instead of offering support. Una states, “It’s not uncommon to find yourself ostracised after experiencing sexualised violence” (p. 107). Referring to her own experience, she observes, “the culture within which all of this was possible relied on silence ... relied on shame” (p. 128). Throughout the book, Una portrays herself carrying a large sack, or what she calls ‘the burden’ (Figure 3.11). She describes this as “the traumatic space that’s left when violence of

any kind happens,” and she represents it visually as an empty speech bubble “so it signifies silence” (quoted in interview by Whitehead, 2015, para. 12).



**FIGURE 3.11**

The burden. Pages illustrated with running ink and Una with an empty speech bubble. From *Becoming Unbecoming*, by Una (2015, pp. 95–96).

*Becoming Unbecoming* deals in visceral ways with emotional trauma, and the author’s use of a pen name at the time of publication indicates the level of caution her decision to publish the work necessitated (although Una has since revealed her identity on YouTube).<sup>47</sup> Reflecting on the eventual critical praise her courage to

<sup>47</sup> I also considered writing my comic anonymously, but it seemed almost impossible these days, due to the lack of privacy in our digital world. This is why I chose other ways to protect myself.

talk about her past elicited, she acknowledges:

It's not easy to step out from beneath the cloud of mortification that erroneously follows us around, but more and more we do. The truth is awful, but we must all learn to live with it if we are to leave the 1970s, and all the rest of history, behind for good. (Una, 2015, p. 128)

Una questions how her life, as well as the lives of other survivors, might have unfolded differently, stating, "What a waste of my valuable time surviving has been! Hours, days, years ... decades!" (2015, p. 140).

*Becoming Unbecoming* speaks about the silencing of sexual violence. Una states that while sexual violence in the UK was increasing, much of it went unreported. She observes, "of course, if you don't report it, you don't count, but it doesn't seem you count much more if you do" (2015, p. 125).<sup>48</sup> Donovan and Ustundag (2017) state that, according to YWCA, 460,000 sexual assaults happen annually in Canada. However, for "every 1,000 sexual assaults, only 33 are reported to the police, 29 are recorded as a crime, 12 have charges presented, six are prosecuted, and three lead to conviction" (p. 228). Victims often stay silent because they think they don't have enough evidence and fear they won't be believed, or they are afraid of the assailant. They also don't want to relive the traumatic experience repeatedly with police and in court. However, the humiliation and shame that come with exposure are probably the most painful, as victims are often blamed for their own abuse. Una argues that "blaming the victim is an act of refuge and self-deception" that "allows the blamer to sit in judgment, imagining some mystical justice that means bad things happen only to bad people, thus ensuring their own safety" (2015, p. 202).

<sup>48</sup> I can deeply relate to this. I debated whether I should include in my comic my experience of sexual violence, but I eventually decided not to. I also questioned myself again why I did not report it, and the reasons are similar to those Una highlights in her novel.

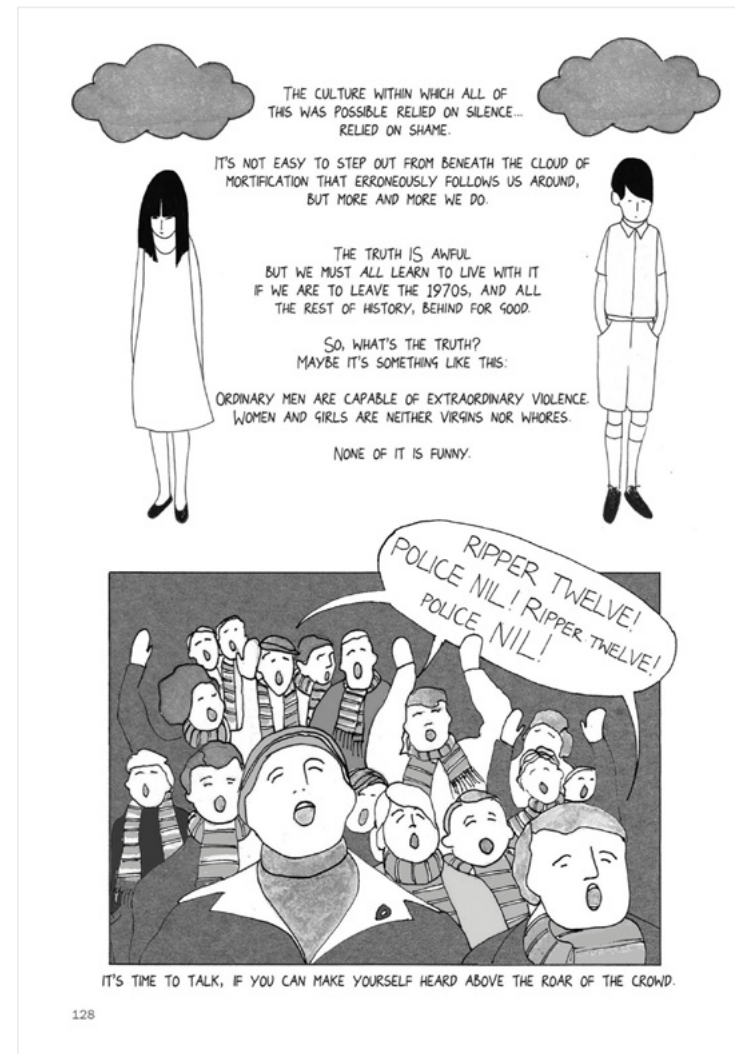


FIGURE 3.12 Page showing a crowd's glorification of the killer. From *Becoming Unbecoming*, by Una (2015, p. 128).

Structurally, *Becoming Unbecoming* employs diverse techniques to apply an autoethnographic analysis to the author's personal narrative. It begins with artwork that blends raw, running ink and symbolic imagery to convey the mixture of fear, guilt, shame,

isolation, and confusion that is too difficult to describe in words (see Chute, 2010; Donovan & Ustundag, 2017; Earle, 2017; Freedman, 2012; Leone, 2018; MacInnes, 2018; Prorokova & Tal, 2018; Romero-Jódar, 2017; Williams, 2015). The storytelling includes newspaper clippings that offer historical context and provide evidence of how gendered violence was trivialised and the serial killer glorified. The book also portrays people of the time: protesting, indifferent, blaming, and even cheering with each new victim, as if it was a football match (Figure 3.12). Later in the book, Una introduces reported facts, analysis, and statistics. These devices relate to Chang's (2016) discussion of the use that autoethnography can make of multiple sources of information.

By recounting her personal experience, Una also exposes the failures of a biased police force and condemns a culture that enables violence by suppressing victims' voices and glorifying the actions of perpetrators. Una shows how what is often framed as concern from 'well-intentioned' people can be an expression of a deeply misogynistic society, which often excuses or justifies perpetrators' acts when their victims are sex workers or viewed as 'indecent'. Her novel draws attention to a society that ignores, belittles, and violates women, stretching back to what Una calls "an ancient landscape of prohibition from wealth, education, suffrage ... an ocean of objectification" (Una, 2015, p. 113).

This combination of personal experience and self-reflection, together with broader data, demonstrates the effectiveness of autoethnographic visual narratives. Donovan and Ustundag (2017) argue that *Becoming Unbecoming* effectively communicates the intense, overwhelming nature of trauma to the reader. They note that Una often draws on her bodily experiences of trauma to show

how it influenced her daily life. This approach offers a nuanced and complex testimony that is often absent from legal documents. Donovan and Ustundag (2017) also note that Una exposes the way women's shared experiences of sexual assault and the normalisation of gender-based violence are often reduced to isolated personal traumas. This phenomenon is driven by what feminists and gender activists call *rape culture*. They suggest that novels such as *Becoming Unbecoming* open space for a broader social recognition of trauma, and with it, the possibility of justice and healing. Donovan and Ustundag (2017) also argue that Una demonstrates that comics and graphic novels can be powerful tools for social analysis, not only capturing the traumatic experiences of socially and politically marginalised groups but also revealing how personal and collective experiences shape one another.

### *DISPLACEMENT, BY KIKU HUGHES (2020)*

The graphic novel *Displacement* intertwines Kiku Hughes' experiences of contemporary life in Seattle with the life of her ancestors, who were Japanese Americans incarcerated in concentration camps in the US during World War II. The story combines memory and historical facts with fiction. Since the author was born after her grandmother died, she did not have the chance to hear her story first-hand, so she decided to conduct her own research. However, instead of sharing her findings through facts and statistics, she uses a time-travel device, not as an artificial time-machine, but as a memory fog that transports her through time and space. Hughes places herself in the shoes of Japanese Americans during the time of internment, imagining what it must have felt like to be arrested and taken to the camps. Her novel is not an exercise in dramatic speculation; rather, it manifests an empathetic

visualisation grounded in extensive research that enables readers to connect historical fact with the emotional and psychological impact internment had on Japanese American people. Through this fusion, the author addresses Chang’s (2016) warnings of autoethnography’s pitfalls, and allows readers to engage with factual accounting while experiencing events on a personal level — feeling the fear, injustice, and systemic racism experienced by those who lived through incarceration. At the same time, Hughes softens the emotional weight of these events by showing the community’s resilience, bravery, activism, and care for one another. This approach aligns with Adams, Ellis et al.’s (2017) understanding of autoethnography as a method where personal experience is used to interpret broader cultural and political contexts through reflexive self-examination.



**FIGURE 3.13**  
 Depiction of the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah — a concentration camp where Japanese Americans were incarcerated. From *Displacement*, by Kiku Hughes (2020, pp. 139-140).

Beyond recounting a historical incident, *Displacement* also explores intergenerational trauma, showing how forced internment affected the lives of Japanese Americans even decades after the war. Her writing shows how Nisei (second-generation Japanese immigrants) were often discouraged from preserving Japanese traditions or learning their language. Her story also reflects the anxiety they carried throughout their life, and their desire to become ‘real’ Americans by distancing themselves from their roots, because being identified as Japanese was seen as dangerous.<sup>49</sup> Hughes admits that she knew little about the past or her grandmother’s life, because she was afraid to ask her mother about it (she wasn’t sure if her mother wanted to discuss it). Her mother shares a similar experience, saying it was difficult to bring up the subject with her relatives, as “most Issei and Nisei avoided talking about it with their children. There was a feeling of shame, or simply the belief that they had to move on” (Hughes, 2020, p. 263). Hughes notes that the experiences and traumas her ancestors endured continued to influence her in ways she was only beginning to recognise at the time of writing the novel. Even after two generations, the trauma was still haunting and impacting her family and the wider Japanese American community. Through her mother’s monologue, Hughes (2020) describes the ‘fog of memory’, used as a time-travel device, as a metaphor for the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma:

I don’t think we are traveling through time or space, really. I think we’re traveling through memory. I think sometimes a community’s experience is so traumatic, it stays rooted in us even generations later. And the later generations continue to rediscover that experience, since it’s still shaping us in ways we might not realize. (p. 234)

<sup>49</sup> I can relate to this sentiment. In Russia, particularly during Stalin’s terror, ethnic minorities suppressed or concealed their heritage to avoid persecution or execution.

Finally, the novel draws parallels between past and present, particularly in its reflection on Trump's rhetoric and actions that, the author suggests, echo historical injustices. Hughes compares the Japanese internment camps to the contemporary refugee camps at the US border, including the forcible separation and detainment of children. Hughes reflects on the fear her family experienced for decades, and expresses concern that such events could be repeated, urging readers to take action.

*Displacement* serves as a reminder of the importance of remembering and confronting history, showing how easily a government can strip citizens and immigrants of their rights, through demonisation and distortion of the truth. Published in 2020, the novel has become even more relevant in 2025, indicating that the author's warning was politically and socially perceptive, because currently people in the US are being imprisoned indefinitely, without due process.<sup>50</sup>

*Una's Becoming Unbecoming*, Hughes's *Displacement*, and *Upgraded Gods* are stories that are rooted in personal experience. Told by women, each combines research with autobiographical elements to develop an autoethnographic perspective that connects personal narratives to broader social histories. All three works explore the long-term impact of personal and collective trauma. While *Becoming Unbecoming* maintains the author's anonymity through the adoption of a pseudonym and the use of non-specific references when describing traumatic experiences, *Upgraded Gods* protects the author's identity through the changing of characters' identities.

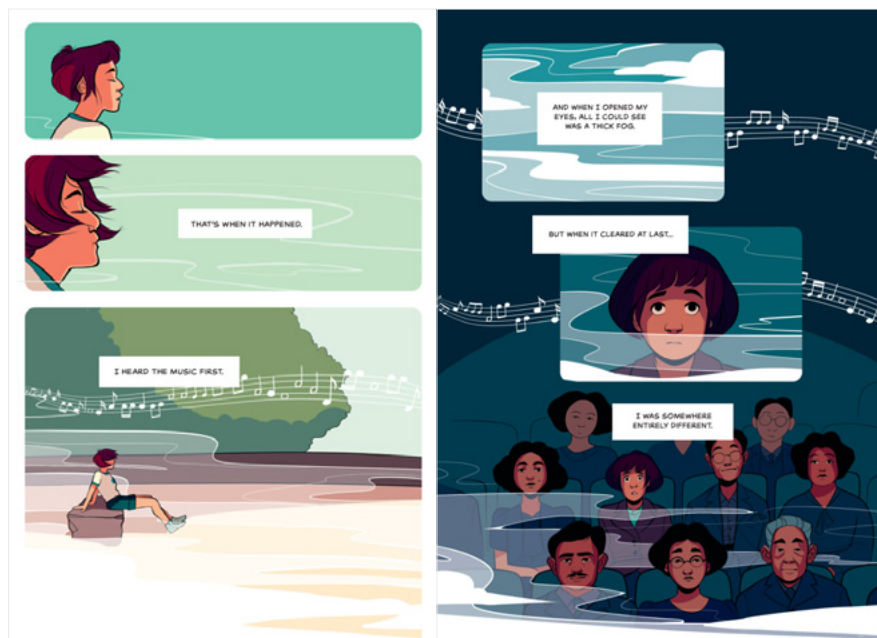
<sup>50</sup> For example, in March 2025 the Trump administration invoked the Alien Enemies Act to forcibly remove at least 137 Venezuelans "without adhering to the most basic standards of due process," expelling them to "a maximum-security prison in El Salvador under the act, where they are being held arbitrarily, indefinitely, and incommunicado" (Human Rights Watch, 2025, para. 7).

Although *Upgraded Gods* does not feature a fictionalised storyline in the same way *Displacement* does, both works incorporate elements of fiction. In my work, this appears through fictional characters who personify philosophical and psychological viewpoints and engage in imagined discussion (Figure 3.14).



**FIGURE 3.14** Double-page spread showing book authors as generic personifications of philosophical and psychological perspectives (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 142–143. (Draft)

A similar device is used by Hughes when fog and music take her to the past, and her deceased relatives become real people with whom she can communicate (Figure 3.15).



**FIGURE 3.15**  
Double-page spread showing the protagonist's ancestors. From *Displacement*, by Kiku Hughes (2020, pp. 13–14).

In this chapter I have contextualised my comic by examining both literature and practice. By examining discourses surrounding definitions of comic books and graphic novels, I have positioned my work as a contemporary comic. I then reviewed literature relating to personal and collective trauma (as they appear in comics). By doing this I have indicated a field in which *Upgraded Gods* makes its contribution. This contribution is then contextualised by pulling a focus on to the history and nature of comics created by women that discuss women's experiences and perspectives. Finally, the chapter has considered literature relating to autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, memoir, and 'truth', as a method of positioning *Upgraded Gods* as an autoethnographic work.

CHAPTER 4

# RESEARCH DESIGN



## INTRODUCTION

The chapter is divided into six sections. I begin with a consideration of the research paradigm and autoethnographic methodology, then move to a discussion of the protean journey of the project's research. This is followed by an outline of experiments with virtual reality (VR) environments that formed part of the study but do not appear in the final comic book. I then return to a discussion of the research methods employed in the comic's narrative construction and visual treatment.

The chapter concludes with a critique of the research design.

## RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm describes

a set of assumptions and understandings about key aspects of the research: the nature of reality or truth (ontology); the intent, ethics and values of the researcher (axiology); the understanding of the nature of knowledge and how it may be known (epistemology); the way information is obtained (methodology); and the nature of the research outcomes. (Ling & Ling, 2016, p.19)

Paradigmatically, my position in this thesis study is that of an artistic researcher who is subjective and filters thinking through her experience and values (Klein, 2017). As such, I do not position knowledge as an objective truth but as something that is created through interactions between myself and the materials, environments, and processes I use (Leavy, 2020; 2025).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study may be described as autoethnographic, supported by a heuristic inquiry. Autoethnography combines aspects of ethnography and autobiography, and it explores personal experiences in connection with others (Adams, Ellis et al., 2017; Adams, Holman Jones et al., 2016). Autoethnography uses self-reflection as a means of understanding a wider range of social, historical, cultural, and political conditions. Anderson (2006) argues that this approach serves "not simply to document personal experience, [but] to provide an 'insider's perspective', or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader" (pp. 386–387).

In *Upgraded Gods* I use my life story as a base for the study. As an autoethnographic inquiry, the project displays "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). I ask the reader "to feel the truth of [the narrative] and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). Ings (2013) notes that although an autobiographical approach can be subjective, it can also "produce very rich texts that create highly distinctive relationships between the narration of personal experience and broader societal concerns" (p. 5).

Despite the methodology being autoethnographically oriented, the designing of autobiographical data (and the related VR technology) into an artistic text employed a process of heuristic inquiry.

Heuristic inquiry may be broadly described as an inquiry-based approach that is used when no formula exists for navigating an existing problem (Ings & Tudor, 2024). The approach is especially

beneficial when an artistic researcher is seeking high levels of discovery through the use of intuitive questioning (Ventling, 2018; 2024). Douglass and Moustakas (1985) describe heuristic inquiry as a process of collecting and synthesising data in “a search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience” (p. 40). They note that heuristic inquiry “requires a subjective process of reflecting, exploring, sifting, and elucidating the nature of the phenomenon under investigation ... to cast light on a focused problem, question or theme” (p. 40).

To broaden the chances of discovery in the research, I employ methods related to narrative design, technological application, and illustrative approach. Given the heuristic nature of the study, these methods engage with trial and reflection that is evaluated internally (Sela-Smith, 2002) and externally (Ings & Tudor, 2024).

## JOURNEY OF A PROTEAN RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for *Upgraded Gods* was shaped and reshaped by conditions I could not have predicted at the outset of the study. Significant, transformative agents included changes in technology, the COVID pandemic, personal health, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

## ORIGINAL INTENTION AND SUBJECT

The project’s intention evolved alongside protean circumstances and moved through four iterations:

- a mixed-reality project (combining a printed comic book and a VR experience);
- a complete comic book in VR;
- a printed book with the VR component used to illustrate a near-death experience; and finally
- a printed comic book (as a developed proof of concept for subsequent expansion).

## EVOLVING METHODOLOGICAL FOCUS

I initially assumed the project would be developed using a heuristic inquiry. I had employed this approach in my Master of Philosophy thesis. However, as the research progressed, I became increasingly aware of the project’s autoethnographic focus, because I wanted to create more than a biographical account in comic form. I was seeking to develop research that critically reflected on human conditions through a narrative that drew on lived experience. As the scope of the research expanded to include the consequences of war and trauma on society (and a consideration of how these contribute to a vicious cycle of collective trauma), the *aftereffects*<sup>51</sup> of my near-death experience were contextualised and subsumed into a wider narrative.

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<sup>51</sup> This is a term used in scientific literature to describe the profound changes in perception that often follow a near-death experience, including one’s behaviour, attitude to life, values, and beliefs (Lommel, 2010; Long, 2010; Moody, 1975/2015; Tassell-Matamua et al., 2017).

## A PROTEAN JOURNEY

Although my Master of Philosophy study enabled me to produce an autobiographical comic book that drew on my childhood and adolescence, I discovered while working on the thesis that VR had the potential to expand the spatial experience of narrative. This facility, I realised, might enable me, as an author, to design levels of immersion unattainable on a printed page.<sup>52</sup>

One of the qualities of VR is that you cannot see your physical body inside it. I wondered how such an experiential realm might be used to simulate an out-of-body experience that could convey the distinctive nature of a near-death experience. Upon entering the PhD programme in 2019, I began searching for software that would allow me to create such a simulation. I chose the Quill VR app,<sup>53</sup> based on its rapid development and potential to afford a hand-drawn aesthetic inside VR (rather than a conventional 3D-rendered look). This, I believed, aligned more naturally with the comic-book medium.

With this consideration shaping an initial research question, a journey began that required heightened levels of flexibility and adjustment, because it would be necessary to navigate an unstable technological vanguard, health conditions resulting from working inside VR building environments, and shifts in the socio-politics of the world that formed the context for the story.

Figure 4.1 provides a summary of the study (as a journey map).

<sup>52</sup> Milk describes VR as “the ultimate empathy machine,” arguing that it can offer an immersive, first-person experience (2015, 02:21).  
<sup>53</sup> Quill was released in November 2016 by Oculus Story Studio, a pioneer in animated VR filmmaking.

**FIGURE 4.1**  
 Journey map (2019–25).  
 (continued)

This journey map documents significant internal and external influences and progressions in the doctoral study’s transitions between July 2019 and August 2025 (the date of the thesis submission).

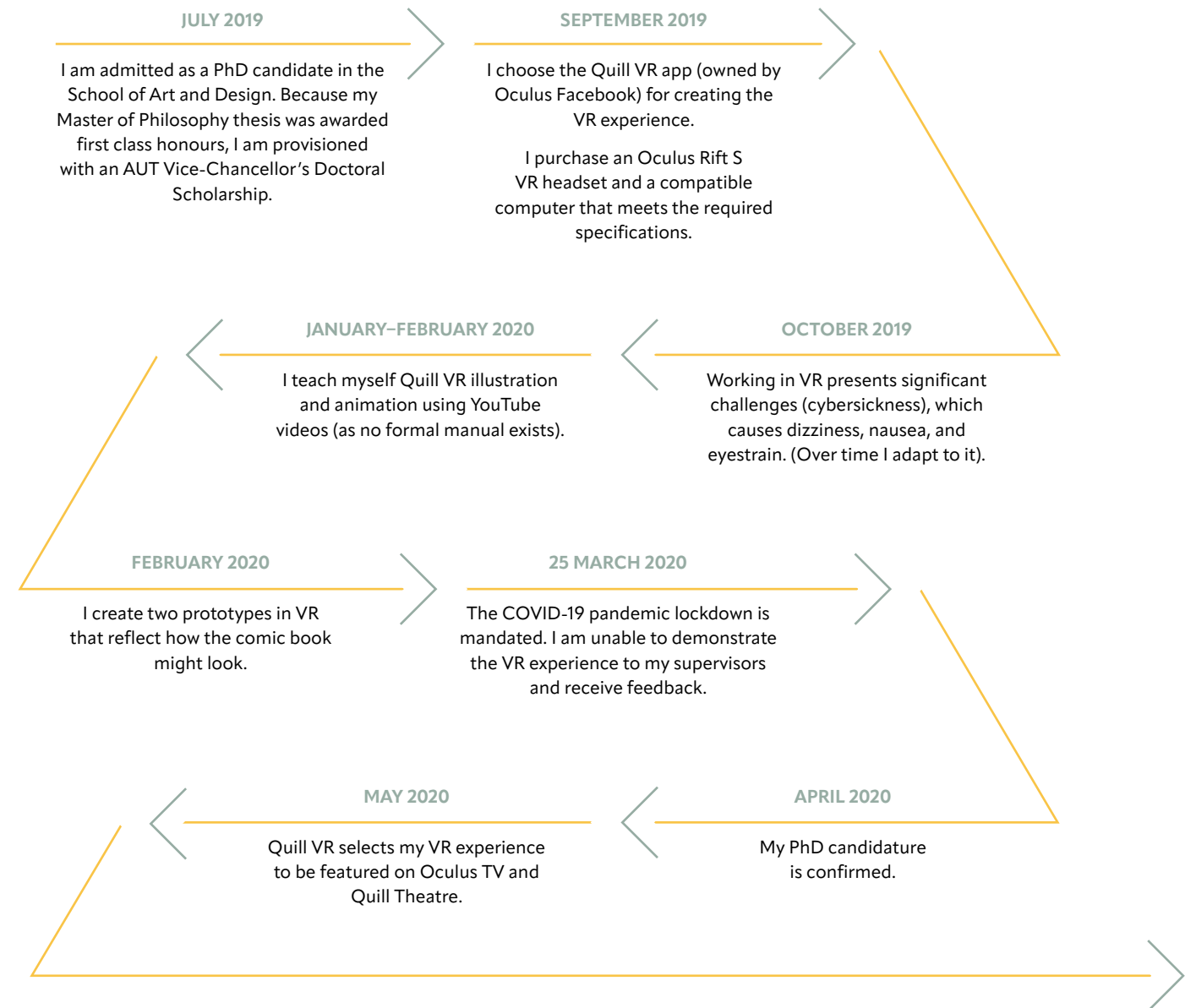
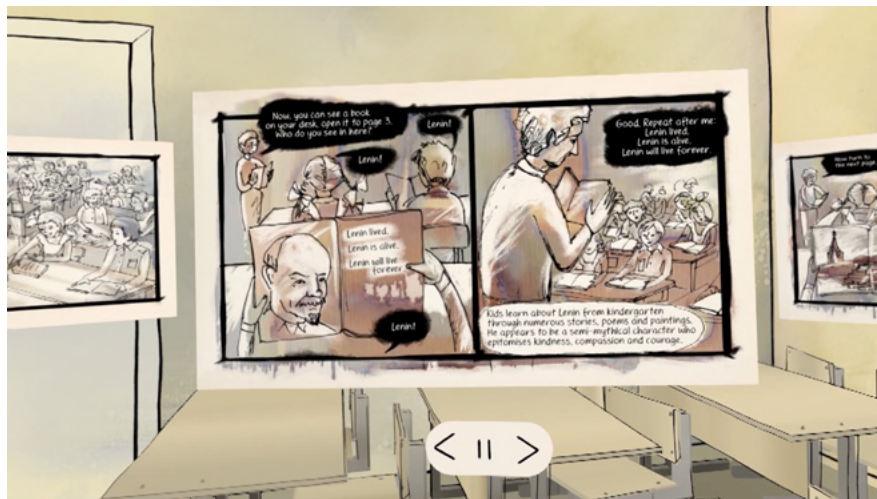


FIGURE 4.1 (continued)



## EXPERIMENTS WITH VR

In September 2019 I began experimenting with VR. My initial experiments explored the potential of combining comic-book frames inside VR environments (scenes). My intention was that the comic's near-death-experience sequence might be fully illustrated and animated inside VR, while the rest of the story could be shown in still frames (Figure 4.2).



**FIGURE 4.2** Screenshot from the video filmed in VR (February 2020). This image demonstrates how I believed a comic-book layout might function in a VR environment (for the full video see Figure 4.3). Using this approach, I was able to immerse readers in an illustrated, animated world with environmental sound added. Frames from the comic book appeared with a navigation bar under them. This enabled the reader to move backward and forward in the story. My intention was to create a full comic that comprised sequential environments inside which specific episodes from the narrative could be read as moveable pages.

Initial experiments explored three approaches to examine potential relationships between written text and spatial environments. (Figures 4.3–4.5 show screenshots of animated scenes that I constructed in VR).



**FIGURE 4.3** First experiment in VR (February 2020). The video shows an experiment where I created a printed comic book inside the VR experience. This episode illustrates propaganda at school and uses indicative frames from my earlier MPhil comic-book spread shown in Figure 2.13.



I then created a second series of experiments (see Figure 4.4) exploring how scenes might be fully illustrated and animated in VR, with speech bubbles appearing as the scene progressed.



**FIGURE 4.4**  
Second experiment in VR (February 2020). For this experiment I stepped away from the comic book's narrative so I could explore a greater range technical and spatial potentials.



A third set of experiments returned to the comic-book narrative and explored ways that characters might be designed to function inside VR and be reusable for other scenes (Figure 4.5). This experiment revealed that, due to software constraints, the file size was limited to 2GB. The scene exceeded this limit even after optimisation. The problem I faced was that this was only one scene in the comic, and my intention had been to create the entire book in VR (over 50 scenes).



**FIGURE 4.5**  
Third experiment in VR (June 2020). The video shows the characters from the comic, and how it might work as a VR comic book.



This limitation forced me to rethink my approach. Instead of building high-resolution assets from the start, I began sketching out scenes in low resolution as a form of prototype. The idea was to later replace only the parts that would appear close to the viewer with high-resolution versions, depending on how the viewer moved through the scene (see Figure 4.6). This approach allowed me to stay

within the 2GB file-size limit while preserving an option to improve visual quality in key areas. Acknowledging that I was working at the vanguard of the technology, I was anticipating that future updates to the software might resolve these current limitations or offer new workarounds.



**FIGURE 4.6** Character development in VR (September 2020). Left: A high-resolution image. Here, a character is stylised but there is still significant detail. Right: A low-resolution image with minimal to no detail.

However, the process presented technical and logistical challenges, including motion sickness (cybersickness).<sup>54</sup> I was facing a steep learning curve with software that was still evolving (and had no formal manual). In addition, I needed to master multiple roles, including directing, screenwriting, storyboarding, character and

<sup>54</sup> Working inside the Quill VR app involves wearing a headset to draw and animate in a fully immersive 3D environment. The process requires constant movement, including scaling, rotating, and passing through digital objects. This can induce severe cybersickness, resulting from a disconnect between perceived visual motion and the body's physical stillness. As a consequence, one can often encounter dizziness, nausea, and disorientation.

background design, VR 3D modelling, animation, sound design, voiceover, optimisation, and project management. Learning these new disciplines while managing an increasingly complex project pushed the boundaries of what a solo researcher could realistically achieve. As a result, I began seeking external funding to hire professionals for areas beyond my expertise and had promising opportunities. But this was halted when Oculus (Facebook/Meta) announced they were discontinuing development for Quill VR (the primary tool I had built my work around). With this announcement, potential funding opportunities vanished. I was forced to reframe my project.

At this time, the scope of my research expanded beyond personal history when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The war challenged the very substance of my comic book, reinforcing its themes of political manipulation, personal freedom, and societal control, making them more urgent and relevant. No longer just reflections on the past, they became pressing concerns for the present and future as we faced growing threats to democracy and the risk of nuclear escalation. It became clear that I needed to extend the story to include the war. I felt compelled to examine what had happened to Russian society and how intergenerational trauma had fuelled widespread support for a dictatorship. Accordingly, I began tying into the comic's exploration of manipulation, propaganda, and other forces that shape an individual's perception of reality.

With this shift, the role of my near-death experience, while still personally significant, became less central. The VR component, once an innovative way to immerse audiences in the experience, had become a technical burden that detracted from the comic's core message.

The burden of designing sequences in VR was exacerbated when, in 2024, while developing the near-death experience for the comic inside the Quill VR app, I encountered glitches and frame-rate fluctuations. These became so severe that after only 15 minutes of use I experienced intense dizziness and I was unable to use the technology for days at a time.<sup>55</sup> Soon after, I experienced severe neck problems and vagus nerve compression, which led to dizziness, vertigo, and loss of function in my hands. This forced me to stop using VR. The symptoms improved after medical treatment, although doctors were unable to identify a clear cause. I remained concerned about returning to the VR environment due to my condition. (Even if VR was not the cause of the condition, it became evident that it was exacerbating the injury.)

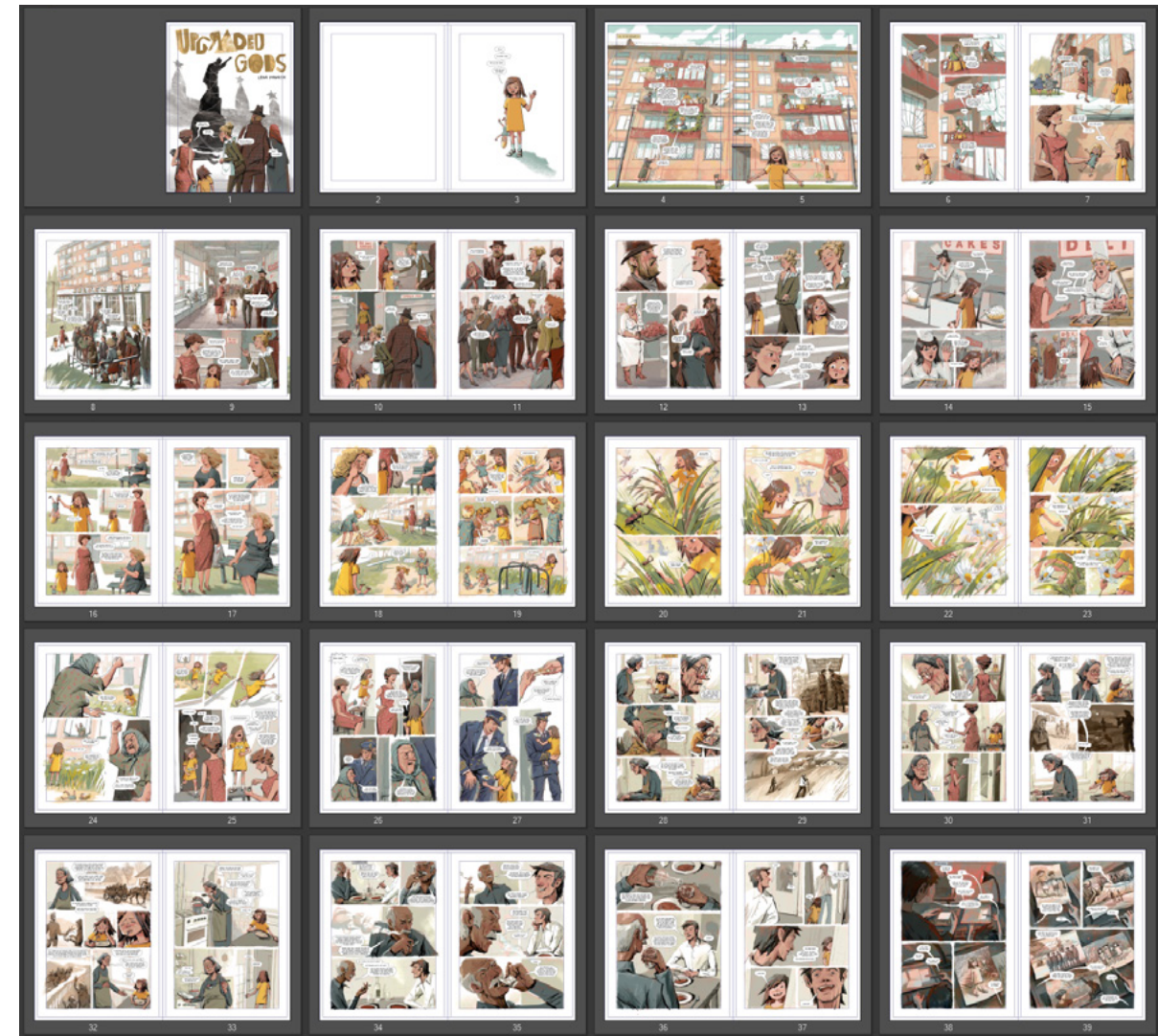
As a result, I decided to concentrate solely on creating a printed comic book (as a developed draft), postponing the development of a VR experience of the near-death episode until I had completed my PhD. This postponement would afford me time to adapt the project for compatibility across multiple VR platforms. Politically, I also want to be sure that *Upgraded Gods* can be completed and shared freely, without the potential restrictions imposed by a corporation such as Oculus (Facebook/Meta), because the VR episode currently designed in Quill VR can only be accessed through their platform.<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, I began to reconsider VR scenes for the print-based comic book and their potential for future reconfiguration into a significant VR immersive experience. The resulting version of

<sup>55</sup> Although I had previously adapted to these effects of cybersickness, the frame-rate glitches I encountered in 2024 triggered the symptoms again, but at greater intensity. With Quill VR no longer supported following Meta's (formerly Oculus/Facebook) discontinuation of development in 2021, there was no way to resolve the technical issue.

<sup>56</sup> The decision reinforces the comic book's concerns with freedom.

*Upgraded Gods* is a 319-page comic book that contains the full narrative and demonstrates both my illustrative and authorial approaches (Figure 4.7).



**FIGURE 4.7** Screenshots of the comic book's pages (2025). Final screenshot of the page thumbnails created in Clip Studio Paint. *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 1–319. (continued)



FIGURE 4.7 (continued)



FIGURE 4.7 (continued)

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods employed in the design of *Upgraded Gods* may be divided into two realms: those relating to the comic's narrative construction and those relating to the story's visual treatment. Although I discuss these methods as discrete approaches, in the study they functioned in conjunction with each other, supporting an oscillating synergistic process that enabled me to move backwards and forwards between experiments as I developed and refined the work.

## METHODS RELATING TO NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

In this realm of the inquiry I utilised the following methods:

- A flow journal
- Road mapping
- Writing dialogue
- Sketching thumbnail spreads to create overviews of the comic's story
- Researching related knowledge

### THE FLOW JOURNAL

A flow journal is a method of writing and drawing that I employed for composing initial story ideas (Figure 4.8). The aim of the journal was to collect memories and insights, and process them into narrative plot points.



FIGURE 4.8  
Flow journals (2019).

I borrow the term 'flow journal' from Csikszentmihályi (1990), who uses the term 'flow' to describe a mental, operational state of a thinker who is fully immersed in an activity being performed. The flow journals operated as vehicles for engaging in goal-driven activities that resourced the direction and structure of my work, and facilitated movements from initial ideation to refinement.

These journals were portable documents that contained ideas that flowed during a process of walking (preferably in the city). The walking kept me alert and conscious while also resourcing visual ideas and insights. When I walked, I recorded my thoughts and reflected on what I saw and thought about. I might sit and write down an idea, or sketch something I encountered or thought about.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ingold and Vergunst (2008) have written extensively about the connection between walking, thinking, and writing, arguing that 'thinking in movement' is essential to human existence.

As the project progressed, elements in the journals were reviewed and organised into a structure using a process I call 'road mapping'.

## ROAD MAPPING

Road mapping describes a method where I looked at each prospective episode and asked:

- What is happening in the episode?
- What is the episode really about?<sup>58</sup>
- Why do I need it in the story?
- Can it be shortened or combined with other episodes?
- What else can be added to make the episode more complex?

By answering these questions, I ensured that each episode met specific goals I set for the narrative, such as worldbuilding, highlighting Russian cultural distinctiveness, portraying various narcissistic traits in people, explaining political and social situations, or showing differing points of view that lead people to different personal, political, and social decisions. The method allowed me to assess the specific role that each element had to play inside the narrative. Using road mapping, episodes were combined and rearranged multiple times to create emphasis and connections. Certain events or characters were also merged to create stronger impact, better pace, or more effective dramatic arcs, and episodes that didn't work were deleted.

I used this method in story development to construct and navigate the multi-layered nature of the comic, because it enabled me to

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<sup>58</sup> McKee (1997) states that a writer needs to separate text from subtext. He highlights the importance of *showing* plot points to the audience rather than talking about them. He explains that real thoughts, conscious and unconscious, are primarily communicated through what we see. McKee suggests that if a scene concerns itself with explaining what it appears to be about, then the writer is in serious trouble.

distance myself from my recorded memories and consider selected events as plot points that formed dramatic arcs within a coherently structured narrative.

## WRITING DIALOGUE

In my Master of Philosophy thesis I had experimented with intra-diegetic dialogue and extra-diegetic commentary as a system of narration. However, in my PhD I moved away from using extra-diegetic commentary, focusing only the dialogue between characters. This shift was originally prompted by the transition of the comic into VR animation. In these environments a narrator can feel out of place, because the voice seems to come from nowhere. Accordingly, I was forced to rewrite the comic book's dialogue to ensure that the messages, originally conveyed through extra-diegetic narration, were still communicated. This caused me to step away from the all-knowing, judgmental position of the narrator and instead document how people see the world; their perspectives, beliefs, and values, and ways in which their decisions and opinions are shaped by societal conditioning, politics, culture, and family.

I began creating comic-book spreads by writing dialogue for each episode, then placing it on the page. This enabled me to assess the volume of text and determine whether the dialogue needed to be trimmed or expanded. I had determined that each episode in the comic would be contained within a single spread, to help reinforce the episodic structure of the story.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Earle (2017) notes that comics offer a unique narrative feature where each episode in the story is visually locked within its own space on the page and in the book. This allows "the specific spatial relationships between panels to correspond to (or contrast with) the temporal relationships between narrative events" (p. 123). She adds that the reader's physical act of turning pages often mimics the unfolding of events within the narrative itself.

The amount of dialogue also helped me to control the pacing of each episode. In scenes where characters were arguing, or events were unfolding quickly, the dialogue became more dense. In calmer, more peaceful moments, I used minimal dialogue to create a sense of space or respite.

I aimed to embed in the dialogue all information that the reader needed to know at a specific moment, while trying to keep the conversation casual. When the composition of a spread was established and characters were added, I sometimes subtracted dialogue because the images were communicating the information effectively on their own.

I also created two kinds of speech bubble. Speech was placed in opaque spaces and thought was communicated in semi-transparent speech bubbles (see Figure 4.9).



FIGURE 4.9 Visual distinction between speech and thought (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 116–117. (Draft)

## USING THUMBNAILS TO CREATE AN OVERVIEW OF THE WHOLE STORY

Once the narrative was developed and the approximate dialogue written, I created thumbnails for each spread to establish the story's rhythm, arcs, and pacing (Figure 4.10). I then printed all of the spreads as small cards and pinned them to a wall (Figure 4.11). This allowed me to easily rearrange them, identify what could be combined, and assess whether certain sections felt too long in relation to the overall story. By employing this method, I was able to refine decisions about what should be preserved or adjusted.

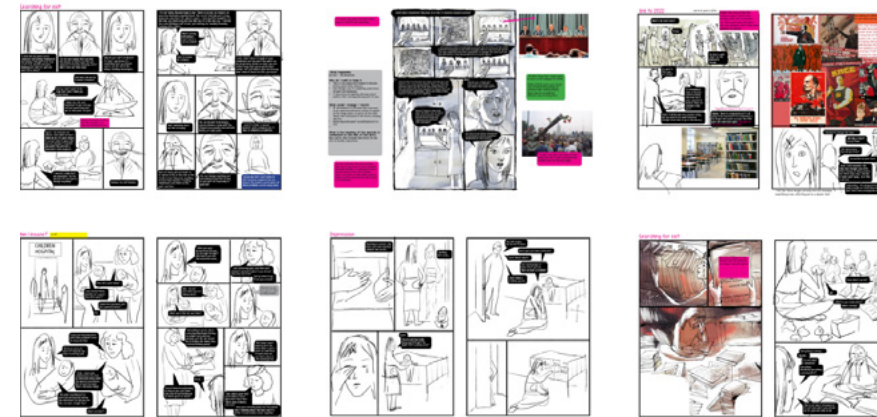


FIGURE 4.10 Thumbnail experiments showing adjustments in progress (September 2021).



**FIGURE 4.11**  
Thumbnails on the wall (September 2021).

## RESEARCH OF RELATED KNOWLEDGE

Although the thesis involved a review of knowledge (which served to contextualise my thinking), a second, concurrent and integrated review also served to refine the comic book's storyline. Research guided my writing, informing details that I had previously only understood intuitively. Such research was influential when I was writing chapters about the Russian–Ukraine war or narcissistic behaviour.

I initially produced far too much material, and it was difficult to decide what to keep. But the research helped me to identify the most important points I needed to make, and as a consequence became a method that supported narrative editing.

## METHODS RELATING TO VISUAL TREATMENT

In this realm of the inquiry I utilised two methods:

- Illustration and composition
- Character refinement

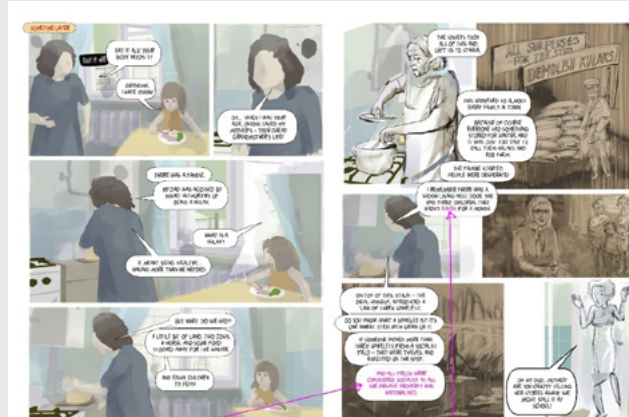
### ILLUSTRATION AND COMPOSITION

In developing *Upgraded Gods*, illustration and composition worked in tandem as co-creative devices that enabled me to establish and adjust the comic's storyline. I initially used quick sketches to illustrate ideas for each spread (Figure 4.11). These were not intended to establish composition, but rather to work out the basic elements and plot points of the story.

When the project shifted to VR, sketching of the spreads was no longer necessary. But later, when I returned to a print format, I sought to repurpose the work developed in VR so I could reduce the amount of new illustration required. My goal was to avoid hand-drawn frames and streamline the production process. However, after designing a number of pages, I was dissatisfied with the results. The figures felt stiff, the compositions lacked dynamism, and the characters showed little emotion. Despite its efficiency, I eventually abandoned this method in favour of a more dynamic, illustrative approach. (Figure 4.12 indicates illustrative experiments that accompanied changes in spread development).



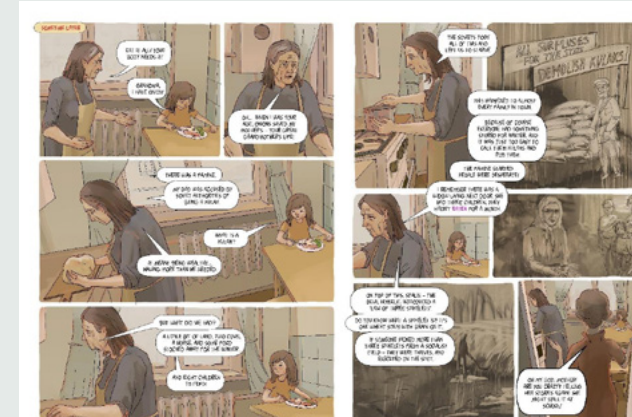
**STAGE 1**  
Illustrations imported from my MPhil project, used to consider potential layouts (September 2021).



**STAGE 2**  
Illustrations that I didn't like or wanted to make more interesting are replaced with screenshots from VR scenes (August 2023).



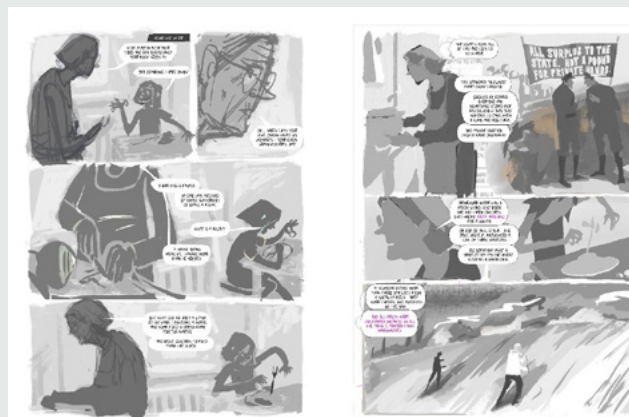
**STAGE 3**  
Experiments with VR scenes. To enhance the visual quality, I imported the 3D scenes into Unity engine, where I could add shading and shadows (features not available in Quill, which requires all shadows to be painted manually) (August 2023).



**STAGE 4**  
The addition of line art and 'paint-over' devices to refine the shapes and forms, while still keeping the original 3D images as a base. I hoped that this approach would speed up the production of the comic book. Although this was efficient, I was dissatisfied with the result. This led me to revise the illustrative style, by experimenting with more manual drawing approaches (August 2023).



**STAGE 5**  
New composition studies that focus on the dynamics of shapes and values across the page. In these experiments I limited myself to four values. This is because reducing the value range enabled me to concentrate on the overall composition, balancing shapes, values, dynamics, and rhythm on the whole page without the distraction of colour or subtle tonal shifts (September 2024).



**STAGE 6**  
The development of expressive silhouettes that might convey a character's emotions while clearly telling the story. This stage was closely connected to character development (Figures 4.14–4.18). I used a character-development sheet to ensure consistency throughout the comic (September 2024).



**STAGE 7**  
The addition of line art that ensured that values were clear and did not compromise the silhouettes (September 2024).



**STAGE 8**  
In the final stage I added colour, using a limited palette that harmonised with the monochromatic scheme that was used to demarcate shifts in time (September 2024).

**FIGURE 4.12**  
Developments in illustrative technique across a sample of the comic's narrative (2021–24). The eight stages illustrate development over a three-year period. *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 28–29.

In the development of the composition (especially in early stages), shape and line carried most of the expressive work, without the interference of colour. Colour was used either to elicit an emotional response or support the expressive work already evident. The colour palette was unified and gradually evolved in response to narrative developments. This provided visual continuity across the comic. Character colouring was kept within a limited spectrum, which supported the stylisation and reinforced its integration within the story's world.

In these experiments I paid close attention to space and composition. When I began composition studies (Figure 4.12, Stage 5), I concentrated on the creation of interesting shapes, rhythms, and dynamics within the page. My goal was to create a flow that supported the story, directing the reader's eye or emphasising particular moments. I also wanted to avoid the convention of multiple square frames mechanising the layout. After experimenting with multiple approaches, I began to carve out white space between the illustrations. I also increased the use of passive space in an attempt to guide the reader's eye towards significant narrative beats, or highlight certain elements. White space also contributed to the overall composition by linking elements across the spread, creating a visual flow between panels and across pages (see Figure 4.12, Stage 8; Figure 4.13, Stage 2).

The same approach was applied to the comic book pages 1–53 and will later be used for the remaining pages (54–319), which are currently at the storyboard stage. Figure 4.13 indicates the extent to which the final illustrations (Stage 2) diverged from the storyboards (Stage 1).



**STAGE 1**  
Storyboard for the proof of concept that uses screenshots from VR scenes (August 2023).



**STAGE 2**  
Final illustration (September 2024).

**FIGURE 4.13**  
Comparison between a storyboarded sequence developed using VR, and the final illustration (2023–24). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 52–53.

## CHARACTER REFINEMENT

Parallel with page development, character designs in the comic underwent multiple refinements. While I discuss illustration and refinement separately, they largely occurred in tandem.

I found it important to develop characters alongside page layouts, because the two influenced one another and shaped both the narrative and how I envisioned the story. To achieve a specific emotional feel, I worked with photographic or video references, sketching characters from different angles and in various situations. These illustrations were intentionally raw and imperfect, with skewed or twisted proportions, because I was pursuing a stylised, slightly exaggerated look.<sup>60</sup>

As McCloud (1993) observes, the more stylised a character is, the more relatable they become, allowing readers to project themselves onto the figure rather than seeing someone distant or unfamiliar. Stylisation also creates space for interpretation. However, I tried to maintain a balance between stylisation and achieving emotive expression, so I could preserve a sense of individuality in the characters. This approach enabled me to convey emotion even in silent moments, because the way characters are drawn can reveal aspects of their personality or reaction, independent of dialogue.

I eventually settled on a character style that was relatively angular. Partially, I chose this simplified aesthetic to ensure that, with additional investment, the approach could be recreated within a VR environment (matching the characters that I intend to create for

<sup>60</sup> I consciously avoided realism in my drawings. This was a decision that didn't come naturally, after more than a decade of Russian academic art training that placed emphasis on anatomical study.

the final version of the near-death experience episode in VR). The illustrative approach balances being technically manageable with a level of tension that is expressed through the sharpened use of angles.

The final refinement is distinguished by brushstrokes that appear expressive and sketch-like. Even though the illustrations appear freely rendered, this effect necessitated recreating brushstrokes multiple times to achieve the necessary texture and effect.<sup>61</sup>



**FIGURE 4.14**

A comparison between early and later treatments of the protagonist's childhood character (2017–2024). Left: Illustrations from my MPhil (2017). Centre: Early iterations of the style and the character (2019–21). Right: The final character treatment (2024).

Initially, characters and environments were developed using linework (Figure 4.15). This approach progressed through experiments that established a recognisable silhouette, with details added only after the overall shape was determined (Figures 4.16–4.18). Characters were

<sup>61</sup> In creating this treatment, I was aiming for line work that was closer to the energy and freshness found in Asian calligraphy.

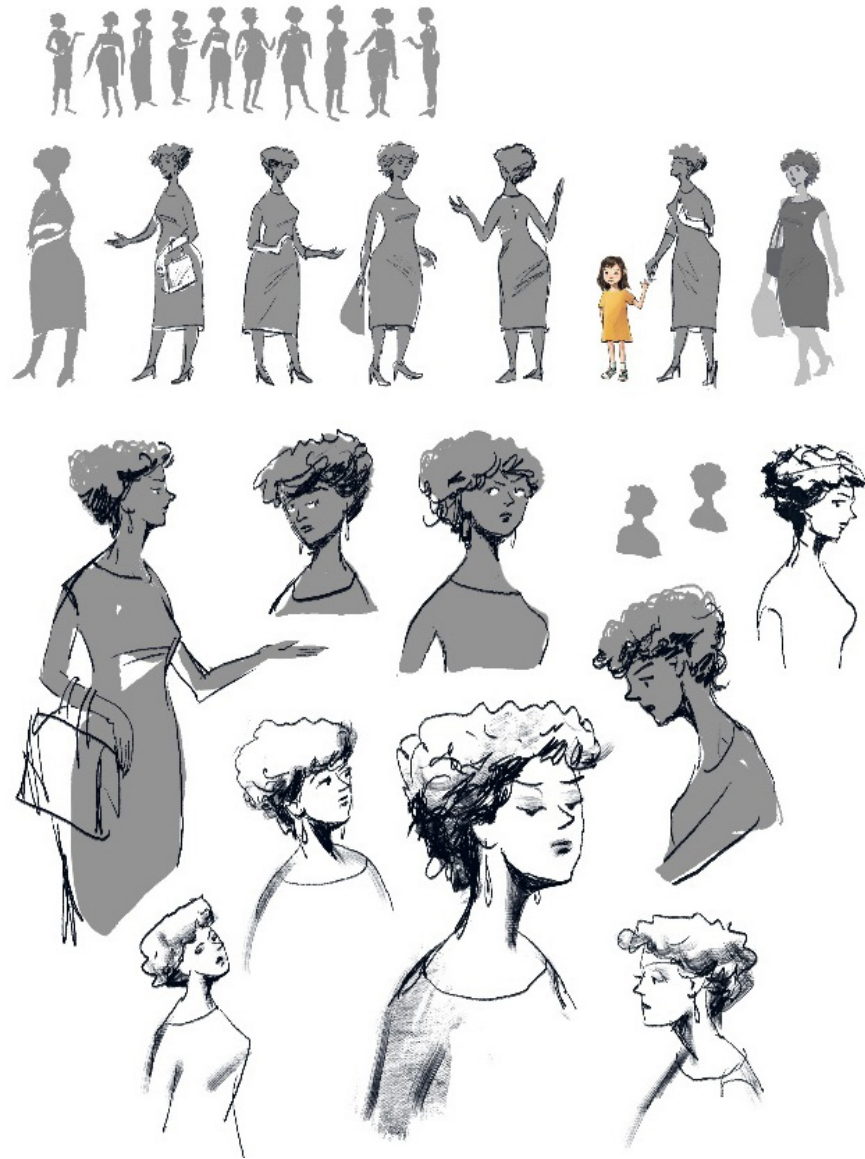
designed with distinct features to ensure they remained instantly recognisable over time. For example, Lena's hair clip serves as a visual marker that remains even in her adult character.



**FIGURE 4.15**  
Development of the store manager's character. A comparison between early sketches of the character and the final design (2019–23).



**FIGURE 4.16**  
Character development of the grandmother (2023). Character design developed from shape and silhouette.



**FIGURE 4.17**  
 Character development of the mother (2023). I used these studies as character sheets to ensure a consistent look throughout the comic.



**FIGURE 4.18**  
 Character studies exploring dynamism in character refinement (2024).

## CRITIQUE OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this project presented both advantages and challenges. One of its strengths was its validation of personal experience, because its autoethnographic orientation enabled me to connect life occurrences to more expansive understandings of both culture (Adams, Ellis et al., 2017; Chang, 2016) and the agency of narcissistic oppression (Durvasula, 2024; Goldner-Vukov & Moore, 2010; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Lopes et al., 2021; MacDonald, 2014; Miller, Lynam et al., 2017; Michell, 1989; Pincus et al., 2013; Winnicott, 1965/1994).

The methodology also enabled a flexible approach to the project. This meant that the study was able to navigate instances of significant change because the heuristic approach, instead of being preset and templated, was responsive to disruption and opportunity (Kleining & Witt, 2000; Ings & Tudor, 2024).

However, the research design also presented significant challenges. First, an autoethnographic study such as this carried considerable emotional cost, because I was recounting personal trauma and placing it in the public domain. Ellis (2004) notes that writing autoethnography is “extremely difficult,” specifying that

honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts — and emotional pain. Just when you think you can’t stand the pain anymore — that’s when the real work begins. Then there’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you’ve written or having any control over how readers interpret your story. It’s hard not to feel that critics are judging your life as well as your work. The critique can be humiliating. (p. xviii)

Thus, an autoethnographic methodology necessitated not only reliving painful memories but also accepting the vulnerability and accountability that come with public exposure.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) note that “the researcher is always speaking partially naked and is genuinely open to legitimate criticism from participants and from the audience” (p. 423). Their observation is especially true of autoethnographic inquiries. Scherr (2013) argues that such work “powerfully blends the personal and political, and related to this, it questions the boundaries of private and public pain” (p. 134). When the self is the protagonist in a comic that positions itself as a story and a political critique, demarcations between public and private pain can pose deep challenges to investment, connection, and self-care. In *Upgraded Gods* I am Lena but I am also distanced from her. I remind myself that no matter how closely I stay true to my life experiences, compressing ten years into a few comic spreads inevitably distorts them. As a consequence, I view episodes in the comic as retrospective metaphorical accounts. I recall the incidents, but I also know that I have authored them. They are reconstructions.

Despite this awareness, I experienced periods of emotional exhaustion and resistance throughout the project, feeling that progress was painfully slow because of the heavy emotional weight attached to it. At times, it felt impossible to move through. I addressed this difficulty by carefully pacing the work, balancing the most emotionally intense episodes with less-intimate creative tasks. Conducting contextual research was also helpful, because it allowed me to deeply (yet objectively) investigate material that enabled me to better understand both the story world and myself. Creating this distance and allowing time for reflection and healing helped me to transform lived experience and trauma into a tangible artefact that

could exist outside of myself. In addition to pursuing contextual researching, I also leaned into my creative drawing practice.<sup>62</sup>

However, in pursuing an autoethnographic inquiry, I also experienced what Chang (2016) describes as the effect of “self-transformation [that] may bring about healings from the emotional scars of the past” (p. 53). She suggests that by sharing painful experiences with others, creators may find liberation and relief from the burdens of isolation, loneliness, and shame, and approach levels of self-empowerment.<sup>63</sup>

Another challenge I encountered related to ethics. Autobiographical accounts, when constructed as narratives, raise challenges for a researcher because she knows that she is presenting characters who represent real people who have had no input into how they are depicted (Ellis, 2007). Couser (2012) notes that in autobiographical works, we know that the characters are “authorial creations” but the reader also understands that they are representations of real people who are “vulnerable to harm” (p. 13). In addressing this issue, I chose to depict characters in non-representational ways and, with the exception of my immediate family, characters are not based on real individuals. Instead, they are a combination of different people from my life, who were stripped of details that could narratively identify them as specific individuals. I followed Ellis’s approach to ‘relational ethics’, where the autobiographical researcher engages in an ongoing process of critical evaluation in which she must “recognize and value mutual respect, dignity and the connectedness between researchers and the communities in which they live” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4).

In cases where I could not provide anonymity (my immediate family), I made conscious decisions to omit certain aspects of the individual’s life narratives and I continually asked myself whether the portrayals felt ‘fair’ and ‘true’ representations of my experience (Ings, 2013). With my partner and my daughter, I showed them iterations of the comic and I explained that they could change or remove anything about which they felt uncomfortable.

To ensure a ‘fair’ portrayal not only of individuals but of the communities they were part of, I also consciously avoided one-sided representations. This is why, in the work, one frequently encounters instances of groups of people presenting different opinions or engaging in arguments.

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<sup>62</sup> Concentrating on developing new skills of drawing and animating in VR enabled me to take my mind off the emotionally difficult material.

<sup>63</sup> This said, despite the healing, I have continued to feel anxiety, fear, and shame, and I expect that these feelings may remain for a while. But I have accepted them as part of the process, and I remain vigilant about tendencies towards self-sabotaging.

CHAPTER 5

# CRITICAL COMMENTARY



## OVERVIEW

This chapter offers a critical commentary on the comic book *Upgraded Gods*. The analysis is structured as an accumulation of thinking that relates the comic's narrative. Initially, I unpack incidents and discourses surrounding the nature of conformity as a social agent. I then consider the concepts of childhood trauma and narcissistic relationships, including the necessity of meeting parental needs, emotional abuse and neglect, and roles adopted in response to narcissistic parenting. This section closes with a discussion of Winnicott's (1965/1994) concept of the True and False Self. These ideas are related back to character depictions or incidents in the story.

The chapter then considers the impact of narcissism on adult relationships. Here episodes and characters are discussed in relation to difficulties with emotional connection, vulnerable self-esteem, narcissistic fantasies and rage, and disjunctions that can occur between delusion and reality.

The commentary then expands into a discussion of collective narcissism and collective trauma. This is followed by an unpacking of narrative instances associated with ideology and propaganda, and an analysis of how tools of authoritarian control (such as fear and reward) operate in society.

## CONFORMITY

*Upgraded Gods* uses personal narrative and research to relate the story of a child, and later a woman, who feels she does not belong in the world into which she was born. In the narrative, she experiences a journey of self-discovery. Trying to make sense of her surroundings, she begins to recognise recurring patterns of power and control that shape not only individual lives but also broader society.

The book opens with a spread that welcomes readers into the world of Lena, a girl growing up in the USSR in the 1980s (Figure 5.1). At first glance, the Khrushchevka (apartment block) is filled with chatting neighbours and resembles a large, cheerful family (an image that is still portrayed by contemporary Russian propaganda). But another dynamic soon emerges, showing people constantly watching each



FIGURE 5.1  
A Soviet apartment block (Khrushchevka) as a critique of ideal communal life (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 4–5. (Final illustration)

other and feeling entitled to dictate how others should live (Figure 5.2). What isn't immediately obvious is that this behaviour goes beyond critical comments; what is said can pose a significant threat to individuals and entire families (Figure 5.3).



**FIGURE 5.2**  
An example of social surveillance and control, where neighbours monitor one another and feel entitled to police each other's behaviour (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 6. (Final illustration)

Lopes et al. (2021) observe that "culture plays an important role in determining how an individual functions in a particular society by introducing values, norms and rules that guide cognition, affect and behavior" (p. 318). Indoctrination, they argue, can begin within the family and continue through education and employment, with certain values being continually reinforced throughout an individual's life.



**FIGURE 5.3**  
An example of how fear (rooted in social surveillance and control) leads to self-censorship (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 30. (Final illustration)

*Upgraded Gods* illustrates how social values are introduced early in life. These include the determining of a woman's role (Figures 5.4, 5.5), or what counts as an appropriate career choice (Figure 5.6).



**FIGURE 5.4**  
An example of how a woman's role is culturally shaped and reinforced (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 16. (Final illustration)



**FIGURE 5.5**  
An example of how cultural expectations around motherhood and female endurance are imposed alongside emotional dismissal (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 25. (Final illustration)



**FIGURE 5.6**  
An example of how cultural norms influence what is considered to be a desirable career choice (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 13. (Final illustration)

Chen et al. (2023) suggest that from infancy through adulthood, “we often align our behaviors, attitudes, and opinions with a majority, a phenomenon known as social conformity” (p. 328). Chakraborty (2023) defines social conformity as the inclination to match one’s behaviour and views to those of others in the pursuit of group acceptance. Thus, parents, teachers, and peers shape children’s “compliance with and conformity to the norms of their social groups” (Chakraborty, 2023, p. 17). This may involve subtle or overt pressure to follow social norms, expectations, and values, which may

extend to controlling how an individual should dress, speak, and even think. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) and Chen et al. (2023) argue that social compliance and conformity are driven by the need to seek accurate information, affiliation,<sup>64</sup> and maintenance of a positive self-concept.<sup>65</sup>

Kim et al. (2021) note that most people belong to groups with some social hierarchy, and in order to function successfully within them, individuals conform to group norms “as a means of benefiting their social and physical welfare within the group, because social hierarchy profoundly affects the welfare” of individuals (p. 1). They argue that this is especially visible when it comes to aligning with higher-status or authority figures. Kim et al. (2021) argue that this can be pronounced in individuals with a stronger social-dominance orientation or greater fears of negative evaluation.

<sup>64</sup> The authors describe affiliation as a fundamental human drive to form meaningful social connections. These may include seeking approval, following social norms, engaging in reciprocal exchanges to strengthen relationships, avoiding rejection or punishment, and attempting to achieve affiliation-oriented goals or rewards.

<sup>65</sup> Chen et al. (2023) suggest that our need to maintain a positive self-concept may include presenting a positive self-image, avoiding the negative consequences, “ingroup favoritism and/or outgroup derogation, and elaborated mentalizing processes to the ingroup, supported by brain systems of reward, punishment, and mentalizing” (p. 328). Additionally, Cai et al. (2024) suggest that the pursuit of a positive self-image may be shaped by confirmation bias (the most dominant and pervasive of all cognitive biases), which overweights “evidence that supports one’s prior belief and underweights evidence that does not” (p. 334).

## OCCURRENCES IN *UPGRADED GODS*

Such dynamics play out in numerous episodes throughout the comic. First, we encounter it in the shop, where we see people switch their alliance as the power dynamic shifts (Figures 5.7, 5.8). This comes naturally for some individuals, and we see them quickly denying their own statements and gaslighting others.



**FIGURE 5.7**  
An argument preceding a change in power dynamics (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 11. (Final illustration)

In the later scene about art school exams, I illustrate how, in the USSR, affiliation with higher-status or authority figures shaped people's lives and futures, and bribery and nepotism functioned as powerful, life-altering forms of connection (Figure 5.9).



**FIGURE 5.8**  
A shift in power dynamics, where individuals switch sides in response to changing circumstances and social pressure (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 12. (Final illustration)



**FIGURE 5.9**  
An illustration of the agency of bribery and nepotism when Lena applies for art school (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 73. (Draft)

In Figure 5.10 we see threat and control playing out in an episode where children are assigned to paint a fence as part of their summer labour requirements. When they complain, they are told that they will be sent to paint dirty toilets if they don't work fast enough.



**FIGURE 5.10**  
An example of threat used to enforce obedience (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 80. (Draft)

In the Soviet Union, survival often meant learning to navigate bureaucracy, bribery, petty theft, and informal exchanges through personal connections. These behaviours, although technically illegal, became the logic of everyday life. People learned to take them for granted, because that's simply how the system 'worked'. In *Upgraded Gods* I show how other cultures may follow very different rules based on a different logic (Figure 5.11), but the underlying drive toward conformity often remains the same. We accept these rules without question, and it can be genuinely surprising when someone from another culture doesn't understand what seems obvious to us.

Chakraborty (2023) notes that people tend to conform to a leader or authority figure's directives, especially in uncertain situations. This,

she suggests, can lead to suppressed self-expression and creativity, and "'groupthink,' a phenomenon wherein group members prioritize conformity over independent decision-making and critical thinking" (p. 19). This dynamic is reflected in the comic, where, during the revolution of August 1991, I include accounts of individuals complying with authority without questioning it (Figure 5.12).



**FIGURE 5.11**  
An example of how culturally specific (unspoken) rules shape people's behaviour (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 213. (Draft)



**FIGURE 5.12**  
An example of groupthink, where individuals comply with authority without question (2025). Here, conformity is prioritised over independent critique. *Upgraded Gods*, p. 82. (Draft)

Capuano and Chekroun (2024) describe conformity as the tendency of individuals to change their behaviour, beliefs, or views to match those of the majority, even when their own views differ. Franzen and Mader (2023) associate the phenomenon with the work of Solomon Asch in the 1950s, whose experiment<sup>66</sup> became foundational in social psychology. Franzen and Mader (2023) note that Asch’s experiments raised concerns that “social influence is also present in other and more important social realms, for instance when it comes to political opinions” (p. 1). To check whether these findings were still relevant in 2021, Franzen and Mader repeated Asch’s experiment with American students and found that their results closely matched the original findings. Significantly, they added political statements to the range of questions, observing that the conformity rate was as high as 38%.

This phenomenon is illustrated in the comic in the conversation about protests in Russia, where, despite the evidence, Lena’s friends do not take facts into consideration, denying the possibility that anyone ‘in their right mind’ would protest against Putin’s government (Figure 5.13).



**FIGURE 5.13**  
An instance of social pressure overriding critical thinking (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 182–183. (Draft)

Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) propose that conformity involves adjusting one’s behaviour to align with others, often driven by the desire to protect or enhance self-image. They state that individuals often “maintain positive self-assessments by identifying with and conforming to valued groups” (p. 611). They also note that conformist behaviour is often present in environments that demand loyalty and submission, where “individuals are frequently rewarded for behaving in accordance with the opinions, advice, and directives of authority figures” (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 595). Such dynamics point to ways in which power may operate within society.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> In his studies, participants were asked to complete a simple task of matching the length of lines, and the correct answer was obvious. However, they would give their reply only after hearing six confederates who intentionally gave a wrong answer. Despite it obviously being incorrect, approximately 35% of participants conformed to the group’s wrong response. Asch tested different conditions and found that when no confederates were present, fewer than 1% of participants gave an incorrect answer. He also found that unanimity in the confederates’ assertion was possibly the most powerful factor in generating conformity, because when “only one confederate offered an alternative answer, the subjects were much more likely to provide an independent (and correct) response” (Benson et al., 2012, p. 227). His experiments suggested that a minority group can significantly influence individuals’ understandings of evident phenomena.

<sup>67</sup> This noted, Capuano and Chekroun (2024) suggest that although conformity has been widely studied, there is still insufficient understanding of the factors that drive the behaviour.

## CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND NARCISSISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

I was born into a world that was governed by rules that permeated social interaction. These rules were invisible but ubiquitous. However, there was no textbook and no official guidebook to follow. I grew up inside a system built on hierarchy and coercion, where survival often meant adapting without knowing to what I was adapting. Conformity was rewarded and questioning was not. Unsurprisingly, the structures that sustained dominance were rarely challenged and remained largely intact. As I grew up, I began to recognise that those who hold power often feel justified in shaping the lives of others, (whether in personal relationships or on a geopolitical scale).

Individuals in a position to exercise social dominance are sometimes called narcissists, abusers, or dictators, and they have the power to make a subordinate's life traumatic. In *Upgraded Gods* I suggest that narcissism and trauma are intertwined, and I use Lena's narrative to illustrate this relationship with recollections drawn from my lived experience.<sup>68</sup>

### DEFINING NARCISSISM

MacDonald (2014) notes that the term 'narcissist' originates from the Greek myth of a beautiful young man, Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. Vaknin (2022) notes that, paradoxically, while it is often assumed that narcissists are in love with themselves, they are

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<sup>68</sup> Although at times, incidents and things that characters say in the story may seem extreme, the dialogue is written (and where necessary, translated) to reflect as closely as possible my recollection.

actually in love with their 'reflection' (in other words, with how they are perceived).

Krizan and Herlache (2018) note that in psychoanalysis, narcissism is considered one of the discipline's most important contributions. However, despite extensive research in the area, they note that attempts to understand narcissism have only increased the complexity of the term, which may cover "everything from a self-oriented motivational state, a normal phase of psychological development, a configuration of personality traits, to a personality disorder" (p. 3). West (2007) argues that narcissism is not an autonomous phenomenon, but may "underlie all other psychopathologies" (p. xiii).

Contemporary psychotherapy recognises two primary forms of narcissism: grandiose and vulnerable. Although these types share many underlying traits, they often appear as strikingly different personalities. The grandiose type<sup>69</sup> is often described as ambitious, arrogant, exhibitionistic, conceited, overconfident, and manifesting domineering attitudes and behaviours (Miller, Lynam et al. 2017; Horton, 2011; Levy et al., 2011; Michell, 1989; Yang et al., 2018). (We see this epitomised in Figure 5.14.) However, the vulnerable form is characterised by low self-esteem, defensiveness, resentment, insecurity, anxiety, hostility, helplessness, and covert shame (Miller, Lynam et al., 2017; Miller, McCain et al., 2014; Pincus et al., 2014; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Pincus, 2013). (We see this illustrated in Figure 5.15.) Both types of narcissism are characterised by a pervasive pattern of inflated self-importance, entitlement, belief in one's uniqueness, a need for admiration and validation, fragile self-esteem, hypervigilance to criticism, devaluation of others, a lack of

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<sup>69</sup> Initially, only grandiose narcissism was recognised and described in psychoanalysis. Vulnerable narcissism was recognised much later.

empathy, anger, aggression, paranoid ideation, and rage (Levy et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2014). When taken to the degree of pathological narcissism, narcissistic individuals can also be manipulative, exploitative, malignant, and psychopathic (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Lopes et al., 2021; Miller, Lynam et al., 2017; Pincus et al., 2014).



**FIGURE 5.14**  
An example of grandiose narcissism (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 252. (Draft)



**FIGURE 5.15**  
An example of vulnerable narcissism (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 63. (Draft)

## HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY NARCISSISM

Narcissism can be difficult to identify, because behaviours like those illustrated in Figures 5.14 and 5.15 can also be exhibited by people without a narcissistic personality. This is because, as Durvasula (2024) explains, narcissism exists on a spectrum and is marked not only by individual traits, but also by their consistency and function. What distinguishes a narcissistic individual is the persistent use of

these traits to protect a fragile and insecure self. In such instances, narcissism can be manifested in behaviours such as manipulation, gaslighting, and emotional domination.<sup>70</sup> Durvasula notes that “the traits aren’t really the issue, but rather how these traits translate into consistently harmful behaviors” (2024, p. 5). She suggests that such behaviours can be enacted without empathy or self-awareness, so the narcissist is able to maintain control over their self-image. Pincus (2013) believes that “the fundamental dysfunction associated with pathological narcissism is related to intense needs for validation and admiration” (p. 95). These cause the individual to constantly seek self-enhancing experiences. Like Durvasula, he observes that, while these needs are part of normal personality development, they are pathological when they become extreme or poorly regulated. Thus, the American Psychiatric Association describes narcissistic personality disorder as “a pathological state which involves seriously disproportionate preoccupation with personal competence, power and superiority” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 145).

MacDonald (2014) argues that we all need some amount of healthy narcissism for normal functioning, and healthy narcissism can resource “a steady sense of one’s worth, based on genuine achievement, the capacity to recover from disappointment or failure and the ability to find comfort and support in relationships” (pp. 144–145). He notes that “we are all on a continuum between healthy and unhealthy narcissism with a range of narcissistic responses from the mild and transient — to the fixed personality disorder” (MacDonald, 2014, pp. 144–145). This is the reason that the issue of narcissism expands beyond those who have been diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder.

<sup>70</sup> Irwin (1995) also asserts that “narcissistic traits are evident in varying degrees across the whole population,” but it is only when they begin to cause serious disruption in a person’s life that they meet the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder diagnosis (p. 659).

## THE NARCISSISTIC PARENT

*Upgraded Gods* explores the dynamics of human relationships and parenting as a way of understanding how individual psychological patterns can echo across society. By examining the impact of narcissistic parenting (which often creates a vicious cycle), the comic offers insight into the mechanisms that sustain power, control, and conformity within social structures. Accordingly, it is useful to discuss patterns of control on the individual level, starting in early childhood, before examining how these patterns are reflected in larger groups.

## MEETING NEEDS

The theme of unmet narcissistic needs is woven through *Upgraded Gods*, particularly in Lena's early interactions with her mother. Here attempts to seek validation or emotional connection are met with indifference, criticism, conditional approval, or anger. MacDonald (2014) states that for healthy development to occur and our primary narcissistic needs in early childhood to be met, "we need the right sort of mother or primary carer" (p. 145).

To understand the roots of narcissism, it's useful to consider the concept of *primary narcissism* in infants that was initially introduced by Freud (1914/2018). Freud argues that it is natural for a child to feel self-centred, particularly when surrounded by a loving family where the child is "the centre and core of creation — 'His Majesty the Baby'" (p. 21). McFarren (1998) explains that all humans are born with this innate self-focus, initially unaware of others and driven primarily by the need to have their basic needs met. He argues that human beings are "neurologically 'wired'" from birth "by their need for contact with other people and by their need for relationships" (McFarren, 1998, p. 246). When this need for relational contact is

unmet by a parent, he suggests that developmental imbalances and pathologies can develop, including narcissistic personality disorder.<sup>71</sup> He states that when narcissistic needs of a child are unmet, the child cannot develop a healthy self-esteem and gradually grow out of self-centeredness. Narcissists, he explains, "somehow become stuck in the normal developmental cycle" (McFarren, 1998, p. 247).

Alice Miller (1997) states that a child's primary needs include not only the provision of food and shelter, but also "to be regarded and respected as the person," from the very beginning of their life (p. 6).<sup>72</sup> She claims that, for a child, being loved and accepted by a parent is not merely a need, but it is integral to survival. Vater et al. (2013) identify primary narcissistic needs such as validation, affirmation, and "empathic interactions with significant others during childhood" (p. 38). In a similar manner, Michell (1989) observes that a healthy relationship with a caregiver is one that offers the child sufficient empathetic understanding, which is essential for establishing a sense of self and positive self-esteem. Michell (1989) observes that narcissistic children are often unable to develop healthy self-love because they are not appreciated for who they are, but rather viewed as extensions of their parents.

Green et al. (2021) and Levy et al. (2011) note that a narcissistic personality disorder can develop from diverse parenting styles, including parental abuse or neglect, authoritarian or overly indulgent parenting, emotional coldness, rejection, devaluation, and invalidation. They suggest that these factors can be exacerbated in environments where caregiving is inconsistent or self-serving.

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<sup>71</sup> Such deprivation is not limited to the development of destructive narcissistic tendencies. This issue is discussed in the sub-sections 'Responses to narcissistic parenting' and 'The True and False Self'.

<sup>72</sup> This can include an acceptance of the child's emotions, sensations, and self-expression.

## OCCURRENCES IN *UPGRADED GODS*

A narcissistic parenting dynamic permeates *Upgraded Gods*, but it is most explicitly illustrated in the relationship between Lena and her mother (Figures 5.16, 5.18, 5.19). We also see historical evidence of the condition illustrated in Lena’s mother and grandmother’s relationship (Figure 5.17).

As a child, I remember my grandmother’s frequent remarks about my mother. In these she often defended me, but in ways that were triggering to my mother. When challenged, my grandmother would deny any criticism, saying things like, “What did I say?” (refusing to acknowledge the impact of her words) (Figure 5.17). Although I cannot know for certain how my mother’s upbringing influenced her, or whether my grandmother’s critical comments contributed to my mother’s narcissistic traits,<sup>73</sup> as a young adult I became acutely aware that my grandmother’s criticisms hurt my mother deeply.<sup>74</sup>

Lopes et al. (2021) suggest that vulnerable narcissism comes from “inadequate and insensitive parenting,” which can be described as a “cold, indifferent, rejecting or harsh” approach that fails to meet the narcissistic needs of a child (p. 317). In contrast, they suggest that grandiose narcissism may originate from overindulgent parenting that “contributes to the formation of self-schemata in children which reflects their internalization of their parents’ views of them being ‘special’” (2021, p. 317). This occurs while the child simultaneously experiences not being seen for who they truly are. Horton (2011) argues that such parenting treats the child “as an object meant



FIGURE 5.16  
An example of diminishing, verbally abusive parenting (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 56. (Draft)



FIGURE 5.17  
An example of intergenerational narcissistic wounding (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 62. (Draft)

73 My maternal grandfather died before I was born, so I don’t know his influence.

74 I cannot recall a single occasion when my grandmother openly praised my mother or acknowledged her achievements (even though she did this covertly, when my mother could not hear).

to satisfy the emotional needs of the parent, rather than as a child to be nurtured" (p. 182). MacDonald (2014) explains that, in such cases, the child can become a mirror of the primary caregiver, reflecting the caregiver's own grandiose narcissistic self to the world. He suggests that children raised in either of these conditions may withdraw and construct a grandiose narcissistic identity as a form of self-defence.

## CHILDHOOD TRAUMA RESULTING FROM EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND/OR NEGLECT

In *Upgraded Gods* we encounter a relationship between narcissistic parenting and childhood trauma. Childhood trauma can arise from a range of experiences, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect; witnessing or experiencing domestic violence; the loss of a parent; the horrors of war; catastrophic injury or illness; rape or assault; household dysfunction such as alcoholism, drug abuse, or mental illness in a family member (Levine, 2008; Maté & Maté, 2022). However, since this discussion focuses specifically on narcissism, the commentary's focus is on childhood trauma that results from emotional abuse and neglect.

Afek (2019) suggests that narcissism originates from early-childhood trauma, particularly emotional abandonment by a primary caregiver. Gallagher et al. (2023) observe that trauma and abuse (specifically emotional or psychological abuse) during childhood can hinder a child's ability to regulate their emotions and establish a sense of self and others. They argue that experiencing persistent and repeated traumas in childhood can be particularly harmful, because they impact on a period of ongoing development.

In biomedicine, trauma is recognised as an intense emotional response to traumatic external events (Donovan & Ustundag, 2017). However, such symptoms, Donovan and Ustundag (2017) note, can frequently be dismissed when visible bodily injuries are absent. Van der Kolk (2014) and Dye (2020) observe that in children, emotional or psychological maltreatment (abuse and neglect) can be more damaging than other traumatic events, including child physical and sexual abuse.<sup>75</sup>

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children defines psychological maltreatment as "a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another's needs" (Myers et al., 2002, p. 94). Myers et al. note that emotional neglect is also dangerous, because it is difficult to detect or prove. This is because it often "goes on quietly in the privacy of the home, often beginning when children are too young to speak out or even know that they are not receiving appropriate care, [unless abuse leads to] nonorganic failure to thrive [resulting in] physical illness or anomalies" (Myers et al., 2002, p. 19).

In her discussion of emotional abuse, Dye (2020) describes the use of "verbal aggression that affects the welfare or morale of the child, or any conduct that humiliates, embarrasses, or threatens the child" (p. 400). She observes that emotional neglect occurs when a child's emotional and psychological needs, such as love, support, and motivation, are not met by their caregivers.

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<sup>75</sup> Doyle (1997) notes that terms like 'emotional abuse' are also defined in literature as 'psychological abuse', 'emotional maltreatment', 'the psychologically battered child', 'psychological maltreatment', and 'mental cruelty'.

## OCCURRENCES IN *UPGRADED GODS*

Such abuse permeates *Upgraded Gods* and is illustrated in Figures 5.16, 5.18, 5.19, and 5.24. In the comic, I use the door as a visual device to represent the separation between the outside world and what takes place behind 'closed doors' (in the 'darkness' of privacy). In addition to being warned not to speak about 'what is private' to others, as a child I also assumed that such silence was normal and other children experienced the same treatment that I did at home. Thus, I never considered discussing my relationship with my mother with anyone. Later, I wondered whether people would believe me, because my mother was seen as an extremely kind person (something she took pride in, often noting that her patients at the hospital called her an angel).

Gallagher et al. (2023) note that emotional abuse and neglect are the most commonly reported forms of trauma in both childhood and adulthood. They suggest that such a "violation of emotional/relational assumptions may be more injurious than what happens to the physical body" (Gallagher et al., 2023, p. 6). They observe that survivors tend to "internalize the meaning behind their perpetrator's abuse," which often leads to self-blame (p. 6). We see this mechanism illustrated in Figures 5.19 and 5.25, where Lena has internalised negative messages to the extent that she continually questions her adequacy and worthiness.

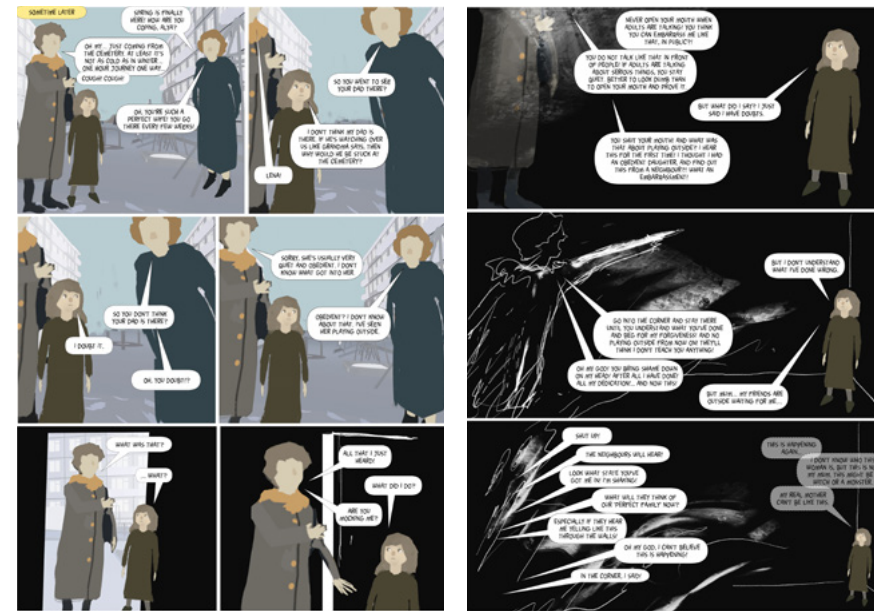


FIGURE 5.18  
An example of 'behind doors' parental verbal aggression (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 58–59. (Draft)



FIGURE 5.19  
An instance of internalised emotional neglect and abuse (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 74–75. (Draft)

## RESPONSES TO NARCISSISTIC PARENTING

In *Upgraded Gods* Lena's relationship with her mother illustrates dynamics that can emerge when a parent is narcissistic. As discussed earlier, this form of parenting can lead a child to develop narcissistic traits themselves; however, this is not an automatic outcome. Alternative self-defence mechanisms may also be activated, including the adoption of specific roles.

Durvasula (2024) identifies a set of such roles that individuals may be assigned in families with a narcissistic parent (or parents). These roles reflect how a child is positioned to meet the emotional or physical needs of the parent (rather than being recognised and valued for who they truly are). In smaller families, she notes, not all of these roles may be filled, or an individual may take on multiple roles.

The first of these is the role of the *golden child*. This describes a child who is idealised and treated as a source of pride or validation for the parent. In contrast, the *scapegoat* is a child who is blamed for problems within the family. Such children often become the "repository for the narcissistic parent's projected shame" and the target of criticism and abuse (Durvasula, 2024, p. 138). Conversely, the *helper* takes on a caregiving role, assuming responsibility for siblings, the household, or even the narcissistic parent. The *fixer* or *peacekeeper* describes a child who attempts to maintain harmony, often mediating conflicts and managing emotional tension. The *invisible child* describes a psychologically abandoned individual who is largely unnoticed and receives little attention or emotional support. Finally, the *truth teller* or *truth seer* describes a child with "insight and wisdom, [who] sees the narcissistic patterns as toxic and cruel (even if they do not know the words to describe it)" (p. 143). Whether the truth teller/seer acts confrontationally or stays silent, even a gaze may be seen as a threat to a narcissistic parent.

In the comic, Lena is often assigned the role of the scapegoat, but she also takes on the role of the truth teller, particularly near the beginning of the narrative. Over time, she comes to realise that speaking out triggers her mother's rage. As a result, she wants to be unseen, unnoticed, or invisible (Figure 5.20). Her grandmother, while sometimes being a truth teller, also adopts the roles of helper or fixer (Figure 5.21).



**FIGURE 5.20**  
An example of inner monologue and the wish to become invisible in response to parental aggression (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 60. (Draft)



**FIGURE 5.21**  
An example of taking on the roles of helper and fixer, and consequently becoming an enabler (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 60. (Draft)

Durvasula (2024) argues that assigning these roles helps a narcissistic parent to maintain control and regulate their fragile self-esteem (although this is often at the cost of a child's authentic development). She notes that although not all children in such systems develop psychological disorders, they often internalise these roles, which can later become inauthentic identities that can persist into adulthood and affect future relationships.

In *Upgraded Gods* Lena and her mother's relationship is strained because there is little evidence of empathy. Neihart (1998) notes that "empathy and responsiveness from caregivers" is vital for the healthy development of an individual, and the repeated lack of these qualities can lead to psychopathology (p. 187). Dye (2020) notes that it is common for trauma survivors to develop psychiatric conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm, eating disorders, attachment difficulties, behavioural issues, personality disorders, aggression, criminal behaviour, and suicidal ideation. She suggests that, if trauma happens in childhood, it may also increase the likelihood of chronic diseases, affect cognitive, social, and emotional skills, induce fear of rejection and abandonment, generate trust issues, and cause an individual to frame the world as an unsafe place. Campbell (2022) also claims that childhood trauma can increase the risk of young adults developing depression and psychosis, and later in life it may contribute to other psychiatric disorders including PTSD, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. She also observes that "the long-term consequences of childhood trauma [are] often underestimated or missed altogether" (p. 1). This is because "the original traumatic pathophysiological effects may be 'silent' until much later in life" (p. 9).

This phenomenon is illustrated in the comic when we see Lena spiralling into teenage alcohol abuse. This trajectory accompanies signs of depression, self-sabotage, and a debilitating mental and physical health condition (Figure 5.22).

In the documentary *The Wisdom of Trauma*, Gabor Maté (quoted in the documentary by Benazzo and Benazzo [2021]) argues that trauma can lead to a wide range of addictive behaviours. These, he observes, may function as temporary coping mechanisms that allow an individual to escape inner torment caused by trauma. Maté describes addiction as an extreme form of escape that may cost individuals love, family, health, even life. Such loss, he argues, reflects the depth of their desperation, and he suggests that the addiction issues can only be healed by addressing and healing the underlying trauma.



**FIGURE 5.22** Teenage alcohol abuse, accompanied by depression and self-sabotage, as a response to trauma (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 86–87. (Draft)

The effects of childhood trauma are also illustrated when Lena experiences postnatal depression (Figure 5.23), and during meditation where she begins to discover her True Self (Figure 5.24).





**FIGURE 5.25**  
An example of a defence mechanism that uses denial and suppression of unwanted parts of the self, becoming integrated with vulnerable emotions and unmet needs (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 89. (Draft)

## THE TRUE AND FALSE SELF

*Upgraded Gods* also deals with the concept of the True and False Self. This construct was originally proposed by Winnicott (1965/1994), who examined the internal processes of individuals exposed to dysfunctional parenting. The theory focuses on conditions where a child is forced to adapt to their environment by developing a False Self that caters to the narcissistic needs of the parents. Winnicott proposes that this internal adaptation can later become a life pattern. He suggested that an infant's compliance is the earliest stage in the formation of the False Self.<sup>77</sup> This occurs because the infant is entirely dependent on the primary caregiver, and "in this field dependence is real, and near absolute" (Winnicott, 1965/1994, p. 145).

<sup>77</sup> Winnicott (1965/1994) argues that in psychoanalysis, there is no point in working with the ego defence mechanism (the False Self), as such work can be carried on indefinitely with no success. He states that when individuals finally reconnect with the True Self, it may feel as if they are speaking to the therapist for the first time; moreover, they feel as if they are only just beginning to exist.



**FIGURE 5.26**  
Meditation leading to the discovery of the True Self (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 150–151. (Draft)

The episode in Figures 5.26 and 5.27 illustrates a dynamic similar to Winnicott's theory. When this meditation happened in my real life, I was not familiar with Winnicott's concept of the True and False Self. In the meditation, I encountered a crying child<sup>78</sup> and a scolding adult (both of whom were me). I interpreted them as my heart and my mind that engaged in an internal dialogue. My mind's harsh words echoed thought patterns formed in response to fear (originating in my mother's aggression and rage). For the child, this fear-driven self-blame behaviour (as illustrated at the end of Figure 5.24) was an

<sup>78</sup> The child I discovered in the meditation aligns more closely with Winnicott's concept of the True Self than with Bradshaw's Inner Child theory. Bradshaw (1990) describes the Inner Child as a wounded and neglected part of the self that "continues to live in an adult body [and] contaminate our adult lives," often through dysfunctional reactions such as withdrawal, shame, anger, or rage (p. 7). In contrast, the child figure I encountered felt like a connection to the True Self — a deeper, timeless sense of inner truth that persists beneath layers of social conditioning and adaptation.

unconscious act of self-preservation (an attempt to protect against negative consequences when no other coping strategies were available). However, over time my mind internalised these thoughts and used them to navigate the perceived dangers of the outside world. I had learned to suppress my emotions, doubt my instincts, and control my truthfulness, because expressing these parts of myself had once felt unsafe.

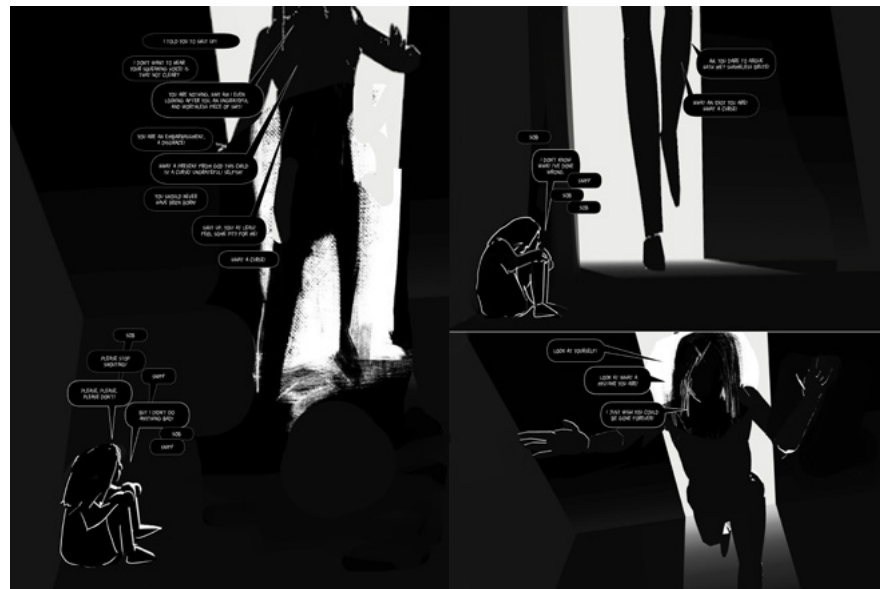


FIGURE 5.27 Meeting the True Self (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 152–153. (Draft)

In *Upgraded Gods* the discovery of the True Self during meditation comes as a surprise to Lena. By this point in her life, she has lost touch with her inner world, and her life revolves around the need to be good and not cause problems. This behaviour is driven by an internalised pressure to avoid disapproval or rejection. At this point in the narrative Lena is deeply depressed. She no longer knows who she truly is. She is living with a version of herself constructed to meet societal expectations (Figure 5.28).



FIGURE 5.28 Lena begins to see her disconnection from the True Self (2025). (Up until this point her life has been shaped by internalised pressure to conform to societal expectations, and this has led to the loss of authentic identity). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 144–145. (Draft)

Building on Winnicott's theory of ego distortion, Alice Miller (1997) explains that when a child's need for empathy and validation is not met and any self-expression leads to parental discontent, they learn that their feelings need to be suppressed if they are to avoid upsetting their parent and losing their love. She suggests that individuals raised in such conditions learn to deny the parts of themselves deemed unacceptable, developing only the traits that are rewarded or expected. This gives rise to the construction of a false image of the self. Neihart (1998) sees the child's dilemma as a choice between abandoning their True Self or being abandoned by significant others. Kahn (1986) notes that such individuals become afraid of exposing their true feelings of anger, discontent, or annoyance, believing that if they do, they will be rejected.

Winnicott (1965/1994) warns that when a False Self forms in an individual with strong intellectual abilities, the mind can become the centre of the False Self, and this can lead to a split between intellectual activity and the person's psychosomatic state. This may explain instances when someone who might appear to lead a highly functioning life and have outward success suddenly destroys themselves in some way, because inside, they feel deeply inauthentic.<sup>79</sup> Kahn (1986) has used clinical studies to suggest that, in extreme cases, such a disconnection can lead to suicide.

While unpacking the development of a False Self, *Upgraded Gods* also explores what it means to reconnect with the True Self, through lived experience and a process of inner searching (Figure 5.29). This is illustrated in an imagined sequence where three 'teachers', which represent different perspectives on personal transformation, urge Lena to uncover internalised deception, face her emotional wounds, and begin the slow, ongoing journey toward self-truth and integration.



**FIGURE 5.29** Guidance from internal 'teachers' who encourage self-inquiry, emotional healing, and integration on the journey toward the True Self (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 149. (Draft)

<sup>79</sup> This dynamic is evident in the comic in Figure 5.22.

## THE IMPACT OF NARCISSISM ON ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

### EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Because *Upgraded Gods* unpacks the impact of narcissism on adult relationships, it is useful to consider some of Lena's encounters and reactions as she attempts to form friendships and intimate connections with other people. In many of these episodes we see the narcissism that permeated her childhood re-manifested, and observe as she attempts to negotiate the consequences. Indicative of this is her relationship with her narcissistic boyfriend, Joe.

Michell (1989) argues that narcissists unconsciously experience deep loneliness and a longing for love, but are often unable to form emotional connections. Instead, he observes, narcissists may exploit those around them, showing little regard for another individual's integrity or rights. By extension, Smith and Hung (2021) note that narcissists often lack the ability to build and maintain meaningful emotional connections, primarily because "they only care about themselves" (p. 27). They explain that a narcissist's interest in another person is often limited to whether they can boost their own image, making them look smarter, more likeable, intelligent, admirable, or superior.

In *Upgraded Gods* Joe exhibits many of these characteristics, and we see them illustrated in Figure 5.30, where he shares the story of his enlightenment (only to be met with Lena's persistent questions, rather than the admiration he expected). His reaction exhibits subtle contempt, as he begins to undermine her for not fulfilling the validating role he had assumed she would play.



FIGURE 5.30 An example of narcissistic response to an unmet need for validation (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 253. (Draft)

Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010) note that narcissists can be “cold, unempathetic, exploitative and indifferent towards others, [experiencing underlying] feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, boredom, alienation, emptiness and aimlessness” (p. 393). For such individuals, love offered is often “destroyed in order to maintain superiority over others,” while goodness in others can provoke envy, resulting in behaviours such as devaluation, control, or emotional withdrawal (Goldner-Vukov & Moore, 2010, p. 395). We see this trajectory playing out in *Upgraded Gods* as Joe becomes increasingly dismissive and manipulative.

*Upgraded Gods* shows that recognising a narcissist can be incredibly difficult, especially at the beginning of a romantic relationship.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Durvasula (2023) notes that “even a therapist needs a few months to definitively understand narcissistic personality patterns in a client” (p. 64).

Their initial behaviour, what is sometimes called ‘love bombing’, often appears warm, caring, attentive, and ideal (Figure 5.31). Durvasula (2023) describes ‘love bombing’ as “the intense and overwhelming initial process that draws you in and distracts you from seeing any red flags” (p. 60). In this phase, a narcissist may seem deeply interested and emotionally invested, flooding the other person with messages, gifts, or large gestures, which can feel like the beginning of a perfect love story (Figure 5.32). Such actions can mimic real connection, desire, and love. Durvasula (2023) describes love bombing as “an indoctrination into a controlling and manipulative relationship” (p. 61). The behaviour builds emotional dependence and creates the foundation for justifying future toxic behaviour.



FIGURE 5.31 An example of the early stages of a romantic relationship that appears as a genuine connection, while subtly revealing red flags (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 246–247. (Draft)



uncontrolled) self-esteem” (p. 324). They argue that a healthy self-esteem exists when both levels are balanced. In contrast, they describe narcissistic self-esteem as “a doughnut with an empty hole in the middle,” where an inflated self-view serves to hide deep underlying insecurity (p. 324).

This high explicit self-esteem<sup>82</sup> is normally associated with grandiose narcissists, because vulnerable narcissists tend to be characterised by low explicit self-esteem (Figures 5.14, 5.15). However, Pincus et al. (2014) argue that narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability can be concurrently present in an individual, with the only difference being that they are dominant in different proportions and at different times. Levy et al. (2011) also note that a vulnerable narcissist may initially appear as reserved, hesitant, and bashful, but upon closer contact they may reveal self-aggrandising fantasies. MacDonald (2014) suggests that “grandiosity is a defence against deep feelings of inferiority and is neither constant nor consistent, leaving the individual torn between thinking himself wonderful or worthless” (p. 145).

In *Upgraded Gods* this is illustrated in the episode where Lena’s mother shifts rapidly between self-confidence and fear of losing her reputation as a doctor. These feelings/responses are composed inside a short dialogue (Figure 5.34). Here we also see Lena’s mother verbally attacking and diminishing her daughter in an attempt to neutralise a perceived threat to her self-esteem.

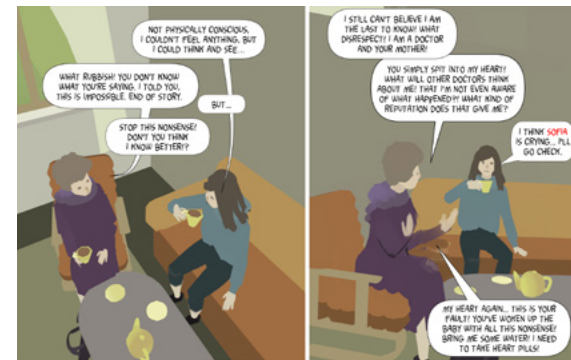


FIGURE 5.34 An example of moving between grandiose and vulnerable states (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 137. (Draft)

This type of aggression escalates in the episode with Joe (Figure 5.35), where Lena feels physically threatened while he blames her for making him angry.



FIGURE 5.35 An example of narcissistic rage, victim blaming, and emotional manipulation (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 256. (Draft)

Lopes et al. (2021) note that, when a narcissist’s need for validation is not met, they can experience an ego threat and their sense of entitlement and incapacity to feel empathy towards others can lead to aggressive behaviour. They note that narcissists often feel justified in expressing anger and refuse to regulate it, believing others are to blame for how they feel.

This victim blaming and emotional manipulation is evident in both Joe’s and Lena’s mother’s characters. Such externalising of blame, Durvasula (2024) explains, is typical of narcissistic behaviour and it occurs because admitting fault can threaten a narcissist’s grandiose self-image. She argues that for individuals like Joe and Lena’s mother to maintain a sense of superiority, it is often necessary for them to

<sup>82</sup> According to Miller and Campbell (2011), individuals who self-identify with traits of grandiose narcissism also tend to report high levels of self-esteem, which is consistent with the nature of this personality type.

configure themselves as the victim, insisting that the blame for their actions is the fault others. This ‘blame shifting’, Durvasula notes, can be associated with behaviours such as “gaslighting, manipulation, and denial” (Durvasula, 2024, p. 53).<sup>83</sup>

Lopes et al. (2021) note that narcissistic individuals tend to externalise blame as a defence against threats to their self-esteem. Accordingly, they will often hold other people responsible for negative or unwanted outcomes (as a way of avoiding having to take responsibility for themselves). This can result in a belief that they cannot be wrong or do wrong to others. In adopting this stance, they will often focus on their own emotions, benefits, and need to preserve a vulnerable sense of superiority.



**FIGURE 5.36**  
Two examples of self-deception and denial followed by a hostile response to an ego threat (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 240, 257. (Draft)

<sup>83</sup> We see this phenomenon illustrated in Figure 5.35.

This dynamic is illustrated in two episodes where Lena expresses concern that her friend is being scammed and manipulated through the use of flattery (Figure 5.36). Rather than reflecting on the situation, her friend reacts negatively, implying that Lena is the person who cannot be trusted, and the warning is rejected as a personal attack. By shifting the blame onto Lena, the friend avoids confronting an uncomfortable truth while simultaneously preserving a self-image built on admiration and emotional gratification.

## NARCISSISTIC FANTASIES AND RAGE

*Upgraded Gods* also explores a distinctive dynamic that occurs between narcissistic fantasy and rage. This phenomenon appears in three separate relationships: between Lena and her mother, between Lena and Joe, and between Lena and her female friend. Each of these storylines unfolds across episodes depicted in Figures 5.34–5.36.

Bushman and Baumeister (1998) argue that individuals who are preoccupied with maintaining a grandiose self-image, in combination with ego threat, can unleash “the highest levels of aggression” (often referred to as narcissistic rage) (p. 220). Krizan and Johar (2015) describe narcissistic rage as “an explosive mix of anger and hostility arising from threats to individual’s fractured sense of self” (p. 784). They observe that such outbursts are often fuelled by shame, mistrust, and angry rumination. Bushman and Thomaes (2011) suggest that such exceptionally aggressive behaviour possibly occurs “in an attempt to ward off threatening information” (p. 324).

To understand why such aggressive reactions occur, it is useful to consider how narcissists construct their sense of self through denials of reality and exaggerated fantasies. Michell (1989) observes that

narcissists are often preoccupied with fantasies of limitless success, power, intelligence, beauty, and ideal love. Pincus (2013) notes that vulnerable narcissists may have grandiose fantasies where they believe themselves to be “a benevolent company owner who [is] adored by his employees,” while in reality, they are still living with their parents in their mid-40s, and “lacking any motivation or effort to address [their] current social, occupational, and psychological deficits” (p. 97). He notes that clinical studies of pathological narcissists have shown that while such individuals may overtly display a grandiose or vulnerable persona, covertly they can spend “most of [their] days fantasizing about being loved and admired” (p. 97), or “performing heroic deeds” (p. 99). In a similar vein, Kernberg (1975/2004) notes that beneath the insecurity and uncertainty of a narcissistic individual may be found “omnipotent fantasies, and a kind of blind optimism based on denial” (p. 38). According to Pincus et al. (2014), such behaviour reflects distorted self-perceptions that compensate for unresolved needs and desires, leading individuals to believe they are “far more capable, powerful, and deserving than reality suggests” (p. 3). These fantasies, Vater et al. (2013) suggest, reflect their “exaggerated illusions of superiority and entitlement,” and can help them to cope with isolation and depressive moods (p. 37).

## DELUSION AND REALITY

*Upgraded Gods* deals with instances where characters deny reality. Initially we see this when Lena hopes that her angry mother is not real,<sup>84</sup> and this denial continues through her adolescence (where she denies her True Self). We then encounter the denial of reality in

<sup>84</sup> See Figure 5.24.

her relationships with Joe and her female friend.<sup>85</sup> The phenomenon is also evidenced in Lena’s Russian friends, who first deny the facts relating to protests in Russia against Putin’s rule,<sup>86</sup> and later during the war in Ukraine when Lena’s friend refuses to believe that Russia is bombing civilians (Figure 5.37).



**FIGURE 5.37**  
An example of denial of reality, shown in Lena’s Russian friend’s response to the war in Ukraine (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 294. (Draft)

Kernberg (1975/2004), Alice Miller (1997), and Winnicott (1965/1994) suggest that early disconnections from reality may occur when parents over- or under-evaluate their children. This, they suggest, can contribute to the development of a narcissistic personality and other disorders. Durvasula (2024), Dye (2020), Freyd, (1994), Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010,) Neihart (1998), and Zerubavel et al. (2018) suggest that these early dynamics can lead to the formation of adaptive behaviours and defence mechanisms that, once established in childhood, continue unconsciously to shape adult behaviour.

In psychology and psychotherapy, the tendency to form fantasies is sometimes referred to as ‘maladaptive daydreaming’ or delusions. Both phenomena have been linked to a wide range of psychological, neurological, and psychiatric conditions, including ADHD, anxiety, depression, dissociation, obsessive–compulsive symptoms, various addictions, personality disorders, general psychopathology, psychotic symptoms, loneliness, shame, psychological distress, low

<sup>85</sup> See Figures 5.35 and 5.36.

<sup>86</sup> See Figure 5.13.

self-esteem, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder with psychotic features, and delirium (Renzi & Mariani, 2025; Somer et al., 2025; Kiran & Chaudhury, 2009).

Pyszkowska et al. (2025) define maladaptive daydreaming as “vivid, excessive fantasy activity that becomes prioritized over other activities and may result in avoidant coping strategies” (p. 53). Kiran and Chaudhury (2009) state that delusions are beliefs that a person is convinced are real, even in the face of clear evidence to the contrary.

Alice Miller (1997) notes that a “child must adapt to ensure the illusion of love, care, and kindness, but an adult does not need this illusion to survive” (p. 65). She argues that no one can be healed by “maintaining or fostering illusion,” and the only way therapy might help is through guiding people to experience the truth (however painful this is). She notes that healing from mental illness requires “the emotional discovery of the truth about the unique history of our childhood” (p. 1). This involves reliving the pain of it, no matter how difficult this is. Only then, Miller (1997) argues, can we free ourselves from illusion and self-deception. She notes:

History demonstrates that [illusions] sneak in everywhere, that every life is full of them — perhaps because the truth often seems unbearable to us. And yet the truth is so essential that its loss exacts a heavy toll, in the form of grave illness. (A. Miller, 1997, p. 1)

In *Upgraded Gods* I depict book authors as generic personifications of psychological and philosophical perspectives on living in illusion and its effects (Figure 5.38 and 5.39). This episode also links psychological concepts of illusion with philosophical traditions in which illusion plays a central role in explaining human suffering.



FIGURE 5.38 Illusion, Reality and the True Self as discussed in Western psychology (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 146. (Draft)

As Roy (2025) explains, illusion (*māyā*) represents misperception, “showing that ignorance distorts our understanding of the self and



FIGURE 5.39 Illusion, Reality and the True Self as discussed in Hindu philosophy (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 148. (Draft)

reality," or, as described in *The Upanishads*,<sup>87</sup> illusion "binds the individual to a cycle of desires and mistaken identity" (p. 13).

A premise behind *Upgraded Gods* is that generating and maintaining illusions can be a dangerous coping mechanism, and the line between what is considered to be normal daydreaming and delusion (a false belief maintained with conviction despite evidence to the contrary) can be a dangerous progression. The comic's narrative traces the trajectories through which individual fantasies transform into delusional social allegiances, which are expressed in collective narcissism, propaganda, conspiracy theories, and ideological revisionism.

## COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM

*Upgraded Gods* examines how individual narcissism and its consequences extend beyond personal relationships into wider social structures. It looks at how some institutions or states seek to control and manipulate people (often under the direction of a narcissistic leader), and how collective trauma fuels and sustains these dynamics. It considers how the patterns that shape personal relationships, such as dominance, conformity, and manipulation, are mirrored in collective narcissistic structures, which are expressed through social hierarchies and controlled through fear and propaganda.

<sup>87</sup> "The Upanishads are ancient texts from India that were composed orally in Sanskrit between about 700 B.C.E. and 300 B.C.E" (Black, n.d., para 1).

## DEFINING COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM

Researchers suggest that the narcissistic tendencies observed in individuals, such as fragile self-esteem, fantasies of greatness, a constant need for validation, and aggression towards ego threat, can also manifest at the group level, where individuals emotionally invest in a shared identity that idealises the collective self (Bushman & Thomaes, 2011; Covington, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Kernberg, 2020; MacDonald, 2014; A. Miller, 1997). Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) argue that just as individuals "can be narcissistic about their personal identities, they can also be narcissistic about their collective identities" (p. 1074). They define collective narcissism as "an emotional investment in an unrealistic belief" in "the unparalleled greatness of an ingroup" (p. 1074). Alice Miller (1997) suggests that this 'ingroup' relationship can turn into an addiction, because the group provides "the illusion that the unmet needs of the former child can eventually be fulfilled (by the group) in the adult" (p. 63). However, she also notes that these individuals may become "the victim[s] of various interests and ideologies" that have a very different agenda to fulfilling vulnerable people's needs (A. Miller, 1997, p. 63).

Collective fantasies of greatness appear in the comic in the section that deals with the war between Russia and Ukraine. Belief in 'unparalleled greatness' sometimes surfaces subtly, and in other instances more overtly (Figure 5.40).



**FIGURE 5.40**  
An example of identification with the perceived greatness of the group (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 294. (Draft)

When Lena challenges group beliefs and identity (collective narcissism) in *Upgraded Gods*, we see friends reacting with dismissal (Figure 5.41) or aggression (Figure 5.42).



**FIGURE 5.41**  
An example of dismissal as a defensive reaction when group identity is challenged (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 295. (Draft)



**FIGURE 5.42**  
An example of people showing aggression in response to a perceived threat to collective narcissism (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 309. (Draft)

## GROUP AND LEADER RELATIONSHIP

Covington (2018) and Kernberg (2020) argue that a narcissistic group and its leader constitute a unified, interdependent system that is driven by the same forces.

Covington (2018) explains that the origin of collective narcissism lies in "increasing economic inequalities, disaffection, and fear of powerlessness of global proportions," which often leads to nationalism, paranoia, fear of outsiders, and isolationism (p. 250). He argues that a large social group will encourage its members to achieve specific goals and ideals. However, when individuals can no longer live up to these ideals, the sense of "inadequacy and failure experienced within the group creates pressure to heal its narcissistic injuries by reviving a time of past glory" when the group's ideals were achievable (2018, p. 255). Covington suggests that when a large group feels humiliated, powerless, or loses hope for the future, it can adopt a victim mentality, and a strong internal bond can form between members who may unite around a common goal of restoring what they believe was lost. He observes that in such instances, "the greater the humiliation and threat to the group's survival, the more the group will be susceptible to the illusion — or fantasy — of supremacy" (2018, p. 255).

In a similar manner, Kernberg (2020) describes a "regressed large group" and its "corresponding pathological" leader (p. 1). This dynamic, he suggests, results from a combination of factors, including historical roots; cultural, social, political, and religious biases; current traumatic circumstances; and the political system in which the group consolidates (p. 1). He observes that individuals who become part of such groups (or mass movements) tend to demonstrate "a reduced capacity for independent judgement and rational decision-making" (Kernberg, 2020, p. 3). Instead, he

suggests, they are driven by a sense of power gained from merging their identity with others and the movement. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985) argues that this

makes the individual particularly liable to identify himself not only with each member of the group but with the group formation as a whole. [The individual's] megalomania finds its expression in this, each person's ego being extended to the whole group ... this allows each member to feel himself to be, not a minute, undifferentiated particle of a vast whole, but, on the contrary, identified with the totality of the group, thereby conferring on himself an omnipotent ego, a colossal body. (p. 85)

Covington (2018) explains that once such a group is formed, it will search for "a charismatic leader who will promise [them] to restore power and status" (p. 255). The emergence of such a leader, he suggests, will be driven by the "group's traditional identity [being] threatened or undermined, thereby triggering anxiety about its physical, cultural, and psychic survival" (ibid.).

In *Upgraded Gods* this is illustrated in Figure 5.42, where Lena's friend expresses aggressive views about how Putin should respond to the war in Ukraine (even favouring catastrophic action over the possibility of losing). What he fears is not physical annihilation, but the collapse of an identity of greatness and the loss of the superiority he believes the country holds. Such consequences he regards as equivalent to extermination.

Covington (2018) explains that a leader who operates inside the dynamic of collective narcissism "is chosen, not for his or her abilities to lead, but according to the individual's persuasiveness that he or she will fulfil this omnipotent role for the group" (p. 258). What the group craves most is not leadership, but the comfort of illusion.

Thus, it's not the leader who creates the group, but rather an already established group will seek out a leader who can embody and strengthen their collective identity. Covington (2018) suggests that, on a psychological level, this shared fantasy is

equivalent to the golden days in the child's fantasy when, as a small child, the infant felt omnipotent with the illusion that he or she was in control of the breast — and that the resources needed for the good life belonged to this child. (p. 258).

This projection of collective fantasy onto Putin is evident in scenes where Lena talks with her mother about the war (Figure 5.43). Lena's mother sees him as a saviour and almost God-like figure, convinced he alone can protect the country from perceived external threats coming from the West.



**FIGURE 5.43** The idealisation of a leader, where he is seen as a solution to all perceived problems (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 301. (Draft)

Kernberg (2020) notes that totalitarian regimes differ from typical dictatorships because they enforce an obligatory ideology that demands that the followers must not only fear but also love the leader. He argues that "the totalitarian regime established by

personalities with malignant narcissism<sup>88</sup> will be reinforced by such an ideology centered on the idealization and fearful submission to the leader” (ibid., p. 19). Kernberg (2020) explains that in this dependency-driven group dynamic, members tend to be insecure, uncertain, and emotionally immature. Therefore, he argues, they will seek a leader who can

help them understand their situation, direct the group, provide their needs, feed them with knowledge, meaning, or security, a leader who presents self-assurance and an attitude of potency and knowledge that is supportive and reassuring, provokes his idealization by the group, and the wish to depend on him. (p. 4)

Kernberg (2020) suggests that such groups tend to reject intelligent, rational, self-reflective individuals as potential leaders. Instead, people who are, “naïve, cliché-formulating” and mediocre are more likely to gain support (p. 8). The group, Kernberg notes, may respond to such leaders with some amusement, even subtle devaluation, but also a sense of relief as their choice creates a feeling of safety. This phenomenon is illustrated in the scene where Donald Trump is discussed (Figure 5.44), and the character downplays Trump’s flaws and positions him as a useful figurehead rather than a capable leader. This devaluation is also evident in Figures 5.42 and 5.45, where Putin as a leader is compared to the perceived greater power of Stalin (a rhetoric common among the ultranationalist Z-patriots, since the cult of Stalin has been revived in contemporary propaganda).

<sup>88</sup> Malignant narcissism was a concept originally introduced by Fromm (1964) to describe Hitler and Stalin. In more recent years, it has been applied to various political leaders, including Putin and Trump (Pfeffer, 2021; Smith & Hung, 2021; Kernberg, 2020; Covington, 2018; Grenyer, 2013; Goldner-Vukov & Moore, 2010; A. Miller, 1997). Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010) describe malignant narcissism as a severe personality disorder that combines narcissistic personality disorder with “antisocial behaviour, ego-syntonic sadism, and a paranoid orientation,” and that has “devastating consequences for the family and society” (p. 392). They suggest that while people with malignant narcissism can be identified in the highest positions of power, they may also be recognised in everyday society.



FIGURE 5.44  
Downplaying a leader’s flaws (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 277. (Draft)

Kernberg (2020) explains that if a leader fails to satisfy the group’s narcissistic needs, members often feel deeply disappointed and search for a replacement, idealising the new leader and projecting onto them the qualities they had previously seen in the former recipient of their ideals.

The working relationship between the narcissistic group and its leader is predicated on the leader taking “responsibility for the direction of the movement” (Kernberg, 2020, p. 3). This absolves followers of the burden of making decisions and the associated moral dilemmas that might accompany their decision making. The shared sense of power, excitement, and liberation from personal accountability, Kernberg argues, is enhanced by openness to the leader’s commands and a corresponding decrease in critical thinking. He maintains that large groups who adopt this behaviour “develop a sense of shared morality of the ‘good’ system that becomes increasingly absolutist and punitive toward those who are in conflict with it” (Kernberg, 2020, p. 10). This may happen along with significant mood swings that are experienced by the whole group.

This tendency is evident in Figures 5.42 and 5.45, where Z-patriots devalue others (both Ukrainians and New Zealanders) and express deep frustration over Russia’s losses in Ukraine, coupled with an excitement about demonstrating power and demanding more blood and civilian deaths.



**FIGURE 5.45**  
An example of collective narcissism (where Z-patriots combine aggression and violent nationalist rhetoric about Ukraine with leader devaluation) demanding even greater brutality (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 308. (Draft)

Kernberg (2020) suggests that individuals with malignant narcissism are particularly attracted to such leadership roles and often gain large bodies of support by mirroring what the group wants to hear (to satisfy its narcissistic needs). He adds that in times of anxiety and uncertainty, a group may choose a leader with additional paranoid tendencies who can unite them against a real or imagined external threat.

## HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY NARCISSISM: FANTASIES OF GREATNESS

As with individual narcissism, collective narcissism exists on a spectrum. MacDonald (2014) notes that both healthy and unhealthy forms of narcissism can operate at a group level. Healthy narcissism in collective identity can foster pride, solidarity, and mutual support within a group, motivating members to work toward shared goals without devaluing others. Conversely, just as individual narcissism involves fantasies of grandiosity and exaggerated self-importance, collective narcissism reflects a similar emotional attachment to an exaggerated sense of the group’s importance and superiority (MacDonald, 2014). Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) observe that collective narcissism is more likely to “emerge in social and cultural contexts that diminish the ego and/or socialize individuals to put their group in the centre of their lives, attention, emotions and actions” (p. 1075). They note that collective narcissism thrives in environments that focus on the group’s superiority and uniqueness, while inducing “downward social comparisons” with outsiders (ibid., p. 1092). Collective narcissism may also originate from a group that values reputation and honour. Bushman and Thomaes (2011) suggest that, especially in collectivistic cultures, people tend to build their positive self-image from “a sense of satisfaction with the social role one plays” rather than from standing out as a unique individual (p. 326).

Covington (2018) notes that collective narcissistic groups have their identities unified and reinforced through a mutual fantasy: a collective wish to return to a state of power, abundance, and supremacy. He suggests that someone who becomes a leader must understand and address the anxieties of individuals inside the group. He specifies two types of leaders: those who lead with acceptance of a new reality and adaptation to the changes (helping their group

to reshape identity in a healthy way); and those who deny reality, promising instead unlimited power, protection against what is lost, or protection from changes in the world. Covington argues that what we may be currently witnessing is a political dynamic that enacts alt-right fantasies that pave “the way to an absolutist, fascist state of mind [where] reality must conform to fantasy” (2018, p. 250).

## AGGRESSION

As with individual narcissism, collective narcissism can be prone to aggression when people experience an ego threat. In *Upgraded Gods* this aggression appears in the narrative that examines the beginning of the war in Ukraine and it is explicit in the conversation shown in Figure 5.45. Hostility also appears in interactions illustrated in Figures 5.46 and 5.47 (although the tone here is more defensive than aggressive).



**FIGURE 5.46** An example of aggression in collective narcissism shown as defensive hostility to ego threat, framed through accusations of betrayal (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 301. (Draft)

Bushman and Thomaes (2011) argue that, like individual narcissists, collective narcissists perceive criticism as a threat, and this may result in aggression and rage directed at the ‘offender’. Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) explain that because collective narcissists view the group as an extension of their own identity, the group functions as a strategy to protect individuals’ “weak and threatened egos” (p. 1075). They observe that collective narcissists have “high but unstable collective

self-esteem that needs constant, external validation” (p. 1091). However, they also note that no validation is sufficient to sustain their unrealistic self-greatness. Accordingly, collective narcissists are likely to interpret the actions of others as unfair, unjust, disrespectful, critical, harming, or threatening. Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) note that the perceived threat can be chronic, because its source is internal (it comes from threatened ego rather than external sources). This results in ongoing demands for recognition and validation of the group’s superiority, where aggressive actions become a means of controlling how the group’s idealised image is externally validated. They observe that responses to a threat may lead to violent actions, including military aggression, right-wing authoritarianism, and blind patriotism, all of which serve to reinforce social dominance.



**FIGURE 5.47** An example of collective narcissism expressed through aggressive rhetoric and victimhood, framed as certainty in Russia’s sacred victory (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 294–295. (Draft)

MacDonald (2014) argues that narcissistic injuries may be rooted in historical conflicts, and they can build on “a collection of wrongs, grievances and injustices together with socio-economic factors which feed a dogged ideology and fuel a shared narcissistic rage”

(p. 149). He suggests that while in a psychologically healthy individual anger is typically short-lived, in narcissists anger is excessive, extreme, and illogical. Baumeister et al. (1996) argue that “only a minority of human violence may be understood as rational, instrumental behavior aimed at securing or protecting material rewards” (p. 5). They propose that the real source of violence may be threatened egotism. They explain:

Wars harm both sides, most crimes yield little financial gain, terrorism and assassination almost never bring about the desired political changes, most rapes fail to bring sexual pleasure, torture rarely elicits accurate or useful information, and most murderers soon regret their actions as pointless and self-defeating. (p. 5)

In *Upgraded Gods* we encounter different forms of aggression. In instances involving Lena’s mother and a couple who believe in the greatness of the Russian nation, the aggression is justified by a sense of righteousness and the belief that they can do no wrong because actions relate to a sacred mission. However, in Figure 5.45 the Z-patriots are more openly aggressive. They may accept that Russia is doing something wrong, but they demand more killing to prove their power over others.

Regardless of the perspective on aggression, all collective narcissists share a need for an enemy onto whom they can project their shame, attribute blame for their problems, and direct criticism and abuse.

## CREATING AN ENEMY: DEHUMANISATION

Covington (2018) argues that collective narcissism will frame “anything or anyone who threatens the group illusion of

omnipotence” as dehumanised, demonised, and warranting attack (p. 260). He argues that having a common enemy strengthens the group’s identity and solidarity in the face of a threat. He maintains that within a group there is a need for such an enemy, and if it doesn’t exist, it needs to be created. He suggests that this ‘other’, outsider, or foreigner will become the focus of hatred and attack. To bolster the group’s sense of goodness and purity, it will project values “like greed, sadism, and hatred onto an external enemy” (p. 261). Dehumanisation of others, he explains, is not a pretence, it’s a reflection of a group’s paranoia, and as soon as one enemy is defeated, another needs to be found to keep strengthening the group’s unity and identity. Thus, Alice Miller (1997) notes, “individuals who do not want to know their own truth collude in denial with society as a whole, looking for a common ‘enemy’ on whom to act out their repressed rage” (p. 116).

This presence of an ‘outside enemy’ permeates *Upgraded Gods’* narration of the war in Ukraine, both in propaganda messages (Figures 5.58 and 5.59) and in people’s repetition of them (Figure 5.47).

Bushman and Thomaes (2011) state that aggression against others is usually restrained at an unconscious level, but dehumanisation can be used to overcome this. They observe that dehumanisation increases aggression while simultaneously reducing empathy, and narcissistic individuals can be particularly aggressive and less empathetic than others. Elbert et al. (2018) also note that dehumanisation of the enemy is a common strategy for removing moral concerns and barriers, and this is why it is often used in propaganda. They give examples from different conflicts where enemies have been called ‘rats’, ‘cockroaches’, ‘hairy monkeys’, or ‘gooks’. MacDonald (2014) states that narcissistic groups justify their

actions with “a sense of entitlement, group-aggrandisement, denial” (p. 148), and collective contempt towards outsiders. Narcissistic groups believe in their “unique sense of purpose and understanding of events that others lack, while paranoia allows for no debate, tolerance or compromise” (MacDonald, 2014, p.148).

While I was writing about *Upgraded Gods* I was in constant communication with family members and people who had been my friends during adolescence. Although the characters in the comic represent diverse perspectives of these people, a common thread in their narrative is that the war is a necessary defence against the rise of Nazism in Ukraine). Russians call Ukrainians Nazis, *Banderovtsy*, *Ukropi*, and *Ukri*.<sup>89</sup> Propaganda portrays them as evil, ruthless, and capable of extreme violence even against their own civilians. To me, it seems bizarre that propaganda was able to put such ideas into people’s heads, considering that for generations the two nations had the same religion, very similar traditions, mixed marriages, extended families, and common business interests that crossed both countries. Many Ukrainians have spoken only Russian their entire lives. This long-term closeness is probably why it took so many years to dehumanise the Ukrainian nation. Otherwise, perhaps the war might have started much earlier (as in the case of the Chechen Wars).<sup>90</sup> As a device, the dehumanisation of Ukrainians has been relentlessly groomed on social media to the extent that it has enabled a pernicious form of victim-blaming.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Banderovtsy* refers to followers of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist leader of the mid-20th century, who is used in Russian rhetoric to portray Ukrainians as rooted in extreme nationalism or fascism. *Ukri* and *Ukropi* [укропы — dill] are derogatory abbreviations of the word ‘Ukrainians’.

<sup>90</sup> The Chechen Wars refer to two armed conflicts between Russia and Chechnya after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The First Chechen War (1994–96) and the Second Chechen War (1999–2008) caused extensive civilian deaths, widespread destruction, and the loss of Chechnya’s independence (Askerov & Vatchagaev, 2020).

<sup>91</sup> Indicative examples may be seen in Figure 5.59.

Kernberg (2020) maintains that the leader of a collectively narcissistic group needs to aggressively speak out against outsiders using “direct, crude, and sadistic expressions of animosity ... devaluing and dehumanizing them while declaring the large group he directs to be selected, ideal, morally justified, and superior” (p. 16).

He observes that a collectively narcissistic group will encourage aggressive outbursts towards minorities, appraising such behaviour as heroic and admirable. This may, in certain circumstances, create “a contaminating festive atmosphere” that thrills and excites members into pushing for the continuation of destructive behaviours directed towards outsiders. Such behaviour can be used to reinforce a strong sense of unity, power, security, and freedom from impunity when violence and abuse towards perceived threats are used (Kernberg 2020, p. 16).<sup>92</sup> Emotional outbursts, physical attacks, and the enjoyment that a narcissistic group receives from abuse can foster and reinforce their sadistic tendencies.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> An example of such attacks on ethnic minorities is evidenced in Figure 5.44. Harding (2009) reports that in Russia, more than 350 people were murdered by neo-Nazis between 2004 and 2009, and many more were beaten or wounded.

<sup>93</sup> Elbert et al. (2018) distinguish between two interconnected forms of aggression: reactive aggression (driven by negative feelings such as anger, rage, and fear, and motivation to overcome them) and appetitive aggression (fuelled by the positive reinforcement and pleasure gained from violence and domination).

## COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AS THE ORIGIN OF COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM

In *Upgraded Gods* I consider the nature of collective trauma and its consequences, to understand why people support and participate in authoritarian regimes (and other forms of abuse).

Covington (2018) argues that it is people who feel most disadvantaged, powerless, and alienated in a society who are most attracted to totalitarian systems. However, Hart and Stekler (2022) note that while political science often views Trump's leadership as appealing to "less-educated, lower-income white voters who feel abandoned by a society moving toward increased diversity, religious pluralism, and economic globalism," this does not explain why other individuals who do not fit this description also vote for him (p. 386). Hart and Stekler suggest that the wider voting profile may be due to narcissistic personality traits that lead to viewing the world as dangerous and as a 'competitive jungle'. People with such fear-driven perceptions tend to gravitate towards right-wing authoritarianism and a social-dominance "worldview that emphasizes law and order, respect for authority, and strict religious adherence, which combine to help people feel safer in a chaotic world" (Hart & Stekler, 2022, p. 387). Hart and Stekler propose that such individuals, especially those of higher status, may view these political systems as opportunities to reinforce their power, status, and access to resources through intergroup hierarchies. This tendency, they argue, also aligns with narcissistic personality traits, which combine underlying insecurity with a sense of grandiosity. They propose that this is because "personality develops before ideology, so it is more likely that narcissism is a distal causative factor instead of one caused" (Hart & Stekler, 2022, p. 389).

Volkan (2013) links extensive traumatic experiences to the origin of collective narcissism. He argues that "after a massive trauma at the hands of the 'other,' members of a large group" may experience victimisation, humiliation, helplessness, and "increase in narcissistic investment in large-group identity" (p. 232). Volkan (2013) explains that massive traumas can include natural disasters, but those who are "affected tend ultimately to accept the event as fate or as the will of God" (p. 231). There are also mass traumas that result from intentional harm inflicted by opposing groups during religious, ethnic, national, or ideological conflicts, which may include prolonged oppression, acts of terrorism, war, or genocide. He argues that such traumas can affect generations, but the focus of the inherited trauma and collective memory might shift with time from grieving the ancestors' loss and feeling their victimisation, to the revenge for the wrongdoing. Volkan (2013) states that such historical events "can be categorized as glorified or traumatic; usually they are both" (p. 230). He provides an example of the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War, which is celebrated as national heroism, resilience, and determination, while concurrently portraying the Russian people as victims who experienced immense trauma and suffering. He explains that these "historical hurts" are often experienced subjectively and believed to be "'bigger' than others' hurts" (Volkan, 2013, p. 230). I find Volkan's description of how the Great Patriotic War is perceived to be accurate. When I was growing up, May 9th (the day marking the end of the war) was a day to commemorate and honour relatives who had died in the conflict. Now the remembrance is used to fuel patriotism among Russians and to justify the war in Ukraine. In *Upgraded Gods* this can be seen in Lena's conversation with a Russian friend who, when referencing the Great Patriotic War (World War II), says, "Russia saved the world from the Nazis once and it will do it again. Russian people are chosen. We are martyrs. Russia has a unique role. No one else is capable of it. We will save life on the planet. We're living in the grace of God" (Figure 5.40).

Volkan (2013) maintains that, regardless of how it manifests, when the central aim across generations is to preserve the memory of a historical event, it can emerge as a significant marker of large-group identity. Volkan (2013) describes this as a *chosen trauma*. He explains:

A large group does not 'choose' to be victimized by another large group and subsequently lose self-esteem, but it does 'choose' to psychologize and dwell on a past traumatic event and make it a major design to be stitched on the canvas of a large-group tent. (Volkan, 2013, p. 232)

Volkan (2013) argues that such chosen traumas, alongside *chosen glory*,<sup>94</sup> often become heavily mythologised over time and serve as a foundation for collective narcissism. He notes that millions of people can unconsciously align themselves with ethnic, religious, or ideological group identities, experiencing in this process humiliation, harm, anger, pain, helplessness, or a desire for revenge when the chosen identity is threatened.

## COLLECTIVE TRAUMA: DEFINITION, SCOPE, AND COMPLEXITY

Kessler et al. (1995) propose that 60.7% of men and 51.2% of women experience a traumatic event at least once in their lifetime.<sup>95</sup> Pedraza et al. (2022) refer to even higher numbers, stating that approximately 90% of people experience traumatic events in their lifetime.

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<sup>94</sup> 'Chosen glory' is a term he uses to describe selected "shared mental representations of pride and pleasure [that evoke] past events and heroes that are recollected ritualistically" (Volkan, 2013, p. 230). Chosen glory often relates to narratives surrounding victories and accomplishments.

<sup>95</sup> Their assertion draws its statistical profile from the 1990–92 National Comorbidity Survey (Kessler et al., 1995).

However, recorded numbers often reflect only reported trauma. (Many of us never talk about our traumas, even with our closest friends.) Epstein (2013) argues:

Trauma happens to everyone. The potential for it is part of the precariousness of human existence. Some traumas — loss, death, accidents, disease, and abuse — are explicit; others — like the emotional deprivation of an unloved child — are more subtle ... but it is hard to imagine the scope of an individual life without envisioning some kind of trauma ... It is rare for someone to get through life without facing trauma. (p. 11)

There is a large body of research on trauma, and researchers use a wide range of frameworks and terminology to describe traumatic experiences. However, Muldoon et al. (2021) note that, despite the regular use of the word, "there is limited clarity about its definition" (p. 502).

Donovan and Ustundag (2017) note that biomedicine defines trauma "as intense emotional reactions to catastrophic stressors, harms caused by something external to the individual" (p. 227). Dye (2020) defines trauma as "a perceived experience that threatens injury, death, or physical integrity, and causes feelings of fear, terror, and helplessness" (p. 400). Gabor Maté (quoted in the documentary by Benazzo and Benazzo [2021]) explains that trauma doesn't describe the event itself, but the wound it leaves inside us that continues to shape how we see the world long after the injury. -

Hübl and Jordan Avritt (2020) discuss two different kinds of trauma. *Intergenerational trauma* describes the lasting impact of unprocessed trauma experienced by individuals or groups and

passed down from one generation to the next.<sup>96</sup> *Collective trauma* is historical trauma that constitutes “a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance” (p. 67).



FIGURE 5.48 Intergenerational and collective trauma expressed through fears for survival passed down from earlier generations (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 290. (Draft)

Muldoon et al. (2021) argue that trauma and its aftermath are inseparable from “social position, socio political capital, and power” (p. 501). They argue that people derive their identity from traumatic experiences.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Earle (2017) argues that “the effects of a traumatic rupture on the construction of identity” are fundamental to how individuals and their families construct personal narratives from inherited memories (p. 98).

<sup>96</sup> Hübl and Jordan Avritt (2020) note that this form of trauma can also be referred to “as transgenerational, multigenerational, or cross-generational trauma” (p. 66).

<sup>97</sup> This is a thematic thread that permeates *Upgraded Gods*.

In *Upgraded Gods* we encounter intergenerational and collective trauma when Lena’s friends discuss fears for their lives and the survival of their children. These fears are rooted in memories of their parents’ trauma, and in grief associated with grandparents who were killed in an earlier generation by the Soviet regime (Figure 5.48).

Similarly, the effect of trauma may be seen in Lena’s life. It is first mentioned at the beginning of the story (Figure 5.3) and revisited at the end (Figure 5.49). This narrative ‘bookending’ of trauma demonstrates how the phenomenon can flow from one generation to the next.



FIGURE 5.49 An instance of intergenerational trauma in Lena’s life (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 313. (Draft)

J. C. Alexander (2004) discusses the phenomenon of ‘cultural trauma’. This, he suggests “occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (p. 1). He proposes that constructed cultural traumas enable social groups, societies or civilisations to recognise the source of human suffering and create collective bonds through a shared experience of that suffering. Building on this idea, Romero-Jódar (2017) discusses the view that individuals may be considered trauma victims or survivors “just by the fact of being born into a society that forces them to perceive the world in a certain way and to create a sense of self that is highly influenced by this society’s collective traumas” (p. 72).

## TRAUMATIC CYCLES

“Hurt people ... hurt people.” This is a common saying, but it is supported by a substantial body of research. Hübl and Jordan Avritt (2020) argue that abusive behaviours within families often go unchallenged and unresolved, eventually becoming unspoken norms within the unit. They note that “children born into intergenerational trauma often inherit a legacy of poverty, risk of abuse, and vulnerabilities to mental and physical illness” (2020, p. 67). Such patterns, they observe, are often difficult to break. They note that extensive research on trauma survivors reveals a troubling tendency where “traumatized individuals often unconsciously reenact their prior victimization” (p. 67). In such re-enactment, individuals may either adopt the role of the victim or the perpetrator. This cycle of unconscious re-enactment, the researchers argue, plays a significant role in fuelling violence within society. In a similar manner, Coid et al. (2016) observe that there is “a strong overlap between violence and victimisation” (p. 79). They also note that individuals can exhibit traits and enact behaviours that are common to both roles. Their research also suggests that previous victimisation is one of the strongest indicators of future victimisation. Messing et al. (2012) report similar findings, stating that individuals who experienced childhood psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, or witnessed the abuse of family member, are more likely to experience abuse in adulthood.

We see this pattern of repeated abuse illustrated in the comic, where Lena enters a relationship with a narcissistic partner and misses the signs of controlling and manipulative behaviour. In the dialogue, she also reflects that this is not the first time this has happened, and she is aware that she tends to gravitate toward such individuals for reasons she does not fully understand.<sup>98</sup>

Conti (2021) explains that many survivors “return to their abusers or find themselves in other abusive relationships because chronic trauma can fool people into believing they don’t have options or they don’t deserve better” (p. 20). Conti also notes that it is not unusual

for individuals affected by chronic trauma to be unaware of it or realise it much later. Van der Kolk (2014) states that there are multiple theories that try to explain why people return to abusive experiences, however none of them completely explain the phenomenon. He refers to Freud’s concept of the “compulsion to repeat”, which suggests that individuals unconsciously reenact trauma in an attempt to gain control over it (p. 37). However, Van der Kolk argues that there is no evidence that reenactment brings relief and instead it often “leads only to further pain and self-hatred” (ibid.). He also notes that traumatic memories can dominate in survivors because they struggle “to feel truly alive right now” and to connect to others who haven’t shared similar experiences (p. 85). He explains that “when you can’t be fully here, you go to the places where you did feel alive – even if those places are filled with horror and misery” (ibid.). Van der Kolk also refers to experiments where frightened animals returned home, “regardless of whether home [was] safe or frightening” (p. 36). He suggests that traumatised individuals may be drawn back to harmful situations because they sought “refuge in what is familiar” (ibid.). Van der Kolk also explores the idea of “attractors – the things that draw us, motivate us, and make us feel alive” and notes that, in some cases, fear or pain can become compelling or even thrilling (p. 37). In addition, he discusses the hypothesis that intense emotions may temporarily block pain as a result of “morphinelike substances [being] manufactured in the brain” (p. 38).

## FROM FAMILY TO SOCIETY

Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010) note that family and society influence one another in complex, reciprocal ways. They explain that dysfunctional families may raise individuals with mental disorders and destructive behaviour towards others and society. Some of these people may attain positions of power, because society often supports leaders who embody collective suppressed aggression. Certain cultures, Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010) argue, actively encourage narcissistic, authoritarian parenting to produce obedient citizens. In this context, the household becomes “the authoritarian

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<sup>98</sup> For example this is evident on pages 262–263 of *Upgraded Gods*.

state in miniature," to which the child must adapt and conform (p. 400). They note that social authorities often serve as powerful role models for parents, and "humiliation of dominants towards subordinates pervades many social relationships" (p. 403). They argue that while society and religion often claim to promote family values, in reality "the values that sometimes dominate society and religious institutions are greed for power and wealth" (Goldner-Vukov & Moore, 2010, p. 401). This pursuit of power, they maintain, undermines wellbeing and contributes to promoting "dysfunctional families and corrupt societies" (ibid.).

Parallels between authoritarian parenting and an authoritarian state permeate the comic. Often this connection appears as subtle asides (as in Figure 5.50). Here we see obedience being shaped inside a family that has politically totalitarian values.



**FIGURE 5.50**  
An example of authoritarian parenting reflecting totalitarian state values, where obedience within the family mirrors political control (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 314. (Draft)

In Goldner-Vukov and Moore's (2010) analysis of dysfunctional family systems, they describe a highly controlling and authoritarian type of family that contains domineering parents and instances of domestic violence. These parents claim that their cruelty is an expression of love, and they often blame their children for outbursts of anger. The researchers suggest that "life affirming feelings from the children can pose a threat to the autocratic adults [so] severity and coldness are promoted as a good preparation for life" (p. 402). Unfortunately, domestic violence in such families often goes unnoticed, because some societies accommodate this kind of family structure into what is considered acceptable social dynamics. Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010) note that children in such families may have "their individual

will broken during the first two years of life," and may never realise that their parents are responsible for their resulting psychological damage (p. 402). Such children, they argue, can "suffer from antisocial, paranoid and sadistic personality disorders, substance use disorders, suicide, crime and mental illness" (p. 402). In their adult life they may tend to support an authoritarian structure of society characterised by violence, destruction, and crime. Goldner-Vukov and Moore note that such children may also develop malignant narcissism or antisocial personality disorders, and in extreme cases they "may even become brutal, ruthless dictators" (p. 402).

## AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL: IDEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA, PUNISHMENT AND REWARD

Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) observe that totalitarian dictatorships and autocracies share a set of core features. These include an elaborate ideology promising a "perfect final state of mankind" (p. 22). These single parties are led by a dictator with a small but "[passionate] and [unquestioning] following who are dedicated to the movement" (ibid.). Structurally, such groups are "hierarchically, oligarchically organized and ... intertwined [with] the governmental bureaucracy" (ibid.). Often, they function as a system of "physical or psychic" terror enforced through secret police and social pressure. They exercise a monopoly over the media and armed forces, and centralise bureaucratic control of the economy and social life (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1965, p. 22).

In *Upgraded Gods I* show how ideology and propaganda are used to legitimise regimes, and how positive and negative reinforcement (such as privileges/benefits and terror/fear) shape people's behaviour in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia.

# THE FUNCTION OF IDEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA IN THE USSR AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

An early episode in *Upgraded Gods* depicts how Soviet propaganda and ideology operated in my early schooling (Figures 5.51, 5.52).



**FIGURE 5.51** Examples of Soviet-era school ideology and propaganda (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 42. (Final illustration)

While these illustrations might be unsettling, in retrospect I realise that the recollections are modest compared to the level of ideological submission school children currently encounter in Russia (Figure 5.53).



**FIGURE 5.52** Children performing a song about Lenin that reflects ideological indoctrination (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 45. (Final illustration)

Kolesova (2022) notes that after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and a period of political and economic instability, the authorities recognised the need for a national patriotic ideal.<sup>99</sup> She observes that while Putin did not declare patriotism a national ideal until 2016, attempts to control historical memory and promote patriotic education had already begun in 2001. After several unsuccessful attempts to find a patriotic identity, a decision was made to focus on patriotism centred around the Great Patriotic War. In the ideological rhetoric of the time, soldiers who died were portrayed as immortal because “they died for the future of the unborn and ... the memory

<sup>99</sup> A comparison can be drawn here with the earlier exegetical discussion of the origin of collective narcissism and the drive to rebuild a group's self-esteem during times of national uncertainty.

of this deed will live forever” (Kolesova, 2022, para. 18). Subsequently, the idea of patriotic identity evolved into a mythologised narrative that is amplified by a range of rituals and symbols. Coalson (2022) notes that after 2005, Putin began to emphasise the importance of integrating ‘patriotic education’ into the Russian education system. However, at the beginning of the war in Ukraine “the country redoubled its emphasis on ‘patriotism’ in the schools” (para. 2). According to Coalson, mandatory weekly lessons discussed topics such as “‘It’s not scary to die for the motherland’, ‘Love your motherland, serve your motherland’, and, ‘The motherland’s happiness is worth more than life’” (para. 10).



**FIGURE 5.53** Examples of ideological submission imposed on children in contemporary Russia (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 302-303. (Draft)

Laruelle (2018) notes that to meet the diverse ideological requirements of the nation, Russian national identity (and its original focus on the cult of the Great Patriotic War) was infused with new

elements including nostalgia for the USSR’s cult of Stalin and the Romanov Empire, ‘traditional values’ promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church, and fascist ideas (Figure 5.54).



**FIGURE 5.54** A fusion of religious, military, and fascist ideology in Russia (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 303. (Draft)

## NOSTALGIA

The transformation of Russia’s national identity was gradual process. Gessen (2018) suggests that Putin’s initial popularity was driven by “a campaign of nostalgia for an imaginary heroic, happy, and orderly Soviet past” (p. 53). From 2000 he became “deeply devoted to the Soviet-era mythology of the secret police” with the aim to reimagine the Soviet era with a unique form of nostalgia, where Stalin was depicted as a heroic leader who brought Russia to victory in World War II and “transformed the country into a great power” (ibid., p. 104). Alkatiri and De Archellie (2021) argue that turning the celebration of victory over Nazism into a ritual created a new pseudo-religion.

Kernberg (2020) maintains that, with time, the idea of a group's inherent greatness can turn into "entitlement and a gradual distortion of reality, in which unpleasant and threatening aspects of reality are denied" (p. 10). This, he argues, can evolve into a new cultural and ideological phenomenon, where altered versions of past and present are confused and time seems to collapse. The group's leadership contributes to this confusion by interrupting the group's historical continuity and replacing it with "a 'new' nationalism, a new shared sentence or a 'new' morality," and a reimagined version of the group's past (Kernberg, 2020, p. 10).

Central to this dynamic is a form of nostalgia that Mazur (2015) describes as an intellectual and emotional construct that distorts the memories of the past, altering how people collectively recall and interpret a historical era or the social systems that once existed. She argues that such nostalgia functions like a utopia; a longing for the time that doesn't exist anymore or may have never existed (at least not in the shape that it is now remembered). Mazur observes that people seek in "the past what they are missing in life at present" and thus nostalgia can be explained as "one of the psychological mechanisms for avoiding emerging problems" (p. 225). She notes that nostalgia is often used as a tool for political manipulations, where "a glowing account of the past [contrasted with] the struggles of the present allows the nostalgia of catastrophes to be transformed into a myth of the 'golden age'" (p. 218). Nostalgia then becomes a "deliberate manipulation of historical images, sanctioned by the government," where certain historical facts are manipulated and exaggerated while others are filtered or forbidden (ibid., p. 225). Similarly, Covington (2018) argues that nostalgia (as a form of 'magical thinking') can combine anxiety about the future and fear of being left behind. He observes that this is often 'cured' by the promise to revive the "Golden Age that has been lost and can be retrieved" (p. 257). He notes that because 'believers' are unsure how

to bring this past Golden Age to reality, they trust the promises of political figures and do not question how the phenomenon will be realised.



**FIGURE 5.55** Lena's research of the 'fascist threat' narrative promoted by Russian propaganda (2025). The sequence shows how the Russian narrative about Ukrainian nationalists is entangled with fabricated events, while Russian nationalism, extremism, the use of mercenaries, and acts of violence are obscured. *Upgraded Gods*, p. 280. (Draft)

It is thus interesting to note that when Putin claimed that a segment of the Ukrainian population were Nazis, this was a logical continuation of a reconstructed narrative. Zeglen (2020) states that Putin manufactured a "fascist threat" to generate fear and panic after Euromaidan,<sup>100</sup> denouncing Ukrainian protestors as Nazis, fascists, and anti-Semites (Figure 5.55). He adds that in 2014, amid economic decline and mass protests against his third presidency, Putin

<sup>100</sup> Euromaidan is a name for mass "protests that coalesced in Kyiv's Maidan Square" (Bahid et al., 2024, p. 1). The protests were against Yanukovich (the Ukrainian president at the time), who aligned with Russia and opposed forging an agreement with the European Union.

used a strategy (which is discussed earlier in relation to collective narcissism) whereby a leader blames outsiders for a nation's internal problems and positions himself as the only leader "capable of dealing with the fascist menace" (p. 351).

Snyder (2018) calls Russian fascism *schizofascism*. He describes it as "actual fascists calling their opponents 'fascists', blaming the Holocaust on the Jews, treating the Second World War as an argument for more violence" (p. 145). However, as can be seen from the earlier exegetical discussion, victim blaming or blame shifting is a tool that is often used by people with narcissistic tendencies.<sup>101</sup>

## THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

In considering Laruelle's (2018) diverse ideological requirements of Putin's 'national identity', it is useful to discuss the role of the Russian Orthodox Church. Stoeckl (2024) argues that its current role is "confined to providing ritualistic and spiritual legitimization for state ideology, perpetuating a logic of authority, control, obedience, and dichotomous friend/enemy thinking" (p. 1). She suggests that, within this framework, the church serves as a ceremonial and religious front for authoritarian, imperial ambitions of the government. Mennecke and Kreß (2025) note that the church deliberately portrays the war with rhetoric that matches official state ideological narratives. Furthermore, they posit a form of 'spiritual guidance' as a tool to influencing believers' emotions and enforcing ideological conformity. Notably, Coman (2023) observes that the Russian Orthodox Church supports the war in Ukraine and encourages people to carry out their military obligations, stating that "if you die for your country, you will be with God in his kingdom, glory and

<sup>101</sup> See subsection 'The need for validation'.

eternal life" (p. 333). Similarly, Składanowski et al. (2025) note that the Russian Orthodox Church has "fervently supported Russian military actions, attributing them with religious and metaphysical significance" (p. 1). They note that in 2024 the church introduced and signed a document framing the war in Ukraine as a sanctified conflict. The document said:

from a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus [*sic*], fulfil the mission of the 'Holder', protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West that has fallen into Satanism. (Składanowski et al., 2025, p. 2)

This is shown in Figures 5.56.



**FIGURE 5.56**  
The Russian Orthodox Church's legitimisation of war being adopted by Lena's friend (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 315. (Draft)

## FASCIST IDEOLOGY (AND THE CONCEPT OF РУССКИЙ МИР)

The third element of Russian national identity evidenced in *Upgraded Gods* is the use of what is often referred to as 'fascist ideology'. There is considerable speculation on the subject, as well as attempts to deny the existence of fascism in Russia. However, Tushkin (2023) has argued that fascist ideas were promoted by the "Kremlin's chief ideologue," Vladislav Surkov (para. 18). Surkov introduced Putin to the fascist philosopher Ivan Ilyin, and this influenced the development

of the concept of Русский мир (a term that can be translated as 'Russian world', but also 'Russian peace'). Tushkin notes that the word eventually "became a codename for Russian imperialism" (2023, para. 20).

Coman (2023) explains that, according to the architects of the Русский мир concept, Ukraine belongs to "Русский мир, from which it tried to depart as a rebellious child seduced by the West — [and therefore] it needs to be purified from foreign influences and brought back home" (p. 339).

In a declaration condemning the Русский мир ideology, international Orthodox scholars and theologians have argued that "Putin and Patriarch Kirill have used the Russian world [Русский мир] ideology as a principal justification for the invasion" (Public Orthodoxy, 2022, para. 3). This ideology considers Ukraine, with its capital in Kyiv, as the Русский мир's common spiritual centre and the 'mother' of Holy Russia (the place of origin of the Russian nation). This is assumption is illustrated in Figure 5.57.



**FIGURE 5.57** An example of the Русский мир (Russkiy mir) ideology subsumed into everyday rhetoric, by someone who may not fully comprehend its intended meaning (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 315. (Draft)

In March 2025 the creator of the Русский мир ideology, Surkov, gave a rare interview to *L'Express* (2025). Recalling Surkov's position that "For Russia, permanent expansion is not just another idea, it is the existential condition of our historical existence" (para. 9), the interviewer asked what he saw as Russia's borders. Surkov stated:

I built an official ideology based on the concept of the 'Russian world', which already existed in philosophical circles. The Russian world has no borders. The Russian world is everywhere there is Russian influence, in one form or another: cultural, informational, military, economic, ideological or humanitarian ... In other words, it is everywhere. The extent of our influence varies greatly from region to region, but it is never zero. So we will spread out in all directions, as far as God wills and as strong as we are. (*L'Express*, 2025, para. 10)

Snyder (2018) states that Ivan Ilyin (who inspired the vision of Русский мир) denied the independence of Ukraine. Accordingly, he believed that Ukraine had no rights to exist, and this belief, Snyder argues, provided Putin with an ideological justification for the invasion. This may be why Putin (2022) quoted Ilyin on 30 September 2022, at the annexation ceremony of four Ukrainian regions. He stated:

I would like to conclude my speech with the words of a true patriot, Ivan Aleksandrovich Ilyin: "If I consider Russia my Motherland, it means that I love, contemplate and think in Russian, sing and speak in Russian; that I believe in the spiritual strength of the Russian people. Its spirit is my spirit; its fate is my fate; its suffering is my grief; its flourishing is my joy." (para. 73)

In the translation of this speech, the term 'Russian people' (*русский народ*) is treated as a singular noun (similar to the use of words fish and sheep in English). Snyder (2018) describes Ilyin's vision of the Russian people as a single organism, in which individuals are "not to think and feel at all" (p. 22). In other words, in Ilyin's conception of society the individual human being ceases to exist.

Figures 5.56 and 5.57 illustrate how this ideology affected the Russian people. Some reflection of the ideology also appears in a conversation with Lena’s mother, who discusses the role of Putin as a saviour.<sup>102</sup>

Barbashin (2018) notes that Ilyin proposed suppressing rationality in people and reshaping humanity through a selection process, producing individuals who would unquestioningly love the leader and submit to his supreme authority (para. 6). He argued that

Ivan Ilyin is proposing for Russia a creation of a national dictatorship that would rely on the exceptional roles of the church and the army, and would engage in constant ‘reeducation’ of people for the sake of a holy mission, including a ‘defence’ of vast Eurasian landmasses from a multitudes of enemies, as well as a nurturing of lesser nations that live on these territories. His philosophy is based on the cult of ‘burdens and ordeals’ of the Russian peoples, its exceptionalism and certain superiority, and he demands a national spiritual renewal, selection and homogenization of the society based upon the criteria of ‘spiritual worth’ with all the consequences for the ‘wrong people’. (2018, para. 12)

Snyder (2018) argues that Ilyin anticipated a Soviet power that would transition into a fascist dictatorship, where “the preservation of all Soviet territory [and] permanent war against the sinful West” will become the mission of Russian people (p. 42).

102 See Figure 5.43.

## CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Having discussed the ideological construct of contemporary Russia, it is useful to briefly cover the nature and dissemination of modern propaganda.

In his analysis of how the Russian regime shapes public opinion, Alyukov (2022), notes that “federal television channels are considered ‘critical elements of the political system’” (p. 338) (Figure 5.58). He argues that the power of the propaganda, rather than residing in “sophisticated strategies of persuasion,” is manifested in a form of political apathy that has been knowingly created by the authoritarian regime (p. 353). Such regimes, he explains, rely on promoting political disengagement. As a result, people often avoid forming coherent political views, choosing not to “challenge authoritarian equilibrium” and believing that their individual participation has little effect.



FIGURE 5.58  
An example of television propaganda portraying an ‘outside enemy’ as dehumanised and dangerous to the ingroup (2025).  
*Upgraded Gods*, p. 300. (Draft)

In *Upgraded Gods* we encounter this phenomenon multiple times. Indicative is an instance early in the narrative, in a discussion between бабушки (babushki — old women) on a bench (Figure 5.12). Later, the same behaviour is illustrated when Lena’s friend argues that it is not for women and artists to think about politics (Figure 5.41).

Beyond the agency of television, Mashuri et al. (2021) note that social media has elevated propaganda to a new level, allowing messages to spread quickly and widely, and providing channels that

can mobilise collective protest by fuelling anger, group identity, and perceptions of injustice and deprivation. They observe that “people are starting to rely more on misinformation, instead of facts or real data” (p. 506), and disinformation now “spreads faster, farther, and deeper,” becoming a catalyst for collective action (Mashuri et al., 2021, pp. 506–507). Bakir and McStay (2018) observe that disinformation is often deliberately written to include emotionally charged, empathetic narratives that influence audiences’ decision making and undermine<sup>103</sup> the credibility of legitimate information (thus, weakening evidence-based news). They observe that social media algorithms further amplify the popularity of this content by targeting specific groups. Kruglova (2021) argues that the power of online platforms lies in their ability to “spread beliefs and facilitate communication between existing members and to recruit new ones and even mobilize them for attacks” (p. 645). She suggests that social media plays a significant role in spreading far-right ideas, strengthening group identity, creating emotional bonds, forming communities and promoting specific ideologies that reinforce beliefs. Such media, she believes, is concerned with “re-creating and changing the identity of members and their perception of the world” (p. 646). This influence of social media is illustrated in Figure 5.59.

Bjola and Papadakis (2020) claim that the primary goal of new Russian propaganda is not to

alter people’s views in support of certain policies, but to induce them into a state of self-defeating and endemic scepticism by undermining the very criteria on the basis of which they develop their cognitive abilities to make sense, interpret and shape social reality. (p. 639)

<sup>103</sup> Yakovlev (2022) discusses a Russian propaganda technique called *the rotten herring*, which relies on spreading a shockingly false accusation. He argues that once such an accusation enters public space and is repeated across different media, the individual inevitably becomes associated with the false claim, regardless of proof.



**FIGURE 5.59** An example of social media’s role in spreading disinformation and shaping collective identity through emotionally charged narratives and targeted content (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 296–297. (Draft)

Similarly, Brandt (2021) notes that Kremlin-financed propaganda deliberately spreads or amplifies false or misleading information to “proliferate preferred, distorted narratives” and spread “multiple, at times conflicting, conspiracy theories to deflect criticism of their misdeeds” (p. 128). Williamson (2016) notes that although it only takes a short amount of time to construct disinformation, the amount of energy needed to refute it is greater in magnitude. This phenomenon he refers to as ‘Brandolini’s Law’.

This is interesting, because Stoica and Umbreş (2021) note that collective narcissists are predisposed to believing in conspiracy theories, especially those that can be viewed as a threat to the group. They maintain that people with narcissistic tendencies see themselves as the victims of evil forces that are responsible for their problems. In a related manner, Mashuri et al. (2021) note that collective narcissism also leads to prejudiced views, conspiratorial thinking, belief in disinformation, biased opinions, monological thinking, and collective action driven by false information. They

suggest that, when a narcissistic group does not receive the external validation it needs, it may rely on conspiratorial thinking or fake news to explain a sense of threat.

## GLOBAL REACH

Towards the end of *Upgraded Gods*, I include an incident I experienced with a weed-control officer. This episode indicates the pernicious agency of Russian propaganda on an international scale (Figure 5.60). Although the incident is locally contextualised, it is indicative of a pervasive phenomenon.



**FIGURE 5.60**  
An example of the global reach of Russian disinformation (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 286–287. (Draft)

Bjola and Papadakis (2020) state that currently, “Western countries face an unprecedented, systematic, and unrelenting disinformation assault on their cyberspace, mainly from Russia” (p. 639). Despite this, they argue there is still little understanding of how nations might protect themselves against cyber warfare. Russian propaganda, they claim, has been employed to break down “trust in democratic institutions of the press and politics, along with educational and civil society institutions [to the extent that it undermines] the credibility of official information in the news” (ibid., p. 640).

Brandt (2021) observes that Russia uses a network of influencers, troll farms, and websites that work as proxy and are “linked to the Kremlin through a network of non-transparent personal and financial ties” (p. 130). She claims that Putin invests large sums to target overseas audiences and he continues to expand this influence.<sup>104</sup>

Arcos et al. (2022) acknowledge that “the target audiences of disinformation implemented as part of hybrid threats are often unaware of these illegitimate uses of digital media by foreign actors and their proxies” (p. 3). This issue is illustrated in the comic (Figure 5.60), where the weed-control officer does not realise that he has been consuming state-sponsored media from Russia.

Fisher (2020) argues that to hide affiliations with Kremlin funding, Russia hires Western news presenters and employs bribed ‘experts’.

In Figure 5.61 the comic refers to strategies used by the KGB in the past and by Russia today, to achieve what Bezmenov (2016), a KGB defector, refers to as ‘Soviet liberation’, which is often followed by

<sup>104</sup> She claims that the budget afforded this initiative in 2021 was approximately “US\$2.8 billion, an increase of more than US\$400 million over previous years” (Brandt, 2021, p. 141).

“thousands of unequivocal examples of the horrendous human suffering, torture and mass death” (p. 3). He explains that a key part of this ‘liberation’ involves *ideological subversion* — the process of “changing the perception of reality in the minds of millions of peoples all over the world” (Bezmenov, 2016, p. 3).



**FIGURE 5.61** A discussion of ideological subversion as a strategy for altering perceptions of reality (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 289. (Draft)

Bezmenov (1984/2020) explains that subversion consists of four stages: demoralisation, destabilisation, crisis, and ‘normalisation’.<sup>105</sup> He argues that once a person is demoralised he becomes unable to critically assess information, because facts no longer mean anything to him. Bezmenov argues that even if a ‘demoralised person’ is shown proof in documents, photographs, or direct exposure to a Soviet concentration camp, he or she would still refuse to believe it, until harsh reality hits them directly. An example of such demoralisation is shown in Figure 5.62.

<sup>105</sup> The term *нормализация* (normalisation), Bezmenov notes, was used in the USSR to describe how, after horrific events, people eventually come to accept what has happened as a new normal.



**FIGURE 5.62** An example of demoralisation, where individuals lose the ability to critically assess information despite clear evidence to the contrary (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 314. (Draft)

## THE FUNCTION OF PUNISHMENT AND REWARD IN THE USSR AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

### REWARD

Permeating the narrative of *Upgraded Gods* are diverse examples of how society and the government’s system of reward operate through the provision and dynamics of privilege. Some examples are explicit, for example the incident in a Soviet shop<sup>106</sup> or the discussion surrounding propagandistic online influencers (where Lena questions whether they are on the payroll of a Kremlin organisation).<sup>107</sup> Other rewards are more subtle and do not involve material benefits, but rather

<sup>106</sup> Figures 5.7–5.8.

<sup>107</sup> Figure 5.59.

the sense of belonging to something greater (for example, a belief that 'Russian people are chosen', which is illustrated in Figure 5.40).

Figure 5.63 illustrates how favours based on nepotism, bribery, and hierarchy (often accompanied by theft, large or small) involved an expectation of 'repayment'. To be wealthy in the USSR was understood as possessing a high-ranking position that would give access to a wider range of connections and 'favours'. In Russian, this was called *blat* (блат).



**FIGURE 5.63**  
An example of *blat*, the system of connections and favours in the USSR (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 10. (Final illustration)

Zaloznaya et al. (2022) note the deep roots of *blat*, describing it as a network of individuals who obtained unavailable (or scarce) goods and services through the use of personal connections.

In my childhood, *blat* was not only accepted by people, but it was also treated it as an integral part of life in the Soviet Union (a survival technique). As a system of privilege some people preferred it, because they saw it as a way of bypassing bureaucracy.<sup>108</sup> It did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR; instead, it adapted to new

<sup>108</sup> Also refer to Figure 5.13 as an illustration of how *blat* was integral to how attitudes to business functioned.

circumstances. The same can be said about theft. This is illustrated in Figures 5.64 and 5.65.



**FIGURE 5.64**  
An example of theft normalised as a survival strategy, learned across generations in Russia (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 169. (Draft)



**FIGURE 5.65**  
An example of petty theft treated as acceptable behaviour (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 174–175. (Draft)

Harding (2011) argues that in contemporary Russia stealing became a pathological habit and the hierarchical structure of the society resembled a mafia organisation. He argues that there is persuasive evidence that “under Putin, the government, FSB and criminal elements have melded together to run Russia” (p. 230) A small example of such functioning is recalled in Figure 5.66.



**FIGURE 5.66**  
An example of a government organisation using mafia-like practices (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 172–173. (Draft)

Harding (2010) claims that

[the] Kremlin relies on criminals and rewards them with political patronage, while top officials collect bribes 'like a personal taxation system.' Russia is a corrupt, autocratic kleptocracy centred on the leadership of Vladimir Putin, in which officials, oligarchs and organised crime are bound together to create a 'virtual mafia state' ... [that uses] arms trafficking, money laundering, personal enrichment, protection for gangsters, extortion and kickbacks. (paras. 1–3)

Gessen (2020) argues that the term 'mafia state' (as a "clan-like system in which one man distributes money and power to all other members") might be an articulate description of contemporary Russian society (p. 6).

While material reward operates as an agent of social control, the avoidance of punishment (not being imprisoned, not being forced to emigrate for safety, not fearing society's ostracism) constitutes another dimension of the dynamic.

## FEAR — THE STATE OF TERROR

As much as the reward system might work and may be seen as inevitable for survival, when I was growing up, the fear induced by the state was arguably a more powerful reinforcement. Bezmenov (2016) states that, historically, the KGB employed "the psychological effect of 'paralyzing with fear,'" both inside the country and abroad (pp. 30–31). This ranged from "occasional killings" of individuals who became a problem for the regime, to the threat of nuclear war (ibid.).

Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) argue that terror plays a key role in totalitarian dictatorships and autocracies. They note that,

[Totalitarian terror] aims to fill everyone with fear and vents in full its passion for unanimity. Terror then embraces the entire society, searching everywhere for actual or potential deviants from the totalitarian unity. Indeed, to many it seems as if they are hunted, even though the secret police may not touch them for years, if at all. Total fear reigns. (p. 169)

Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) note that such regimes often use the latest technology to extend their surveillance and control everywhere, eliminating safe spaces.<sup>109</sup> The fear of being 'observed' magnifies the regime's power and creates an appearance of unanimity. Those in opposition might be able to avoid detection, but they are left isolated. This paralyses resistance and makes conformity seem preferable.

<sup>109</sup> This is discussed in Figure 5.48.

In Russia, this fear was built on millions of deaths. Gessen (2018) states that “the Soviet killing machine” was the largest and most efficient of the 20th century, instilling fear across the entire population and making clear that no one was safe (p. 12). In *Upgraded Gods I* recall stories told to me by my grandmother and the anxiety of my mother that we might be overheard repeating such memories as early examples of such fear. It was understood that anyone could be executed or sent to the Gulag. Gessen states that “tens of millions of Soviet citizens and thousands of foreigners were incarcerated in the hundreds of camps, prisons, and colonies that made up the Gulag”; many of these individuals died from execution, torture, starvation, or hard living conditions (p. 12). Zhukov and Talibova (2018) note that Soviet state terror was distinctive for its scale; the Gulag network was more than 50 times larger than the system of prison camps in Nazi Germany. Charges that could result in incarceration included “‘counter-revolutionary’ crimes, including treason, insurrection, terrorism, espionage, contacts with foreign states, propaganda, agitation, and a failure to report any of the above” (p. 270). Convictions were established not by a court but by a ‘troika’ (an NKVD officer, a party member, and a prosecutor), and were often resourced through interrogation and forced confession (through torture). Some individuals were executed on the day of their arrest.

In the comic I illustrate the coexistence of parallel realities of incarceration by contrasting propaganda’s cheerful posters of the Gulag prison camps with less-disseminated photographs of the period (Figure 5.67). The difference between these images is so marked that, even today, many Russian people refuse to believe estimates of the Gulag’s death toll. For many contemporary Russians, the choice of believing in the dream of the ‘great father’ Stalin is safer than accepting documentary evidence of historical Soviet state terror.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Such denial resonates with ways that children cope with trauma by denying or suppressing it.



FIGURE 5.67 Propaganda posters contrasted with images of Gulag prison camps (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 98. (Draft)

This fear is illustrated in Lena’s life early on, when her friends see nothing wrong with Putin coming to power or with protests against him being suppressed (Figure 5.68).

The fear resurfaced during protests in Russia against the war in Ukraine, yet many people still attended them despite the threat of arrest (Figure 5.69). The issue is also evident in the comic’s images that show children being arrested and the impact of these arrests on Lena’s friends.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>111</sup> See Figure 5.48.



**FIGURE 5.68** Lena's fear and her friends' indifference regarding Russia's shift toward totalitarianism (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 184. (Draft)

Zhukov and Talibova's (2018) study of why Russians did not protest more against the regime revealed that Soviet repression effected deterrence in several ways. First, they note that the regime remained in power for 70 years and only lost a grip on society for a very short period (so the threat of terror never really went away). Second, they note that informants were everywhere, and this made people afraid to speak, even to friends or family. Finally, they note that the punishments for individual 'transgressions' were often extended to family members, and this served to pass fear on to the next generation.



**FIGURE 5.69** Examples of how the government creates fear and suppresses dissent (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 284-285. (Draft)

We see fear permeating the comic. An early example is evidenced in the conversation between Lena's father and his friend, and the admonishment he gives the child when he realizes that she has overheard his conversation (Figure 5.70).<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Similar anxiety is evident in Figures 2.16 and 5.3.



FIGURE 5.70  
An example of fear passed through generations (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 36–37. (Final illustration)

Later in the narrative, a similar anxiety appears in Lena’s conversation with two friends who fear that their own parents might report them for their anti-Putin political views (Figure 5.71).

Bezmenov’s (2016) psychological ‘paralysis by fear’ is also illustrated in *Upgraded Gods* when Russia bombs civilian areas of Ukraine, intended to spread terror amongst the populace (Figures 5.72 and 5.74). The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (2025) has noted that “since the beginning [of the] full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022, HRMMU has documented the deaths of at least 13,580 civilians, including 716 children, and 34,115 civilians injured, including 2,173 children” (para. 9). I illustrate my feelings of anxiety and helplessness in the face of documentary evidence of these attacks in an account of the tenuous connection I maintained with one of my friends, who was attempting to save her young family (Figures 5.72 and 5.73).



FIGURE 5.71  
An example of fear of betrayal within the family (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, p. 291. (Draft)



FIGURE 5.72  
An account of personal anxiety and helplessness in the time of war (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 292–293. (Draft)

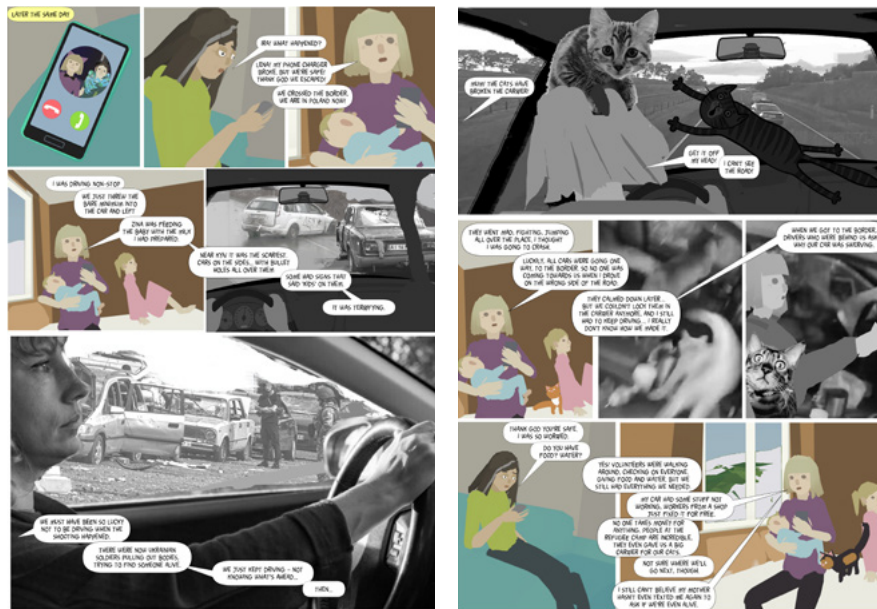


FIGURE 5.73  
Lena's friend trying to save her young family during the attacks (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 298–299. (Draft)



FIGURE 5.74  
The horrors that Russian soldiers committed in Ukraine (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 306–307. (Draft)

*Upgraded Gods* also shows how a traumatised, painful past and the fear it causes are often not discussed (Koebach & Robjant, 2021) (Figure 5.75). When a society reaches the stage when “the reality of the indiscriminate, unpredictable and extreme violence is too frightening to confront since it is uncontrollable,” it can exhibit forms of collective avoidance (of the issue) (Koebach & Robjant, 2021, p. 5). This can result in a form of learned helplessness, and pressure for more safety and control from the government. Koebach and Robjant (2021) note that eventually such a society may adapt to violence, and the threshold of violence will be lowered, leading “to an increased collective aggression, and therefore higher levels of family and community violence, or crime” (p. 2). They note that this can create a vicious cycle, escalating violence and crime to such a level that the justice system is unable to serve its purpose in stopping it.



FIGURE 5.75  
A comparison between family avoidance and the later revelation of state-actioned punishment (2025). *Upgraded Gods*, pp. 311, 313. (Draft)

In this chapter I have discussed how narcissism and trauma (both individual and collective) can create a vicious cycle. Using instances from the comic, I have illustrated how these forces intertwine and reproduce themselves across personal, social, and political contexts.<sup>113</sup>

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**113** These issues have been unpacked because they are the dominant themes in *Upgraded Gods*. However, I am cognisant that there are other aspects of the narrative worthy of examination, including the agency of dark humour; the preservation of memory and knowledge (both individual and collective); and patterns of victimisation and trauma bonding. These will form the focus of postdoctoral writing about the work.

# CONCLUSION



CHAPTER 6

## SUMMARY

The thesis has sought to address two related questions.

- 1 What is the potential for personal experience, conveyed through a comic book, to illuminate and make accessible a consideration of social issues and the long-term effects of trauma within society?
- 2 How might a comic book constitute a form of social resistance as a counter-narrative to oppressive intra-personal, social, and political regimes, by navigating the potentials of image, narrative, characterisation, and cultural reflection?

In addressing these questions, the study has examined how a comic book can serve as a vehicle for translating complex psychological, social, and political concepts into an emotionally resonant, accessible narrative. *Upgraded Gods* interweaves autobiographical material with historical and social critique, to demonstrate how a personal narrative (situated within the cultural, historical, and ideological landscape) can illuminate the enduring impact of childhood and intergenerational trauma on both individual and broader societal structures.

Narratively and theoretically, the thesis has considered trauma responses that can lead to the development of psychological defence mechanisms (including narcissistic tendencies), suppression of the True Self, and internalised systems of control that can be reinforced by fear and reward. By tracing parallels between private and public realms, the comic reveals how unresolved trauma can contribute not only to psychological suffering, but also to the normalisation of authoritarianism.

The exegesis has described how the creative process itself became an inquiry, where research and practice informed and reshaped one another. Through a complex system of narration, the comic demonstrates how multiple, sometimes contradictory, viewpoints and perspectives can coexist, positioning the personal as a subjective lens through which systemic issues are examined. Thus, *Upgraded Gods* demonstrates how a visual narrative can both document and resist. It also illustrates how the comic medium can enable multi-layered representations of fragmented memory, which can be harnessed to create a deeper understanding of the past.

## CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The research makes contributions to diverse fields.

First, drawing on studies by researchers like Covington (2018), Fromm (1964), Goldner-Vukov and Moore (2010), Hart and Stekler (2022), Kernberg (1975/2004), MacDonald (2014), Miller (1997), Volkan (2013), Winnicott (1965/1994), and Golec de Zavala et al. (2009), the study reframes the discussion of authoritarian systems and their relationship to trauma and narcissism. It does this by foregrounding childhood and intergenerational trauma as integral to understanding how narcissistic defences scale from individual to collective contexts, perpetuating cycles of abuse and control. This contribution is grounded in the use of autobiographical comic book narration, which integrates personal experience, visual storytelling, and critical analysis to examine how these dynamics operate across both intimate and socio-political contexts. In so doing, the thesis expands psychological understandings of authoritarianism beyond ideology or pathological leadership by tracing the ways in which authoritarian systems can be internalised, enacted, and perpetuated through everyday family dynamics and coping mechanisms rooted in survival.

Second, building on the work of contemporary writers like Hughes (2020), Guibert (2003/2009), Lewis et al. (2013–2016), Sacco (1996/2001), and Una (2015), *Upgraded Gods* contributes to the field of autoethnographical visual narrative, where comic design reaches beyond personal testimony or memoir to operate as a tool for political and social critique. Positioned alongside the criticality of comic-book authors like Delisle (2003/2007), Lomasko (2017), Nakazawa (1973/2004), Satrapi (2003–2004/2007), Spiegelman (1973–1991/2003), and Tran (2011), *Upgraded Gods* offers an independent counter-narrative to rhetoric controlled by the state and reinforced by society. In so doing, it contributes to a corpus of creative work that demonstrates how illustrated narrative can illuminate processes of suppression and provide a space for reclaiming personal agency, truth, and freedom, (including the right to remember, speak, and interpret history on one’s own terms). By extension, the narrative invites the reader to critically question inherited beliefs and examine the role these beliefs play in shaping both individual and wider political and social structures.

The comic also contributes to a growing body of work by female authors like Barry, (2002/2005); Bechdel (2006); Gloeckner (2000); Satrapi (2003–2004/2007); and Una (2015) who, drawing on embodied personal experience, have used comics to challenge dominant societal narratives related to women’s roles.

Finally, by translating complex theoretical concepts into a comic book, the thesis demonstrates how an artistic inquiry can be employed to articulate theoretical ideas and analytical depth, so they reach wider audiences. As evidenced in the work of Hughes (2020) and Una (2015), such approaches involve translating psychological and political theory into lived scenes that evoke emotional recognition and critical reflection.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

There is an academic truism that suggests “a doctoral thesis is never finished, you just relinquish it to the examiners.” Perhaps behind this phrase lies an understanding of the etymological root of the word thesis. *θέσις (tithenai)*, means “a proposition, a setting down or placing” (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008, p. 1497). If a thesis is a ‘proposition’, then it is also a living phenomenon, a product of time and context. Integral to this is its propensity to grow. Accordingly, this thesis may be understood as a proposition that is in a state of growth. While *Upgraded Gods* is a discrete comic artefact and the exegesis is an explanation that “interprets, guide or leads” (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008, p. 498) the reader through its development and scholarly contexts, the next phase of the research is concerned with expansion.

Because *Upgraded Gods* is currently a proof of concept, in the next year I will progress it into a publishable comic.<sup>114</sup> This will involve finalising the artwork for the pages that have been blocked out (pp. 54–319). It will also involve refining layouts and applying edits based on publishers’ feedback.

I have designed the near-death-experience episode so it can be transformed into a VR experience and adapted for compatibility across multiple platforms. This aspect of the comic may require additional funding if I am not able to complete the work using only my own resources.

Separately, I will be researching publication of the virtual reality episode on different platforms that host immersive experiences. This near-death experience I plan to make accessible for free, so it can be used as promotional material for the printed comic. Consideration

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<sup>114</sup> I will be seeking publication pathways for the comic, including independent publishers that specialise in graphic memoirs and socially engaged comics.

will also be given to the comic's possible expansion into digital formats and exhibitions, particularly in educational or activist contexts.

As part of the finalisation process, I will undertake a careful audit of the visual references incorporated in the comic. This includes images I have sourced from the internet or screenshots from social media. This audit will apply only to images that reference real events (such as those depicting war or political repression).<sup>115</sup> I want to retain selected images under the provisions of fair use, particularly where they document historically significant moments and contribute to the work's critical and evidentiary value. Where permissions cannot be obtained or cleared, such material will be replaced or redrawn. This process will ensure that the final manuscript meets ethical and legal standards for image use, especially in relation to copyright.

I also plan to continue research into the relationship between trauma and narcissism, with a particular focus on how individuals caught in this cycle (whether as perpetrators or victims) may become trapped in psychological patterns that are difficult to break. The ongoing nature of this inquiry will extend to the writing of academic journal articles that explore the barriers to self-awareness and recovery, and the social, political, and familial conditions that reinforce such dynamics. I also intend to use *Upgraded Gods* as a case study to discuss how devices such as humour, characterisation, and documentary evidence can be used to heighten a sense of cultural distinctiveness in a comic-book narrative.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> It will not include 'placeholder' images or blocked-out scenes used in drafting the proof of concept.

<sup>116</sup> Indicative journals for such an article include *Studies in Comics* (Intellect), which publishes work related to methodologies, comics, and associated theory (<https://www.intellectbooks.com/studies-in-comics>), *Narrative Culture* (Wayne State University Press), a journal that publishes articles that theorise narrative as a broad human practice (<https://wsupress.wayne.edu/journals/narrative-culture/>), and the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (Taylor and Francis), which considers articles associated with the production and consumption of comics in cultural, institutional, and creative contexts (<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcom20>).

## CONCLUDING REFLECTION

I was born in Russia, a country home to nearly 195 ethnic groups,<sup>117</sup> some of whom, like me, lost their roots through ethnic cleansing. My allegiance and responsibility to the people living on this territory (especially children, who are the most vulnerable and dependent part of the population) is to expose systematic political abuse and deception. This places me in a vulnerable position. Russian prisons now contain many political prisoners arrested during protests against the war in Ukraine.<sup>118</sup> These are not ordinary institutions. They facilitate a system of torture<sup>119</sup> that some people do not survive.

I am also an author and illustrator. I witness times that have changed, as a totalitarian regime in the country that is home to my friends and family now threatens other nations. I also watch how, in other parts of the world, democracies are coming under threat, even in places like the United States. Consequently, I apply my abilities to support the continuance of democratic principles and the protection of freedom. However, I understand that freedom exists on several levels. At its most basic, it is the absence of physical constraint (when one is neither imprisoned nor enslaved) for being ideologically different to those who hold positions of power. Freedom also involves the ability to live according to one's own choices. A deeper dimension emerges in liberation from the controlling mind itself and from the

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<sup>117</sup> The number of 195 ethnic groups is given by Geopolitical Futures (2016). Similarly, Minority Rights Group International (2020) states that, according to the 2010 census, there are 193 ethnic groups; however, they also note that official figures indicate 277 languages spoken in Russia.

<sup>118</sup> According to OVD-Info, as of 10 October 2025, "1744 persons are deprived of their liberty in Russia today based on political motives" (para. 7). According to Reuters (2025), however, the numbers may be higher, with at least 10,000 people imprisoned if one includes Russian political prisoners and Ukrainian civilian hostages.

<sup>119</sup> The most compelling evidence of this is the leaking of 40 gigabytes of footage spanning 2018 to 2020. The material was obtained by the human rights group Gulagu.net. It reveals thousands of prisoners in multiple Russian prisons being beaten, tortured, and raped by guards (Sauer, 2021).

delusional contracts it creates as we attempt to cope with traumatic life experiences.<sup>120</sup>

By preserving lived experiences and re-examining suppressed histories, *Upgraded Gods* has sought to resist the erasure of memory imposed by authoritarian power. In place of official narratives designed to fragment or distort collective understanding, the work asserts continuity and coherence, offering space for marginalised voices to be heard. In doing so, it proposes that art can safeguard memory, confront manipulation, and contribute to the ongoing struggle for truth.

This project has been a transformative journey that has spanned more than a decade. As a Master of Philosophy thesis, it began as an exploration rooted in my near-death experience and the potential of virtual reality to express it. At the time I had no intention of delving into trauma, politics, or ideological critique. Yet, as the research evolved, the focus of my work changed, together with the world around me, amplifying the urgency of very different questions.

As Camus (1953/2022) states, “freedom is not a gift received from a State or a leader but a possession to be won every day by the effort of each and union of all” (para. 12). However, Baldwin (1985/2021) asserts that “freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and people are as free as they want to be” (p. 249). Thus, *Upgraded Gods* ends not with resolution but with awareness: that freedom, whether personal or collective, is never granted but is continually reclaimed. For freedom to exist, it must be exercised as an active and ongoing choice, one that demands the courage to resist both external domination and internalised fear and compliance.

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<sup>120</sup> The last level of freedom I experienced was the freedom from bodily limitation during the near-death experience, which also brought to the fore unanswered questions about existence.



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THANK YOU