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Webcomics as a Reflection of Current Social Anxieties: A Look at the Post-apocalyptic *For Their Own Good* (2020) by Kateryna Kosheleva

Abstract: The comic medium has long served as a reflection of contemporary social anxieties. Webcomics – comics created for online publication – have evolved from early works inspired by syndicated strips to address more serious issues, including pressing societal concerns. This article focuses on the ongoing Ukrainian webcomic *For Their Own Good* (2020), by Kateryna Kosheleva, analyzing how it engages with two prominent contemporary anxieties: anti-scientific sentiment and war. This study also examines the ways in which the comic medium effectively portrays these issues, drawing on relevant theories of comics and graphic narratives. The article concludes that webcomics, like other forms of graphic storytelling, provide a valuable lens for exploring societal turbulence, and should be considered in analyses of contemporary online graphic narratives.

Keywords: the comic medium, webcomics, graphic narratives, Ukrainian comics, war and conflict, anti-intellectualism, Kateryna Kosheleva, *For Their Own Good*

Abstrakt: Historia medium komiksowego jest tematycznie związana z refleksją nad współczesnymi problemami i zmartwieniami społecznymi. Szczególną rolę grają webkomiksy: komiksy, które są tworzone dla środowiska online i najczęściej publikowane na dedykowanych stronach internetowych. Wczesne webkomiksy były głównie inspirowane zabawnymi paskami publikowanymi w gazetach; z czasem jednak doszło do zmiany tonu – webkomiksy zaczęły się skupiać na poważnych tematach, m.in. aktualnych problemach społecznych. Niniejszy tekst skupia się na jednym przykładzie: publikowanego webkomiksu ukraińskiej autorki Kateryny Koszelewskiej pod tytułem *For Their Own Good* (2020). Artykuł przedstawia analizę dwóch istotnych wątków przedstawionych w webkomiksie: sentymentów antynaukowych oraz wojny. Ponadto zwraca uwagę na to, jak skuteczne jest medium komiksowe w ukazaniu tych wątków, odnosząc się przy tym do istotnych teorii komiksowych. Autor dochodzi do wniosku, że webkomiksy, tak jak inne powieści graficzne, ukazują w sposób wartościowy aktualne problemy społeczne. Co więcej, webkomiksy powinny być włączane w dyskusje i badania dotyczące rozwoju internetowych powieści graficznych, w szczególności tych dedykowanych współczesnym problemom społecznym.

Słowa kluczowe: medium komiksowe, webkomiksy, powieści graficzne, komiksy ukraińskie, wojna i konflikt, antyintelektualizm, Kateryna Kosheleva, *For Their Own Good*

In the current digital age, the comic medium has taken on more than a few new forms. A well-known example is the webcomic, although one can also differentiate further categories, such as digital comics, digitized comics, mobile comics or even interactive multi-narrative imagetexts known as hypercomics (Goodbrey 2013, 291–292; Niewiadoma 2022, 21–31). When webcomics first appeared in the 1980s, they existed as simple images either linked to emails or shared on forums. Frequently, their topic matter was humorous and relatively trivial, e.g. about everyday life or video games (Garrity 2011). Early webcomics of the 1980s and 1990s were primarily inspired by syndicated cartoons and comic strips (Niewiadoma 2022, 8–10), forms that in themselves were of humorous nature, but could also aptly draw attention to current events and issues. Garrity (2011) specifically pinpoints the first decade of the 2000s as pivotal for webcomics experimentation in both form and topical matter, which was largely connected to the introduction of the personal computer, the World Wide Web expansion, and growing access to a stable Internet connection. Indeed, it is around this time that the non-fictional webcomic gained in popularity; an example is Kochalka’s autobiographical webcomic strip, *American Elf* (1990), gaining traction. Similarly, Kleefeld connects the appearance and development of the Web, personal computers, and appearance of websites to the rapid growth of webcomics. Importantly, he notes that early webcomics reflected individual interests, which at the time were mostly related to technology (Kleefeld 2020, 21–22). This early approach, as he says, “helped to define the primary tone and style of later webcomics” (Kleefeld 2020, 21). While interest in subject matter underwent dynamic shifts and changes, ranging from fiction to non-fiction, and from simple entertainment to counterculture ideals, the core of idea of the webcomic was established early on, understood as an independent work freed from publisher’s constraints (Benatti 2024, 2), often taking advantage of such digital affordances as feedback mechanisms, interactive elements, and what Scott McCloud described as “the infinite canvas,” also known as infinite scrolling (McCloud 2009).¹

However, along with their ability to take advantage of the instantaneous nature of the Internet to publish almost immediately, webcomics were gradually defined through their oft-represented, independent subject matter. Furthermore, their specific para-textual adaptations were also key. In media studies, attention is frequently drawn to surrounding factors that influence particular texts and genres, including technology, platforms, and cultural norms. In his study on television genre theory, Jason Mittell comments that “[g]enres exist only through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural context” (Mittell 2001, 8).

¹ More information on the lack of typical pagination often present in webcomics can be found in Scott McCloud’s seminal book, *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form* (2000) and his blog entry, “The Infinite Canvas” (2009), <https://scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/canvas/>.

Indeed, Mittell's approach takes the weight off of strict taxonomy, encouraging a thorough inspection of cultural contexts and practical ways in which different kinds of media, mediums, and genres function. In fact, Mittell underscores both the fluidity and stability as a "discursive practice," which is connected intricately to ongoing discourse that frequently exists "outside the boundaries of text" (Mittell 2001, 8–16). In a similar fashion, in *Convergence Culture* Henry Jenkins draws attention to the fact that there is an erosion between the one-to-one understanding of medium and its function; everything is converging and overlapping, with current developing mediums influencing subject matter, genres, technology, and vice versa (Jenkins 2006, 10). Such approaches emphasize the continued need to go beyond strict textual analysis, and to take into consideration not just the medium, but also other factors that may be connected to a given work.

Applying this contemporary approach to webcomics as a medium and as a marker for independent genres one can indeed trace para-textual developments that have been crucial in defining webcomics. Firstly, webcomics were adapted to the browser window, "making use of the inherent elements of a web page in order to enrich their presentation" (Batinić 2022, 350). Furthermore, webcomics began to be understood as relying on two para-textual factors: the authorial intent to publish online, and the lack of a proprietary application needed to read webcomics (Kleefeld 2020, 2–4). In his book on webcomics, Kleefeld emphasizes the importance of these two factors, along with the development of contemporary crowdfunding and payment models (Kleefeld 2020, 34–36). These have culminated through the appearance of such platforms like Kickstarter and Patreon, along with webcomic hosting websites such as Webtoon that allow for creators to be paid, and for readers to freely access their favorite titles. As such, "webcomics as a whole became successful enough that industries have grown up around them to better support creators who just want to tell their stories" (Kleefeld 2020, 36). This allowed for the reducing of barriers to potential readers, and established webcomics as a democratic genre that was well-equipped to credibly dedicate itself to sensitive issues.

In general, the comic medium has a long history of providing a timely reflection of current social anxieties and issues. This is, for instance, reflected in academic publishing. In his introduction to the anthology *Comics Studies Here and Now*, Frederick Luis Aldama dubs comics a "unique, transformative cultural phenomena," referencing the breadth of subject matter that comics frequently dedicate themselves to, including timely contemporary matters (Aldama 2018, 2). Indeed, a cursory look at select publications over the past decade aptly shows this: for instance, there are Paul Gravett's (2014) key insights on comics' contributions to underground anarchy movements, or Chris Foss et al's (2016) edited anthology on the role of comics in shedding light on disabilities, and Marc DiPaolo's (2011, 2018) critical books on the representation of war, politics, and class conflict in comics.

Furthermore, an overview of canonical comic titles confirms the medium's general preoccupation with relevant social concerns. Notable examples belong to the superhero genre, such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) which preoccupies

itself with violence and cold war politics, while others belonging to the autobiographical genre, such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) or Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991), reflect the horrors of war and tyrannical rule. Others, such as Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006) and Kate Beaton's *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands* (2022) touch upon the problem of immigration, potential violence, financial insecurity and cultural displacement – all timely concerns for many contemporary readers. Today, comic authors continue to comment on the challenges humanity faces. This can be especially traced through the recent publishing of comic anthologies centered around impactful world events such as *COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology* (2021) discussing the devastation of the COVID pandemic, and *Lower Your Sights: A Benefit Anthology* (2022) dedicated to raising awareness regarding the war in Ukraine.

This brief cross-section of scholarly sources and comic titles is mentioned here to underline how often the comic medium takes to discussing modern anxieties and concerns; thus, comics can shed light on relevant matters at their time of publishing, the matters that frequently continue to be pertinent well into contemporary times. It was back in the 1940s that Sidonie M. Gruenberg urged to recognize comics as a social force, citing their general appeal and relative reading ease as valuable in drawing attention to current topics: “But in so far as the comics do appeal to greater multitudes and in so far as they do penetrate the thoughts and sentiments or multitudes, and affect attitudes, they constitute a social force” (Gruenberg 1944, 208). Hillary Chute also telegraphs the importance of the comic medium in offering a relevant and current reflection of political and social issues (Chute 2008, 455–456), and Achel Davis points to comics' long history in promoting activism, gently noting that a good comics scholar must remember to differentiate between comics' intent on either accurately reflecting current events and fulfilling a documentary role from comics that are propagandist in nature (Davis 2022, 6).²

Thus, it is unsurprising that comics often reflect the anxieties of the time: the past years have been turbulent worldwide, influencing creativity in various ways. It is why the following article focuses on one particular webcomic: *For Their Own Good* (2020), written by Ukrainian author Kateryna Kosheleva, analysing how the webcomic reflects and addresses two prominent current anxieties: anti-scientific and anti-intellectual sentiments, as well as war and conflict. Using the example of *For Their Own Good* (2020), the conclusion is such that webcomics, like other kinds of graphic narratives, are valuable in portraying current societal turbulence due to their form. Indeed, in the introduction to the anthology dedicated to teaching and the varied nature of comics, Craig Hill notes the comic medium's general communicative benefits that can span a wide variety of topics, including those that are challenging to approach (Hill 2017, 3–4). This notion can be easily extended to webcomics. In her article discussing the use of com-

² For more detailed information on the role comics play in culture and politics, one can turn to a variety of academic sources. The author of this article recommends two titles especially: *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities* (2015) edited by Rikke Platz Cortsen et al., and *The Power of Comics and Graphic Novels* (2023) by Matthew Smith et al.

ics in class to address difficult current issues, Kaitlin E. Thomas calls the comic medium ideal in presenting current events. She comments: “comics . . . are able to uniquely aid their reader to understand the ebbs and flows of society, politics, and history” (Thomas 2021, 368–372). It can be argued that *For Their Own Good* (2020) is similar in its intentions, only as a fictional, post-apocalyptic title.

Kateryna Kosheleva describes her creativity as “[lying] at the intersection of literature and visual arts-graphic novels” (Kosheleva 2022a). She frequently addresses current events and contemporary themes; most prominent in her recent work is the focus on her country’s distress, as evidenced, for instance, by her participation in the *Lower Your Sights* (2022) and *Peremoha: Victory for Ukraine* (2022) anthologies. As Kosheleva explains in a short interview “With the war raging in Ukraine, my home country, it’s difficult to make art about anything else, and [*Lower Your Sights*] was an excellent way of telling a story of the people living through it” (Kosheleva 2022a). Furthermore, her artistic work also contains sci-fi, dystopia, post-apocalyptic and cyberpunk themes, as well as historical and folklore topics, examples of which can be seen in her portfolio on her website Tokkamak. Her most current work is *For Their Own Good* (2020), the ongoing post-apocalyptic webcomic that follows a 14-year-old disabled heroine, Grace Hoffer. The plot centers around Grace’s life in a post-apocalyptic world, which is riddled with violent conflicts and harsh living conditions.

As Kosheleva mentions in an Instagram announcement regarding the continuation of her webcomic, “The story is inspired by different times and a different conflict, but I believe the insights it’s built around are still valid” (Kosheleva 2022b). As such, the webcomic functions as a relevant commentary for contemporary events: the prevailing themes in *For Their Own Good* (2020) center around unfortunately timely issues aptly commented on through plot progression and the skilled use of the comic medium.

Therefore, the article devotes attention to the two main themes dominant in the webcomic:

- anti-intellectualism and anti-science sentiments, portrayed through the presence of radical anti-scientist factions and general loss of knowledge,
- war and conflict manifested through multiple allusions to a past apocalyptic war and plot-current conflicts.

These themes are commented upon in subsequent paragraphs,³ with a focus on how Kosheleva enhances the presentation of them using the comic medium.

Overall, Kosheleva’s work situates itself within the contemporary Ukrainian digital comics and webcomics culture. In recent years, grassroots efforts within the comic medium have been embraced, becoming pivotal in shedding light on current issues and concerns, as well as themes rooted in Ukrainian tradition and folklore. A testament to this are the appearance of dedicated hosting platforms, such as Kartopelka.fun or the now-defunct Comics.com.ua, as well as the emergence of documentary digital comics, a notable example being titles published for

³ Page numbers are referenced according to Tokkamak, the website the webcomic is hosted on. Page numbers are preceded by either a chapter number (abbreviated to ‘chap. 1’ etc.) or the extra post-chapter addition titled “sidetracked” (abbreviated to ‘st. 1’ etc.), for clarity.

the online Ukrainian INKER magazine.⁴ Moreover, folkloric and ethnographic motifs are being insistently explored within horror and dystopian genres, evidenced by the appearance of such print comics as *Ochi Demona: Franko* (2022), *Katarsys* (2023) and *V Zemliu* (2018–2021). Importantly, the aforementioned titles and platforms represent a turn towards exploring historical trauma, memory, conflict, and national identity within the comic medium, a vital cultural shift within Ukrainian literature that Kataryna Kosheleva's work has become a part of.

It must also be noted that Kosheleva refers to her work as a graphic novel. Indeed, *For Their Own Good* (2020) has the characteristics most often associated with the graphic novel, i.e. three tiers of panels on each page, fully colored pages that are roughly 7 by 10 inches in print form, an independent publishing status, and a poignant, stand-alone topic matter. The term “graphic novel” itself has been initially used as a way to elevate comics, denoting their non-superhero, non-fictional topic matter (Hatfield 2005, 5–6; La Cour 2022, 139). However, in recent years, the term has been used fairly interchangeably with other types of comics, and is largely used to denote the aforementioned formatting and self-contained characteristics – graphic novels are usually book length, and are made up of either one volume or a few. *For Their Own Good* (2020) is published in volumes⁵ online, with each volume containing 20 pages, plus the four page side-stories. Still, it maintains its webcomic status: it is published online with the intention of being read on a browser, and thus can be classified as medium-native according to Kleefeld's categorization (Kleefeld 2020, 2–4). Moreover, it is not printed and contains reader feedback mechanisms, as pages are also published on Instagram where readers can comment on updates; thus, *For Their Own Good* (2020) situates itself within the overall webcomic culture associated with independent publishing and direct, social-media driven reader engagement.

Therefore, at its core, *For Their Own Good* (2020) can be classified as a long-form epistolary webcomic title, much like the well-known post-apocalyptic webcomic *Stand Still, Stay Silent* (2022) by Minna Sundberg, which has also been published online (and in print) in similar format. On the basis of these observations, this article will refer to *For Their Own Good* (2020) as a webcomic, but in the understanding that the term is used as a means of specific cultural and genre categorization, and not as a way to discredit Kosheleva's choice of terminology.

⁴ Current issues can be found on the website Inker.world. The magazine can also be supported through Patreon, indicating an overarching trend in grassroots efforts based on crowdfunding within Ukrainian comics.

⁵ At the moment of writing the article six have been published; the author has also announced a hiatus.

Anti-Intellectualism and Anti-Science Sentiments

The webcomic's strong underlying warning against rising anti-intellectualism is perhaps best demonstrated in the opening pages showing the heroine exploring an abandoned and destroyed library (Kosheleva 2020, 1–5). There are clear burnt piles of books (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 1, 5), insinuating a deliberate destruction of preserved knowledge. Indeed, the post-apocalyptic world Grace inhabits is incredibly resistant to intellectual and scientific advancements. Books have no real value as many cannot read or choose not to. An example of this can be seen as early as in chapter 1, where Grace barter for a book, persuading a shopkeeper that if he exchanges it for a bottle of whiskey: “you’ll be safe with no sneaky Redeemer or some such findin’ you’re hoardin’ them weird dangerous books” (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 1, 11). The Redeemers (shortened to “dims” within the webcomic) that Grace mentions are a heavily-armed, fanatical, quasi-religious group that harbors strong anti-scientific sentiments. The radical organization actively blames intellectuals and any advanced knowledge for the tragic war that caused devastation. In the words of a Redeemer priest, knowledge and science is heresy that has “destroyed half the world, and left another half mangled” (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 3, 13).

Anti-intellectualist and anti-scientific rhetoric is a contemporary issue that is alarmingly persistent; scholars have been drawing attention to concerning statistics portraying an overall disregard for scientific knowledge that accompanies radical thinking (Peters 2018; Merkley, Lowen 2021; Hotez 2023). In his article “Anti-intellectualism is a Virus,” Michael Peters warns against the detrimental effects of this phenomenon, concluding that “the [anti-intellectual] virus can damage and eventually kill the life of debate or public discourse in a democracy” (Peters 2018, 362). In the webcomic, this has already come to fruition: in flashbacks, the Redeemers are revealed to be highly violent. They intend to eradicate advanced scientific knowledge, along with any people willing to learn or who themselves are intellectuals or scientists. Perhaps one of the most striking early revelations is the massacre of scientists conducted by the group (Kosheleva 2020, st. 3, 1), along with their organizing of labor camps for people who have been found at fault.

Thus, *For Their Own Good* (2020) indirectly addresses a highly pertinent, contemporary issue within a fictional post-apocalyptic world. Moreover, it sheds light on the potential negative effects such anti-intellectual approaches may have, especially with our increased reliance on generative AI. In the side-story to chapter 3, a cyberneticist explains that due to automation, the overuse of AI and nuclear weaponry, global destruction took place (Kosheleva 2020, st. 3, 1). This destruction was then blamed on “mad scientists and common folk, straight from a cover of a bad comic book, simplistic caricature of reality” (Kosheleva 2020, st. 3, 1). The line is strikingly metatextual; an ironic commentary on the comic medium itself, and a direct portrayal of modern concerns. In this way, Kosheleva's webcomic situates itself within the history of the comics addressing contemporary issues, one of them being an increasing concern with declining literacy

and questioning of intellectual thought. To combat this, comics have gradually taken on a role of promoting knowledge and positive approaches to learning; they have concerned with anti-intellectual sentiments, recommending ways to both directly and indirectly combat negative attitudes, be it through promoting abstract scientific concepts in education (Akcanca 2020), or through selecting relevant themes and topics in educational and casual environments (Jacobs 2013, 40–44; Hill 2017, 3–9). As a graphic novel character, Grace herself represents a fictional positive effect of such efforts: as a teen, she flaunts established rules in defiance of close-minded thought, through seeking knowledge, reading books, and even fixing a library robot, Codex, who serves as an assistant and friend.

It is also important to mention that the first chapter of *For Their Own Good* was published in 2020, at the height of COVID, during which anti-vaccination sentiments and overarching distrust towards doctors and scientific institutions was rampant. As was mentioned, addressing anti-intellectualism and anti-scientific sentiments is not unusual in the comic medium, especially in recent years, with the most popular topics being medical themes centered around the COVID response.⁶ Kosheleva follows this trend with *For Their Own Good* (2020), using narrative approaches within the medium to make a poignant observation. The use of flashbacks introducing the Redeemers allows the reader to track the tragic consequences of a post-apocalyptic world where technology and science are distrusted: society is having difficulty rebuilding due to a lack of basic technological aids, medicine is scarce as it is not being developed, and basic intellectual skills such as reading and writing are seriously declined. Citizens suffer from widespread anti-intellectualism, perhaps best shown through Grace's parental figure, Alan Doherty: his wife is suffering from cancer and lack of advanced medical care. What is worse, Grace needs to hide her robotic medical brace from Redeemers, who prefer her to be immobile rather than use a life-changing disability aid (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 3, 12). The loss of knowledge is mourned heavily in Kosheleva's webcomic; characters' reactions range from hopelessness to a will to fight back against the phenomenon, all described over a mix of flashbacks and plot points.

The proficient use of flashbacks as a narrative driving point in *For Their Own Good* (2020) is indeed crucial in emphasizing just how devastating anti-intellectualism can be. In *For Their Own Good* (2020), such retrospection is guided by narrator captions and monochromatic color choices. Namely, Kosheleva uses orange and brown hues for present day narration, which is occasionally complimented by whites, blues and greys when appropriate i.e. when illustrating water or snow. Flashbacks, however, are distinctively colder, and almost exclusively colored in pale blue hues. As such, Kosheleva's coloring does not opt for realism, but follows a tradition of monochromatic coloring frequently used in graphic narratives portraying disaster or war (Chute 2016, 100–102). The use of such coloring imparts a sense of gravity, one that can be observed in other online comics, such as

⁶ More on COVID comics in "Comics in the Time of a Pan(dem)ic: COVID-19, Graphic Medicine, and Metaphors" (2021) by Saji et al., and "COVID-19, Comics, and the Visual Culture of Contagion" (2020) by Obuobi et al.

Coco Wang's documentary webcomics, which use only red, black and white to portray the seriousness of China's earthquake disaster in 2008 (Wang 2008).

War and Conflict

The aforementioned narrative and artistic approach is especially effective in consistently evoking the second, heavily persistent theme throughout the webcomic: war and conflict. While Kosheleva vaguely acknowledges in *For Their Own Good* (2020) the apocalypse-inducing Big War and how it was started, her main focus is on the aftermath. This comes as no surprise as Kosheleva herself declares that she is interested in historical processes (Kosheleva 2022a) and makes it a point throughout the webcomic to focus on individual experiences and suffering. This is shown not just through present narration, but also flashbacks that show the difficulties the characters have faced since the Big War ended, that is for roughly 25 years. The effects of the war are also shown in part through background visuals, which can be well-observed through large panels and the use of spreads⁷: devastation of some sort is seen on every other page, usually in the form of ruined buildings and heavy machinery in the background or poor living conditions (e.g. Kosheleva 2020, chap. 1, 1, 18–20; chap. 2, 13–18; chap. 3, 4–6, chap. 4, 5–6, 22–23). Key are also regular narrative allusions to food and medical shortages, as well as the presence of the Guard – a government military faction that is trying to bring stability – and Redeemer conflicts, which are the driving narrative force of the webcomic.

The enduring trauma that the characters live through is in the spotlight, and many characters are motivated by their own personal experiences during the war. A good example is Mal, a scout from a neighboring safe-haven city Ursa. After the character is introduced in chapter 4, it is gradually revealed that he has been heavily influenced by witnessing active conflict. His childhood is spent in awe of weaponry and military efforts (Kosheleva 2020, st. 4, 2–3), but in his older age he understands the gravity of any kind of military service (Kosheleva 2020, st. 5, 2). This is exemplified through his actions in chapters 5 through 6; he agrees to escort Grace to Ursa after rescuing her from the Redeemer camp, but conducts himself in a suspicious and cautious manner, keeping his distance and avoiding answers to Grace's repeated questions. Notable is his curt response to Grace's question if he had killed anyone: "... here's a free piece of advice – don't ask that question ... the answer'd change nothing, not really, other than probably annoy the hell out of the person you're asking" (Kosheleva 2020, st. 4, 1).

Interestingly, the webcomic also discusses such concerns as authorities' inefficiency and inactivity, often contrasted with adept individual efforts. For instance, after Grace is taken by the Redeemers, Doherty decides to spur into action, abandoning the sanctioned Redeemer guild and cursing his lack of conviction (Kosheleva 2020, chaps. 3–5). But while individual inaction is seen as redeemable, inaction on a higher level is much more heavily criticized throughout the

⁷ A spread is a large panel that can span more than one page in a comic (Cortsen 2022, 304).

webcomic. Upon discovering the Redeemer prison and escaping with the help of Mal, Grace poses the questions why the Guard does not do anything about it, to which Doherty bitterly replies “damn politics” (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 4, 16). While Mal explains the small numbers and risk of another all-out war, the tone is set, and further touched upon in chapter 5, when Doherty goes to the Guard headquarters and offers his help to the Colonel, whilst criticizing the Guard’s inaction against Redeemers (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 5, 2). This event is complimented by a flashback from ten years ago, a few pages later (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 5, 16–17), where a younger Doherty similarly criticizes the Guard’s late arrival to help with the Redeemers, and refuses to help the very same Colonel with keeping the peace, claiming he is tired of the shifting powers and does not want to put in effort to help people.

War and conflict is certainly not alien to the comic medium. Kees Ribbens (2022) points out that “War has been represented in sequences of images long before the emergence of the comic strip,” taking care to note that in more recent years an increasingly personal experience of war has been portrayed, be it though civilian survivors or veterans (Ribbens 2022, 349), or through specific conflicts spurred by past wars (Conroy 2009, 18–26, 152–174). Contemporary comics frequently function as metonymies, drawing attention to specific people and events situated within the conflict in order to represent a bigger issue at hand (Sullivan 2017, 4). Such an approach is usually more nuanced and often focused on the act of witnessing, whilst also not shunning honest portrayals of violence and political issues (Ribbens 2022, 349). Examples of such contemporary approaches to war and its aftermath within the comic medium include Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), Joe Kubert’s *Fax from Sarajevo* (1996), Joe Sacco’s titles such as *Palestine* (1993), *The Fixer* (2003), or *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), Garth Ennis’ *War Stories* (2004), Jess Ruliffson’s *Invisible Wounds* (2014), or George Takei’s et al. *They Called Us Enemy* (2019). The aforementioned examples are grounded in realism; they are either biographical or/and documentary, with some, like Joe Sacco’s works, belonging to the category of “comics journalism.” As Chute points out in her book on comics portraying conflict and disaster: “The essential form of comics – its collection of frames – is relevant in its inclination to document [...]. In its succession of replete frames, comics calls attention to itself, specifically, as evidence” (Chute 2016, 2). The comic medium portrays things in a paradoxical way: moving but stationary, allowing for the meticulous analysis of presented information.

However, there are also many titles that lean towards the fictional, choosing allegory and metaphor to critique and comment on current conflicts. Such works can be usually found in the post-apocalyptic, sci-fi or alternative history genre, such as *We Stand on Guard* (2015) by Brian K. Vaughan and Steve Skroce, *Junkyard Joe* (2022) by Geoff Johns and Gary Frank, *Simon Says: Nazi Hunter* (2019) by Andre R. Frattino and Jesse Lee or the well-known *DMZ* (2012) by Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli. The comic medium is well suited to the “crafting of histories and historiographies” (Chute 2016, 2). Creative invention, just like in Kosheleva’s case, aids in crafting accuracy, while certainly not contradicting

it. *For Their Own Good* (2020) thus follows the footsteps of such titles; the webcomic portrays a fictional yet personal approach in its thematic dealing of war, addressing not only its complexity, but morality.

The complexity of war and moral ambiguity is shown, for instance, in chapter 4, which focuses on the Redeemers camp. After a successful bomb attack (which has caused casualties for both Redeemers and prisoners) carried out by the captive scientists, a medical assistant tries to speak of the trickiness of placing blame only to be quickly shut down by a wounded scientist: “You’ve never been at war, have you? These people here. . . they are convinced no one will come and save them. Keep looking around, carefully, ‘cause you’re about to see what that kind of despair makes people do” (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 4, 18). The line is foreboding if one takes into account current world events: the gap between those who hear of war and those who experience it is significant, and actions become impossible to judge neutrally – words do not help. Such narrative statements are frequent throughout the webcomic. Striking is also Kosheleva’s dedicated imagery depicting the impact of violence. There are two key examples: the splash page⁸ depicting the bomb exploding in the Redeemers’ camp (Kosheleva 2020, chap. 4, 11), and the cover for chapter 5, showing a bomb cloud that is a collage of the scientists that sacrificed their lives to carry out the attack. It is worth noting that splash pages in the comic medium serve a distinct narrative purpose: they evoke a dynamic and usually grand event in static form, extending the duration of what is often a quick or spontaneous event (Mikkonen 2017, 57). In the case of an explosion, a splash page pauses a rapid event, allowing for reader contemplation. A span of time is observed holistically, in a synoptic way (Hatfield 2005, 54–55): the visual tension between the detonation and Doherty’s shocked face is frozen on page, allowing the reader to absorb the gravity of what has happened. Noteworthy is also the thorough use of action-to-action panel transitions (McCloud 1994, 70) which develop dynamic action points, heightening the danger and tension associated with living in a post-apocalyptic world, along with the trauma and peril of war.

Conclusion

It can be seen that Kosheleva has attuned *For Their Own Good* (2020) to the surrounding social climate, adopting a holistic approach to immediately observable social anxieties and concerns embedded in a still-developing fictional plot. The webcomic is one of many that are a testament to how the comics medium “propose[s] the value of inventive textual practice to be able to express trauma ethically” (Chute 2016, 4). Indeed, comics architectural use of the page and token visual representation challenges “traditional notions of chronology, linearity and causality – as well as [places pressure] on the idea that ‘history’ can ever be a closed discourse” (Chute 2016, 4). *For Their Own Good* (2020) is a prime example of how this notion is adeptly challenged – historic processes are connected,

⁸ A splash page is an often wordless illustration that can take up to several pages as one big image (Cortsen 2022, 304).

and causality effect can be traced throughout time. The combination of the static and dynamic in graphical narration shows in close spatial proximity how the past affects the present, demonstrating the development of not just characters, but also how certain attitudes and events, such as anti-science sentiments and war, affect their fictional world. In this way, *For Their Own Good* (2020) is also a part of the wider cultural shift within Ukrainian independent non-print comics; importantly, Kosheleva's work takes on a profound meaning due to her Ukrainian nationality, further cementing how the webcomic form's immediate and independent nature is beneficial in portraying modern anxieties, catastrophes, wars, and turmoil.

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