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The Visual Architecture of an Evolving Diasporic Identity: Anya Ulinich's Protagonist Sasha Goldberg

1. Introduction

The author and artist Anya Ulinich has been described as belonging to a "group of Russian-Jewish-American writers […] who draw simultaneously on immigrant street cred and erudite literary tradition" (Gershenson 2023). Ulinich was born in Moscow in 1973 and, at the age of 17, left the Soviet Union with her family to settle in the United States. She published her first novel, *Petropolis*, in 2007 and her second – a graphic novel titled *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* – in 2014. Ulinich's formal training as a visual artist, combined with her writing in a second language, are what make her first novel highly innovative; more specifically, her use of language and text in visual ways, as well as her inclusion of several original illustrations, combine to create not just a reading experience but a veritable viewing experience that increases overall engagement with the text and expands the possible interpretations of the narrative in manifold ways. It is with this novel's visual architecture, then, that Ulinich provides the reader a window into how her protagonist renegotiates an already-complex identity once in emigration, adapting to her new language and culture through both preservation and rejection of cultural and linguistic memories.

The protagonist, Alexandra Goldberg (called Sasha), has an almost unbelievably complex and interstitial identity. She is a mixed-race Russian (her father was half African) with an inherited-through-adoption Jewish surname, who must navigate the world of a teenager with a body that doesn't conform to dominant notions of beauty; moreover, she is at once a child and (in her own words, an "accidental") mother; she lives in a Siberian town called Asbestos 2 (formerly called Stalinsk) that originated as part of the Gulag, but she was raised by parents of the intelligentsia from Moscow and Leningrad. After the first third of the novel, Sasha leaves Russia on what will become an episodic quest to find her missing father and, consequently, her identity becomes diasporic, as well.

The scholar who has most significantly influenced the theoretical approach of this chapter is the artist Gali Weiss, whose research belongs to an emerging area known as diasporic visual culture. Weiss's approach, in turn, builds upon the work of such scholars as Marianne Hirsch and Stuart Hall. From Hirsch, she finds critical the notion that postmemory relies on "relating to the past through imaginative investment and creation" and that inherited traumatic narratives often dominate people's lives (Weiss 2016, 69). From Hall, Weiss incorporates the concept that "the future existence of the diaspora identity is in its continual re-creativity, re-being, that is, in its becoming" and that the diasporic identity is a "performative mode of agency" (Weiss 2016, 61). To combat the idea of a fixed image/identity, then, in her artistic practice Weiss creates hybrid

portraits by layering imagery: a drawing of a "sitter" (model) made directly on a photograph of the sitter's parent or child. Weiss's work has inspired me to view the totality of visual elements of *Petropolis* as composites or "transient states of imagery" (Weiss 2016, 74). Although these visual elements do ultimately build toward and conclude with an identity that has significantly adapted, matured, and healed, each layer of the process is reflected in both the language(s) at the end of the novel and the concluding illustration.

This chapter will be structured in two parts. In the first, I will move through the text to trace how Ulinich uses language(s) – including its/their visual representation on the page – to portray Sasha's evolving diasporic identity. After all, language "is a site of struggle where individuals negotiate identities" and identity "is co-constructed through interactions" (Noels 56). Although *Petropolis* was written in English, there are numerous words throughout the novel that are in (transliterated and italicized) Russian. Additionally, Ulinich successfully employs linguistic defamiliarization and irony through her capitalized incorporation of aspects of consumerist democratic capitalistic American culture.

In the second half of this article, I will describe and then analyze the opening illustration to each of the novel's five parts, with an eye to how they reflect "transient states" (Weiss 74). These illustrations reveal a surprising amount of information about Sasha's diasporic experiences. It is very possible that, as a visual artist, Ulinich expects her readers to reflect on the illustrations more than readers might generally tend to do. I will discuss how each subsequent illustration builds on the former and how the final one ultimately represents Sasha's more stable existence as an immigrant. *Petropolis* is in very deliberate conversation with some fascinating philosophical ideas regarding the body (in this case, Sasha's) being an analogue for the world. This is ultimately accomplished through Ulinich's subtly layered references to Leonardo DaVinci's world-famous image of the Vitruvian Man[114], whose meaning will prove key to understanding the protagonist's "simultaneously rebuild[ing] and mourn[ing]" her hyphenated existence (Hirsch, 1996, 664).

2. Visual emphasis of language(s) on the page

It is well known that language reflects identity. Maria Rubins, for one, has expounded on this idea, writing "Language itself transcends the role as a tool of communication and self-expression and becomes a crucial symbol of identity." (Rubins 2021, 3) Another scholar, the linguist Anna Wierbicka, has studied how specific key words serve to reflect aspects of a particular cultural identity. She explains: "Culture-specific words are conceptual tools that reflect a society's past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways" and that "a person's conceptual perspective on life is clearly influenced by his or her native language" (Wierbicka 1997, 5)

[114] The discussion of the Vitruvian Man will be included in the second half of this chapter. See page X for the image.

Petropolis is an English-language novel that uses contains certain words in transliterated Russian as signifiers of cultural identity and memories of a previous life. While the role of language in identity construction is potentially important for any monolingual-translingual writer[115], Ulinich deliberately and conspicuously employs specific words in both Russian and English as tools for constructing Sasha's evolving identity. For example, she incorporates certain words in both languages in such a way that they actively demand the reader's eye -- in effect, often disrupting the flow of the narrative. Ulinich has discussed her relationships to both English and Russian, saying "Russian is my emotional language. Russian words have very deep flavors for me; they're inseparable from the objects and actions they describe. […] English words are signifiers, which gives me a nice illusion of control when I write but sometimes I worry that I'm creating the literary equivalent of plastic fruit for people who are hungry for a real apple" (Johnson 2009, 15). She has also likened English words to Lego blocks, which underscores the idea of the writer as architect (NPR 2008).

Since Part One of *Petropolis* is set in 1992 Post-Soviet Russia, throughout this section of the novel Ulinich incorporates Russian words frequently (in italicized transliteration), the most common one being *detka* (little one), which is what she was called by her mother. Many of the other words similarly reflect the world of a child in her native childhood home, such as *lapochka* (sweetheart)*, Babushka* (Grandma)*, Babulya* (Granny), and *Tetya* (Aunt). Yet other words reflect the difficulties and peculiarities of Soviet life, such as *pokoinik* (the deceased)*, idiotka* (idiot)*, nomenklatura* (nomenclature)*, subbotnik* (Communist Saturday worker)*, samizdat* (clandestine form of self-publishing) *and voenkomat* (military commissariat). Wierbicka explains that "key words" are "particularly important and revealing in a given culture" and are "used in a particular semantic domain (emotions, moral judgments...)" and express "attitudes, values, and expectations." (Wierbicka, 1997, 15-17) While Ulinich often provides some context behind these Russian words, she does not in general directly translate them, so, for readers unfamiliar with Russian, the reading experience will most certainly feel "foreign." All these examples are words that simply don't translate directly and it is clear that Ulinich did not want to lose any authenticity of meaning.

In Part Two of the novel, Sasha has left Russia as a mail order bride to marry an American named Neil in Phoneix, Arizona. She has left her baby behind with her mother, who had manipulated the situation to her own benefit, appropriating the role of the baby's mother and relegating Sasha's relationship with the child to that of a distant aunt. In this section of the novel, Ulinich continues to incorporate Russian words quite frequently; however, they differ from those in

[115] In his book on Soviet-born authors who do not write in their native tongue, Adrian Wanner compares terms to describe authors such as Ulinich: "In spite of their personal bilingualism, as authors they are, as Elizabeth Beaujour would put it, 'monolingual writers in an adoptive tongue,' or—if we want to borrow the terminology proposed by Steven Kellman—they belong to the category of 'monolingual translinguals' rather than 'ambilinguals'" (4).

Part I in that they are more conversational words and often slang or emotionally-laden terms, such as: *privet* (hey), *negritanka* (black woman), *nado zhe* (exclamation of surprise), *psychushka* (insane asylum)*, babskie stuchki (*literally "grandmotherly stuff," here meaning "coy art doodles")*, Gospodi* (the exclamation Dear Lord!), *zatknis'* (shut up), *eto takoi surrealism* (it's so surreal)*, narkotiki* (drugs)*, and nezashto* (no big deal).[116] These various words are used primarily by Sasha and two young Russian emigres she meets who introduce her to American culture (as well as to recreational marijuana). Lexicon is a guide to "ways of living, thinking, and feeling" (Wierzbicka 1997, 10), and it is clear that, at this point of the novel, Sasha uses Russian to express emotions, as well as to experiment with a new kind of freedom. As Nancy Ries has proposed in her work on Perestroika-era Russian identities, this time period saw a "remodeling of ideological positions": previously stable social identities adopted negative American "archetypal images" as emblems of freedom (Ries 1997, 175). Viewing Sasha through such a lens suggests that, in this phase of her adapting to American culture, she might be rejecting the Russian "female-owned discourses" of "decency, morality, and good behavior" (Ries 1997, 72).

The stark difference in language in Part II, however, is that, more than these new categories of Russian words, is that the text is littered with references to (primarily) cheap and vulgar aspects of consumerist American culture. To wit, on the opening page alone we come across the following: Aqua Velva, Listerine, Tostitos, and the titles of two TV shows: *The A-Team* and *Sesame Street.* On the following page, we observe Sasha surrounded by Rice Krispies, Walgreens, and McDonalds. Several more pages in, Sasha takes in various signs for businesses and a church: TACO BELL, PARTY CITY, CAMELBACK CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, WENDY'S, RALLY'S, TEXACO, JACK IN THE BOX, 7-ELEVEN, ALBERTSON'S, LOS ARCOS, and SEARS. The use of the upper-case letters is very effective, demanding that English readers (many of whom would be Americans) engage in moments of defamiliarization with their own ubiquitous cultural products and companies. Throughout the rest of Part II, Ulinich continues to satirize American culture – to a certain extent, this is Neil's version of American culture, but, more broadly speaking, it might also represent a typical example of an American big city in the late 1980s. Additional emblematic examples are: Red Lobster, Lazy-Boy, Slim Jims, Squirt, and the Nearly Free Shoe Warehouse. (This last store Ulinich concocts as a brilliant example of the absurdity of mass production and consumerism to which her protagonist is still acculturating.) Wading through this onslaught of American consumerist capitalist culture, the reader experiences Sasha's culture shock first-hand. Moreover, viewing this through a poststructural theory of language, Sasha — as a subjugated individual on numerous levels -- is appropriating English in such a way that challenges the stereotypical American identity and opens new possible identities for herself

[116] This last one is spelled as it sounds (as all one word), rather than correctly (three separate words). N Russian it can be used in response to "Thank you." Ulinich is drawing attention to the auditory aspect of the phrase rather than its correct grammatical form.

(Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, 13). In other words, "languages may not only be 'markers of identity' but also sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity, or discrimination" (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, 4). Sasha's reactions to her surroundings in Phoenix would also have been informed by the common views in the Soviet, Perestroika, and post-Soviet years on materialism and commodity culture and how they reflected spiritual loss and problematic social distinctions (Ries 1997, 131).

Lest we forget, at this point the novel has become an episodic quest, so once we arrive at Part III, Sasha has surreptitiously escaped from Neil and Phoenix and is now in Chicago, living with a wealthy Jewish family. Essentially a pet charity project for the eccentric mother, Sasha cleans house (and not very well) in exchange for her keep – which will evolve into an imprisonment. The first two-thirds of this section contain minimal Russian language, as there is no one in the home who speaks Russian and because Sasha in the continued process of letting go of her native language. Interestingly, the few times the italicized Russian words appear, it is Sasha talking to herself: ***zatknis' (shut up), zdravstvuite (hello, what's this?), avos'ka (the in-case-bag).***[117] One other interesting example in this section is a phrase created with code-switching: "*Lucky mne tozhe,"* meaning something like "I'm lucky, too." This is the first example where her adopted language creeps into her native Russian.[118] There is also the clever insertion throughout the chapter of this Jewish-American family's last name –Tarakan, meaning "cockroach." Through the use of this name (and other insect-inspired names of wealthy American Jews she meets), Ulinich has incorporated Sasha's native language into the text in a new manner – through humorous linguistic jabs that serve to continue to resist her subjugated position in her adopted country.

Another way that Ulinich incorporates Russian language into Part III is by devising a sudden switch in narrator, when in one chapter Sasha's father is brought in to tell his story of how and why he left the USSR. The flashback to his Russian past prompts the appearance of more Russian words related to Soviet oppression and bureaucracy, such as *otkaznik* (Refusenik), *blat* (corrupt dealings), and *OVIR* (the Office of Visa and Registration). He also calls his wife a ***ved'ma*** (witch), after she tells him he has no will of his own. When the reader returns to Sasha in Chicago, there is one four-page chapter left containing only two Russian words: Sasha cursing with the word *chiort (Devil!)* and later saying *privet (hey)* on a payphone to a Russian friend who will connect her with a Russian family in New York. The final chapter of Part III, aptly titled "An Element of the Landscape", is a critical moment in Sasha's development, for, along with her native ceasing its frequent interruptions, Sasha now sees herself, like (non-brand-name) gas stations and large to-go coffees, as just another "anonymous" element of the American landscape (Ulinich 2007, 230).

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[117] ***Avos'ka*** is another example of a Russian word that just cannot be translated without its cultural context. The word is built around the adverb ***avos'***, which can be translated as "perhaps" or "hopefully" and is a kind of small bag that was carried around just in case there might be something worth standing in line to buy.
[118] Also around this time in the novel we see Sasha's memories of her life in Russia are starting to fade: "the pain of being away from [her baby] Nadia was becoming duller, more like a memory of pain" (182).

She embraces the anonymity as a form of freedom, having successfully escaped a third traumatic situation.

Part IV begins with Sasha making her way to the East Coast. First, she stays briefly with an elderly (and racist) Russian couple on Coney Island and then she moves on to Brooklyn, where she finds and confronts the father who years before had abandoned her and her mother. In terms of Ulinich's use of Russian in this section of the novel, there is not less, as might be expected with Sasha's progressing acclimation; rather, there is an increased amount while Sasha is staying in Coney Island with the Russian couple. The types of words reflect typical aspects of Russian culture and attitudes that are, significantly, already becoming somewhat defamiliarized for Sasha: *schchi* (traditional cabbage soup), *soonduk* (storage chest), *tapochki* (slippers), *shubas* (fur coats), *intelligentsia* (Russian intellectuals), and identifying someone as a *negritanka* (a black woman--a word that is used twice). Significantly, Sasha is, in effect, at a point in her Americanization where she can view these objects and concepts as Russian and Soviet stereotypes. The repeated use of the word *negritanka* (black woman) ensures the reader will keep in mind Sasha's status as Other, even (or especially) among Russian emigrants. Then, unexpectedly, Sasha sees on a Russian television channel a story about her hometown in Siberia and "remembered that this kind of stove was called a *burzhuika*" (Ulinich 2007, 237) and that "*burzhuika* – [was] a reliable indicator of hardship" (Ulinich 2007, 238). It is of note that Sasha is here described as *remembering* the Russian word, underscoring the increased distance she now feels from her native language and country. Following this scene is another key moment in her transition. In a letter to her daughter, she writes: "I hardly remember you but I know what you need. You will have food and clothes. …light-up sneakers and cherry-flavored vitamins, cartoon bedsheets, and a dollhouse with tiny furniture. …singing greeting cards. I will become your means of survival" (Ulnich 2007, 239). After this realization, there is very little Russian incorporated into the novel and, most often, when it appears, it is prefaced by Sasha remembering it from her past life. For example, remembering her mother's phrase *vozmi sebya v ruki* (get a hold of yourself). Or remembering a *khrushcheba* (a derogatory spoken term for a type of apartment building popularized during the Khrushechev era). Or a cleaning woman with black teeth at the birthing house saying to her, as Sasha lay on the bathroom floor, "*Vo dura, kuda zabralas*'" (You fool, how'd you end up here?) (Ulinich 2007, 264). At this point Russian is receding into Sasha's past and, concurrently, English is becoming second-nature – so much so that she even notices an error in English – a sticker on café door (in all capital letters) that reads YOUR (misspelled) ONLY AN OBJECT. She also recognizes the now-familiar-to-her iconic American speech "I have a Dream" on National Public Radio. Otherwise, we still continue to see her American life through some capitalized brands and businesses, such as a Jack-O-Lantern, Cheetos, Starbucks, Elmo, Barbie, and Hot Wheels. And then, at the moment when Sasha is embedded quite deeply in American life, she makes a return trip to Russia to see her mother and daughter. On this visit, she reflects on the Russian word *ponayehali* and how "That

single word means 'they arrived over a period of time, in large masses enough as to become an annoyance'" (Ulinich 2007, 281). And immediately after this, expressed in italics is her thought, tinged with irony: "*Oh the great and mighty Russian language*! (Ulinich 2007, 281). It is also at this juncture of the novel – in response and due to Americans' more direct way of social interaction – she "finds herself missing Brooklyn" (Ulinich 2007, 281). In Russia, a woman she has known for years calls her "The American" and Sasha feels proud of this designation (Ulinich 2007, 281). Never proceeding too long without humor, Ulinich then notes that Sasha is unable to remember the Russian term for "bologna". Four years later, on her next trip to Russia, the English will spill into Russia and the Russian will have changed culturally. Her family in Siberia will be eating the – capitalized – Spam and Crisco that she sends them, and her daughter will be wearing a tee-shirt that says – in all capital English letters – GIRLS RULE. The few incorporated "Russian" words on that visit serve to prove how the Russia she once knew has changed significantly: for example, *dredy* (dreadlocks) and *heep hop (hip hop)* will be new Russian words for her, though of course familiar through the English cognates.

The epilogue begins with a phone call from her "Aunt" Vera in Siberia, informing Sasha that her mother has disappeared. Sasha had known her mother was dying from cancer and now understands she will have to return to her former home, bring her Russian daughter back to the US, and become (again, anew) the girl's mother. When Vera calls, the English-language reader is immersed in a world foreign to them: "*Allo? Allo? … Allo?"* followed by *"...*Sasha *doma?"* (Is Sasha home?). Of course, the fact that one of the last Russian words in the book is establishing that America is her home is not lost on the reader. Ulinich will refer again to this word "home"–but in English – in the novel's closing sentence. As for the last Russian word Sasha says in the novel, it's connected to her new identity as a mother. While she's on the plane from Russia to the US with her daughter, after they've both lost the woman who was the only mother they each knew:

> "Why don't you talk to me?" Sasha asks.
>
> "You aren't Mama."
>
> "Neither are you," Sasha says, "but I don't make a *morda* at you, do I?" She demonstrates a sour face, her first stab at parenting (Ulinich 2007, 319).

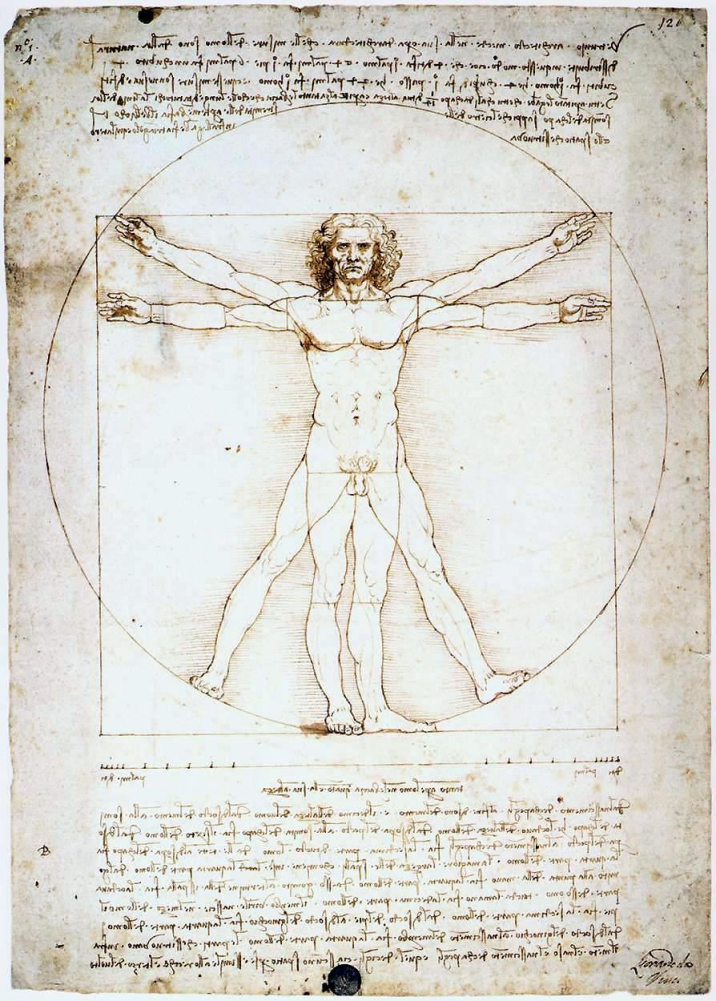
With regard to the capitalized words denoting American consumerism that have been weaving in and out of this novel's pages, there are only a couple that appear in the epilogue. This aspect of American culture is no longer new to Sasha and the hot pink Dora the Explorer suitcase already belongs to her daughter. It has been appropriated. The promise she made to her daughter earlier in the novel has been fulfilled.

It is clear that Ulinich uses the visual words on the page to help illustrate the evolving identity of her protagonist. Toward the end of Part III, when Sasha is about to leave Chicago for Brooklyn, Ulinich all but instructs us to read the way we just have. In her disappointment at finding

no note from her friend, Sasha examines the address he left her, thinking: “Maybe it was in the spaces between the lines, in the width of the margins, the curves of the font” (Ulinich 2007, 228).

3. Sasha’s Vitruvian progression

The visual emphasis of language(s) on the page is part of a larger overall focus on the visual architecture of this novel. Having first received her Bachelor’s Degree from one of the premier art schools in the US, The Chicago Art Institute, and then a Master’s in Fine Arts from the University of California-Davis, Ulinich was a committed and vetted visual artist when she undertook the writing of this first novel. At first blush, it is easy to disregard the rich allusions to questions of identity that the five illustrations in the novel can offer the reader. Having established a foundation of the basic structure of the novel through discussing Ulinich’s use of language throughout, we will now move through the novel again, but with new focus on the illustrations. Before that, however, I will offer some background information on Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man (c. 1487).



Although it is Leonardo who drew the famous figure of the Vitruvian Man, it was the first-century BC Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio who devised the concept in writing (with

Caesar Augustus's figure in mind), that inspired Leonardo some 1500 years later. Vitruvius believed, in journalist Toby Lester's words, that the architect's job "was to survey the cosmic order of things, grasp its circular animating principles, and then bring them down to earth. And the way to do that […] was with the help of the set square" (Lester 2012, 29). Connected to this was Vitruvius's belief that the proportions of the human body "conformed to the hidden geometry of the universe" (Lester 2012, xii). Vitruvius was not the first to view man as a *minor mundus* or microcosm, but he outlined in detail the symmetry and proportions of man for use in architecture. What Leonardo did, that Vitruvius had not, was imagine two decentered superimposed figures within the circle and square, creating "…a dynamic look at man […] [with] attention to the concrete, to the individual, moving, and living man" (Zwijnenberg 1999, 104). Beneath the figure is a scale line, calling attention to the particularities of man's proportions. What is truly remarkable about Ulinich's illustrations is that she identified the Vitruvian Man as the perfect metaphor for a diasporic identity – particularly one that is so interstitial even before emigration.

It is important to note here that Sasha's body size, as well as her physical movement through the world, was throughout her young life the object of negative attention, particularly from her overbearing mother; thus, the complexities of how her "overweight and uncoordinated" female body informed her identity are of significance (Ulinich 2007, 4). I will turn to Catherine Riley and Lynne Pearce, who have written a concise and very informative overview of feminist criticism concerning the "ideal [female] body type". Apropos of the time period of Ulinich's novel, Riley and Pearce discuss how Naomi Wolf, in her 1990 book *The Beauty Myth,* suggested that the female's ever thinning "ideal" weight at the end of the twentieth century was a response to women more commonly leaving the domestic sphere to enter the work force and how "their bodies were made into the prisons their homes used to be" (Riley and Pearce 2018, 60). Riley and Pearce go on to explain that "consumer culture exerts unrelenting pressure on (especially) women to be thin" (Riley and Pearce 2018, 60). While it's her Soviet mother who badgers Sasha the most about her weight, Sasha certainly would carry the related trauma through emigration and, in particular, the American fascination with "waifs" in the 1990s.

The novel's illustrations, more than the text, reveal Sasha's Vitruvian progression in emigration. In the ensuing sections of this chapter a description of each of Ulinich's illustrations, set apart in italics, will precede the analyses. The Vitruvian Man's basic geometric elements (circle, square, pentagram, and line) will be underscored to aid in the visualization of Sasha's Vitruvian progression. The circle and the square are the two key shapes connecting man (or, in this case, woman) symbolically to the universe: "The ideality of the circle, with its single center and circumference with neither beginning nor end, [has] a privileged position in the symbolic geometry of the religious imagination as the perfect representation of the divine" (Rosand 2012, 38). Of course, in a more prosaic interpretation, the circle and square can refer to an architect's compass

and square. The pentagram and the number five, on the other hand, have long symbolized man in many world cultures (e.g., the head and four extremities) (Wayman 1982, 185, 187).

First Petropolis illustration: The image is a hand-drawn map with directions written in cursive Russian at the bottom of the page. At the top left of this map is a row of five numbered half circles (like the arch of a parabola) representing a row of half barrels. To their right is an irregular circle labelled "svalka" (junkyard). Below these, the middle of the drawing shows a row of three transmission towers connected by a thick line, representing a fence, and the top half of one of the towers falls inside the circle. Below this, in the center of the drawing is a small square kiosk labelled "tabak" [tobacco]. At the very bottom of the map is a circular smiley face.

Part I begins in Asbestos 2, a town built as part of the Gulag system, and where Sasha has grown up. The opening image reflects a moment that will be highly integral to the novel's arc: Katia, a new friend of Sasha's from her after-school art program, hands Sasha directions to her home. (The type of home Katia lives in will come as a shock to Sasha.) This first illustration, then, is rendered as Katia's hand-drawn map and includes a significant amount of her handwritten Russian cursive text. It is also important to note that this map is what will lead Sasha to the young man (Katia's brother) who will become the father of her "accidental" child. While it is extremely unlikely anyone would notice this on their first read, this illustration contains deconstructed elements of the Vitruvian Man.

The map Katia draws shows a path that winds around a square kiosk, continues between two of three transmission towers, then along the side of a circularly-shaped junkyard, and, finally, toward a row of five half barrels. All of the main geometric elements that comprise Leonardo's drawing are present here: a square, a circle, a line, and a pentagon (represented by the transmission towers). In the text, Ulinich provides a subtle hint when she draws the reader's attention to the idea that the transmission towers stand on what might be viewed as legs: "The towers that had looked so elegant from a distance turned out to have elephant legs of riveted steel" (Ulinich 2007, 44). Further on in the text, Ulinich transposes –twice – a square inside a (half) circle when Sasha describes seeing and entering Katia's home, which is one of the barrels: Sasha sees a door in of the end of a barrel and, upon entering, thinks "Did she expect the room to become square, to suddenly expand into another dimension? It must have been the furniture, the way it fit into the cylinder" (Ulinich 2007, 45). Throughout the entire novel, Ulinich will continue to write about these geometric elements, surely inspired by the Vitruvian man, and to incorporate them into the subsequent illustrations.

Second Petropolis illustration: Unlike the previous image, this one is not handmade. Centered in the upper half of the page is a square with rounded corners, inside of which is a human figure bent over in a seat (creating a circle with their body), their hands protecting their neck. An arrow points to the placement of the hands, which are the only part of the figure that is dark. Just below this square image are the words "Part Two" in typed English. Along the entire

bottom of the page is the top of a drawing of the roofs of two houses, the tops of five palm trees and four street lights. On the roof on the house on the left is a small square chimney, on the roof of the house on the right is a circular turbine exhaust vent. The streetlights are long thin pole arms reaching upward at what could be a ~30-degree angle off the main pole. There are also two parallel barely visible lines of cable connecting the streetlamps.

In comparison with the first illustration, instead of a hand-dawn note with handwritten cursive Russian text, we are confronted with a kind of American pop art – first, an image from an airplane safety information card and, next, what appears to be the top section of a very realistic drawing (almost resembling a photograph). While the style of this illustration is entirely different from the first one, there is a recognizable continuation of the theme of Vitruvian Man, now in a slightly less deconstructed form. First, the square has merged with the circle in two ways: the square itself has rounded edges and it contains the outline of a human figure preparing for a crash in a rounded fetal form. There are however, two additional examples of a circle and square in small square chimney and circular turbine vent. Next, while the Vitruvian shape of the man with outstretched arms (here represented by the streetlamps) remains outside the square and circle, the scale line can be identified in the cables connecting the streetlamps.

This illustration depicts Sasha's flight to Phoenix, her move to America after having been commodified as a mail-order bride. With this stark contrast in design, Ulinich appears to be underscoring America's use of mass-produced media, in comparison with Russia's lack of it – or early 1990s lack of it, anyway. Notably, pop art "represented the modern consumer landscape" of mass-produced imagery, common objects and recognizable elements ("Pop Art" 2022). The specific images we see here also speak to Sasha's trepidation regarding what life in America will bring her. The passenger in the image is preparing for a crash landing and the houses we see are incomplete. Ulinich is clearly referencing Sasha's apprehension around the unknown and potentially foreshadowing her home in Arizona not becoming a fulfilling home.

Third Petropolis illustration: This illustration is entirely contained within one large circle centered on the page. Within the circle is a second circle that forms an edge, recalling a dinner plate. Between these two circles, in all-capital printed Russian, are the words "Kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est" (He who doesn't work, doesn't eat). In the center of the plate are three objects, each of which reach beyond the confines of the inner circle: a spray bottle, a square passport, and a toilet cleaning brush. The slightly tilted vertical spray bottle has the words PART 3 written in English on its label. The bottle is also partially covering a tilted square passport that reads "USSR" in Russian and has a 5-pointed star on it. On top of both those items is the toilet brush, which is positioned horizontally and slightly tilted. The head of the brush is circular and has three drops of liquid coming off it. It also has four lines next to it that suggest motion.

The opening illustration refers to a very specific moment in the text, when Sasha is looking at vintage porcelain from the Soviet Union displayed in her new home in the US and sees on one

of the plates the words “Kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est” (He who doesn’t work, doesn’t eat). The choice in media and design is again both relevant and unique from the previous illustrations, as this is stylized to be reminiscent of Soviet propaganda posters and is imbued with dark irony. The last thing Sasha expected in America was to be a maid and prisoner in a luxurious home in the Chicago suburbs. Mrs. Tarakan, the wealthy Jewish mother, wants to keep Sasha close by (to the extent that she hides Sasha’s passport), yet tends to forget about her, often enough that Sasha goes without eating for long stretches of time. She has exchanged one form of commodification and imprisonment (a mail-order bride) for another (a human pet/toy/curio).

With this illustration we can again identify the main geometrical shapes that comprise Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man. The circle and square are again merged, although the square (in the form of the passport) has shrunk in size, the circle has doubled, and the shape of the man (pentagon) has also now clearly merged into the circle. His shape is recognizable in, of all things, the cleaning bottle and toilet brush. These represent Sasha’s current “professional” identity. While things are not going smoothly for Sasha, things at least are progressing. She survived the move to the US, extracted herself from a bad situation in Phoenix, and is now learning a skill (housecleaning), that will help her become independent in the future. Although, as Judith Butler pointed out, “the overarching paradigm of consumerism” contributes to how identities are shaped, Sasha adapts quickly and is learning to navigate her American environments with wile (quoted in Riley 2018, 46). A final aspect to note is that this illustration merges both Russian and English languages.

Fourth Petropolis illustration: The illustration appears to be a pen and ink drawing of a tree, centered on the page and with the base of its trunk resting on a line of wavering width an inch from the bottom of the page. Under the line on the left side is written in cursive English “part four.” The tree has no leaves, but many branches, and the crown of the tree is circular. One branch is longer than the rest: it juts out at what appears to be a ~30-degree angle reaching toward the top left corner. At the top of this branch sits a seemingly indistinct shapeless form. There is no square shape in this illustration.

In Part 4 Sasha has escaped again and finally found her father in Brooklyn. This image, like the first and the third images, refers to an identifiable moment in the text: toward an explanation for why he abandoned his wife and daughter in Russia, Sasha’s father sketches an image of a tree, stating “Life is like climbing a tree…First, you have all the branches – all the choices. You climb. There are fewer branches, fewer choices. Then you’re crawling up a single twig. It breaks.” In response to this cowardly justification, Sasha retorts: “You can always land on your feet, Papa. Or jump down” (Ulinich 2007, 249). At first glance, it might appear that, with the fourth illustration, Ulinich has possibly abandoned the progression toward the symmetry and geometry of the Vitruvian Man; however, certain elements of it are still recognizable and there are indeed reasons for the change in progression. To begin with, the tree itself arguably simultaneously represents two

of the standard elements – it embodies both the Vitruvian Man (with branches as outstretched arms), as well as the circle (via the outline of the crown of the tree). The scale line is for the first time in position along the bottom of the page. Most notably, however, it is this image, with its wild, organic, and dynamic tree branches, that finally captures what one Leonardo scholar described as the "dynamic look" of the "moving" Vitruvian man (Zwijnenberg 1999, 104).

Next, the absence of the square here feels conspicuous, but it turns out that Sasha's father, as the artist of this very image, is intimately associated with squares and cubes. In this part of the novel, Sasha describes her father's existence in this way: "He has this weird two-room apartment. The rooms are perfect cubes, as tall as they are wide, and the windows are perfectly square. I think somebody built it as an experiment. Live in a cube! Equilibrium through space!" (Ulinich 2007, 308). It is significant that it is not ultimately her father who provides a home for her – it is quite the opposite, in fact. Her quest for him is now over and has ended in enormous disappointment but also in freedom. Subsequently, there is yet another way to interpret the lack of a square here: through the very act of her journeying, Sasha has in effect created a square. Brooklyn is the fourth place that closes a square (after Asbestos 2, Phoenix, and Chicago) she has been in this episodic novel, and it is where she will put down her roots.

In this section of the novel, Sasha comes to see her father, whom she had idealized for so long, as an "amoeba," just surviving without any agency (Ulinich 2007, 307). Unlike him, Sasha is resilient and experienced when it comes to trees. When she was little, she was told she had to be a tree in the school pageant, while all the other girls in her class would be Snowflake Fairies. When she asked why she couldn't be a fairy like the other girls, her father, realizing that she would "bear the weight of her difference" throughout her life, told her to look in the mirror (Ulinich 2007, 13-14). Ulinich's illustration of the tree brilliantly encapsulates the novel's denouement. Sasha has proven she is a survivor. She escaped three oppressive situations, finding her father against all odds…only to realize she doesn't need him.

Most interestingly, this tree enhances our reading of this text in another fruitful direction. Ulinich amplifies Sasha's story by placing it within the much larger context of so many other immigrants in America. I am referring to an intertextual reference to the 1943 American novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, which comes to the fore most clearly with the help of this illustration. The core metaphor of this celebrated literary classic is the Tree of Heaven; against all odds it survives and continues to grow without any care in its destitute urban environment. This driving metaphor, combined with certain facts about the protagonist, suggest that Smith's great American novel serves as a powerful subtext to *Petropolis*. The parallels are notable – down to the dysfunctional origin stories of both female protagonists: much like Sasha's, Francie negotiates "a hard-working and emotionally remote mother" (Therrien 1999, 98) and a father who is "lazy, intemperate, of weak character, a bad provider, and apparently unwilling to reform, despite his knowledge that he is harming his family" (Therrien 1999, 99-100). Employing this borrowed

canonical American metaphor hints to the successful acculturation of both the protagonist and her author, both of whom are buttressed by the inspiring success of the American female protagonist and her American female author.

While Smith's American classic is a powerful intertextual source for Sasha's resilience and coming "home" to Brooklyn, the Vitruvian man has been the novel's visual guiding metaphor from the novel's opening page. The most obvious textual reference is in the chapter previous to the epilogue, when Sasha is looking at one of her stepmother's books, called *Healing Techniques*. On its cover was "the ubiquitous Da Vinci man stretched in his circle but this time it was a woman" (Ulinich 2007, 298). Sasha is now working with her stepmother, who, in the meditation class she teaches, says "Let's mimic the landscape with our bodies" with "arms spread" (Ulinich 2007, 299). Her stepmother also tells Sasha she needs "to stop being so angry" and that she's "dealing with complex issues" (Ulinich 2007, 300). In thinking about her boyfriend, Sasha wonders "whether love lift[s] the weight of your suffering, dissolve[s] the walls of your cube, release[s] you into the world…" (Ulinich 2007, 313). She is actively meditating and becoming a part of the American landscape. Of great significance is that the episodic structure of the novel reinforces this idea of Sasha having been compartmentalized, having lived in separate cubes, and that she needs to break out at the end.

Fifth Petropolis illustration: The final illustration is an obvious reworking of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man. The human figure is framed by a circle and square and there is a line along the bottom of the illustration. The word "Petropolis" is written in English italics to the left of center along the top of the square. There are two superimposed versions of a woman seen from behind (pentagon). She has outstretched arms – one set perfectly horizontal, the other at ~30-degree angles. The two sets of feet are distinctly placed, as well. The figure has dark pig tails and is in a tee-shirt and jeans and has a bag slung over her left shoulder. Outside the circle but inside the bottom left of the square is a small music box, itself comprised of squares and a circular mirror.

The most complex illustration in the novel appears in the epilogue. As the artist Weiss seeks to depict layered and transient diasporic identities in her portraits, in this final illustration Ulinich encapsulates the convoluted progression of Sasha's diasporic identity; moreover, the illustration depicts her current state: the acceptance of the highly interstitial identity and the postmemory with which she was born, and even looks to the future beyond the end of the novel. It is the only obvious illustration of Sasha in the book. Instead of Leonardo's naked, front-facing, and ideally-proportioned Vitruvian man, on the page stands Sasha – clothed, back-facing, and not what has commonly been considered ideally proportioned. More specifically, it is two superimposed views of Sasha – which I interpret as both her Russian and American selves. She will not need to give up one for the sake of the other, for she has learned to embody both harmoniously. She now stands inside both the square and circle with the Vitruvian scale line below her. Sasha's mother has died, she has accepted her father for who he is, she is in love (with an American), and,

perhaps most importantly, she has become a mother in practice, in addition to biologically, having brought her daughter to America.

4. Conclusion

Relevant to this discussion is the etymology of the term "diaspora," deriving from the word "scattering" in Greek.[119] Ulinich, leaning on elements from her own émigré journey, deliberately guided her protagonist through the process of (re-)building a life from the scattered pieces of her memories of her Soviet homeland, her inherited traumas, and her new (and evolving) American identity. The novel's epilogue shows that this (re-)building was accomplished through binary means. First, there is the more linguistically cohesive and balanced narrative, in which Sasha is finally able to think "in an in-between language," (Ulinich 2007, 324). Secondly, the final illustration shows the various Vitruvian elements are neatly assembled and it follows Leonardo's lead in how the text is merged with illustration: "the writing is adjusted to the circumference of the circle and fitted to the width of the square," as David Rosand points out in his article on the Vitruvian Man, "Reading the figure. (Rosand 2012, 36).

Petropolis opens in the town Asbestos 2, with Sasha being chastised by her mother for the way she awkwardly walks with wide steps. It concludes in Brooklyn, coming full circle, when Sasha "takes wider and wider steps, waiting to trip," but she "makes it home without falling" (Ulinich 2012, 324). The illustrations prefacing each section of the novel, in addition to the visual use of language on the page, allow for a significantly more comprehensive understanding of Sasha's intrepid journey. Cast now as a Vitruvian Woman, she has learned to live in a harmonious way (within an earthly square, a cosmic circle, and a scale line) and to understand her interstitial identity as being unique, while also a microcosm of the world around her.[120] Through her carefully curated visual use of words as bricks (or "legos") and her evolving dynamic illustrations that relied on the "the hidden geometry of the universe" (Lester 2012*,* xii), Ulinich designed and built a creative home for an equally creative protagonist.

Postmemory is an act of mourning that can occur through creation (Hirsch 1996, 662 and 664). Growing up in the environment she did, with a father who had gone so far as to attempt suicide and with a deeply unhappy mother, as well, Sasha's acts of postmemory stemmed from the fact that she "[grew] up dominated by narratives that preceded [her] birth" and her "own belated stories [were] displaced by the stories of the previous generation" (Hirsch 1996, 662). In response, Sasha became the architect of her own identity, building a multilayered and balanced identity upon a former one "of ghosts and shadows" (Hirsch 1996, 683). As the author, Ulinich brought Sasha to life over the course of a novel in five parts--the very number that represents man. One theory as to

[119] For an in-depth discussion of the term in relation to the Russian diaspora and how its traditional definition came to be associated with the Jewish diaspora, see Slobin, 2013, 20–22.

the gender of the Vitruvian Man is that it was not out of “squeamishness at depicting the female body” but because “the posture of spreading out the legs and arms in the male figure symbolizes surrender of the microcosm to the macrocosm. A female body in such a posture would not serve, since it could be construed as surrender to the male and not surrender to the macrocosm” (Wayman 1982, 185). We cannot say for certain whether Ulinich thought about this issue, but placing Sasha’s figure with her back to the audience is a creative way of combating such an idea. Sasha is not performing for any audience; her internal life and identity is now centered. I will conclude this chapter with one last point, as the music box in the final illustration begs comment. It clearly represents her daughter, Nadia (connected with the Russian words for “hope”), who will also carry with her inherited memories and an interstitial identity that she will need to center. Ulinich places the music box outside of Sasha’s circle but on the edge of her square, thereby showing their connection as mother and daughter while simultaneously preserving Nadia’s individual life path. Ulinich inscribes inside the music box a figure of a ballerina creature, not yet in the circle or square, with its arms reaching upward at the Vitruvian 30-degree angle, as a nod to her daughter’s distinct life journey beyond the confines of the novel.

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