DECODING THE NOTION OF A CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY WITHIN AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PICTURE NARRATIVE

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DECODING THE NOTION OF A CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY WITHIN AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PICTURE NARRATIVE

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April 2012
Declaration

The dissertation is a result of my own independent work, except where otherwise stated. Sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references. A reference list is appended.

Signed:

[Signature]

.............................

Date: April 2012
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Abstract

This study presents an investigation into the process of constructing an autobiographical self within the genre of the autobiographical picture narrative, and explores this process both in terms of a theoretical study of this concept as well as an interpretation of a number of photographs. The interpretation entails a reading of selected autobiographical picture narratives by the artist-photographers Maggie Taylor and Lori Nix by means of a method derived from visual social semiotics. Specifically, the semiotic reading focuses on Taylor and Nix’s photographs *Twilight swim* (2004) and *Ice Storm* (1999), respectively, after which the researcher’s own autobiographical photograph entitled *Fennel and coriander* is read by means of the same methodological approach. The semiotic reading is guided by five salient characteristics of the autobiographical picture narrative, namely fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration and narrative function. Harrison’s (2003) visual social semiotic framework (which reflects the work of social semioticians Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002) was augmented in light of the five salient characteristics in order to construct an appropriate methodological framework. A comparative reading of the works by Taylor, Nix and the researcher reveals that although each of the artist-photographers followed a peculiar and unique approach in constructing the autobiographical picture narrative, parallels can be established in terms of various central concepts, as is evident from the semiotic reading. In particular, the role of memory and the interpretation of autobiographical elements emerged as common denominators. The process of constructing an autobiographical memory therefore provides the narrator-photographer with the options of escaping into and not from memory, thus allowing for unique possibilities in terms of interpretation, fantasy and construction.

Keywords: autobiographical picture narrative, autobiography, narrative, Maggie Taylor, Lori Nix, constructed narrative, fabrication, visual social semiotics
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<td>ACE</td>
<td>Accumulated cyclone energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISAF</td>
<td>International Shark Attack File</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMWR</td>
<td>Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report</td>
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<tr>
<td>RP</td>
<td>Represented participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPs</td>
<td>Represented participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCR CMP</td>
<td>University of California Riverside’s California Museum of Photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFO</td>
<td>Weather Forecast Office</td>
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<td>WKWMP</td>
<td>Western Kansas Weather Modification Program</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian (Nora, 1985:15)

1.1 Background and contextualisation

This dissertation explores a selection of images produced by the artist-photographers Lori Nix (1969 - ) and Maggie Taylor (1961 - ). In particular, the use of narrative elements in the works *Ice storm, 1999* (see Figure 1.2) and *Twilight swim, 2004* (see Figure 1.1) are investigated as these relate to autobiographical aspects. Upon closer investigation it seems as if the autobiographical and narrative elements present themselves in fairly oblique, or constructed ways, in the form of reference to, for instance, autobiographical memory, particular socio-cultural environments, and personal experiences of the artist-photographers. Both Nix and Taylor’s images comment on their immediate surroundings in a manner that suggests that their pictures either reflect real past events, or serve as a window into a fabricated reality that nonetheless seems to say something pertinent about the artist-photographers.

The carefully constructed ice storm, broken telephone/electricity wires, prairie dogs and general chaos caused by weather conditions in Nix’s (see Figure 1.2) constructed diorama draw on her autobiographical narration of memories of real events. Although the image at first glance communicates on a very literal interpretation, the metaphoric reading of the image reveals the aspect to which the photographer incorporated a measure of fabrication that perhaps reveal more closely “how” she remembers instead of providing cold hard facts.

The painterly Photoshop-manipulated effects that Taylor, on the other hand, applied to her digitally constructed autobiographical image *Twilight swim, 2004* (see Figure 1.1) create the impression that this picture, unlike Nix’s image, communicates in a wholly surrealistic manner that seem to bear little relation to the worlds of facts. In this manner, Taylor’s autobiographical narrative communicates more clearly through construction and fabrication (see, for example, the fish in the foreground camouflaged with a shark fin). Nonetheless, both images contain (1) autobiographical elements (Nix, n.d:1; Standen, 2005:7), (2) filtered through memory (Nix, n.d:1; Standen, 2005:9) which means that they have been
constructed in the interest of reinterpreting events in order to add a peculiar subjective dimension to the act of making and remembering.

The current study focuses on the ways in which both Taylor and Nix choose to fabricate (reinterpret) and stage autobiographical picture narratives and, while so doing, rely on autobiographical memory as an aid to rework past experiences (as opposed to taking photographs that would merely reflect events from the past).

For the purpose of the current research, the term “autobiographical picture narrative” refers to events that occurred in the image-maker/narrator’s life as these are constructed and visually “written” as narrative interpretations, events or characters. Constructing an autobiographical narrative, according to Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang (2004:27), involves not only autobiographical memory, but also other factors such as “real experiences, together with things heard, seen, read, narrated and invented”. Steiner and Yang (2004:27) further explain that memories of past experiences can be augmented through the imagination. In the process, the social and cultural contexts in which memories are created and interpreted also play a role.

According to the prominent theorist Maurice Halbwachs (1992:7), “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories”. Halbwachs (1992:7) claims that it is also in society that people recall, recognise, and localise their memories. The author explains that autobiographical memory comprises events that we ourselves experience, and that memory can therefore not be separated from society, as society influences and shapes the very construction of memory. The individual therefore does not function in isolation during the process of constructing an autobiographical narrative; he or she is strongly influenced by, and grounded in, the socio-cultural environment.
Ruth Frost (n.d.:2) summarises the complexity of autobiographical memory by suggesting that autobiographies are attempts to construct narratives which can readily result in a measure of tension between reality and fiction. It will be argued in this study that the constructed autobiographical narrative may reflect the past but that it is more likely to suggest a constructed reality and a constructed central character, which means that neither reality nor the character are simply reflected; they are interwoven into a new stage of remembering.

This state of affairs can be explained in part by the fact that an autobiographical memory tends to fade gradually, particularly because it is not always collectively remembered and maintained, as is often the case with collective social memory. Frost (n.d.:11) explains that a measure of memory disintegration takes place in all people, allowing for one memory to be replaced by another. Constructing an autobiographical narrative, therefore, according to Steiner and Yang (2004:16), involves a continual process of recollecting fragmented autobiographical memories and combining a number of factors in order to create a new, somewhat fictional reality. Craig Barclay (as cited in Frost, n.d.:15-20) notes that, “[w]e build a sense of self from our autobiographical memories, evaluating experiences and constructing stories”. However, the newly created and interpreted version of the autobiographical narrative cannot be said to be wholly “untrue” – interpretations of events may arguably also stand in for versions of said events.
It is, perhaps, not surprising that the autobiographical narrative has been widely criticised (Steiner & Yang, 2004:15). The authors note that, “even ‘auto’ seems questionable in the light of changing views of the self, since it suggests a unified and autonomous entity, thereby ignoring the ‘socialization’ of the subject” (Steiner & Yang, 2004:15). Indeed, the process of constructing an autobiographical narrative allows the individual to shape his or her character or persona through the process of both augmenting and recalling memories, experiences, and stories. As such, an autobiographical narrative can be considered as an “interpretation” that involves both real events as well as enhanced autobiographical memory, which works towards distorting, commenting on, and fabricating a constructed reality. This reality, in turn, helps to recreate and construct the individual’s character or persona. Therefore, while autobiographical photographs or images may be associated by some with empirical “truth”, or with a reflection of events, another dimension of verity is possible when a constructed reality and character are introduced: it can be argued that a more profound and subjective version of the truth is communicated that conveys more than (empirical) appearances and may therefore include memory and highly subjective interpretations.

According to Paul Jay (as cited in Smith & Watson, 2001:186), “the attempt to distinguish ‘autobiography’ from ‘autobiographical fiction’ may … be ‘pointless’ for if by ‘fictional’ we mean ‘made up’, ‘created’ or ‘imagined’ – something, that is, which is literary and not ‘real’ – then we have merely defined the ontological status of any text, autobiographical or not”. Although the character who tells the story exists and is real, the process of narrative storytelling, however, tends to incorporate fictional tactics. This is found, as it will be shown, in Taylor and Nix’s methods of fabricating, constructing and staging the story of the self.

Lynne Warren (2006:319) proposes that autobiographical image-making can be divided into photographs [or images] that fabricate autobiographical reality, and photographs [or images] that are constructed and staged. Warren (2006:319) explains that, “fabricated imagery is produced by techniques like combination-printing, montage, and photomontage”; according to Warren these techniques are used “to invent a scene or event that never existed or took place”. “Set-up” or staged photography, as Warren (2006:316-319) furthermore explains, also “refer[red] to as tableaux or directorial photography, involves the artist creating a ‘reality’ or ‘stage’ upon which they organise and arrange subjects and/or props in a particular way for the intention of photographing it”.
Prominent artist-photographers such as Nix, Taylor, Samantha Everton (1971 - ), and Cindy Sherman (1954 - ) have, since the 1980s and thereafter, begun to explore the potential of constructing a photographic world where fabrication and reality are merged, in order to create a narrative that may also involve a constructed central character or persona. For example, the famous *Untitled* series by Sherman shows a central character who is always a different person/constructed version of one woman (Steiner & Yang, 2004:66-67). Constructed personas as well as constructed spaces or environments may point to a reinterpretation of a type, or of an issue in society (as found in the work of Sherman and Kruger) or to the reinterpretation of a series of actual events. Samantha Everton (1971) (see Figure 1.3) and Sherman’s (see Figure 1.4) photographic narratives illustrate the perception or memory of the lived experience as a constructed fabrication¹, instead of as a “factual” representation. If the reality of the autobiographical narrative is a construct, and the self at the centre of the autobiography is similarly a construct, then the very notion of autobiography as “factual” is undermined. Indeed, the extent to which “reality” is incorporated and narrated through the autobiographical process is therefore questionable.

¹ That is, as photographs that are fictitious in nature.

**1.2 The artist-photographers Maggie Taylor and Lori Nix**

Nix and Taylor are both intrigued by how they can manipulate their constructed environments either by creating miniature staged or fabricated imagery. These processes allow them to determine the extent to which they are capable of merging autobiographical
memory with other factors, for example, the experience, perception, and personal memory of the aspect or event being commented upon. The process of controlling and constructing an autobiographical narrative offers photographers such as Taylor and Nix the opportunity to incorporate autobiographical memories, and also to comment on their socio-cultural environment (Nix, n.d.:1; Standen, 2005:7-9).

The critic Paul Karabinis (in an interview with Standen, 2005:7) explains that Taylor considers her work as autobiographical in nature. The artist also notes that her images sometimes take months to complete, during which time her autobiographical memories, environment, daily activities, or dreams inspire and influence her end product. Standen (2005:7) explains that Taylor’s work is, “obviously symbolic but not symbolically obvious”. She is subtle in her photographic approach, so that the work tends to enchant viewers before prompting them to discover an obscured narrative that is not immediately visible.

Nix can also be described as an autobiographical photographer/image-maker. Her approach to the narrative tableau as photographic construction is not that of “a distanced documentarian”, but, rather, her constructions “possess the psychological intensity of one who has seen life as more surreal than fairy tales” (Nix, 2003: ¶ 3). Growing up in Kansas, Nix experienced “natural disasters featuring tornadoes, floods, snowstorms and insect manifestations” (Nix, 2003: ¶ 3). She draws inspiration from childhood experiences, society and autobiographical memory, and uses these to construct altered realities in the form of miniature still lives that seem to depict the aftermath of disaster situations, such as those portrayed in her series titled Accidentally Kansas and her series titled The City.

In view of the above contextualisation and background to the study as well as the introduction to the photographer-artists, the central problem statement of the study can now be formulated, followed by the aim and objectives of the study.

The problem statement is linked to the practical body of work that accompanies this dissertation. In order to construct an autobiographical picture narrative, the researcher felt it necessary to explore salient examples of artists who practice this photographic genre such as Nix and Taylor - in order to establish the nature of the autobiographical picture narrative. During this process, the central concern is to explore the tension between constructedness and reflection of reality, and in the process to develop a suitable model (semiotics) for
interpreting these autobiographical picture narratives. Finally, the interpretation of images guides the construction of the researcher’s own body of work.

1.3 The aim and the objectives of the study

The study sets out to investigate the construction of an autobiographical self within an autobiographical picture narrative with reference to the photographers Nix and Taylor. The following objectives have been formulated in support of this aim:

• To define the term “autobiographical picture narrative” and to conceptualise the historical origins of this type of narrative, and to distil the essential characteristics of this type of narrative.

• To examine how visual social semiotics can assist in reading a constructed autobiographical picture narrative according to the essential characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative.

• To interpret the work of Taylor and Nix in order to demonstrate how the construction of an autobiographical picture narrative brings about a constructed version of both reality and the individual’s character or persona.

• To determine how the interpretation of the central characteristics of the autobiographical picture narrative can be applied in the construction of the researcher’s autobiographical picture narratives submitted for the practical component of this study.

1.4 The aim of the practical component

This study is situated within the field of practice-led research, which entails that the theoretical framework and contextualisation of the study guide the development of the practical body of work. The theoretical study therefore provides the foundation for the practical output, creating a conceptual framework to construct an autobiographical character

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2 In the early 1900s, the Swiss professor of linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) proposed a new science called semiology. At the same time, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was developing a similar study called semiotics. Visual social semiotics originated almost a century later, in the 1990s, as an elaboration of Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday’s (1978) social semiotic view of language.
or persona, and guiding the process of creating a constructed autobiographical picture narrative by means of photographic techniques.

The practical research combines both fabricated and staged photography with a view to construct an autobiographical picture narrative, while relying on the parameters identified in the social semiotic reading facilitated by the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative, namely fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural structure\(^3\), commonalities in female narration\(^4\), and narrative function.

The researcher's approach for the practical body of work, in contrast to the approach of the artist-photographer Nix (who sculpts props and creates mainly domestic installations for her narratives) is to populate both urban, rural and computer-generated environments with figures and found objects. An autobiographical picture narrative is thus constructed, which combines fabrication and staged narrative tableaux. This narrative explores the notion of a constructed reality, while drawing on what Steiner and Yang (2004:27) describe as real experiences, observation, autobiographical memory, literature, and the social environment. The researcher's practical work incorporates both fabrication and reality, while relying on autobiographical memory to ground the constructed character(s) within the socio-cultural environment, depicting the autobiographical character in a multi-representational role as a female narrator.

The practical work of the researcher therefore explores the boundaries between autobiographical memory, fabrication, and reality. The autobiographical character is, however, influenced by the social and cultural environment in which the narrator finds him/herself. The autobiographical narration is therefore not only a representation of events consisting of a merging of reality and fabricated (reinterpreted) events, but also reflects on the narrator's character within the social cultural environment.

1.5 Significance of the study

On a theoretical level, by examining contemporary autobiographical narrators such as Nix and Taylor, similarities and differences in their approaches towards autobiographical

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\(^3\) For the purpose of this study, "socio-cultural structure" will refer to both the social and cultural structure that the individual is brought up in and includes the physical context such as people and places that shape and influence the individual.

\(^4\) An autobiographical narrative constructed by a female narrator as opposed to a male narrator.
narrative constructions can be determined as these relate to the search for and construction of the character of the self.

Regarding the methodology, the implementation of Harrison’s (2003:46) visual social semiotic framework provides the basis for identifying differences and similarities in the use of visual language within the constructed narratives. This framework will be shown to be an appropriate methodological approach for studies in photography.

Furthermore, in terms of the link between the theory and the practical body of work, the findings of the study have the potential to contribute on a practical level as well as a theoretical level towards the field of photographic construction of autobiographical picture narratives. The researcher wishes to contribute towards scholarship in the field of photography on the level of higher degrees by means of her insights and practical application of these insights.

1.6 Methodological approach and chapter division

The methodological approach for the dissertation is qualitative in nature, concentrating primarily on a literature study. The study focuses on how a newly created reality, as well as a constructed self, is achieved within the autobiographical picture narrative. Salient concepts such as fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration, and narrative function will be discussed, as these have a profound effect on the nature of an autobiographical picture narrative. The work of the selected artists (Taylor and Nix) is interpreted by means of a semiotic reading that incorporates the concepts mentioned above. The semiotic reading of the selected images allows for interpretative insights into autobiographical picture narratives, consequently providing the necessary conceptual tools for the researcher to create a reality in the form of an autobiographical picture narrative.

The practical component consists of a series of photographs that constitute constructed autobiographical picture narrative, while the theoretical component of the study is subdivided into six chapters.

In Chapter 1 the background and context to the study have been set out and the central problem statement as well as the aim and objectives to the study have been formulated.
Chapter 2 presents a theoretical exposition of the concept of an autobiographical narrative and proposes a definition of the autobiographical picture narrative. This is followed by a historical contextualisation of the autobiographical narrative. The chapter also presents a discussion of the salient characteristics of an autobiographical narrative, which will guide the visual social semiotic reading of the visual images presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the method of interpretation. This chapter introduces the study of semiotics and contextualises the notion of visual social semiotics. The focus is on Harrison's (2003) visual social semiotic framework that is related to the work of social semioticians Kress and Van Leeuwen. Social semiotics is presented as a tool to visually read and interpret the constructed autobiographical picture narrative.

The following chapter provides an overview of the two autobiographical photographers Taylor and Nix, followed by a social semiotic reading of the selected images, namely *Twilight swim, 2004* and *Ice storm, 1999*, and the chapter concludes with a comparison of the visual narratives found in the images. The semiotic reading of the images will be conducted according to the five characteristics of an autobiographical narrative, as derived from Chapter 2, namely fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration, and narrative function.

Chapter 5 presents a reading of the visual narrative technique of the practical component of the study, as well as a reflection on how this visual narrative technique compares to the technique that is apparent in Taylor and Nix's autobiographical narratives. Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter. Here the study is summarised, insights are noted and recommendations are made for further research.
CHAPTER 2
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out to define the concept of an autobiographical narrative. A brief historical contextualisation of autobiography in the field of literature, as well as within the photographic genre, is presented. Finally, five characteristics relevant to this study’s approach to the autobiographical genre are discussed, namely fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration, and narrative function.

The visual social semiotic reading, which is presented in Chapter 4, will be guided by the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative as identified and discussed in this particular chapter.

2.2 A definition of autobiography as a genre

Jens Brockmeier (in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001:254) notes that an autobiography is a “self-fashioned biography”. Hence, an autobiographical narrative can be defined as “a story, or a part of it, that refers in one way or another to one’s life history” (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001:247). Brockmeier (in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001:250) defines an autobiographical narrative as a narrative that simultaneously incorporates both past and present, while also hinting at the future. An autobiographical narrative can consist of language, imagery, sound, spatial construction, or a combination thereof (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001:255). According to Craig R. Barclay (in Rubin 1995:94) the process of constructing an autobiography is “embedded in affective, interpersonal, sociocultural, and historical contexts.”

One of the leading theorists of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune (1989), highlights three facets that define the genre: “[f]irst, the autobiographical view is taken from a retrospective vantage point; second, it focuses on the individual life; and third, it is concerned with one’s own existence, that is, it refers to an empirically lived (and thus ontologically given) life course” (as cited in in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001:254). The autobiography therefore is a historical text and looks back predominantly, but not
exclusively, at the concerns of a central character or persona, and is based - to a greater or lesser extent - on observable facts and events.

The autobiographical narrative is unique in the sense that it allows for the narration of the inner privacy of the self, which is not necessarily a record of existence, but instead illustrates how the narrator would prefer to interpret and construct his or her life, and is thus a reflection of his or her character or persona (Gusdorf, 1980:45). Developmental psychologists such as Robyn Fivush and Janine P. Buckner explain that through the process of “examining autobiographical narratives, we gain access” into how the individual constructs “their own identity” (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:149).

The psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan explains that an introspective observation plays a central role in constituting the characteristics of the individual (as cited in Fivush & Haden, 2003:149). In the publication *The reflective self in an autobiographical narrative* by Dr Kiriaki Massoura and Dr Mark W.J. Garner (2005:1), the authors explain that “[l]ife does not offer itself to us, as it were, as a pre-formulated story: it has to be made into stories if we are to experience it in any but the most basic and instinctive manner. And through narratives in interaction we develop the capacity for self-interpretation” [italics added for emphasis]. When creating autobiographical stories, one also needs to understand that the self does not exist in isolation, and that past and present experiences need to be interpreted in order to formulate and construct a coherent reading of these (Massoura & Garner, 2005:1).

Narrating an autobiography involves, among other things, the act of revealing the character of the self to the viewer or reader. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001:32) explain that individuals, “make themselves known by acts of identification and, by implication, differentiation”. Smith and Watson (2001:33) note that personal characteristics as these are found in an autobiography are directly linked to “gender, national citizenship, work status, sexuality, class location, generational location, ethnicity, and family constellation”. These multilateral levels of distinctiveness allow for the self to adopt various personae during a single day. Characteristics of personae, in this sense, are constructed and discursive. Characteristics are therefore not simply inherited, and the self of the autobiographical narrative is therefore not born with a particular status. Instead, these personal characteristics are generally adopted and influenced “through the discourses that surround them” (Smith & Watson 2001:33). Stuart Hall (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994:392) further notes that
the production of an individual’s characteristics is therefore never completed; it is always in progress. According to Smith and Watson (2001:33), “social organisations and symbolic interactions are always in flux”. This means that such interactions have a direct bearing on an individual’s personal characteristics. Smith and Watson (2001:33) explain that, “a meaningful identity, on one day or in one context, may not be culturally and personally meaningful at another moment or in another context”.

An autobiography involves not only a revelation of the character, but, as Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:223) explains, it transcends notions of revelation, and rather entails a process of constructing “selfhood”, which “cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate”.

2.3 Historical contextualisation: written and photographic autobiographies

The first known autobiography, titled Memorias, was written in the fifteenth century by a Spanish noblewoman by the name of Leonor López de Córdoba. The first known English autobiography was also written in the fifteenth century by Margery Kempe and was titled The Book of Margery Kempe (Kempe & Windeatt, 1985:1). The autobiography described her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as well as her visits to Rome. Her manuscript, however, was not published until 1936. According to James Fieser (2003:118), “the term autobiography was first used in 1797 in a review attribute[d] to William Taylor of Disraeli’s Miscellanies in the British Monthly Review”. However, it was only in 1956 that the Belgian critic Georges Gusdorf published a seminal essay titled Conditions and limits of autobiography, which was considered the first critical modern autobiographical study (Smith & Watson, 2001:122). During the twentieth century, the term “memoirs” came into common usage when referring to self-life writing (Folkenflik as cited in Smith & Watson, 2001:2).

The development of the autobiographical genre within the photographic medium has similarly been piecemeal. With the invention of photography just over 150 years ago, the medium came to be associated with special status, namely that of being a so-called realistic representation. Photography was referred to as a “non-deceiving mirror”, representational of “absolute pictorial objectivity”, and it was essentially focused on achieving a non-manipulated, sharp record of a found object or event, striving for technical perfection (Felix, Kohler & Vowinckel, 1995:21).

The first permanent photograph still in existence was recorded in 1826 with the use
of a camera obscura. It documents the view from the photographer, Nicephore Niepce's top floor workroom and seems to be a truly objective, factual and unconstructed image. Many documentary photographs have since followed, such as the famous 1838 street scene, which is a document of the first recorded person appearing in a photograph (the person was standing still for long enough to be photographically recorded) by photographer Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (Bajac, Elizabeth & Francesco, 2010:36-37).

However, the understanding and exploration of reality as construction soon entered the field of photography. The British High Art photographer, Oscar Rejlander of the 1850s became an expert at for instance staging images for the purpose of photographing them. Rejlander started experimenting with combination printing and produced popular works such as the albumen prints entitled, "The two ways of life" (1857) (see Figure 2.1) making use of double exposures, photomontage and retouching techniques (Frizot, 1998:188).

![Image](image-url)

Figure 2.1: Oscar Rejlander, Two ways of life, 1857

The unconventional photographer Felix Nadar (1820-1910) was also one of the first photographers who practised the earliest form of constructed photography. In 1861 Nadar staged and re-enacted a scene from 1785-1787 for photographic purposes under low light in the Catacombs of Paris, showing a "person" removing rotting corpses to the designated new cemeteries on the outskirts of Paris (see Figure 2.2). Due to technical limitations of the photographic medium, such as a slow shutter
speed, Nadar had to make use of a mannequin in his staged scene in order to produce a sharp image.

The re-enacted scene by Nadar illustrates the removal of the mass graves from the Catacombs that took place because of the fear that existed among Parisians of disease-causing “miasmas”, as well as fear of a possible stench from the rotting corpses (Marien, 2002:152-153).

Figure 2.2: Felix Nadar, Interior of Catacombs, Paris 1861

Technical improvements such as the insight that gelatin could be used as a promising substitute for the glass plate collodion process (by the English doctor Richard Leach Maddox in 1871), meant that the photographer could now purchase ready-to-use manufactured plates within camera boxes and was no longer responsible for making and coating there own negatives (Frizot, 1998:233-234).

A 24-year old bank clerk and amateur photographer, George Eastman, invented a plate-coating machine in 1880 and started the Eastman Dry Plate Company in New
York, followed by the Kodak camera in 1888 that revolutionising the face of photography. Eastman in this way famously not only simplified but also popularised photography (Frizot, 1998:237-238). Due to the improved photographic equipment, documentary photographers such as Lewis Hine (1874-1940) captured and exposed child labour within America, while Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) utilised the medium to capture decisive moment documentary photographs (Langford, 1997:93-104).

The photographic movement since the 1880s shifted from placing the emphasis on Naturalism and Impressionism towards focusing and incorporating Symbolism in their work (Frizot, 1998:313). Artist-photographers such as Man Ray (1890-1976) experimented with Photograms (or “rayographs”) to creating abstract images abusing the conventions of both photography and art (Langford, 1997:128). The photographer Paul Strand (1890-1976) was the first to “turn his back on pictorial photography and to create aesthetically pleasing pictures which were ‘straight’, i.e. showing the subject realistically and not by manipulating the photographic process” (Langford, 1997:131-133).

2.4 More recent explorations of the photographic autobiographical narrative

After 1975, the quality of the photographic medium dramatically improved, and by then, technically flawless negatives could be produced, medium- to large-format cameras were readily available, and photographers started to experiment more with colour photography. Photographers were no longer bound to difficulties regarding the technical manufacturing processes of the photographic medium as commercial manufacturers were responsible for these. However, as Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:29) point out, photographers started to, instead, focus more on exploring aspects of content and a new interest emerged on the narrative possibilities of the medium.

Terms such as “narrative”, “storytelling”, and “anecdotal” are often associated with the vocabulary of realistic art. This association may account for the fact that although the notion of constructing a written autobiography has gained status over time, autobiography would not become a well-known genre among photographers until the

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Frizot (1998:313) explains that Pictorial photography “was a particularly contemporary form of artistic expression”.

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1980s. Lovejoy (1990:1) explains that, "it was not until the 1980s that photography became recognised as an acceptable medium in mainstream [art]". Photographic art during this age often tended to explore the use of staged images in the process of creating meaning, and autobiographical narratives became fashionable in the medium of photography. In many instances, the photographer's intent was to deliberately and openly manipulate the notions of objectivity by creating a fictitious representation of a recollected autobiographical memory. Emphasis was placed on the conceptual and content-related aspects: "the particular construction of the narrative structure of a tableau or picture story" (Felix, Kohler & Vowinckel, 1995:38).

In particular, photographers such as Nix, Taylor, Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, and the South African artists Leora Farber (1964 - ), Berni Searle (1964 - ), and Tracey Rose (1974 - ) began to explore the autobiographical narrative through the photographic medium, not only to express personal experiences, but also to comment on their socio-cultural environments.

The Johannesburg-based artist, Farber (n.d.:1) has the following to say regarding her work, "[m]y artistic practice revolves around a general theme with multiple offshoots, namely the (de)construction of gender identity". Through the photographic series entitled, Dis-location / Re-location (2006-7) she explores methods through which different cultures, for instance, are grafted into or onto her skin (Farber, 2005:1). In the series she sets out to explore a "personalized postcolonial identity through reference to colonialism, geographies, histories, political positions, and cultural affiliations" (Farber, 2005:1). Robyn Sassen (2007:16) explains that Farber's work "evokes complex narratives, the immigration to Africa by a Jewish woman in the late 19th century".
Farber constructs her photographic images by, among other strategies, proposing that she grafts (or figuratively implants) a diverse range of material/s onto the skin of the female persona, Bertha Marks, who can be said to simultaneously represent Farber, her female ancestry as well as Mrs Marks herself. According to Sassen (2007:1) the strength of Farber’s series can be ascribed to the attention paid to detail making use of a combination of typically English plants such as roses, representing her mother’s Eastern European origin and love for roses, combined with the African aloes, representational of her mother’s “new” relocated residence. The combination of the roses (Eastern Europe but also suggestive of the “English rose” meaning beautiful woman) and aloes (that suggest Africa) forms a new amalgamation. Farber is shown in the series to literally sow the amalgamation into/onto the persona’s (her) body. According to Farber (2005:2), “skin” within a South African context especially evokes a “complex relation to various controlling political trajectories and regimes”. The process of “sowing” into and onto the skin becomes an appropriate technique for not only implanting but also metaphorically merging various cultures as such creating a hybrid within her, but also within the current political climate. This shows that Farber’s narrative is autobiographical but also overlaps with historical narratives, and bears the traces of the current as well as historical socio-cultural contexts.
The Cape Town artist Berni Searle originally trained as a sculptor, but is known for her use of found material combined with large-scale digital photographic prints in order to create compelling installations that interrogates her views regarding history, memory and place.

Searle (as cited in O'Toole, 2003:1) explains the following about her work:

Without providing any definite answers, I think my work raises questions about attitudes towards race and gender. I think it operates on different levels and reflects different racial and political experiences – but I don’t think my pieces are limited by that. I hope they transcend and go beyond that, and provide a space for illusion and fantasy. They reflect a desire to present myself in various ways to counter the image that has been imposed on me. Race is inevitable in South Africa.

Figure 2.4: Berni Searle, Untitled, Series: 'Colour Me', 1998

Searle’s work not only deals with issues relating to race, colour, language and women, but also raises questions about the complex history of South Africa. She uses her own body and constructs photographs making use of coloured and aromatic spices either staining her body to suggest for instance trauma or alternatively covering her body with spices and leaving an imprint of her body on the floor. The spices are representational of the spice trade that was brought to South Africa due to the white colonists that anchored at the Cape of Good Hope in the 17th century. Sean O’Toole (2003:1) explains that as a result of interbreeding between white colonists, local inhabitants and “slaves brought from other parts of Africa” a mixed race or
“coloured” race originated. Through her work she confronts this particular aspect of the South African history and the obsession with the classification of races. Therefore, her work is autobiographical, deals with memory and the interpretation of memory, but always positions her narratives in the broader socio-cultural context.

The young South African artist Tracey Rose was brought up with a Catholic background and, as Sue Williamson (2001:1) explains, she has a “rich ancestry which includes German and Khoisan forbears”. An analysis of her own social history as well as issues of the body, identity and gender constitutes the theme of her own work.

The South African female artists Farber, Searle and Rose work with issues of the self within the genre of constructed identities. They merge reality and fiction through their picture narratives in order to bring about constructed and intertextually layered narratives that explore their autobiographies and while the same time commenting on society and socio-cultural realities that have a bearing on their work, their memories and their personas.

The American-born artists Eleanor Antin (1935 - ) and Lynn Hershman (1941 - ) have both explored the photographic medium, focusing on self-presentation, and their work also shows a concern with the idea of “multiple presentations” - as such, they achieve another level of autobiographical narrative, one consisting of the self and the alter ego (see Figures 2.8 and 2.9) (Steiner & Yang, 2004:16). These two artists have been at the forefront of women’s performance art and through invented personae, they address, in a playful manner, difficult issues regarding gender, as well as the female identity (Steiner & Yang, 2004:34).

Clearly, the autobiographical narrative in the medium of photography has featured strongly since the 1980s and remains a current concern. Since this period, artists tended to focus on explorations of the self as the object of the photograph, and on using photography as a means of presenting a “subjective interpretation” that incorporates aspects such as constructed imagery, double exposure, and a combination of multiple images. The practice of constructing photographs from the imagination, according to Jeffrey Hoone (n.d.:1), “has allowed photographers to explore, question, and extend pliable links between the veracity of photography as evidence and the photograph as extension of the imagination” [italics added for emphasis].
Consequently, since the 1980s, a number of photographers have constructed, arranged and staged scenes before photographing them, and may (or may not) decide to refrain from post-production manipulation in the darkroom (Felix, Kohler & Vowinckel, 1995:15). Such artists would, therefore, assume the role of a film director, while staging and re-enacting the narrative, as Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:15) explain:

First he [the artist/photographer] develops an idea for the picture – the ‘script’ so to speak – then has the appropriate sets, props, costumes, and if needed, make-up prepared, selects performers and ultimately employs all of these elements to stage fictional events or scenes from everyday life, from history, legend, mythology or science fiction.

It is, furthermore, common in contemporary constructed, staged, and arranged photography since the 1980s (as seen for instance the work of Nix and Taylor) to replace people in the photograph with surrogates – dolls, toy figures, animals, or inanimate objects - and also to resort to the use of sculptures, as has been evident in the constructed photography of Nadar since the 1800s (see Figure 2.2).

Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:19) define the aims of the contemporary post-1980s photographer as the following:

1. The photographer-artist must invent his or her subject, or, more precisely, fabricate it; finding meaning is no longer sufficient.
2. The methods that the photographer-artist employs in doing so are entirely his or her own choice. Either he or she makes the effort to arrange, construct, or stage his or her subjects before the camera, or he/she uses pictures produced by others as points of departure for his or her own work.
3. The photographer-artist is not restricted by the use of exposure techniques.
4. The photographer-artist is not only encouraged to manipulate negatives, but also prints. Imagination and creativity are strongly promoted.
5. Although technical finesse in the production of negatives and prints is sometimes an ideal, it is not a prerequisite for a successful picture.
6. The creative achievement of the photographer-artist is measured according to his or her ability to undermine the traditional claim that the camera image represents “truth”, “objectivity”, and “realism”, and to instead give the camera image the character of an “autonomous” pictorial object. (This last point is of the utmost importance for the current study since the work under discussion is...
Concerned with interpretations of reality, memory and the like and not with revelations or factual representations thereof.)

Constructed photographs since the 1980s, according to Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:34), can be subdivided into the following categories:

1. **“Self-presentations”:** The artist may slip into a variety of roles, testing different identities.
2. **Narrative tableaux:** Several human actors play out scenes from everyday life, history, myth, or a fantasy of the directing artist.
3. **Miniature stages:** The tableaux reconstruct events, as in point 2 above, but in miniaturised format, using dolls and other toy objects.
4. **Still lives:** These are decidedly ‘postmodern’ arrangements featuring objects of various differing origins and meanings in leading roles.
5. **Photographic sculptures and installations:** These are large-scale staged scenes with various types of objects”.

This photographic trend that has emerged since the 1980s has been particularly conducive towards constructing a metaphorical narrative (or an interpreted narrative); as such, photographers began to incorporate and merge fiction and reality to convey the narrative. Indeed, according to Rugg (1997:1), photographs, “can display many views and variant versions of the same person which simply supply a visual metaphor for the divided and multiple self”.

While contemporary artist-photographers such as Taylor, Sherman, Nix, Searle, Farber, and Rose rely on a constructed metaphorical autobiographical interpretation, also exploring the characteristics of the “divided self” and the “multiple self” through the narration, other artists such as Wolfgang Tillmans (1968 - ), Ryan McGinley (1977 - ), and Nan Goldin (1953 - ) produce unmanipulated documentations of their immediate surroundings (aligning themselves with the “factual”/objective and “revelational” schools of thought in photography). The two approaches – the imaginative and subjectively constructed approach, and the so-called factual and objective approach - point to two essentially different beliefs about photography - that of either interpreting or reflecting the world.

Susan Sontag (2002:4) indicates that all photographs are mediated, even if they seem “objective”. According to Sontag (2002:4),
[w]hat is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.

However, Sontag (2002:5) further notes with a measure of concern that, “a picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture”. Taylor and Nix’s reflection of their autobiography can therefore be interpreted as representing reality while their interpretation could be what Sontag refers to as the distorted version of reality.

Constructed photographic narratives, by implication, focus on constructing a “puzzle of meaning” that consists of metaphors. Often these “puzzles of meaning” also incorporate image captions or accompanying text to provide a measure of “evidence” that directs the viewer to the image. It is often the artist’s intention to create a variant of a narrative that plays, “with the realisation that there can no longer be any established truths but instead only contradictory mixtures of appearance and reality, fact and fiction” (Felix, Kohler & Vowinckel, 1995:39). Of course, such a narrative still communicates one version of “the truth” – but not the so-called “objective” truth.

Generally speaking, the twentieth century saw a proliferation of the use of the manipulated image. Photographers began to incorporate techniques such as photomontage and collage to rearrange the basic form of representation and focused on “construct[ing] a pattern of meaning” (Clarke, 1997:197). The digital advances of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries resulted in a heightened complexity of the notion of constructedness: that of distinguishing what is “real” and “reality” in a world dominated by media and images (more often than not, highly manipulated). This abundance of media and images confuses our understanding of so-called empirical reality and brings about multiple new realities. According to Felix, Kohler and Vonwinckel (1995:22), “[i]n many cases … the world of media images has replaced empirical reality as the frame of reference through which we find orientation in the world”. Media images have come to define who we are.\(^2\)

2.4 Characteristics of constructed realities

In what follows, five salient characteristics of the autobiographical narrative that have

been identified, are discussed. These are fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration and the narrative function. These characteristics are discussed within the context of constructing an autobiographical picture narrative.

2.4.1 Fabrication and reality

An autobiographical narrative does not only provide a factual, mirrored, retrospective view of the individual, but also constitutes the imaginative socialisation of the subject during the process of construction (Steiner & Yang, 2004:15-16). Therefore, the construction of an autobiographical narrative allows for fact and the imagination to merge. Natalie Sutherland (n.d.:8) notes that this merging of fact and fiction does not diminish the credibility of the autobiography; rather, fictional narratives can be seen as containing valuable subjective and imaginative insights by means of which narrative meanings are communicated.

Artists such as Lynn Hershman (1941 - ) and Eleanor Antin (1935 - ) have both deliberately explored the notion of fiction within a narrated autobiography by, for instance, creating alter egos of themselves in order to explore different personae of the self. As such, autobiographies constructed within the arts embrace the creative potentiality of the visual medium, while literary autobiographies, on the other hand, tend to emphasise the, “desire for truth [as] traditionally a defining criterion” (Steiner & Yang, 2004:16). In From the end to the beginning: Retrospective teleology in autobiography, Brockmeier (in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001:254) cites Lejeune as he points out that a written autobiographical narrative allows for the individual to narrate himself or herself, as he or she would like to be projected. Steiner and Yang (as cited in Fivush & Haden, 2003:194) further note that an autobiographical narration consists of a merging of fact and imagination and as such, allows for the self to construct a persona that will be acceptable in his or her socio-cultural environment.

Including a measure of fabrication in an autobiography allows the narrator to explore various dimensions of events and character. While it may, for instance, be expected that an individual should have one identity only and that he or she might tend to suppress anything that does not conform to this identity, a constructed autobiography allows the individual to construct multiple characters, which allow him or her to explore the possibility of various dimensions of the self (Felix, Kohler &
In Dan P. McAdams’ research titled *Love, power, and images of the self* (1984), he explains that an autobiographical narrative can also be created by introducing an “idealised personification of the self”, also known as an “imago”, that functions as a protagonist in the narrative (see also Fivush & Haden, 2003:193). As a result, the multiple characters presented in the autobiography are able to personify the various facets of the individual’s life (Hermans as cited in Fivush & Haden, 2003:193).

![Christian Boltanski, *Christian Boltanski separated by five years and three months*, 1970](image)

Figure 2.5: Christian Boltanski, *Christian Boltanski separated by five years and three months*, 1970

Steiner and Yang (2004:19) note that the French artist Christian Boltanski (1944 - ), for instance, deliberately incorporated fiction into his work of the 1960s and 1970s to reconstruct his life. Works such as *Portrait Photographs of Christian Boltanski* (1972) consist of both “fictitious documents and photos of friends or of strangers to ‘illustrate’ his life story”. Boltanski integrated “photographs of anonymous boys of different ages” into his work to “invoke his own childhood years” (see Figure 2.5) (Steiner & Yang, 2004:19). Boltanski has been cited by Steiner and Yang (2004:68) as reflecting on his autobiographical interpretation: “I’m a rather constructed person, and
my reality is disappearing more and more. I suppose it’s partly like that for everyone, artist or not. You decide what bit of yourself is to show or not”.

In what seems to be in contrast to Boltanski’s approach, artists such as On Kawara (1933 - ) followed a more traditional approach to recollecting and interpreting autobiographical data: “Kawara draws up a precise list of unadorned facts which accumulate into a detailed account. In I met, I read, I went (1969), he arranges events under different categories, thereby tracing the various trajectories of his life and at the same time confirming his existence” (Steiner & Yang, 2004:19) (see Figure 2.6). Kawara allows for very little so-called autobiographical scrutiny and interpretation through the narration of his life. In the end, both Kawara and Boltanski work with constructed selves, although Kawara's work has the semblance of objective factuality, it is as much an interpretation as Boltanski’s.

![Figure 2.6: On Kawara, Date Painting (Today-Series, 1973 & 1976)](image)

Another example worth noting in this regard is the American photographer Nan Goldin (1953 - ), who has been cited by Steiner and Yang (2004:176) as saying “since my early teens, I’d lived by an Oscar Wilde saying, that you are who you pretend to be”. Goldin photographs “friends and acquaintances, many of whom have overstepped the rigid gender boundaries of mainstream society – transsexuals, drag queens and transvestites, people who either cannot or will not decide on their own sexual identity” (Steiner & Yang, 2004:26) and in doing so, her goal is to reflect on and document through her photographs not only her own life, but also the time spent with these friends and acquaintances (see Figure 2.7). By spending time in a specific socio-cultural milieu, Goldin reflects on the parallel worlds of her friends and family, how the everyday world has impacted on them and indirectly on her, as such. These
parallel existences affect how she sees herself and how she constructs her autobiography.

The notion of cultural documentation influencing autobiographical narration, as in Goldin's experience, is reaffirmed by Steiner and Yang (2004:186). According to these authors, experiences with different cultural backgrounds can influence and change one's own identity, or even one’s self-image, and can thus create uncertainty and insecurity regarding certain characteristics of the individual. Consequently, the narrator frequently redefines the characteristics of the individual, and, as such, rewrites the autobiographical narrative.

Figure 2.7: Nan Goldin, Taboo in the Bathroom, 1991

The socio-cultural environment and the personal goals of the individual play a role in how the autobiographical narrative is constructed. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (cited in Fivush & Haden, 2003:194) explain the relation between autobiographical memory and the narrator's personal goals by noting that personal goals influence what and how autobiographical memory is processed, and thereby function as a control system. The individual's personal objectives guide the self in order to store and later retrieve autobiographical memory, so as to formulate and construct an identity within the autobiographical narrative.
2.4.2 Autobiographical memory

Autobiographical memory is the place in our memory banks where personal experiences are accumulated (Draaisma, 2004:1). John F. Kihlstrom, professor of psychology at Yale University, explains that memory can be divided into two forms, namely “procedural knowledge” and “declarative knowledge”. While “procedural knowledge” consists of cognitive and motor skills, “declarative knowledge” focuses on episodic and semantic memory. Kihlstrom (2002:1) further explains that episodic memory is what is known as autobiographical memory. However, Kihlstrom (2002:13) cautions that episodic memory describes a specific event and therefore remains factual and is not autobiographical, unless linked to the self, or unless it incorporates either the “I” or the “me” in the memory. Kihlstrom (as cited in Steiner & Yang, 2004:180) explains how easily autobiographical memory can be influenced by current situations, and how fragile the process of recalling childhood memory can be:

Each autobiographical memory … is part of a personal narrative, which reflects our views of ourselves … They represent the current ‘life style’ of the individual, and serve to remind the person of who he or she is … Childhood memories don’t determine adult personality; rather adult personality determines what will be remembered from childhood.

In John A. Robinson and Leslie R. Taylor’s study, Autobiographical memory and self-narratives: a tale of two stories (1998), important differences between autobiographical memories and self-narratives are highlighted. Robinson and Taylor’s study illustrates that people retain information in excess of what would generally be believed as sufficient. Autobiographical memory therefore generates a vast repository of information and experiences. Robinson and Taylor (in Bruce et al 1997:125) suggest that self-narratives, “… include only a subset of the remembered events stored in autobiographical memory”, and self-narratives “may also include information that is not technically part of the autobiographical memory base”.

Massoura and Garner (2005:11) propose that memory is the only “means of connecting the past and the present selves, to make sense of the present life in terms of the past”. In the case of, for instance, a traumatised memory, the self can be unreliable in the narration and can be influenced by the immediate socio-cultural environment, narrating the memory of others and as such, giving a false description of the past (Massoura & Garner, 2005:12). Although the narrator has the intention of providing a descriptive narration of past experiences, the “dissociated traumatic
memory” has the potential to result in a fabricated memory. However, new traumatic events can potentially trigger past suppressed memories, which can result in contradictory autobiographical memories (Massoura & Garner, 2005:13). Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (as cited in Fivush & Haden, 2003:194) furthermore state that although it is the narrator’s intention to provide a “descriptive” interpretation, the individual’s subjectivity can still determine what and how autobiographical memory is processed and can evidently also, in a sense, control the recollection of the autobiographical memory.

Expanding on this notion, Jens Brockmeier and Qi Wang (2002:47) suggest that the socio-cultural milieu may further influence an autobiographical memory and in this way determine how the self interprets an autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory can be considered as a driving construction consisting of social dialogue between, for instance, family, friends and acquaintances, as well as the larger cultural milieu. Brockmeier and Wang (2002:47) therefore suggest that “autobiographical remembering is a cultural practice”.

Robinson and Taylor (as cited in Fivush & Haden, 2003:126-195) concur that an autobiographical narrative may consist of information that exists over and above the autobiographical memory base, such as the information that one finds in an “imagined future”. The self-narrative includes an “imagined future” into the narration and will include information such as “how I see myself in 10 years, what events I believe I will experience one day, what I leave behind” (Fivush & Haden, 2003:195).

The notion of autobiographical memory is only one possible form in which the past is recollected. However the narrator relates to the larger society – in terms of his or her cognitive responses, such as his or her ability to feel, think and behave - has a significant impact on how he or she interprets their autobiographical experience and therefore constructs his or her self (Brockmeier & Wang, 2002:47).

2.4.3 Socio-cultural structure

The individual does not live in isolation and is influenced by the social and cultural structures that surround him or her. When constructing an autobiographical narrative the narrator generally establishes her/himself within their social and or cultural structure. The French mathematician, scientist and Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes (1595-1650) first formulated the idea of the solitary individual as a self
This notion subsequently resulted in the Western belief of the individual as an independent subject existing in the world. However, this idea is contested in contemporary thinking. According to Massoura and Garner (2005:1-2), “[t]he world contains other individual selves as well as various objects and processes, which the self strives to know and understand, and this knowledge to a large extent determines how the individual behaves as an inhabitant of the world”. The self is therefore perhaps not a “solitary self”, but instead “exists in its interactions with the physical and social worlds, interactions that are almost entirely unconscious and unreflective” (Massoura & Garner, 2005:1-2). The process of narration, according to this view, becomes a process of defining the (changing) self.

McAdams (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:187) argues in Identity and the life story that the notion of constructing an autobiographical narrative does not only include factual experiences, but also refers to the ability of the individual to deflect outside influences so as to construct an “acceptable” narrative. The narrator will therefore reconstruct the autobiographical narrative with the intention to create a socially acceptable outcome:

Life stories are based on autobiographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful (McAdams in Fivush & Haden, 2003:187).

The concepts of culture and the self, although intertwined, are at opposing ends of the social continuum. While culture refers to the similarity between people, the self, in turn, emphasises the individual (Fivush & Haden, 2003:169). Narrating life-stories occurs in all cultures and becomes a social event where stories are shared with other people; autobiographies therefore, “[m]irror the culture wherein the story is made and told” (Fivush & Haden, 2003:200). Hence, an autobiographical narrative is not only influenced by the cultural environment, but also lives within the culture. McAdams (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:200) explains the extent to which culture influences autobiographical narration:

They are born, they grow, they proliferate, and they eventually die according to the norms, rules, and traditions that prevail in a given society, according to a society’s implicit understandings of what counts as a tellable story, a tellable life.

In view of McAdams’ research, it is important, therefore, to note the extent to which
the narrative is influenced by how the individual interprets and remembers events, and also with reference to how society and the cultural environment contribute to and influence the manner in which the narrative is constructed. McAdams\(^3\) (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:202) concurs that the modern cultural climate poses unique problems for human selfhood and, “require[s] modern men and women to become especially adept at assimilating their lives to culturally intelligible stories”.

Due to the interpreted nature of recollected autobiographical memory, social and cultural influences on the self and the subjective nature of the self, the autobiographical narrative may be a fictional representation of events, a constructed narration consisting of personal interpretation, an imagined future, and a number of “imagos\(^4\)” that are created in order to narrate the idealised personification of the self. The autobiographical narration is, furthermore, influenced by aspects such as the gender of the narrator, which are likely to influence the narrator when constructing an autobiographical narrative.

### 2.4.4 Commonalities in female narration

The current undertaking of reading and constructing the autobiographical narrative is grounded in a female perspective. This is, firstly, because the researcher is female; this female narration perspective is also a more self-conscious decision because of the peculiarities associated with female autobiographical narratives. Furthermore, the reading of the autobiographical picture narrative will include an analysis of autobiographical images constructed by two female photographers. The intention is not to present a feminist autobiographical interpretation, but instead to highlight the female narrator’s approach to constructing a narrative of the self, while indicating, where relevant, commonalities and differences between male and female approaches to autobiographical narratives.

It has been noted that the 1980s saw a heightened exploration of narrative and constructed approaches to photography. During this era, it also became evident that autobiography was not restricted to the literary arts, but was instead, “a symptom of a much wider phenomenon cutting across and linking a diversity of fields, including literary theory and practice, sociology, ethnography and history, and sponsoring a

\(^3\) McAdams’ work on cultural modernity was conducted from 1996 to 1997.

\(^4\) It may well be the perceived norm for a person to have one identity and suppress anything that does not conform, but, as explained by Fivush and Haden (2003:193), “imagos” are created, allowing the self to explore the possibility of multiple characters.
widespread blurring of distinctions between established genres” (Stephens, 2000:195). According to Stephens (2000:195), “class, gender, and ethnicity emerged among the most significant elements in the production of individual and cultural identities to which autobiography could contribute”. As a result, autobiography combines fiction with discourses such as, “biography, sociology and ethnography to explore class, gender and family” (Stephens, 2000:195).

Michael Sheringham (in Stephens, 2000:187) was cited in Changing the script: woman writers and the rise of autobiography as saying that, “[w]here woman writers are concerned […] the turning point with regard to autobiography occurs in the 1980s”. Smith and Watson (1998:5) concur that it was not until the 1980s that interest in female autobiographical practice was acknowledged, not only as part of feminist theories, but also more inclusively as “women’s life experiences”.

Sheringham (in Stephens, 2000:188) highlights a number of key points in terms of the global change evident in both men’s and women’s autobiographical narrative writing (and photography) since the 1980s:

1. The prominence given to the relationship with significant others, especially parents;
2. Empowerment through writing;
3. The search for new autobiographical forms; and
4. The grounding of individual experience in historical and material reality.

Although the first two points recur throughout literary genres of female autobiography, new developments characterise work produced since the 1980s. These are exemplified by point 4 above, namely, “the grounding of individual experience in historical and material reality” (Stephens, 2000:188) which seems to have emerged more strongly in work since the 1980s.

Furthermore, Sheringham (in Stephens, 2000:190) asserts that female autobiographical narratives tend to, “define the self in relation to significant others rather than in terms of self-creation”. Sheringham (in Stephens, 2000:190) further notes that, in contrast to male autobiographers, “women do not tend to perceive themselves as representative of their epoch, nor as possessing essential and sovereign selves enjoying a privileged existence”.

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Estelle C. Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9), editor of the first anthology of essays dealing with the subject of female autobiography, titled *Woman’s autobiography: essays in criticism* (1980), maintains that male and female autobiographies should be read differently. She argues that not only are noticeable differences evident in terms of the content, but also in terms of the style of the narrated autobiography. She argues that this state of affairs can be ascribed to the, “long-term restriction of women to the private, personal world and the prevailing view that women’s lives are too insignificant to be of literary interest”. Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9) proposes that female autobiographical narratives tend to “mime the everyday quality of their lives”.

Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9) highlights a number of broad differences between male and female autobiographical narratives; for instance, woman tend to place emphasis on both their personal as well as their domestic details within their autobiographical narratives, they furthermore also describe their connections to other people through means of life writings. Men, on the other hand, tend to distance themselves within their autobiographies and instead focus on narrating their success stories and histories of their professional life. Women are likely to seek validation through the construction of their autobiographies. Women tend to sift through their life in search for understanding and explanation while masking their feelings and playing down the public aspect of their lives. Men, in contrast, are likely to exaggerate and boast about themselves in their autobiographies, creating an idealised personification, casting themselves into heroic moulds in order to project their universal importance. Men also tend to shape the events of their lives into coherent wholes characterised by linearity, harmony, and orderliness. Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9) points out that in contrast to men, women characterise their lives as a “disconnected […] pattern of diffusion and diversity in discontinuous forms, because the multidimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write”.

The nature of women’s art production is also situated within the broader discourse of gender and its social ramifications. Typically and conventionally (in terms of anatomical sexuality), a person is born either male or female, and society conventionally expects a person to assume an identity believed to be appropriate to the sex of that person – to assume a gender role. This means that people who want to “fit in” tend to suppress anything that does not conform or is deemed not suitable
to the socially ascribed gender role or character. Traditionally, gender roles have been fairly rigidly determined by social convention; this rigidity and prescriptiveness are even more apparent in the case of roles ascribed to females. This might, according to Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:39), explain why that females in particular tend to opt for a staged presentation of the self: “[f]or women artists, trying on alter egos represents palpable emancipation, a step toward liberation from the rigid role expectations with which they are confronted daily in the mass-media and in everyday life”. These alter egos do not necessarily have to represent the identity/identities or real dimensions of the self, but in many cases they become fictional and assume the role of an imaginary character (as demonstrated in the works of artists such as Eleanor Antin (1935) (see Figure 2.8) and Lynn Hershman (1941) (see Figure 2.9) and therefore represent a range of selves that can be safely explored.

Figure 2.8: Eleanor Antin, Portrait of the King, 1972.
In light of the views proposed by Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9) and Sheringham (in Stephens, 2000:188), as set out above, the differences between male and female approaches to autobiographical narration become evident. These differences should guide one when interpreting the autobiographical narrative and also during the process of constructing one’s own narrative.

2.4.5 A summary of narrative aspects

The process of constructing an autobiographical narrative can never be concluded, but merely suspended at some point in its development. Unlike a biography, the narrator is narrating his or her own life; the process of interpreting the ongoing events is therefore never completed.

Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:216) adds that the process is never free from questions, such as which self the autobiography is about, and what perspective it is from and who it is intended for. Following Bruner, Linda Rugg (1997:1) asks her own questions regarding the process of constructing an autobiographical narrative:

What (or how) do photographs mean in the context of an autobiography? Do
they come to the rescue of autobiographical referentiality through the presentation of the author’s body in the world, or do they undermine the integrity of referentiality through multiple or posed presentations? Did the invention of photography transform the way we picture ourselves?

Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:216), suggests that an autobiographical narrative should be viewed in light of the following:

It must, on the one hand, create a conviction of autonomy, that one has a will of one’s own, a certain freedom of choice, and a degree of possibility. However, it must also relate one to a world of others – to friends and family, to institutions, to the past, to reference groups. But there is an implicit commitment to others in relating oneself to others that, of course, limits our autonomy. We seem virtually unable to live without both, autonomy and commitment, and our lives strive to balance the two. So do the self-narratives we tell ourselves.

In discussing the autobiographical narrative, Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) summarises research by the psychologist Ulric Neisser (Neisser, 1993; Neisser & Fivush, 1994; Neisser & Jopling, 1997; Neisser & Winograd, 1988) and proposes what he calls “a set of reminders about how to tell a good story” about the self. Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) emphasises that these are guidelines, not prescriptions. These guidelines are as follows (Bruner in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215):

1. A story needs a plot.
2. Plots need obstacles to goals.
3. Obstacles make people reconsider.
4. Tell only about the story-relevant past.
5. Give your characters allies and connections.
7. But keep their identity intact.
8. And also keep their continuity evident.
9. Locate your characters in the world of people.
10. Let your characters explain themselves, as needed.
11. Let your characters suffer moods.
12. Characters should worry when they do not make sense.

Various methods can be used as a starting point when constructing an autobiographical narrative. One of these methods is Patricia A. Case’s (1983:37-89) 400 questions, where the intent is for the “apprentice autobiographer” to answer her questions each with a page-long answer, which will result in a fully formed autobiographical narrative of the self (Bruner in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215). Lejeune
likewise proposes an approach for beginning with the construction of an autobiographical narrative, namely "to invert the relationship that you ordinarily have with your life". This entails drawing a map of one’s life where the self becomes a continent surrounded by smaller islands. This is followed by populating the map, and, as such, the diagram becomes a symbolic construction.

These approaches for constructing an autobiographical narrative, as proposed by Case and Lejeune respectively should be used with caution, as Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) warns that exclusive use of any particular approach could become monotonous.

2.5 Chapter summary

Autobiographical narration is part of the process of investigating and exploring the self. The process of constructing an autobiographical narrative, given that it is concerned with interpretations of events and memories in a subjective sense and also in terms of a social context, allows one to interact with the development of oneself as a character within a socio-cultural environment. The five characteristics of an autobiographical narrative (namely fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration and narrative function) play a crucial role in shaping the narrated autobiographical character. These characteristics influence and ultimately inform how the individual constructs and narrates his or her autobiography.

These characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative as discussed in this chapter will guide the semiotic reading of selected images by the photographers Nix and Taylor presented in Chapter 4, as well as the researcher’s photographs, which are presented in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of visual social semiotics as the methodological approach that will be used when interpreting the images. Visual social semiotics as an approach to the interpretation of visual texts was first proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996), who based their model on the work of Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday (1978). The refined visual social semiotic framework proposed by Claire Harrison (2002) entitled Visual social semiotics: understanding how still images make meaning (2002), is also based on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s work and serves as the methodological framework for the reading of selected autobiographical photographs by Taylor and Nix. The semiotic approach to the reading of the photographs in Chapter 4 will also be guided by the characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative1 discussed in Chapter 2.

This chapter aims, firstly, to define and contextualise the terms semiotics, social semiotics, and visual social semiotics. Secondly, the chapter provides an introduction to the proposed framework, highlighting Kress and Van Leeuwen’s three metafunctions as discussed in their framework, namely the representational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the compositional metafunction.

3.2 A brief definition and contextualisation of semiotics

The founding pioneers of semiotics in the early 1900s were Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss professor of linguistics at Geneva University, and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). They developed a parallel study of signs, defined as “the science of the life of signs in society”. The study of signs entails, “everything in a culture that can be seen as a form of communication, organised in ways akin to verbal language, to be understood in terms of a common set of fundamental rules or principles” (Hodge & Kress, 1988:1).

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1 As noted in Chapter 2, the salient characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative are the following: fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, sociocultural relevance, commonalities in female narration and narrative function.
Although Saussure and Peirce worked independently, there are fundamental similarities between their views. Saussure, for instance, referred to the study of signs as “semiology”, while Peirce used the term “semiotics”. In 1969, the International Association of Semiotic Studies decided to adopt the term “semiotics” to encompass all published research from both traditions, that is, semiology and semiotics (Crow, 2003:15).

Both Saussure and Peirce proposed that the “sign” was fundamental to the study of semiotics. Furthermore, both emphasised the importance of “the relationship between the components of the sign”, which allows the interpreter to turn this relationship into a recognisable comprehensive message (Crow, 2003:15). Semiotic structures can be said to consist of three distinct components, namely the signs themselves, the way they are organised into systems, and the context in which they appear (Crow, 2003:16).

Saussure’s focus was on linguistic signs; he particularly explored words as signs. The word “dog”, for example, would be the signifier, while the object “dog” would be the signified. In general, Saussure felt that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, which means that the signifier bears no resemblance to the signified and the signifier, as such, has to be learned through culture and convention (the exception being onomatopoeia) (Berger, 1998:33).

Peirce’s model, on the other hand, emphasises the role of the interpreter - he explored, “how we make sense of the world around us” (Berger, 1998:33). To this end, Peirce proposed a triangular model consisting of “the sign itself, the user of the sign and the external reality - the object referred to by the sign” (Crow, 2003:15-24). Peirce also distinguished between three categories of signs, namely the icon, the index and the symbol. These categories entail that (Berger, 1998:35) an icon signifies by means of resemblance, such as a photograph or a drawing that resembles a person. An indexical sign is signified by a causal connection between signifier and signified, and the meaning and/or intention can be interpreted, for instance smoke, which suggests a fire. A symbol, on the other hand, needs to be learned and signifies by convention, because there is no logical connection to the sign and what it represents, for instance (Berger, 1998:34-35) a cross or a flag that signifies Christianity or a particular country.

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2 The convention is to refer to Ferdinand de Saussure as simply Saussure, not De Saussure.
3.3 Social semiotics

Social semiotics is a relatively new branch within the field of semiotics and was proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). As is the case with contemporary approaches to investigative strategies, social semiotics entails a mode or a process of enquiry instead of a series of ready-made answers. In particular, social semiotics, according to Van Leeuwen (2005:1), “offers ideas for formulating questions and ways to search for answers” and therefore encourages interdisciplinarity. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:8) propose that, in the context of social semiotics, the sign-maker has to bring the signifier (the form) and the signified (the meaning) together to form a new sign.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:6), three prominent schools have been concerned with the use of semiotics. During the 1930s and 1940s, the first of these prominent schools, namely the Prague School³, focused on developing the work of the Russian Formalists⁴. During the 1960s and 1970s, the main concern of the Paris School was to apply the theories of Saussure and Peirce.

The key impetus for the development of social semiotics originated, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:6), from two sources, namely Halliday’s social semiotic view of language, proposed during the 1970s and the work of the Sydney Semiotics Circle (in the 1980s and 1990s), which was a development of Hallidayan systemic-functional linguistics. Visual semiotics scholars have included Michael O’Toole, Kress, Van Leeuwen, Bob Hodge and Jay Lemke.

³ In 1926 the Prague School was founded by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), the first chairman of the Russian Formalists Student Group and a member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. According to Harry Aveling (2005:7), “the Prague School’s emphasis on structures, as an alternative way of defining [De] Saussure’s concept of relationships, led to its being described as “structuralist”. The Prague School applied these ideas of ‘structure’ and ‘function’ to all forms of communication, including literature”.

⁴ The Russian Formalists originated with Victor Shklovsky’s publication of The resurrection of the world (1914) and was brought to a premature end by a politically motivated recantation. The movement centred around two student groups, namely the Moscow Linguistic Circle, founded in 1915, and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, the OPAJAZ, founded in 1916. Language was seen as central to the Russian Formalists, and, as such, the two groups were united in finding the principles that make literature literary.
Van Leeuwen (2005:1) proposes that, “social semiotics is a form of enquiry” and, as such, “is not a ‘pure’ theory”, nor a self-contained field. He explains that, “it does not offer ready-made answers”, but instead, “offers ideas for formulating questions and ways of searching for answers”. The approach of social semiotics is therefore interdisciplinary in nature and an essential feature of this approach is that it can only come into its own while being engaged with other approaches and disciplines. Social semiotics asks, “how people use signs to construct the life of a community” and is based in social, cultural and historical exploration of meanings (Lemke, 1990:183).

Semiotics focuses mainly on the concept of the sign, while social semiotics is an enquiry about sign-making. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996:6) theory entails, firstly, that the interpreter presents a discussion of formal elements as the signifiers of, for example, colour, perspective and line, and, secondly, the “way in which these forms are used to realize meanings”, also known as the signifiers. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:8) explain that in social semiotics the signifier (the form) and the signified (the meaning) are independent until they are unified by the sign-maker as a new sign.

According to Jewitt and Oyama (in Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151), social semiotics, unlike traditional semiotics, “does not focus on ‘signs’, but on socially meaningful and entire processes (‘texts’). The sign is an analytical category; text, by contrast, is a social category”.

Van Leeuwen (2005:1) notes a number of significant changes that are evident in the shift of focus from semiotics to social semiotics:

1. In social semiotics the focus has changed from the “sign”, to the way people use semiotic “resources”, both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them.
2. Rather than constructing separate accounts of the various semiotic modes – the “semiotics of the image”, the “semiotics of music”, and so on – social semiotics compares and contrasts semiotic modes, exploring what they have in common [and] how they differ, and investigating how they can be integrated in multimodal artefacts and events.
3. Social semiotics focuses on how people regulate the use of semiotic resources – in the context of specific social practices and institutions.
4. Social semiotics is itself also a practice, oriented to observation and analysis, and to social intervention, to the discovery of new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:18) developed their model of visual social semiotics in order to facilitate the interpretation and communication of visual language; they believed that, “the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it – and the other way round”.

3.4 Visual social semiotics

Visual social semiotics is a fairly new field of study that has branched out from social semiotics. It originated in the 1990s as an elaboration of Halliday’s social semiotic view of language (1978), namely Hallidayan systemic-functional linguistics. The key interest in the study of visual social semiotics was the focus of the Australian scholars Kress and Van Leeuwen, as well as O’Toole (1980).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:1) explain that, “despite the very large amount of work done on images, not much attention has been paid to the meanings of regularities in the way image elements are used – in short, to their grammar – at least not in explicit or systematic ways”. It is the “focus on meaning” that Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:1) seek to explore in visual social semiotics, providing “usable descriptions of major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of Western visual semiotics” in order to “analyse how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers”.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:1) believe that visual communication is no longer only a necessity for the domain of the specialist, but instead that “visual literacy” is becoming a prerequisite in especially the contemporary workplace. It is their belief that, in general, “grammar”, remains formal and is “studied in isolation from meaning” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996:1). In this regard, Halliday (1985:101) notes that:

Grammar goes beyond formal rules of correctness. It is a means of representing patterns of experience … It enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them.
Semiotic modes have focused extensively on developing linguistic “grammar”, and it is through visual social semiotics, for example, that Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:1) propose to develop a mode for interpreting visual “grammar” in order to be “creatively employed by artists […], the same grammar we need when producing attractive layouts, images and diagrams for our course handouts, reports, brochures, communiqués, and so on”.

The meaning of visual “grammar” is grounded in a specific culture and, as such, points to a measure of social interaction necessary for the creation of meaning. It is therefore important to note that visual “grammar” is not universally understood, but instead is culture-specific.

According to Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:134), visual social semiotics furthermore involves, “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted”. Traditionally, semiotics has been defined as the “science of signs”, placing the emphasis on what Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:140) describe as “what is’ and not ‘what could be’ or ‘what might be’” and as such was seen as a by-product of design. In contrast, “[v]isual social semiotics is functionalist in the sense that it sees visual resources as having been developed to do specific kinds of semiotic work” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:140).
In 1996, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002:140) expanded on Halliday’s (1978) semiotic modes, where he had established three main “metafunctions”; however, Halliday’s “metafunctions” do not include the reading of images, while Kress and Van Leeuwen’s method / approach does. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002:140) adopted the theoretical notion of Halliday’s “metafunctions”, but adapted these to visual communication so that these would include the “representational”, “interactive” and “compositional” metafunctions. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s method of visual analysis “provides essentially a descriptive framework” and, as such, does not “offer all that is needed for sociological interpretation of images” and in certain instances might need to draw from related theories; the method is “effective in bringing out hidden meanings” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:154). In accordance with Harrison (2003:47), the visual social semiotic framework\(^5\) as an approach to analysing images

[\(]^{1}\) is unique in stressing that an image is not the result of a singular, isolated, creative activity, but is itself a social process. As such, its meaning is a negotiation between the producer and the viewer, reflecting their individual social / cultural / political beliefs, values, and attitudes.

### 3.5 Proposed framework: Visual social semiotics

In Visual social semiotics: understanding how still images make meaning, Harrison (2003:46) proposes a visual social semiotic framework (see section A of Figure 3.1), based on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s research in Reading images: the grammar of visual design (1996), focusing on the three metafunctions as illustrated in the framework (the representational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the compositional metafunction).

Kress and Van Leeuwen’s proposed visual social semiotic structure as illustrated by Harrison (see section A of Figure 3.1) is applied in Chapter 4 in order to present a semiotic reading of the selected images (see section B of Figure 3.1). The semiotic reading is also guided by the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative (see section C of Figure 3.1).

\(^{5}\) Harrison’s proposed framework and subsequent research titled Visual social semiotics: understanding how still images make meaning focus specifically on analysing images within a multimodal World Wide Web environment, where images are combined with, for example, words and shapes to form what Horn (as cited in Harrison, 2003:46) calls a “unified communication unit”. According to Horn (as cited in Harrison, 2003:46), the “tight coupling” of visual elements means that “you cannot remove the words or the images or the shapes from a piece of visual language without destroying or radically diminishing the meaning a reader can obtain from it”.

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3.6 Representational metafunction

The “representational metafunction” (see Addendum 3.1) refers to the people, places, and objects within an image and, consequently, according to Harrison (2003:50), answers the question “what is the picture about?” In *Visual meaning: a social semiotic approach*, Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:141) quotes Kress and Van Leeuwen describing a syntactic pattern specifically related to the visual image that would “relate visual participants to each other in meaningful ways” and would divide the pattern into “narrative structures” and “conceptual structures”.

3.6.1 Narrative structures

According to Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:141), narrative representations, “relate participants in terms of ‘doings’ and ‘happenings’, of the unfolding of actions, events, or processes of change”. Narrative pictures, according to Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:140), are evident through the presence of vectors. Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:140) explain that a vector refers to a line, either a diagonal line or a representative thereof, and expresses a “dynamic, ‘doing’ or ‘happening’” relationship.
A narrative structure can consist of an “actor”, which usually indicates where the vector originates from, as well as the “goal”, which represents the participant that the vector is directed towards. If the picture, or a scene within the picture, consists of both an actor and a goal, then the action taking place between the two is referred to as a “transactive reaction”. However, if the actor, for example, is looking at an object (goal), but the goal is not clear, it is then referred to as a “non-transactive reaction”, and, as such, establishes the active and passive roles within the picture (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:143).

3.6.2 Conceptual structures

Images that exclude the use of vectors are referred to as “conceptual”; that is, “[t]hey visually ‘define’ or ‘analyse’ or ‘classify’ people, places and things (including abstract things)” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:143). Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:143, 144) identify subcategories of “conceptual structures”. The three significant structures are the “classification structures”, the “symbolic structures”, and the “analytical structures”.

Classification is known to, “bring different people, places or things together in one picture, distributing them symmetrically across the picture space to show that they have something in common, that they belong to the same class”, while “symbolic structures” “define the meaning or identity of a participant”; therefore, the meaning or the identity of the participant is determined by the “symbolic attribute” (Kress & Van Leeuwen as cited in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:143). Kress and Van Leeuwen (as cited in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:144) identify the symbolic attributes as having the following characteristics: “they are made salient in representation, for example by their size, position, colour, use of lighting; they are pointed out by means of a gesture; they look out of place in the whole; they are conventionally associated with symbolic values”.

“Analytical structures”, according to Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:144), “relate participants to each other in terms of a part-whole structure”, for example, a map of Africa would be seen as a carrier, and would be used to analyse or define the various “parts” or countries, also known as the “possessive attributes”.
Harrison (2003:52, 55, 56) summarises each metafunction in her framework with potential questions, to assist in the analysis of the selected images. The current study sets out to use a visual social semiotic approach that has initially been developed for reading and interpreting web-based photographs towards the interpretation of autobiographical narrative photographs.

3.7 Interpersonal metafunction (Interactive meaning)

According to Harrison (2003:53), the aspect of visual social semiotics that deals with interactive meaning (see Addendum 3.2), or what she refers to as the “interpersonal metafunction”, answers the question “how does the picture engage the viewer?” Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:145) explain that the “[i]mage can create particular relations between viewers and the world inside the picture frame”. By using three key factors, namely “contact”, “distance”, and “point of view”, the viewer is able to interact with the image and realise how to interpret the meaning thereof.

3.7.1 Contact

People making direct contact with the viewer in images not only establish a relationship with the viewer, but also symbolically “demand” something: “[f]acial expression and gestures then fill in what exactly they ‘demand’ in this way: they can demand deference, by unblinkingly looking down on the viewers, or pity, by pleadingly looking up at them; they can address viewers with an ingratiating smile or unsettle them with a penetrating stare” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:145-146).

Without this direct contact, “demanding” the attention of the viewer, the viewer becomes detached from the people in the frame and is left to “observe” the image; such images are referred to as “offers”. The image offers the viewer information, but does not “demand” the viewer’s attention (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:146).
**3.7.2 Distance**

Images can bring people, places, and things close to the viewer, or they can keep the viewer at arm’s length. In everyday interaction the norms of social relations determine the distance we keep from each other. We tend to see people up close only if we have an intimate acquaintance and as such the person reveals their individuality and their personality. By contrast, however, seeing a person from a distance is the relation we would have with a stranger (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:146).

Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:146) explain that a close-up view (a head-and-shoulders view, or less) of the people in a picture frame suggests an intimate or personal relationship with the viewer, while a medium view that cuts the figure between the waist and the knees suggests a social relationship. Showing the full figure (a long shot) suggests an impersonal relationship.

**3.7.3 Point of view**

Frontal angles are used to “increase audience identification and involvement with the represented participant(s) [RP(s)]”, while vertical angles can be used to bestow power to the RP in a particular role within an image (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:147).

**3.8 Compositional metafunction**

Compositional meaning (see Addendum 3.3), according to Harrison (2003:55), asks the question “how do the ‘representational meaning’ and the ‘interpersonal meaning’ [what Jewitt and Oyama refer to as “interactive meaning”] relate to each other and integrate into a meaningful whole?” Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:147) further explain that compositional meaning consists of three “resources”, namely information value, framing, and salience and modality.
3.8.1 Information value

According to Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:147), information value is “realized by the placement of the elements of a composition”; the authors explain that “the idea is that the role of any particular element in the whole will depend on whether it is placed on the left or on the right, in the centre or the margin, or in the upper or the lower part of the picture space or page”. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s 1996 study (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:148), elements placed on the left are presented as “given” information, and, as such, interpret what the viewer or reader already knows and is familiar with, as a “departure point for the message”, while elements placed on the right are interpreted as “new” information. The reader or viewer must pay special attention to an element presented as “new” information, because of the unfamiliar nature of the content presented in the image.

Elements placed at the top of an image, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:148) 1996 study, represent the “ideal” quintessence, the “idealized or generalised essence of the information, hence usually also as it is ideologically the most salient part”. Elements placed at the bottom of the picture frame represent the “real” information, or the more “down-to-earth” information, such as, for example, the photographic evidence.

Lastly, elements placed in the centre are (perhaps somewhat ironically) interpreted by the viewer as of “marginal” importance; they hold everything together: “[t]he marginal elements are then in some sense the elements that are held together by the centre – belonging to it, subservient to it” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:149).

3.8.2 Framing

Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2002:149) note that, “[t]he term ‘framing’ indicates that elements of a composition can either be given separate identities, or [be] represented as belonging together”. Framing can therefore either “connect” or “disconnect” elements.
Disconnection can take place either through the use of framelines, through contrasting colour or form, through the use of empty spaces between elements, or, as Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:150) explain, “through any form of discontinuity, disconnection or contrast that can be visually signified”.

Connection, on the other hand, is achieved in exactly the opposite fashion as disconnection, “through similarities and rhymes of colour and form, through vectors that connect elements, and of course through the absence of framelines or empty space” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:147).

3.8.3 Salience

Kress and Van Leeuwen used the term “salience” in 1996 to “indicate that some elements can be made more eye-catching than others”. This can be achieved either through size, through colour contrast (red is always a very salient colour), or through tonal contrast. As such, salience refers to anything that can make an element noticeable in its surroundings (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:150-151).

3.8.4 Modality

Modality is concerned with that which is “real”, such as a photograph that is thought to be an “image of the real”, showing a representation of what reality has presented, and, conversely, “what is thought of as true to reality”, such as graphs and diagrams, as they are seen as “images that depict the world as it is, objectively, scientifically”. However, both graphs and diagrams lack the photographic characteristics that create the impression of reality.

Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:150-151) propose that photographs have characteristics that allow them to appear to be “specific”, “concrete”, and an “imprint of reality”, while graphs and diagrams are seen as “abstract” and “conventional”. Both modes of representation can, however, “claim to be real”, due to the “different definitions of reality” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151).
Jewitt and Oyama (in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151) argue that a photograph is a “naturalistic modality (modality = ‘reality value’)”. These authors define visual reality as follows: “The greater the congruence between what you see of an object in an image and what you can see of it in reality with the naked eye, in a specific situation and from a specific angle, the higher the modality of that image” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151). Therefore, if, for instance, the colour in the photograph, or the sharpness, or the perspective, or even the saturation, increases, then the modality decreases, and the photograph instead “looks ‘more than real’ or ‘surreal’, ‘fantastic’ or ghostly”, depending on the way this particular meaning potential of what Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) call sensory modality is actualized in the specific context” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151).

In contrast to “naturalistic modality”, “scientific modality” (such as graphs or diagrams) “is based not on what things, in a specific situation and from a specific angle, look like, but on how things are in general, or regularly, or according to some deeper, ‘hidden’ truth” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151). The scientific image “probes beyond the surface and abstracts from detail. There often is no background, detail is simplified or left out, colour and depth regarded as superfluous” (Jewitt & Oyama in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:151).

### 3.9 Visual social semiotic framework

In the development of a visual social semiotic framework, Kress and Van Leeuwen focused exclusively on developing a mode for interpreting and understanding the multimodality of visual grammar. Image analysis does not stand in isolation, but, according to Harrison (2003:47), reflects on the “individual social / cultural / political beliefs, values, and attitudes” central to the development of an autobiographical narrative genre where the self is not only influenced by memory, but is also established within a socio-cultural environment.

The photographers Taylor and Nix, whose work will be read in Chapter 4, both work with the autobiographical narrative, which means that they tend to construct images from memory and with reference to the social context of everyday experiences. The images are examples of constructed narratives that seem to be fictitious in nature; they are, of course, interpretations of subjective memories. Their works comprise a photographic image as well as an image caption that can guide the reader.
3.10 Characteristics of an autobiographical narrative

Fivush and Buckner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:149) propose that by examining autobiographical narratives, the reader gains insight into how the artist-producer has constructed his or her identity. The salient characteristics of an autobiographical narrative, as noted in Chapter 2, will guide the semiotic reading of Taylor and Nix’s photographs.

3.10.1 Fabrication and reality

Through the process of constructing an autobiographical narrative, the producer decides to what extent he or she incorporates the self and establishes the identity within the narration in order to express their characteristics through the narration. The producer furthermore decides to what extent he or she will rely on incorporating a fabricated persona.

3.10.2 Autobiographical memory

In theory, the autobiographical narrator will recall and narrate episodic events. It is through the reading of the images that it will become evident to what extent the recollection of autobiographical memory becomes evident and the importance that the narrator places on emphasising autobiographical memory within the visual narrative.

3.10.3 Socio-cultural structure

Theoretically, the female autobiographical narrator tends to incorporate her environment as part of her narration. The narrator decides to what extent she will incorporate and be influenced by her socio-cultural environment and, as such, may tend to express aspects of socio-cultural relevance through the narration.

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6 It should be noted that although the reading of both Taylor and Nix’s photographs will be based on semiotics, it nevertheless still constitutes a subjective reading, and it is therefore important to realise that the reading is grounded in available literature and is visually interpreted by a South African researcher.
3.10.4 Commonalities in female narration

Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9) highlights differences and commonalities between male and female narration, and explains that female narrators tend to emphasise personal and domestic details and to describe their connections to others in the narration.

3.10.5 A summary of narrative aspects

Jerome Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) proposes a 12-step theoretical guideline for constructing a narrative that is a summary of research conducted by Neisser (Neisser, 1993; Neisser & Fivush, 1994; Neisser & Jopling, 1997; Neisser & Winograd, 1988). The motivation for including this guideline is to find commonalities between the construction of the autobiographical picture narrative and Bruner’s process of construction (in the practical body of work as well as in the reading of images).

According to Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:34), a number of artist-photographers specialise in constructing photographs as self-presentational, narrative tableaux, miniature stages, still-lives or photo sculptures, and installations. The aim of the current study here is to reveal how the autobiographical photographers under discussion applied these processes.

3.11 Chapter summary

Saussure and Peirce’s semiology and semiotics (which correspond in many respects) gave rise to a broader field of enquiry, namely social semiotics - here meaning-making also in a social context is regarded as centrally important.

The researcher will now set out to read the selected works by Nix and Taylor by means of an integrated approach based on the notion of visual “grammar”, as established by Kress and Van Leeuwen, and as elaborated by Harrison. The social semiotic reading is guided by the characteristics of an autobiographical narrative as set out in Chapter 2. As such, the reading of the selected images constructed by Nix and Taylor provides a foundation for a broader understanding of the various ways in which an autobiographical picture narrative could be constructed.
CHAPTER 4
A READING OF SELECTED WORKS BY MAGGIE TAYLOR AND LORI NIX

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a reading of selected works by Taylor¹ and Nix. In each instance, the artists’ respective approaches and photographic techniques are discussed, and this is followed by a contextualisation of global and local events particular to the constructed images so that the relevance of socio-cultural elements on the photographers’ processes of construction can be indicated.

Finally, a reading of the images *Twilight swim* (2004) by Taylor and *Ice storm* (1999) by Nix is presented; the reading is based on the visual social semiotic framework discussed in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.1, section A). The semiotic reading is also guided by the salient characteristics of the autobiographical narrative derived from the literature study in Chapter 2. The interpretative and constructed nature of the autobiographical picture narrative is foregrounded by means of these characteristics (fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural relevance, commonalities in female narration, and narrative function).

4.2 Maggie Taylor: her artistic approach

Cleveland-born fine art photographer Maggie Taylor is best known for her digitally created surrealistic dream images that are generally autobiographical in nature. She purposely constructs her photographs by means of symbolism and metaphors, so that the viewer may find it difficult to decipher the content of the work without engaging in a thorough process of interpretation. The software company, Adobe (2004:4) describes Taylor’s work as one of their success stories, stating that the content of her images are whimsical, aesthetically pleasing, and dreamlike; Adobe furthermore notes on their website (http://www.images.adobe.com) that Taylor cautions viewers that her, “images are dreamlike, but not all dreams are good – some are good, some are funny. I want my images to mean different things to different people, to make viewers feel or imagine something new”. Although her work is autobiographical in nature, Taylor (2006:336) explains that her intention is to

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¹ This discussion refers frequently to the book, *Adobe Photoshop master class: Maggie Taylor’s landscape of dreams* (2005) on Taylor by Amy Standen due to the fact that it is the only significant source and published book discussing Taylor’s work ethic, technical process and methods of construction.
construct a “visual riddle” or “open-ended poem”, while she aspires to create work that is both “playful” and “provocative”.

During a 1998 interview with critic Paul Karabinis, Taylor (as cited in Standen, 2005:7) confirmed that her work stems from her personal experience and, as such, is derived from her “own memories and dreams – from [her] psyche”. Her work incorporates aspects of “childhood memories and impressions: the fear of the dark; the sensation of being out of place; deflated expectations; or sibling relationships” (Standen, 2005:7). Even though Taylor’s work is autobiographical, it also draws on popular culture, specifically television and its consumption. This strange combination of source material means that her work defies obvious interpretation: “I work very spontaneously and intuitively, trying to come up with images that have a resonance and a somewhat mysterious narrative content”, Taylor (2006:336) notes. Furthermore, Standen (2005:9-10) describes the artist as an introvert who was content being on her own as a child, and who spent excessive amounts of time watching television and reading fiction books – these childhood activities would strongly influence her constructed narratives. During Taylor’s early years she obviously, given her love of television and fiction, developed a passion for narration. She names and referred to people appearing in her images as “characters” (Standen, 2005:9-10). Instead of photographing people to appear in her narratives, she generally uses images of people - these already photographed images of people are like objects that can become characters assigned with a new identity so as to portray her own autobiographical narrative.

Taylor (as did many female photographers since the 1980s, such as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger) explores the fabricated nature of photography and combines “factual memory” and “fictional daydream”, in order to construct a fabricated reality that is, in essence, a subjective interpretation rather than an “objective” reflection. Karabinis, gallery director at the University of North Florida, notes that Taylor’s work can be seen as, “hybrid pictures hovering somewhere between painting and photography. As such, I suppose I don’t hold them hostage to [empirical] reality” (Standen, 2005:28).

During Taylor’s student years, she worked in a photographic documentary style, but soon discovered that creating her own realities instead of recording or reflecting the available reality was much more rewarding. Realising this, Taylor started to collect and use objects that are tattered and have a story to tell, salvaging the objects and
reassigning a new identity to them, so that they become “characters” in her narrative. She combines them in photographic collages, a style she developed in the mid-1980s. Her work, according to Standen (2005:66), can be described as, “sedentary, first of all, but it’s also highly methodical, organized and detail orientated”. Due to her introverted nature, she avoids photographing people, and instead uses characters that she assigns with a personality in order to narrate her constructed autobiography. Standen (2005:7) describes these characters as follows:

Like her well-worn toys and dolls, these long-dead faces are the detritus of human relationships, of childhoods grown out of, marriages celebrated and ambitions realised. They imply a history and a context, but they hold their secrets close.

Her work is, furthermore, characterised by qualities that can be described as female. Although the majority of Taylor’s images include the use of already photographed or alternatively scanned images of female characters, she does occasionally include images of men in her constructed photographs. According to Standen (2005:144), for Taylor, “the woman is the default protagonist of these fantasy worlds, just as Taylor stars in her own dreams”. Standen (2005:144) further explains that due to the autobiographical nature of Taylor’s work, it is natural to assume that she will include characters in her picture narratives that remind her in some rudimentary way of herself. In images such as, for instance, Mood lifter (2001) (see Figure 4.1), Taylor has included an image of herself, and also incorporated elements from fictitious characters, which resulted in the actual characters’ identities being concealed.

According to Jerry Uelsmann, Taylor’s husband (as cited in Standen, 2005:42) Taylor's works are constructed in a manner that allows the viewer to deal with the image on a personal level:

Almost all of Taylor’s images suggest a narrative; I can’t think of one that doesn’t. It may be nebulous, but a narrative suggestion or thread exists throughout her work. And no matter how dreamlike it may be, you are drawn into a personal dialogue with the image.

Taylor imbues her photographs with a strong sense of metaphorical significance, therefore presenting a narrative that communicates beyond the level of representation (Standen, 2005:71). According to Karabinis (as cited in Standen, 2005:29), she also approaches her work with a sense of subtlety, leaving nothing more than clues for the viewer to interpret: “It’s a secret world that has few guideposts but unlimited destinations.” Indeed, Standen (2005:7) notes that Taylor
defines her work as being “obviously symbolic but not symbolically obvious” and prefers to leave her final constructed narratives as open-ended themes for the viewer to interpret.

Figure 4.1: Maggie Taylor, Mood lifter, 2001

4.3 Maggie Taylor: approach to “photographic” construction

Taylor’s technique is characterised by a reliance on objects with ample narrative potential. Her studio in Gainesville, Florida, contains what she labels as, “quirky 19th-century photographs, taxidermy specimens, mounted insects, vintage toys, sea shells, feathers, and other artefacts” that she collects from either flea markets, online auctions, or from her immediate environment, which she would digitally scan and use in her constructed narratives (Adobe, 2004:1). Many of the objects used in her photographs come from a family collection of toys and objects, including memorabilia.
that she inherited from her grandmother. The collection consists of an assortment of threads, which has become the colour palette for her constructed photographs, as well as 1950s hats and a childhood schoolbook illustration with her grandmother’s enigmatic World War I-inspired doodles, which have made their appearance in Taylor's images, such as *Butterfly hunter, 1998* (Standen, 2005:71) (see Figure 4.2).

Although trained as a photographer, Taylor substituted her 4x5 mid-format camera for a high-quality flatbed scanner in 1996, which allowed her to, “enter a menagerie of found objects into her computer” (Taylor, 2006:336). Since 1996 she has used digital technology to both scan and construct her images (in a strict sense, then, she is not working as a photographer but rather as an image-maker). The constructed “photographs” are created using multiple high-resolution flatbed scanned images of either objects, old photographs, or her own documented images, generally ranging between 30 and 60 or more layers, from where they are enhanced and manipulated in photographic software such as Photoshop in order to achieve the desired result. The complex, multi-layered Photoshop files consisting of various scanned objects and visual information, often pushing the limits of Taylor’s computer’s memory, as well as the photographic genre of altered and/or fabricated photography. The results are a surrealist-like montages that suggest a painterly image; they are also vibrant, colourful and rich in symbolism. According to Paul Karabinis, Taylor's work ethic - bordering on an obsessive need for control - allows her to express her personality through her work, assigning her full control over her medium to rework each image to perfection (as cited in Standen, 2005:26).

Although Taylor’s images are Photoshop-manipulated, she refrains from creating images that, to her mind, look too “contrived” or “artificial”, and will instead resort to scanning and incorporating hand-drawn images to imbue her work with a sense of warmth and intimacy (Standen, 2005:66). In spite of advances in technology and the computer’s ability to manipulate a single image in a vast range of ways, she explains that a single constructed Photoshop image may take months to complete before she is satisfied with the narrative, and she therefore produces only 12 to 16 complete images a year.

Trudy Wilner Stack (as cited in Standen, 2005:35), an independent curator, editor, and writer (mostly publishing between 1992 and 2002), compares Taylor’s use of a scanner to create her fabricated autobiographical photomontage images to the technique used by the Dadaists and Surrealists of the 1930s, namely the
However, while in principle the two techniques seem to be similar, the intent of the photogram is to merely record the silhouette of an opaque object, while the scanning technique used by Taylor, in contrast, provides “full detail and colour” (Standen, 2005:35).

![Figure 4.2: Maggie Taylor, Butterfly hunter, 1998](image)

Taylor's work has been described by Alison Nordstrom, curator of photographs at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, as a nuance of vibrant colour, light-hearted and cartoon-like; however, Nordstrom explains that once the viewer explores the work beyond the surface, a contrasting darker layer of symbolism awaits interpretation (in Standen, 2005:30). By implication, it is the ambiguous nature of Taylor's work that remains its most poignant essence. Nordstrom muses about the “new” medium within which Taylor operates (in Standen, 2005:30):

Should Taylor's images be classified as photography? Printmaking? Do we need a new genre? Does digital art signal the death of classical artistic taxonomy? Or are those questions not so compelling after all? The question of Photoshop is one that we have to address, but it matters less and less. We

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2 According to Standen (2005:35), “[t]he photogram, one of photography’s earliest and most unmediated manifestations, is made by simply laying the subject on light-sensitive paper and exposing it to light to describe its exact outline and its contours if it has any transparency”. 

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have to think about how we define photographs now that they’re not about film anymore, but that’s true of every photograph we deal with.

Digital technology has changed conventional approaches to photography profoundly, allowing the photographer to construct images that range across different genres. Each one of Taylor’s images functions in isolation; however, they also fit into a narrative series structured as chapters. Careful editing is required by the artist when presenting the narrative sequence, in order to communicate the intended outcome effectively.

Mark Sloan, director and senior curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, comments on Taylor’s work as follows (in Standen, 2005:50):

Maggie Taylor’s imagery recalls for me the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, Fernando Pessoa, Italo Calvino. She is creating ciphers that elude specific meanings yet pertain to all of us in some way. There is a familiar and approachable aspect to the specific elements within a given image, yet her combinations create an uneasy tension, inviting the viewer to untangle the web of associations. The resulting untanglings will be different for each viewer.

Figure 4.3: René Magritte, The Lovers, 1928
The symbolic elements in Taylor’s constructed images often entail the use of animal parts, masks, blindfolds, clouds, or faces blurred beyond recognition or removed from their bodies. The artist attempts to explain herself through the narrative, but does not make her intention explicit (Standen, 2005:71). Regarding the use of figures with detached or removed heads in her picture narratives, she explains that “[o]n one level, it’s a vision of insanity; on another, it’s a reference to dreams, where we trade in reality and our conscious minds for a surreal, dream-state logic” (Standen, 2005:105).

Taylor’s tendency to construct figures with either a detached, removed or strangely juxtaposed head can be related to the work of Surrealist artists such as René Magritte (1898-1967). Sylvester (2009:27) suggests that Magritte most likely used these images in order to express feelings of trauma resulting from the suicide drowning in the local river of his mother when he was only twelve years old (during night-time in the cold month of February, in 1912). When people found her body, her face was covered by her nightdress; this was interpreted as both mysterious and extremely upsetting: “[i]t was never known whether she had hidden her eyes with it in order not to see the death which she had chosen, or whether the swirling currents had veiled her” (Sylvester, 2009:12). Similar to Taylor’s images, Magritte’s subsequent work resembles a dream-state interpretation of the events that took place on that night (see Figure 4.3).
Interpreting and recollecting imaginary and dreamlike associations of memories characterises Taylor’s work (see Figure 4.4). Like Magritte, she often uses images of disembodied female figures that are covered in light-coloured drapes. Above all, like the Surrealists, Taylor gives meaning to events and images through her own subjective awareness and recollection:

Maggie [Taylor] forsakes full narrative for a more cryptic, unmoored, and symbol-driven method of empowering her subjects with meaning. It seems that Maggie is drawn back into a complexly romanticized vision of the past where a bit of cut hair or other keepsake could encompass a universe of emotion and meaning (Standen, 2005:35).

Standen (2005:102) elaborates on this kinship that Taylor’s work has with that of the Surrealists: “[her] pictures mean to trigger the subconscious, to free viewers from the constraints of the rational world so that [as Taylor describes it] they experience a convergence of factual memory and fictional daydream”. Objects such as birds and feathers have frequently been found in the works of Surrealist artists such as Joseph Cornell (1903–1972), Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), and Magritte; these objects were often used by Surrealists as symbolic representations of freedom, a notion that is central to the movement Standen (2005:102). Surrealist associations occur in a number of Taylor’s works where she incorporates notions of freedom and flight, and of the strange confluence between fiction, reality, memory and dreams. Ever since childhood Taylor has had dreams and nightmares of flight, the dreams offering an escape or a feeling of being able to let go of daily inhibitions while the nightmares creates the feeling of captivity.

4.4. Maggie Taylor: technical aspects

During the process of constructing Twilight swim, 2004, Taylor was particularly drawn to a specific postcard from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, depicting a female figure as a, “mannequin modelling a silk dress and long gloves from the museum’s collection” (Standen, 2005:72). The lightness of the postcard, in contrast to the dark tintypes that she has in her collection, was specifically selected for use in the construction of Twilight swim, 2004. Standen (2005:72) quotes Taylor as saying that she liked the unfamiliarity of, “people dealing with their environment in a strange way” and, as such, worked on a concept where she wanted to place a standing figure in water, and the mannequin on the postcard was ideal for the concept.
Figure 4.5: Maggie Taylor, *Twilight swim*, 2004

A layer mask has been added to the skirt of the mannequin, set at 80% transparency, stretching to the sides in order to create the illusion that it has been “caught and unfurled by a current” (Standen, 2005:75). A “watermark” was added around the waist of the mannequin, as an indication of “where her dress has absorbed moisture” (Standen, 2005:75).

Taylor explains that the most difficult part of constructing her images is usually finding appropriate heads to use with her figures (itself a Surrealist pursuit!). This is in part because the old photographs she often likes to use tend to be very unclear, and appropriate facial expressions are crucial to her images. In this particular instance, Taylor was looking for a facial expression that would be appropriately ambivalent to the danger that lurks behind her (Taylor frequently includes elements of danger in her images). The image of the woman in *Twilight swim* looks like a nineteenth-century tintype photograph of a young girl, and Taylor covered her head with a digitally drawn
bathing cap that matches her memories of a 1960s swimming cap that she had worn in her youth (Standen, 2005:76).

Taylor also included several jumping fish in the background, which she later replaced with shark fins, as well as two fish hanging like “epaulets from the woman’s shoulder” and, as Standen (2005:76) explains, these become the “element of uncertainty that will elevate this image from simple illustration to narrative”. Taylor (as cited in Standen, 2005:76) noted that she wanted to add an element in the distance that would, “imply a certain danger, or something going on in the distance that you aren’t quite sure about”.

The gradations of the image in dark chiaroscuro tones create a mysterious nocturnal feeling; both the face and the surroundings seem to emanate a sense of mystery. However, Taylor still felt that the image needed a crucial element of drama and, according to Staden (2005:76), she also felt that it would be necessary, “to add narrative without adding obviousness or cliché”. The touch of drama was added to the image by digitally drawing shark fins that appear to be circling the woman, each shark fin with, “its own drawn shadow and a little white ripple where it hits the water” (Staden, 2005:77).

The artist also inserted an element of confusion (or, an element that points to a quirky sense of humour) by adding a shark fin to the body of the fish swimming next to the woman, and noted that, “I won’t show the bodies of the sharks instead, I’ll add a fin to the underwater fish” (Taylor as cited in Standen, 2005:77). She explains that by digitally adding the shark fin to the fish by means of Photoshop, she achieves a less menacing effect. The fish swimming next to the woman, as well as the shark fins in the background, are placed at a horizontal angle, and are therefore oblique to the viewer. Her intention with the introduction of the shark fins is therefore not to create an impression of danger. Taylor in actual fact, places the shark fins behind the women, creating the impression that she is protecting them from the scrutinising gaze of the viewer.

Taylor’s image shows a great deal of attention to detail; she digitally painted both the moon and stars, and also used a combination of several scanned copies of a fish that she found from a nineteenth-century hand-coloured etching, in order to create the effect of what a slightly blurred fish seen underwater and in motion would look like. As with most of Taylor’s images, this work involves a sense of fantasy and combines
beauty and danger in a strange narrative (Thomas, 2010:1). Elements such as the fairy-tale moon emphasise a dreamlike quality in her work – in some instances she incorporates a full moon (in images such as *Evening Plunge*, 2007 and *Adrift*, 2005, see Figure 4.6 and 4.7), or a waxing crescent, as in *Moth dancer*, 2004 (see Figure 4.8) and *Distracted cats*, 2003 (see Figure 4.9). However, she seldom makes use of a waning crescent, as illustrated in the image *Twilight swim*, 2004.

The image *Twilight swim* 2004 was constructed using seven photographic layers of water, as well as “several images of clouds and sky” (Standen, 2005:74). The various photographic layers of sky provided Taylor with the opportunity to create the desired colour and intensity in the sky, similar to what she intended with the lower half of the image consisting of water. The water was created by means of a combination of photographs from California’s Mono Lake and Yosemite National Park, which was heavily struck during the 2004 hurricane season. Taylor used a layering technique in
Photoshop to create a “dreamlike effect” that is also dangerous with the intention of creating the feeling that one is “looking through somewhat murky water” (Standen, 2005:74). Indeed, officials in the state of Florida warn swimmers to stay clear of the beaches when the water appears to be murky, as this poses a higher risk for shark attacks.

4.5 Maggie Taylor: context

In *Twilight swim* Taylor references natural events (or disasters) that took place during 2004 when the image was constructed in the state of Florida where she resides. These real events constitute a backdrop to her living environment and have a bearing in her autobiographical narration.

Although Florida is prone to being struck by hurricanes, the 2004 season exceeded all expectations, with a total of 15 named storms, 16 tropical depressions, nine hurricanes, and six severe hurricanes. According to an assessment report conducted by the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) (MMWR, 2005:1), four of these hurricanes and one tropical storm hit landfall, resulting in numerous fatalities as well as damage to and loss of property. In addition, nearly half of the inhabitants of Florida did not have an evacuation plan in place prior to these disasters.

The most notable four hurricanes were Hurricanes Charley and Frances, which were both Category 4 hurricanes, and Hurricanes Ivan and Jeanne, which were Category 3 hurricanes, as well as Tropical Storm Bonnie (Avila, 2005:1). 2004 was ranked as the year of the most accumulated cyclone energy (ACE) since the 1950s. Hurricane Ivan was recorded as the longest-lasting as well as the strongest “Cape Verde-type” hurricane, and, as such, contributed to nearly a third of the ACE for 2004. In addition, Hurricane Ivan measured the second-highest ACE of any tropical cyclone recorded in the Atlantic since 1899 (Stewart, 2005:1-2).

Not only is Florida prone to natural disasters such as hurricanes, but also, according to research conducted by the International Shark Attack File (ISAF), it has recorded the highest number of unprovoked shark attacks in the United States. According to the ISAF, “[t]his area normally has higher numbers of shark-human interactions as a result of very high aquatic recreational utilization of its attractive waters by both Florida residents and tourists, especially surfers” (ISAF, 2004:1-2).
It is commonly known that the Gulf of Mexico bay waters are prone to sharks; however, according to statistics kept by the United States Lifesaving Association (Beachhunter, n.d.:4), as well as the ISAF (2004:2), beach attendance during 2004 was down by more than 25% due to the four major hurricanes that struck Florida and, as such, affected “human beach utilization patterns”.

As a safety precaution, the United States Lifesaving Association advises swimmers to avoid swimming either during darkness or twilight hours, as sharks tend to feed in shallow waters during these hours (Beachhunter, n.d.:4-5). Sharks tend to have impeccable eyesight; however, murky waters as evident in *Twilight swim* caused by, for instance, sediment and algae, makes it difficult for sharks to see.

Unlike *Twilight swim* where the woman is seen with two fish draped around her shoulders, fishermen for instance, are advised not to tie fish around their waists, or draped over their body after catching them, as this will attract sharks. Shiny objects are also to be avoided at all costs, as they can look like “the sun’s reflection off the scales of a fish underwater” (Beachhunter, n.d.:4; Electric Blue Fishing Charters, 2011:1-3).

### 4.6 A semiotic reading of *Twilight swim, 2004*

#### 4.6.1 Representational metafunction

In *Twilight swim* Taylor relies on symbolism and metaphorical suggestion to construct her autobiographical narrative. Semiotically speaking, the “representational metafunction” answers the question “what is the picture about?”. It is an image of a woman in water, possibly the ocean, with strange fish around her neck and in the water – most of these are likely to be sharks. The deep dark colours are evocative of night-time. Because of the strange combinations of elements such as human, sharks and ocean the image seems to be unreal or impossible, thus suggesting that it has been constructed to evoke a dream-like state. The constructed image is atmospheric, dramatic and suggestive of wetness and silence; it is haunting and evokes the work of the English portrait and landscape painter Thomas Gainsborough (Armstrong, 2004: 82).

The opaque middle ground reveals three RPs, indicative of the shark fins. Two shark fins appear on the left and one on the right, swimming towards each other. The
middle ground consists of the only human RP, which is a female figure with a serene expression standing slightly off centre in the picture frame, wearing an elegant evening dress, a 1960s green bathing cap, and draped with seaweed and two fish (RPs) around her shoulders while she is wading waist deep in the ocean.

The middle ground distance as well as the foreground distance divides the female’s figure in half. The translucent foreground shows her long flowing dress with pleats running down the front of this garment, while her hands are tucked modestly next to her body. The foreground and middle ground distance disclose the human and non-human RPs.

The far distance represents a twilight scene with a waning crescent moon to the left of the image frame, as well as stars and soft clouds. The representation of the nocturnal scene in *Twilight swim*, is characterised by dark hues such as dark greens and blues, with a touch of yellow-orange, pale peach-pink, and pink. Feisner (2006:119) explains that “colo[u]r’s most important functions are to provide visual and psychological information, and to generate reactions from a viewer”. Taylor uses this palette in order to express a sense of drama and a haunting, nocturnal atmosphere. Feisner (2006:123) generally associates dark compositions with “feelings of night, mystery, and fear”. The author elaborates that, “dark values can also seem quiet and subdued and can increase an object’s perceived size”.

The “narrative image” consists of both “actional vectors” created by the non-human RPs such as the direction the shark fins are pointing and the direction the disguised foreground fish is swimming as well as “reactional vectors” representational of the human- and non-human RPs (disguised fish) eye contact with the viewer. Through the “reactional vector” the human RP’s nonchalant gaze gives the impression that she is playing an active role of looking, instead of being looked at.

4.6.2 Interpersonal metafunction

With reference to the “interpersonal metafunction”, the “image act and gaze” between the human RPs and the viewer require direct eye contact, thus creating the impression that there is a strong sense of engagement between the viewer and the female RP.
The "social distance and intimacy" of the human RP, at first glance, consists of a view from the waist up and as such is indicative of a relatively "far personal distance". However, at closer inspection the rest of her figure is revealed in the murky water and the entire figure is indeed visible, creating the impression that she is perhaps closer to the viewer, and as such represents a "far social distance", including her entire figure as well as allowing enough space around her to contextualise and place her in a specific environment.

The horizontal perspective which entails the involvement between the RPs in the image and the viewer consists of both a ‘frontal angle’ as well as an “oblique angle”. The perspective created by the human RP refers to a frontal angle to the viewer. This angle facilitates stronger involvement on the part of the viewer, creating the impression that the RP is "one of us". The non-human RPs (the fish as well as shark fins) are at an oblique angle to the viewer, creating greater detachment and therefore implying that the RPs are "one of them".

4.6.3 Compositional metafunction

The intention of the “compositional metafunction” is aimed at integrating the “representational meaning” and the “interpersonal meaning” in order to create a meaningful whole. The compositional metafunction, according to Harrison’s framework, also highlights the importance of the left or right placement of the RPs within the image, since placement suggests that the RPs can assume different informative roles.

Semiotically speaking, then, the placement of the three shark fins on the left of the image as well as the disguised fish (the one with a shark fin tied around its body in the foreground) could therefore suggest "given" or “available” knowledge, information from the left flows into the middle and right, and brings with it the desire to link the “known” and the “unknown”. The placement of both the shark fin on the right of the image, as well as the female figure and the two fish draped around her shoulders have the value of “new” knowledge. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (as cited in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:148), the viewer or reader must pay special attention to an element presented as containing “new” information, such as RPs placed on the right of the image, due to the unfamiliar nature of the content presented, because the “old” knowledge entering the sphere of “new” knowledge creates a feeling of uncertainty and mystery.
This discussion that follows is presented in two sections: the first relating to the contextual level (where reference is made to actual events of 2004) and the second proposing a more subjective, content-driven level of reading.

4.6.4 The contextual level

In terms of context, the circling sharks could represent the shark attacks that frequently along the Florida coast, or metaphorically, they could be indicative of the four major hurricanes that sowed destruction during 2004. One of the shark fins in the background is isolated from the others, placed to the right of the female figure, which could represent Hurricane Ivan, the strongest of the four storms, which intensified as it moved further east. The remaining three shark fins could be representational of Hurricanes Charley, Frances and Jeanne, which reached landfall, causing major destruction to the state of Florida.

The human RP could represent the state of Florida, the fragility of her femininity in turn representing Florida’s susceptibility to natural disasters. If the RP is read as indicative of the state of Florida, then Taylor’s reference to phrases such as “the watermark”, as well as the impression of the dress being caught by the current, could strengthen this notion and could refer to the rise in water levels during the hurricane season.

The human RP is half submerged in the ocean, wearing her evening dress and bathing cap. This strange attire, a combination of an evening dress while at the same time wearing a bathing cap, could be a metaphor for the state’s insufficient preparations for the 2004 hurricane season, where almost half of the state did not prepare a proper evacuation plan for the hurricane season. Similarly the female figure is only partly prepared (bathing cap) but the largest part of her body is not (i.e. mentally prepared but not physically).

The human RP’s body language reveals very little emotion: her hands are placed neatly next to her body, her gaze is directed boldly at the viewer, her eyes open, her lips slightly parted without a smile, her ears as well as her hair tucked into the bathing cap, while her body is softly lit by the moonlight, casting a split lighting over her. Her only bodily adornments are the strange fish draped over her shoulders and the seaweed necklace and body piece originating from the sea, creating the impression that she is the threshold between the earth and the ocean.
Allan and Barbara Pease (2005:183) explain that a “power stare” (see Figures 4.1 and 4.4) creates authority. For instance, when the perception is created of being under attack one is advised not to blink, while maintaining eye contact (see Figure 4.5), as a result pretending to be oblivious to the lurking danger. The woman’s direct gaze in *Twilight swim, 2004* therefore suggests confidence, while she is pretending to be oblivious to her surroundings and looks into the distance. As an allegory of the state of Florida, the figure maintains eye contact while initiating a “power stare” creating authority and suggesting confidence and pretend not to be perturbed by the lurking danger of her current situation.

Indeed, the storms that occurred in and around Florida gave rise and could be a possible source of inspiration for Taylor’s work. Although Taylor is inspired by her immediate surroundings, she constructs her photographs in way that interprets events as autobiographical experiences. Her interpretations allow for the real to become indistinguishable from the imagined, the fictional, and the subjective. This is where the second level of interpretation presents itself.

### 4.6.5 The level of content

When asked by Standen (2005:128) to explain the content of her work, Taylor, similar to Surrealists, mentioned that she felt that explaining the content of her work diminished the impact of the image, and made the image “less interesting to look at”. Taylor therefore gives little explanation, if any, about the intent of her images but instead resorts to describing the construction process that she follows in the image *Twilight swim* (see Figure 4.5).

Taylor’s image seems to suggest levels of consciousness and the unconscious – especially in view of the night-time evocations (night is associated with dreams and the emergence of the unconscious). In this sense, the work seems to suggest that the unconscious is fascinating yet dangerous; that it breaks into consciousness like a shark’s fin breaks through the murky seawater. Also, since her work is mostly autobiographical, the woman is likely to also stand metaphorically for Taylor, who may feel serene in the storm, or threatened but strangely calm, and thus surreal. Nothing is what it seems – all is weird, strange, and uncertain; everything is subject to transformation, to being haunted. For instance, water symbolically stands for sexuality and for the unconscious mind. Being liquid and viscous, water is associated with feminine qualities that can represent a journey of either emotional or spiritual...
experiences (Passeron, 1984:189). Water, especially during the night, suggests a dream-world where half-formed fragments of thought, desire and ideas float around looking for a place in consciousness to emerge. Furthermore, the water is murky, meaning that so many things become murky, vague, slippery and unclear at night.

Elements such as the moon, stars, the atmospheric twilight sky, the female figure’s head, bathing cap as well as the two fish and seaweed draped around her shoulders that are all placed in the top half of the image present, and according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (as cited in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002:148), the “ideal” or “idealised” or “essence of the information” as the top part of an image is usually the most salient part of that image.

Symbolically the “ideal”, such as the moon, stars and event-taking place at twilight could indicate that it is a time for dreaming, so when the unconscious emerges from the water it enters another dreamtime where peculiar combinations and juxtapositions threaten empirical reality. Thus, together with the first level of reading (the woman “is” Florida) she also becomes a dreamt “me”; the real storms and sharks become stormy interior experiences. The association of the stars furthermore enhance the notion that night-time is a time for dreaming with qualities signifying aspects such as dreams, aspirations, ambitions, and ideals or desires that can be associated with omens or mystical events.

The waning moon incorporated in Taylor’s image is associated with waning energy as the moon decreases in size, which could refer to Taylor’s desire to fall asleep and enter the world of dreams (sleep here suggests the unconscious and a place of mystery). Allied to this suggestion, one can add that the waning moon also has connotations to emotions, nurturing, and fertility and as such represents a feminine quality (as opposed to the sun which is masculine).

According to Harrison’s framework, elements placed at the bottom of the picture frame such as the fish disguised with a shark fin and the view of the female figure from her waist down represent the “real” information, also seen as the more “down-to earth” information, referred to as the photographic evidence. Similarly, elements placed at the centre of the picture frame are viewed, ironically, as having “marginal” importance; and holds everything together, these would be representational of the four shark fins and the torso of the female figure. The human RP holds greater salience in the image, capturing the attention of the viewer through size, colour, tonal
contrast, foreground placement, sharpness of focus and making direct eye contact with the viewer.

When reading the “real” information imbedded in the constructed image, the woman, possibly representing Taylor, is standing in the ocean, symbolic of the deepest reaches of the soul, and is associated with the unconscious and with emotions. It is a place that is wet, mysterious, salty and constantly in rhythmic movement caused by the moon. The figure of the woman is surrounded by the fish, in what seems to be both a threatening and an erotic or sexually charged situation. The sharks could represent death or sperm, or both (thus suggesting predatory sexual advances or desires). Her parted lips also have obvious erotic associations and these are ironically juxtaposed by her modest stance. In this sense, she evokes the juxtaposed innocence and sensuality found in images like Alessandro Botticelli’s (1444-1510) *Birth of Venus* (herself an allegory, like the woman in Taylor’s image) (see Figure 4.10). Similarly to Taylor’s image where the female is possibly standing in the ocean surrounded by the fish (sperm), the goddess of beauty, fertility and love, Venus was born from the foam and semen of the god, Uranus that was scattered on the ocean, after Cronus cut his genitals and blood and semen dropped on the sea where they began to foam.

![Figure 4.10: Sandro Botticelli, Birth of Venus, 1485](image)
In semiotic terms, a photograph is generally concerned with an “image of the real” or as representational of reality. However, Taylor’s image can be interpreted as quite removed from reality; it has the quality of a riddle that presents various nuances of meaning – most of them evocative of mystery such as haunting weather, a haunting imagination, sexuality and fear, the drama of the unconscious, transformations and femininity, and ultimately, a place and time where everything is changing and anything is possible. The character represented in the constructed image, possibly Taylor, presents a serene expression despite the erotically and otherwise charged atmosphere. This strange calmness relates to the notion that at night, the unconscious surfaces, and breaks through the daytime façade of the conscious mind. Similarly, her inner turmoil, possibly her desire, but also her fear, break through the water (and her consciousness) and undermine the grip that reality may want to have on her.

4.7 Lori Nix: her artistic approach

Photographer Lori Nix is known for producing work that blurs the lines between truth and fiction. She does this by constructing and photographing small-scale dioramas of fictional worlds that appear to exist on a large (real) scale. Her passion for building and constructing models dates back to her time spent at graduate school. Due to constraints she experienced at the time such as limited space available for constructing, her models were of necessity restricted to tabletop models – and this constraint then became her signature style. The highly detailed, obviously fabricated miniature dioramas are guided by childhood memories; in this sense, she tells her own stories by retelling what she remembers. Her work usually concerns subjective responses to surroundings and she often refers to her childhood experience of Ohio and rural Western Kansas. Her early series titled Accidentally Kansas (1998-2000), for example, recreates impending disasters that she encountered during her youth, such as tornadoes, snowstorms, and insect infestations. Hoone (n.d.:1) explains that Nix constructs each image she produces meticulously with a contradictory sense of innocence and visceral impact and, as such, relies “heavily on the imagination and trepidation of the viewer”. She pays attention to the craft of construction while at the same time focussing on how to convey a subtle yet disturbing message.

Nix explains during a video-recorded interview with Pinback that she has an “addiction to natural disasters, strictly based on her childhood upbringing” (Loro, 2007). Reflecting on her earliest memories of growing up in Western Kansas, she
recalls often being either outside during times of disaster in her hometown, or watching television broadcasts of disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and snowstorms. These experiences obviously stimulated her imagination so that remembering events such as disasters could become imbued with subjective emotion. Thematically, her work often addresses themes of destruction, decay and abandonment.

As a photographer, Nix finds that she is rather self-conscious when walking outside photographing with her camera, and therefore she prefers instead to work from home, where she creates an introspective environment in which she can control and manipulate her subject matter. Nix started building her models while still living in Ohio. These models resembled her immediate environment, they were simple in appearance, and represented natural various disasters. In 1999 she relocated to an apartment in Brooklyn, New York, and continued to build and construct her dioramas. Throughout, she tends to reflect upon her physical environment so that it has become the most significant influence on her work and helped her to imbue her dioramas with different perspectives on her surroundings. For example, she describes a shift in perspective that is evident in her work from Accidental Kansas constructed in Ohio, to her later series constructed in New York, such as Shadows of the city (2005-2007) and Some other places (2000-2002) and suggests that the later series is “charged with anxiety and uncertainty” and, in contrast to her former work, the new work explores situations that are both eerie and ominous, a shift from “natural disasters to psychological trauma” (Hoone, n.d.:1).

As Nix explains in an interview with Jonah Samson (2007:3-4), the narrative progression that one discern in her series from Accidentally Kansas to Shadows of the city and Some other places, is the result of not only her new environment, but is also representational of how she feels at present: “I think my whole nature is turning a little darker, just from living in an urban environment. I also think that I am getting more mature in my work and taking bigger risks – wanting to do more grand scale scenes” (Nix as cited by Samson, 2007:4).

The University of California Riverside’s California Museum of Photography (UCR CMP) has the following to say about Nix’s work Some other places (UCR CMP, 2003: ¶ 4):
Like fairy tales, Nix’s photographs inspire in viewers a willing suspension of disbelief. She constructs these miniature worlds from model kits, and silk flowers embracing the practice of scene building while setting the stage for the viewer’s imagination to invent fantastical tales of iconic American landscapes. Nix’s tableau views are not those of a distanced documentarian, but rather they possess the psychological intensity of one who has seen life as more surreal than fairy tales.

4.8 Lori Nix: approach to “photographic” construction

At first glance, Nix’s work gives the impression of visually tranquil yet intriguing images. According to Samson (2007:4), what makes Nix’s work so intriguing is that the slightly sinister quality of her dioramas adds a measure of tension to the images so that they solicit a response of dark fascination. In an interview with Theme magazine, Nix was cited as being, “fascinated by the control of retelling these [natural] disasters” (Jiae, 2010:2). She explains that the ominous mood of her work can be ascribed to her fascination with “the darker side of human nature”; her interest in natural disasters and human catastrophes is related to this fascination (Samson, 2007:4).

Nix’s fabricated images not only draw from her autobiographical memory growing up in rural Kansas, but also from paintings from the 19th century, for example the 1850s New York-based group of landscape painters who formed the “first true artistic fraternity”, namely the Hudson River School under the influence of the English émigré Thomas Cole (Avery, 2001: 1). Nix is further influenced by “God’s hand in nature” and “man standing in awe” of nature (a Romantic inclination), and she draws inspiration from 1940s architecture (late Art Deco architecture often featured in her replications of buildings used in her set) (Mall, 2011). According to Nix (as cited in Jiae, 2010:1), her work expresses a sense of impending dystopia, which she almost ironically combines with visual inspiration derived from analysing the colour and compositional structures of historical and landscape paintings. The dystopic combined with the nostalgic elements of landscape paintings are further informed by an interest in the constructive use of humour in the works of sculptor Tim Hawkinson (Samson, 2007:1). Clearly, her work is a reflection of a subjective sense of memory where ideas, histories, actual places and events merge with things seen, felt, feared and loved.

A further influence on her dioramas is the eponymous 1930s and 1940s mobile theatre device that, according to Nix, was seen as a “sketchy and unknown science”
at the time. The diorama originated in Paris in 1822 and was viewed as a popular form of specialised theatre entertainment (Mall, 2011). It is Nix’s goal to construct dioramas that create the impression, at first glance, of realistic spaces. Her intention is to keep the viewer in suspense while at the same time prompting a feeling of dissonance within him or her. This is achieved by exposing, upon closer inspection, an artificial environment that challenges the viewer’s perception of reality.

Nix’s miniature dioramas are concerned with the triviality of what happens either before or after a natural disaster: the moments, as Nix explains, when everything slows down, and a sense of detachment from reality is experienced. Instead of focusing on the “climax of the decisive moment”, Nix’s work tends instead to capture the strangely calm, silent and alienating aftermath of the drama. According to UCR CMP (2003:1), it is exactly this quality that distinguishes her work from the work of artists such as Gregory Grewdson (1962 - ) and David Levinthal (1949 - ), who also engage in the practice of constructive narrative photography but who (distinguish from Nix). Generally speaking, Nix does not use human characters in her photographs, and instead constructs an ominous scenario that the viewer needs to visually interpret with the aid of subtle contextualising pointers that she includes in her images (UCR CMP, 2003:1).

In an interview, Nix explains that she “feeds off her environment” (cf. Mall, 2011) when constructing her dioramas, and, as such, she was influenced by the simplicity of her hometown in rural Western Kansas when she constructed Accidental Kansas, while her later series, for example The city, were influenced by her environment while she was living in New York - the overwhelming architecture, combined with the rushed lifestyle (Loro, 2007). Her work is autobiographical in nature not in the sense that she uses herself as the visible protagonist, but rather in the sense that a subjective reconstituting of memories of and responses to environments and events provide her with the raw material necessary to create a narrative in which she is the central, invisible character. The emotional content and craft are, of course, also markers of her subjectivity.

4.9 Lori Nix: technical aspects

After completing graduate school, Nix wanted to create images based on her childhood upbringing in rural western Kansas, but instead of travelling to the various
locations, she relied on memory and replicated the events that she experienced as a child in her home environment. These scenes are fabricated and meticulously crafted and constructed into miniature tabletop dioramas of artificial environments made from materials such as foam, polystyrene, paper, paint, and miniature modelled objects. Since moving to New York, her dioramas have been restricted to tabletop size, as she manufactures, builds, and photographs the sets in her Brooklyn apartment.

When sculpting her sets, she usually finds an object that will set the scale in each diorama, such as the sunglasses in the display cabinet, on the ground floor, that she bought to use as props in the diorama titled Mall, 2010 (see Figure 4.11), or the chairs that were specially built for Beauty shop, 2010 (see Figure 4.12) from the series Lost city (Mall, 2011). Most of her props are either sculpted by herself and her assistant Kathleen Gerber, or their production is outsourced if they are too complex and intricate to make (Loro, 2007).

![Image of Mall, 2010 by Lori Nix](image)

Figure 4.11: Lori Nix, Mall 2010

Nix’s process of fabricating and photographing her dioramas can take anything from one to fifteen months to complete, while the smaller intricate pieces (such as a chandelier that became an object in one of her models) may require three to four
months to complete. As noted, she designs and builds these models in the living room of her Brooklyn apartment and, as such, works on one model at a time due to space constraints. After constructing a diorama, Nix spends approximately two weeks photographing the set with an 8x10-inch camera, using 20 to 30 sheets of film. During these two weeks, she will spend a great deal of time readjusting and re-photographing the scene, before she takes the final photograph and destroys the fabricated diorama. Certain pieces may be recycled and used as material for new dioramas, while the remainder gets thrown away. Kim Jiae (2010:1) explains that Nix’s images are “[s]hot tight to the subjects”, and that, “these photos distort the scale of the subjects by enlarging small things to fill the frame, making them appear larger than life and ominous”.

Figure 4.12: Lori Nix, Beauty shop, 2010

During an interview, Samson (2007:2) described Nix’s work as highly detailed images that are not only playful, but also dark in content. Lighting essentially becomes a form of sculpting and creating the desired mood, bringing her fabricated dioramas to life. For instance, Nix will travel to the Shed Aquarium and observe the environment and her experience, as well as the quality and the colour of the light, which she later uses
as reference material when conducting research for her diorama (this was the process used during the making of *Aquarium, 2007*). Scenes such as *Mall, 2010* (see Figure 4.11) and *Map room, 2010* (see Figure 4.13), for instance, were shot using approximately 14 studio strobe lights and were photographed at night in her New York apartment with 35 triggered flashes at a maximum depth of field of f64, in order to create the desired ambience.

![Lori Nix, Map room, 2010](image)

Although not a trained model maker by profession, Nix’s passion for building these dioramas originated from an undergraduate major that she had completed in ceramics. However, building detailed models is mainly a self-taught skill that started with an interest in books on “model railroading”.

An official of the Stephen Cohen Gallery (n.d.: f4) in Los Angeles, exhibitor of vintage and contemporary photography and photo-based art from the United States, Europe, and South America since 1992, commented as follows on Nix’s work:

> She subverts the traditions of landscape photography in order to create her own humorously dark world. Her photographs toy with romantic notions of landscape and her lush, rich colour and theatrical lighting magnify a sense of isolation and melancholy. The obvious artificiality of the scenes does not
diminish the tension created in the photographs. It is the ‘fake’ quality that enhances the enjoyment of the illusion.

The dioramas are created for the sole purpose of being photographed, and are therefore constructed with a controlled perspective specific to the camera angle. Image manipulation takes place during the construction of the dioramas, and, as such, Nix does not rely on any digital post-production or manipulation. Redux’s executive director, Seth Curcio (as cited in Pool, 2008:1), explains that photographers such as Nix, Nathan Baker, Chris Scarborough, and Luis Gispert create new photographic realities through either building miniature dioramas, or constructing photographs through processes of digital manipulation.

4.10 Lori Nix: context

According to Nix, the series Accidental Kansas is a recollection of her years growing up in Kansas, representing the natural disasters that frequently occurred. With reference to Ice storm, 1999 Nix does not reveal specific information regarding the time of day that the event unfolds, but rather emphasises the season, as well as the drama of the ice storm and the location. The scene as constructed from autobiographical memory also uses selective colour to create the illusion of an apocalyptic event.
Due to the vast open spaces and low population in rural Western Kansas, telephone communication is a valuable means of keeping in contact and dispatching assistance during a crisis, while electricity provides much-needed heat during winter storms. According to Westar Energy (2007:1), ice stuck to power lines, as illustrated in Nix’s image (see Figure 4.14), coupled with strong winds, can cause the “lines to flap and snap along the wooden poles”. Westar Energy (2007:3) further explains that the difficulty of sending utility crews to repair damaged and broken wires is that melting snow and ice can cause flooding or turn the ground into a muddy surface, creating difficulty for heavy trucks to access the disaster areas.

Western Kansas is prone to experiencing violent weather conditions. In 1999 a blizzard caused great damage and 73 deaths to the area. Disruptions to transportation, especially after the storm, caused havoc, either halting or delaying services for up to four days (Winter Storms, n.d.:5). Telecommunication systems, a lifeline during disaster situations such as the 1999 storm to provide warnings and post-blizzard communication was not yet adequate to provide information to rural areas. Nix’s image (see Figure 4.14), shows broken telecommunication wires due to the storm, which would have resulted in insufficient communication, nor would it be possible to dispatch for needed assistance during an accident.

Kansas is a state in the Great Plains region of the United States of America. Western Kansas is a dry region with a rural farming economy and a very low population density. This region is vast with open land and often characterised by extreme weather conditions, snowy winters and natural disasters (Travelsks, n.d.:1). The economy is largely based on agriculture, and little natural vegetation occurs (National Weather Service Forecast Office, n.d.:4). Limited traffic and straight open roads with excellent visibility means that it is easy to “observe atmospheric phenomena” (National Weather Service Forecast Office, n.d.:4) in this region.

The prairie dogs (also apparent in Nix’s image) elicit mixed reactions from the farming community of Western Kansas. The harsh landscape and farming conditions in Western Kansas mean that the livestock of farmer and rancher is threatened by the infestation of prairie dogs. According to Berton Lee Lamb, Richard P. Reading, and William F. Andelt (2006:108-109), “the most common perception of prairie dogs among rural people is that they are pests”. Furthermore, farmers as well as ranchers tend to feel that burrows dug by prairie dogs not only cause damage to farming
equipment, but also injuries to their livestock if they were to step into these burrows (Lamb, Reading & William, 2006:109).

In 1999, (also the date reflected in her image title - see Figure 4.14) the local authorities attempted to develop a positive attitude towards prairie dogs within rural communities in order to save the species from possible extinction. However, this incentive for conserving prairie dogs was abandoned in 2004, and the only probable remaining solution to the survival of the species is now to give agricultural communities a financial incentive for conserving these animals (Lamb, Reading & William, 2006:114).

Human intervention strategies have furthermore extended to the possibility of controlling rainfall in Kansas. Since rain is scarce in Kansas, and the farming conditions are harsh as the area is prone to natural disasters, a programme called “cloud seeding”\(^3\), which was developed after World War II to assist in increasing rainfall patterns, was considered and implemented in 1975 to decrease the disastrous effect of hailstorms. Residents are concerned that the methods implemented for cloud seeding are, however, reducing the much-needed annual rainfall. Maria Sudekum Fisher (2007:1) highlights that, “[a] 1998-1999 study of the WKWMP [Western Kansas Weather Modification Program] found that while there was a statistically significant reduction in hail that year, there was no evidence to support the program’s attempts to increase rainfall”. The cloud-seeding programme as well as the prairie dog initiatives reflect human intervention strategies and represent man’s attempts to reconstruct and control the land in an artificial manner.

4.11 A semiotic reading of Ice storm, 1999

4.11.1 Representational metafunction

Similar to Taylor’s image, Twilight swim, 2004, Nix’s constructed photograph also relies on symbolism and metaphors to narrate her autobiographical intent. The photograph portrays a landscape depicting the aftermath of an accident that took place due to a natural disaster. Upon closer inspection the foreground depicts a non-human RP, namely a submerged car (but which of course most likely does contain an invisible human RP), sinking to the bottom of the frozen lake. The middle ground

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\(^3\) Cloud seeding, a method of controlling the weather, is achieved by shooting silver iodide, or a dry ice mixture, into storm clouds. In theory, this action creates raindrops in the clouds, thereby “increasing precipitation and reducing moisture for hail formation” (Fisher, 2007:1).
reflects the curved road, the two prairie dogs (RPs), the road sign (RP) indicating the curvature in the road as well as the broken telephone or electricity wires (RP) that is covering the road. The far distance shows a desolate landscape covered in ice in which the scene unfolds, with a dark ominous sky and shrubs.

_Ice storm_ functions, semiotically speaking, as an iconic sign that signifies by means of resemblance to the actual landscape. The visual information, although manufactured and constructed, can easily be recognised but is further elaborated by means of the use of an "action narrative", which strongly relies on the use of vectors such as the car, the prairie dogs, the traffic sign, and the wires to direct the viewer’s attention.

On a different level, the image communicates symbolically as Nix constructed her diorama to reflect an event from her autobiographical memory. Also, the image does not only relate event(s) that took place during her childhood, but also her personal responses to events as well as her experiences. It can be argued that the constructed landscape and weather conditions that Nix so readily portrays in her dioramas have become part of the self-narrative that she purposefully scaled down to a proportion where she can "control" the situation or event.

### 4.11.2 Interpersonal metafunction

The one prairie dog looks back in the direction from where the vehicle approaches. The animal does not make eye contact with the viewer, thus creating an "offer". The car appears to be sinking to the bottom of the dam, with its headlights still on, capturing the event as it is unfolding (chillingly reminiscent of the car pushed into the lake in the film _Psycho_). Like the prairie dog, the vehicle also creates an "offer", while presenting itself to the viewer at an oblique angle.

The image relies on horizontal balance while making use of “dynamic” vertical lines to create tension, such as the car and the wires running downwards at an angle. The narrator intentionally does not create a feeling of closeness, leaving the viewer to experience a sensation of powerlessness and distance, as if helplessly observing the event.

Both the electricity- and the telephone wires are broken and covered with snow, creating a downward triangular shape in the direction of the car, while the prairie
dogs form “graphic” vectors, directing the viewer’s attention to the action taking place below in the dam.

Except for the road sign, all the vectors are “graphic”, being either objects or lines created to guide the viewer in a particular direction. The traffic sign, however, is an “indexical vector”, directing the viewer's attention in the opposite direction, and is in contrast to the “graphic vectors” formed by the wire. Both the prairie dogs and the car form a “diverging indexical” vector.

4.11.3 Compositional metafunction

The placement of the RPs within Nix’s images, such as the car, the prairie dogs, the road, the road sign and the electricity or telephone wires, are mainly all on the right of the image thus semiotically creating the impression of “new” knowledge as opposed to elements on the left that is seen as “given” knowledge which equates to knowledge that is familiar or of common-sense to the viewer.

The overall tonality in Ice storm comprises cold colours, emphasising the weather conditions depicted. The dramatic cloud backdrop consists of dark hues, while the white of the ice is used to highlight contours, directing the viewer's eye over the lighter areas. Darker hues are used in the distance, as well as in the sky, to create depth, possibly symbolising the overarching threat that is always lurking in the forces in nature such as tornados, ice storms, floods or insect manifestation.

Nix intentionally creates another level of tension in this very subdued image, by incorporating two prairie dogs at a time when their existence is seen as unwanted by the majority of residents in the area. She furthermore incorporates three possible scenarios that could have caused the accident resulting in the death of the passengers, namely the ice storm, the wires crossing the road, or the prairie dogs obstructing the road.

This “whodunnit” scenario suggests that the viewer has to play along in constructing the narrative; Nix creates a delayed interpretative reaction. She allows the viewer to first explore the image and to discover bits of her autobiographical images together with its metaphors and symbolism. The viewer tends to experience a feeling of desperation and helplessness when observing the unfolding events, such as the unfolding accident narrative in Ice storm where the car possibly swerved for the
prairie dogs; the broken wires crossing the road that suggest no possibility of help or communication; and the consequent icy water grave suggested by the plummeting to the bottom of the dam. In Nix’s images she often creates the impression that we are seeing what happened after some or other event; the viewer is therefore looking at a single image that is suggestive of a narrative.

Nix creates (“makes”) an image by representing destruction (“unmaking”). The storm that ravaged the landscape, in a sense representational of an apocalypse, has been scaled down in her diorama, perhaps Nix made the storm smaller in order to control it, and to make it hers. It becomes ironic that Nix would focus on constructing man-made miniature scale models to replicate the vast power of nature. She is in a sense “taming” the vast power of nature and as such reducing the size of the storm to a tabletop arrangement, but ironically/strangely making the storm even more devastating in her narrative arrangement.

Although the image represents an event that Nix recalled from her childhood, it can also be viewed as the way in which she internalises her own storms or difficult situations she faces on a daily basis. She speaks of her need to control, of not being comfortable with people and working in her home environment where she is the most comfortable.

The dark ominous sky and overall feeling of the image are associated with mystery, possibly the mystery of who Nix really is as she puts on a façade and does not reveal herself to the public. The apocalyptic landscape as well as the water that takes up the majority of the image may be symbolic of the unconscious mind and here also of death and oblivion indicating that she is figuratively covered in ice, cold and impersonal. She is feeling isolated and trapped in the environment (metaphorically her unconscious) that is leading to destruction, an apocalyptic landscape while her only connection, the telephone- electricity wires, are broken and she can’t make contact to escape her desolate environment, she has to deal with her unconscious while in isolation. A figurative interpretation of the literal illustration of her autobiographical narration could signify that Nix is feeling captured and drowning in her unconscious (the water) consisting of memories, thoughts and ideas. The car “drowning” is a possible metaphor for Nix herself; it could suggest that she is submerged in a vertigo experience of floating from reality. The prairie dogs could then represent the people in her life that are merely onlookers in the unfolding event taking place in her life.
4.12 Reading the narrative according to the characteristics of an autobiographical narrative

4.12.1 Fabrication and reality

Taylor and Nix have similar approaches in their autobiographical narrative construction, in the sense that both tend to merge fabrication and reality. Their process of selection and construction involves, in a manner that recalls Christian Boltanski’s statement “what bit of yourself is to show or not” (Steiner & Yang, 2004:68). Taylor and Nix recreate reality by relying on either metaphors or atmospheric tension to construct an autobiographical narrative and, as such, control the extent of information that is revealed in the narration.

Taylor prefers to conceal her autobiography within a fabricated construction. This does not as much “allow” interpretation as “invite” and “complicate” interpretation. She asks the viewer to interpret her narrative intent, merging fabrication and a recollection of autobiographical reality in order to create a fusion of autobiographical possibilities. She tends to create imagined environments and makes use of various personae in order to narrate the autobiographical story (see Figure 4.5, 4.8 and 4.9, Moth dancer, 2004, Distracted cats, 2003 and Twilight swim, 2004), while Nix very seldom incorporates people, and instead focuses on the environment and the aftermath of disasters that she experienced as a child. Although Nix fabricates her environment, her narrative focuses on conveying a recollection of her childhood experiences.

4.12.2 Autobiographical memory

Similar to the written narrative, the autobiographical picture narrative involves autobiographical memory and narration; although the visual narrative does not necessarily constitute a chronological narration of episodic events and tends to work fairly freely with the divide between fiction and reality.

Nix’s photographs relate aspects of her autobiography narrative by means of bits of resembling episodic memory that reveal “factual” aspects of her childhood memories. However, it is apparent that both Nix and Taylor also “conceal” their autobiographical memories, using fabrication (such as metaphors and symbolisms) as a tool to camouflage autobiographical reality. Both Taylor and Nix engage with their
autobiographical images incorporating the “I” or the “me” in the narration, personifying the narrative and, as such, acknowledge that they are not separated from the narration.

Nix and Taylor’s respective photographs, *Twilight swim* and *Ice storm* both narrate a traumatic natural event, and these are most likely associated with traumatic memories. Massoura and Garner (2005:12) explain that a narrator could possibly be unreliable in recollecting autobiographical information from a specific event, and, as such, could be influenced by his or her immediate socio-cultural environment and the memory of others, causing him or her to give a “false” description of the event depicted. The dissociated nature of traumatic memory, as explained by Massoura and Garner (2005:13), could result in a fabricated memory, and, therefore, result in a fictitious interpretation. The boundaries between autobiographical memories are often obscure, making it difficult to distinguish between fabrication and reality; therefore it can be argued that reality is perhaps one big fabrication.

**4.12.3 Socio-cultural structure**

The individual does not live in isolation; but is born and raised within a particular social and cultural structure that generally influences and shapes his or her persona. Similarly, autobiographical photographers such as Nix and Taylor are influenced by the social and cultural structure that they reside in.

Nix grew up in a very dry, arid agricultural community. The socio-cultural structure she grew up in possibly influenced her autobiographical narration, for instance teaching her from a young age how to emotionally manage when constantly facing life threatening natural disasters. Within the socio-cultural structure the community experienced natural disasters such as severe droughts and snowstorms, evident in her image titled *Ice storm*, 1999. Through Nix’s autobiographical narration she recalls events such as the snow storm of 1999, but instead of narrating these as merely factual, she instead makes the storm “her” storm narrating not only what they as a society experienced within the specific community, but also her personal experience. The image is therefore not only factual, but on a secondary level becomes a metaphor for the subconscious and its storms.

Taylor lives in Florida and through her autobiographical image *Twilight swim* she comments on the social and cultural structure of the community. Taylor gives her
characters connections and places them within a context that will allow them to evolve but at the same time remain true to her own identity.

Taylor and Nix both incorporate their environment as part of their narration, similar to the process followed in the written narrative. The autobiographical narrator does therefore not stand in isolation, but is influenced by the socio-cultural environment.

4.12.4 Commonalities in female narration

With reference to the characteristics of the female narrator, Taylor and Nix both incorporated elements of personal detail in the narration of *Twilight swim* and *Ice storm* (Jelinek as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9). The narratives not only portray symbolic elements of the narrator’s personal feelings and emotions, but also describe their connections with other people.

Akin to the female written autobiographical narration, it can be argued that Nix and Taylor found empowerment through the narration of their autobiographical images or image-making. Through the process of physically constructing a miniature scale model of what in reality was a large scale natural disaster, or personal metaphorical storm, Nix empowered herself to be able to cope with her personal experience of disaster. Similarly, through the process of image-making Taylor empowered herself by grappling with her unconscious. The process of constructing an autobiographical narrative allowed both photographers the opportunity to develop a measure of control over their stories by being able to decide what to tell and how to narrate events.

It has become evident through the semiotic reading of the two autobiographical photographers’ work that they explore new forms of autobiographical narration, such as the process of constructedness which allows for the photographers to make their interpretation of reality and memory their own, and grounds it in their subjectivity, as such also empowering the photographers.

Female life writings usually emphasise personal and domestic details and describe connections to other people. In the semiotic reading of Taylor and Nix’s work their imaginative reliving of events does not particularly reflect domestic connections, except for possibly Nix’s image of the snow story. Taylor does not distance herself in the narration. Nix, however, isolates herself from people and prefers to work on her own, constructing dioramas instead of going into the streets to photograph people.
Therefore, her constructed images clearly reflect her sense of distance and isolation from the society that she lives and finds herself in.

In female life-narratives women, unlike men, tend to authenticate themselves in stories that reveal a greater measure of self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding, employing understatement to mask their feelings and play down public aspects of their lives. Similarly, Taylor and Nix rather self-consciously mask their feelings within symbolism and metaphors using events that they experienced in their life as a background to merge reality and fabrication in order to give life to for instance their subconscious as such they diminish the actual importance of the public aspect of their lives.

In the writings of female autobiographical narrators one tends to find that unlike men, female narration is often characterised by irregularity and as such has a disconnected pattern of diffusion and diversity in discontinuous forms due to the multidimensionality of the female’s socially conditioned roles (Jelinek as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9). Taylor and Nix’s work suggests levels of discontinuity and multifacetedness; this aspect is at the heart of the constructedness that characterises their narratives.

In contrast to the assertions of Jelinek (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998:9), Taylor and Nix do not conceal their autobiographical character as female narrators, but instead talk about their identity/self in their own ways, thus creating a subjective, constructed approach that they are able to control.

The female autobiographical narrator does not focus on exaggerating her life or character in order to create a heroic mould, idealising her life and/or her existence. In the work of for instance Nix, it could possibly be interpreted that she metaphorically associates herself with the car, submerged in the icy water (representational of death or of her subconscious mind). She therefore does not ascribe herself the role of the saviour or the heroin in the narration, but instead focuses on validating her life by exploring and evaluating stories from her past experiences and in the process appreciating her emotions and feelings. She therefore disregards the public positioning of her autobiographical character within her narration.
4.12.5 A summary of narrative aspects

Chapter 2 of this dissertation highlighted Jerome Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) 12-step process of constructing a written autobiographical narrative by summarising research done by psychologist Ulric Neisser (Neisser, 1993; Neisser & Fivush, 1994; Neisser & Jopling, 1997; Neisser & Winogrand, 1988), in order to narrate a good story, for example, intriguing the viewer by introducing a strategy, introducing the character, allowing for the character to grow, introducing obstacles to make the viewer reconsider or re-evaluate the intended narrative, and introducing mood into the narration. Similarities seem to be evident when comparing Bruner’s 12-step process of constructing a written autobiography to Nix and Taylor’s methods of constructing an autobiographical narrative in their respective images; however, Nix and Taylor refrain from a monotonous process of narration, by hiding the content of the narration behind metaphors and symbolism, for the viewer to investigate and interpret.

Similar to the written narrative, the autobiographical picture narrative incorporates what Bruner (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) identifies as a plot, and introduces various obstacles and goals into the narration. A plot requires steps of events, for instance, the one occurrence after the next (this makes a plot into a narrative). A plot furthermore requires conflict, for instance events causing havoc, inner conflict, outer conflict, man and beast, fantasy and reality, shark versus non-shark, in order to function. Resolving the conflict or not may be part of the narrative.

The particularly charged atmosphere in both instances contribute to the plot because it introduces an obstacle, an event takes place (for example the snow storm) and it unfolds into the next event (for example the broken telephone/communicational wires), and as a result causes conflict (for example the car driving off the road and subsequently being submerged in the icy cold water). The atmosphere is furthermore achieved by the use of lighting, allowing the photographers the opportunity to create a particular mood and ambiance.

4.13 Chapter summary

Taylor and Nix’s work can be aligned with similar practices notable in art and photography since the 1980s, which entailed a strong element of constructing or staging.
It becomes evident through the visual social semiotic reading of Taylor and Nix’s selected images, based on the characteristics of an autobiographical narrative, as developed in Chapter 2, that similarities exist in terms of the process of narration between the written narrative and the autobiographical picture narrative. Similarities furthermore also exist between the works of the 1980s autobiographical photographers, Taylor and Nix. Both Nix and Taylor created underlining tension and incorporated an element of danger within their narration. Taylor as well as Nix relies on the use of metaphors and symbolisms in order to conceal their emotions and feelings. The autobiographical images in both cases are imbued with layers of potential meanings.
CHAPTER 5
CASE STUDY OF THE PRACTICAL COMPONENT

5.1 Introduction

This study comprises two components, namely a theoretical dissertation as well as a practical portfolio that consists of a body of photographs taken by the researcher and presented in an exhibition. This chapter integrates the practical component with the theories discussed in the dissertation by means of a semiotic reading of the researcher’s photograph *Fennel and coriander* from the series *Journey* (see Figure 5.1). This semiotic reading is guided by the five characteristics of an autobiographical narrative, similar to the discussion of Taylor and Nix’s work in Chapter 4.

The practical component explores two phases of the researcher’s life, which are titled *Karoo childhood* and *Journey*. The first phase, *Karoo childhood* consists of a series of images that depict miniature toys that signify the researcher’s Karoo childhood. This phase addresses concerns such as drought, surviving as a Karoo farmer, and the importance of water (in the Karoo, one is so often at the mercy of nature). The last phase, *Journey*, merges fabrication and reality in order to narrate selected aspects of the researcher’s life, illustrating her feelings, dreams, nightmares and fears.

5.2 The researcher: her artistic approach

The researcher is a South African-born photographer who currently works with the process of constructing an autobiographical picture narrative. She relies on autobiographical memory and relates her narrative from the viewpoint of a female narrator, within her socio-cultural environment. The researcher grew up in the Eastern Cape on a Karoo farm at the foot of the Cockscomb mountain, a rich and diverse landscape and a sanctuary in her formative years.

Born in South Africa in 1980 in an environment sheltered from the political turmoil and unrest that characterised the country at the time, the narrative of childhood and youth is strongly interspersed with tales from her parents, grandparents and the media such as television and radio. The researcher grew up in a multicultural environment where racial
differences did not feature prominently in her upbringing and people were not differentiated in terms of colour or race – perhaps quite unusual for the time in South Africa. As such, the practical component does not reflect features of the underlying racial tension that existed or that currently exists. The constructed autobiographical narrative does therefore not stand in isolation, but it is influenced by the researcher’s specific experience of her socio-cultural environment, and enhanced by autobiographical memory. This means that personal feelings, emotions and opinions are freely incorporated into the work. Ultimately, the autobiographical narrative becomes a highly subjective interpretation of past events and narrates the individual’s perception of events that have been experienced and witnessed.

In what follows, a semiotic reading will be conducted of *Fennel and coriander*, the concluding photograph of the series *Journey*. This series shows of individuals from various races in the process of narrating the autobiographical narrative of the researcher. It is not the researcher’s intention to focus on race differentiation, but rather to illustrate a merging of cultures. Although the researcher’s ancestry can be traced to a specific culture, she does not identify herself with any particular one but, instead focuses on an integration of cultures.

Similar to the works of Taylor and Nix, the researcher’s autobiographical narrative explores constructed and interpreted versions of events and memories in order to introduce subtle experiences that arise from the tension of merging fabrication and reality.

5.3 The researcher: approach to “photographic” construction

The autobiographical narrative consists of a multifaceted construction that contains elements of riddles and hints of symbolic meanings. *Fennel and coriander* (see Figure 5.1) relies on these metaphoric strategies in order to narrate the autobiographical content of the photograph; events and the like are not unfolded in a chronological fashion.

The researcher’s autobiographical narrative comprises images of a collection of childhood memorabilia, toys, found objects as well as constructed objects. These are used as signifying elements of the narrative. This autobiographical narrative series, similar to those of Taylor, also includes various individuals assigned with a new identity portraying the researcher’s autobiographical narrative, and as such offers the possibility of representing the personae of the narrator in various circumstances.
The series *Karoo childhood* and *Journey* consist of numerous photographs that are constructed in the environment where the researcher grew up. A selection of the objects used in the autobiographical narrative originates from a family collection of toys, objects and memorabilia. The camera RAW photographic files are digitally enhanced with software such as Photoshop CS5.

Photographic equipment utilised to construct the images consists of a DSLR Canon EOS 5D Mark II, as well as various lenses such as a shift and tilt, wide-angle and a telephoto. A high-resolution flatbed scanner was used to digitise old negatives that were incorporated in the narrative.

![Image of Fennel and coriander](image.png)

Figure 5.1: Nina Joubert, *Fennel and coriander*, Series: Journey

### 5.4. The researcher: technical aspects

The image *Fennel and coriander* (see Figure 5.1) was manually constructed on location and photographed as a single image; Photoshop was only used in order to enhance the aesthetics and overall appearances of the image.
*Fennel and coriander* (see Figure 5.1) was photographed in a Victorian-style dilapidated and abandoned old farmhouse situated on a neighbouring Karoo farm, Tecoma, *en route* to the local farm school which the researcher attended from Grade one to Grade seven. The farmhouse was built in the late 1800s. The image shows an empty room with what used to be a fireplace to the left of the frame, another empty room where the PRs are situated and to the right, a wide open terrace with ornate pillars, arched corrugated sheet ironed roof referred to as a ‘bullnose’ and tall Bluegum invader trees in the far distance (Marincowitz, 2007:16).

The Victorian-style house provides the background in which the narrative is constructed. The house was built with exposed soft-burnt firebricks as seen in the foreground; bricks like these were originally burnt at a low temperature to a red, pinkish colour and became durable when plastered with a lime and mud mixture. The mud mixture referred to as ‘dagha’ contained a small amount of lime and provided a rough textured wall surface that subdued the harsh Karoo sunlight. Occasionally, soft animal fat known as tallow was added to the ‘dagha’ mixture to create a waterproof coating (Marincowitz, 2007:11). These elements are important because they lend an element of authenticity to the image, while they also suggest decay and levels of meaning that are exposed by the passing of time.

The image has been constructed to provide both a view of the interior of the house as well as the terrace and surrounding exterior. The interior is shaded in dark neutral tones, contrasting with the brightly lit exterior. The dark interior view on the left holds little information and focuses mainly on the dilapidated old fireplace. The fireplace is characteristic of Karoo style houses and provided heat as well as additional light at night due to the fact that no electricity was available in this particular farming community until the 1940s.

The foreground that shows the two masked figures and doll’s limbs and heads mounted on the painted wall introduces elements of surprise and confusion. The appearance of these objects and figures have the character of a riddle. At this stage it is not clear whether the figure on the terrace is walking towards the darkened room with the figures or away from them and towards the bright light.

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1 Mortar, soft mud for joints between bricks and plastering.
Similarly to Taylor and Nix’s approach, the researcher’s photographic series presents a fusion of reality and fantasy which creates a sense of mystery, strange beauty and a peculiar sense of restlessness.

5.5 The researcher: context

The contextualisation that follows focuses on events that took place in and around the area where the photograph, *Fennel and coriander* (see Figure 5.1) was constructed and where the researcher grew up.

Due to the harsh climate conditions of the Karoo landscape and its implications for farming - severe droughts, rising agricultural costs, theft and the increase in farm murders – many farmers have opted to either sell their land in order to move to the cities or, alternatively, farms were converted into game farms. Therefore, unoccupied farm houses dot this landscape. They present the threat of being either inhabited by unlawful tenants or alternatively to have been used by criminals who are known to heard stolen livestock into the homes and from there load and transport them Farm owners have therefore from time to time resorted to demolishing these historic homes as a safety precaution.

The Tecoma farmhouse was last occupied in the late 1960s and has since been vacant. The current owner of the property and surrounding land has started the process of demolishing the house in order to firstly reuse the available material and secondly to avoid criminal activity. The house that once symbolised the haunted ghost house, and a known feature when travelling on the dirt road to where the researcher grew up, will now also slowly disappear.

5.6 A semiotic reading of *Fennel and coriander*

5.6.1 Representational metafunction

According to Harrison’s visual social semiotic framework, the “representational metafunction” answers the question, “what is the picture about?". *Fennel and coriander* (see Figure 5.1) shows of an interior and exterior view of this old dilapidated house. The elements in the foreground are in focus (the two masked figures or alternatively, RPs and the doll’s body parts that are mounted on a painted wall). The scene through the door on
the left gives the viewer a glimpse view of the interior space containing the remains of an old fireplace. The vista through the door on the right shows a blurred figure on the terrace walking either towards or away from the figures in the foreground.

The symmetrical views in the photograph of the farmhouse consist of ‘graphic’ vectors directing the viewer towards the figures in the foreground and/or alternatively to the blurred figure in the distance. As a result the viewer resorts to evaluating and balancing opposite ends (playing a game like “spot the difference”). However, although the viewer sees a symmetrical interior view of the house, the visual weight leans slightly towards the right of the image due to the lighter colour of the terrace that draws the viewer’s attention.

The different tonalities in the building bricks furthermore emphasises the contrast evident throughout the image, while the lighter bricks are the stronger ones and the darker-toned bricks are the weaker ones (Marincowitz, 2007:9). Metaphorically the contrast can either suggest different states of mind, or alternatively the relationship between decay and regeneration.

The “narrative image” is created consisting of both “action vectors” such as the mounted bodies and heads, as well as “reactional vectors” such as the eyeline created between the RPs (two figures in the foreground). The RPs makes contact with the viewer but not with each other. “Conceptually” the RPs (figures in the foreground) present the viewer with a “symbolic concept” of who and what they represent, for instance, two aspects of the central person situated in an environment that creates the feeling of desolation while the narrator merges both fantasy and fear in her autobiographical illustration.

5.6.2 Interpersonal metafunction

With reference to the “interpersonal metafunction”, the RPs in the image consist of objects such as the doll's heads, as well as the foreground figures, “demanding” image act and gaze of the viewer. The RPs (doll heads mounted on the wall) suggest a static “demand” while the body language of the two sitting figures in the foreground wearing the masks evoke a feeling of being’ removed, uninviting the viewer, with a cold distant gaze.

The image creates the impression that the narrator allows for the viewer to observe, but does not allow anyone into her life. The narrator keeps the viewer at a “safe” distance and
merely allows them to be spectators. The blurred unmasked figure in the bright light represents her untroubled soul while the persona that is revealed to the viewer is masked, unapproachable, distant and aloof.

5.6.3 Compositional metafunction

Semiotically speaking, the “compositional metafunction” places the RPs (in the foreground on the left) with the value of being “given” knowledge and as such these RPs equates to containing knowledge that is rational or alternatively familiar to the viewer. The blurred RP (on the right) in the distance is given the value of “new” and can present a “new” problem, solution or issue. However, the two RPs that are seated in the foreground have greater salience in the image, capturing the attention of the viewer through foreground placement, colour, tonal contrast and sharpness of focus.

The pictorial framing devices around the RPs are visibly strong and as such indicate a greater connection between the grouped RPs, for instance the two-masked RPs in the foreground are framed together, while the dolls and limbs are again framed separately. The RP on the right (blurred figure) is framed by the door and again places the figure within a strong framing device. The framing devices create a separation between the various RPs, although the connection within the grouped RPs are relatively strong and visually form a collective.

The bright colours and the representation of light and shade in the image communicate on a high modality, visually suggesting a sense of authenticity and validity. Nonetheless, even though the image communicates on a high modality the “realness” of the photograph remains questionable and the viewer is left with the portentous riddle of disjointed signifiers, especially the way that the figures seem unrelated to the environment.

5.6.4 The contextual level

In terms of the context of Fennel and coriander (see Figure 5.1), the decayed environment within which the constructed autobiographical narrative unfolds could function as a metaphor for the farming community that runs the risk of disappearing due to the harsh weather, environmental and economic conditions that farmers encounter in South Africa.
In the opposing rooms, dark versus light could be a metaphor for the farmer’s constant struggle to survive while the masked RPs in the foreground could represent the criminal activity that has been taking place on South African farms such as the theft of livestock. The doll’s heads and body parts could also represent the captured (and often slaughtered) livestock that the thieves have collected, while the blurred RP walking outside, represents the oblivious attitude to the criminal activity taking place within the community.

5.6.5 The level of content

Similar to Taylor and Nix’s approach, the researcher refrains from explaining the autobiographical concept of the images, as it is ultimately the viewer who interprets and deciphers the content of the constructed images and in doing so reads the image from his or her frame of reference adding a new dimension to the autobiographical reading of the narrative.

Figuratively speaking, the dolls and limbs displayed on the wall represent the fears and nightmares of the researcher and appear in various images throughout the autobiographical picture narrative. The impression is created that a doll’s head and/or body is being selected from the wall display (also the storage facility for the dreams and nightmares) to form part of the researcher’s dreams or nightmares. Dolls are generally given to girl children to provide a form of entertainment, or alternatively to create a nurturing environment. Children tend to bestow the doll with an imaginary identity to provide either comfort or in order to fulfil the role as a companion. As the child grows older the dolls are left behind, the dolls’ imaginary identity are removed and they become empty and cold objects in a lost, forgotten and abandoned environment.

Symbolically, abandonment can refer to death, guilt or the loss of contact for instance with nature. In this constructed autobiographical image, the abandoned farmhouse signifies a storage facility for the researcher’s childhood dreams and her fears. She has moved away from the place where she grew up and as a result, lost contact with her roots, creating a sense of abandonment in her narrative.

The impression is created through the constructed autobiographical narrative that a mask is selected from the storage facility (abandoned house) to hide and/or conceal emotions and feelings, protecting and preventing the researcher from revealing her persona until she feels
less apprehensive and perturbed by her surroundings. These camouflages are representational of the masks worn by the RPs in the foreground. Symbolically, the mask creates the assumption of a different personality or the entrance into a new stage of life.

The two masked RPs in the foreground symbolise the duality of all things. The white outfit symbolises peace, purity, detachment from worldliness and perfection, while the black outfit symbolises ignorance, mourning, punishment and death. The two masked figures in the foreground, that provide the researcher with an “escape” from reality once she wears the masks, constitute a combination of things positive and negative. It can therefore be interpreted that the researcher masked “stage” becomes an act of balancing.

The masked hybrid man/animal in the foreground (half man, half horse) has a resemblance to Centaur, the Greek mythology where the creature with the head, arms, and torso of a man possesses the body and legs of a horse. The South African artist Jane Alexander (1959 - ) is also known to sculpt figures, replacing the human head with that of an animal, a surrealistic hybrid that Julie McGee has termed “humanimal” in her essay “Canons” (cited in Allara, 2011:6). In Notes on African Adventures and Other Details, Alexander (in Subirós, n.d:71) has the following to say regarding her work:

The experience and structure of apartheid as a social system was a significant source in my early work and a foundation for research for my later production in which I reference a broader view of discrimination, colonialism, displacement, security, etc., and the concomitant and pervasive conditions and relations of social control and political power… All my figures, male/ female, hybrid or doll-specific, are intended to act, with a degree of realism, representation, and invention, as an imaginative distillation and interpretation of research, observation, experience, and hearsay regarding aspects of social systems that impact the control and regulation of groups and individuals, of human and nonhuman animals.

A theme exists throughout her sculpted figures of “becoming animal/becoming human” (Allara, 2011:71). Her work engages with the political situation in South Africa.

Similar to the dolls and limbs displayed on the wall in Fennel and coriander, the hybrids as Allara (2011:5) explains that is created by Alexander become “ghosts’ of the past or ‘harbingers’ of the future”. According to Allara (2011:5) “[w]e do not, like a child, provide metaphorical life to these dolls; rather, they have a life of their own.”
In contrast to Alexander’s work, the masked “humanimal” reflected within *Fennel and coriander*, does not reflect on the political situation within South Africa, but acts as a “vessel” that “transports” the researcher in a child-like disguise between inept and surreal situations.

The image (see Figure 5.1) represents the researcher as a blurred figure (on the right), unmasked, walking towards the “storage facility” and as such suggests that the current state of the researcher is that of tranquillity however, she might be approaching the said storage facility in order to again mask herself with an appropriate attire in order to escape or alternatively deal with her current state with the use of a less venerable outer appearance. These contrasting opposites become an act of balancing throughout the constructed autobiographical narrative.

5.7 Reading the narrative according to the characteristics of an autobiographical narrative

5.7.1 Fabrication and reality

Similar to Taylor and Nix, the researcher merges both fact as well as fiction in order to narrate the autobiographical concept, relying on metaphors and contrasting elements to convey the meaning of the picture narrative. The image provides the viewer with the necessary information in order to decipher the researcher’s construction.

The masks worn by the two figures in the foreground imply that the self (blurred figure) conceals her persona and/or alternatively, consider the notion of alter egos or different characters allowing the researcher to escape from social reality and enter a fabricated realm, exploring different dimensions of the self.

5.7.2 Autobiographical memory

An autobiographical narrative as explained by Draaisma (2004:1) is a recollection of accumulated personal experiences and does not stand in isolation. Taylor for example draws from her childhood experiences but then constructs a narrative that encapsulates her personal interpretations and view of herself in the narrative; similarly the researcher focuses on merging autobiographical memory with views, thoughts and feelings of herself as well as
her immediate surroundings and as such the autobiographical memory becomes a merger of not only fact but also fiction.

According to Jens Brockmeier and Qi Wang (2002:47), one's autobiographical memory may be further influenced by, for instance, dialogue between friends and family and as such the autobiographical memory becomes a social practice. The process of recollecting information from especially early childhood, for instance stories and events told by family and friends of the researcher's early childhood years are strongly influenced by interpreting and understanding social dialogue; however, it becomes a process of deciphering numerous dialectic contributions of the same event. For instance, an event that was experienced by the researcher in her formative years may be narrated in different ways by various contributors; it is therefore the narrator's responsibility to make sense of the information.

The old farmhouse for instance was chosen as it forms part of early childhood memory. Being situated close by the road to the local primary school, it was passed on a daily basis and became an iconic house often referred to as the ghost-house due to its haunting features. However, in conversations the researcher was informed of the often unlawful occupation of these old houses as well as the practice of herding livestock there at night. In this sense one can say that autobiographical memory merged with bits of conversation as fact.

5.7.3 Socio-cultural structure

The autobiographical narrative is established within a cultural context and therefore not only reflects on the life of the narrator, but also refers to the socio-cultural environment, such as, for example, the farming community, her family, friends and events that took place during the time period the autobiographical event was constructed. Depending on how the character perceives her socio-cultural environment, she could be either negatively or positively influenced.

5.7.4 Commonalities in female narration

The autobiographical narrative is constructed from a female's perspective which means that the researcher's personal details and her connection to her surroundings features strongly.
The autobiographical narrative constructed by the researcher in Figure 5.1 presents an attempt to come to grips with fragments of past experiences. However, the researcher, similar to female autobiographical narrators such as Nix and Taylor, also suppresses feelings and instead relies on metaphors to convey personal emotions.

The researcher creates what Felix, Kohler and Vowinckel (1995:39) classify as a “staged presentation of the self” which allows her the independence to explore the notion of alter egos and to liberate herself from society’s prescriptions. The researcher explores the notion of alter egos through the incorporation of fiction in the narrative, thereby creating imaginary characters (the masked personae).

### 5.7.5 A summary of narrative aspects

The researcher does not follow a rigid pattern of constructing an autobiographical narrative such as Bruner’s (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) 12-step-guideline. Instead, the narrative is influenced by a stream-of-consciousness approach and does not necessarily have a beginning nor an end, similar to that of Taylor’s autobiographical narratives. Nonetheless, the narrative does focus (with reference to Bruner in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) on establishing the self within the world of others, especially friends, family and past experiences. Although the researcher sets out to portray an autonomous self, it is an ongoing struggle to balance an autonomous self with the self that relates to others.

### 5.8 Chapter summary

Constructing an autobiographical picture narrative entails a recollection of not only autobiographical memory, but also influences of various other aspects such as the socio-cultural environment, whether story narrated from a male or female’s perspective, the degree to which the narrative relies on reality and incorporates fiction and, finally, the construction process of the narrative.

Although the researcher’s method of constructing the actual autobiographical narrative differs from the dioramas of Nix and the digitally constructed narratives of Taylor, parallels do exist between central concerns. The visual social semiotic reading of *Fennel and coriander* (see Figure 5.1) has identified a range of similarities in the process of constructing
a narrative from a female perspective when read according to the five characteristics of an autobiographical narrative.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of the preceding chapters

This study set out to investigate a process of constructing an autobiographical picture narrative, specifically with reference to the photographers Lori Nix and Maggie Taylor. The following aims and objectives were formulated in support of this study:

• To define the term autobiographical picture narrative and to conceptualise the historical origins of this type of narrative, and also to establish five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative.

• To examine how visual social semiotics can assist in reading a constructed autobiographical picture narrative according to the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative.

• To describe and examine, with reference to the work of Taylor and Nix, how the construction of an autobiographical picture narrative leads to a different interpretation of both reality and the individual’s character or persona.

• To determine how the theoretical conceptualisation, specifically the salient concepts related to the autobiographical picture narrative, can assist towards the construction of the researcher’s autobiographical picture narratives submitted for the practical component of this study.

The practical component comprises two series that together make up the researcher’s constructed autobiography: Karoo childhood and Journey.

The written component of the study was subdivided into five chapters followed by the final concluding chapter. A theoretical consideration of the autobiographical narrative and autobiographical picture narrative was presented in Chapter 2, followed by a historical contextualisation of the autobiographical narrative. The chapter also presented a discussion of the five salient characteristics of an autobiographical narrative, namely fabrication and reality, autobiographical memory, socio-cultural structures, commonalities in female narration, and narrative function, which facilitated
the visual social semiotic reading of the visual images in Chapters 4 and 5. The five characteristics of an autobiographical narrative not only guided the semiotic reading of the selected images, but also played a crucial role in terms of guiding the researcher in constructing her autobiographical narrative.

Chapter 3 presented the methodological framework. Semiotics and visual social semiotics were conceptualised, with emphasis on Harrison’s (2003:46) visual social semiotic framework that reflects the work of social semioticians Kress and Van Leeuwen. Harrison’s (2003:46) framework, which entails the three metafunctions (representational, interpersonal and compositional), was used to read and interpret the constructed autobiographical picture narratives of photographers Taylor and Nix in Chapter 4, and also to interpret the researcher’s own work in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 firstly provided an overview of the two autobiographical photographers Taylor and Nix, followed by a reading of their selected photographs, namely *Twilight swim, 2004* and *Ice storm, 1999*. The semiotic reading of the respective photographs was conducted according to the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative derived from Chapter 2.

Taylor and Nix have similar approaches to their narrative constructions, in the sense that they merge fabrication and reality, and consciously disclose only selected elements in their autobiographical narratives. Nix’s autobiographical narratives (such as the series titled *Accidental Kansas*), to some extent suggest a chronological narration of episodic events, while Taylor refrains from offering a narrative sequence.

Both photographers rely on their autobiographical memory in order to construct the autobiographical picture narratives. The photographs *Twilight swim* and *Ice storm* both suggest a recollection of a traumatic event and subsequent traumatic memory.

Both images reflect on the climate, people and/or places surrounding the photographer-artists. With reference to the semiotic reading of Taylor and Nix’s selected images, it became apparent that commonalities exist between their approach of constructing an autobiographical narrative and that of female narrators as illustrated in literature highlighted in Chapter 2. Unlike the “typical” female strategies of narrating, Taylor and Nix’s autobiographical narratives instead conceal their character within their autobiographical narration through the use of metaphors and symbolisms. They provide the reader with possibilities of interpreting their
autobiographical identity, feelings and emotions through the use of symbolism and metaphors. As indicated in Chapter 2, similar to other female narrators, neither Taylor nor Nix idealise their lives or their existence through the autobiographical narration, but instead explore and evaluate past experiences. Nix, for instance, recalls events that occurred during her childhood and re-interprets these occurrences, merged with her emotional responses to these. Her autobiographical narratives, similar to Taylor’s, become a fusion of fact (the snow storm) and fabrication, creating an image that combines past (childhood) and present (current state of mind).

Chapter 5 provided a reading of the researcher’s own photograph *Fennel and coriander*, from the series titled *Journey*. The semiotic reading was conducted, with reference to the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative as discussed in Chapter 2.

Although the researcher’s process of constructing the autobiographical narratives differ from that of Taylor and Nix’s dioramas and Photoshop-manipulated images, respectively, parallels do exist between a number of approaches found in the work of all the artist-photographers in this study.

Taylor, Nix as well as the researcher all fuse elements of fabrication and reality in their autobiographical narratives, incorporating symbolism in order to, in some instances, conceal the identity of the narrator embedding the image with various layers of meaning. The researcher as well as Nix and Taylor furthermore combine autobiographical memory with reflection and feelings, as well as their immediate surroundings, and as such the autobiographical memory becomes an amalgamation of fabrication and reality.

Similar to Taylor and Nix, the researcher’s autobiographical narrative is influenced by her immediate socio-cultural environment – here one can mention aspects such as the farming community, friends, family and certain.
As female autobiographical narrators tend to do, the researcher as well as Taylor and Nix created a "staged presentation of the self" (see Felix, Kohler & Vowinckel, 1995:39) that allows the artist-photographer to explore the notion of introducing alter egos. The construction of an autobiographical memory provided the narrator with the options of escaping into and not from memory, interpretation, fantasy and construction.

The researcher refrained from displaying her autobiographical picture narrative in a sequence as illustrated in Bruner's (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) 12-step-guideline for constructing a narrative and was instead influenced by a stream-of-consciousness approach. The work, like to those of Taylor and Nix's, does not have a beginning or an end. This points to a dream-like, highly subjective experience and interpretation of time which, in turn, can be likened to an empowering strategy in the sense that the (female) narrator can construct an interpretation of reality and memories that helps her to claim her version of things as real.

6.2 Contribution of the study

This study has identified five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative that were used to guide a semiotic reading of an autobiographical picture narrative. Also, the study proposed an augmented version of Harrison's visual social semiotic framework, previously applied to the reading of web-base imagery for reading an autobiographical picture narrative. Theoretically and methodologically speaking, the current study contributes towards interpretation strategies appropriate to the autobiographical picture narrative.

In terms of the link between the theoretical and methodological aspects and the practical component, the contribution of the current study is that it illustrated how the theoretical and methodological insights could guide the construction of an autobiographical narrative.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

Further research could focus on a comparison of male versus female autobiographical narrators in order to determine whether differences and similarities can be found regarding the extent to which they incorporate autobiographical
memory, fiction and reality as well as the incorporation of their socio-cultural environment, commenting on the influences of society through their narration.

A comparative study of selected international autobiographical photographers with selected South African autobiographical photographers could determine how the socio-cultural environment influences and impacts on the photographers’ narratives.

A further direction for future research could be to explore structured guidelines for constructing an autobiographical picture narrative within the photographic genre. Examples highlighted in this study are, for instance, Bruner’s (in Fivush & Haden, 2003:215) 12-step-guideline for constructing a narrative and Case’s (1983:37-89) method that requires the narrator to answer 400 questions (a fairly rigid approach). The applicability of these models to the photographic genre could therefore be investigated.

6.4 Closing comments

The research into this particular study yielded insight into the complexity of not only the theoretical aspects but also the methodology utilised to practically construct an autobiographical picture narrative from a female’s perspective.

Selected autobiographical photographers such as Nix and Taylor, whose work was semiotically read according to the five characteristics of an autobiographical picture narrative, provided the opportunity to study their approach and furthered insight into conceptualising and constructing an autobiographical picture narrative.

The study provided the researcher with the opportunity to contribute to an existing theoretical body of work in this regard.

The study also provided the researcher with the opportunity to utilise the knowledge and insight acquired during the theoretical component so as to be reflected on in the practical composition, developing a unique approach to constructing an autobiographical picture narrative from a female’s perspective.
REFERENCE LIST


London: Thoemmes Press.


*Loro.* 2007. Producer, Ami Kealoha; director, Josh Cramer; Missingpieces tv. 79th episode. Captain Lucas, Inc. [Video recording]


Harrison (2003:52) established the following questions for analysing the representational metafunction:

1. Who are the represented participants\(^1\) (RPs) in the image? Include both human and non-human objects.
2. Are there any vectors in the image that indicate action? If so, what kind of story does this action tell?

\(^1\) Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:47, 48) explain that “represented participants” is the preferred term to use in visual social semiotics instead of “objects” or “elements” and represents the participants in respect of whom or which we are speaking or writing or producing an image.
3. Are the human RPs looking at each other, creating eyeline vectors? If so, what does this tell me about the history of these people?

4. If there are no vectors, what is the image trying to tell me in terms of social or cultural concepts? What types of conventional thinking do different objects evoke in me?

5. Is the image a complex one with more than one process embedded within it? If so, how do these embedded processes add to my overall understanding of the image?
### Addendum 3.2

Basic features and processes of the interpersonal metafunction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic features</th>
<th>Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image act and gaze:</strong> The image act involves the eyeline of the RPs in relation to the viewer.</td>
<td>Demand: The RP is looking directly at the viewer. A demand generally causes the viewer to feel a strong engagement with the RP. Offer: The RP is looking outside the picture or at someone or something within the image. In this case, the RP becomes an object of contemplation for the viewer, creating less engagement than that of the “demand”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social distance and intimacy:</strong> Social distance is determined by how close RPs in an image appear to the viewer, thereby resulting in feelings of intimacy or distance.</td>
<td>The viewer can see the RP in six different ways: 1. Intimate distance: The head and face only. 2. Close personal distance: The head and shoulders. 3. Far personal distance: From the waist up. 4. Close social distance: The whole figure. 5. Far social distance: The whole figure with space around it. 6. Public distance: Torsos of several people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective: The horizontal angle and involvement:</strong> This angle refers to the relationship between the position of the RPs and the viewer.</td>
<td>The frontal angle: This occurs when the RP is presented frontally to the viewer. This angle creates stronger involvement on the part of the viewer, as it implies that the RP is “one of us”. The oblique angle: This occurs when the RP is presented obliquely to the viewer. This angle creates greater detachment, since it implies that the RP is “one of them”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective: The vertical angle and power:</strong> There are two possible vertical-angle relationships: (1) that of the RPs and the viewer, and (2) that between RPs within an image.</td>
<td>High angle: The RP that is “looking up” has less power. Medium angle: The RP that is “looking horizontally” has equal power. Low angle: The RP that is “looking up” has less power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Harrison (2003:55) summarises this section with the following useful questions:

1. Does the image include human RPs? If so, what type of image act is taking place - is it a “demand” or an “offer”? Theoretically, an object can create a “demand” – for example, a car placed so that its headlights appear to be looking at us. However, “demands” and “offers” seem most powerful when they involve an actual human face.

2. If the image act is a demand, how does it affect me? And is it accompanied by any gestures or expressions that make it more forcible?

3. If the image act is an offer, why has the producer of the image chosen to make the RP an object of study?

4. How close do I feel to the RPs in the image? Does the closeness make me feel as if the RPs are friends or strangers? In either case, why has the producer of the image chosen to evoke these feelings within me?

5. What do I notice about the perspective in the image? What horizontal and vertical angles have been used?

6. How does the vertical angle add to my knowledge of power relations between myself and the RP, and between the RPs themselves?

7. What other semiotic resources could the producer have used to create a different impression?
### Addendum 3.3

**Basic systems and elements of the compositional metafunction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic system</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Left/Right:</strong> RPs on the left side of an image have the value of being &quot;given&quot; knowledge, while RPs on the right are &quot;new&quot; knowledge.</td>
<td>Given knowledge equates to familiar and common-sense knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top/Bottom:</strong> RPs at the top of an image have the value of being &quot;ideal&quot;, while the RPs below represent the &quot;real&quot;.</td>
<td>New knowledge equates to an issue, a problem, or a solution. (Note: This value is based on how we read in Western cultures, that is, from left to right. This does not necessarily apply to cultures in which reading is done from right to left or in columns.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Centre/Margin:</strong> RPs in the centre provide a nucleus of information, to which surrounding elements are subservient.</td>
<td>Ideal equates to emotive, imaginary, what might be, often the pictorial of an image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size:</strong> The larger the RP, the greater the salience.</td>
<td>Real equates to factual, informative, down to earth, practical, often the textual elements in an image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharpness of focus:</strong> Out-of-focus RPs have less salience.</td>
<td>Centre/Margin: RPs in the centre provide a nucleus of information, to which surrounding elements are subservient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tonal contrast:</strong> Areas of high tonal contrast have greater salience.</td>
<td><strong>Foreground/Background:</strong> The RP in the foreground has greater salience than the RP in the background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Colour contrast:</strong> Strongly saturated colours have greater salience than &quot;soft&quot; colours.</td>
<td><strong>Framelines:</strong> These are the lines within the image that divide RPs or hold them together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foreground/Background:</strong> The RP in the foreground has greater salience than the RP in the background.</td>
<td><strong>Pictorial framing devices:</strong> The stronger the lines around the image, the greater the connection between RPs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Information value:** The placement of the RPs allows them to take on different information roles.

**Salience:** Salience refers to the ability of the RP to capture the viewer's attention.

**Framing:** How RPs are framed affects whether they are seen as connected or separate.
Harrison (2003:56) summarises compositional meaning with the following useful questions:

1. How have the RPs been placed to provide information, and why has the producer of the image chosen this particular placement?

2. Which RPs are more salient than others, and how does this salience affect the image and meaning of the image?

3. How are the PRs held together or separated within an image, and why?

### Addendum 3.3

**Basic systems and elements of the compositional metafunction (CONTINUED)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic system</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modality:</strong> Modality refers to how we feel about the visual message’s validity and reliability. Images with higher modality appear more real than those with lower modality. However, the “realness” of the imagery can be problematic.</td>
<td>Modality markers: The visual clues that indicate “realness” generally run along a spectrum of possibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colour saturation, differentiation, and modulation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* A full-colour photograph equates to high modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* A black-and-white photograph equates to low modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contextualisation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* A fully conceived background equates to high modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* A background that is completely absent equates to low modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depth:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* A deep perspective equates to high modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* NO perspective equates to low modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illumination:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* The fullest representation of light and shade equates to high modality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* An absence of light and shade equates to low modality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. How does the use of colour or the lack of it affect the rhetorical message of the image?
5. How real does the image appear to the reader, and does this sense of reality affect the validity of its message and that of the accompanying text?
6. Are there other ways this image could have been organised that would strengthen its message and more effectively enhance its accompanying text?