

Kate Warren, "Persepolis: Animation, Representation and the Power of the Personal Story," *Screen Education*, Winter 2010, Issue 58, PP. 117-23.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), based on her graphic novels of the same name, is one of a growing number of films that employs formats such as animation, which is traditionally aimed at younger audiences, to depict complex and confronting subject matter. In doing so, such films offer interesting avenues of investigation for students and educators, not only in terms of the stories told, but also in relation to how these artistic and aesthetic techniques affect the narrative structures and modes of representation offered.

Author, illustrator and filmmaker Marjane Satrapi was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969.¹ As a child she witnessed one of the most dramatic periods in her country's recent history: the overthrow of the shah in 1979, the subsequent Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. The film *Persepolis* charts her childhood in Tehran, her secondary education in Vienna and her tertiary studies in Iran, and concludes with her decision to leave Iran permanently for France. The formative years of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood are negotiated during a period of great flux and trauma for her country, her family and herself. Through her graphic novels and this film, Satrapi depicts these events and experiences with frankness, humour, poignancy and emotional power.

Questions of representation

When approaching cultural and historical traumas - such as war, revolution and genocide - questions are often raised about how these events are to be represented, who is 'entitled' to represent them, and whether they should be represented at all. Philosopher Theodor Adorno famously stated that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric',² a sentiment still around in present-day thinking. One example would be French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who argues that the Holocaust overrides *any* form of visual representation and 'erects a ring of fire around itself... because there is a certain ultimate degree of horror that cannot be transmitted'.³

In a sense, animation acknowledges the impossibility of representation and is a less didactic approach to depicting particular stories or events. Although it lacks the element of realism associated with documentaries and docudramas, animation imbues its subject matter with other distinct aesthetic and narrative characteristics. Increasingly, artists, writers and filmmakers are using animation to tackle traumatic stories in ways that also offer accessible means of dealing with such difficult content.

A seminal example, to which *Persepolis* is often compared, is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in which the author presents the oral testimony of his father, a survivor of Auschwitz. As a graphic novel that tackles adult subject matter, *Maus* is not unique." However, Spiegelman's decision to draw his characters as different animals according to their nationality is particularly evocative - Jews are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs. Spiegelman's use of animal substitutes acknowledges 'the ultimate inauthenticity of his representations'⁵ and contradictions that emerge when portraying personal histories of such trauma and magnitude.

Animation offers a means for deeply personal, sometimes dangerous, stories to be told without the burden of maintaining realism and negotiating 'authentic' reconstruction. Satrapi explains her reason for choosing animation, saying that she fears live-action and the inherent difficulties 'would have turned [*Persepolis*] into a story of people living in a distant land who don't look like us',⁶ Contemporary modes of historiography increasingly forego the traditionally linear attempts to write history,⁷ acknowledging that personal and collective/cultural memories and fantasies are equally important in the creation of meaning around events.⁸

Animation is an excellent vehicle to explore the interrelations between memory, fantasy, dream and

experience. *Persepolis'* simple and at times austere visual style lends the film not only a feeling of universality, but also a deep sense of individuality and personal vision.⁹

An animated choice *Persepolis* was made using traditional hand-drawn cell animation. Satrapi set up her own studio in Paris, working with cult French illustrator Vincent Paronnaud as cowriter and co-director.¹⁰ Together they have drawn stylistically from the illustrations of Satrapi's novels, extrapolating and adapting them for the cinema. The animated images were finished using felt pens," thus retaining the dense black-and-white monochrome of the novels while adding evocatively textured backgrounds and cinematic references.

The animated form allows *Persepolis* to distance itself from contemporary stereotypes that surround Iran, particularly in light of George W. Bush's inclusion of the country in the 'Axis of Evil' and ongoing debates over its potential nuclear ambitions. The city of Tehran is depicted obliquely in the film, lacking specifically cultural, geographical or historical referents; it could be any number of cities in any number of countries. It is through the central characters that the significance of the surrounding events is interpreted and understood. When Marjane's father (Sean Penn) tells his young daughter (Amethyste Frezignac) of how Iran's Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son came to rule their country, his story is presented in the form of a Persian puppet show,¹² a reference to Iran's lengthy history and cultural heritage that stretches much further back than many contemporary perceptions.¹³

Stereotypes and assumptions surrounding contemporary conflicts and issues are furnished largely through the news media and the flurry of images that bombard us daily. These images can achieve iconic status with remarkable speed and endurance, sometimes becoming more recognisable than the original event." *Persepolis*, too, depicts such iconic images of conflict, such as army tanks rolling through city streets, stone-throwing crowds and statues being torn down in celebration. Within the film's narrative, such events are centred on the deposition of the shah; however, through high-contrast black-and-white animation the images lose their specificity. The film's images differentiate themselves from ubiquitous news footage, operating in the realm of symbols as opposed to documentation. The abstractional nature of animation lends these scenes a universal quality, offering oblique images that broader audiences can relate to or empathise with.

The monochrome palette of *Persepolis* also reflects the film's narrative, as life for Marjane and her family in Tehran becomes increasingly restricted and dangerous after the Islamic government is installed. As with German expressionist films and American film noir, *Persepolis* uses contrasts between darkness and light to represent the inner motivations, emotions and experiences of its characters.

Persepolis employs a style of animation that often renders the black areas of the frame particularly dense and without texture or a sense of depth. After her beloved Uncle Anouche (Iggy Pop) is re-arrested by the new Islamic regime, Marjane is shown against this pure black background, so that the outline of her black hair and clothing merge and disappear within the frame. Her figure is depicted floating in this black void, communicating the sense of isolation experienced by her and her family in the face of such personal losses.

Exile and return

From the film's opening scene, the character of Marjane is positioned between cultures and environs. In the opening moments, Marjane is shown waiting solemnly at Paris-Orly airport, where she elicits a disapproving look from the woman beside her as she puts a veil on her head. These contemporary images of Marjane are the only moments of colour, bookending and punctuating the film. Along with the voiceover, they designate the story as an extended flashback. Yet Marjane does not board the plane at Orly. She is shown as a liminal figure; this anticipates how *Persepolis* explores the complex themes of exile, homeland and return.

After the new Islamic government has established itself, many family members and friends of the middle-

class Satrapi family leave Iran, dismayed that the joy and hopefulness experienced with the removal of the shah has been replaced by an equally oppressive regime. The sense of isolation that accompanies such dislocations is shown as not only affecting the émigrés but also those left behind. In one scene, Marjane's parents and family members reflect on the recent events, debating whether they too should leave. The figures appear one by one, standing in a spotlight against a pure black background, often speaking directly to camera. This sequence underscores the growing sense of isolation faced by those who remain, their ties to the wider world severed and their dreams for the future fading.

The theme of exile is compellingly embodied in the character of Uncle Anouche. An idealist and a revolutionary who fought against the shah, Anouche was forced into exile in Russia after his own uncle was executed. Gaining an education and a new life in his adopted country, Anouche nonetheless risked everything to return to his homeland. Attempting to sneak across the border in disguise, Anouche was recognised and imprisoned until the deposition of the shah. Marjane meets her uncle upon his release and immediately connects with this passionate and hopeful figure who carves toy swans from the stale prison bread. Yet Anouche's progressive views render him an enemy for the new regime too and he is ultimately executed. Again, the visual prowess of the film communicates emotively the anguish that Marjane feels at the loss of her uncle, as her two white swans are gently engulfed by black water.

The memory of Anouche indirectly contributes to Marjane's own exile at a young age. After repeatedly challenging her high school teachers, inspired in part by her uncle's story, her parents send her to study in Vienna, concerned for her safety and future opportunities.

As previously noted, the image of Tehran is rendered non-specifically; this is an attempt to remove the sense of 'otherness' that has historically been imposed upon non-Western cultures and countries. By contrast, the Austrian elements are connoted as exotic and foreign: Viennese trams and Jugendstil architecture, *Sachertorte* cakes and sidewalk cafes, yodelling and ringing church bells. Unlike the minimal depiction of the Tehran city-scape, Vienna is animated as an exaggerated, over-the-top environment. The cobblestoned streets appear as rolling hills and local supermarkets become akin to amusement parks that Marjane is able to joyfully rollick through.

The animated form allows such exaggerations to exist convincingly within the film's world and encourages viewers to experience the same sense of wonder, foreignness and culture shock that Marjane feels. This is a world completely foreign to the young protagonist and while appreciative of the opportunities afforded to her, she retains a lingering sense of guilt over her 'frivolous life' while her family faces the darkness of war. Marjane finds it difficult to reconcile her real-life experiences of revolution and death with the idealistic and philosophical musings of her fellow students. Without the support networks of her friends and family, she falls into a deep depression after a romantic heartbreak and winds up sleeping on the streets, before eventually returning to Iran.

Persepolis counters the belief that to escape a dictatorial regime for a free country will bring happiness ever after; rather, it depicts characters caught between vastly different environments. Marjane struggles to accept how her European acquaintances perceive her culture. Frustrated by their preconceptions of Iranians as 'barbaric' and 'ignorant', she at one point introduces herself at a party as being French.¹⁵ Yet Marjane's return to Tehran after her time in Vienna is bittersweet; the city has been devastated by the war and the government has stifled political discussion by imprisoning and executing activists. As young university students, Marjane and her friends become accustomed to the restrictions imposed on them, disregarding the deeper implications on their personal freedoms. Yet, as will be discussed shortly, it does not take long for the opinionated Marjane to once again begin challenging and questioning this state of affairs, resulting in a more permanent flight from her homeland.

Personal story, broader implications

As the previous discussions imply, *Persepolis* is fundamentally a personal 'coming of age' story, set amid unique situations and events, and this makes it a rewarding and accessible text for students. The film is not a political call to arms or a historical documentation; it is a distinctly personal vision with broader implications. Importantly, *Persepolis* offers a protagonist whom viewers can immediately identify with and relate to. Young Marjane is spirited, outspoken and cheeky, idolising Bruce Lee as a child and obsessing over punk music as a teenager. Like any adolescent she can be irresponsible, inconsiderate and reckless. While such traits are normal in teenagers across cultures, *Persepolis* effectively depicts the potentially brutal repercussions they can have in situations of conflict and oppression.

Children instinctively reflect and imitate the adult influences in their lives; however, in situations of war and violence this can have deeper ramifications. When the shah is overthrown, an old family friend of the Satrapis, Siamak Jari, is released from jail after spending years as a political prisoner. Upon his return, Siamak describes his experiences of torture at the hands of his captors. The entire family is present to hear Siamak's harrowing testimony, including young Marjane.

As a child unable to properly comprehend the magnitude of such stories, Marjane naturally turns these experiences into a game. In the following scene, Marjane and her friends immediately begin to mimic and role-play the stories of murder and torture. They find some nails in a toolbox and pick their victim, a young classmate called Ramine. Believing that Ramine's father worked for the shah's secret police, the children decide that he must have killed 'a million people'. They chase the young boy through the streets with nails in their fists, vowing to gouge his eyes out. This brief pursuit is presented in a comical, almost slapstick fashion, yet the fervour with which the children adopt these personae hints at the way that impressionable young minds can easily be converted to the belief systems of the adults around them.

Characters in *Persepolis* often struggle to comprehend, reconcile and adjust to the severely and rapidly changing social and political realities. Some of the impacts are immediate but other effects are felt gradually and are ongoing. The following example is more menacing in terms of how it conveys the consequences of careless actions. As a university student, Marjane is waiting on the street to meet her boyfriend when the police arrive unexpectedly and begin questioning the people in the street. Knowing she could be in serious trouble for the make-up and outfit she is wearing, Marjane impulsively accuses a nearby male bystander of harassing her. The man is quickly taken away and Marjane is left to return home without hassle.

This is an important point of character development. Pleased with her ingenuity, Marjane explains proudly to her grandmother (Gena Rowlands) how she avoided punishment from the authorities. Her hard-nosed grandmother is scathing in her response, dismayed at Marjane's lack of integrity. Preoccupied by her own personal life and concerns (like most teenagers), Marjane has shut her eyes to the reality of life under the oppressive Iranian authorities that could deal out potentially severe (and unspecified) punishments to her unwitting victim. It takes the stern rebuke of her grandmother for Marjane to reconnect the sacrifices of family members such as Anouche with her present situation.

If *Persepolis* had been a Hollywood docudrama, such a moment might have been connoted overtly as a fundamental narrative turning point, perhaps accompanied by a swelling score and character flashbacks. However, in the film's simpler narrative structure and animated form the significance of the moment reveals itself more gently. Gradually, Marjane once again begins to question the surrounding structures of authority as she did as a cheeky and argumentative child. Marjane's final decision to leave Iran for France is clearly one from which there is no going back, and reveals the reason why, at the film's beginning, she failed to board a Tehran-bound flight at Orly airport. Although the events of *Persepolis* are clearly coded as memories

of the past, they continue to exert their effects in the present. Despite *Persepolis'* monochrome palette, the stories it tells and the issues it highlights are anything but black and white.

Please note: there are French and English versions of the film Persepolis, with different actors providing the voices for some characters. This article refers to the English version.

Endnotes

¹ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2003.

² Adorno did later revise this much-quoted statement. See Theodor Adorno in Theodor Adorno & Rolf Tiedemann (eds). *Can One Live after Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, pp.xv-xvi,

³ Lanzmann's epic documentary *Shoah* (1985) is the realisation of this strongly held belief. Lanzmann made the comment in response to the release of Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993). See Claude Lanzmann, 'Why Spielberg has Distorted the Truth', *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 3 April 1994, p. 14.

⁴ Other interesting examples to consider are Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, the work of American illustrator Robert Crumb, the rich tradition of Japanese manga, and recently *THE 99*, a comic series featuring superheroes based on Islamic culture and society,

⁵ Joan Gibbons. *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*. I.B. Tauris. London & New York, 2007, p.89.

⁶ Marjane Satrapi. 'Interview with Marjane Satrapi - Director/ Author of *Persepolis'*, *Payvand Iran News*, 26 December 2007. <<http://payvand.com/news/07/dec/1254.html>>, accessed 25 November 2008.

⁷ See Jeffrey K. Olick, 'From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products', in Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (eds). *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Walter de Gruyter. Berlin & New York, 2008. p.151, Also see Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', in Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (eds), op. cit., pp.1-15.

⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1997, p.36.

⁹ Released at a similar time to *Persepolis*. Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir* (2008) is also an interesting example to consider,

¹⁰ James Mottram, '*Persepolis* - An Interview With Marjane Satrapi'. *The List*. no. 601, 24 April 2008, <<http://vifww.list.co.uk/article/7947-persepolis-an-interview-with-marjane-satrapi>> accessed 25 November 2009.

¹¹ Marian Quigley, 'Drawing on Experience: Animation as History in *Persepolis'*, *Screen Education*, no, 51, Spring 2008, p.66.

¹³ Peter Chelkowski, 'Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre'. *Die Welt des Islams*. Leiden. 1984,

¹⁴ Likewise, the film's title is not specifically referenced in the narrative, but it links the story of these contemporary characters to the history of Iran and Persia stretching back thousands of years.

¹⁵ For a detailed and enlightening discussion on the roles of news media images in the creation of cultural memory surrounding contemporary historical events, see Sturken, op. cit.. pp.19-43. For a relevant discussion on the role that journalists and the media play in the construction of history, see Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

¹⁶ Marjane's conscience in the form of her grandmother's voice and silhouette, immediately appears to chastise her for her cultural denial.