Perceiving *Persepolis*: Personal Narrative, Sense Memories, and Visual Simplicity in Marjane Satrapi's Animated Autobiography

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Abstract In Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the personal is political. Originally told through a series of graphic narratives and then as an animated film, Satrapi's autobiographical account tells of her experiences growing up in Iran under the Shah, then under the even more repressive Islamic Republic, before her parents sent her to school in Vienna at the age of 14. Caught between East and West, Satrapi finds herself having to adapt to her new culture while longing for home. It is suggested in this discussion of *Persepolis* that Satrapi's narrative works within the confines of what Laura Marks has termed intercultural cinema, an expanding genre wherein individual memories of diasporic peoples are called upon to connect with their cultural and social histories. This project is an examination of how the medium of animation functions in its visual and narrative structure in order to loosen the perceived boundaries between cultures, geographies, histories, and socio-political backgrounds. Employing Walter Benjamin's concept of storytelling, this analysis explores how *Persepolis* uses personal narrative and individual memory to make room for new voices and subjectivities to emerge within the historical archive. It is proposed that *Persepolis* encourages an embodied, sensory, and interactive relationship between viewer and viewed in order to create a shared collective experience, and an argument is made for the expansive capabilities of a simplified visual medium to deepen our understanding of the complex influence of memory, cultural tradition, and nostalgia in the production of individual and social histories.
Key words intercultural cinema; memory; personal narrative; storytelling; *Persepolis*; animation

In its prismatic enveloping of stories within stories and flashbacks within flashbacks, Marjane Satrapi's animated film *Persepolis* self-reflexively explores the nature of storytelling. The film is an examination of the very construction of the historical narrative,[1] and through its visual and narrative structure brings to issue the way we remember and deal with the past. Heavily abridging the vignettes of Satrapi's precursory graphic narratives, 1 the film engages in personal remembrance to confront the disasters of the war that tore her country apart. Its fluid, black and white imagery trans-

lates the pages of the fragmented graphic narratives into a fully integrated story of experience, only to contrast with and consequently highlight the disjointed, complex, and traumatic political and social ruptures that catalyzed Satrapi's tale of remembrance. Despite the film's departure from the vulnerable imagery and splintered storylines inherent to the graphic narratives, I maintain the film preserves its confrontational relationship with the past, albeit in an altering of visual and narrative functions. The seamlessly minimalist visual style employed in the film appears a conscientious attempt to emphasize the representational pitfall of providing simplified answers about Satrapi's homeland, its politics, and her status as an exile, while the narrative 's structural underpinning purposefully embeds itself within a tale of conflict and metamorphosis, underscoring the persistent intersecting of the personal with the political.

There exists a healthy appetite for recent scholarship devoted to Satrapi's graphic novels, much of which involves a reading of her narrative within a lineage of feminist and postcolonial criticism and interpretation. The analysis within these pages does not stray too far from these themes of political and cultural exile, notions of 'othering,' and the dynamic of East-West interrelations. However, the primary objective here is to examine how these issues have been translated into the field of animation and what this means for the viewer's participation with and interpretation of Satrapi's visual narrative. It is my suggestion that *Persepolis* works within the confines of what visual culture theorist Laura Marks, in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, has termed *intercultural cinema*, an expanding category of film that is "characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West" (Marks 2). According to Marks, intercultural cinema appeals to the individual memories of diasporic peoples through embodied, nonvisual, and sensory experience in order to connect to their cultural and social histories (xiii). Carving my argument out of the framework of contemporary visual culture and cinematic theory, this investigation seeks to understand how *Persepolis* functions within the discursive, sensual, and visual stratum in order to excavate and shed light upon the historical archive while employing individual narratives as a means to open itself up to its audience in a shared collective past.

This essay employs a selection of the stories that are framed within Satrapi's larger narrative to illustrate how *Persepolis* provides access to a collective history by means of personal experience, memory, and a simplified visual medium. The investigation begins with an examination of Satrapi's personal narrative as a reemergence of Walter Benjamin's notion of storytelling. In his critical 1936 essay "The Storyteller," Benjamin advocates for the continuance of the tradition of storytelling, the act of passing down experiences in social circuits, wherein new voices and subjectivities are allowed to emerge within the historical archive while provoking a ripple of transformation throughout the perception of history (83 – 107). This will lead to a discussion of how *Persepolis* activates personal and collective memories through the physical objects of everyday life as well as through sensory and bodily knowledges. Finally, I argue that the hybrid nature of *Persepolis* in both its form and content invites active viewership and investigation into Satrapi's world, utilizing visual simplicity to map out a

complex, multi-dimensional history, and emphasizing that geographies, histories, and individual and collective experiences are not segregated, but interwoven into a permeable relationship of exchange.

History in Flux

Concerned with the historical archive, Marks defines intercultural cinema as seeking to uncover who or what has been included in it, ignored by it, or denied access to it. Linked to this crisis is the discrepancy between officially documented history and private memory. In confronting this disparity, intercultural artists perform a dismantling of the historical archive as a means to reconstruct a past that includes their own voices, experiences, and perceptions. The political, social, and cultural changes that intercultural artists hope to spark must "be effected in a sort of dance between sedimented, historical discourses and lines of flight, between containment and breaking free" (Marks 28 – 29). As a storyteller, Satrapi's individual experience serves as a trampoline for historical and social analysis, providing us with an alternative archive and her endeavor to break free.

Storytelling is of a different order than reporting, suggests Benjamin. It requires the bringing of one's own interpretation to the table, making the telling of an event more than just an exchange of information, but instead an experiential process of understanding (Benjamin 69). With the dissemination of official information, Benjamin observed that the value of lived experience declines (83). This decrease in value represents a social decay, as the art of storytelling weaves wisdom into the fabric of everyday life (Benjamin 86). Satrapi's engagement with the graphic narrative and animated film to tell a different version of history serves as a counterpoint to this lack of personalized meaning within the mediation of information, stressing that the surface of events is merely an invitation for deeper investigation.

Constituting itself around the hidden knowledges embedded within the quotidian details of life, Satrapi's visual narrative reveals the documentation of an event to be inherently incomplete, neither history nor memory being reliable or capable of grasping the totality of the past. Waxing whimsically about how she and her first boyfriend Marcus met in Vienna, Satrapi recalls a handsome, sweet young man who danced with her under the stars, held her hand, and with whom she had snowball fights in the park. An aspiring writer, he would read his play to her, and she loved it. Then he cheated on her. Suddenly her saccharine remembrance turns sour: "How could I have been so stupid? That deceitful bastard led me by the nose..." (Paronnaud and Satrapi, 00:57:50).[2]

This remembrance is an expression of what *Gilles Deleuze* calls *the powers of the false*, wherein "the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible" (127). As *Persepolis* reflects upon the formative years of its young protagonist, it is necessarily a story of transformation and of how perceptions change as one grows older. How we remember an experienced event is a selective, fuzzy process resulting in a myriad of mentally constructed histories, which do not allow for an objective record of the past. *Persepolis* allows perceptions to directly confront lived events, and in doing so, highlights

their relationship of innate indiscernibility.

I do not suggest that Satrapi is an unreliable narrator making up fictions about a past that didn't happen. On the contrary, her story reminds us that communal histories are necessarily irretrievable and fragmentary, requiring that they be examined from all angles. The role of *Persepolis* as an excavator of the archive is not to uncover an objective truth of historical events, for that does not exist, but rather to show what the archive was not able to say. Satrapi's account of Marcus may seem trivial, but it is a defining moment in her cultural acclimation and gives context to her experience as an exile. In this moment, she finds herself both adjusting to a less sexually repressed culture and, having lost her closest companion, dealing with loneliness and cultural isolation. Satrapi's story is one of many hidden layers that has folded itself upon the events surrounding the Iranian Revolution. It is in her unfolding of it that social histories are revealed.

Recollection Images and Objects

Persepolis' employment of the idiosyncratic becomes a thread, which weaves its way through a personal and collective history and binds together the tales of previous storytellers, including that of her Uncle Anoosh. Sitting at her bedside, Anoosh passes down his own personal tale to the young Marjane. He tells her of his struggles under the Shah, how as a Communist he had to leave his family and escape to Russia, and that when he returned, he was imprisoned for several years. "It's important you know the history of our family that should never be forgotten," he tells her. "I promise I won't forget," she responds (Paronnaud and Satrapi 00:18:17). Never documented by official history, Anoosh's story becomes part of Satrapi's, and as she becomes a storyteller, she passes it on once again.

In the absence of images or documentation of her uncle's struggle, Satrapi offers her own. Reimagining her uncle dangerously trekking his way through the treacherous, snowy mountaintops and diving into magnificent, crushing tidal waves, Satrapi visually mythifies him. These imaginative reconstructions become what Deleuze refers to as recollection-images, dreamy, visual manifestations that through individual perception and memory both reveal gaps and add texture to the narrative of history (45). Recollection-images are not a direct link to memory, however. In envisioning for us her uncle's remembrance, Satrapi must employ her own imagination and a filmic flashback in order to beckon forth Anoosh's experience and ignite the significance of his memories. As Marks puts it, "a recollection-image, moistened with memory springs to life" (53). And by visually reactivating Anoosh's memory in the present, Satrapi quite fittingly re-animates her uncle's past.

Expanding on the recollection-image, Marks proffers the recollection-object, a material object, which, like the recollection-image, is capable of encoding collective memory (Marks 78). Each moment in time is the product of the past that has shaped it, and just as our bodies store the memories of our personal histories, showing the wear and tear of lived experience, objects have pasts all their own. Souvenirs, heirlooms, items we bought or that were given to us all possess their own stories of past ownerships, migrations, and experiences. Such material objects pervade the works of

intercultural artists as they serve as memorials to all that was lost due to the forgetting of official history (Marks 76). But they can also serve to reconnect someone with what has been lost on a more intimate level. When Satrapi tenderly recalls the bread swans her Uncle Anoosh made during his imprisonment and gifted to her before his execution, she both demands public recognition of his martyrdom and connects with her uncle's spirit. The bread swans, serving this purpose, become a physical medium between Satrapi and her uncle. What once touched him, touches her, and as Satrapi invokes the materiality of these hand-carved bread swans, she experiences physical contact with him.

Recollection-objects are also crucial for the intercultural artist who longs for what has been lost through cultural displacement. Complex intercultural movements may imbue commercial objects with memory and transformative powers. As global movements of capital and cultural exchange shift commodities between geographies, the most unassuming of items can become status symbols (Marks 98 – 99). Marks terms these objects transnational and asserts that they take on new meanings as they travel through new places and contexts (98 – 99). *Persepolis* is filled with such commodities, be it the Michael Jackson pin Satrapi wore on her punk jacket, her *Nike* sneakers, or the bootlegged *Iron Maiden* album Satrapi was caught buying on the streets of Tehran. These objects, considered symbols of Western decadence, were forbidden in her culture and consequently became coveted and mysterious.

Amidst the rubble created by its historical excavation, *Persepolis* uncovers many of these recollection-objects and transnational artifacts. These objects serve as fragments of private histories and memories that when pieced together, create the texture of lived experience. Each fragment calls upon the sensual and material experiences of everyday life in order to draw viewers into Satrapi's narrative while providing a physical link between the present and the past, between memory and the actual event. In *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory* as *Material Culture in Modernity*, anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis argues that material experience triggers the senses to act as meaning-generating apparatuses and serve as a valuable tool in the interpretation of collective history (6). An emphasis on sensory and bodily memory becomes crucial for intercultural works whose objective is to reveal the knowledges that may have slipped out of the verbal or visual archives, knowledges that have been stored in memory, the senses, and the body (Marks 111). When Satrapi invokes the jasmine flowers her Grandmother ritually put in her bra to smell nice, the abundance of foodstuffs available on Austrian grocery shelves, or the songs of her favorite musical groups, she is referencing the capacity of human sensory experience to transport a person to another time and place, pulling history onto the same plane as the present.

These objects and sense experiences are all sites for Satrapi's process of transformation. They are the objects that stood witness to her transitions and experiences, and the everyday details that Satrapi brings together to form the story of her life. And it is through the representation of these physical and sensual recollections that Satrapi allows access to her personal and cultural memory, inviting the viewer to connect his or her own material worlds, cultural lifestyles, and everyday experiences to hers. As Seremetakis suggests, "the sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear

within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses, and acts... Thus the surround of material culture is neither stable nor fixed, but inherently transitive, demanding connection and completion by the perceiver" (7). Working on an epic scale, *Persepolis* invokes the spirits of recent histories and ancient pasts and braids them into Satrapi's contemporary narrative. And as excavated material objects mingle with memory, as sense perceptions are called upon to reconnect to what is lost, the spectator is pulled closer to each layer of time. It is here, at the level of reception, that an affinity is created between the viewer and Satrapi's quotidian narrative, evoking histories of other lives, struggles, and journeys.

Cultural and Visual Hybridity

Persepolis operates within a complex web of temporalities and personal and cultural histories. While the term intercultural implies existence within multiple cultural contexts, it also indicates a fluidity of movement between those cultures and the subsequent potential for evolution and transformation (Marks 6). Throughout her narrative, Satrapi is in a constant state of transition, whether it be the political revolution in Iran, cultural displacement, or changes within herself. East meets West in Satrapi, but so too does adolescence and adulthood, a physical metamorphosis at which she unabashedly pokes fun in her story. Satrapi's willingness to present these periods of transition, the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of life, recalling unpleasant memories and embarrassing moments with brutal honesty, provides her character with an accessible vulnerability. The raw confrontation Satrapi has with herself and her place in the world provides an unguarded account of her personal and cultural transitions amidst volatile social upheaval.

When Satrapi is sent to live in Austria at the age of 14, she finds herself searching for both a personal and cultural identity. In Vienna, we see her struggling socially, befriending other outsiders at school, and losing connection with her homeland. Wanting to avoid the bombardment of stereotypes and judgments associated with her cultural background, Satrapi disengages from her Iranian heritage, at times pretending to be French. As an intercultural artist, Satrapi must work within a complex set of identity politics wherein one's identity is not viewed simply as a unique and stabilized position, but rather an interminable process of internal and external evaluations. This process, Marks argues, can lead to a feeling of cultural homelessness (4). As Satrapi says upon her return from Vienna: "What I experienced weighs on me but I cannot talk to anybody... I was a stranger in Austria and now I've become one in my own country" (Paronnaud and Satrapi 1:09:29).

In the process of these transitions and displacements, Satrapi's identity becomes what cultural theorist Ella Shohat calls "hyphenated" (Shohat 7). As a Franco-Austrian-Iranian, even the simple question, "Where are you from?" becomes hard to answer for Satrapi. Her skin color, accent, and name—anything that might set her apart—forces her to conduct a deconstruction of heritage in order to provide an adequate response. Satrapi's "body is inscribed with a language she must laboriously learn to read. That is, she must learn to read for the purpose of translating back to people who assume the right to know things in their own language" (Marks 90). This

process of continuous translation creates an excessive amount of cultural baggage for Satrapi. Moving between cultures, Satrapi learns to dutifully explicate anything about her cultural and national background that, while once seemingly self-evident, might suddenly be incomprehensible within another culture or nation.

Satrapi performs a kind of self-excavation, and in searching for her own identity, she speaks to a collective one. By situating herself in a system of historical, geographical, and personal archives, Satrapi acts as mediator between private and public worlds, both inside and outside her homeland. There are two moments in the film when Satrapi relies upon her father to pass down the history of Iran and its state of affairs: when he explains to the young Marjane how the Shah came to power not by divine appointment, but through a combination of political backscratching and nepotism (Paronnaud and Satrapi 00:05:55), and again upon Marjane's return from Vienna when he fills her in on what happened while she was gone, that while the eight years of war were over, many in Iran felt there was no real change other than the staggering loss of life (Paronnaud and Satrapi 1:04:24). In both moments, Satrapi finds herself not as an authority on a history she witnessed, but in the place of the inexperienced or uninformed viewer, enabling her to act as a medium between cultures and temporalities while providing access to a similarly positioned audience.

Staying with these moments from the film, I would here like to draw upon the relationship between the cultural and temporal hybridity of our protagonist, and the hybridity inherent to the narrative's visual structure. *Persepolis* works as a cinematic hybrid since it is a mix of autobiography, fantasy, and historical documentary, and the visual possibilities inherent to animation allow for this interplay. Playful imagery maps out complex issues of political calculations, revolutions, and executions. We see the Shah as if a puppet (figure 1), his convulsive movements triggering the connection to

Figure 1. Screenshot from *Persepolis*; Parronaud and Satrapi; 2008.

the physicality and dimensionality of a marionette. But when his figure is turned to the side (figure 2), we see the thinness of the image, the Shah appearing to be nothing more than a paper doll. This tension between physicality and transparency, between depth and superficiality within *Persepolis*' visual structure calls attention to its

incompleteness and begs the viewer for closer examination and visual cognition. The restraint of Satrapi's graphic style is not a vacant dead-end, but rather an exercise in visual excavation, each frame ready to be searched for hidden meanings.

Figure 2. Screenshot from *Persepolis*; Parronaud and Satrapi; 2008.

Persepolis is able to evoke what cannot be represented visually through the simplicity of its imagery. The focus of the film is not about offering a supposed authenticity by means of costuming or scenery, rather the emphasis is on presenting a narrative of human experience. In its representation of military combat, bomb strikes, and executions, *Persepolis* intensifies the emotional impact of its dramatic narrative by means of understated, static imagery with only the silhouettes of figures. While minimalist in form, the image of a soldier dying (figure 3), his body seamlessly bleeding against

Figure 3. Screenshot from *Persepolis*; Parronaud and Satrapi; 2008.

the flattened surface of the picture plane, it is in fact the bareness of the image that cries out for what has been lost.

Without changing the fundamental mechanics of the medium of animation, *Persepolis* transcends the boundaries of its graphic format. If it is through personal narra-

tives that intercultural works make us question where knowledge comes from, then visual representation becomes a tool for rethinking what forms these knowledges take shape. And just as the intercultural artist must work within the dominant discourse in order to make room for a new language to emerge, *Persepolis* finds itself operating within the constraints of its visual form, using minimalist line drawings and animation to challenge the conventions of visual understanding while graphically engaging the viewer through a heightened emotional, sensual, and physical relationship.

Conclusion

To steal a phrase from Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, *Persepolis* "bleeds history".[3] Satrapi's narrative, its dependence on memory, its handmade artistic production, intimately beckons forth each viewer to come to terms with it on an equally experiential level. By idiosyncratically employing the verbal, sensual, and visual to open up the historical archive, *Persepolis* seeks to close the gap between viewer and viewed, and between personal memory and official history. It becomes the viewer's turn to mingle his or her own knowledges, experiences, and memories with Satrapi's in order to bring about new subjectivities and depths of perception.

Nostalgia, in its Greek etymology, is a fusion of *nosto*, "I return," and *algho*, "I feel pain" (Seremetakis 4). Much more potent than pure memory, nostalgia washes over the entire body, manifesting itself in a fluttering sensation in the gut, or in an aching heart. It has the ability to awaken an unresolved trauma or the pain of an old wound. *Persepolis* works on this level of nostalgia, traveling back to a distant past and embedding it into the present. Moving across time and space, *Persepolis* takes its spectators back and forth, around and around, and back again. Like a merry-go-round, *Persepolis*—with its whimsical imagery— allows each viewer to journey through Satrapi's experiences, witnessing the events surrounding the Iranian Revolution as she did growing up, with comparable feelings of awe and wonder, rushes of excitement and anxiety, and that familiar longing to go home. Satrapi's story calls upon the audience to connect with her experience in order to bring them closer to her world. And it is in this intimate, mutual relationship where there exists potential for those old wounds to heal.

Notes

1. *Persepolis* was originally told through a series of four graphic novels and was released in France by L'Association publishers in the following order: *Persepolis* 1 - November, 2000; *Persepolis* 2 - November 2001; *Persepolis* 3 - July 2002; and *Persepolis* 4 - September 2003. These novels were condensed into *Persepolis* 1: The Story of a Childhood and *Persepolis* 2: The Story of a Return for the English publication. References herein are to the complete works of *Persepolis*, in a single volume edition.

2. Both French and English translations of the film and graphic novels were used during this research, however for purposes of this discussion only the English editions will be referenced.

3. See Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. London: Penguin, 1987, c1986.

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