

Jon Davies, "A Polite Way of Being Desperate: An Interview with Marjane Satrapi," *Cineaction*, 2008, Issue 75, p58-61

Persepolis is the darkly humorous adaptation of Paris-based Marjane Satrapi's candid graphic novels about her coming of age in Iran and in Austria. Directed by Satrapi and fellow comics artist Vincent Paronnaud, the film is one of the most ambitious and successful attempts at conveying through animation the interplay between past and present, fantasy and reality, and perhaps most of all, the author's inner life and the wider social and political conflicts unfolding around her.

Headstrong, Bruce Lee-loving Marjane (Gabrielle Lopes, Chiara Mastroianni) is a young girl growing up in the Tehran of the late 1970s, where there is a large popular movement to depose the U.K.- and U.S.-backed Shah. Marjane's immediate family is secular, while her beloved Uncle Anoush (François Jerosme) is a fiercely idealistic communist, so they are all horrified when Islamists fill the political vacuum left after the Shah is finally ousted; this betrayal hangs like a pall over the film. With the one-two punch of the Islamic Revolution and the bloody Iran-Iraq War, Satrapi and Paronnaud wryly convey the conformism and hypocrisy of the Islamic authorities. They are eager to sniff out impropriety at every opportunity yet bewildered by globalized American culture: Marjane's Nike sneakers get her in trouble for being "punk," while pop-music cassettes by the likes of Iron Maiden and "Michael Jackson" are covertly sold on the streets like drugs.

While *Persepolis* is trenchantly critical of all social and political injustice - and perhaps even more so, stupidity, apathy and cruelty—it is always first and foremost about Marjane. She is sent to study at a French lycée in Vienna in 1986, to escape the constant surveillance and repression. There she struggles with trying to fit into a racist and affluent Western culture, and she befriends a posse of bratty self-proclaimed anarchists, as well as taking her first stabs at love. After ending up homeless and alone, she eventually returns home to the Iran of the early 1990s to find a country gutted by war and intensified domestic repression, demoralized beyond measure. (The film's refrain could be "just when you thought it couldn't get any worse...") After a deep depression, she goes to art school, leaves behind a failed marriage and sets out for France on her own. The film is so moving because of Marjane, and the contrast it develops between her rebellious, fanciful and very open mind and the obscene terrors and laws of the world outside is as stark as the rift between her family home—where one is free to shed the constricting veil—and the heavily monitored and guarded city streets.

As a salve, the film mines black comedy from the most tragic situations, particularly as the hard times depicted bring out the worst in people. Early in the film the casual commonplaceness of horror is conveyed as Marjane and the neighborhood kids cavalierly play "torture" and scheme to tear a boy's eyes out for his father's rumored involvement in the Shah's secret police. (This also neatly summarizes how easily hearsay and scapegoating can whip the populace into a bloodthirsty frenzy.) Other scenes—particularly those of young Marjane spending time with her uncle in and out of prison—are almost unspeakably sad. In this case it is because *Persepolis* itself fulfills Uncle Anoush's wishes that his story of the good fight be told because the "family memory must live on." The directors also heavily heartedly capture the bitter ironies of history: how everyone suddenly boasted of being revolutionaries *after* the Shah had fallen; and the struggle to keep one's integrity when forced to lie and cheat just to stay alive. Thankfully, Marjane's grandmother (Danielle Darrieux)—an elegant, staunch woman who perfumes her brassiere with jasmine—acts as Marjane's conscience, and her loving, endlessly empathetic parents (Catherine Deneuve and Simon Abkarian) are hugely supportive as well. The combination of the voice actors with the boldly drawn characters brings these real-world people to life with more poignancy and pathos than live-action cinema ever could.

The directors pull off their story's tonal variations with aplomb, as real traumas about the most absurd fantasies. These include a sequence highlighting the abundance of European supermarkets that is staged like a Hollywood musical, and a sequence depicting the grotesque mutations her body endured during puberty. Similarly, Marjane's first serious relationship plays out twice: first as lovestruck fantasy, and then as grotesque tragicomedy. This is what animation is capable of.

This status as an animated film is what sets *Persepolis* apart from most memoirs, though it follows on a small but vital tradition of using animation to capture the more personal fallout of real-world war and violence. On the one hand, animation's techniques require some physical and temporal distance from any real historical events that are being depicted. On the other, because animation is an artistic, interpretive vision, it is in some ways more immediate on an emotional level and more capable of expressing subjective responses to the experience of strife totally unrestrained by the laws of time and space. Animation allows one to imagine the impossible, a process for giving form to the desire to change the world. This is dramatized when bright-faced young Marjane introduces herself to us as a future prophet, and reads her grandmother a wish list of regulations to go in effect when she rules the world.

Primarily in black and white, the film's style is bold and graphic, akin to the anti-realistic "limited animation" where forceful, flat forms are all the more expressive for their simplicity. Such horrors as the Shah's forces opening fire on protestors or the thousands of political prisoners executed by the Islamic Republic are powerfully conveyed through stylized silhouettes, humanizing what could have been undifferentiated masses of people into unforgettable tableaux. As Satrapi explains in our interview, animation also allowed her an infinite number of ways of telling the story, a promiscuity of genre and style that would appear too mannered in live action (particularly the visual tropes of the silent era that it employs). *Persepolis* never hides its cartoonishness - in fact, it is quite self-conscious about it - which makes its reckoning with some of the most extreme traumas a person could go through all the more memorable. After all, much Classical-era studio cartooning followed the convention that the character can never die, no matter how many cliffs they fall off or shotgun blasts they take to the face, but the risk of irreversible death is around every corner in *Persepolis*.

The film has generally been rapturously received by all but the Iranian authorities, who have tried to suppress it in various ways. In the popular press, this has unfortunately left the film marked by the over-simplifying and unproductive label "controversial," which obscures the great intelligence and wit of its political satire. It is ultimately a work that could only have been created by a mind that is open and free - from shame, from fear, from not knowing whether to laugh or cry, from preconceptions of how one should think and feel—and perhaps that is what scares despots most of all.

Jon Davies: What or who were some of your influences when you were thinking about making your graphic novels into an animated film?

Marjane Satrapi: German Expressionism was very important for the black and white and how to treat the shadows, then Italian Neo-realism for the small anecdotes and the family story, and then other movies like *The Night of the Hunter* to make the story more epic. Vincent and I did not precisely think about influences when we were writing the script, but we had a good cinematographic culture. Then when you are working with other people, you have to tell them, "you should think of Murnau or Fritz Lang," then you realize what your influences are.

J.D. Everything you mentioned is live-action fiction cinema....

M.S. Absolutely. There are no animation influences, actually. It's not that I don't like animated movies, but we didn't have anything that we could use as a reference. What could we make reference to, Walt Disney? Even though there are many Disneys that I like, or Tex Avery or Miyazaki. The whole difficulty of the project was that when you are working with a team of 90-100 people, what can you tell them? We had to make an animation and we didn't have any references for it, so we had to create our own.

J.D. I take it you don't see the film as a documentary because you're treating it in an "epic" way as you say?

M.S. It's *really* not a documentary about my life, no matter how personal the story is. As soon as you make a script out of it, it becomes fictional, romantic...it has to be sublime actually, that is the artwork. It is certainly not a documentary, far from that. If in real life there are people that have seen God with their own eyes and the ghost of Karl Marx and all of that, then, ok, we can call it a documentary.

J.D. Can you discuss how you used animation to its greatest advantage: its capacity to illustrate these fantastic sequences representing things you never could with live action?

M.S. Absolutely. The first thing is that as soon as you put a story in a geographical place with a certain type of face, a certain kind of person, it really belongs to this part of the world. We didn't want to make a story that would be again about these Middle Easterners that are so crazy, we don't know what they are talking about, they are so far from us that we will never understand them. The drawing is very much abstract so that helps everybody to identify, because Tehran can be Cincinnati, it can be Chicago, it can be any big city. It can be anywhere and it can be anybody. That is the first advantage with animation, then you have all the different ways of narrating the story, for example the puppet scene [where paper "puppets" perform a quick burlesque of how the Shah was put in power], all of that. If your name is Federico Fellini you can do that gracefully, but if your name is not Federico Fellini you might be very vulgar, it's better not to even try. Here the animation helps again: The drawing permits us lots of freedom, it gave us possibilities we wouldn't have with live action.

J.D. It's interesting that the more subjective and imaginative a view you present, somehow it's more universal because of that... What actually inspired you to turn the books into a film?

M.S. I am very much convinced that if you make a book, it is the worst idea in the world to turn it into a movie; you cannot have a worse idea than that. But suddenly it was a possibility, people came to me and said I could do exactly what I wanted. This is the kind of thing that doesn't happen every day, so we decided let's go for it, knowing all the dangers, knowing you can make a real shit out of it, and at the same time having enough faith to just say, ok, we'll try to do our best.

J.D. It's quite rare that somebody is in a position where they can direct the adaptation of their own book; was that a challenge?

M.S. All my life has been about doing things myself. I didn't know how to make comics, either. I always think that I will take a chance, and in the worst case I will make a disaster, but I am not dead...and in the two years time that I am doing this disaster at least I will learn something. How much can you lose when you are learning something? It has helped me not to know anything, any codes, because then you have to invent your own. Also, I am a hardworking person; it's not just

a question of talent. Talent is maybe 20% of it, 80% of the thing is that you have to work like hell.

J.D. The film is quite darkly funny; do you see your ability to make fun of the regime as a kind of survival strategy?

M.S. I don't think I'm making fun so much of the regime; the first person that I'm making fun of is myself, just taking out the subversive part, humor is the most important and the most efficient way of communicating: if you can make people laugh then everything is fine. Humor is also understanding the spirit of the other one, it's not like crying. You cry because you're sick or your father is dead; all people around the world cry for the same reasons, but we don't laugh for the same reasons, and laughing with somebody is really, really understanding the other one's conceptual part of the brain. And you can very easily be sad with yourself but to be able to laugh you have to laugh with other people, it is about communication between two human beings. Of course, there are so many bad things happening in the world, having humor for me is in a way a polite way of being desperate. If you are desperate and you are all the time vomiting your despair on people's heads, this is very far from being polite. Considering that everybody has their own pain in their life, I don't want to add another layer to that, it's not about who suffered more. Suffering is the same thing anywhere, if they cut off a piece of your finger or your arm, it's not because the surface is smaller that it aches less, it aches the same.

J.D. It seems like a lot of the most lasting humor—or even the most lasting art in general - comes out of despair.

M.S. Absolutely, that's what art is good for.

J.D. Can you talk about the balance you strike between your inner life—^you as an individual—and the world around you?

M.S. That's exactly why I put it in my point of view, and I think that's why people relate to it. It's much easier to relate to one person than to a whole nation or to a group of people, because a group of people is abstract. I believe there is nothing more universal than one person, and I also believe that individualism is the basis of democracy, that each person has the right to think the way they want and feel the way they want. It's not a movie about the history of Iran, of course history is in the background, politics is in the background, but how can it be otherwise?

J.D. So taking all that into account, how do you feel when something happens like the film being pulled by the Bangkok International Film Festival and the Iranian government interfering, all of a sudden making the film "controversial." What position does that put you in?

M.S. The Bangkok Film Festival, apparently from what I know, they asked [the Iranians], is this movie going to be a problem for you? And what do they want them to say? Of course they will say this is a problem for us. You know, these are the things that happen—Thailand is not a democracy either. What can I say? I have made this work. They say this gives Iran a bad image, blah blah blah, I think the people that say this kind of stuff have not watched the movie in reality, because it is an attempt that the people of the world will make peace with the Iranians and see the Iranians the way they are, not the way they see on the TV: crazy fanatics with the only goal in their life is to go and destroy the West. What do they want me to say? I don't have anything to say to them,

I know what I have done.

J.D. Is it strange being forced to relive your childhood and adolescence in a way while making the film and touring it around, because it's been over ten years since you were there?

M.S. Yes, that's true, I always say that the truth is never far. But you should never forget that it is also a story. You know the sequence, just to give you an example, with me and my grandmother going to watch *Godzilla*. My grandmother used to speak a lot in the cinema, this is the truth, but I never went to watch a *Godzilla* movie with her, but because of the war and all this fire that comes out of this animal, it was more appropriate to put that instead of another movie. It is very funny really, the moment the script was written, I really felt like this was just fictional, so I started talking about her, Marjane, as if she were someone else, so it's a very schizophrenic feeling to make a movie like that. But at the same time, you know, I'm not a neurotic artist, it doesn't cause any problems to me. This is the difference between having neuroses and being pragmatic."

This interview was originally conducted in August 2007 for the Toronto International Film Festival's *Festival Daily* newspaper