

Tom Prasch, "Persepolis (2007)," *Film and History*, Fall 2008, Vol. 38, Issue 2

Mohammed Reza Shah held a massive, \$100-million celebration of the 2,500 anniversary of the founding of the Persian empire at Persepolis, the ancient capitol. Although the ancient empire provided the excuse, the real celebration was of the Shah's own rule, his consolidation of power and his campaign to modernize (and Westernize) his nation. The Ayatollah Khomeini denounced the bash from exile as the "devil's festival." At the time, Marjane Satrapi was about to turn two.

Less than a decade later, the Shah himself would be overthrown, cast out by a coalition of secular leftist and Islamic opponents as Western once-allies, increasingly disturbed by the autocratic tendencies of the Shah, abandoned him. Khomeini would return triumphantly from exile and begin work installing the theocratic regime that governs Iran today, undermining, and then imprisoning, his once-time leftist allies along the way. Marjane Satrapi would experience the regime change, and the first years of the Iran-Iraq war that quickly followed, as a young girl, still only 14 when her parents sent her into safety and exile in Austria.

When, again in exile, this time more permanent, this time in France, she began to shape her stories of her past into narrative. Influenced by Art Spiegelman's "Maus," with its revelation about the possibility of the comic form to take on serious subjects, she chose to create an autobiography in graphic form. She called the work "Persepolis," hearkening back to that conceptual center of her homeland. The first volume of the work (at least in English translation; two volumes in the original French) tracked her experiences as a girl in the years of transition, 1978-84; a second volume (two, again, in the original French version) continued the story over the next decade, through her coming to adulthood (incorporating the Austrian exile, her return home, and her final departure from her homeland). Throughout the published work, she uses simple black-and-white illustrations to convey her story.

The film "Persepolis," a traditional hand-made animation developed through a collaboration between Satrapi and French comic artist Vincent Paronnaud (aka Winshluss; the two discuss their working methods in an interesting "making of the movie" video on the film's MySpace page: <http://www.myspace.com/persepolismovie>), recasts the tale somewhat, most notably by hewing to a more strictly chronological framework, while preserving both the graphic novel's tone and, broadly, its look. The only color sequences occur, at the outset and the ending, in an enveloping frame tale set in Paris's Orly airport (which makes Orly a bit like Oz), as the protagonist considers returning to her homeland (and then does not). The intervening black-and-white middle thus figures as the territory of memory, and the combination of heavily black backgrounds and still relatively simple drawing techniques enhances the effect. Nick Pinkerton, reviewing the film for the "Village Voice" (11 December 2007), notes: "Satrapi and Paronnaud say they were inspired in part by silent-era German Expressionism, which is evident in the film's dynamic gouges of black." Indeed, as with Expressionist works (think "Caligari," say), the effect of the combination of the color framing episode and the film's broader visual look underlines the anchoring of the film in mind, in Marjane's memory.

The resulting film is a stunning achievement in animation, but also a valuable contribution (like the books on which it is based) to our understanding of the unfolding of the Iranian revolution and its impact on the people (especially the women) who experienced it. Part of its virtue is that it insistently recalls what we in the West tend to forget in our tendency to simply rush from Shah to Ayatollah: the complex web of opposition to the Shah's regime, the forms of resistance, and the undermining of secular alternatives once the Shah was overthrown. But more centrally, it provides an account firmly rooted in personal experience, rather than a more conventional political account of the transition.

Thus we come to understand, for example, how the imposition of the veil was experienced by someone resistant to it. We note how repressive regimes work over time on the individuals who are subject to them,

leading citizens toward self-censorship and self-saving scapegoating of others. We note, with Satrapi's self-deprecating humor as foil, the interesting tangle of Westernizing tendencies as translated in the underground resistance to the regime (thus Maryjane can think of herself as "punk," buy Iron Maiden cassettes on the black market, and still wear a Michael Jackson button). We see how resistance continues in underground cultures, in drinking parties and black markets and the rest. And we can note how axes of class (since Satrapi's family is comfortably part of the elite) and gender (since she is a woman) figure in the revolutionary transition.

As with the books, "Persepolis" also follows Marjane into exile, recounting her Austrian experience. In some ways this divides and weakens the film, and certainly the exile material resonates less deeply and with less particularity than the account provided here of living through revolution and war. At the same time, it allows Satrapi to look at things from the other side, to come to terms with her positioning as Iranian exile among people who less than fully understand the regime she has left behind, and to critique the European intellectual elites whose experiences are made possible above all else by their comfortable position, unthreatened by the sort of changes she has herself experienced