

**Marian Quigley, "Draw on Experience: Animation as History in *Persepolis*," *Screen Education*, Spring 2008, Issue 51**

'The Story Always came first. It's not a movie made by technicians.'<sup>1</sup>

- Marc Jousset, art designer, *Persepolis*

The film *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, 2007) is a close adaptation of Marjane Satrapi's two-part graphic novel. The books have sold over a million copies worldwide, while the film won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007 and was nominated for Best Animated Film at the 2008 Academy Awards. Underlying the success of both the novel and the film are Satrapi's strong narrative and evocative graphics. The use of traditional 2D black-and-white animation methods is true to the book's original graphics {Satrapi did the drawings for both) and is a refreshing change from the 3D, computer-generated films which tend to dominate cinema screens today and in which technical spectacle can sometimes take precedence over storytelling.

### **Graphic novel into film**

We had to start from scratch, to create something altogether different but with the same material... People generally assume that a graphic novel is like a movie storyboard, which of course is not the case. With graphic novels, the relationship between the writer and the reader is participatory. In film, the audience is passive. It involves motion, sound, music, so therefore the narrative's design and content is very different.<sup>2</sup>

- Marjane Satrapi

*Persepolis* follows a long-established tradition of historical and fact-based comic book narratives<sup>3</sup> such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (first published in book form in 1986) - a biographical account of the Holocaust - which influenced Satrapi's decision to become a graphic novelist:

*Graphic novels are not traditional literature, but that does not mean they are second-rate. Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw it seems a shame to choose one. I think it's better to do both.*<sup>4</sup>

*Persepolis* is both an autobiography of a young girl growing up in Iran from the 1970s to the 1990s and a history of that country's turmoil and repressive regimes during that period. The title is taken from the name of the Persian capital founded in the sixth century BC by Darius I and later destroyed by Alexander the Great, and serves as a timely reminder of this former grand civilization. As Satrapi explains:

*Since the Shah fled to escape the Islamic revolution in 1979, this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists ...*<sup>5</sup>

*Persepolis I* is set in Tehran and depicts the overthrow of the Shah's regime, the coming of the Islamic Revolution and the beginning of Iran's eight-year war with Iraq as experienced by Marjane (voiced in the film by Chiara Mastroianni), or Marji, and her family; it ends with her parents' {voiced by Catherine Deneuve and Simon Abkarian) decision to send her away from Tehran to Austria to continue her education in safety, *Persepolis II* describes her struggle to assimilate, both in Vienna and then in Iran following her return, and ends with her decision to move to France. As Satrapi explains;

*In the first book, I lived the revolution and the war ...In the second book, when I go into exile, my will and*

*wish of being integrated into a new culture is so big that I have to forget about who I am and where I come from.*<sup>6</sup>

The film differs from the novels in that it comprises a long flashback sandwiched between the opening and closing scenes - both of which are set at Orly Airport in France and are animated in colour. This was done to convey 'a sense of distance, of nostalgia for the story' which is about exile.<sup>7</sup> In the opening sequence of the film, a homesick Marjane, now a young woman, dons a headscarf in preparation for a trip to Iran. (She later removes it and doesn't take the flight.) In contrast, the book opens in Iran in 1980 when, as a result of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, ten-year-old Marjane and her female schoolmates are forced to wear the chador at school. In each case, the veil/ covering is a symbol of repression - particularly of Iranian women. The marked contrast between the doleful image of Marjane and that of the Western woman applying lipstick beside her in the airport restroom signifies the division between the two cultures with which Marjane is to struggle throughout her lifetime.

### **Autobiography and history**

*Persepolis* is a dark comedy which centres on Marjane, a feisty young girl whose main aims when she grows up are to shave her legs and to become 'the last prophetess'. Her rebellious nature and unquenchable thirst for knowledge are fostered by her parents - communist activists who encourage her to think for herself and express her opinions -and by her grandmother (voiced by Danielle Darrieux) - a blaspheming, pipe-smoking divorcee of strong moral convictions with whom Marjane retains a close relationship throughout her life. It is her grandmother who invests her with the ideals of 'integrity' and remaining true to herself. She chides her granddaughter for using an innocent man to escape from the mullahs (Islamic clerics), reminding her that her uncle and grandfather gave their lives to protect the innocent. The importance of her grandmother is emphasized by the film's final scene: a black screen accompanied by a voice-over of Marjane's conversation with her grandmother (shown earlier in the film on the eve of Marjane's departure for Austria) who explains that she puts jasmine flowers in her bra every day in order to smell sweet.

The film's main comic elements are associated with Marjane's acts of rebellion. Her love of Western popular culture sees her bartering with black marketeers for a copy of an Iron Maiden tape and donning a jacket emblazoned with the proclamation 'Punk is not dead'. She has evening conversations with God and Karl Marx and consistently displays courage in standing up to authority; teachers, mullahs, nuns, housekeepers - and God.

However, these light-hearted moments do not dispel the film's evocation of the fear and tragedy that continue to permeate the family's lives. The Shah's regime is one of brutal repression, and members of Marjane's family are arrested, tortured and sometimes executed as political prisoners because of their leftist ideals. Her neighbours are killed when their apartment block is bombed during the Iran-Iraq War. The Islamic Revolution results in an even more repressive regime which results in more deaths. Alcohol is banned and couples are not even permitted to hold hands in public.

Women, including Marjane and her mother, are subjected to strict religious conformist conventions regarding female behaviour and dress. Even female models in the life drawing classes Marjane attends are fully covered. Women who wear make up or who fail to cover their heads are 'whores'. Only virgins are safe from execution - so those who fail to comply with regulations are forced to marry the Guardians of the Revolution, who take their virginity, then execute them.

Young boys either become Guardians of the Revolution who patrol the streets to enforce the repressive laws or are enticed to become soldier-martyrs with a plastic key which will supposedly give them entry to Heaven. A former window cleaner becomes a hospital director who decides the fate of his patients, claiming that it

is subject to 'God's will'. When regimes change, former heroes become enemies; one teacher tells Marjane that the Shah was chosen by God; later, another instructs her and her classmates to tear pictures of the royal family from their textbooks.

Oppression and extremism are not limited to Iran, however, as Marjane discovers during her exile in Europe. Iranians are viewed as 'savages' (so that Marjane at one point pretends that she is French) and sexual freedom can result in exploitation. Her newfound anarchist friends in Vienna spout empty slogans and lack the strong familial bonds that Marjane is used to. After her boyfriend deceives her, she becomes homeless and eventually ends up in hospital. As Marjane explains to an Iranian friend, 'You can die in the West and nobody cares.' She notes with irony that she survived a revolution and a war but it was love that nearly killed her.

Marjane returns to a 1990s post-war Tehran which resembles a 'cemetery' and where 'everyone is looking for happiness so much they forgot they weren't free'. Her lack of sense of belonging in her former homeland and her failed marriage triggers a bout of depression which is overcome when she decides to move to France. In the film's last scene, the French taxi driver asks her where she's from - 'Iran' is her reply. We are reminded that she removed the veil in the opening scene of the film - although she refuses to accept her homeland's repressive laws and lives in exile, ultimately she reclaims her Iranian identity.

### **Questions of technique**

'The novels have been a worldwide success because the drawings are abstract, black-and-white. I think this helped everybody to relate to it ...'<sup>8</sup>

- Marjane Satrapi

The decision to make an animated, rather than live-action, film was so as not to lose the universal appeal of the story. Satrapi describes the style of the film as 'stylized realism' incorporating 'down-to-earth, realistic scenes, and a highly design-oriented approach, with images sometimes bordering on the abstract'.<sup>9</sup> It is influenced by live-action films, including German expressionism and Italian neo-realism, along with 'the fast pace of Scorsese's *Goodfellas* [Martin Scorsese, 1990]' and employs 'movie style editing, with a great many jumpcuts'.<sup>10</sup> An example of this is the fast panning shot as Marjane races home to her bombed street in search of her family.

The film includes 600 characters - the fronts and profiles of which Satrapi drew. These were then developed by the film's designers and animators, aided by film of Satrapi acting out the scenes. Altogether, the film comprises approximately 80,000 drawings for around 130,000 images which is not unusual for traditional hand-drawn animation. The characters' voices were recorded prior to filming so that the animation, motions and facial expressions matched the actors' dialogue and acting.

Because the decision had been made to use sheer black and white for the characters, grey shades were used for the background scenes of Tehran and Vienna. Although traditional, hand-painted methods were used, digital compositing (rather than superimposing several images using celluloid) was used to combine images from several sources in order to create a single shot.

The film also utilized traditional trace animators. Pascal Cheve of animation studio Pumpkin 3D explains why:

It was essential to be true to Marjane's line. An animation studio is a team of over 100 people, all with their own style. An animator will be more focused on trying to make the character move in the right way Assistant animators will then put the final touches to the drawings, to make sure they're true to the original. Then the 'trace' team comes in, and they work on each drawing with a quill pen, a paintbrush or, (as was the case here),

a felt pen, to ensure that they are consistent with the line that runs through the movie.<sup>11</sup>

The austerity of the images is both relevant to the story and a metaphor for the black-and-white viewpoints of extremists. It also serves to heighten the film's dramatic moments: the silhouettes of army tanks and soldiers wearing gas masks in wartime; the white heads of the executed Iranian political prisoners as they fall to the ground; Marjane's illuminated head and face as she lies submerged in the blackness of depression.

Throughout the film, music 'plays a crucial role; it connects the sequences and gives unity to the film'.<sup>12</sup> Four different musical atmospheres are utilized to delineate the four major parts of the film. The first two use mainly string instruments to create a sober atmosphere. The dream scenes' dialogues with God feature a piano and a few strings, while 'Iranian disco' music is used for the disco scene. Lively music accompanies Marjane's delight on discovering the well-stocked shelves in Vienna's supermarkets but this is repeated like a 'scratched record' to depict her ensuing boredom.<sup>13</sup> The height of comical expression is attained with Marjane's poorly sung rendition of 'Eye of the Tiger' (synonymous with *Rocky III* [Sylvester Stallone, 1982]), which marks Marjane's recovery from depression and her emancipation (she shaves her legs) while, at the same time, mocking facets of Western popular culture.

*Persepolis* is successful as an autobiography which conveys a girl's love for her family, and as a historical narrative which provides insight into an often misrepresented people. Moreover, it demonstrates the efficacy of traditional animation techniques in engaging audiences.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jousset quoted in interview by Jean-Pierre Lavoignat, March-April 2007, in *Persepolis* production notes.

<sup>2</sup> Satrapi quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Witek. *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar*, University Press of Mississippi, 1989, pp.96-97.

<sup>4</sup> Marjane Satrapi, 'On Writing *Persepolis*', Pantheon Graphic Novels, <<http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/graphicnovels/satrapi2.html>>, accessed 22 July 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Marjane Satrapi, 'Introduction', *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and the Story of a Return*, Vintage, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Satrapi quoted in Dave Weich, 'Marjane Satrapi Returns'. Powells.com <<http://www.powells.com/authors/satrapi.html>>. accessed 22 July 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Paronnaud quoted in Lavoignat, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Satrapi quoted in Lavoignat, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Paronnaud quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Cheve quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Composer Olivier Bernet quoted in *ibid.*