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The eye of *Persepolis*' tiger: how melancholy and nostalgia resonate through Satrapi's animated film?

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Abstract

Will Eisner coined the term sequential art to refer to comic strips/books and graphic novels, while arguing that this distinct discipline not only has much in common with film-making but it is in fact a forerunner to film-making. Sequential art is a powerful form of popular culture. However, the scholarly community has generally ignored this popular form of art. This article discusses the animated film *Persepolis* (Paronnaud and Satrapi, 2007) and explores the ways in which animation is used. We analyse this film in terms of the cultural memory discourse and suggest that this film not only creates a melancholic cultural memory of the past it negotiates, but also, paradoxically, it generates a nostalgic one. As we shall argue, the film's inherent melancholy and nostalgia allegorically communicate a quest for identity in our present-day societies.

Keywords

allegory

animation

cultural identity

cultural memory

melancholy

nostalgia

Persepolis

tracing

These are the main concerns of this article, and before proceeding to our analysis of the film we shall unpack the notion of cultural memory. In 1925 the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs explained memory from a sociological framework and shifted the memory discourse from the spheres of neurosciences, psychiatry, and psychology to a socio-cultural framework. Halbwachs argued that ‘it is in societies that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in societies that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories’ (Halbwachs 1992: 38). Social frameworks create our social memories or what Halbwachs called collective memory. Outside such frameworks, our individual memories die out. As he contended, people remember so long as they belong to a group, and because one can be a member of many groups at the same time there can be many collective memories (Halbwachs 1992). Furthermore, this memory work is determined by what society needs to remember. In other words, collective memories are created and recreated in order to keep a society stable.

Jan Assmann (1995: 126) differentiates collective memory (which he calls communicative memory) and its social base from cultural memory and its cultural base. For Assmann cultural memory is different from collective memory in two ways: first, it revolves around cultural characteristics that ‘communicative’ (or ‘everyday memory’) does not possess. Second, it is different from history, since history does not have the characteristics of memory. Assmann’s concern with the first distinction –

namely, the difference between collective/communicative memory and cultural memory – is founded on the fact that communicative/collective memory is characterized by its proximity to the everyday. When we move from the everyday, we have cultural memory. While communicative/collective memory has a three-generation cycle, cultural memory is rooted to the ancient world. As he states, ‘Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time’ (Assmann 1995: 129). While Halbwachs maintained that society makes us remember, Jan Assmann makes the claim that ‘the converse is also true: our memories help us to become socialized. Socialization is not just a foundation, but also a function of memory’ (2006: 4). He goes on to argue:

As always man is the sole possessor of a memory. What is at issue is the extent to which this unique memory is socially and culturally determined. Halbwachs took the step leading from the internal world of the subject into the social and emotional preconditions of memory, but refused to go so far as to accept the need for symbolic and cultural frameworks. For him, that was a frontier that should not be crossed. Memory in his view was always *mémoire vécue*, lived, embodied memory. (Assmann 2006: 8)

In contrast, for Assmann, cultural memory is based on various institutions such as museums, libraries, monuments and institutions of education, as well as ceremonies, rituals and practices. Cultural memory’s role is to unite and stabilize a common identity that spans many generations, and it is not easy to alter, as opposed to collective or communicative memory, which has a three-generation cycle (Assmann 2006: 29). Consequently, the representation of history through institutions and the arts

becomes a matter of remoulding the solidified narrative with the aim to preserve society's stability. In view of this, we must ask how memories are used to inspire and organize groups and form identities. As we discuss below, the cinematic handling of history in *Persepolis* is a quintessential example of the creation of a cultural memory of the Iranian past. The fact that this is done with animation is not only interesting but also crucial.

The animated *Persepolis*

Will Eisner (1985) called for a serious scholarly reading of comic books and graphic novels and for the recognition of sequential art as a literary form as it combines both word and image. *Persepolis* is an example of what Eisner argued for – an animated film that deals with a serious subject. *Persepolis* is based on Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novels *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2000 and 2001) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2002), which narrate Satrapi's growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran and her subsequent flee to Austria until she returns to Iran where she seems to feel that she does not belong there anymore. This article will focus on the choice of animation and the relation of this choice to the cultural memory the film generates rather than to look closely into the adaptation of the novels into the film as this has been addressed adequately elsewhere (Quigley 2008). The film encompasses three of the genres in animation Paul Wells outlines in his book *Scriptwriting* (2007): political, paradigmatic and primal. Political as Satrapi's vision of Iran's political struggle is told from a personal and moral sense. Paradigmatic animation is, as Wells states, 'based on already established textual or pictorial sources' (2007: 90). This elegantly fits *Persepolis* as the film is based on

Satrapı's graphic novels. The final genre, within Wells's categorization, befitting *Persepolis* is primal. For Wells, primal animation 'depicts, defines and explores a specific emotion, or state of consciousness, often illustrating dream states, memory, surreal fantasy, meditative conditions and heightened senses of inarticulate or unspeakable experience' (2007: 94). *Persepolis* features surreal dream states, some of which will be discussed later on within this article. It is the film's political dimension coupled with its depiction of memory and dream-like states that makes the animated *Persepolis* so effective and it is this choice of animation that creates the melancholic cultural memory of the Iranian past.

Satrapı chose the medium of animated film, and in specifically the tracing technique, to tell the story instead of a live action film. Tracing is a, hand-drawn 2D technique in which, once the animators have drawn the pencil drawings and the assistants have finalized them, the tracing team brings the drawings to life, working with the precise thinness and thickness of the lines, and adding depth. This technique Satrapı employed was crucial in order to maintain the authenticity of the emotion within the narrative. Paronnaud, the co-writer and co-director of the film, said in an interview that he and Satrapı knew from the beginning that it was going to be an animated film. As Satrapı stated,

With live-action, it would have turned into a story of people living in a distant land who don't look like us. At best, it would have been an exotic story, and at worst, a 'Third-World' story. The novels have been a worldwide success because the drawings are abstract, black-and-white. I think this helped everybody to relate to it, whether in China, Israel, Chile, or Korea, it's a universal story. *Persepolis* has dreamlike moments, the drawings help us to

maintain cohesion and consistency, and the black-and-white (I'm always afraid colour may turn out to be vulgar) also helped in this respect, as did the abstraction of the setting and location. (Youtube)

***Persepolis* as an animated film emphasizes the universal**

Persepolis is arguably more effective as an animated film rather than live action as the graphic novels' imagery translates to the screen directly, providing an authentic portrayal of Satrapi's narrative. The narrative features romance and humourous elements to reinforce the nostalgic feelings throughout. These humourous elements are treated with sensitivity and add levity to the scenes, as, for example, the use of transitions such as the iris wipe. These iris transitions within each section of the film are reminiscent of classic cartoons as they close in on a circle, or adapt the circle to a heart. The iris wipe is used in the romantic scenes when, for example, Marjane meets her husband. Or as in the scene in the film where Marjane empowers herself and dances in sequence to 'The Eye of the Tiger' pop song, her voice raw and full of cheeky humour. This lightness in tone appears again in the two sub-plots/romances in the film, as, for example, when Marjane's grandma gives advice to her on romance/divorce. This humourous treatment of romance in the film raises existential and political issues anchored in the past and points to the working-through of this past.

The two romances in the film narrate the affair Marianne had while she was in Austria, and the man she married on her return to Iran. The first one was a sexually liberated romance – she was in a western country after all. However, the film appears to pinpoint Marianne's feelings of isolation in Austria. She was an outsider and did

not feel at home, despite falling in love. This becomes evident when she lies about her identity to a man in a bar, she tells them that she is French in order to fit in. Whereas; the relationship with her husband-to-be in Iran appears to be secretive because of the conservatism which prevailed in Iran after the religious revolution. Her open and western attitude during that relationship put her in a difficult and dangerous position and this made her stand out as different from everybody else in Iran on her return. In both instances she tried to conform to the environment she was in, but did not succeed. In Iran she had to get married to seemingly make it bearable. These two treatments of romance in the film highlight her feelings of isolation and otherness. This problem of non-belonging is aligned to the problem of the past and history in the film. Despite the humourous elements that resonate throughout the film, *Persepolis* deals with a serious and difficult Iranian past.

In *Persepolis* history is presented as a problem and not as a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and an end. This is a problem that is highlighted by the protagonists in the film, and in particular with Marjane. For instance, the film opens in the present with Marjane at the airport about to go back to Iran (Figure 1).

Please insert Figure 1 here

While she waits for her flight the story is told in the form of flashbacks in black and white. The setting often becomes an overlay of silhouettes and other fluid imagery to underline the narrative, still inked drawings are utilized as background to the animated action. The simplicity and striking imagery of the coloured scenes help to

distil the ideas being presented in the film and turn them into not just mere memories of past times, but into emotions. The film's clever use of movements and dissolves, as mentioned above, help the viewer realize that a change in setting is about to occur. It also changes its aesthetics to signal shifts in time. For example, the first flashback is superimposed on the present. In long shot, Marjane is sat at the airport lounge, smoking (Figure 2). The camera zooms in to a medium close-up and slowly the background becomes black and white (Figure 3).

Please insert Figure 2 here

Please insert Figure 3 here

She appears to be sad and desolate. The style in this opening scene at the airport only seems to highlight her isolation. It is as though she does not know where she belongs. This opening scene in the present points to her search for belonging and identity, a search that is evident throughout the film. In the next scene, the superimposed 5-year-old Marjane runs in front of the present-day Marianne. The superimposition of a scene from the past adds a further layer to the narrative of the film as the present-day Marjane looks at the child-Marrjane running in front of her before turning her head in the other direction (Figure 4).

Please insert Figure 4 here

In black-and-white the camera then follows the child-Marjane who runs into her friend Nioucha's arms. We are suddenly transported back to the past and specifically - her school years. However, there are no visual artifacts of the different historical periods to reinforce the narrative. This blending of the past with the present is what makes *Persepolis* relevant to the present as it problematizes history, and this is made clear from the beginning of the film.

This problem of history and the representation of the past are made more dramatic with the use of the traditional tracing technique. Satrapi says that the vibrations of the hand make the drawings come to life in the traditional techniques employed in *Persepolis*. The importance of using this technique in her film in particular lends an emotional resonance to the characters. As she explains, all the drawings made with a pencil are then traced. Tracing is a very important step because the characters' expressions are crucial. If we have a close-up of the eyes, for example, the lines have to be perfectly neat, especially for a dramatic scene; otherwise the emotion is lost (Satrapi 2013). An example is shown in the still shot below of Marjane and her uncle Anoosh (Figure 5).

Please insert Figure 5 here

This emotional impact of the tracing technique makes us sympathize with the characters – namely, Marjane and her family – as they live through the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Iran–Iraq war. Also, the tracing technique is important as it lends authenticity to the characters. As Wells states, ‘[...] animation is particularly equipped to play out narratives that solicit these emotions because of its capacity to illustrate and enhance interior states, and to express feeling that is beyond the realms of words to properly capture’ (2007: 127). Despite the lightness of tone and element of comedy present throughout the film, *Persepolis* deals with a troubled and serious past and the role of government in society, religious values, defining truth and the question of identity in our societies. The film achieves this in a nostalgic fashion as we argue. For one thing, the mere fact that the film is made using an old technique is nostalgic in itself. In our attempt to understand the predominate nostalgia of this film, we will first look at Svetlana Boym’s concept of reflective nostalgia.

Nostalgia and How it Resonates in the Film

Nostalgia comes from the Greek word ‘Nostos’ (*Νόστος*), which means the return to one’s home, and ‘Algos’ – (*ἄλγος*), which means pain. Hence, nostalgia is the painful need and desire to return home. Svetlana Boym contends that nostalgia projects values onto the past that might not have been there in the first place. For Boym there are two kinds of nostalgia that affect our memories and understanding of our relationship with the past: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia refers to the desperate need to retain origins and a lost collective home, as it has been embedded in collective memory. It can be found in nationalist movements, revivals and reconstructions of monuments. In contrast, reflective nostalgia does not

recreate a mythical past; reflective nostalgics work-through the past with the hope of creating a better future. Reflective nostalgia is more about the passing of time, while it foregrounds the irreversibility of the past (Boym 2001: 49). It does not try to restore anything, but glorifies details from the past in a self-reflexive, meditative manner. According to Boym, while reflective nostalgia invokes collective memories of a lost home or past, it often embraces an ironic or humourous feel, and this is what makes it a creative form of longing (2001: 351). Satrapi and Paronnaud manage to express this reflective nostalgia throughout the film not only through the build-up of the narrative and sub-plots in the film, but also more importantly through animation.

The most nostalgic scenes in the film are the scenes that revolve around Marjane's family and in particular the conversation between Marjane and her grandmother and Marjane and her uncle Anoosh. For example, before Marjane is sent to Austria she spends her last night at her grandmother's and sleeps with her in her bed. As her grandmother talks to her and gives advice to her, jasmines start falling on the screen superimposed on the traced images. Marjane feels comfortable in her grandmother's arms; her feelings of belonging are made even more apparent with the use of the flowers falling down over the images like Proust's madeleine's. This choice of the superimposed falling jasmines is not accidental in this flashback. There is a familiar smell of these flowers; her grandmother used to put them on her breasts every morning.

Through the treatment of the romance she had with her boyfriend in Austria and her ex-husband, the film points to feelings of non-belongingness as mentioned above. In a similar way, the nostalgic treatment of her life in Iran, the parties and meetings that take place outside the political arena of the country, points to Satrapi's quest for identity. The aforementioned scenes are like a safety hatch, like small acts of

rebellion, which creates a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, despite the nostalgia that prevails in the film, the animation throughout the film feels raw due to the sharp contrast of black and white that resonates melancholy.

The animation of the sections of the film in which the Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War is treated use differing style and tone. The technique is simplified and whimsical in style, highlighting the fact that this is the retelling of a difficult, complex history to Marjane. This use of a simplistic, cut-out style of animation here (as often used in children’s animated programmes) makes the history-heavy content more palatable, indicating how Satrapi is receiving the information as a child and her father is relating/retelling the facts in a more child-friendly way without patronizing her (or the audience). Similarly, the style of the animation changes in the scene where Uncle Anoosh, a communist fighter, escapes and travels to Russia using a similar cut-out style for the sea scene to indicate to the viewer that this is a nostalgic but painful and complex memory.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, for which Marjane’s family was also fighting, failed according to Satrapi. The overthrow of the Shah, who in her dad’s words was a dictator ten times worse than his father, opened up the way to elections which ended with a 99.99 per cent victory for the Islamic Republican Party under the leadership of the religious leader Khomeini. Satrapi chooses her uncle Anoosh to explain this overwhelming victory for the Islamic Republican Party to the audience, in a rather lightened way that runs throughout the film: ‘It’s only natural. Every revolution goes through a period of transition. Half of the country is illiterate. Nationalism and religious fervour are the only things that can bring together’. In the next scenes we are shown people demonstrating in the streets and the police and the army killing unarmed people in the same different whimsical style and tone mentioned above.

These choices are not accidental in the film. Despite the lightness of the film, the style of animation adds a certain level of gravity to the narrative as opposed to the lightness with which the rest of the film, and in particular the dialogues, is treated. Satrapi presents the Iranian Revolution through the prism of socialism. For Satrapi and her family the Revolution did not lead to a communist or a socialist Iran; on the contrary, the new post-Revolution regime created an Islamic Republic. The religious transformations that took place are treated many times in the film in the same disillusioned and melancholic style as the scenes about the Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War.

Marianne’s melancholy is rooted in the history and political life of her country and her search for identity. Marjane went back home and tried to adopt in the Iranian society. She even works as a gym instructor at some point. Nevertheless, none of her attempts succeeded. She sees many restrictions on her family due to the change in the political life in Iran. A case in point is the flashbacks of the goodbyes with her family at the airport both times she left Iran. In the first flashback, 40 minutes into the film at the airport her parents are stressing the positive so as to encourage Marjane to look to a better future in Europe saying she ‘must eat the chocolate torte’, they will visit her, and she is ‘a big girl now’. Her father ends with ‘never forget who you are and where you come from’. They smile and wave her off, but as Marjane turns back to see them one last time she witnesses her father having to physically carry her bereft mother – the reality of her parents’ sacrifice in order to give their daughter a better life. This is contrasted with the resolute messages her parents relay to her as she leaves Iran for the final time. Marjane’s mother says, ‘Today you are leaving for good, you are a free woman. Iran is not for you Marjane and I forbid you to return’. These airport scenes with her family are emotional markers of time (her father says he did not recognize

her on her return from Austria) with poignant moments of deep reflection culminating in Marjane's taxi ride away from the airport at the end of the film, her grandmother's jasmine flower memory lingering in her memory...with the inclusion of one jasmine flower floating solely across the screen.

What kind of cultural memory?

Persepolis as an animated film works at many levels, and it is through the choice of animation that this difficult past is worked-through. Apart from the fact that animation appeals to everyone, as Satrapi has repeatedly said (Youtube), the international appeal of animation is not the only thing that makes this film work. Animation permits the showing of the unimaginable beyond live action. In many cases throughout the film, the animated surreal elements show Marjane's state of mind that speaks directly to the audience. This would not be the case with a live action film.

The film is paradoxically nostalgic as it offers nostalgic memories of comfort and belonging. Nevertheless, Marianne does not feel comfortable or that she belongs anywhere anymore. The constant existential quest for identity pervades *Persepolis*. At the same time, the film's melancholy is noticeable not only in relation to Satrapi's narration of her personal relationships – for example, when she lived in Austria and the depression that she went through afterwards – but also in her critique of the Iranian history dealt with in the film.

The film creates a melancholic cultural memory of the Iranian past that criticizes the religious transformation of the country and the events that followed. The film's view of the Iranian Revolution and the cultural memory the film creates is one of a lost chance for a social revolution to take place. In the scenes where people are

shot in the streets by the new government's army after the 1980 presidential elections, Marjane laments the new government's attacks on the people opposing the religious changes as she narrates, 'under the pretence of fighting a foreign army, the Iranian government exterminated the domestic enemy'. The leftist elements in the society appear to be put in prison, executed or tortured. This view of the 'real nature' of the Iranian Revolution and the foundation of an Islamic Republic against the will of the people is fundamental to the form and style of the film. Through this exploration and working-through of the past, Satrapi manages to melancholically register the unfulfilled potential of her country. Therefore, the film becomes a left-wing critique of the Iranian past, while the nostalgic tone of a possible, but yet repressed, revolutionary outcome prevails in the film, suggesting, to use Boym's categorization above, that Satrapi is a reflective nostalgic. It is as if for Satrapi the communist element in the Iranian Revolution stood for a potential utopia of a social revolution that was not realized. Her views of Iranian history as a nightmare and her insistence on approaching it through graphic novels and animation have been vindicated by history.

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