The Unbearable Lightness of *Persepolis*: Cultural Memory and the Melancholy of History

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the animated film Persepolis *(Vincent Paronnaud, Marjane Satrapi, 2007), and analyzes the ways in which not only it compliments but also complicates historical representation. In particular, we focus on the formal animated choices and elements that influence historical representation. We analyze this film in terms of the cultural memory discourse, and we argue that the film's overall sadness and its allegorical register communicate a quest for identity in contemporary societies.*[1]

KEYWORDS

animation
cultural memory
history
nostalgia
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[1] This article is a reworked version of the paper: 'The Unbearable Lightness of *Persepolis*: The Allegorical Register of Melancholy and Nostalgia' which the authors presented at the Second Global Forum of Critical Studies: Asking Big Questions Again, organized by Euroacademia in Prague, in February 2014.

This article discusses the animated film *Persepolis* (Vincent Paronnaud, Marjane Satrapi, 2007) – based on the graphic novels *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* written by Satrapi and published in 2003 and 2004 respectively – while analyzing the ways it complicates historical representation. What is of particular interest is the fact that, in her attempt to transfer the graphic novel on screen, Satrapi chose to use cinematic language and techniques. Since the graphic novel and the animated film have some commonalities, we argue that this particular choice enabled the filmmakers to deal with difficult subjects and reveal emotional depth as the dramatic impact of the film becomes more intense. We analyze the film in terms of the cultural memory discourse, and in particular, we focus on the formal animated elements that destabilize historical representation, in the sense that they help create a powerful and very specific cultural memory of the historical events depicted in the film. Finally, as we shall argue, the film's overall sadness and its allegorical register of history communicate a quest for identity in contemporary societies. Before proceeding, however, to a detailed discussion of the film, we shall unpack the concept of cultural memory.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY VS CULTURAL MEMORY

In 1925 the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs shifted the memory discourse from the spheres of psychology, psychiatry, and neurosciences to a sociological context. Halbwachs contended that "it is in societies that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in societies that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (1992: 38). Social frameworks give us our social memories, or what Halbwachs called collective memory. Outside such frameworks, our individual memories fade away. As he argued, people remember as long as they belong to a group, and because we can be a member of many groups, there can be many collective memories (ibid). Moreover, what society needs to remember for its stability is the precondition of this memory work. To put it differently, collective memories are reproduced in order to keep a society stable.

Jan Assmann separates collective memory, or as he calls it communicative memory which has a social basis, from cultural memory that has a cultural basis. For Assmann (1995: 126) cultural memory differs from collective memory in two ways: first, it focuses on cultural characteristics that collective or communicative memory lacks. Second, by definition, it is related to memories and memory work, and not history, which is based on evidence and argumentation. Assmann's focus on the distinction between collective/communicative memory and cultural memory is grounded in the fact that communicative/collective memory is characterized by its proximity to the everyday. When we move from the everyday, according to Assmann, we have

cultural memory. Communicative/collective memory has a three-generation cycle, while cultural memory is anchored in the ancient world. As he asserts: "cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time" (1995: 129).

Halbwachs insisted that society makes us remember. However, Assmann states 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). Assmann 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. (2006: 8)

For Assmann, cultural memory expands the concept of collective/communicative memory, and is based not only on lived, embodied memory, but also on symbolic and cultural frameworks, on institutions such as libraries, museums, monuments, and institutions of education as well as ceremonies, rituals, practices, and the arts. Hence, by definition, autobiographies, biographies, historical accounts, and *memoirs* create cultural memories, and to go back to our film, since *Persepolis*, both the graphic novels and the film, is based on the author's *memoirs*, *Persepolis* is by definition linked to the notion of cultural memory. Moreover, while for Halbwachs collective memories are reproduced in order to keep a society stable, Assmann asserts that cultural memory is politically charged since its function is to unify and stabilize a common identity that spans many generations and it is not easy to change, as opposed to collective or communicative memory that has a three-generation cycle (2006: 29). Hence, if we follow Assmann's theorization of cultural memory, the representation of history through institutions and the arts becomes a matter of *praxis*, of transformation of the historical narrative for the sake of society's stability and the stabilization of a common identity. In the light of this, we must ask how memories and cultural memories are used to mobilize groups and form identities, not only in the form of official history, celebrations or ceremonies, but also in the arts. Cinema is a powerful medium that creates cultural memories. By applying the cultural memory approach onto our examination of the film, we will investigate the kind of cultural memory the cinematic treatment of history in *Persepolis* creates and how.

THE ANIMATED *PERSEPOLIS*

Will Eisner coined the term sequential art to refer to comic strips/books, and graphic novels, since, as he argued, this distinct discipline and a powerful form of popular culture, not only has much in common with filmmaking, in fact, it is a forerunner to filmmaking. Eisner was pioneering in the drive for 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 (1985: 5). As he explains, in comics "the regiments of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regiments of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other" (ibid: 8). Hence, the reader of a comic book/graphic novel has to use both visual and verbal interpretive skills in order to read the story.

Around the time Eisner's renowned text on comics and sequential art was published, important graphic novels with serious subject matter emerged, especially with 'un-representable' or sensitive themes, such as the Holocaust, genocides, and wars. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (published in Raw Magazine initially in 1980, then by Pantheon Books in 1986), and Raymond Briggs's *When the Wind Blows* (1982) are notable standout works in this respect. *When the Wind Blows* was originally a graphic novel about an elderly British couple preparing for a nuclear attack, and made into a film directed by Jimmy T. Murakami (1986). *Maus* is the story of Vladek Spiegelman, a Jewish survivor of Hitler's Europe (Speigelman's father). As *The New York Times* described it

> "*Maus*" is not a graphic novel but a work of memoir and history. It tells the story of Mr. Spiegelman's father in Poland before World War II, in Auschwitz during the war and as an old coot in Rego Park, Queens, after the fighting stopped. Part of Mr. Spiegelman's accomplishment in "Maus" is that he turned it into a second-generation Holocaust survivor's account, too. That is, he made himself a character in the book and threaded in his own quizzical modern sensibility "Maus" doesn't have a tired or sanctimonious bone in its body. (Garner 2011)

Persepolis is another example of a graphic novel that deals with a serious and painful subject matter.

Persepolis, the film, as mentioned above, was adapted from Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels based on her life that narrate Satrapi's growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran that took place in 1979[2], and her subsequent flee to

[2] In 1978-1979, mass ongoing demonstrations took place in all major Iranian cities in opposition to the Shah to end the reign of the Pahlavi monarchy. According to Poulson "the primary concern of all movement groups involved in the revolution was to end American influence in the Iranian political system. Both Marxist and Islamic groups

Austria until she returns to Iran only to realize that she does not belong there anymore. This adaptation is interesting in the filmmaker's choice to use cinematic language. As Satrapi stated in an interview by *Payvand Iran News* in 2007:

> 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 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. (Lavoignat, 2007)

In the same interview, Paronnaud, the co-writer and co-director of the film, adds an interesting insight into their influences whilst making the film:

> I had seen a lot of Italian comedies because my mother loved them. Marjane is very fond of Murnau and German expressionism, so we drew our inspiration from that and then put together what we both liked. Marjane's book is about family life, so the film was going to be based on a central family theme also. The usual codes in animation didn't seem to fit, so I used movie-style editing, with a great many jump-cuts. Even from an aesthetic viewpoint, we drew our sources from cinematic techniques. (ibid)

Persepolis significantly differs from the Hollywood superhero comic book to film adaptations, and is markedly distinct, for example, from the Rodriguez/Miller *Sin City* (2005). Although *Sin City* is a feature film, Rodriguez meticulously stuck to Frank Miller's original text, literally taking each panel from the graphic novel and attempting to recreate it on screen (Leitch 2009). Moreover, *Persepolis* has multi-dimensional generic characteristics. The film encompasses three of the genres in animation, as mentioned by Paul Wells (2007) in his book *Scriptwriting*: political, paradigmatic, and primal. Political in two ways, first as the film deals with historico-political issues, and second as Satrapi's vision of Iran's political struggle is relayed from a personal and moral sense. Paradigmatic animation, as Wells states, is "based on already established textual or pictorial sources" (2007: 90). This neatly fits *Persepolis* as the film is based on the graphic novel. 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,

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regarded the Shah's government as an extension of the authority of the United States" (2005: 230). The Revolution ended in the overthrow of the Shah, and the establishment of a caretaker short-lived government, which was also chased to exile. The revolutionary regime that came to power was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been on exile in Iraq first and then France for fourteen years, and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. For an insightful account of the revolution, see Kurzman (2004). For an excellent account of the history of political parties in Iran at the time, see Abrahamian (1982).

meditative conditions and heightened senses of inarticulable or unspeakable experience" (ibid: 94). *Persepolis* features memories, surreal dream states and fantasies, some of which will be discussed further on within this article. It is the film's political dimension, as well as its depiction of memory and dream-like states, that make the animated *Persepolis* work in a way in which it creates a specific cultural memory of the Iranian past. In this context, the choice of the filmmakers to employ animation is important.

Satrapi, explaining her choice to tell her story through the medium of animated film instead of a live action film, argues:

> The reason we're using animation instead of real images is very simple. Drawings have an abstract quality. If we used real images, it would be a few Arabs in a country. Right away it would be an ethnic film. It becomes the problem of those people who live over there and are crazy about God. But drawings, with their abstract quality, emphasize the universal. It doesn't matter who, a dictatorship is a dictatorship, whether in Chile, in China, in Iran or anywhere else, it's the same. The drawings have enough of an abstract quality to make you consider that it could happen anywhere. On top of that, there are many dreamlike moments in the film that would be impossible to film without turning it into science-fiction because of the dreamlike and poetic quality. Drawings also have this ability to adapt and still remain coherent (YouTube 2013).

Persepolis, as an animated film rather than live action, not only emphasizes the universal but also is more effective, as the graphic novels' imagery translates to the screen more directly, providing a more authentic portrayal of Satrapi's narrative.

Persepolis' narrative utilizes humorous or satirical elements on the one hand, and romance on the other. Humor is employed with sensitivity and adds levity to the scenes, as for example in the use of iris transitions within each section of the film reminiscent of classic cartoons as they close in on a circle, or adapt the circle to a heart –as, for example, in the romantic scenes when Marjane meets her husband at a party later in the film. Occasionally humor reinforces nostalgic feelings as is in the scene where Marjane empowers herself, and dances in sequence to 1982 pop song *The Eye of the Tiger* with her voice faltering and full of cheeky humor**.** This lightness in tone is also used in the two sub-plots/romances dealt within the film. When Marjane's grandmother gives advice to her on divorce, lightness in tone is evident in the dialogue between Marjane and her grandmother as Marjane opens up to her about her marital problems late into the film. Her grandmother appears to reassure Marjane on the life choices she is making as she reveals she got divorced fifty five years prior, and in a nonchalant tone says: "All that drama over some silly divorce…" Then while puffing on a long pipe she

asserts: "if there's one thing I've always known it's that you're better off alone than with some jerk". The humorous treatment of romance in *Persepolis* and the lightness in tone are further connected with existential and political issues that are anchored in the past that is depicted in the film.

The two romances treated in the film narrate the affair Marjane had while she was in Austria, and the man she married when she returned back to Iran. The first was a sexually liberated romance; she was in a Western country after all. However, the film highlights Marjane's feelings of isolation in Austria. She was an outsider and did not feel at home, despite the fact that she fell in love or her efforts to belong into the society by joining groups of friends. This becomes more evident when she lies about her identity to a man in a bar and tells him that she is French seemingly in order to fit in. This is evidence of her identity being especially fragile at this point. Later in the film, the relationship with her husband-to-be in Iran seems to be secretive because of the conservatism that prevailed in Iran after the religious Revolution. Marjane's openness, and Western attitudes during that relationship, put her in a difficult and dangerous position at times, and this is what marked her as different from everybody else in Iran on her return. In both cases, she tried to conform to the environment she was in, but did not succeed. In Iran she had to get married to make it bearable. These two treatments of romance in the film point to her feelings of isolation, and not-belongingness. The problem of non-belonging in the film, and the graphic novels, is closely related to the problem of the past and history depicted. Despite the humorous or satirical elements that are prominent throughout the film, and the film's lightness in tone, *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 resonates with the protagonists in the film, and in particular with Marjane. For instance, the film begins in the present with Marjane at the airport to go back to Iran. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Marjane at the airport

While she waits for her flight at the airport the story unfolds in the form of flashbacks in black-and-white. The setting often becomes an overlay of silhouettes, and other fluid imagery, to enforce the narrative with the use of still inked drawings as background to the animated action. Satrapi conveys isolation and loneliness to the audience through the simplicity and starkness of the colored scenes as they help to distill clearly the ideas being presented in the film, and turn these ideas into not just mere memories of past times, but into emotions.

The film utilizes techniques such as iris, as mentioned above, to 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 a long shot, we see Marjane sitting at the airport lounge, smoking (Figure 2). The camera zooms in to a medium close-up while slowly the background becomes black-and-white (Figure 3). She looks sad and desolate. The style in this opening scene at the airport highlights her isolation. What does Satrapi gain by stylistically imposing feelings of isolation and sadness on Marjane here?

Figure 2: Marjane at the airport lounge.
She should be happy going back home

Figure 3: Marjane looking sad and desolate

Satrapi gains an allegory for a search for belonging. Allegory comes from the Greek word 'Allos' (*Αλλος*) – which means other – and 'Agoreuein' (*Αγορεύειν*) – which means to speak. Somebody writes allegorically when the obvious meaning of what he/she writes denotes something else. Somebody interprets a text allegorically when he/she interprets the text as if it alludes to another meaning than its obvious one (*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993: 37). In this scene it is as if Marjane does not know where she belongs. The setting of the airport suggests a place of transition, a place in between. While fixing her headscarf in front of the mirror, it is as if she does not recognize herself. This opening scene at the present allegorically points to her search for belonging and identity, a search that is evident throughout the film.

Next, the superimposed five-year old Marjane runs in front of the present-day Marjane. The superimposition of a scene from the past here complicates and adds to the narrative of the film, as the present-day Marjane looks at the child-Marjane running in front of her before turning her head in the other direction (Figure 4). Then the camera in black-and-white follows the child-Marjane who shouts to her mother and runs into Nioucha's (a friend's) arms. We are suddenly transported back in the past and in particular during 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 the past relevant to the present as it problematizes history, and this is made clear from the beginning of the film.

Figure 4: the superimposed five-year old Marjane.

This problem of history and the representation of the past are made more dramatic with the use of the tracing technique as similarly used in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Tracing is a hand-drawn 2D technique, a technique that in animation now is considered traditional, in which once the animators have drawn the pencil drawings, and the assistants have finalized them, the tracing team deals with bringing the drawings to life, working with the precise thinness and thickness of the lines, and adding depth. Satrapi says that

the vibrations of the hand in the traditional techniques employed in *Persepolis* make the drawings come to life and tracing lend an emotional resonance to the characters. As she explains "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 Annoosh (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Marjane and her uncle Annoosh.

Satrapi (2013) believes this technique reveals imperfections on screen and it could be said that it is essential to maintain the authenticity of the emotion and the characters within the narrative. Wells makes it clearer when he states "[…] animation is particularly equipped to play out narratives that solicit […] 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). This emotional impact of the tracing technique is employed to make us sympathize with the characters, namely Marjane and her family, as they live through the Iranian Revolution, and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War.

THE NOSTALGIC IMPULSE

Despite the constant element of comedy that, as we have seen, is present throughout the film, *Persepolis* deals with a troubled and serious past, as well as with the role of government in society, religious values, defining truth, and the question of identity in our societies. It is interesting and paradoxical that despite the fact that both the film and the graphic novel deal with such serious subject matter and a traumatic past, a war that broke out in the author's country, a war in which her family was involved as well, this narrative is nostalgic.[3]

[3] It is interesting and paradoxical that nostalgia is prominent in many contemporary films dealing with traumatic or difficult historical and political pasts, as for example in *When Father was Away for Business* (Emir Kusturica, 1985), *Land and Freedom* (Ken Loach, 1995), *Kolya* (Jan Sverák, 1996*), La lengua de las mariposas* (José Luis Cuerda, 1999), *Malèna* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000), just to name a few. What we mean by

Nostalgia comes from the Greek word 'Nostos' – (*Νόστος*) which means the return to one's home, and 'Algos' – (*Άλγος*) which means pain. Thus nostalgia is the painful urge, need, and longing to return home. Svetlana Boym argues 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 influence our collective or cultural memories, and our understanding of the relationship with the past: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia refers to the urgent need to hold on to origins, and to a lost collective home, as it has been fixed in collective memory. Restorative nostalgia can be found in nationalist movements, revivals and reconstructions of monuments. In contrast, reflective nostalgics do not pretend to rebuild a mythical past; they meditate on the past and history with the hope to create a better future. Reflective nostalgia is more about the passage of time, while it foregrounds the irrevocability of the past (Boym 2001). It does not attempt to restore anything, but relishes details from the past in a self-reflexive manner. While reflective nostalgia evokes collective memories of a lost home or past, it often adopts an ironic or humorous tone, and this is what makes it a creative form of longing (Boym 2001: 351).

Satrapi and Paronnaud succeed in expressing nostalgia, which prevails throughout the film, not only through the escalation of the narrative, the use of romantic sub-plots or humorous and satirical elements, but more importantly through animation: the mere fact that the film is made using an old technique is nostalgic in itself. It is also in this nostalgia in the film, through stylistic and thematic choices, that Marjane's search for longing and belonging is anchored, while the humorous reflective nostalgic treatment of the past points to a kind of working-through the past. Predominate reflective nostalgia makes the film into a powerful cultural memory.

The most nostalgic scenes in the film are the scenes revolving around Marjane's family, and especially 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 *Madeleines*. 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.

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paradoxical here is that one would expect that such traumatic events would not evoke nostalgia.

Nevertheless, through the treatment of the romance she had with her boyfriend in Austria, and her ex-husband, the film highlights feelings of non-belongingness as mentioned above. Similarly, the nostalgic treatment of her life in Iran, the parties and meetings that take place outside the political arena of the country, point to Satrapi's quest for identity. These parties and meetings are like a safety hatch; like small acts of rebellion, which create a sense of belonging. However, 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 sadness.

The animation of the sections of the film, where the Iranian Revolution and the Iran Iraq War is treated, uses a 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, while 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 to the mountains and swims to Russia. Here the landscape and sea are exaggerated and dreamlike using distinct styles to indicate that this is a nostalgic but painful and complex memory. These two sequences are perfect examples of the blending of collective/communicative and cultural memory. Marjane's father explaining the Revolution and the Iran Iraq War and Anoosh's telling of his adventures are two reconstructions of past events, of political history and personal experiences. They both contain biographical elements of embodied memories, and they both take place within a generational cycle. Hence, these narrations are collective memories of the pasts they narrate. At the same time, these two narrations are blended with images that recall traditional Iranian iconographical patterns, namely cultural memories. Moreover, these two sequences are in both cases juxtaposed and completed by Marjane's personal experience told in first person voice over, with a different imagery.[4]

[4] The cut out style of animation chosen in the section of the film in which Marjane's father retells the story of the Revolution could also be in reaction to the long history of puppetry, a traditional form of art and technique in Iran dating back to the 11th century. However, the cut out style of animation chosen for the scenes in which her father tells the history of her country appears to mock the regime as it is such a simplistic, almost crude technique not finessed like the rest of the film. Satrapi has stated that she is influenced by American comic book art during her childhood (Satrapi 2013). She also bought American music as a child and embraced western culture. These are deliberate choices and at odds with the traditions and rules which surround her. Also, Satrapi teamed up with Vincent Parronaud, a Western artist, to adapt the graphic novels onto the screen, whose graphic, bold black and white style resonated with her own graphic art style.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, for which Marjane's family was also fighting, did not succeed 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% victory for the Islamic Republican Party under the leadership of the religious leader Khomeini. Satrapi chooses her uncle Anoosh to explain this overwhelmed victory for the Islamic Republican Party to the audience in a rather lightened way that runs throughout the film after all: "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 stylistic 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 create 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.

Marjane's sadness, and even melancholic feelings, is anchored in the history, and political life of her country, and her search for identity. Marjane went back home, and tried to adopt in this Iranian society. Nevertheless, all her attempts failed. She sees many restrictions on her family, and changes due to the change of the political life of the country they live in. The identity issues are raised in the film by the blend of the personal with the political (often raised by Marjane's grandmother as well as Marjane), and also in relation to the experience of emigration. A point in case is the flashbacks of the goodbyes with her family at the airport both times she left Iran. In the first flashback, forty minutes into the film at the airport, her parents are emphasizing the positive 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, which is not accidental since it points to Marjane's identity issues mentioned above), with poignant moments of deep reflection culminating in Marjane's taxi ride away from Paris' Orly Sud airport at the end of the film: her grandmother's jasmine flower memory is lingering in her memory, giving her comfort and reassurance as it connects her to her homeland, concluding with the inclusion of one jasmine flower floating solely across the screen.

CONCLUSION: WHAT KIND OF CULTURAL MEMORY?

Persepolis as an animated film works in many levels, and it is through the choice of animation that a traumatic past is worked through. Apart from the fact that animation succeeds in appealing to everyone, as Satrapi has repeatedly said (2013), the universal appeal of animation is not the only thing that makes this film work. Animation allows 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 appeal directly to the audience. This would not be the case with a live action film. Moreover the film is paradoxically nostalgic; it offers nostalgic memories of comfort and belonging. Yet, Marjane does not feel comfortable or that she belongs anywhere anymore. *Persepolis* is invested with the constant existential quest for identity. At the same time, the film's sadness is evident not only in relation to Satrapi's narration of her personal relationships, for example when she lived in Austria, and her depression that she went through afterwards, but also in her treatment of the Iranian history dealt with in the film. What kind of cultural memory then this film creates?

The film creates a cultural memory of the Iranian past that laments 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 generates, is one of a lost opportunity for a social revolution to take place. After the 1980 presidential elections, and the scenes where people are shot in the streets by the new government's army, Marjane criticizes the new government's attacks on the people opposing the religious transformations as she narrates in the film: "under the pretence of fighting a foreign army, the Iranian government exterminated the domestic enemy." The leftist elements in the society are shown to be put in prison, executed or tortured. This perspective on the 'real nature' of the Iranian Revolution, and the establishment of an Islamic Republic against the will of the people, is central to the form and style of the film.

This reversal, a leftist revolution turned into a repressive Islamic state, is also central to Marjane's identity problems and feelings of isolation and not belonging, as throughout the film she struggles with the conservativeness so evident to her in her country. Through this examination and working-through of the past *Persepolis* depicts, Satrapi succeeds in registering the unfulfilled potential of her country. The film takes the form of a left-wing critique of the

Iranian past, while the nostalgic atmosphere of a possible, but yet suppressed, revolutionary outcome prevail in the film, suggesting that Satrapi is a reflective nostalgic. Satrapi's view is that the communist element in the Iranian Revolution represented a potential utopia of social revolution that was not realized. Her view of Iranian history as a nightmare, and her insistence on approaching it through graphic novels and animation, has arguably been vindicated by history.

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