

The Intertwining of Exile, Identity, and Memory in Satrapi and Paronnaud's *Persepolis*

Persepolis narrates the life-story of Marjane – an Iranian woman who has immigrated to Paris – through flashbacks that intertwine her coming-of-age with historical events. Thus, the Revolution against the Shah, the institution of the Islamic Republic, and the Iran-Iraq war emerge between the lines as Marjane becomes an adolescent and then an adult woman who faces the challenges of a repressive regime in her motherland as well as the prejudices of the Western societies in which she now lives.

The movie Persepolis (2007) by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud – as a film about a woman produced by a woman director (in collaboration with a male filmmaker), and as an Iranian immigrant's autobiographical work focused on her youthful experience in her homeland – offers multiple paths of analysis. This paper examines one of the most meaningful issues presented in the movie, namely the correlations among exile, identity and memory. However, I will not only explore how these themes interact in Persepolis, but also propose that Satrapi responds to the typical issues raised by the exile through the recourse to an active and significant preservation of her identity through memory.

As a diasporic filmmaker, Satrapi is very sensitive to thematic as exile, memory and identity. Therefore, they constitute the main focus of the plot of *Persepolis*, which is basically her autobiography. In this sense Persepolis can be inscribed in what Hamid

Naficy called “accented cinema” (109) which examines cultural differences and the concept of nationality through categories such as “hybridity,” “diaspora,” and “exile”. In fact, the protagonist’s experiences abroad assume connotations of an intentional exile: Marjane leaves her country, where her family and her loved ones live, in order to escape the social repression exercised by the regime. This action turns out to be very painful for Marjane who suffers from nostalgia and longs to come home (especially during her adolescence and at Christmastime). To sum up, exile in Persepolis is presented as a cause of displacement, fragmentation, nostalgia, isolation, reformulation of the identity; characteristics which inscribe Persepolis within the “accented cinema” tradition¹.

These themes are inscribed in the medium also through stylistic features. For instance, the frequent shift from one house to another represented in a rapid sequence of jumps among different buildings effectively transmits sense of displacement, homelessness, fragmentation of spaces and identities represented by the lack of a stable place in which to build a life. In fact, this fast and accumulating sequence underscores the inconsistency and volatility of those settlements that become mere houses – places where she could live – not places that she could call home. Moreover, the use of

¹(Naficy, 4): “Another aspect of the accent is the style characterizing these films, whose components [...] are open-form and closed form visual style; fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure; amphibolic, double, crossed, and lost characters; subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feelings; interstitial and collective mode of production; and inscription of the biographical, social and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers.”

flashbacks is emblematic because it breaks the linearity of the narration by going back and forth from present to past and vice-versa, thus conveying a sense of fragmentation. The distinctive use of color is relevant too: the fact that it is applied just to the scenes that refer to the present situation (adult Marjane in the French airport) underlines a separation between present and past (and between the “commenting self” and the “self commented upon”). Such a distinction can be interpreted as signal of a binary system, which is another feature of the exilic filmmaking highlighted by Butler². The distortion in the representation of time given by the flashbacks and the use of color can be connected to the subversion of the realistic treatment of time that connotes the “accented” cinema (Naficy, 22). Another stylistic element that inscribes the thematics linked to exile is the cyclic structure of the movie: rather than conveying the typical sense of fulfillment and closure attributed to the figure of the circle, it contributes to reinstate openness and a lack of a complete solution. Persepolis, in fact, begins in an airport and ends in a taxicab that will take Marjane to her destination. Both settings transmit a sense of movement and of travelling that expresses the idea that Marjane’s journey and quest for identity are still in progress, not yet resolved. Hence, airplanes and taxicabs are two means of transportation that become means of deterritorialization (Naficy, 5), symbols of a lifelong journey. These stylistic tropes become active and effective thanks to the language of animation, a mode which serves to emphasize the

² “Binarism tropes the tension between the absent homeland and the host country and its effects in the experience of doubled subjectivity which some exiles have described”. Alison, Butler. Women’s Cinema. The Contested Screen. (London and New York: Wallflower, 2002) 115.

fictionality³ of the story (in opposition to documentaries⁴, or live-action films which aim to achieve a faithful depiction of reality⁵) and to facilitate the identification with the protagonist's values and viewpoint through the displacement of contents in an abstract dimension outside of the real world⁶. Thus, in this sense, animation is itself a deterritorializing mode.

Satrapí's complicated authorial self-inscription (Butler, 60) is another stylistic feature that contributes to activate exilic tropes in the film. In the structure of Persepolis, the author's self-inscription is not only present, but also manifold and complex. The most relevant form of self-inscription is the fact that the protagonist of the movie is the director herself (Marjane). Secondly, further layers of self-inscription can be detected by

³ The relevance of the concept of "fictionality" applied to Persepolis is illustrated by Satrapí's comment in an interview in which she underlines the idea that the audience should not forget that her film is a form of art, not just a mere autobiography: "Of course it's not a documentary about my life. Of course the parts of fiction shouldn't be forgotten, because this is a story." Chernin Stephen "Satrapí's personal look at Iran in 'Persepolis'". Associated Press, 20 Dec. 2007.

⁴Satrapí's structuring the movie in the form of a fiction provides the chance to reinvent and re-elaborate biographic material without the restrictions determined by a forced obedience to the "Real Truth". The cartoon, in fact, can be considered a technique opposite to the documentary in relationship to the portrayal of reality: while the documentary form is generally devoted to an objective and trustworthy exposition characterized by an almost scientific method of observation; the cartoon transfers concepts in an abstract and almost fantastic world that merely alludes more or less overtly to the issues of the real one.

⁵ Regarding the debates about documentaries and the grasp of reality see: T. Minh-Ha Trinh, "Documentary Is/Not a Name." *October*, Vol. 52. (Spring, 1990), 76-98.

⁶ The displacements of contents in a dimension outside from reality, in fact, "allow the viewers to experience the story not as an exotic tale but as something happening to a person with whom we can [...] identify". (See the online article "Cannes.Persepolis." GreenCine Daily. 2007.). Hence, it serves to diminish the distance between the spectator and the narrated events and to increase the identification of the audience with the protagonist.

considering the particular technique utilized in this movie: animation. The cartoon represents the filmic equivalent to comic strips, the medium through which the story was originally published⁷, a format which is directly linked to Satrapi's career as an illustrator. The filmmaker herself stressed her fondness for cartoons in an interview⁸. Such a conscious and intentional adoption of this distinctive language for the film can be read as a sort of authorial self-inscription, as it testifies to the author's wish to activate a structure already familiar to her by transporting it from "literature" to the cinematographic environment. In addition, the author's labor of drawing each frame by hand as required by animation, literally allows the representation of the author's "hand" and graphic style within the cinematographic medium. According to Butler's reading of Naficy:

the function of self-inscription in exilic cinema is to problematize both authorship and autobiography by structuring the films to suggest continuity but not identity between the author as an empirical person, outside the text, and the author as structure and system within the text [...] The purpose of self-inscription is [...] the construction of a viable speaking position which [...] mirrors and enacts the author's experience of selfhood and embodiment as multiple and fragmented (61).

⁷ See: Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*. L'Association (Collection Ciboulette). Tome 1: [2000](#); tome 2: [2001](#); tome 3: [2002](#); tome 4: [2003](#); *Persepolis*: [2007](#) (comprehensive version).

⁸ See the interview: Stephen Chernin, *Satrapi's personal look at Iran in 'Persepolis'*. Associated Press, 20 Dec. 2007.

Persepolis seems to embody this perspective, given the proliferation of selves that leads to fragmentation; the presence of the empirical author's mark in the movie through animation and through the complex authorial self-inscription; and a relationship of continuity between the "commenting self" and the "self commented upon" that nevertheless does not meld into a monolithic identity.

In his essay, Naficy distinguishes between external and internal exile (11), but in Persepolis, Marjane seems to embody both typologies. In fact, she suffers from an external exile after physically leaving her motherland to live abroad (very significant is the scene when Marjane enters a boarding school run by nuns: the communication with her roommate is impossible because they speak two different languages), but she also experiences an internal exile after distancing herself from her previous identity as an Iranian woman, the niece of a political activist (uncle Anoosh), and a descendent of the royal family. Indeed, as Naficy points out, both diaspora and exile have in common "trauma, rupture and coercion" (14).

Nevertheless, exile includes also a reinterpretation of one's personal identity. This process, however, is complicated by the retrospective narrative mode that characterizes memoirs (which creates multiple selves), and also by the construction of the narration as a "Bildungsroman" (in fact, it illustrates the protagonist's path from childhood to adulthood), another practice that forges identity. Marjane, in fact, leaves her motherland when she is a child on the verge of adolescence, hence her personal identity is still undergoing formation. The significance of the childhood period is

highlighted through the use of the animation⁹, capable of providing the child's perspective about the world¹⁰ and of speaking the child's language¹¹. As Marjane steps toward adulthood, she passes through the physical transformation of adolescence, the experience of love, marriage, divorce, but she also acquires political and civic consciousness, attends university, leave[s] her parents and her country to build her own life, faces cultural differences, social marginalization, and even depression. Therefore, the reformulation of identity in Persepolis is determined both by the protagonist's exilic experience and by her transition from childhood to adulthood via adolescence.

At this point it is interesting to closely examine the reciprocal influences between the topics of exile and identity in Marjane's autobiography. Marjane could be said to undergo two different periods of exile: the first determined by her parents when she is still a child¹², the second decided by herself when she reaches adulthood. Marjane's identity in her motherland is basically constructed through the imprint of knowledge

⁹ Animation, in fact, is a technique usually associated with a children audience, and the story is told by a child protagonist. Therefore, through the use of animation, the "gaze" assumes a twofold connotation: female and child, two viewpoints neglected by the mainstream cinema, which is generally dominated by the adult men's outlook.

¹⁰ In fact, there is an accent on young Marjane's point of view toward other characters when they appear in the scenes: they are introduced through a gaze that begins from their feet and the knees, then reaches their hands and arms and only at the end arrives to their faces, thus following the children's typical visual progression. In this way the spectator is encouraged both to adopt a child's viewpoint and to identify with the protagonist.

¹¹ Evidence of this is the introduction of political contents under the form of a fantastic tale narrated by the relatives (in the case of Uncle Anoush the history of his life as a political activist becomes a sort of "good-night tale" in which the young uncle is the hero with a mission to realize) and in the form of a puppet theater –with opened and then closed curtains- where characters are one-dimensional and use the typical wooden and rigid movements.

¹² Her parents decide to send their daughter away from Iran in order to protect her from the danger of being arrested or persecuted as a rebel against the imposed religious values.

and advice given by her family. In particular, it is possible to identify two perspectives that shape this imprint:

1) INTERNAL FOCUS: oriented to Marjane's realization as a person, offered by the female members of the family (mother and grandmother). Marjane's mother, in fact, wants her daughter to be "an independent and well-educated woman¹³" following a quasi-feminist view emphasizing women's self-determination. Marjane's grandmother, as the provider of "pearls of wisdom", underscores the importance of being coherent with herself and never forgetting her origins. In her advice, the value of memory in shaping one's identity becomes explicit.

2) EXTERNAL FOCUS: aiming to develop Marjane's political and civic consciousness, offered by the male members of the family (father and uncle). The father and the uncle are the ones who explain the uncensored version of the political history of Iran to Marjane and accentuate the importance both of reacting against oppression¹⁴ and of following her own ideals¹⁵.

When Marjane immigrates to Austria, many events show that she is asked to deny her previous identity. Indeed, her being and behaving differently from all the others becomes a means of exclusion, isolation, and even xenophobia. Marjane, in fact,

¹³ This idea becomes explicit when Marjane's mother cries in the restrooms during the celebration of her daughter's wedding stating that she wanted her not to be trapped in a marriage but to become independent and educated.

¹⁴ Marjane's father is proud of his daughter when she silenced her teacher who was presenting a revised version of the history. Moreover, he adds that she resembles her uncle Anoosh, a political activist.

¹⁵ Uncle Anoush escaped from Iran to follow his political faith, thus he teaches Marjane to be loyal and constant to her ideological principles.

is perceived as a foreigner who lacks good-manners by the nuns (who blame her eating habits) and even as a prostitute and a thief by a retired professor of philosophy¹⁶ who shares an apartment with her. These examples show that Satrapi's criticism is directed not only to Iranian politics, but also to just Austrian xenophobia. Such a tendency to criticize both homeland and the host country is identified by Naficy as a distinctive mark of the ability of accented cinema practices to create meaning by commenting upon diverse realities and "ways of life".

On the other hand, Marjane has difficulties integrating herself in European culture: she does not make friends among other students of the boarding school where she lives, she spends her free time and Christmas holidays alone, she discards her Austrian friends' nihilist philosophy, she fails in her love experiences¹⁷, and even has to face destitution. Marjane explicitly states that she cannot bear the idea of having an easy life in Vienna while her loved ones are risking their lives in their homeland. In order to be accepted in her new environment, she finally tries to deny her origins: when a man tries to approach her in a nightclub, Marjane declares that she is French. However, the pretense does not work and she ends up regretting having betrayed her grandmother's recommendations. The turning point arrives when she wakes up in a hospital after several bouts of bronchitis and the doctor asks her where she lives. Her response, "Iran," is immediately followed by her decision to call home and go back to her

¹⁶ Frau Doctor Schloss.

¹⁷ The first man she met turned out to be homosexual, while the second betrayed her.

homeland. At this point it is clear that Marjane has abandoned any desire to adapt to the new culture and identifies herself solely and completely with her Iranian origins.

It is worth noting the way in which a means of communication such as the telephone works to highlight Marjane's exilic experience. As Naficy explains (5), epistolary is relevant in terms of creation and exchange of meaning within exilic filmmaking, and therefore represents a recurrent element in accented cinema. In Persepolis the telephone (a form of epistolary¹⁸) is the sole means of connection between Marjane and her family, the only way through which her parents can receive news from her and it seems to follow the sudden veers of the protagonist's identity. In fact, when Marjane aims to integrate herself by rejecting her own Iranian identity, the telephone constitutes a sort of "false" source of communication because she lies to her parents about her situation in Vienna in order to prevent them from worrying¹⁹. On the contrary, as soon as Marjane reaccepts her Iranian roots, the telephone suddenly becomes the means to reestablish a true contact with her parents and to express her discomfort in the host country.

Naficy notices that in the case of exile as well as in the diaspora, "people have an identity prior to the departure and it melts with the second one (14)." This is exactly the problem in Persepolis: Marjane's Iranian identity does not integrate with the European

¹⁸ See Naficy, 5.

¹⁹ She said to her parents that she was going to spend the Christmas holidays with some friends even though actually she was going to be alone because her friends went back to their parents' houses.

one in this first exile. She does not manage to find a compromise between the two identities (and corresponding cultures) and her reaction is to repudiate either the previous or the new identity.

In fact, her experience abroad has been so negative that she tries to erase it from her past and from the process of forging her identity. Evidence of this is provided by her request to her parents not to interrogate her about life in Austria. However, although Marjane desperately tries to re-adapt to her life in her motherland by dismissing and forgetting her Austrian identity, she fails because her Austrian identity has become an active part of herself: in Austria she immersed herself fully into European culture, had her first love experiences, and even developed a mature body²⁰. As a consequence, she soon realizes that she feels like a stranger in her homeland, just as she had felt in Vienna. In this case, Marjane exemplifies the figure of the “stateless person” – which has a prolific tradition both in the exilic practices and in the Jewish culture²¹ – traditionally characterized by the ideas of diaspora and homelessness. The stateless person, as a homeless figure who does not belong to any specific country, represents the very antithesis of the idea of cosmopolitanism in which, on the contrary, each individual is supposed to consider him-or herself a “citizen of the world” who feels at home everywhere. The unintegrated identities of the protagonist can be read as

²⁰ In fact, her parents don't recognize her when she arrives at the airport because she left as a child and came back as a woman.

²¹ See Claudio Magris. Lontano da dove. Joseph Roth e la tradizione ebraico orientale (Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 1989).

an unfolding of the binary system (constituted by the opposition of motherland and host country) connected to exilic practices (Butler, 115).

Marjane's internal struggle for identity finally leads to her depression. She reacts by desperately trying to re-adapt to an environment that she considers her motherland and the foundation of her identity but that actually has changed through the years that she spent abroad.

Her re-appropriation of her cultural heritage passes through conformation to current Iranian values: Marjane wears the veil²² and even gets married. Nevertheless, the civic conscience instilled by the male members of her family pushes her to object to the most evident forms of sexual discriminations and social oppression that she encounters. For example, she publicly protests against the regulations around the length of the veil established in the university and against the habit of censoring female nudity even in artistic contexts²³. The death of one of Marjane's friends due to the oppressive form of civic control exercised by the authorities triggers her ultimate reaction: another voluntary exile, her second and definitive one.

However, this second exile has different connotations in comparison with the first one.

First of all, in this case, it is Marjane, not her parents, who makes the decision to leave

²² In a highly exemplary scene she even forgets that she has it on, a clear signal that she got so accustomed to the repressive policies of the Iranian morality that they now are an unremarkable part of her everyday life.

²³ In a lesson of anatomy the model is completely covered by the veil, so it is not possible to guess the form of the body that should be the object of the study. In addition, the nude female bodies of a Botticelli painting (Aphrodite's birth) are covered with black ink in a way that censors almost the entire picture.

the country because she rejects its violent dimension and its imposition of religious morality against women. This shift in decision-making is in itself a sign of the changes in the protagonist's identity and a proof that she has reached self-consciousness and the ability to set her own goals. Such a crucial resolution echoes her similarly firm decision to divorce her husband, a fact that can be read as a sort of symbolic act of rejection of the common morality which disapproves of divorces and especially criticizes divorced women. Secondly, in this case Marjane manages to resolve her troublesome quest for identity through the recourse to the preservation of memory made up of the advice given by both the male and the female members of her family. Various pieces of evidence of this process can be found in Marjane's preparation for departure. For instance, she visits the places where her relatives are buried, thus stressing the importance of remembering and preserving the heritage that they have transmitted to her. In addition, she also visits the place that most characterizes her country (the Caspian sea shores), testifying to her willingness to carry with her the memory of the geographical spaces that shape her Iranian origins.

Finally, the title of the movie, the final scene of Persepolis, and the last few words are highly emblematic because they highlight Marjane's new perspective and attitude. In fact, the title Persepolis denotes the director's intention to refer back to the glorious past of her country, since she chose to cite the ancient name of the Capital of Persia (Persepolis) instead of the name of her city (Tehran), displaying a form of "national

pride”²⁴. Moreover, the final reinstatement of Marjane’s grandmother’s advice about jasmine flowers, exemplifies the great impact of her grandmother’s legacy on the protagonist’s life and in shaping her future. Very important also is Marjane’s reply to the taxidriver’s question about her provenance: “from Iran²⁵,” few words strategically emphasized by the silence that precedes and follows them. In fact, the semantically overdetermined word “Iran” is loaded with all the connotations acquired throughout the narration and exemplifies Marjane’s intention to use her Iranian roots and her family’s legacy as a basis to face the future and the new forms of identities that she will encounter in the journey of her life. Her decision to preserve memory is testified too by the author’s words in the introduction to the graphic novel: “I don’t want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten. One can forgive but should never forget²⁶”.

²⁴ Satrapi’s intention is proven by the passionate words she used to describe her country in “Persepolis” era: “[...] Cyrus the Great. He established what became one of the largest empires of the ancient world, the Persian Empire, in the sixth century B.C. Iran was rich.” See *Introduction*, September 2002 in Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).

²⁵ I am referring to the Italian version where Marjane says “dall’Iran” which means “from Iran”, thus she uses two words.

²⁶ See “Introduction”, September 2002. Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).

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