

Nuance and depth needed: Persepolis

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Persepolis, directed by Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, based on Satrapi's graphic novels

(Illustrations included in this review are from *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, and Vincent Paronnaud/ courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics Inc. © 2007/ 2.4.7. Films. All Rights Reserved.)

The animated autobiographical film *Persepolis* is unique and engaging on several levels. In it, Marjane Satrapi treats some of the most significant historical and political experiences of the Iranian people of the past half century, events that continue to reverberate both in Iran and throughout the world. Told from her perspective as a high-spirited child living through them, these events become animated in more ways than one.

Satrapi recounts the turbulent decade beginning with the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, through the Iran-Iraq War, during part of which time she was a student in Austria, followed by her return to Iran as a young woman in the early 1990s. Her increasing discontent under the repressive Islamic regime culminates in her self-exile to Paris, where she now lives and works as a graphic novelist. *Persepolis*, winner of a 2007 Cannes award, is her first feature film.

The graphic style of the books is brought to the screen with considerable charm. The film, co-directed by Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, effectively uses the stark contrast of black and white to suggest other kinds of absolutes and frequently is inventive and lyrical, especially in communicating young Marji's imaginary worlds.

The story begins in 1980 when Marji and her classmates are told they must wear the hijab, or veil, even though they go to a secular French school. The events of 1979-1980 unfold rapidly. Marjane is caught up in the excitement sweeping her parents' generation as the despised US puppet, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, is driven from power by a popular uprising. Her parents are part of the educated middle class—secular, left-wing, and “avant-garde” in Marji's words—and they take part in the protests.

The child's incomplete understanding necessitates explanations, through which the history of Iran is roughly sketched. “ ‘Twenty five hundred years of tyranny and submission,’ as my father said. First our own emperors, then the Arab invasion from the West followed by the Mongolian invasion from the East and finally modern imperialism.”

Her father explains that Reza Shah (or Reza Pahlavi, father of

the Shah deposed in 1979) was brought to power by the British after World War I to counter the influence of the Bolsheviks and keep Iran and its resources under the control of Western powers.

Marji also learns her grandfather had been one of the princes of the Qajar dynasty that Reza Shah had overthrown. While initially thrilled to have a prince for a grandfather, Marji discovers that her grandfather, a cultivated man, had been won over to the ideas of Marx and became a communist in the wake of the 1917 Revolution in Russia. He was subsequently imprisoned and tortured.

Her parents and particularly her grandmother are warm, intelligent and engaged people, breaking the stereotypes often promoted in the West of a uniformly conservative and brainwashed society. The narrative is filled with a host of relatives and friends, many of them in or around the Communist (Tudeh) Party, who struggle against the regime, find uneasy accommodation within it or, in many tragic instances, become its victims.

While Marji and her school friends play-act at protests and shout the radical slogans they've overheard, the adults argue the issues on a more serious level. Marjane's uncle Anoosh, who had been imprisoned by the Shah upon his return from Moscow—his refuge after participating in a failed nationalist uprising in Azerbaijan—is released along with other left-wing political prisoners in the early days of the Islamic revolution. In his arguments with Marjane's more skeptical father, Anoosh advances the disastrous two-stage theory of the Stalinists: “In a country where half the population is illiterate, you cannot unite the people around Marx. The only thing that can really unite them is nationalism, or a religious ethic...but the religious leaders do not know how to govern. They will return to their mosques. The proletariat shall rule! It's inevitable!!!”

Despite his repeated assurances that “everything will be alright,” the tragic consequences of this outlook are swift. Uncle Anoosh is re-arrested by the regime and executed along with thousands of other left-wing students and workers who had been misled by the Tudeh Party into supporting Ayatollah Khomeini and Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (The newly Stalinized Communist Party in Iran had supported Reza Pahlavi in the 1920s, as a “revolutionary leader.”) Far from returning to their mosques, Khomeini and the other clerics consolidated power through

subjugating all aspects of daily life to Islamic law.

Given her precocious consciousness, Marjane struggles to make sense of these experiences. She reads comic books called “Dialectical Materialism,” knows all about Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and listens to conversations in her imagination between God and Marx. However, at times in the film, one begins to feel that Satrapi uses the disjunction between the little girl and her “big ideas” too much for somewhat easy laughs, either defensively or out of a skepticism acquired later.

As *Persepolis* advances through the 1980s, the impact of the brutal Iran-Iraq War is omnipresent: air raids and bomb shelters in the basement; a family loses its home and stays with the Satrapis as refugees; another family is killed by a bomb; neighbors squabble in the supermarket over scarce food. There are increasing political repression and executions.

But Marjane is ever rebellious. She dresses as a punk under her hijab, and buys Iron Maiden cassettes on the black market, almost getting caught by the Female Guardians of the Revolution. When she tells off her religion teacher at school, arguing that the Islamic regime holds more political prisoners than the Shah did, Marjane’s family uses its resources and connections to send her to Austria. Satrapi amusingly caricatures the punk rock scene and the anarchist youth, the sexual promiscuity and identity politics of the mid-1980s in Western Europe.

Marjane’s story becomes increasingly grim as she tries to fit herself into a radically different social milieu in Europe. People for the most part are unaware of what she has been through, or seem indifferent. Isolated from her close family, she is susceptible to disastrous relationships that, while presented as amusing, probably weren’t in reality. She develops a drug problem, the severity of which is more evident in the novel than in the film, and after a break-up with a boyfriend ends up homeless and then coughing up blood in a hospital.

“I had known a revolution that had made me lose part of my family. I had survived a war that had distanced me from my country and my parents, and it’s a banal story of love that almost carried me away,” Marjane exclaims, and yet one suspects there is more to it than that. Her parents convince her to come back to Iran, which she does, re-donning her veil to do so.

From here, the story takes up Satrapi’s struggle to cope psychologically as she tries to reintegrate into Iranian society but is unable to do so. In one sense it seems that the political upheavals that had such a bearing on the first part of the story recede in importance in the second part. And yet the turn inward also expresses the logic of the times, at least for a young woman of Satrapi’s background and class.

While living by day shrouded in hijab, long coat and trousers, underneath rebellion is expressed through wearing forbidden make-up and nail polish, and in the privacy of their homes she and her friends party every night, with tragic consequences when raided by the Guardians of the Revolution.

The film loses focus as it gets into Marjane’s twenties. The inevitable impressionism of the little girl’s perceptions becomes more of a problem when Satrapi needs to solve complex issues that demand nuance and depth. Her political perspective and middle class orientation as an adult come to have more bearing here. No doubt sincere in her opposition to the current regime, she can only address the effects of a betrayed revolution, a decade of war, and wholesale political slaughter and repression, in terms of individual identity and nationalism—whether or not Marjane is an “Iranian” as she embarks on life as an exile in Paris. The possibility of renewed political struggle is not raised and most probably considered impossible, at least not beyond the parameters of this or another so-called moderate wing of the “reformist” clergy.

Nonetheless, Satrapi’s story raises immensely important historical experiences. By 1979, the Tudeh Party Stalinists had already done immense damage, subordinating the working class to one or another section of the Iranian national bourgeoisie and making it possible for the clerics to take power in what was a massive social upheaval with enormous revolutionary potential. *Persepolis* touches on many aspects of these tragic experiences, more openly than any films produced in Iran, but it is by no means simple to draw out their lessons.

Which leads one inevitably to raise the question (and not for the first time in a WSWWS review—similar issues arose in regard to *Sin City* and *V for Vendetta*): Can a graphic novel, or a film based on one, successfully handle material that is complex and contradictory, or is the form itself inherently too confining?

Satrapi’s *Persepolis* maintains the most appealing visual aspects of a cartoon—as well as its weaknesses. Whether the form keeps the narrative from penetrating more deeply, or whether the inability to penetrate more deeply led Satrapi to resort to a limited and limiting form, is difficult to say. Whichever is the case, the unfortunate result is that *Persepolis* ultimately lacks the nuance and depth required.



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