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THE TEXTURE OF RETRACING IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S *PERSEPOLIS*

HILLARY CHUTE

In July 2004, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story on graphic novels, speaking of them as a “new literary form” and asserting that comics are enjoying a “newfound respectability right now” because “comic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal.” However, this lengthy *Times* article virtually ignores graphic narrative work by women: the piece excerpts the work of four authors, all male; depicts seven authors in photographs, all male; and mentions women writers only in passing: “The graphic novel is a man’s world, by and large” (McGrath 2004, 24, 30). This is not true. Some of today’s most riveting feminist cultural production is in the form of accessible yet edgy graphic narratives.¹ While this work has been largely ignored by feminist critics in the academy, interest is now growing from outside the field of comics, as we can see in recent essays in journals such as *Life Writing*, *MELUS*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and *PMLA*.² Feminist graphic narratives, experimental and accessible, will play an important role in defining feminisms that “could provide a model for a politically conscious yet post-avant-garde theory and practice” (Felski 2000, 187).

I use “graphic narrative,” instead of the more common term “graphic novel,” because the most gripping works coming out now, from men and women alike, claim their own historicity—even as they work to destabilize standard narratives of history.³ Particularly, there is a significant yet diverse body of nonfiction graphic work that engages with the subject either *in extremis* or facing brutal experience. In much American women’s work, autobiographical investigations of childhood, the body, and (traumatic) sex—speciously understood as private, all-too-individual topoi—are a central focus. Yet whether or not the exploration of extremity takes place on a world-historical stage (as in, say, the work of Joe Sacco and Art Spiegelman), or on a stage understood as the private sphere (as in, say, the

work of Alison Bechdel or Phoebe Gloeckner) should not affect how we understand these graphic narratives as political: the representation of memory and testimony, for example, key issues here, function in similar ways across a range of nonfiction work through the expansivity of the graphic narrative form, which makes the snaking lines of history forcefully legible. I am interested in bringing the medium of comics—its conventions, its violation of its conventions, *what it does differently*—to the forefront of conversations about the political, aesthetic, and ethical work of narrative. The field of graphic narrative brings certain constellations to the table: hybridity and autobiography, theorizing trauma in connection to the visual, textuality that takes the body seriously. I claim graphic narratives, as they exhibit these interests, “feminist,” even if they appear discrete from an explicitly feminist context.

Further, I argue that the complex visualizations that many graphic narrative works undertake require a rethinking of the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize recent trauma theory—as well as a censorship-driven culture at large. Unquestionably attuned to the political, these works fundamentally turn on issues of the ethical, in Lynn Huffer’s important sense of the ethical question as “how can the other reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement?” (2001, 3). I am interested in this notion of ethics as it applies to autobiographical graphic narrative: what does it mean for an author to *literally* reappear—in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page—at the site of her inscriptional effacement? Graphic narratives that bear witness to authors’ own traumas and those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they reconstruct and repeat in order to counteract. It is useful to understand the retracing work of graphic narratives as ethical repetitions (of censored scenarios). In *Sexuality and the Field of Vision* Jacqueline Rose writes that the encounter between psychoanalysis and artistic practice draws its strength from “repetition as insistence, that is, the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten—something that can come into focus now by blurring the fields of representation where our normal forms of self-recognition take place” (1986, 228). This repetition is manifested with particular force in the hybrid, verbal-visual form of graphic narrative, where the work of (self) interpretation is literally visualized; the authors show us interpretation as a process of visualization.⁴ The medium of comics can perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness powerfully

because of its rich narrative texture: its flexible page architecture; its sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant visual and verbal narratives; and its structural threading of absence and presence.

Here, I focus on *Persepolis*, an account of Marjane Satrapi's childhood in Iran, in which she endured the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. (We may understand the book as bridging the wartime-focused testimonies of Sacco and Spiegelman, and the child-oriented testimonies of many American women authors.⁵) Satrapi currently lives in France and writes in French. *Persepolis* was encouraged into existence, as she has explained, by French cartoonists in the L'Association comics publishing collective (particularly David B. of the autobiographical *Epileptic*), with whom she happened to share the Atelier des Vosges studio; their support, as well as her discovery of work such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, led her to compose her story in the form of comics. (It is important to understand Satrapi in the context of Europe, where her book was not only a surprise bestseller but also what L'Association publisher Jean-Christophe Menu correctly terms a "phenomenon" [2006, 169].)⁶ While *Persepolis* has been translated into many languages, because of the political situation in Iran it is unable to be officially translated into Farsi or published there—although Satrapi recently mentioned that there is a Persian version, which she has not seen or authorized, circulating on the black market.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A CHILD

Satrapi, an Iranian born in 1969 whose work was first published in an explicitly feminist, antiracist context in the United States in *Ms.* magazine (2003b), presents in *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (first available in the United States in 2003) a visual chronicle of childhood rooted in and articulated through momentous—and traumatic—historical events.⁷ *Persepolis* is about the ethical verbal and visual practice of "not forgetting" and about the political confluence of the everyday and the historical: through its visual and verbal witnessing, it contests dominant images and narratives of history, debunking those that are incomplete and those that do the work of elision. And while its content is keenly feminist, I will argue that we may understand the text as modeling a feminist methodology *in its form*, in the complex visual dimension of its author's narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject.

Throughout Satrapi's narrative, the protagonist is a child (the young Marjane, called "Marji"). The issue of veiling opens the book (Fig. 1).

Satrapı begins *Persepolis* with a row of only two frames. In the first panel, the narrator offers exposition. In a box above a drawing of an unsmiling, veiled girl, sitting with her arms crossed in the center of the frame, she situates the reader with the following information: “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980.” The following panel depicts a line of four similarly composed girls, unsmiling and with crossed arms, and a sliver of a fifth on the reader’s left: we are only able to infer a hand, a bent elbow, and a chest-length veil. The narrator writes, “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna” (2003a, 3).

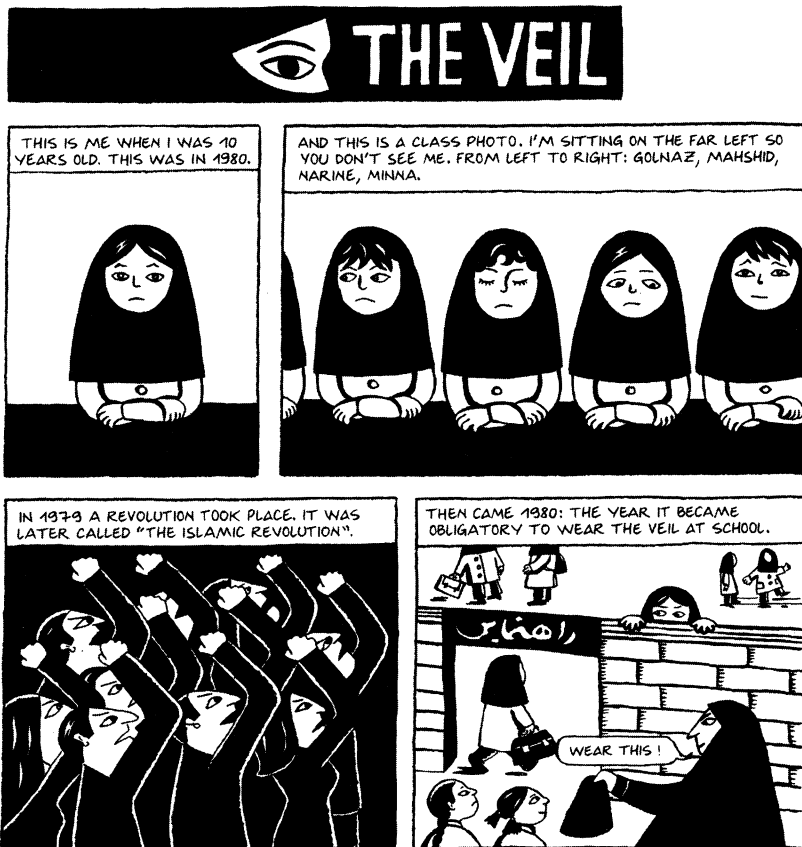


Fig. 1. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapı, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Here Satrapi uses spacing within the pictorial frame as the disruption of her own characterological presence. We do in fact, clearly, “see” her—just not all of her—but her self-presentation as fragmented, cut, disembodied, and divided between frames indicates the psychological condition suggested by the chapter’s title, “The Veil.” An icon of a single eye, directly engaging the reader, dangles over the book’s very first gutter, reminding readers at the outset that we are aligned with Satrapi’s penetrating vision and enabling retracing of that vision: “I give myself this duty of witnessing,” Satrapi explains about the book (2004a). Satrapi defines *Persepolis* as a text of witness; the two-volume series concludes decisively in 1994 because that was when she left Iran for good. She will not write a third volume based on “second-hand information” (Leith 2004, 12). Here, her self-establishing (“this is me”) and the immediate deestablishment of her person in the following frame (“you don’t see me”) not only creates disjuncture between narration and image (we do see her, even as she notes we do not; we know we are seeing a drawing, even as she announces the panel as a photograph) but also indicates how the visual form of the graphic narrative, in harnessing the possibilities of pictorial space, can create a complex autobiographical fabric. The comics form calls attention to what we as readers “see” and do not see of the subject: the legibility of the subject as a literal—that is to say, readable—issue to encounter.

The first page also zooms from the ostensibly prosaic—a drawing of a class photo and list of the names of classmates pictured—to the explicitly political; the panel subsequent to the row of ten-year-olds throws us back a year: “In 1979 a revolution took place. It was later called the ‘Islamic Revolution,’” reads text above the frame, which pictures an anonymous crowd of people throwing their fists into the air in front of a stark black background. And then quickly enough, we are back at school and 1980: “Then came 1980: the year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school.” *Persepolis* literally moves back and forth across a momentous event. In the first four frames alone, we have criss-crossed from 1980 to 1979 and back to 1980; the chapter will then backtrack to 1975. Divided into nineteen chapters, *Persepolis* narrates the trials and tribulations of precocious Marji and her upper-class leftist parents: their protests against the Shah, and later against the Islamic regime; Marji’s growing class consciousness; the torture and killing of family and friends; the havoc wreaked by the Iran-Iraq war; and Marji’s fierce and danger-

ous outspokenness, which eventually leads her fearful parents to send her out of the country at age fourteen. The book's last page shows her mother fainting at the airport as Marji leaves Iran.

Satrapi's text is framed diegetically, and externally in her introduction, by injunctions to "never forget": it is the defining project of the text. Arguably the most moving narrative thread in the book is Marji's relationship with her charismatic uncle Anoosh, a Marxist. He is allowed only one visitor in prison before his execution, and he requests Marji. Anoosh tells her: "Our family memory must not be lost. Even if it's not easy for you, even if you don't understand it all." Marji replies, "Don't worry, I'll never forget" (2003a, 60). The phrases—"don't forget," "never forget"—recur again at significant moments in the text. In the brief prose introduction to *Persepolis*, Satrapi affirms that her book, visually and verbally, is indeed itself the product and act of "not forgetting" upon which Anoosh insisted.

Persepolis not only does not forget, but also, more significant, shows us the process of "never forgetting" through its layers of verbal and visual narration: it presents the procedure, in addition to the object, of memory. *Persepolis* proliferates selves on the page. The graphic narrative form allows for a dialectical conversation of different voices to compose the position from which Satrapi writes, verbally and visually inscribing multiple autobiographical "I"s. Satrapi's older, recollective voice is most often registered in overarching narrative text, and her younger, directly experiencing voice is most often registered in dialogue, and in the discursive presentation of pictorial space—the "visual voice" of the book is one of its many narrative levels. (To allow these levels their distinct weight, I refer to *Persepolis*'s author as "Satrapi," to the narrator in the text as "Marjane," and to the child protagonist as "Marji.") Satrapi's embrace of the perspective of youth for her narrative is a way for the author to return to and present the historical events of her childhood with a matter-of-factness that is neither "innocent" nor "cynical," but in constant negotiation of these as the character Marji's knowledge and experience increases, and as the author, reaching back, engages the work of memory that requires a conversation between versions of self. Satrapi shows us the *state of being* of memory (as opposed to a singular act of recall) by triangulating between the different versions of herself represented on the page.⁸ She shows us, then, the visual and discursive process of "never forgetting."

While one way that Satrapi unfolds the procedure of memory is through the spatializing form of comics, which visualizes and enmeshes an overlap of selves and their locations, the other crucial aspect is her style. As I have asserted, *Persepolis*'s presentation of pictorial space is discursive: Satrapi displays the political horror producing and marking her "ordinary" childhood by offering what seems to a reader to be a visual disjuncture in her child's-eye rendition of trauma. This expressionism weaves the process of memory into the book's technique of visualization. Satrapi's stark style is monochromatic—there is no evident shading technique; she offers flat black and white. The condition of remembering, Kate Flint points out, "may be elicited by the depiction of deliberately empty spaces, inviting the projection of that which can only be seen in the mind's eye on to an inviting vacancy" (2003, 530). In *Persepolis*, while many of the backgrounds of panels are spare, a significant number of them are also entirely black. The visual emptiness of the simple, ungraded blackness in the frames shows not the scarcity of memory, but rather its thickness, its depth; the "vacancy" represents the practice of memory, for the author and possibly for the reader.

STYLE AND TRAUMA: THE CHILD

Satrapi's technique also specifically references ancient Persian miniatures, murals, and friezes, especially in the frequent scenes in which public skirmishes appear as stylized and even symmetrical formations of bodies. Her style locates itself along a continuum of Persian art: Satrapi notes that in Persian miniatures, as in her own text, "the drawing itself is very simple," eschewing perspective—and she describes this aspect of her style as "the Iranian side [that] will always be with me" (2004a). Sheila Canby observes that Persian painting offers a "flat surface to form a rhythmic whole"—a quality we note throughout *Persepolis* that Canby asserts necessarily marks Persian paintings as exceeding mere mimetic representation (1993, 7). But while we may recognize traditions of Persian art in *Persepolis*, Satrapi's use of black and white specifically, as with the political underpinnings of her overall visual syntax, must also be understood as consonant with traditions of the historical avant-garde. The minimalist play of black and white is part of Satrapi's stated aim, as with avant-garde tradition, to present events with a pointed degree of abstraction in order to call attention to the horror of history, by re-representing endemic images, either imagined or reproduced, of vio-

lence. While Luc Sante (2004) suggests the expressionist Matisse as an inspiration, *Persepolis*'s sure, stronger stylistic inspiration is avant-garde, black-and-white cinema—especially expressionistic films such as Murnau's vampire fantasy *Nosferatu* (1922), whose "games" with black and white Satrapi has claimed as an influence (2004a).

Theorizing her particular use of black and white—which is not related to the color-rich classic tradition of Persian miniatures—Satrapi explains, "I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become something so normal, so banal—that is to say everybody thinks it's normal. But it's not normal. To draw it and put it in color—the color of flesh and the red of the blood, and so forth—reduces it by making it realistic" (Hajdu 2004, 35). Throughout, *Persepolis* is devastatingly truthful and yet stylized. The fact of style as a narrative choice—and not simply a default expression—is fundamental to understanding graphic narrative (as it is, of course, to understanding, say, prose, poetry, and painting).⁹ Satrapi's choice of pared-down techniques of line and perspective—as with modernist painting such as Cezanne's; as with German Expressionism; and as with abstract expressionism, which justifies a flatness of composition to intensify affective content—is hardly a shortcoming of ability (as some critics have alleged) but rather a sophisticated, and historically cognizant, means of doing the work of seeing.¹⁰

Satrapi's autobiography is a "story of a childhood," and *Persepolis*'s style reflects this perspective: the narrative's force and bite come from the radical disjuncture between the often-gorgeous minimalism of Satrapi's drawings and the infinitely complicated traumatic events they depict: harassment, torture, execution, bombings, mass murder. *Persepolis* is about imagining and witnessing violence; more than half its chapters—which each commence with a black bar framing a white title drawn in block letters and preceded by a single, shifting icon—contain images of dead bodies and serious, mostly fatal, violence. A prominent example of what I have named its child's-eye rendition of trauma occurs early, in the book's second chapter, "The Bicycle."

Here, in the text's first startling image of violence, Satrapi depicts a massacre that Marji first hears about by eavesdropping on a discussion between her parents. The corresponding image we see represents the death of four hundred moviegoers deliberately trapped inside the burning Rex Cinema (whom the police willfully decline to rescue): it is a

large, almost full-page-sized panel in which the anonymous, stylized dead, their faces shown as hollow skulls, fly burning up from their seats as sizzling, screaming ghosts (2003a, 15). This is clearly a child's image of fiery death, but it is also one that haunts the text because of its incommensurability—and yet its expressionistic consonance—with what we are provoked to imagine is the visual reality of this brutal murder. While Satrapi defines her text as one of witness—"I was born in a country in a certain time, and I was witness to many things. I was a witness to a revolution. I was a witness to war. I was witness to a huge emigration"—we see in *Persepolis* that witnessing is, in part, an inclusive, collective ethos: the author draws a scene of death not as a child perceives it empirically, but as she *imagines* it in a culture pervaded by fear of violence and retribution (Leith 2004, 12). In this sense, *Persepolis*—ostensibly a text about growing up and the private sphere—blurs the line between private and public speech.¹¹ In a form keyed to structural gaps through the frame-gutter sequence, Satrapi further stresses the gap between our knowledge (or our own imagination) of what brute suffering looks like and that possessed by a child. The tension that is structural to pictorially depicting trauma in a visual idiom shaped by the discursive scaffolding of a child is one of *Persepolis*'s most moving and effective tactics supplied by the graphic narrative form.

The following chapters reflect Marji's growing awareness of turmoil, in that they offer further images of massacre. They both present mass death in a highly stylized fashion: indeed, they show her attempts to understand violence and death through attempts to visualize these occurrences and circumstances. As befits a child's understanding, the style is simple, expressionistic, even lovely in its visual symmetry: in the penultimate panel of "The Letter," Satrapi draws ten bodies—five on each side of the panel (2003a, 39) (Fig. 2). They are horizontally stretched out, abstractly stacked, configured to meet one another, as if linked in dying (the man in the foreground of the frame reaches his arm across its length, almost as if embracing the man who faces him). The bodies are stylized against a black background, filling up the frame, some open mouthed in horror, some appearing grimly asleep. In that mass death in Satrapi's work looks almost architectural, her representations both suggest a child's too-tidy conceptualization of "mass" death and tacitly suggest the disturbing, anonymous profusion of bodies in the Iranian landscape.

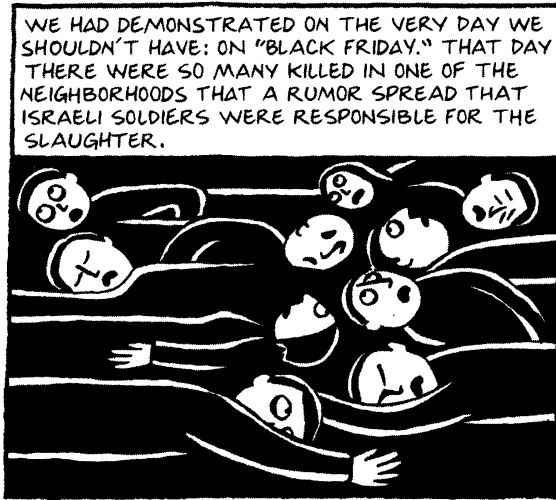


Fig. 2. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Forcefully underlining the work that style performs in *Persepolis*, the chapter “The Heroes” is one of the most pivotal in the book. Here, two political prisoners recently released from prison after the shah’s upending, and who are friends of the Satrapi family, visit their home and describe their experiences of torture to the Satrapis. Significantly, Siamak Jari also describes how a guerilla friend *did not* survive his time in prison. A panel, large and unbordered—its unboundedness evoking both the uncontainability of trauma and also the fleeting, uncategorizable images running through Marji’s imagination as she listens to Siamak recount the fate of a guerilla friend who “suffered the worst torture”—accompanies the narration (2003a, 51).

A torturer urinates into open wounds on the man’s back; brutally whips the man bound face down to a table; thrusts an iron into the center of the man’s back, searing his flesh. While we are supposed to understand these depictions as the child Marji’s envisionings, they are plausible visualizations, consonant with the “real world” depicted in the text. The page’s last tier is one single panel—connoting stillness in eliminating the passage of time between frames—in which Marji contemplates the household iron: “I never imagined that you could use that appliance for torture” (51). While these images unsettle the reader, on the following page, Marji’s imagining of Ahmadi’s final, fatal torture is one of the text’s most potent moments, suggesting the political point of Satrapi’s expressionism.

We learn from Siamak of Ahmadi that “in the end he was cut to pieces” (52). The accompanying, page-wide panel shows the limit—what Marji *cannot* yet realistically imagine (Fig. 3). The frame depicts a man in seven neat pieces, laid out horizontally as a dismembered doll on an operating table would appear (indeed, he appears hollow). His head is separated cleanly from the torso, precisely severed at the waist, shoulders, and above the knees. Referring to this panel in an interview, Satrapi theorizes her visual-verbal methodology in *Persepolis*, calling attention to the pitfalls of other, ostensibly transparent representational modes: “I cannot take the idea of a man cut into pieces and just write it. It would not be anything but cynical. That’s why I drew it” (Bahrapour 2003, E1). By drawing this image from a child’s (realistically erroneous but emotionally, expressionistically informed) perspective, Satrapi shows us that certain modes of representation depict historical trauma more effectively, and more horrifically, than does realism (in part because they are able to do justice to the self-consciousness that traumatic representation demands).

The visual, *Persepolis* shows, can represent crucially important stories from a child’s putatively “simple” perspective, because no perspective, however informed, can fully represent trauma.¹² The horror of “the idea of a man cut into pieces” cannot be adequately illustrated by words—or by pictures—from the perspective of either children or adults: it is in “excess of our frames of reference,” as is testimony itself (Felman 1992, 5). Here, the patently artificial containment of testimony, the act of

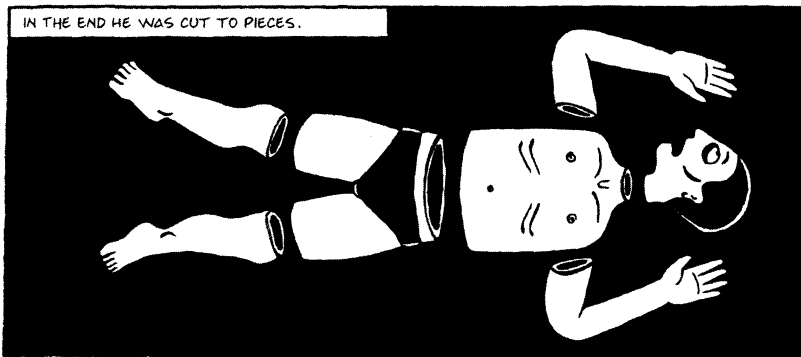


Fig. 3. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

bearing witness, in comics frames signals, but not despairingly, the text's awareness of this condition of representation. In *Persepolis*, Marji's visualizing of a man cut into neat, hollow pieces provides what I have been calling a productive disjuncture. It is a moment of defamiliarization (a child's imaging of torture) in which one recognizes not only the inadequacy of any representation to such traumatic history, but also, more significant, the simultaneous power of the radically inadequate (the child's naive confusion).¹³ *Persepolis* at once comments on the insufficiency of any representation to "fully" represent trauma and also harnesses the power of the visual to represent an important emotional landscape (the child's), which is moving paradoxically because of its distance from and proximity to the realities it references. In the panel's emotional impact and its sparseness, offering a disarticulated, white body floating on an all-black background, *Persepolis*'s style shows that the retracing work of historical graphic narrative—even when retracing trauma—does not have to be visually traumatic. The minimalist, two-tone, simplified schema of *Persepolis* at once speaks to the question of representation and also, in its accessible syntax, its visual ease, suggests the horrifying normalcy of violence in Iran.

VIOLENCE AND THE ORDINARY

Persepolis does not shy away from representing trauma, even as it stylizes it. Dead bodies litter the text, appearing consistently—and significantly—in pages that also casually situate readers in the everyday details of Marji's life. Throughout, *Persepolis* demonstrates the imbrication of the personal and the historical. We see this clearly in the chapter "The Cigarette." Its last page is composed in three tiers: the top tier is located in the family basement, the middle tier at an execution site, and the bottom tier back in the basement. Satrapi shows us—as if it is par for the course—a panel depicting five blindfolded prisoners about to be executed against a wall, directly above and below frames in which we view Marji in that prosaic, timeless rite of initiation: smoking her first cigarette (2003a, 117) (Fig. 4). Here, Satrapi presents her experience as literally, graphically divided by historical trauma. This episode acquires further significance by breaking out of the book's established schema of narrative levels. Marji faces readers head-on, as if directly addressing us, and delivers frank summaries of historical and personal events. This retrospective mode of narratorial address to the audience from *within* the

pictorial space of the frame and the child body of Marji is unusual in the text; the blurring of voices and registers here works with the blurring of the historical and “everyday” registers that is also part of the narrative suggestion of the page.



Fig. 4. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Through techniques such as combining on a page—with only apparent casualness—what constitutes the historical “routine” (execution) and the personal “routine” (sneaking cigarettes), Satrapi uses her understated graphic idiom to convey the horror of her “story of a childhood.” *Persepolis* shows trauma as ordinary, both in the text’s *form*—the understated, spatial correspondences *Persepolis* employs to narrative effect through comics panelization—and in *style*: the understated quality of Satrapi’s line that rejects the visually laborious in order to departricularize the singular witnessing of the author, as well as open out the text to readers. In its simple style, *Persepolis* powerfully alludes to the ordinariness of trauma: one does not need, and in fact should reject, the virtuosic to tell this tale, it suggests. The book’s division into chapters with plain titles, most of which commence with the definite article “the” and are followed by a commonplace noun, denotes the ordinariness Satrapi is intent on underlining, even when the events depicted appear extraordinary.¹⁴ And while *Persepolis* may show trauma as (unfortunately) ordinary, it rejects the idea that it is (or should ever be) normal, suggesting everywhere that the ethical, verbal, and visual practice of “not forgetting” is not merely about exposing and challenging the virulent machinations of “official histories,” but is more specifically about examining and bearing witness to the intertwining of the everyday and the historical. Its polemical resonance lies in its rejection of the very idea that the visually virtuosic is required to represent the political trauma that plagues Marji’s childhood.

Its only apparent visual simplicity coupled with emotional and political complexity—and insisting on the connectivity of aesthetics and politics—*Persepolis* has earned the most international attention of any graphic narrative in the past ten years (it has been translated into more than twenty languages). And yet, right now, *Persepolis* is poised to garner an even larger readership. On May 27, 2007, the film version—which was written and directed by Satrapi, and to which she retains all creative rights—won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.¹⁵ *Persepolis* the film presents several intriguing aspects relevant to this essay’s discussion of witnessing. That Satrapi, a first-time director with no film experience, confidently declined to sell the rights (even when Hollywood money came calling), and demanded full creative control, demonstrates how one woman brought the auteur-driven model of the literary graphic narrative—and life narrative—to a different medium (one that happens to be the dominant representational idiom of our time).

Satrapı translates the conceptual, epistemological concerns of her graphic narrative into the medium of film through its process of creation. She insisted on an artisanal mode of production, so her team hand-traced images on paper—an art that has long been obsolete in animation, replaced by computer technology. She also insisted—as for the graphic narrative—on black and white, a rarity for contemporary animated films. But most strikingly, *Persepolis* the film, as with the book, insists in its mode of production on what I call the texture of retracing, and underlines the power and risk of reproducing and making visible the site of one's inscriptional effacement (as critique, as a narrative of development, as a positing of the collectivity of self). As with American author Alison Bechdel—who posed, for her own visual reference, for every person in every frame of her brilliant graphic memoir *Fun Home*—Satrapı acted out the physical gestures for each scene of the film to give her animators a physical reference (“I play all the roles. Even the dog,” she told the *New York Times* [Hohenadel 2007, 18]). *Persepolis* is a work of reimagination and literal reconstruction that retraces the growing child body in space, reinscribing that body by hand to generate a framework in which to put versions of self—some stripped of agency, some possessing it—in productive conversation. *Persepolis* the film is, in a sense, a repetition of this primary act of repetition. Satrapı, in the expanded field of production afforded by film, yet inserts her literal, physical body into each frame of the film through her own physical act of repetition.

Making the hidden visible is a powerful if familiar feminist trope. Yet for Satrapı, as with other authors of feminist graphic narrative, making the hidden visible is not simply rhetorical; *Persepolis* offers not simply a “visibility politics,” but an ethical and troubling visual aesthetics, presenting the censored and the censured through the urgent “process of re-representation and re-symbolization,” to draw on a crucial formulation of Drucilla Cornell's (1995, 106). Iran, which, as noted earlier, has not allowed the graphic narrative to be published there, decried the film version of *Persepolis*; the day after it won the Jury Prize, Medhi Kalhor, cultural advisor to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, released a statement to the Iranian press calling the film “anti-Iranian” and accusing it of trying to “sabotage Iranian culture” (Satrapı, accepting her Cannes prize, dedicated her award “to all Iranians,” despite explaining at a press conference that “I no longer go to Iran, because the rule of law does not exist there”) (iafrica.com 2007; “Persepolis” 2007). Kalhor further alleged,

“The Cannes Film Festival, in an unconventional and unsuitable act, has chosen a movie about Iran that has presented an unrealistic picture of the achievements and results of the glorious Islamic Revolution in some of its parts” (PressTV 2007). Protesting the prize, the culture bureau demonstrates both the enormous impact and the risk of representation that Satrapi forces us to confront, offering us texts that suggest the importance of cultural invention and visual-verbal mapping in the ongoing project of grasping history.

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NOTES

1. I agree, for example, with journalist Peggy Orenstein, who asserts in a lengthy profile of cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner—which, ironically, ran in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2001—that “a small cadre” of women cartoonists “is creating some of the edgiest work about young women’s lives in any medium.” Orenstein makes an important point: “Perversely, even their marginalization—as cartoonists, as literary cartoonists, as female literary cartoonists—works in their favor. Free from the pressures of the marketplace, they can explore taboo aspects of girls’ lives with the illusion of safety” (28). In a forthcoming book project, I examine work by Gloeckner as well as by Marjane Satrapi, Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, and Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

2. Female cartoonists themselves have long been vocal proponents and theorists of the value of their work in a male-dominated medium. The noncommercial American “underground comix revolution” of the late 1960s and 1970s—which established the mode of serious, artistic work for adults that we now recognize in the term “graphic novel”—saw numerous and heterogeneous feminist comic books. One of these, *Twisted Sisters*, went on to engender two important book collections of original work

(1991 and 1995), many of whose contributors are discussed in the *Comics Journal* issue "Comics Gal-ore" (2001).

3. For further explanation of comics terminology, see Chute 2006.

4. If James Olney writes that the autobiographical practice he calls "the autobiography of memory" is composed "simultaneously of narration and commentary; past experience and present vision, and a fusion of the two in the double 'I' of the book," graphic narratives meet and exceed Olney's criteria in displaying the autobiographer's shaping "vision" (1980, 248).

5. There are two volumes of *Persepolis*. All page references here are to the first volume, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Satrapi 2003a).

6. For more on the European comics field, see Beaty 2007. *Persepolis* was originally published in France in two volumes as *Persepolis 1* and *Persepolis 2* by L'Association in 2000 and 2001, respectively.

7. Ms. excerpted *Persepolis* previous to the book's release in a section titled "Writing of War and Its Consequences." In Ms., the title of the work—*Persepolis: Tales from an Ordinary Iranian Girlhood*—differs from that of the final book version issued by Pantheon, which carries the subtitle *The Story of a Childhood* (2003a); the inclusion of "ordinary" in the original title underlines one of the central claims of this essay. *Persepolis*'s sequel, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004b); a memoir-style story about sex and intergenerationality, *Embroideries* (2005); and an account of the suicide of Satrapi's musician great-uncle, *Chicken with Plums* (2006) have also been published in English; I focus here solely, as noted, on the first volume of *Persepolis*.

8. In "Painting Memory," Kate Flint tracks the shifting perceptions of Victorian artists in the process of representing the invisible operations of memory; she points out that "memory, in part because of the way in which it is bound in with the operation of the senses, had come to be seen as something different from simple recall" (2003, 530).

9. Critics have misread graphic narrative: Patricia Storage, for example, comments that *Persepolis* is "a book in which it is almost impossible to find an image distinguished enough to consider an important piece of visual art" (2005, 40). As I hope to make clear, authors of graphic narrative are not interested in creating images to be independent artworks, but rather in what Spiegelman calls picture writing, and Satrapi calls narrative drawing.

10. The merit of *Persepolis*'s style has been a subject of debate in the United States, and also in Europe (see Beaty 2007, 246–48). One common strain of criticism identifies the book's political topicality as its reason for success but devalues its aesthetics.

11. I use "speech" in the manner of Leigh Gilmore's assertions about the "nexus of trauma and gender as the terrain of political speech, even when that speech explicitly draws on a rhetoric of private life and elaborates a space of privacy" (2003, 715).

12. However, in keeping with my focus on what I think of as the "risk of representation" of trauma in visual-verbal texts, there is significant critical attention to the role of the visual in the presentation of traumatic experience. See, for example, Saltzman and Rosenberg 2006 and Bennett 2005.

13. I use "imaging" in de Lauretis's sense as that which binds affect and meaning

to images by establishing the terms of identification, orienting the movement of desire, and positioning the spectator in relation to them (1984, 135).

14. The two exceptions are a place-name—"Moscow"—and a proper name, that of a popular American singer, "Kim Wilde."

15. Satrapi codirected the film with Vincent Paronnaud, a fellow comic-book author who also had no feature-length film experience (the film is in French). The two shared the Jury Prize, a tie, with *Silent Light*'s Carlos Reygadas.

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