The Unbearable Lightness of *Persepolis*:
The Allegorical Register of Melancholy and Nostalgia

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Abstract

Will Eisner coined the term sequential art to refer to comic strips/books, and graphic novels while as he argued, this distinct discipline not only has much in common with filmmaking, in fact, it is a forerunner to filmmaking.Sequential art is a powerful form of popular culture. However, this popular form of art has generally been ignored by the scholarly community. This paper discusses the animated film *Persepolis* (2007) and analyses the ways it complicates historical representation. In particular, we focus on the formal animated elements that destabilize historical representation. We analyse this film in terms of the cultural memory discourse and suggest that the film creates a melancholic cultural memory of the past it depicts. Finally, as we shall argue, the film's overall melancholy and its allegorical register communicate a quest for identity in contemporary societies.

Keywords: cultural memory, animation, Tracing, *Persepolis*, nostalgia, melancholy, allegory, cultural identity.

These are the primary concerns of this paper and before proceeding to a detailed discussion of the film, we shall unpack the concept of cultural memory. In 1925 the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs attempted to explain memory from a sociological framework and shifted the memory discourse from the spheres of psychology and psychiatry to a social and cultural framework. Halbwachs writes: "it is in societies that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in societies that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories"[i]. Social frameworks give us our social memories or what Halbwachs calls 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.[ii]Moreover, what society needs to remember 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 (which he calls communicative memory) and its social basis from cultural memory and its cultural basis. Cultural memory differs from collective memory in two ways: first, it focuses on cultural characteristics that 'communicative' or 'everyday memory' lack. Second, it is different from history, which does not have the characteristics of memory. Assmann's focus on the first distinction, namely the distinction between collective/communicative memory and cultural memory, has its grounds on the fact that communicative/collective memory is characterized by its proximity to the

everyday. When we move from the everyday, we have cultural memory. While communicative memory has a three-generation cycle, cultural memory is anchored in the ancient world. He asserts: "cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time"[iii]. While Halbwachs insisted that society makes us remember, Assmann argues that the opposite is also true, our memories help us socialize. Cultural memory's function is to unify and stabilize a common identity that spans many generations and it is not easy to change. Cultural memory is based on institutions such as libraries, museums, monuments, institutions of education as well as ceremonies, rituals and practices. Hence the representation of history through institutions and the arts becomes a matter of *praxis*, of transformation of the solidified narrative for the sake of society's stability. In the light of this, we must ask how memories are used to mobilize groups and form identities. As we discuss below, the cinematic treatment of history in Persepolis is a prime example of the creation of a cultural memory of the Iranian past.

The Animated *Persepolis*

Will Eisner argued for a serious scholarly reading of comic books and graphic novels and for the recognition of sequential art as a literary form as it combines both word and image. The reason for this, as Eisner explains, has to do both with the artist/creator and the critic. On the one hand, a serious reading of comics, and sequential art in general, would prompt the production of more worthy subject matter. On the other, as Eisner asks "unless comics address subjects of greater moment how can they hope for serious intellectual review?"[iv] As he further explains, in comics "the regiments of art (eg. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regiments of literature (eg. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other."[v] Hence, the reader of a comic book/graphic novel has to use both visual and verbal interpretive skills in order to read the story.

Persepolis is based on Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis* that narrates Marjane's growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran and her subsequent flee to Austria until she returns to Iran only to realize that she does not belong there anymore. Satrapi chose the medium of animated film, and in particular the tracing technique, to tell her story instead of a live action film. Tracing is a traditional, hand drawn 2D technique 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. The tracing technique Marjane employed in the film was essential to maintain the authenticity of the emotion within the narrative. Paronnaud, the co-writer and co-director of the film said in an interview that he and Satrapi knew from the beginning that it was going to be an animated film. As Satrapi further explains:

With live-action, it would have turned into a story of people living in a distant land who don't look like us. At best, it would have been an exotic story, and at worst, a "Third-World" story. The novels have been a worldwide success because the drawings are abstract, black-and-white. I think this helped everybody to relate to it, whether in China, Israel, Chile, or Korea, it's a universal story. *Persepolis* has dreamlike moments, the drawings help us to maintain cohesion and consistency, and the black-and-white (I'm always afraid colour may turn out to be vulgar) also helped in this respect, as did the abstraction of the setting and location.[vi]

Persepolis as an animated film emphasizes the universal.

Persepolis is more effective as an animated film rather than live action as the graphic novel's imagery translates to the screen more directly, providing a more authentic portrayal of Satrapi's narrative. The narrative utilizes romance on the one hand, and humourous elements on the other to reinforce the nostalgic feelings that are prominent in it. These humorous elements are treated with sensitivity and add levity to the scenes, as for example the use of dissolves. These transitions within each section of the film are reminiscent of classic cartoons as they close in on a circle, or adapt the circle to a heart-as in the romantic scenes for example when Marjane meets her husband, 1.12 minutes in. Or as in the scene at 1:10 in the film where Marjane empowers herself and dances in sequence to *The Eye of the Tiger* pop song, her voice faltering and full of cheeky humour**.** This lightness in tone is also used in the two sub-plots/romances dealt with in the film, as for example when Marjane's grandma gives advice to her on romance/divorce.This humorous treatment of romance in the film raises existential and political issues anchored in the past it depicts and thus points to the working-through this past.

The two romances treated in the film narrate the affair Marianne had while she was in Austria, and the man she married when she returned back to Iran. The first one was a sexually liberated romance – she was in a Western country after all. However, the film highlights Marianne's feelings of isolation in Austria. She was an outsider and did not feel at home, despite the fact that she fell in love. This becomes evident when she lies about her identity to her boyfriend-to-be when they meet for the first time. She tells them that she is French in order to fit in. On the other hand, 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. Her 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. This problem of non-belonging is closely related to the problem of the past and history in the film. However, despite the humorous elements that are prominent throughout the film, *Persepolis* deals with a serious and difficult Iranian past.

In *Persepolis* history is presented as a problem and not as a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and an end. This is a problem that 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. (fig.1)

Figure 1

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 wants the audience to have certain feelings about the events presented in the film after all. The simplicity and starkness of the coloured scenes help to distill the ideas being presented in the film and turn them into not just mere memories of past times, but into emotions. The film utilizes movements and dissolves, 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 (Fig. 2). The camera zooms in to a medium close-up while slowly the background becomes black-and-white (Fig. 3).

Figure 2

Figure 3

She looks sad and desolate. The style in this opening scene at the airport highlights her isolation. It is as if she does not know where she belongs. This opening scene at the present points to her search for belonging and identity, a search that is evident throughout the film. Next, the superimposed 5-year old Marjane runs in front of the present-day Marianne. 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-Marrjane running in front of her before turning her head in the other direction (Fig. 4).

Figure 4

Then the camera in black-and-white follows the child-Marjane who runs to her mother's arms. We are suddenly back in the past and in particular during her school years. However, there are no visual artefacts of the different historical periods to reinforce the narrative. This blending of the past with the present is what makes *Persepolis* relevant to the present and this is made clear from the beginning of the film.

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

Figure 5

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. Subsequently, the tracing technique is also important for the authenticity it lends to the characters. Despite the constant element of comedy that is present throughout the film, *Persepolis* deals with a troubled and serious past and about the role of government in society, religious values, defining truth and the question of identity in our societies. The film does this in a nostalgic fashion as we argue. For one thing, the mere fact that the film is made using an old technique is nostalgic in itself. In our

attempt to understand the predominate nostalgia of this film, we will first look at Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia.

The Nostalgic Impulse

Nostalgia comes from the Greek word 'Nostos' – (*Νόστος*) which means the return to one's home, and 'Algos' – (*Ἄλγος*) which means pain. Thus nostalgia is the painful urge, need and longing to return home. Hence, the discourse of nostalgia always implies a sense of loss and is always contrasted with a present from which something is always missing. Svetlana Boym links nostalgia to modernity, capitalism and globalization and argues that nostalgia results in a projection of values onto the past that may not have been there in the first place. For Boym there are two kinds of nostalgia that dominate our memories and understanding of the relationship with the past: restorative 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 is found in national and 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 to create a better future. Reflective nostalgia is more about the passage of time, it foregrounds the irrevocability of the past.[viii] It does not attempt to restore anything, but savours 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.[ix] Satrapi and Paronnaud succeed in expressing this reflective nostalgia that prevails throughout the film not only through the escalation of the narrative and sub-plots in the film, but more importantly through animation.

The animation of the sections of the film where the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war is treated use 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 and her uncle 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 escapes to the mountains using a similar style to indicate to the viewer this is a nostalgic but painful and complex 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 night.

Through the treatment of the romance she had with her boyfriend in Austria and her ex-husband, the film highlights feelings of non-belongingnes as we showed 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. The aforementioned scenes 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 melancholy.

Marianne's melancholy 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. She even becomes a gym instructor at some point. Nevertheless, all her attempts failed. She sees many restrictions on her family and changes due to the change of the political life country they live in. 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'll visit her and she's 'a big girl now'. Her father ends with 'never forget who you are and where you come from'. They smile and wave her off but as Marjane turns back to see them one last time she witnesses her father having to physically carry her bereft mother-the reality of her parents sacrifice in order to give their daughter a better life. This is contrasted with the resolute messages her parents relay to her as she leaves Iran for the final time. Marjane's mother says 'Today you are leaving for good, you are a free woman. Iran is not for you Marjane and I forbid you to return'. These airport scenes with her family are emotional markers of time (her father says he did not recognize her on her return from Austria) with poignant moments of deep reflection culminating in Marjane's taxi ride away from the airport at the end of the film, her Grandmother's jasmine flower memory lingering in her memory…with the inclusion of one jasmine flower floating solely across the screen.

Through this examination and working-through of the past, Satrapi succeeds in melancholically registering the unfulfilled potential of her country. The film creates a melancholic cultural memory of the Iranian past that laments the religious transformation of the country and the events that followed. The film offers nostalgic memories of comfort and belonging. Yet, Marianne does not feel comfortable or that she belongs anywhere anymore, *Persepolis* is invested it with the constant existential quest for identity.

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Notes

[i] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

[ii] Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 38.

[iii] Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 129.

[iv] Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art* (Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 5.

[v] Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*, 8.

[vi] See interview by Jean-Pierre Lavoignat, "The Art of World Cinema: *Persepolis*", accessed December 10, 2013, http://www.writingstudio.co.za/page2600.html.

[vii] See "The Making of Persepolis", accessed November 12, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwAWGdRx_Qc.

[viii] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49.

[ix] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 351.

Short Bio-notes

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Kate has been Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Animation programme since 2007 and MA Animation programme leader since 2012. She studied for an MA in Computer Animation from C.N.B.D.I., France and has previously worked at Teesside University and Doncaster College. Kate's industry experience includes working as an in-game and full motion video animator for Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. Published works include festival screenings in Europe and WWF-One World nominated for a BAF! commercials award at the Bradford Animation Festival in 2007. Magazine publications include articles in Imagine and 3D World magazine on behalf of WAK Studios. Kate has secured funding from Screen Yorkshire and The Arts Council Lottery Fund for short form animation and recently co-ordinated a short animation and supported material for a NHS Bright Smiles project with the School of Health at Salford.