Reader Engagement in *Persepolis* through the Contexts of the Graphic Memoir

With its potential for nuanced and multi-layered meanings, the graphic memoir has become an avant-garde format for many authors. It allows readers to develop enriched narrative insight by actively connecting word and image in ways unavailable to traditional genres.

Intricately woven, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* utilizes the juxtaposition of imagery and text to not only portray her unfathomable stories of growing up in a war torn Iran, but also reflect upon their authenticity. Satrapi’s use of the iconic engages readers with heightened experiences of perspective, emotion, and memory in order to enhance this authenticity. Through the graphic novel format, memoirs such as *Persepolis* are devised as reservoirs of memories; here *Persepolis* functions to gather those memories where a collective of different ethical standpoints and timelines are engaged with by Satrapi. Through this engagement, Satrapi provokes readers to reflect on their own ethical and ideological views, encouraging the development of a symbiotic relationship between them and the narrative.

Functioning as co-creative intermedia, graphic novels provide readers with an enhanced connection with a narrative through the active engagement of closure and the icon. As Scott McCloud states in *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” is called closure (63). In essence, the act of closure allows readers to fill in the blank areas between initial perception and the later completion of the whole. McCloud further explains
that “when we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details”; minimizing an image down to its “essential ‘meaning’ [or making it more iconic]... can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). Proper utilization of the iconic allows for a sophisticated text such as Persepolis, where Satrapi minimizes detail down to the essentials, enabling the subtleties of emotion and memory to become prominent. This is shown in panels three and four on page 142 of Persepolis, where the minimal detail in the style heightens the emotion. In these panels, Satrapi’s use of the iconic with her style allows for heightened closure. Furthermore, since the reading of comic books has been widely regarded as an adolescent pastime, those “who encounter these revisionary texts” that present incommensurable substance in an avant-garde format such as Persepolis “are thus obliged to reexamine their expectations and critical perspectives” (Davis qtd. in Darda 32).

One of the most effective ways that the iconic style functions in graphic memoirs is in the representation of the face as an icon. As an icon is identifiable, it is also relatable, and, therefore, so is the face when it is presented in this way. Persepolis immediately familiarizes the reader with Marji (Satrapi’s self within the narrative) and creates an identification with her. The first panel on the opening page shows Marji’s face (see fig. 1); this iconic depiction of her face identifies her human qualities, and in this identification readers find a part of themselves. This is important as where there is no face, “the result is, in one case, a representation of the inhuman, and in the other, the total eradication of human presence” (Darda 36). Satrapi’s representation of the face as an icon allows for a prominent identification and a deeply personal engagement with the memoir. As Judith Butler has observed, to achieve the maximum potency of identification within the iconography, the “face must aspire to represent the human but fail and show its failure
to represent or ‘capture’ the human in total” (qtd. in Darda 36). Identifying with Marji as a human being and as an individual is also about understanding the complexity of her character.

Darda argues that “the icon of Satrapi’s autographic is not about [readers] seeing [themselves] as the protagonist... but about seeing the protagonist as complex” (38). In *Persepolis*, Satrapi represents herself in her entirety; she shows her ethical dilemmas, bright moments, as well as her downfalls as she grows up. And, importantly, in doing this, she carefully reflects on the construction of her narrative, attempting to stay true to herself in her representations. Throughout the portrayal of all of her life's dilemmas in *Persepolis*, Satrapi crucially reflects on her representation of events. The stakes of this reflection are rooted in her childhood in Iran where one misspoken word or activity in the wrong place or time could have resulted in Marji’s arrest. Attentive readers soon realize, then, that *Persepolis* is not only about the representation of
Iranians as humans, but also about the presentation of representation throughout her life. These realizations connect readers with the character because Satrapi stays true to herself and demonstrates that she is complex and a human being with both wise and poor decisions.

Engaging readers with ideas regarding the qualities of memory, as well as its utilization of illustration in conjunction with the written word, the graphic narrative also allows the traversal of both time and emotion. Such traversals happen and are dictated within the confines of the readers’ own memories, where they are transported back through their lives to experience profound emotional states triggered by the fundamentals of Satrapi’s stylized imagery. Satrapi’s style is one of distinct contrast between black and white with only subtle instances of shading. This visual style, as described by Chute, is one in which the “visual emptiness of the simple, ungraded blackness in the frames shows not the scarcity of memory, but rather its thickness, its depth” (98). According to Chute, it is through this representation of memory that Satrapi, in Persepolis, is able to reflect upon the “insufficiency of any representation to ‘fully’ represent trauma” (Chute 103). In portraying the riveting scenes of her childhood during the Islamic Revolution, Satrapi “harnesses the power of the visual” (103). She connects herself to readers, showing the tragedies and hardships of losing relatives, moving away from home, and coming of age. As everyone can relate to the complexities of coming of age, she represents her story in the “important emotional landscape” of the child, where this complex movement works due to “its distance from and proximity to the realities it references” (Chute 103).

An instance of trying to represent the un-representable can be seen in the pure black void of panel five on page 142 in Persepolis. This void is the panel’s only imagery, and it is accompanied by the narration, “no scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger.” As Satrapi’s black panel indicates, neither words nor images could describe what she saw
or felt. And, left with a black panel of a mirror, readers, by reflecting on their own traumatic memories, are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with Satrapi’s memoir.

Satrapi’s graphic representation of memories produces closure for a reader precisely because of how memory works. According to a study conducted at Northwestern University's School of Medicine, our memories function in such a way that, when one recalls the past, “brain networks change in ways that can alter the later recall of [an] event” (n.p.). In other words, when an event is remembered, it is not the actual event being remembered; rather, one is actually recalling the instance in which they last remembered the memory. Memories are therefore comprised of countless recollections of instances that build upon each other in order to produce the most recent memory. In the pages of a graphic novel, one is able to transcend time, viewing the past, present, and future simultaneously in the panels. *Persepolis* is built upon many layers of memory, each offering different perspectives. Due to the way memory builds upon previous recollection, these perspectives accumulate with readers’ personal records of memory through closure. As McCloud notes, closure involves “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63) and in this case readers use closure to tie these different perspectives together, a process which once again contributes to the symbiotic relationship between readers and Satrapi’s narrative.

Perspective is the window through which all information is filtered in a narrative, and the graphic memoir allows for a view of varying perceptions alongside their ethical standpoints. As Nancy Pedri explains, “[variations] in framing may also have to do with variations in narrative point of view,” and in *Persepolis* readers are occasionally given frames providing views of both the narrator” and of "what can be seen by a character” (Pedri 10). Furthermore, as Marji’s “consciousness” is what filters her tale, the panels predominantly show her as she “engages in the story world,” where she is “not only partaking in its action, but also imagining others as they
partake in it” (Pedri 10). Within this interplay of perspectives, there is the visual thread, the written thread, and the author who weaves these strands together. Here, the voice of Satrapi’s “older, recollective” self is evident within the narrative of the text, whereas her more adolescent, “directly experiencing voice” is predominant in the dialogue (Chute 97). Furthermore, this younger voice is often portrayed in Satrapi’s “discursive presentation of pictorial space,” where Persepolis’s “visual voice” functions as part of its numerous layers (Chute 97). As Chute argues, this “graphic narrative form allows for a dialectical conversation of different voices to compose the position from which Satrapi writes”; within this composition, “verbally and visually [inscribed] multiple autobiographical ‘I’s’ coalesce (97).

Satrapi has carefully constructed the form of her presentation to challenge the normalization of violence. The portrayal of violence as entertainment has become such a cornerstone of Western culture that many have become desensitized to its horror. However, contrary to this normalization, “it’s not normal,” and within the ethics of the graphic memoir, if the artist draws it “in color—the color of flesh and the red of the blood... [the color] reduces it by making it realistic” (Satrapi qtd. in Chute 99). Therefore, Satrapi’s stylistic choice is able to portray violence as it is and as it should be perceived — not normal. Furthermore, Satrapi utilizes the perspective of the adolescent to emphasize the reality of violence; as Chute proclaims, readers of Satrapi’s Persepolis are viewing a “child’s-eye rendition of trauma” (98). To fully comprehend this graphic memoir, it is important to understand that the “fact of style [is] a narrative choice” that pulls readers into truthful representation, “and not simply a default expression” (Chute 99).

Through the utilization of the graphic narrative’s enriched, avant-garde structure, memoirs such as Satrapi’s Persepolis become profound; these pictorial and written narratives
intertwine a variety of complex ethical perspectives that can portray a memoir’s depth through its engagement with readers. These perspectives can come together to construct a vastly complicated and highly nuanced autographical composition. As style is important with any form of human expression, it is crucial in utilizing the full potential of this autographic medium. When narratives such as *Persepolis* unite specific concepts and perceptions, they create a multilayered, sophisticated graphic memoir. This comics format enables readers and the memoir to become extensions of each other, as readers are left questioning their own methods of speculation and perception.
Works Cited


