

The Success of Combination

A Study of Hybridity Through the Combination of Aesthetics and History in
Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*.



“This text, more than any other, transformed the status of comics as a
legitimate vehicle for the telling of history.”

- Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys

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June 24, 2016

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Abstract

This thesis examined the way aesthetics and history work together in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and how this combination positions the reader in a third space. The thesis used several different theories to make its statement, being the reader-reception theory, the theory on Orientalism and the theory on the reception of comics. All of these theories focus on the hybridity, or third space, that is created through tensions existent and created between a text and its reader during the reading of a text. A close reading of several frames of *Persepolis* was conducted in order to point out how the frames depict notions of hybridity and thus how they use the third space in both the aesthetic and historical parts of the work. The analysis performed serves to combine the theory and the close reading and thus gives an explanation of the way the theories presented are apparent in *Persepolis*.

The combination of the theory, the close reading and the analysis showed that what Satrapi wanted to achieve with *Persepolis*, is to raise awareness with her audience that their—Western—conception of Iran is not a correct one. She uses all of the elements of her work in order to raise this awareness with her reader, intertwining text and image so that her message is evident, but still leaves room for interpretation. The combination of a personal and Orientalist history within the work allows her to interact with the reader by letting him identify with the characters and negating this identification simultaneously. The study performed shows that the use of hybridity, within the combination of aesthetics and history in both format and content of the work, is one of the key elements of the work that allowed it to reach the success it has known and still knows today.

1. Introduction

The fact that Marjane Satrapi's intriguing comic work *Persepolis* has been sold over a million times¹ allows me to state that it is one of the greatest successes of the comic book industry, which makes it an interesting study object. Although Satrapi is a talented writer and illustrator, and her drawings match the context perfectly, *Persepolis*' success has also benefited from the context it was published in. This context is mainly a political one: the four-volume *Persepolis* series was completed in September of 2003, only three years after the attacks on 9/11.² The events that took place on and around this date, and the attitude that the West held toward the East after President Bush's choice of words in his State of the Union Address in 2002, in which he included Iran in the 'axis of evil,'³ enhanced the division between West and East. This division was not only a division between West and East, but in this context also a division between good and evil. Still, this sentiment instigated a new curiosity about Iran, both in terms of Westerners wanting more information, and Easterners

¹ Since its first volume's initial publication in November of 2000.

² *Persepolis 1* was published in November of 2000, *Persepolis 2* in October of 2001, *Persepolis 3* in August of 2002 and *Persepolis 4* in September of 2003. Although all four volumes have been published separately, I use *The Complete Persepolis* for this thesis, which is a collection of all volumes. I will thus be referring to *Persepolis* as a whole instead of adding the volume number.

³ Iran aggressively pursues these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens -- leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections -- then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic. (Bush, 2002)

wanting to offer a response to the Western framing. *Persepolis*, among other Iranian memoirs, used this opening to speak to the curiosity of (second-generation) Iranian exiles that sought a way to access their culture and history, to connect with their home country and its inhabitants, and to address Westerners' curiosity to learn more. Besides the political context that increased interest in works such as *Persepolis*, the book was issued at a time when the memoir genre experienced a major increase in popularity (Malek, 360). Amy Malek states in her article, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series", that memoirs gained popularity because they depict a true story while maintaining an engaging narrative (360). Another aspect of these memoirs that impacted their popularity is the fact that there is a relatively large amount of Iranian women who succeeded in publishing their memoirs since 1999, presumably because they are able to combine the emotional part of their story with the political one.

The main focus of my thesis will be on the reception of *Persepolis*, which is why I use and combine Hans Robert Jauss' and Wolfgang Iser's theories on reader-reception theory to explain, in relation to *Persepolis*, the way a text affects its reader. These theories are mainly written on the interaction between a text and its reader, the way a reader deals with the information he is given and especially with the information he is *not* given and what this does to his experience on the reading of the story. The interaction between a text and its reader in this theory explains the positioning of the reader in the third space—that between the text and the reader himself—and how the reader forms a third story from the information he receives and is not given.

Edward Said's theory on Orientalism will be used because, according to his explanation and definition of Orientalism and the Orientalist, Satrapi should be considered an Orientalist for the way she finds herself between two cultures and writes about them while belonging to neither of them. It is the way she transmits these feelings of not belonging

throughout the story of *Persepolis* that make the work Orientalist. Satrapi wrote her work deliberately for the Western reader, which makes her able to use the Western stereotypes about the East—which she knows the reader has—to set the work in motion, to create an interaction between the text and the reader, by negating these ideas throughout the story.

Although I already write on reader-reception theory, this theory is one that was written for works that consist of text only. Since *Persepolis* is a comic, it is necessary to include comics reception in my discussion. Because the genre has not been considered to be of academic use until recently, there is not very much theory on comics reception at hand. Still, the theories on comics reception that I use throughout my thesis do explain the rise of the comic and the shift of the use of the word ‘comic’ to that of ‘graphic novel’ to refer to works like Satrapi’s.⁴ Moreover, these theories explain how text and image work together in comics and how a tension is created between text and image and between the format and its reader. The theory on the reception of comics and the creation of a third space in comics thus elaborates on the already existent reader-reception theory.

Through a close reading of several frames from *Persepolis*, focused on both a personal and a more national history, followed by an analysis of the work that connects the theory presented to the close readings performed, I aim to explore how the combination of aesthetics and history position the reader of *Persepolis* in a third space, through which Satrapi allows the—Western—reader to identify himself with the story, while at the same time confronting him with his stereotypes and ideas about the East.

⁴ The term graphic novel was used so that its content would seem more mature than that of the all-known comic book. Although many theorists use the term ‘graphic novel’, I prefer to use the term ‘comic’ or ‘comics’ throughout the work, since that is the preference of Satrapi herself.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Reader-reception theory

The first scholar to write on reception theory was Hans Robert Jauss. In his book, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, which includes the essay, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” (Jauss, 1969, 1970), Jauss stresses the dialogic nature of literary response and history. A literary work can only become a historically important literary work if it has been found interesting enough by its readers to be remembered and promoted; literary history cannot exist without active participation.

According to Jauss, the historical and communicative character of literature’s public presupposes a relationship between the work, audience, and new work that is dialogical and process like at the same time (Jauss, 1407). Indeed the work, audience, and new work are in constant dialogue with each other, for they can only exist in communication. With this constant dialogue between text and reader, the appearance and experience of literature are also tied together (Jauss, 1407). This means that through a connection or dialogue between text and reader, the outlook of the text is connected to the experience a reader has while reading. Complementing this idea of audience and writer having to work together is the work of Wolfgang Iser, who argues that the work is virtual, meaning that the work itself is situated in between the text and its reader because it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader (Iser, 1524). The work, he claims, derives its dynamism from this virtuality. He explains virtuality further by arguing that the reader sets the work in motion by applying his thoughts to it and in doing so also sets himself in motion. The actualization of the text, then, is an interaction between the text and reader, which is why we must focus on both the writer and reader in order to learn about the text itself (Iser, 1524). The difficulty in reading the virtual, or the work, in a text-reader relationship is that there is no face-to-face

situation, as there is in a real conversation (Iser, 1525). There is neither a sort of context or frame that guides the conversation. While there are codes, for example a book's cover or title, that hint towards a certain frame, they need to be analyzed before a frame can be drafted from them. It is this lack of certainty, this lack of guidelines that triggers the interaction between a text and its reader. This interaction between text and reader introduced by Iser is also mentioned by Jauss, who elaborates on the interaction by adding a historical implication to it.

The relationship that develops between a text and its reader has, according to Jauss, both aesthetic and historical implications: aesthetic because the first aspect of reading a literary work is deciding whether you like it or not and historical because the liking of the first reader sustains the existence of the work for the following generations.⁵ Jauss therefore shows us that no reader can enter into a literary experience without using foreknowledge. In fact, using foreknowledge is a fundamental element of the literary experience, for it is unavoidable when reading a new text, and it is the base on which new information in the same experience is projected. This foreknowledge does not, however, come from the reader himself per se, since the literary work always contains elements of a familiar cultural nature. While the text can trigger certain feelings within the reader and certain memories of what he already knows or has already read, the framing of the text within a certain social situation—for example in a university—also lends important foreknowledge. Additionally, the way in which a work is framed also plays a role in reader reception. The cover and size of a book, for example, can hint to the work's genre or the age range it is meant for. The necessity of using additional foreknowledge is thus always present because a text alone leaves open spaces that the reader must fill in (Iser, 1527) it is precisely both these open spaces and the reader's

⁵ It is through these aesthetic and historical implications that a literary canon can be formed. It is because of these canon formations that it has become difficult to look at a history of literature, since all we seem to know is a history of a reception of literature. If we want to renew our literary history, all prejudice of literature must be grounded, because literature's historicity rests on a collection of experiences had by the reader before the reading of the literary work. A literary fact is therefore not a literary fact at all, but merely a piece of pseudo-history, based upon the opinion or taste of one of its readers. A literary work lives on only if its next readers find it as interesting as the previous readers did. The reception and continuity of a work of literature depends wholly on its public (Jauss, 1409).

foreknowledge that create an interaction between text and reader that is guided both by what is written and what is not written at the same time.

Jauss calls this collection of expectations and rules, of implications and explications that are documented in one's mind, a "horizon" (Jauss, 1412). A reader can have for example a "horizon of expectations" or a "horizon of experience of life" (Jauss, 1411). These horizons can be narrowed or broadened when reading a literary work. Because of the existence of these horizons, there is a certain distance detectable between the horizon of expectation and the work itself (Jauss, 1412). According to Jauss, this distance determines the work's artistic character. The smaller the distance, the more artistic the work appears. This means that if a work corresponds with a reader's horizon of expectations, it is considered more beautiful because it triggers the knowledge a reader already has and satisfies the reader's desire. This idea is extended with the introduction of "literary evolution" (Jauss, 1418). A literary evolution occurs when a new literary work rises against the background of other preceding works, reaches a climax, and is then replaced by another new literary work in a similar genre. This literary evolution allows older forms to be recognized after their climax. It is possible, however, that one form does not get through the first horizon, which causes it to be forgotten or unrecognized. When, however, a newer work does get through the horizon, the older work can be rediscovered because the horizon opens itself to this form of writing (Jauss, 1418).

2.2 Orientalism

Considering the fact that *Persepolis* is an exile cultural production, it is important to include Edward Said's theory on Orientalism in the discussion about reader reception. Published in 1978, *Orientalism* provides a key term in the discourse on the interplay between Western and Eastern culture. According to Said, Orientalism is "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said, 1866). Indeed, rather than being a *geographical place*, the Orient is a *political space* that has helped

shape the idea of Europe through an emphasis on the differences between the West and the East.

Said's introduction of the term as an institution for dealing with the East, or more specifically, as an institution upholding the domination of the West over the East, implies that the countries belonging to the idea of the Orient are not seen as individual nations with their own cultures but rather as a whole that is the same and should be treated in the same way. It is due to this that the West looks at the East in terms of the "Other" or "them" and at itself in terms of the "I" or "Us." Although Said states that Orientalism is a will or intention to understand another culture, another world, he also states that it is a "dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires [...] in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced" (Said, 1877). The contradiction between these statements—that there is an attempt to understand the East and that the idea of the Orient is shaped by writings on the idea of the Orient—is what lies at the heart of stereotyping. By applying a collection of Western ideas to several different nations and cultures and treating them as one, an Eastern stereotype—the Orient—was created.

It is precisely this stereotype, this "Othering," that Satrapi aims to negate in *Persepolis*. She stated in an interview that:

If people had known exactly how my country was, where it was located, if they had been saying things that seemed reasonable, even if these things reflected different points of view, but which corresponded at least somewhat to reality, I would not have had to repeat all these things. The fact is that the image of my country has been so misrepresented, and that it was so removed from what I knew, that I felt compelled to talk. (Hill, 19)

Because the Orientalist Western depiction of Iran has, to a certain degree, remained unchanged since the late 1970s, Satrapi felt urged to tell her story, one in which she explicitly explores Orientalism through recounting her experience as an Easterner in Austria. What is interesting is that she also uses the Western constructed idea of the Orient to create an interaction between her text and its reader. As I will demonstrate through close reading passages from *Persepolis*, a Western reader encounters the work with a certain set of ideas, and perhaps even stereotypes, about the Orient that he has gained through his Western education. By affirming and negating these Orientalist ideas and by making a distinction between what is shown and what is told, Satrapi plays with the reader's foreknowledge and establishes an interaction between the text and the reader. The reader is thereby brought into action by his own stereotyping and is then refrained by Satrapi's denial of these stereotypes.

What is created by this interaction between the text and the reader as set in motion by Satrapi, can be called hybridity. Amy Malek introduces the notion of hybridity as being a third space between two other spaces, for example cultures. It is by denying the two spaces that a third space is created (Malek, 357). The explanation of hybridity functioning as a third space between two other spaces is applicable to both the interaction between text and reader and to Orientalism. In an interaction between text and reader, the third space is the story the reader creates himself through the interplay between his experience and the text. It is the result of the filling in of the blanks in the text. In Orientalism, hybridity is the third space an Orientalist finds himself in when he encounters a feeling of exile in both his home country and his host country. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi is able to combine these meanings of hybridity by creating a work that cannot exist without a third story added to it both by the reader who fills in the blanks, and by telling her own story of finding herself in a hybrid space between the West and the Orient. In doing so, Satrapi combines a personal history that allows for the reader to identify with the main character, with a national history that denies this

identification. By familiarizing the reader with elements of her childhood, upbringing and education that the reader may have experienced himself, but at the same time constantly putting these elements in the context of war, Satrapi allows the reader to identify with the story but almost immediately denies this identification. In denying this identification through the depiction of war and hereby contradicting the reader's original set of ideas about Iran, she emphasizes the differences between the Orient and the West. It is through this game of identification and denial that Satrapi plays with her reader, that the reader's horizon of expectation when encountering the work is broken, it has been opened for new and other forms that talk about Orientalism: a literary evolution has taken place.

2.3 Comics Aesthetics

The prime theory on the reception of comics, which provides a valuable addition to the reader-reception theory explained above, consists of the works of Charles Hatfield and Thierry Groensteen. The idea of an interaction between a text and its reader, and a kind of interplay between the two, can also be seen in comics, but what comics do differently, of course, is add to the text-reader relationship the image-reader and text-image relationship. Drawing on reader-reception theory, Hatfield uses the terms *inert spectatorship* and *committed reading* (Hatfield, 33). He argues that images in comics are seen as received information, and can thus be handled in a passive way, while text is seen as perceived information, which means that it has to be handled in an active way; images are open and easy, while text is coded and abstract. In comics, these functions can change or mix. Images can become abstract, like text, and text can become open and easy to grasp, like images (Hatfield, 36-37). The author of a comic mostly guides this type of reception, since he decides what kind of images or text to put into the work. This interplay between the function of image and text in a comic also has influence on the way a page is designed. In order to be able to

speak of page designs, there is a certain set of terms that is used in comics theory. I will use a page from *Persepolis* in order to concretize the terminology.

The whole of the figurative elements on the page is called the *hyperframe* (red). A hyperframe consists of several *frames* (green), which border the *panel* (yellow), in which the text and images appear. The panels are separated by *gutters* (blue), which are the empty spaces between the panels. Gutters are, therefore, more of a result of the drawing of frames than vice versa. However, the size or place of the gutter may influence the reading experience, depending on its relation to the story told both in image and text. The image below gives us a concrete idea of what a gutter can do to a text. The gutter dividing the last two panels in the upper right corner of the page clearly depicts a division between Marji's mother and grandmother, which is emphasized by the fact that they are sitting in opposite directions. The gutter dividing the panels in the middle of the page functions as a division between a dream space and the real world, and the gutter dividing the panels on the bottom of the page functions as a way of showing that time has passed as Marji runs to hug her father.

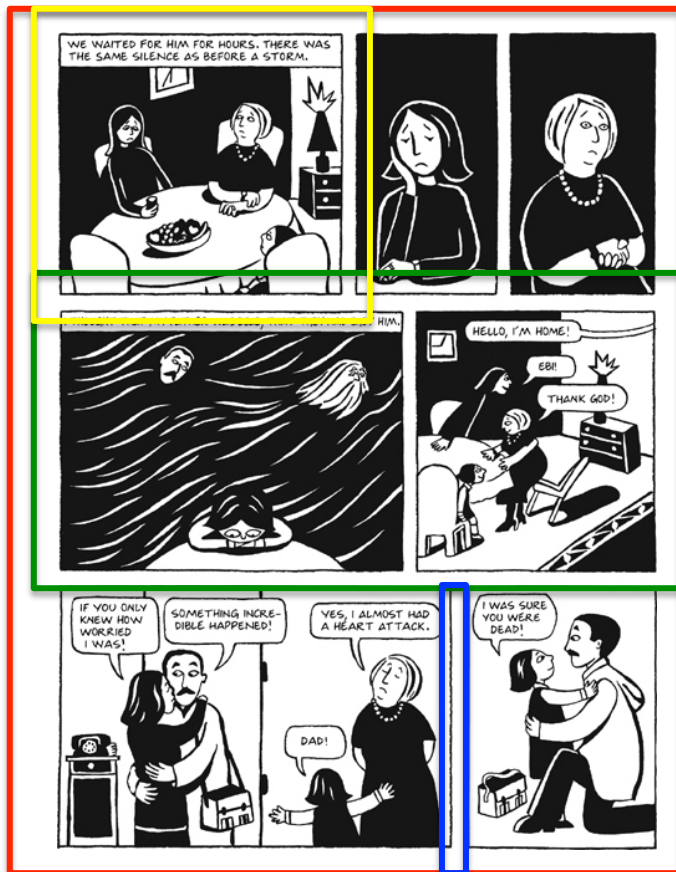


Figure 1. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 38.

The frame in the graphic novel or comic book is always a sign of something to be read. It draws the reader's attention and suggests that the story will continue in the next panel. The first panel is therefore of great importance because it has to draw enough attention to itself and to what comes next so that the reader will keep reading. As aforementioned, panels are enclosed by frames. Many scholars agree that a frame is a unit, an isolated sign, thus implying that every frame is a sign in itself and that it has an implicit meaning that guides the reader to the next frame. In other words, a single frame can have the power to attain a reader for a certain amount of time, but inevitably pushes him onto the content of the next frame. Other scholars, including Groensteen, disagree with this theoretical explanation of the function of the frame. Groensteen argues that the frame does not have enough space to depict enough action for the reader to want to read on (50). However, even in his disagreement with this

view of how comics encourage reading, his argument also suggests that for a reader to want to read on, a comic needs more than one frame to tie the reader to it in sequence.⁶

Hatfield introduces two terms that can be linked to the idea of a frame never being a single unit: breakdown and closure (41). Breakdown occurs when a story or narrative is divided into several images, and closure occurs when connections between those images are made by the reader, when the narrative becomes a whole again.⁷ Closure is not only achieved through the interplay of images, but through the interplay of the visual and verbal codes as well. Certain words, such as “later” or “that morning” may help the reader to connect the images into a sequence and to thus achieve closure. However, although text and image work together in comics, they are still seen, read, and received as two different factors that have to be treated in a different ways. Our learned assumptions about text and images highly influence the reading experience (Hatfield, 41). The art of comics lies in its play on the fact humans are mostly not able to see image and text as a whole; it is the tensions between the constant destabilization of the distinction and the habit of distinction that contribute greatly to the comics reading experience. As Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue, it is by using this tension that the author can tell two stories: one in images, the other in text. In their text, Chute and DeKoven state that:

The form’s syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page [...] the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate

⁶ “This function is trivial and, in most cases, superfluous. In theory, the panel sufficiently manifests its enunciative character, its status as a link in the discursive chain; it attracts the eye so much that, even if it is unframed, the reader pauses there for at least an instant. Yet, the function that I have called “readerly” acquires all of its significance in the case where a part of the image on the page might appear insignificant, because it doesn’t allow enough space for the action or the spectacle, or merges in its immediate environment to the point where this section risks not being seen.” (Groensteen, 51)

⁷ These are complementary terms, they describe a relationship between a sequence and a series; the series of images has to be translated by the reader into a narrative sequence, through which closure is achieved. The sequence that is created by the reader triggers a certain rhythm and certain expectations, which the author can in his turn use to attract the reader’s attention by exceeding all expectations or by doing the unexpected. Similarly, a slight change in the design of a frame can break the rhythm and ‘warn’ the reader that this is another event that is, for example, happening inside the author’s head. One needs to really read the comics in order to notice these changes in rhythm. A comic skimmer might not even build up a rhythm or expectations, let alone notice changes in these rhythms. (Hatfield, 41)

narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time. (769)

It is by the interplay of the two stories and the conclusion drawn by the reader on the meaning of these two “stories,” that hybridity takes place and the third meaning of the comic is constructed. As Hatfield states in his book: “Thus the interplay of the two [text and image] suggests a third, more comprehensive meaning that the reader must construct through interference” (37). This statement by Hatfield relates back to the initial reader-reception theory, where the text and the reader function as two “stories” that allow for hybridity to take place and a third meaning to be constructed.

An illustration of the author telling two stories can be seen in the following image (fig. 2).



Figure 2. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 53.

This image clearly depicts a contradiction, a tension, between text and image. The text says: “now that the devil has gone.” The image, on the contrary, displays the devil surrounding the family. The image thus contradicts the text, coinciding with Hatfield’s theory on the different functions of text and image and the different stories they tell. The story of the text in this image is different from the one in the image, which leads to a third story

assembled by the reader using the information given in the comic.

The appearance of text surrounding images can influence one's reading, and yet still one does not see the printed words as a part of the fictional world one finds oneself in. These words are seen as a background commentary on the images rather than as an indispensable element of what one is reading or experiencing. This effect of text within a comic can be modified when the writer very actively incorporates the text in the image, so that the distinction between text and image is more difficult to make and the reader is disoriented but encouraged to become aware of what he is reading. Although text is not actively incorporated in the image below (fig. 3), this image is a clear example of the image complementing, rather than contradicting, the text.

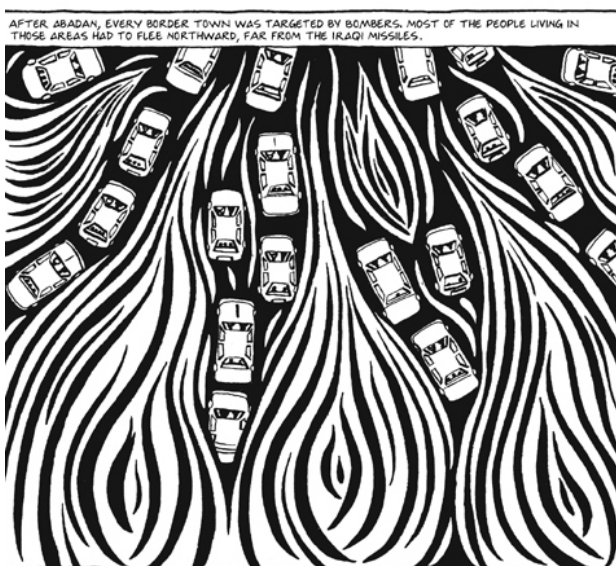


Figure 3. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 106

Above the image depicted in this panel it says that people from target areas fled the country in order to escape the missiles. The text is visualized concretely by displaying an image in which the cars are chased by flames. This is an image that uses text as a background commentary since the image speaks for itself; its meaning is readable without reading it in

text. The chasing of the flames does not only show the severity of the situation and the danger these people have been in, it also gives an idea of the permanence of these people's decisions. After leaving their homes there will be no turning back.

Contradicting what has been said earlier about the existing tensions in comics, is the fact that this tension does not necessarily have to be a tension between text and image, or text and symbol. The tension found in comics may also be a tension found between different symbols, leaving text out of the picture. This will then become a tension between symbols that tell and symbols that show. The tension occurs because symbols that show are representational images that depict what is happening, while symbols that tell are complementing symbols that criticize or respond to the symbols that show (Ibid., 41).



Figure 4. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. P. 343

This distinction between telling and showing frames is visible in this image (fig. 4), where the background image of dancing, drinking, and music *shows* and the image in the middle of the group of men *tells*. The image in the background shows us what is happening in Marji's life and in the lives of many other Iranians who do not agree with the regime. The block in the middle, the telling image, looks like a window through which the regime is controlling its people and criticizing them for their actions. What is interesting about this

image though, is that its functions can also be reversed so that they complement the text guiding the image. When talking of the representation of Iran, the image in the middle shows what other countries are made to think is happening in Iran, while the background image is the showing image that criticizes the way Iran is represented to the rest of the world.

The tension existing between the manner of drawing and what is depicted is enhanced because of the contrast existing between them. While the characters in *Persepolis* are, for example, drawn with a clear line, in a simplistic way, they endure difficult or harsh situations. I will explain this notion through a reading of the image below (fig. 5).



Figure 5. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 120

In this image, a dancing Marji and her friends are drawn in a similar way to the boys in the upper panel: all are wearing black clothing and are presented more or less as the same silhouettes. It is precisely this similarity in drawing that reinforces the differences between the children: they are all children, but in very different situations. Thus, a democracy of form

takes place here. Because every character is drawn in the same way, there is no difference between the characters and what they are doing, but rather it is the background that changes their actions. It is, among others, this fact that gives us an insight in the way aesthetics and history play together in the reception of a comic. The comic genre is one that evidently provides an entrance into the depiction of a (hi)story through the use of aesthetics. As Rocío G. Davis states,

The shocking sequencing, which suggests simultaneity, foregrounds the child's vacillating perceptions: though intellectually she acknowledges that violence happens, her emotional life is that of an upper-class teenager and she locates herself in a world where typical adolescent processes can still, and must be, lived. This dramatic depiction of the contrast between the poorer teenagers' lives and her own through a one-page juxtaposition is one of the most effective pages of her text. (275)

The reality depicted in the upper image, the telling symbol, contrasts the reality depicted in the lower image, which is the showing symbol. The lower image shows us what is happening in Marji's life, while the upper one depicts a scene that is happening as well, but not in Marji's world. Marji's peers from poorer backgrounds were given no choice but to accept their 'golden' key and undergo the consequences of this acceptance. Marji herself, on the contrary, enjoys her privileges as a child in a richer family, though she realizes that not everybody is granted this luxury. While these children have the same rights in principle, it is through this frame that Satrapi shows us that, in war times, the socio-economic situation in Iran determines destinies.

The academical acknowledgement of comics as literary works has created an evolution in the field of literature. It is because of the way that comics expand the tensions that are normally visible between text and reader in a written text, to tensions between text,

image and the reader, that a literary evolution is created and that horizons of expectations are broadened.

Now that I have established the relevance of the theory in consideration of *Persepolis*, I turn to a close reading of several frames that is based more on the content of the work than on its format. In doing so, the historical aspect of *Persepolis* will be exposed and its relation to the aesthetics will be furtherly explained. Furthermore, an emphasis will be laid on the hybridity taking place in the content, the story of the work as well.

3. Close Reading

3.1 Introduction to the Close Reading

In performing several close readings of different important frames in *Persepolis*, I aim to apply the theory presented in the framework above to the literary work that serves as the subject of this study. Furthermore, as previously stated in the introduction, I aim to address an analysis of *Persepolis* through a look at both her personal history and that of her country. The images chosen for the close readings below are divided into two sections: the first one addresses and illustrate Marji's personal history, the second one addresses and illustrates her country's history and the Orientalist element of *Persepolis*.

First, I will closely read frames that show Marji's life as a normal child. These are frames that describe a more personal narrative and that do not necessarily depict the political war context. I find these frames important for this research because they show the reader that, even in a context of war and political chaos, a child's or teenager's life in Iran is comparable to one in the West. These frames also emphasize Marji's life as a normal child in an abnormal world. It is the contrast between her life as a normal child and teenager and the context of war, pointed to throughout her conversations and the situations she finds herself in, that emphasize that her upbringing has been different from ours. Next, I will focus on the notions

of Orientalism and exile in *Persepolis*. Being a diasporic and Orientalist writer and having been encouraged by her parents to move out of her home country, Satrapi's autobiographical character Marji has experienced the consequences of Orientalism and finds herself in an exiled position, which she manages to depict through images and text in an interesting way.

3.1.1. A Normal Child in an Abnormal World

Despite growing up in a context of war and revolution, the interests Marji has and the things that entertain her are not very different from the ones a child growing up in a different context would have. Throughout her comic, Satrapi is able to depict several elements of childhood and of her experience growing up that are recognizable to any reader because he has likely had similar experiences in his childhood.



Figure 6. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 62.

The chapter that includes this hyperframe tells the reader the story of Mohsen and Samiak, two friends of Marji's parents who were imprisoned by the regime. It gives the reader a look into the way they were tortured and treated. What is interesting, however, is that the story is animated through the eyes of Marji, those of a small child who is not supposed to hear this story. Note that, in the upper right frame, she says: "My parents were so shocked that they forgot to spare me this experience...". The frame below shows the reader Marji's

imagination of the stories told. The frame has no borders, which implies that the degree of violence in the tortures has no borders, that the trauma depicted and occurring cannot be contained.

Looking at the bottom frame, we see Marji looking at her own iron with a scared look on her face. The text guiding the image reminds the reader of the fact that this story is told through the eyes of an innocent child, a child that does not have torturous associations with an iron. In her book, Hillary Chute says that: “The open door [...] that graphically divides Marji from the iron at which she stares will never, it is suggested, be closed. For Marji, this is a distortion of the familiar: the location of horror is in the everyday.” (151).



Figure 7. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 9.

What is striking about these frames and panels that tell the reader about Marji’s life as a child, is the fact that, be it with small changes added in text or images, the frames could be used in a comic about any child growing up. When looking at figure 6 for example, where the little girls are playing with their veils because they do not understand the meaning of the veil, one could replace the veils in the panel with, for example, neckties for an all boys school. The veil has no meaning to the little girls; they do not want to wear them because they don’t see why they should. It is the rebellion of an unwilling child that Satrapi depicted in a way that could be depicted in a different story. This unwillingness to wear their veil also indicates that

these children do not have any possibility to express the way they feel about the changes happening in their lives. It is not their place to say anything about it or to have an opinion about their situation. Thus, refusing to wear the veil and playing with it is, to them, a way of letting the adults know that they do not agree with the changes.

It is this idea of “rebell-ing-as-much-as-we-can” that is recurrent in the story.

Throughout her (teenage) life, we see more ways in which Marji is attempting to rebel the system in her own way.



Figure 8. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 137.

Complementing the former panel is the frame hereabove. The frame is part of a hyperframe that shows the consequences for those who rebel against the state’s regime. Marji is not able to rebel against the regime of her country. She is, however, able to rebel against her mother’s “regime,” which she compares to that of her country and which, to her, may have the same impression as that of her country. Her actions of rebellion are recognizable to the reader as actions of a teenager in the process of becoming a grown-up.



Figure 9. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 153.

The discussion depicted in the frame above is one that could be conducted between a Western mother and daughter in a non-war situation as well. It is a sign of Marji becoming a grown up and determining her own rules in what she can and cannot do. The fact that she states that her mother was “very permissive” in comparison to other Iranian mothers emphasizes the fact that her parents stand behind her in terms of developing herself. Marji’s mother allowing her to go and buy (Western) tapes is an indication of the fact that her parents want to bring her up as a world citizen, as someone who knows about the West and about Western music. This is visible as well in the willingness of her parents to buy her a denim jacket, skinny jeans, Nikes, and music posters when they go on holiday to Turkey. (Satrapi, 152)

3.1.2. Orientalism and Orientalizing

As Marji loses the innocence and her childhood perspective, and is confronted with another (Austrian) culture, her visions of the world she lives in change. She realizes the way that cultures work together and look at each other, and the consequences that these interactions have on her as an individual that has encountered two different cultures.



Figure 10. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 232.

This panel is part of the chapter where Marji's mother visits her in Austria. For her mother, it is the first time she has travelled to Europe since the Islamic revolution. She tells Marji the way she has been treated and the difference with the way she was treated before. This small monologue gives the reader a look into the way the Orientalized feel, a piece of information that has scarcely been shared by the Western media. Note as well the use of "they" and "we," which is similar to the way the West looks at itself as "we" and at the East as "they." This change in the use of the terms is an example of reverse "othering" executed by the Iranians towards the Europeans.

The hyperframe and the single panel below (fig. 11 and fig. 12), are examples of a different type of reverse "Othering" and give us an idea of how the (Western) media Orientalize and frame the information they share.



This frame puts the reader in the same situation as Marji. She has just returned from Austria, and her father is surprised that she did not hear the news of Iran having been invaded by Iraqi troops. Her mother corrects him by stating that she has been in Europe for the last four years. This sentence tells the reader two things: firstly, that the news in Europe is very different from that in Iran and European media do not broadcast all events, especially those happening in Iran. Reading these panels and the ones preceding them, the reader gets an idea of the framing of the Western audience by its media. Secondly, the sentence tells the reader that Marji's parents, and she as well, seem to think it is quite normal that Europe did not broadcast these events. Though Ébi at first assumes that she must have heard of it, he takes back his words when Taji reminds him of the difference in Eastern and Western news. For the Iranians, it seems to be clear that the broadcasting of the Iranian war is very subjective in Europe (and in Iran as well).



Figure 12. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 362.

The content of this hyperframe reminds me of our current situation. The way the West frames information makes the Western think that they are the ones suffering from the war. These frames are a clear example of reverse “Othering”, as the Europeans appearing on television are the ones that are afraid while they have nothing to be afraid of, and the ones that find themselves in a situation of war are laughing at them for the way they react. The perspective is reversed; the West is suddenly depicted as a problem area while the war is going on thousands of kilometers away. The page confronts the reader with the way the media he receives is framed in a way that seems to be aimed at scaring its people.



Figure 13. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. p. 307.

This image is one of the strongest of the whole comic. Text and image complement each other in a way that does not allow the formation of a third story by the reader. The intertwining of text and image is done in a striking way in which the state described in the text is extremely accurately drawn in the image. This panel describes the exiled situation Marji finds herself in upon returning to Iran—one of extreme culture shock. While she enjoyed her freedom in the West, she still missed her home country and decided to return to it after having been hospitalized for neglecting her body. However, the home country she thought she came back to is no longer the same country she left, at least for her.

Because of her experiences in the West, the regime in Iran now has a different effect on her, since she is no longer used to it. The harsh experiences she has had in Austria affect her feelings of being a Westerner, but it is those experiences that simultaneously make it difficult for her to feel at home in her own country. She never felt like a European in Austria and she now does not feel like an Iranian in Iran. This feeling of displacement, of not belonging is how exile feels. The image complements the text because it depicts an empty silhouette of a human body—the outline of a body containing and feeling nothing.

In order to complete the explanation of the way aesthetics and history work together in *Persepolis*, I shall combine both the theory and the close readings in the analysis below.

4. Analysis

This analysis combines the theory presented with the close readings performed and explains how aesthetics and history are combined in both sections. The aesthetic element of the book is its format, the graphic aspect of the story. The historical element exists of two histories: that of Marji herself—the personal narrative, her being a normal child—and that of her home country within the dialogue between East and West—the Orientalist aspect of the work. Within the combination between aesthetics and history, the reader is put in a third space that allows him to interact with the text he encounters.

On the combination between aesthetics and personal history, there is a correlation between the manner and quality of drawing and the content displayed by the drawings. The drawings in the first volume(s) are more childlike; she is a child and draws like a child. As Marji grows up and acquires more skills, develops her intelligence, her drawings improve as well. This difference between the drawing styles, although reinforcing the story, has not been done on purpose per se; Satrapi herself even calls it coincidental in an interview with Robert Root:

By coincidence the first book is about my childhood, so I draw like a child. In the second book I draw like a ... a... I was going to say, like a human being ... like a grown-up. [...] because the more you draw, the better you draw[sic].

(154)

This combination between aesthetics and personal history is also visible in the way Satrapi draws the living room and other rooms of her parents' house. The reader may have a certain image of an Iranian household filled with extravagantly decorated carpets and pillows,

but the interior of the house depicted in *Persepolis* resembles the interior of a Western home, one the reader may recognize in his own home. As Malek states in her article:

Satrapi tells her story in simple, black and white drawings, but depicts surroundings that are simultaneously Iranian and yet largely familiar to Western audiences: [...] these images provide non-Iranian readers with a glimpse at both the level of Westernization achieved in the Pahlavi era but also elements that were likely a part of their own childhood. (371-72)

Although this is a statement that may be true to a certain extent, Satrapi gives a different explanation for the depiction of backgrounds in the interview with Hill. In this interview, she asks:

So for a complex story in which there's lots of text, a story that recounts many things, do you really think I also need to add backgrounds and color spots, which not only are useless, but also destroy the rhythm of the reading experience? (21)

The Western look of the Satrapis' house is thus merely a result of Satrapi's intentions to keep the story whole, to not distract the reader from what is told, than to provide the reader with pictures that confirm her Westernized upbringing. Still, it is only because I present the information Satrapi gives herself on these decisions, that their principal meaning is revealed. The fact that *Persepolis* is a comic with images that look Western but from the background for a discourse that takes place in the East, creates a tension in the novel that allows the reader to form his own story out of the information he is given. Despite the fact that not every reader may notice the discrepancy in a Western looking household in Iran, the reader's identification with the characters is subconsciously reinforced. A reader can thus be put in a third space without necessarily noticing.

A third element of the way aesthetics and personal history are combined, is seen in Satrapi's drawing style and choice of colors. What's striking about this element is the fact that within Satrapi's drawings, traditional Iranian drawings are resembled and contrasted at the same time. The resemblance resides in the flat depiction of the characters, the lack of shadows and perspective in the drawings. As in Persian miniatures, the drawing itself is very simple. Note also that, in some frames, the more insignificant the person, the smaller he or she is drawn in comparison to the others, which is also the case in Persian miniatures. Satrapi herself says that her style of drawing is part of her Iranian side she will always have with her. (Chute, 145) While maintaining this Iranian style of drawing, she contradicts it at the same time: although shadowless and flat, Persian drawings are mainly full of bright colors, an aspect that none of the drawings in *Persepolis* entail. On the absence of color, Satrapi said that since she writes about the Middle East, she writes about violence. The coloring of blood and flesh that is inevitable when writing and drawing about violence makes the situation too real and therefore unrealistic, because the people have gotten too used to seeing violence and its colors. (Ibid., 146) In an interview with Hill, she states the following on the use of color:

[...] if you add color, especially for a book like *Persepolis* in particular, and you show someone being tortured, you show his blood, then you reduce that human being to looking like a piece of meat. People for me are human beings, not pieces of meat. (21)

The only color visible in the *Persepolis* series is that on the covers of the volumes. The first French editions, which were published as four different volumes, each have a different color with a different meaning to it that corresponds with that volume's content. In an interview with Satrapi, she explains that red is the color for the revolution, green that of the Islam, yellow is the color of anti-Semitism in Austria—note the resemblance with the yellow star—, and blue is the color that emphasizes Marji's inner peace that she finds in the last

volume (Ibid., 23).

This personal narrative is the leading narrative in *Persepolis* and it is it is through the personal depiction of the similarities between East and West that their differences are emphasized. By emphasizing elements of her Western upbringing and the leftist ideas of her parents, while at the same time constantly putting these elements in the context of war, Satrapi plays with the reader's ability to identify with a character through a negation of this identification.

What Satrapi aimed at when writing *Persepolis*, was giving the Western audience an idea of Iranian life as it was (to her), to propose a counterpoise to the information about Iran distributed in the West. In the interview with Hill, she states that

If people had known exactly how my country was, where it was located, I they had been saying things that seemed reasonable, even if these things reflected different points of view, but which corresponded at least somewhat to reality, I would not have had to repeat all these things. The fact is that the image of my country has been so misrepresented, and that it was so removed from what I knew, that I felt compelled to talk. (Ibid., 19)

It is this drive to tell the truth about her roots and the position Satrapi finds herself in—in between the two poles—that allows her to use the perceptions of the West to create a story about the East. In reversing the roles of the East and West and confronting the reader with the fact that the West has failed in distributing correct or complete information about Iran, and that it is because of some actions by the West that Iran has suffered, a change of perspective takes place that puts the—Western—reader into the position the East has been put in by the West. As read in Davis, we should read comics “as a site where ‘history’ itself or the representations of history, are put into play: interrogated, challenged and even undermined.”

(Davis, 271) By confronting her reader with the “Othering” Satrapi has endured herself, and by making him privy to her experiences and her situation, she draws the reader into the third space she finds herself in. The reader is not able to look at his own culture, or to receive Western news, in the same way as he used to because he is aware of its faults. Albeit incomparable to the third space Satrapi finds herself in, because the objected reader has presumably not spend a part of his life in Iran, she does manage to create a space for her reader that is similar to her own.

The Orientalist aspect of the comic is enhanced and reinforced by the addition of the aesthetic to the textual base of the story, which obliges the reader to not only read, but also look at the true history of Iran. It is through this obligation of seeing rather than only reading that a reader is not able to distance himself from the facts presented to him; he is urged to alter his preconceptions about Iran. This feeling of being confronted is enhanced by the addition of the self in the comic; the visible face of Marji telling the reader about her country's and her own history allows the reader to step into the story and engage with it rather than looking at it from the outside. The fact that this is a child's face reinforces the narrative, since the child has a power of captivating the reader in a stronger way than a grown-up would perhaps (Malek, 371). This is because every reader can identify with a child, since everyone has been a child, and because the innocence of the child makes the objectivity of the story more credible.

As Satrapi yields the reader into the story by letting him identify with the child narrator and the familiar surroundings the narrator grows up in, she simultaneously pushes the reader away by confronting him with the actions of his region. It is through this tension between sameness and identification and difference and distancing that an interaction between text and reader is established.

5. Conclusion

The relatively new perspective on the way aesthetics and history are combined in *Persepolis* and the notion of hybridity or a third space in this combination, offers a new insight to the discussion around the comic and the way it received its success.

As I have made clear throughout my thesis, Satrapi uses the notion of hybridity or third space in two ways and intertwines its meanings in both content and format. The third space that is created through an interaction between text and reader and allows the reader to form his own story out of the information he already possesses, is expanded in the reading of a comic. In comics reading, the reader forms a third space not only through an interaction between text and reader, but also through an interaction between text, image and reader. The interference of the image in the already existent relationship between text and reader makes the comic a platform to tell stories in a different, in my opinion stronger way. By using content as a way to depict the ways in which the characters experienced “Othering” and by reverse “Othering” the Western characters in the novel, Satrapi negates the reader’s assumptions about the East and creates an interaction, and thus a third space, for the reader.

Satrapi uses the combination of aesthetics and history not only because they allow her to tell a story in a way she feels is the only way to *write* it, but also because this combination is the only way to *read* a story like hers. By using images to contradict and complement her text, she allows the reader to identify with her story but at the same time rejects this identification through numerous confrontations about Western behavior. Her ability to display her story in a way that is accessible to multiple generations and nationalities by using multiple perspectives in one character is an ability that has proved successful. With millions of publications worldwide, not only received in Western, but also in Iranian audiences, Satrapi has managed to write a story that is—to some extent—relatable to many, while being the story of an individual.

Although the notions of Orientalism and “Othering” are very apparent in *Persepolis*, and accurate in the context in which it was published, this “Othering” that is described is not something of that time alone. It is a thing that has always happened, is still happening and will presumably continue to happen for some time in the future. Looking at the current situation involving IS and the refugee crisis and the Western attitude towards it, this is undoubtedly a form and outlet of “Othering” from a Western perspective. The way *Persepolis* was received bears hope for future works like it. The work has experienced a literary evolution and opened horizons for other (autobiographical) comics on different or similar subjects. There is more need for educational and accessible books like Satrapi’s, and *Persepolis* has paved the way to fill in this need. Perhaps in the future there may be room for a similar work by a Syrian war refugee.

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