

The Art of Memoirs:
An Exploration of the Dynamic Between the Narrative and Visual in Graphic Memoirs

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing movement in the study of comics or graphic novels as a literary form. Graphic novels as the contemporary audience understands them are a relatively recent development of sequential art. Within the contemporary genre of literary comics, autobiographical comics are one of the most prominent varieties (Kunka, 2).

Autobiographical graphic novels present an interesting hybrid between different literary traditions as well as between the visual and the textual. This thesis aims to further explore the form of autobiographical graphic novels and what the form of a graphic novel adds to the narrative of an autobiographical coming of age story. The focus will lie on the relation between text and image in the graphic memoir.

Sequential artforms predating modern comics have a long and rich history. They have appeared in many different forms in many different cultures, think for example of hieroglyphics or the Bayeux tapestry (McCloud, 12). However, comic books, in which written text is used in combination with the sequential images, only begin to make a significant appearance at the end of the nineteenth century. The recognition and study of comics or graphic novels as a literary form began even later. The study of comics as a literary genre or art form has been a relatively recent movement, starting in the last couple of decades (McCloud, 9).

There has been a lot of discussion on how to define a comic and if comic books can be seen as a form of literature, as well as discussion on how to define autobiographies, memoirs and other life-narratives (Chute, 3). McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is widely seen as the foundation of comic studies in the English language. In this comic McCloud endeavours to describe and define comics by methodically explicating the history, vocabulary, methods etc. of comics. McCloud's work lays the basis for reading

comics, and thus graphic memoirs, in an analytical way as well as providing the vocabulary needed to discuss graphic memoirs academically.

Combining the fields of graphic narrative studies and autobiographical studies, autobiographical comics have very recently become a subject of study and discussion, such as with Kunka's book *Autobiographical Comics*. Kunka identifies graphic memoirs as a pivotal literary genre of contemporary comics (2). According to Smith and Watson, the academic field of autobiographical narratives is "wide-ranging, and ever growing (X). In their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* they also address graphic memoirs and the uniqueness they bring to the genre of the autobiography:

Graphic memoirs have become a site for telling complex stories of gender, sexuality, trauma, and the nation that reach millions of readers and potentially circulate worldwide as they open up new and troubled spaces. Several features of autographics distinguish it from other media of self-representation ... Graphic memoirs are verbal and visual hybrids, they have overlapping layers in which the speaker presents themselves, and an effect of amplification and simplification (169).

This thesis will explore the visual hybridity of graphic memoirs that Smith and Watson speak of and the way in which it lends itself to the telling of complex stories.

The case studies to be examined in this analysis are Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Both of these graphic memoirs concern coming-of-age stories. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines a coming of age novel as "An English term adopted as an approximate equivalent to the German Bildungsroman, although with an implied distinction in terms of time-span. (...) a coming-of-age novel may be devoted entirely to the crises of late adolescence involving courtship, sexual initiation, separation from parents, and choice of vocation or spouse." This definition relies on the concept of a

bildungsroman, which is defined as: “A kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity.” The stories of both these works have compelling similarities, yet interesting differences. Both comics tell the coming of age story of a girl, thus making identity and girlhood important themes. The girls in question face a lot of challenges growing up. Hence, trauma is a key factor in both memoirs. At the core these novels are both coming of age stories that involve and explore trauma.

However, the stories are different enough to provide an interesting comparison and show two different types of autobiographical stories. The graphic memoirs portray different girls facing varying challenges. *Fun Home* explores the childhood of Bechdel who discovers her own sexual and gender identity. According to Smith, there are also other themes explored within Bechdel’s coming-of-age story “Different autographic possibilities are mobilized in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. A provocative exploration of sexuality, gendered relations in the American family, and modernist versions of what Bechdel calls “erotic truth” (Smith, 172). *Persepolis* focusses on conflict and looks at Satrapi’s childhood in a war-torn Iran and explores themes such as religion and oppression: “Marjane Satrapi’s two books of autographics about revolutionary Iran, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis II* link the coming-of-age story of an only child in a Marxist-leaning, multigenerational bourgeois family reputedly descended from the kings of Persia to events in Iran between the late 1970s and the early 1990s” (Smith, 171). As Smith states, Satrapi’s coming-of-age story not only tells the story of her growing up but through that story also relates the story of Iran’s development. Besides the stories themselves, the artwork in the comics is also interesting to compare. Both artists have unique styles which present an interesting comparison. Not just in the way things are portrayed but also in what they choose to depict. Both comics present an

interesting dynamic between text and image which allows for an analysis of what graphic novels, as a form, bring to the autobiographical narrative of a memoir.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* the protagonist is Bechdel herself, her challenges to overcome include among others, her abusive father, discovering her sexuality and dealing with her father's death. Bechdel narrates her own coming of age story thus making *Fun Home* a memoir. According to Pedri, the author of a memoir is expected to, to the best of their abilities, write as factual about actual people and actual events.:

Memoir, it is argued, claims to, and is thus expected to “depict the lives of real, not imagined, individuals.” Memoir communicates as accurately as possible through self-representation a self and a life that exist or existed in the real world. Its writing can thus be said to be governed by what David Davies, expanding on the theories of Kendall L. Walton and Gregory Currie, calls the fidelity constraint, a constraint that makes readers “assume that the author has included only events she believes to have occurred, narrated as occurring in the order in which she believes them to have occurred” (Pedri, 128).

However, Bechdel starts doubting her capability of relating nothing but the truth even as a young girl. The images in *Fun Home* offer commentary on the trustworthiness of memoirs and their narrators, for example in the re-drawings of Alison's diary. When Alison starts her diary, her father says to her: “just write down what's happening” (Bechdel, 140). Alison disputes this statement by reasoning that she can only account for her subjective perception of what is happening. She starts doubting her own grasp on reality and therefore begins to write *I think* in between sentences, thus distancing herself from making definitive statements. The

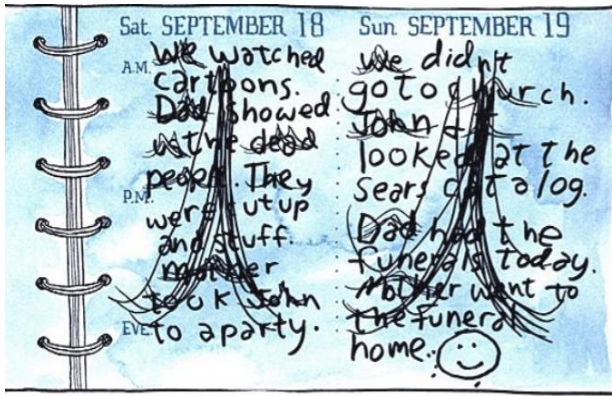


Fig. 1. (Bechdel, 148)

drawings of Alison's diary show this increasing doubt because the pages decrease in readability. After writing *I think* she starts writing a curvy circumflex as a shorthand for, *I think*. Soon she draws circumflex over words and then over entire pages, rendering her diary almost

unreadable (see Fig. 1.). Bechdel clarifies as follows: "Again, the troubling gap between word and meaning. My feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience (143)." She expresses her doubts about being able to articulate reality accurately and completely truthfully:

The narrator acknowledges her own doubts as an artist, admitting, if even implicitly, that uncertainty, 'untruthfulness,' and artifice are inevitable features of remembering and creating. The implications of these words for memoir's factual representation of self-echo across *Fun Home*, which incorporates into its narrative an extended discussion on Alison's struggle to put the story into words and images. Implied in them is that so much of her life cannot be adequately, accurately represented. Her story, she admits to readers, is riddled with gaps and fissures, doubts and uncertainties (Pedri, 133).

In this statement, Pedri makes the link between Alison's narrative struggle, which is represented in her diary, and Bechdel, the author, who is writing the memoir. The doubt displayed by Alison about being completely factual in writing down her life in her diary, is also commentary on Bechdel's own memoir; Through the drawings of her diary Bechdel, the narrator, signals that she is attempting to represent her history as truthfully as she can, but that she can only account for her own perceptions of the story.

Similarly to the redrawn diary pages, a lot of panels depict drawings of photographs and rewritten texts. Through these redrawn photographs and texts *Fun Home* contains a personal archive of sorts. Bechdel discloses in the interview with Chute, it was a photograph that sparked the whole memoir (Chute, 1005). As Chute remarks, the drawing of that particular photo, the snapshot of Bechdel's old babysitter is the only double spread in the book (1006). The importance of these photographs is emphasized in the contrasting drawing style that makes them stand out; The drawing style is more realistic than displayed in the regular, more cartoon-like, style of *Fun Home*. The photographs are crosshatched, shaded and has many details, in contrast to the more frequent style which has crisp black lines, less detail and almost no shading (Chute, 179). As can be seen in the double spread (see Fig. 2.). The recreated photographs act a reminder that the story Bechdel is telling is not a work of fiction because they are actual images from her life, not just recreated but copied into the memoir in detail. Through the form of the graphic memoir Bechdel can include the photographs that inspired *Fun Home* and use them to underscore the reality of her story.

Another important aspect of the double spread is that it is not just the photograph that is pictured in this panel but also a hand holding said photograph, and it is surrounded by speech bubbles which convey Bechdel's thoughts while she looks at the photograph (see Fig. 2.): "The blurriness of the photo gives it an ethereal, painterly quality. Roy is gilded with

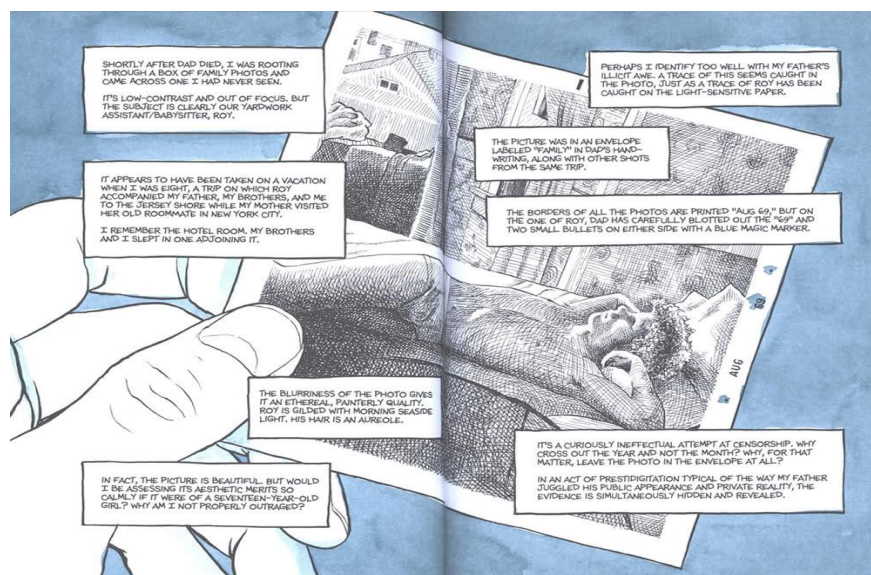


Fig. 2. (Bechdel, 100)

morning seaside light. His hair is an aureole” (Bechdel, 100). Alison’s hand holding the picture and her thoughts written around it, shows that the reader is looking into this story through the eyes of Bechdel and that audience is reminiscing along with her. The hand holding the picture in contrast to the narrating voice which is recalling the first time Bechdel encountered the picture, gives a visual to the multiple “selves” at play in a memoir. It visualises the difference between the narrated-I and the narrating-I (Chaney, 24); In memoirs one can differentiate between the narrating and the narrated “I” (Smith and Watson, 72). The narrated-I being the protagonist, young Alison in the case of *Fun Home*, and the narrating-I being the storyteller who is doing the actual reminiscing, Bechdel. Whereas in a traditional memoir these different forms of the “I” are distinguished by the difference in first and third-person (73), in a graphic memoir the difference can be visualised by the narrated-I being drawn and the narrating-I acting as a disembodied voice around the images of the narrated-I.

Furthermore, a graphic memoir allows for intertextuality in both the text and the images. The story of *Fun Home* is conveyed in a strongly intertextual manner. Bechdel grows up in a household where literature is a paramount part of life. Her father is an English teacher and there is an actual library in her childhood home which might be what epitomises the importance of literature in the Bechdel family (Bechdel, 60). The narrating voice of the memoir also often alludes to different literary works. A good example is in the opening scene of the memoir. Bechdel describes a game she used to play with her father where he would hold her up like a plane. By comparing this game to “Icarian games”, the narrator introduces the myth of Icarus which serves as a metaphor within the story:

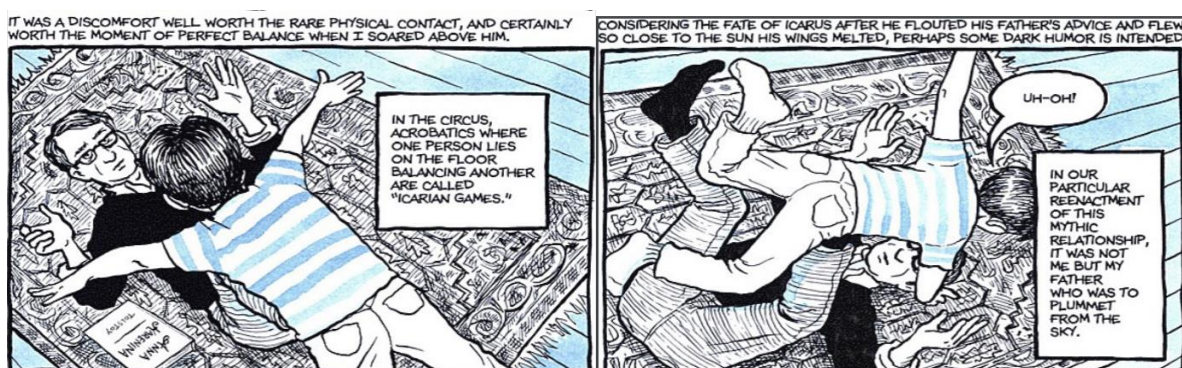
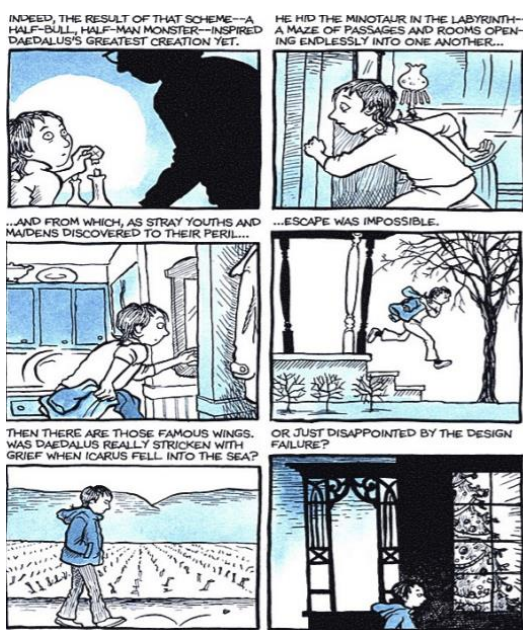


Fig. 3. (Bechdel, 3)

In the circus, acrobatics where one person lies on the floor balancing another are called “Icarian games.” Considering the fate of Icarus after he flouted his father’s advice and flew so close to the sun his wings melted, perhaps some dark humor is intended. In our particular re-enactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky (Bechdel, 3). In this panel the text contradicts the visuals by stating that her father was the one who plummeted from the sky (see Fig. 3.). Thus, inverting the role of father and child, as in the original story it is Icarus and not his father Daedalus who falls. Bechdel casts her father in both roles: “For if my father was Icarus, he was also Daedalus – that skillful artificer, that mad scientist who built the wings for his son and designed the famous labyrinth...and who answered not to the laws of society, but to those of his craft” (Bechdel, 7). He represents the figure of Daedalus because he designs the labyrinth in which he himself and his child are trapped (Mitchell, 10). Bechdel’s father designs a figurative labyrinth in the form of the restored house in which they live. This is further shown when Alison runs through several rooms of the house to escape from the house with her angry father looming over her (Bechdel, 12). Above the panel where her father is shown as a looming shadow, the narration describes the monster of the labyrinth: “a half-bull, half man



monster”, the minotaur (see Fig. 4.); When Alison is shown running through the house it is described as “a maze of passages of rooms opening endlessly into another and from which (...) escape was impossible” (12). She eventually has to turn back which implies that there is no escaping the house that her father built (12). The family house is the labyrinth and her father plays several roles as Daedalus, Icarus and even the minotaur. Thus,

Fig. 4. (Bechdel, 12)

the myth that is referenced in the narration is visually used as a metaphor for the complex relationship between Alison and her father.

However, what makes the intertextuality in *Fun Home* so intriguing is that the references to other literary works within the memoir are not just limited to the text. The images provide a form of intertextuality that is unique to the graphic memoir. This intertextuality will only be noticed when the reader pays close attention to the images within the panels themselves and makes a connection to the narration around them. A good example are the books read by Alison's father. While in the narration there is an unequivocal point made with the Icarian myth, on the same page there is another literary reference hidden that acts as a metaphor for Alison's relationship with her father. In the opening of the memoir her father lays the book he was reading aside so he can play a game of aeroplane with Alison. When he lays it aside the reader can see that he is reading Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (see Fig. 3.): "Bechdel prompts the reader to recall that memoir's opening: All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Lydenberg, 137). It is a striking opening sentence which, when the reader makes this association, offers direct commentary on the unique unhappiness of the Bechdel family. The theme of an unhappy family, which characterises the memoir is announced on the very first page (Bechdel, 3). However, not in the narration, this theme is only shown in a tiny detail drawn in the corner of a panel. The negative sentiment on families that *Anna Karenina* conjures seems out of place on this first page as it depicts a father playing a game with his daughter which would suggest a happy family dynamic. However, immediately after the panel that contains Tolstoy's memoir, when one turns the page, this game falls apart and the harshness of Alison's father and the unhappiness of the family is introduced when Alison's father stops the game and orders her to clean and repair the house (4). The novel could also be interpreted as alluding to the probable suicide of Alison's father, as its main character Anna Karenina commits suicide

(Freedman, 131). Thus, the book not only introduces the theme of an unhappy family but also foreshadows the suicide. *Fun Home* references both the story of Anna Karenina and the myth of Icarus within the one panel (see Fig. 3.). This shows that a graphic memoir has an extra layer of intertextuality available in the panels in addition to the intertextuality in the narration.

Foreshadowing is another literary element that the images of a graphic memoir lend a new form to. An example of this is the foreshadowing of the “Sunbeam Bread” truck that ends up hitting and killing Alison’s father: “Yes, it really was a Sunbeam Bread truck (Bechdel, 59).” Bags of Sunbeam Bread are featured throughout Bechdel’s memoir (21, 31, 59, 67, 112, 217). They are not very prominent nor mentioned in the text (see Fig. 5.). It is an unspoken repetition throughout the memoir. The irony being that something so innocent as



Fig. 5. (Bechdel, 112)

the picture of a little girl eating bread while smiling, is such an omnipresent omen of death. Especially because bread is generally associated with life. The theme of death is linked to a visual motif. The images allow for a silent repetition of a major theme, death, in *Fun Home*.

Furthermore, graphic memoirs provide a unique layer of subtext within the panels. Such is the case when the pictures offer commentary on, or additional information to what is being told in the narration. One instance is when Alison has to pick up a copy of the *Odyssey* in her college library for an independent project she is supposed to work on:

Remarkably, this interview with Mr. Avery occurred on the self-same afternoon that I realized, in the campus bookstore, that I was a lesbian (...) and indeed, I embarked that day on an odyssey which, consisting as it did in a gradual, episodic, and

inevitable convergence with my abstracted father, was nearly as epic as the original (Bechdel, 203).



Fig. 6. (Bechdel, 203)

Just below this quote, in the last panel of the page, we see Alison deciding against Homer's *Odyssey*, which looms in the foreground, its detailed, black cover is in sharp contrast with the bluish-grey background (see Fig.6). Instead she picks up a copy of *Word is Out*, a book containing transcribed interviews with LGBT people. She looks over her shoulder to the book she was supposed to get as she instead chooses to pick up a book which will help her discover her own sexuality (Freedman, 135). The *Odyssey* obtains a dual meaning in these panels. Firstly, it shows Alison casting aside the goals that have been laid out for her by her controlling father and choosing her own path. This is emphasized by the fact that this is her father's favourite work of literature:

Could this Hobson's choice have been a form of divine intervention? Like the goddess Athena's visit to Telemachus, when she nudged him to go find his long-lost dad, Odysseus? For I was begging admission to not just any English class, but one devoted to my father's favourite book of all time (Bechdel, 202).

Secondly, these panels also underscore the similarities between Alison's story and the story in the *Odyssey*. The narration describes the journey of self-discovery she undertook after picking up those books in the universities' book shop as Alison's personal *Odyssey*, "nearly

as epic as the original” (202). Bechdel elicits similar themes to those in the *Odyssey* like a desire for reunion and the relationship between father and child (Freedman, 136). All of this culminates in a crucial turning point in Alison’s life, conveyed by just the one drawing within this one panel. The subtext of the images in the graphic memoir adds this analogy between Alison choosing to explore her sexuality and rejecting her father and the journey described in the *Odyssey*.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Similar to *Fun Home*, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi is a graphic memoir that tells the coming of age story of a young girl growing up to a woman whilst facing many challenges. It was originally written in French and has been translated to English as well as an array of other languages. In the story there is an entanglement of very personal and yet universal storylines just as in Bechdel's memoir. For example, Marjane's rebellious personality which is specific to her but can also be very recognizable for readers who identify with her in that aspect. Marjane's memoir also conveys a larger narrative of the situation in Iran during the Islamic revolution and in the tumultuous period following the revolution. By intertwining these storylines, the interaction and struggle between the personal and the public are shown. The relation between text and imagery is again an essential part of the memoir; The choice of a graphic memoir as the form for her story is an important one:

One revolutionary aspect is the very medium Satrapi has used: comics. This medium had never previously been used by any Iranian author, let alone an Iranian woman, perhaps partly because, as a mode of storytelling that relies on images as well as words, it might at times entail depicting women unveiled, which is taboo (Abedinifard, 78).

Here Abedinifard touches upon how the form of a graphic memoir is a choice that gives Satrapi, as an Iranian woman, a revolutionary way to tell her story. The combination of images with text gives her a way to show things that would otherwise be unseen. The graphic novel allows her to not only discuss but also show taboo topics, such as unveiled women. The veil is an important theme throughout the memoir. "The Veil" is the first chapter title in *Persepolis* and it is also the only chapter title that is repeated. "The Veil" introduces the



Fig. 7. (Satrapi, 3)

reader to Marji, the character, as well as the Islamic revolution (Satrapi, 3). The iconography of the chapter title above the first gutter is striking: a single eye looking directly at the reader, surrounded by the black of the veil (see Fig. 7.). It reminds the reader of the method of conveying the story that this critical memoir will take by representing Marjane Satrapi's penetrating vision (Chute, 96). Without words the reader is reminded that this is a story from a specific standpoint and created with a specific vision. As Satrapi herself has stated: "I give myself this duty of witnessing" (96). She has defined the memoir as a text of a witness, a testimony (97). When a witness gives a traumatic testimony, it requires a sympathetic audience (Smith and Watson, 286). Therefore, Satrapi's memoir, which also acts as a traumatic testimony, requires a sympathetic audience. The graphic form of her memoir makes that she can use a chapter title in order to will her audience to be sympathetic by showing them that what she is relating to them is what she witnessed.

This duty of witnessing is stated by Satrapi in the introduction of *Persepolis*:

This old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. (Satrapi, 0).

In the introduction Satrapi states that her memoir is an exercise in never forgetting as well as offering a critical view on the perceptions of Iran (Chute, 97). This view is portrayed in one icon by the veiled eye. It is an eye that is both veiled but also piercing through the metaphorical as well as the physical veil, giving the reader a look behind the veil.

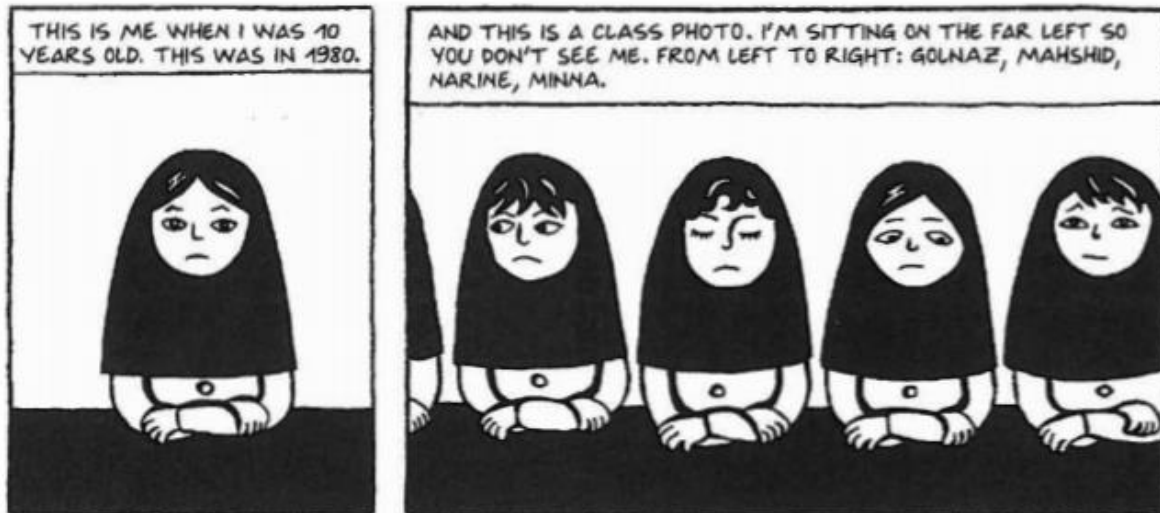


Fig. 8. (Satrapi, 3)

After the veil in the chapter title, Satrapi and her classmates are portrayed wearing their veil in a school photograph. They are all sitting cross armed and not looking particularly happy (see Fig. 8). Marji herself is cut out of the panel with only her left elbow and shoulder showing. This is a curious way to portray oneself and the thought-provoking caption adds to the meaningful self-portrait: “I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me (Satrapi, 3).” Her being on “the far left” can be interpreted as referring to her leftist political views that clash with the far-right regime which forced the veil on her and her classmates. Furthermore, because she is on the far left, she cannot be seen. As a result of her being too left, she does not fit in in fundamentalist Iran and thus cannot properly be seen. Satrapi suggests here that she does not fit in to this frame of her nation, she refuses to be cast in this stereotypical image



Fig. 9. (Satrapi, 3)

of an Iranian girl. In the panel at the bottom of the first page it is shown how the girls first react to the obligatory veil: “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” (3).

The girls are shown taking their veils off, playing with them and complaining about them (see Fig. 9). Satrapi often addresses the limitations that being forced to wear the veil imposes on women (Abedinifard, 82). The first page opens with the static and sombre images of girls who are veiled and then immediately refutes this stereotype by cutting Marjane out the panel, she does not fit in this stereotype and then by showing the girls without their veils on and reacting to the veil in a very human and childlike way. In addition to stating that the girls did not like the veil, the images provide a powerful argument by showing how children react to the obligatory veil.

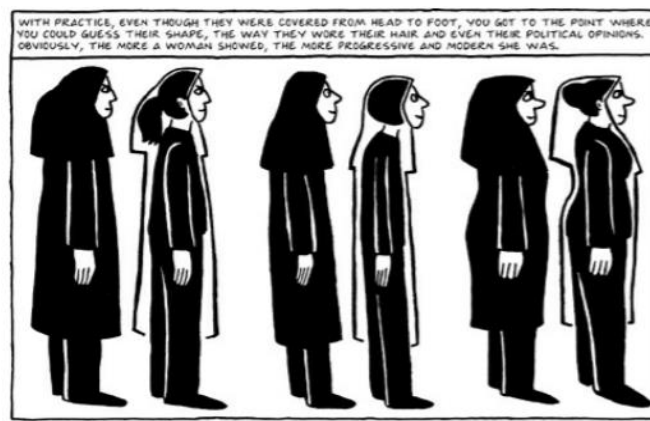


Fig.10. (Satrapi, 296)

Satrapi does not just discuss the veil and its effects in the text but she also shows different aspects of the veil in the panels. Thereby, she gives an insight into the culture of the veiled women and breaks a taboo by showing the readers unveiled women. For example, when she lifts the veil by portraying the veil in a see-through manner (See Fig. 10.). Satrapi lifts the veil in order to argue that one can guess a veiled woman's shape and her political stance by the way she wears her veil. By showing that a veiled woman can be read differently from different angles, Satrapi argues against the simplified stereotype that persist of the veiled woman (Ostby, 564).



Fig. 12. (Satrapi, 331)

Furthermore, the images of the graphic memoir allow Satrapi to add visuals from her Persian culture that would otherwise have gotten lost in translation. Where the text has been translated and adapted to a western audience, the combination with her drawings makes that the memoir retains some of Satrapi's cultural heritage. Satrapi's drawing style and aesthetics draw from traditional Persian miniatures. She herself has stated that classic Persian miniatures have been a major influence on her art: "Is there nonetheless something in your style that is unique to your Persian cultural

background?" Satrapi said, "Certainly. The characteristic of including little perspective, and that of characters becoming taller or smaller based on their importance. These devices very much evoke Persian miniatures" (Hill 20). An example of a character varying in height due to importance is when Laly's father comes back from prison (Satrapi, 52). Marjane is proven wrong by her friend Laly and suddenly Laly's father is a hero by undergoing and surviving torture. This makes Marjane feel small compared to her friend and she actually shrinks in the panel, whereas her friend in her righteousness suddenly grows taller and towers over Marjane



Fig. 11. (Satrapi, 52)

(see Fig. 11.). This shows a shift in importance between the characters, as perceived by the characters themselves in that moment. This resembles characters on Persian miniatures that are scaled based on their importance. Besides resembling Persian miniatures, it also acts as a handy visual tool, it immediately shows how Marjane feels at this moment without spelling it out. This frame conveys both a cultural style element and succeeds in portraying a feeling.

An example of a panel that does not just contain elements of a miniature, but much resembles an actual Persian miniature is Marjane's design for an Iranian equivalent of Disneyland (see Fig. 12.). In addition to the little perspective and the characters varying in height, there are also other dominant characteristics that are ascribed to Persian miniatures that feature in *Persepolis*. Namely, a portrayal of a powerful woman as a warrior: "Many Shāhnāmeḥ Persian miniatures contain expressive or empowering images of female or gender-ambiguous figures who render the epic's male warrior-heroes transfixed, spellbound, or otherwise momentarily powerless" (Ostby, 566). In this image Gord Afarid, who is a mythological Iranian heroine, dons warriors clothes to fight Sohrab, the commander of the Turanian army. Here Satrapi joins in an age-old tradition of depicting this epic battle between these two legendary Iranian heroes (568). Even in the modern art form of the graphic memoir, Satrapi can represent an old Iranian myth, thereby portraying her culture. Moreover, she portrays an Iranian heroine. By showing this myth she again subverts the stereotypes of Iranian women as passive and subservient. Satrapi picks an empowered warrior woman from Iranian mythology for a full-page miniature. Through the form of the graphic memoir Satrapi not only shows traditional miniatures that represent her culture, but specifically one that shows the story of a historic warrior woman.

However, despite having been inspired by Persian miniatures, Satrapi's style is very much her own distinct style. Much like a writing style can set apart writers, a drawing style can do the same. It shapes a unique identity within the work. Her style differs from classical Persian art in more than one way, the one of the most significant being her usage of black and white. In contrast to Satrapi's contrasting, black and white palette, classic Persian miniatures traditionally use a wide array of colours (Abedinifard, 91). Both the black and white contrast and highly stylized, simplified features of *Persepolis*'s style are representative of the attitude Satrapi has towards portraying and dealing with the absurdities and traumatic memories of

her childhood (94). About her choice for black and white imagery Satrapi states the following:

I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become something so normal, so banal – that is to say everybody thinks it's normal. But it's not normal. To draw it and put it in color – the color of flesh and the red of the blood, and so forth – reduces it by making it realistic (Chute, 99).

Black and white allows Satrapi to have a layer of separation between the gory truth of reality. In the text she mostly does not shy away from telling gory details of the war. However, in the visuals she does not go for realism or colour in order to step away from the normalisation of violence. It portrays violence like the absurdity Satrapi found it to be. An instance of the black and white palette being used to create a distance from gory violence is when Satrapi illustrates the nationalist slogan: “to die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society” (Satrapi, 115). Satrapi illustrates it the way she imagines it as a child (see Fig. 13). Even though it displays blood being extracted from a person’s veins, the black and white masking what would be the red of blood, makes for a defamiliarizing effect of the underlying reality (Abedinifard, 90). Satrapi’s simple and highly stylized drawing style also ties into this. It is a way to portray traumatic events by making them more abstract and childlike, which is a unique strategy that Satrapi can employ in a graphic memoir because the form allows for her to combine detailed, traumatic narratives with simplified and stylized depictions. It is not inconsequential that Satrapi experienced most of these traumatic events as a child and that



Fig. 13. (Satrapi, 115)

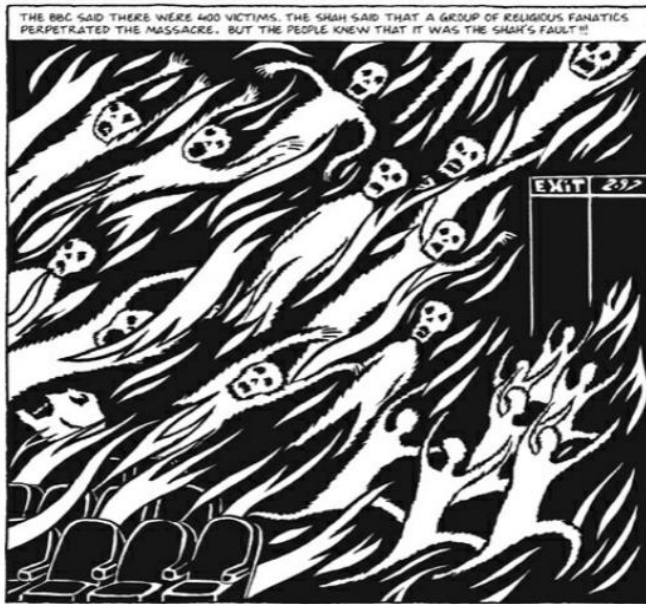


Fig. 14. (Satrapi, 14)

they are told through the character of Marji, a girl. Chute calls this simplification through a child narrator: “a child’s-eye rendition of trauma” (Chute, 99). The child’s-eye rendition of trauma is a technique employed by Satrapi in her graphic memoir to show violence in a less banal way and as a way of coping with the traumatic story that these child’s-eye renditions

illustrate. An example of this child’s-eye rendition is when Marji hears her parents talking about how the Rex cinema was set on fire with 400 people trapped inside (Satrapi, 15). The story is told through the conversation Marji’s parents have and the narration that Satrapi offers. However, the illustrations show how a child, Marji, would envision these events playing out. Especially the haunting image of fiery ghosts rising up from cinema seats engulfed in flames (See Fig. 14.). As a method of coping with the horrific tale that is told in the text, the images show a simplified version of a traumatic moment of death and suffering as envisioned by a child. Here the form of the graphic memoir adds a level of trauma processing. The story is traumatic but the images that accompany the traumatic narrative provide a way to deal with the trauma through the simplification. Satrapi lightens the burden of visualising horrible violence for the reader by granting a gruesome incident the simplification of a child’s-eye rendition. Satrapi steps away from the banality of violence and allows the reader to imagine the story in a more abstract way.

Lastly, there is both visual and textual mirroring going on in scenes within the memoir.

Hereby, one scene can be mirrored in two different ways, in two different parts of the

memoir. The most poignant example is the scene that ends part one of *Persepolis*, “The Story of a Childhood”, where Marjane parts with her parents in the airport when she leaves Iran for Austria (Satrapi, 153). As she looks back one last time, she sees her father carrying off her mother who has been overcome by emotion (see Fig. 15.). The textual mirror takes place ten years later, at the end of the second part of *Persepolis*. The scene essentially repeats itself with Marjane again saying farewell to her family at the airport. When the second part closes the same way the first part did, Marjane reflects on the first time she left Iran: “The goodbyes were much less painful than ten years before when I embarked for Austria there was no longer a war, I was no longer a child, my mother didn’t faint and my grandma was there...” (Satrapi, 343). While the scenes mirror each other, the second departure also shows the development Marjane, her family and the country of Iran have gone through in the second half of *Persepolis*.

The visual mirror is in a different scene than the airport scene in part two. It is the drawing Marjane makes on the subject of “the martyrs” for a college entrance exam. She bases her drawing on Michelangelo’s “La pietà” (283). In “La pietà” the virgin Mary cradles the dead body of Christ in her arms. The pose of the veiled woman holding the soldier draped in her arms is not only reminiscent of “La pietà” but also of Marjane’s father holding her fainted mother (see Fig. 16). In this drawing Marjane appropriates both this personal moment



Fig. 15. (Satrapi, 153)



Fig. 16. (Satrapi, 283)

of trauma and archetypal Christian imagery of suffering and compassion into a nationalist Iranian picture (Whitlock, 975). This shows that additionally to a textual mirror like a traditional memoir would contain, a graphic memoir can also show a meaningful mirror in the panels. In the form of a graphic memoir Satrapi is able to echo one scene in two powerful yet completely different ways.

Conclusion

To conclude, in both graphic memoirs the form of a graphic novel adds to the traditional autobiography through the different ways image and text interplay. The images often offer commentary on the text and visualise details that go unspoken in the narrative. Such as the foreshadowing omen of the sunbeam bread and the unspoken intertextuality of the books portrayed in *Fun Home* or the thrice repeated mirror of “La Pietà” in *Persepolis*.

In both memoir's the aesthetics of the drawing style provides a method to support the story that is being related through the text and to add a uniquely personal touch. In *Persepolis* a more stylized child's-eye rendition and a black and white palette allows Satrapi to depict horrific war scenes in a less realistic and more humane way. Furthermore, her style ties the story to her Persian heritage by the inspiration Satrapi took from the style of Persian miniatures. For Bechdel, the contrast between her normally quite cartoonish style and the realistic recreation of the photographs serve as a reminder that she is telling a real story concerning actual people. Bechdel also ties in her heritage by realistically redrawing her real family photographs and thus turning *Fun Home* in a personal archive of sorts. Next to relating their lives' story in the written story, these memoirs also visually represent their heritage.

Furthermore, the imagery adds to the testimonial aspect of memoirs and the relation between the text and the images provides commentary on the role of the narrator. The reader can see the difference between the narrated-I and the narrating-I in the differences between what is said and what is shown. Bechdel also touches on this by showing her narrated-I doubting her abilities to relate the absolute truth in her diaries. Satrapi gives herself the duty of witnessing and shows this by starting the first chapter of her memoir with the drawing of an eye looking directly at the reader from behind the completely black veil. Yet in the panel

under that chapter header, she portrays her narrated-I just out of frame, as if the narrating-I cannot capture her completely.

Another main aspect that the form of a graphic novel has provided to the autobiographical novels *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* is a way to process the trauma that is often inherent in these kinds of narratives. Satrapi tells of the horrors of war that she has witnessed yet her childlike drawings allow her to depict these traumas in a less gory and more respectful way. Bechdel's memoir brings to light the trauma of her father's possible suicide and of her questioning his sexuality while she is discovering her own. Her act of making *Fun Home* into both an archive and an investigation into the truth of the traumatic event of her father walking in front of a truck make this memoir into an exercise in processing trauma. The repetition of both the sunbeam bread and the actual image of her father stepping in front of the truck make the reader relive the trauma as Bechdel has done.

All in all, the form of the graphic novel for a memoir adds, amongst other things, visual motifs and mirrors, commentary on the written text, aesthetic heritage, a consideration of the reliability of the narrator and a coping mechanism for a narrative that is inextricably linked to trauma.

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