

Persepolis: The Complexity of Simplification

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If a person were to hastily flip through the pages of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*, using only eyes to judge, the book could easily be put off as just another piece of literary fluff. Their inner literary critic might utter a perplexed gasp and their mind might reel with the wonder at how they happened upon something that was surely intended for the children's comic book section. With any further examination of the book's literary content and the power of its simplified artwork, however, such an easy to assume accusation shows through as fatally incorrect. *Persepolis* is the memoir of a young woman growing up in the decimating national conflicts of 1970s Iran depicted alongside an unexpectedly, simplified artwork style. At first it may appear that this is done only for the sake of unique marketability or because it is merely Satrapi's natural drawing style. A deeper examination, however, will reveal that "...a form of amplification through simplification" (McCloud, 30) is achieved and visual support is given to the text in a manner that realistic or more "serious" art could not accomplish. Though simplified in its artistic approach, *Persepolis* is anything but simplified in content.

When a writer chooses to include illustrations in a piece of literature, the first task is to decide the level of abstraction/ realism the art will present. In *Persepolis'* case, a simplified art style works best, as it amplifies only the primary features of the text, unlike realism which would be far more focused on social details. Given the book's heavy subject matter (of both a war beyond massive devastation and the metamorphosis of a girl

caught in its trauma), *Persepolis* has a great deal of information to cover in the writing alone and does not require the burden of more details in its art. As a result, it wisely employs a comic format to reiterate just the focal points of the written text. This concise visual power exists in a multitude of panels, even those as casual and unassuming as Marjane's dash to the train station (*Persepolis II*, 77), which shows a quick, to-the-point summary of what happened after Marjane overslept. A realistic depiction of the same image could have lost the hurried, expressive lines and drawn away from the exaggerated frenzy.



(Figure 1, left: *Persepolis II*, 77, Figure 2, right: *Persepolis I*, 15)

Even the more dramatic illustrations, such as the burning Iranian citizens trapped in the movie theater (*Persepolis I*, 15), add another layer of captivating emphasis to the accompanying text without including distracting or complicated details. Though the panel is undoubtedly packed with imagery, a minimalistic method is still maintained, which allows the visually similar fleeing figures and flames to mesh into a single horror. This quality amplifies the illustrated chaos and builds on the sensation of inescapable terror, all messages clearly conveyed through abstraction that might have been lost if life-like art were used instead. Panels such as these are oriented towards amplifying the gist of the

accompanying text, not bogging down the storyline with additional layers of complex information.

Simplification develops more than just the accentuated written messages, however, as it also opens a portal to the symbolic location of characters in Marjane's life. What makes simplified art so paradoxically layered is the fact that the further it steps from reality, the closer it approaches the realm of artistic subjectivity and the iconic, of which "symbols are one category" (McCloud, 27). On the subject of simplified comics, Scott McCloud states, "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way realistic art can't" (30). Essentially this means that simplified art is able to focus on the specific representative details of an object or person, whereas realistic art must display the details in full. Satrapi excellently utilizes this capability through symbolic characters like the female Guardians of the Revolution, who lose their human qualities to Satrapi's artistic interpretation. Blackened cloth envelops these characters from head to toe, diminishing them to a simple white face floating in a bell of darkness, as if they were ghosts prowling the Iranian sidewalks for immoral citizens to haunt. By lacking structured physical anatomy, the caricatures are given the ability to freely bend reality by looming at great heights in one panel and shrinking back to their natural state the next, creating a visual connection to something sinister and serpentine that does not obey universal laws that apply to humans. By removing central human qualities and individuality from the Guardians of the Revolution, the characters become visually symbolic of needless antagonism Marjane faces in Iran.

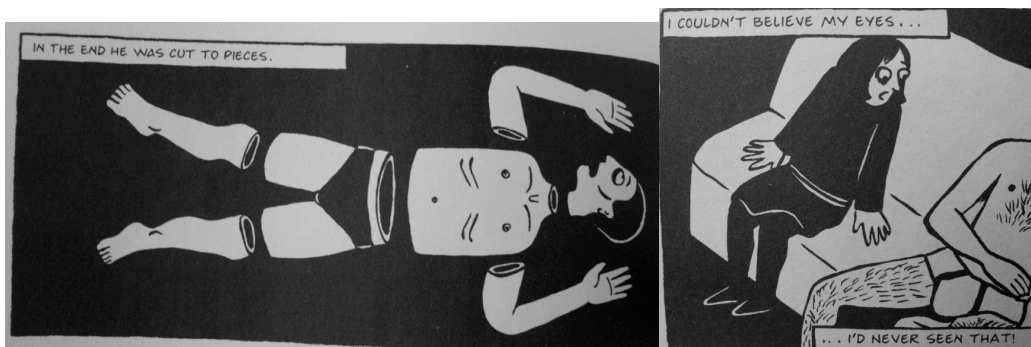


(Figure 3, left: Persepolis I, 133; Figure 4, right: Persepolis II, 64)

A second example comes through the briefly mentioned Ingrid, who introduces Marjane to “transcendental meditation” and “tripping”, a role that calls for a wild and offbeat character. Appropriate to this, Ingrid’s caricature always dons a flowing dress composed of circular patterns and, aside from her outline, is entirely saturated in whiteness. Such features combine to create an otherworldly portrait, amplifying the image of a creature psychedelic enough to push Marjane into a world of drugs. It is Ingrid’s contrasting, alien appearance that amplifies her status as a psychedelic being, and equally it is the Guardians’ lack of human form that makes them so visually sinister and amplifies their role as antagonists. By simplifying the images, Satrapi transforms the characters into icons and as a result, places them closer to the symbolic position they assume in Marjane’s life.

The power of simplicity does not end here, however, as it reaches beyond amplifying the symbolism of specific characters, and spreads across the scenes of artwork to highlight certain details that speak to Marjane’s young, naïve perspective. Do not

mistake this as a claim that a cartoon drawing style makes the art more base, intended for children, or incapable of holding any deep meaning. Instead, its purpose here is to capture the essence of a youth's point of view by representing a complex world in a simplified manner. An appropriate example of this arrives on page 52 (*Persepolis I*) in which Satrapi depicts the image of a man's body, chopped into thick pieces as though he were some sort of plastic fragmented doll. The demise of the man perfectly captures the gruesome imagination and misunderstanding of a child with no true concept of what a man "cut to pieces" would actually look like. While a realistic portrayal of the same image may have hit with a more horrifying impact, the audience would naturally attribute the realism to the point of view of an adult, who would possess the life experience to imagine such a thing. Satrapi's memoir strives to capture her distinct, young adult experiences and with the help of simplified illustrations, her in-experienced and naïve perspective becomes visually distinct and allows the reader to fully submerge his or herself into Marjane's mindset.



(Figure 5, left: *Persepolis I*, 52. Figure 6, right: *Persepolis II*, 33)

Admittedly, a certain complication with this theory does exist, due to the fact that Marjane grows up while the books' illustrative style remains static. Though it is true that Marjane survives a significant amount of new, adult experiences in *Persepolis II*, it should be noted that she does not face these moments already in a state of full maturity

and understanding. *Persepolis II* opens, after all, with Marjane slowly settling into Austria, a country overflowing with Western trends and liberal freedoms far beyond Marjane's experiences in Iran. Without Iran's restrictions or parental sheltering, Marjane comes to face a number of blunt, adult situations from drug parties to public sexuality, which immediately startle her. In the public sexuality scene (page 33), simplification (and a well-designed "camera" angle) allows the panel to directly intensify the distressing, foreign details of a barely clothed man, such as the thickened expanse of leg hair and bulging undergarments. The heightened shock and ridiculousness of this frame is entirely clear, especially when compared to the prior example, which depicts a man in the exact same state of dress, but with a completely different focus on grotesque bodily features. While the first example uses simplification to amplify the naive imagination of a child, the second uses the style to focus on foreign qualities to reiterate her young, inexperienced shock. Although Marjane is much older here than in the last example, she lacks experience in a world under Western liberties and still views these peculiar, new situations through a filter of naivety. By visually interpreting this filter through the artwork, the audience can see through Marjane's eyes as she confronts these strange circumstances.

This is what it all comes down to in the end, after all: seeing the world of *Persepolis* through Marjane's subjective eyes, and little else achieves this goal with greater success than the inclusion of art. On the surface, it may appear that Satrapi's simplified illustration style only persists in *Persepolis* because it is her preferred style or that it makes the memoir unique and intriguing. However, Satrapi's art functions in a far more complex role that accentuates the accompanying text and solidifies the captivating

and personally significant aspects of her experience. Through generality and a lack of explicit realism, Satrapi invigorates the book's deeper messages in a manner that extends beyond the written word and into conceptual imagery. "By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world...the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (McCloud 41), concepts that convey the subjective, but still far too true life of Marjane Satrapi. This simplified and symbolic universe is not Iran or Austria or France; it is Marjane's Persepolis.

Works Cited

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