Unveiling: *Persepolis* ∗as Embodied Performance

JENNIFER WORTH

This paper examines Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novels *Persepolis* 1 and *Persepolis* 2 as examples of unconventional solo performance, and argues that these personal narratives can be read as a type of embodied performance that might otherwise be denied Satrapi. The traditional novel is regarded as an outlet for women denied a public presence; the graphic novel goes a step further, allowing presence both vocally and physically through repeated self-portraiture, which deals frankly with distinctly corporeal issues of visibility, sexuality and identity. These are threaded through the narrative and dealt with frankly in both word and image. Drawing on comic and performance theory to discuss how Satrapi uses the interplay of visual and narrative languages to perform herself, I contend that graphic novels may best be understood as occupying a middle ground between the novel and the theatre, where their formal liminality frequently echoes the liminal states of their protagonists.


This trend seems limited to female authors, a phenomenon perhaps traceable to the nationalist ideology that has traditionally gendered the Iranian homeland as female; this observation becomes particularly poignant given that the mass emigration was spurred by the ascension to power of a repressively patriarchal fundamentalist government.² Historically, women from both East and West have gravitated towards the written word as an artistic outlet which allowed them to step safely into the public sphere. In Iran, where Islam has been a formidable presence since the seventh century and the official
state religion since the sixteenth century, the opportunities for women to be publicly seen and heard have been extremely limited, making the pull of the written word particularly strong.

In Iran as in many Middle Eastern countries, theatre as conceived by the Western world took root only in the nineteenth century, but street performance and public storytelling are long-established traditions. These popular forms were not written down, but left to the gifts of performers called naqqali in Farsi, a role – like the hakawati of Egypt – almost exclusively taken by men. In the early eighteenth century those women who did perform were banned by the clergy. Reza Shah, through his mission of westernizing Iran in the early twentieth century, finally brought women back onto the public stage, where they stayed until the Islamic revolution. But even during this period, government censorship was strict, and socially critical drama, ‘the most voluble voice in the history of modern Iranian theatre’, was strongly discouraged. In order to evade government control, playwrights resorted to various strategies to conceal their messages. Bizhan Mofid wrote his Shahr-e qessa (City of Tales, 1969), one of the most popular Persian plays of all time, as a musical children’s parable.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the most acclaimed of the recent Iranian autobiographies borrows its form from a genre typically considered more suitable for children: the comic book. Marjane Satrapi’s two-volume graphic novel Persepolis 1, originally published in France, and issued in the United States in 2003 and 2004, is not only anomalous in the field of Iranian émigré memoirs in its blend of visual and textual elements, but also in its intent. Unlike her more conventional contemporaries, Satrapi is not simply concerned with recounting the difficulty of resolving an identity caught between two worlds, as the titles of the other autobiographies indicate. Rather, she demonstrates the complex interplay of political and personal history that serves to construct – or obstruct – the formation of identity itself, ultimately breaking away from a marginalized, ‘caught-between’ identity, ironically, through an embrace of her liminal status.

I argue that Satrapi is not concerned simply with documenting her past, but with performing – that is, actively re-creating – her quest for identity through the mimetic acts of showing and telling her personal history. The popular and critical success that Persepolis has found is, I believe, due to the resonance between her self-proclaimed liminal identity and the liminal form of the graphic novel itself.

Comics as performance

The point of the project at hand is not to denigrate comics as a legitimate art form or deny them their own genre. Neither do I propose to create a poetics of the graphic novel, but instead I intend to borrow concepts from the language of performance as a way of understanding this art form. This approach is not suitable for all graphic novels, but Persepolis, as a first-person account, is predisposed to this type of reading. There are a number of major elements that particularly support the reading of this type of graphic novel as solo performance: the personal nature of the narrative, the presence of the body and focus on embodiment, and the concern with art – and life – as a process.
The story presented in *Persepolis*, like so many staged solo performances, is an autobiographical account told in the first person. The first volume, which covers the years 1979 to 1984, is certainly concerned with the specific historical events that shaped Iran’s place in the Middle East in the 1980s, linking them to international concerns including the oil business and relations with Israel and the West. And yet we see them through Marjane’s changing perspective, as she struggles to understand the different worlds – historical, political, social and personal – which surround her. The second volume, documenting 1984 to 1994, concentrates more on Marjane’s coming of age, as she spends four years in Vienna pursuing her education and her adult identity before returning to Iran, where, after earning a college degree, marrying, and divorcing (all the while struggling against social and political oppression), she finally realizes she must leave her homeland behind forever.

Leading comic theorist Scott McCloud champions comics as a form of intimate, personal communication in which ‘individual voices still have a chance to be heard’. Although the graphic novel is a mass-produced popular cultural form, McCloud’s assertion seems to ring especially true for an artist like Satrapi, who tells her personal story in her own voice and renders it in her own hand.

The language used to discuss comics highlights the connection to performance. Will Eisner, who first theorized comics as an art form, borrowed freely from the language of theatre and performance in his pioneering works *Comics and Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling*, using the term ‘actor’ to describe the characters who ‘speak’ to each other through the text, and discussing issues of layout using the term *mise en page*. McCloud, Eisner’s principal inheritor, continues this tradition, linking the perpetual present of performance to the comic form in which ‘it is always now’, even when, as in *Persepolis*, the narrative is set in the past.

It could be argued that live performance and the graphic novel have a common cousin in the form of *tableaux vivants*, which literally stage the encounter between movement and immobility, present and past. Despite its French name and well-established European heritage, *tableaux vivants* are not an invention of the West. Iran’s only indigenous dramatic form, the religious pageant known as Ta’ziyeh, developed from simple recitations of *Rozat al Shohada* (*The Garden of the Martyrs*) and narrated religious processions in the sixteenth century into *tableaux vivants* under the Safavid dynasty (well before a significant European influence was felt in Persia), before creating its current form, which retains its processional manner and stylized performance idiom. Notably, Ta’ziyeh, which had significantly diminished during the twentieth century, was revived after the Islamic Revolution, while Western-style theatre was either largely repressed or coopted for use by the fundamentalist government. This traditional, distinctly Persian ritual performance is invoked in *Persepolis 1*, when Marjane and her classmates are encouraged to beat their breasts (a crucial act for Ta’ziyeh spectators) while watching funeral processions for the ‘martyrs’ who died in the Iran–Iraq War.

If it can be argued that all artistic products are mimetic, the graphic novel, which uses both words and images to represent actions and events, can be considered a particularly rich mimetic product due to its complex interweaving of visual and written elements. In his analysis of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (a work to which *Persepolis*...
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has frequently been compared), Andreas Huyssen borrows from Adorno’s concept of mimesis by way of reconciling it with Bilderverbot (‘forbidden images’) of the Holocaust. Huyssen points out that Adorno’s term Angleichung is defined as ‘a becoming or making similar, a movement toward, never a reaching of a goal’.10 This notion, as we shall see, is central to Satrapi’s project, which not only represents the effects of historical trauma (revolution, war and so on) but additionally foregrounds the female body, also considered unpresentable under the Islamic regime. Furthermore, it is this sense of Angleichung that helps create a bridge from the concept of the mimetic (mere representation) to that of performance (a dynamic activity).

My understanding of Persepolis as performance is also rooted in Richard Schechner’s now standard definition of performance as ‘restored’ or ‘twice-behaved’ behaviour. Satrapi’s story of becoming was first ‘behaved’ – that is, simply lived – over the course of fourteen years in Iran and Austria, but has been consciously behaved a second time, restored though the process of writing and drawing, and thus transformed into a unique performance.11

Mimesis, as Adorno conceived it, is the process through which humans make themselves similar to their environment through assimilation, and it is particularly through bodily mimesis that the distinction between Self and Other becomes permeable, allowing for recognition of the dialectic which underlies fundamental power structures, and subsequently allowing for the subversion of those structures.

I have little doubt that my assertion of Persepolis as embodied performance will be greeted with scepticism: how can a two-dimensional image have the legitimacy of the living body? The illustrated body is the only body Satrapi gives herself. There is no disruption of the idiom in which she has chosen to perform, even outside of the narrative. In fact, there is no image of Satrapi anywhere in either text that was not created by her hand. On the book jacket, instead of a flattering photograph, she includes another full-body illustration of her present-day self (Fig. 1). This representation of her body takes the place of her physical body: dynamic, changing, and self-aware.

Focus on the body

The body, in myriad manifestations, takes centre stage (if you will) in Persepolis; there is scarcely a panel that does not prominently feature the human form. Although the story is autobiographical, Satrapi focuses much of her attention on the bodies of others, male and female, as well as her own. Many images of dead, dismembered, mutilated and even missing bodies – the victims of war and tyranny – pepper her book, as well as illustrations of joyous, whole bodies, both active and at rest. Frequently, these two types of image are placed in close proximity to one another, highlighting their contrasts (Fig. 2).

Despite the frequency of these illustrations, it is Satrapi’s own figure that predominates. Through the books, Satrapi presents her Kunstfigur, Marjane, growing and changing physically from a child into a woman over the course of fourteen years. It is not just through her repeated self-portraiture that Satrapi indicates an interest in the body, but also in her manner of relating her physical experiences to mental and emotional transformations. Satrapi’s focus on embodied experience as the primary means of understanding begins early in the books.
Upon learning of her grandfather’s politically motivated imprisonment in a water-filled cell, the nine-year-old Marjane rejects the opportunity to play with her father in favour of sitting in a bath in order to ‘know what it felt like to be in a cell filled with water’. Hearing other stories of family friends tortured with a hot iron, she begins to
relate to her peaceful domestic environment in a different way – even, in a short-lived attempt to appropriate some of this terrible power for herself, inventing her own methods of physical torture to try out on her playmates.\(^\text{13}\)

The years of revolution and war take a mental and physical toll on all of Iran, but young Marjane is more immediately concerned with her parents’ tyranny, and despite
having witnessed unspeakable violence, she declares her transition to adulthood with a personal action: smoking. As the fundamentalist system becomes more entrenched, Marjane’s frustration grows, and her outspoken ways make her vulnerable to attack by the authorities. Her parents, who are Zoroastrians, not Muslims, decide that a secular lycée in Europe is the safest environment for their daughter. Persepolis 1 ends with Marjane about to board a plane for her new beginning in Vienna.

Unfortunately, the transition proves difficult. Although her academic abilities are considerable, Marjane has difficulty fitting in with her peers, and seeks to educate herself through Western books like Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. She literally interprets Beauvoir’s pronouncement that women’s lives would change if they urinated standing up, and in a panel that is both funny and sad, Satrapi portrays her clumsy attempt to pee while standing (Fig. 3). Despite the naivety of this early endeavour, it is through her funny, sad and sometimes messy embodied experience that Marjane/Satrapi learns her most important lessons.

Fig. 3 Marjane discovers that learning abstractions can be messy in the concrete. From Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Anjali Singh, copyright © 2004 by Anjali Singh. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.
During her four years in Austria, Marjane frequently moves physically from place to place, and goes through a series of physical transformations, some with a sense of purpose, some inadvertently. At a number of points, Satrapi takes a break from the forward thrust of her narrative to illustrate these physical changes point by point across several panels. Every time she does this she links the external changes she shows as reflective of internal changes (Fig. 4). Each section of this text is accompanied by a drawing featuring the change described. That this particular transformation, puberty, is not a deliberate change like so many of the others only strengthens the argument that, for Satrapi, thought is intimately tied to the body’s experience. Not only does Satrapi connect physical with more intangible changes, she also asserts that the body is capable of surpassing the difficulties created by language.

Throughout both volumes, Satrapi’s narrative voice (which is distinct from Marjane’s) indicates how frequently she is lied to – by her parents, her friends, her government. Knowing that words can be used to manipulate, she comes to regard embodied experience as more reliable. During a visit from her mother, Marjane has difficulty verbally expressing the troubles she has faced in Vienna, but finds relief that ‘when words failed us, gestures came to our aid’. Several times Satrapi entirely forgoes written text to tell parts of her story, such as the death of a friend, entirely in images, as if to suggest that words are a poor substitute for some experiences (Fig. 5). Given that it covers Marjane’s experience from ages fourteen to twenty-four, much of Persepolis 2 deals frankly with sex. Marjane is first exposed to sex through the example of her friend Julie, who has had numerous partners and who is forthright (if somewhat careless) about sexual matters. Initially, Marjane has difficulty reconciling the traditionally reserved nature of her homeland – ‘where even kissing in public was considered a sexual act’ – with the West, where premarital sex seems to be a matter of course. Eventually, her views on sex become relatively Westernized, as she cycles through several romances and a spell in a Wohngemeinschaft with eight gay housemates.

Back in Iran, her new opinions and her sexual experiences bring her some trouble with her more ‘traditional’ friends, but, moreover, Marjane’s experiences in Austria highlight the social restrictions she faces in her homeland, where the presence of women covered by chadors and veils ironically makes her pay even closer attention to the body and the messages it conveys. As an art student who is asked to draw a male model without looking at him (looking at the opposite sex being restricted by the moral code), and later stopped from running because her physical movement draws men’s attention, she comes to realize how bodies, and particularly female bodies, operate as a site of power struggles, and how a government can utilize that power to achieve its own ends (Fig. 6):

The body is not simply to be celebrated for its beauty or capacity for pleasure (a common position of many American performance artists), but recognized as an important locale for personal and political articulation.

The importance of the body as a site of personal expression is taken up again as the topic of Embroideries, Satrapi’s next graphic novel, which records a single afternoon of discussion among ten multi-generational women, friends, neighbours and family. Unlike Persepolis, however, Marjane appears only briefly in a first-person introduction.
Satrapi ties physical change to mental and emotional development, even when the physical change is, like puberty, involuntary. From *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Anjali Singh, copyright © 2004 by Anjali Singh. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

before the story turns to a multivocal discussion of sex. This type of all-female gathering echoes what folklorist S. A. ‘Enjavi-Shirazi calls *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi* (roughly, ‘theatre games’), which are recognized ‘by their initiatory functions, eroticism and transgressive quality in both content and form.’ Topics include
keeping a husband’s interest, infidelity, children born out of wedlock, being forced to marry a man one does not like or know and who has been chosen by one’s parents, problems with female in-laws (with whom a young bride traditionally lives), proper and circumspect behavior. 20
Fig. 6 Satrapi recognizes that the body has both personal and political dimensions. From Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Anjali Singh, copyright © 2004 by Anjali Singh. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

This text might be found on Embroideries’ overleaf, so accurately does it describe its contents. Thus we see evidence of another connection between a traditional (if private) Iranian performance situation and Satrapi’s work in the graphic novel.

Given the forthrightness of both word and image in Satrapi’s works, there is almost nothing that could be considered vulgar or offensive. Nudity, although rarely used, is implied through silhouette; coarse sexual language (terms stronger than ‘ass’) occurs only once or twice; and Marjane’s sexual encounters are visually elided and only textually alluded to in the vaguest of terms: ‘I’ve had a few experiences’ is as explicit as she gets.21 This type of discretion indicates both Satrapi’s Persian modesty and her respect for the power of the body.

Comics as liminal

Satrapi’s choice to tell her own story through a graphic novel is a well-thought-out strategy that uses the liminality of the form to effectively underscore her subject matter. In the field of cultural production, comics are considered at best a marginal art form, and among both artists and readers women are a minority. Among those that do exist, these female comic voices are frequently ‘outsider’ voices (for example lesbians and the disabled) that use comics as a public venue otherwise unavailable to them. By choosing to present her story through the graphic novel, Satrapi is clearly placing herself outside the mainstream. The American editions of the books try to downplay this aspect by publishing Persepolis on thick, creamy paper in two hardback volumes as a way of marking its cultural cachet and seriousness as a piece of literature. (In France, where the graphic novel is slightly more accepted, four smaller, more economical paperbacks were released.)

Huysseun credits Spiegelman with transforming the popular genre of the comic, through his complex modernist narrative, into a blend that transcends dichotomies of high and low culture,22 but McCloud believes that comics, characterized by a combination
of images and words, are always a liminal form that is ‘at once both and neither’. \(^{23}\) In addition to comics’ marginal status in the art world, they are defined as a hybrid mixing words with images, narration with imitation, high with low, presence with absence, for the story is told not only through the combination of the words and images, but also in the spaces between the picture panels (known as ‘gutters’). Comics, like theatre, are a medium of communication where, unlike film or television, the audience must be ‘a willing and conscious collaborator’ to fill in the gaps in action between panels. \(^{24}\)

The importance for Satrapi of this marginal, liminal quality is that the margin harbours the potential for transgression; it is the location where, in Kristevan analysis, the rules of the symbolic system break down. The border is a place of continual negotiation of Kristeva’s ‘subject-in-process’, or the eternal ‘becoming’ of Adornean Angleichung. Although it may seem strange to mix Adorno and Kristeva with a popular cultural form like the graphic novel, Satrapi’s text is at heart about the creation of the self. Satrapi deals in detail with the serious issues of identity and subjectivity these theorists engage, but she does so in an accessible, frequently humorous way. The political bent of both books is unmistakable, which is perhaps unsurprising from a woman who as a child was given a comic book called Dialectical Materialism, and was raised by her Marxist parents to understand the social and political ramifications of the events of history, even as she benefited from the social inequities that resulted. \(^{25}\)

It is not only the intrinsic liminality of the comic form that serves Satrapi’s objective, but the particular visual idiom she chooses for it. With the exception of the colourful red and blue bindings, the whole of Persepolis, text and images, is presented in stark black and white. This method keys into two related principal concepts of comic art. The first is ‘amplification through simplification’. \(^{26}\) The second related concept specifies an inverse relationship between the presentation of the physical world and the world of ideas: ‘de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form [that is, through simplification], the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts’. \(^{27}\) As images become more iconic, or as one might say, ‘cartoony’, readers are simultaneously more able to identify with the subjects portrayed and are drawn into the thoughts and theories that underlie the text. And ‘cartoony’ Satrapi’s drawings, with their bold lines and acute contrasts, make for surprisingly vibrant, engaging images. Their simplicity and straightforwardness underline her painfully honest authorial voice. The illustrations are black and white; her analysis is anything but.

Persepolis

Satrapi’s embrace of the liminal is evident from the outset, in the title of her books. They are not named for Marjane herself, nor for either of the countries where she grows to adulthood, nor even the country that she currently calls home, but for ‘Persepolis’, the lost capital of Persia, a lost land. (Persia is distinct from Iran, a product of Western intervention.) Likewise, Satrapi initially reveals herself to be lost, adrift between her Persian heritage, her Iranian nationality, her Western (specifically French) education and a fundamentalist regime – only one of many foreign authorities that have hijacked her homeland over several millennia. Early in the first book, Satrapi includes a succinct page
of illustrations summing up the multiple waves of invasion to which the Persian Empire was subjected, as well as a short history of these same events in an Introduction, informing the reader of the Persian Empire’s 2,500-year existence, and particularly focusing on the events that led to its eventual obliteration in the twentieth century. Regardless of Persia’s ontological status, today’s Iran, although not lost, can be considered in some ways as liminal as Satrapi herself. Currently carrying the burdensome designation of member of the ‘Axis of Evil’, it can be classified as Islamic, but not Arab, suspended somewhere between the East and the West, or even considered a part of Asia (as The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre designates it).

This introduction indicates that Persepolis (the first volume, at any rate) is intended to some degree as a defence of an occupied and unjustly maligned country, but Marjane is squarely at the centre of the story. That the nation’s history and Marjane’s personal history are intricately interwoven is an even clearer demonstration of the identification between women and Iranian (here more specifically Persian) culture.

Veiling vs. framing

Perhaps the most crucial metaphor in understanding Persepolis is the veil. This article of clothing is introduced in the very first image, a solitary portrait of ten-year-old Marjane looking decidedly nonplussed at this recent addition to her wardrobe (Fig. 7). ‘The Veil’ is also the title of the chapter this image is found in, as well as a chapter title in the second volume, a repetition underscoring its importance to the story as a whole.

For Satrapi, the veil – and all it represents – is a means to hide and control women. While in her homeland, Marjane must wear the veil, as ordered by the Islamic Guardians of the Revolution, but later finds that, even while pursuing her education in presumably free Austria, she hides herself under a succession of various symbolic ‘veils’, cloaking herself beneath different, physically distinct manifestations, none of which bring her the satisfaction of subjecthood. Rather, they do the opposite: ‘The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules’. Marjane once goes so far as to deny her Iranian heritage outright, but it only increases her anomie.

It is her failure to find herself beneath any of these Western ‘veils’ that drives Marjane once again to don the hijab and return to Iran, where she struggles with depression. She realizes her predicament: ‘I was nothing. I was a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn’t even know anymore why I was living’. After a failed suicide attempt, she undergoes another physical transformation – this time, intentional – to remake herself into a sophisticated woman. Eventually she falls in love, but immediately after her wedding Marjane realizes that donning a bridal veil was merely another misguided attempt to fulfil a pre-scripted social role, and regrets her decision to marry: ‘I had conformed to society, while I had always wanted to remain in the margins’.

The frames that surround each of the hundreds of panels that make up Persepolis are a convention of Western comic art. Practically, these frames serve the double purpose of isolating important moments in the story, and of creating the spaces necessary for
Fig. 7 The veil is introduced early, as the first image and the cover image of Persepolis I. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L’ Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.
the story to move forward, as ‘Space does for comics what Time does for film’. Not all graphic novels use this device with such steadfastness and consistency, however. Satrapi uses a fairly straightforward mise-en-page: the panels are to be read from left to right and from top to bottom. But these frames are not only meant to guide the reader’s eye through the text; they function as a metaphorical alternative to the veiling Marjane experiences within the narrative.

Satrapi frames herself literally and repeatedly in her graphic novels, in all stages of development and through all her physical and ideological veils – as a would-be prophet, as a young Marxist revolutionary, as a punk, as a girlfriend, as a stoner and eventual drug dealer, as a homeless person, as a student, as a daughter, as a wife, as an Iranian, and so on. This graphic framing, supplemented by the textual framing of Satrapi’s narrative voice, serves as a constant reminder of Marjane’s subjecthood in all of its objectified manifestations. The frames keep her squarely in the middle of her own story, and are the single consistent element as she goes through a process of trying on different veils, like masks, in an attempt to uncover her true self.

Fig. 8 The last panel of each book presents the same location and a similar action, but with very different meanings. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L’ Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.
The importance of this literal framing is seen in contrasting *Persepolis* with *Embroideries*. Concerned with women’s embodied experience and frank sexual subject matter, *Embroideries* completely dispenses with the familiar convention of comic frames, and even, after a brief introduction, with the first-person narration characteristic of Satrapi’s earlier works. Marjane is a character, but the topic of this volume is not identity construction, and the visual language of the text reflects that.

Both volumes of *Persepolis* end in a similarly open-ended fashion, with Marjane standing in an airport (a liminal space if ever there was one), about to embark on the next, undiscovered chapter of her life. At the end of the first volume she is merely a girl leaving for a new country at her parents’ behest, but at the end of *Persepolis* 2 she is a woman who realizes that she only way to permanently leave behind ‘the veil’ is to embrace her marginal status and leave for a new new country, France, where she need not worry about being one or the other, or even one and the other. This change is presented visually in the final panel of each book (Figs. 8 and 9). Separated from her family by a glass wall, young Marjane presses herself against the glass, wide-eyed with shock and grief. Ten years later, behind the same piece of glass, Marjane, now a woman, smiles and
waves to her family. Her small figure is located in a corner of the panel, about to step out of this struggle-filled narrative for good.

Satrapi’s performance in *Persepolis* (lived behaviour ‘restored’ through writing and drawing) is certainly unconventional, as it results in a finished image-text, not a ‘live’ presentation like conventional performance, but the narrative she creates leaves her story one of open-ended becoming, in effect projecting her performance beyond the end of the narrative time frame, even beyond the end of the actual creation of the texts themselves.

In a recent interview, Satrapi declared, ‘The goal of my life is always to be marginal, to be on the margins, not to be part of any group’.34 For Satrapi, the margin is clearly not a negative place, but quite the opposite; it is ultimately a place of freedom, where living on her own terms and performing her own journey is finally possible. Ironically, it is because Marjane has plenty of experience with mimesis, adopting skin-deep appearances in failed attempts to assimilate, that Satrapi is able to reach her goal of liminality. Recognizing the faulty dialectics of identity through her mimetic ‘veils’, she finally disappears into the liminal subject-in-process, an endless becoming.

**Notes**

∗ For the sake of clarity, I will use “*Persepolis*” to refer to the first volume and “*Persepolis*” to refer to the work as a whole in the body of the article, even though the official title of the first volume has no numerical marker and will be thusly identified in the end notes.


3 Gaffary *et al.*, ‘Iran’, p. 196.

4 Houshmand, ‘Iran in Theater’.


(This notation format indicates the page number, 197, followed by the panel number, 2. The absence of a colon and number after the page number indicates that the entire page is being cited. I will use this format for all graphic-novel citations.)

6 Ibid., p. 104:1.


8 Contrary to conventional wisdom, Western-style theatre continues in present-day Iran. Ideological constraints as well as more practical restrictions regarding appropriate dress and interactions between women and men have critically affected dramaturgy, but have also resulted in a new tradition of experimental performances (like Atilla Pessyani’s wordless *The Mute Dream*, performed at the Lincoln Center Festival in 2002) which stretch the definitions of theatre. Few Persian-language plays (either those written in Iran or elsewhere, by exiles) are available in English translation, making comparisons for this study difficult, but scholarship indicates that they are almost universally concerned with sociopolitical issues.

Andreas Huyssen, ‘Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Speigelman with Adorno’, in *New German Critique*, 81 (Autumn 2000), pp. 65–82, here p. 72. Although the comparisons to *Maus* are legitimate, Satrapi also has another antecedent in Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*.


Ibid., pp. 34:8, 35. The imperfect grammar of this passage is representative of much of the text of the books, and conspicuously resembles spoken rather than written communication.


Ibid., pp. 28, 30, 58:2.


Gaffary *et al.*, ‘Iran’, p. 197


Huyssen, ‘Of Mice and Mimesis’, p. 70.


Ibid., p. 65.


Ibid., p. 41.

Satrapi, *Persepolis 1*, pp. 11:1–2.

This same image appears on the cover of *Persepolis 1*.


Ibid., p. 118.

Ibid., p. 163.


Natasha Walter, ‘Marjane Satrapi: The Lipstick Rebellion’, *The Independent Online Edition*, 6 September 2004 (http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/interviews/story.jsp?story=558825, accessed 30 March 2005). What is not mentioned is that however marginal Satrapi may present herself to be, the presence (to say nothing of the success) of *Persepolis* indicates that she has had many opportunities others have not enjoyed.

**Jennifer Worth** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Theatre Department and a Gilleece Fellow at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Wagner College on Staten Island, NY. She has been published in *Theatre Journal* and *Western European Stages*, for which she currently serves as Managing Editor. In 2006, she was awarded IFTR/FIRT’s New Scholar’s Prize in Helsinki for this essay.