Framing the “Minor” in Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's Persepolis

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Abstract
Satrapi’s work illustrates, on various levels, current debates in the profession surrounding the boundaries of twenty-first-century French and Francophone studies. For example, her texts both directly and indirectly treat in varying degree issues concerning fragmented societies and cultures; intermedial or splintering forms of artistic and cultural production; political and ethnographic boundary transgression; and continuities and differences in racial, sexual, and gender consciousness. These issues are all at the forefront in calls for papers from recent preeminent conferences in the field; including but not limited to the 2009 Modern Language Association Annual Meeting and the 2009 20th- and 21st-Century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium. Furthermore, Satrapi’s artistic sensibilities and uncompromising storytelling or narrative talents complicate previous thinking and discussion of the cinematic genre of animation and its generally-accepted categorization as a so-called “minor genre” or “minor cinema” in the fields of film and cultural studies. In relation to Satrapi and Persepolis, it is this “emergence of the minor’s inherent complexity and multiplicity”—as well as her “creative inventions” and “innovative interference”—that showcase how this narrative has the potential to (re)frame our construction and understanding of literature, comics, cinema, auto/biography, “culture,” and storytelling as well as reposition how we may come to think of “minor genres.”

Keywords
close reading, input and output activities, integrating language and literature, literacy, teaching methods

Disciplines
French and Francophone Language and Literature | Language Interpretation and Translation | Modern Languages | Teacher Education and Professional Development

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The treatment of “minor literature(s)” and “minor genres,” although certainly not new to the field of contemporary French and Francophone studies, might be in the midst of experiencing a resurgence of interest in the profession as evidenced by the number of related panel topics at the 2009 and 2011 Modern Language Association Annual Meetings across a number of disciplines and genre-based literary and film studies discussion groups. One may even venture so far as to say that there is perhaps a growing interest in (or at least a return to some of the key) issues surrounding so-called “minor” literatures and “minor” genres. Having never disappeared from the field entirely—as the volumes of late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century scholarship on (auto)biography and lifewriting, women’s literature, queer theory and sexuality studies, and multicultural and ethnicity discourse all reveal in varying ways—the issue of the “minor” has recently found a new “home,” so to speak, in the domain of transnational studies; where scholars often use it as a point of departure in their investigations of the construct of global/local and formulations of “otherness” and marginality in a variety of cultural productions. It is within this transnational vein of critical methodology that the question of “minor” takes on a new light when we think of the impact that graphic novels and animation in general, and Marjane Satrapi’s graphic narratives in particular, have on cultural production and theoretical discussion.
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With the increasing recognition among scholars of the so-called “literary” and “aesthetic” contributions made by graphic novels and comics (in other words, sequential art) as well as animation, these traditionally-considered “minor” or sometimes “underground” genres seem growingly less and less minor with their wide-reaching influences impacting more and more cultural or artistic productions of various nature or medium. From cinema to television and from fashion to Internet media and beyond, the proliferation of graphic narrative imagery and graphic narrative-infused discourse commands our attention almost everywhere we look. Within French and Francophone studies, Marjane Satrapi, an important Iranian-French transnational contemporary graphic novelist and animation filmmaker, through her unique graphic narrative imagery and discourse, complicates previous thinking and discussion of the issues of “minor literature(s)” and “minor genres.”

Satrapi’s work illustrates, on various levels, current debates in the profession surrounding the boundaries of twenty-first-century French and Francophone studies. For example, her texts both directly and indirectly treat in varying degrees issues concerning fragmented societies and cultures, intermedial or splintering forms of artistic and cultural production, and continuities and differences in racial, sexual, and gender consciousness. Furthermore, Satrapi’s artistic sensibilities and uncompromising storytelling or narrative talents complicate previous thinking and discussion of the cinematic genre of animation and its generally-accepted categorization or status as a so-called “minor genre” or “minor cinema.” Before jumping into our analysis and discussion of Satrapi’s work and its relation to the “minor,” let us take just a very brief and cursory look at the constructs of “minor
genres,” “minor cinemas,” and “minor literatures” so in order to analyze better her film *Persepolis* which she co-directed with underground comic book author and filmmaker, Vincent Paronnaud.

Traditionally speaking, one has typically drawn a distinction between the notion of “minor literatures,” an approach to the study of literature formulated by Deleuze and Guattari, and the idea of “minor genres,” an academic (and commercial) system of categorization or theoretical construct for the study (and production and distribution) of film and literature genres. Deleuze and Guattari identified “a minor literature” as a literature written in a “major” (official or dominant) language that deterritorializes the major language from a marginalized or minoritarian position through political expression or revolutionary conditions and via its collective enunciative value. In terms of genre, many North American library catalogues identify “minor literary genres” as all those other than the main genres of: drama, essays, fiction, poetry, and prose literature. In relation to film, scholars as well as film industry executives and film distributors identify “minor film genres” as sub-genres to main genres; e.g., buddy-cop film, chase film, or girls-with-guns film as minor or sub-genres to the major or main film genre of action and adventure.

The question of “minor cinemas,” however, is admittedly less common. In the closest approximation of Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of “minor literature” within the domain of film studies, it would perhaps seem that scholars have most often articulated this major/minor dynamic along the lines of Hollywood (i.e., major) versus World Film (i.e., minor) or even as mainstream cinematic production (i.e., popular film—major) versus
marginal cinematic production (i.e., avant-garde, “ethnic,” or art film—minor.) However, and more to the point of my interests in this essay, I wish to bring to light the status or place of animation in this major/minor dynamic. As any survey of typical film studies curricula, film course syllabi, or canon of “great films” would reveal, animated films are almost always outnumbered, if not non-existent; thus clearly occupying a marginal (or minor or secondary) position in relation to live-action films, at least in these contexts. Hence, for the sake of argument in this essay, it stands to reason that graphic narratives (i.e., sequential or animated art), in common thinking and pedagogical practice and whether on paper or on screen, represent forms of so-called “minor literatures,” “minor cinemas,” and “minor genres.”

Yet, whether theoretical or practical in its formulation or appellation, the qualifier “minor” has functioned in scholarship and curriculum both to recognize “other” types of discourses and texts as well as codify (when possible) a working rhetoric or form of these very discourses and texts often along vertical relationships to the “major” (i.e., mainstream, dominant, “original,” or hegemonic forms of literature and film). By discussing “minor” texts in relation to the “major”—for example, by focusing solely on how the minor recuperates and/or challenges the major—the minor risks appearing as if always mediated by the major as its primary means of identification; thereby eliding what Lionnet and Shih call the “creative interventions” or the “complex and multiple forms of cultural expressions of minorities and diasporic peoples” (7) and potentially dismissing what I call the “innovative interference” of intercultural or intermedial hybrid texts; in other words, the less-scripted
FRAMING THE “MINOR” IN MARJANE SATRAPI AND VINCENT PARONNAUD’S *PERSEPOLIS*
Stacey Weber-Fève

and seemingly more random convergence of rhetorical conventions and politics of narrative expression from two or more different genres or forms of cultural production.

This argument against the categorizations of “major” and “minor” texts is certainly not new, and the call to move away from binary constructions in general is decades old. What is newer in the treatment of the qualifier “minor,” however, is its pairing with transnational studies where scholars increasingly analyze the term and its forms via horizontal or transversal movements of culture. This is to say, the recognition that the minor and the major “participate in one shared transnational moment and space” (Lionnet & Shih 7). The minor and major in this transnational lens of analysis are still part and parcel of the processes of hybridization but through reciprocal exchange, they produce and perform productive comparisons of texts across as well as within a multitude of cultures; hence the horizontal or transversal movement. In their introduction in Minor Transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih call for a “cultural transversalism,” a critical construct which they describe as having an emphasis on “minor cultural articulations in productive relationship with the major (in all its possible shapes, forms and kinds), as well as [manifesting] minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether” (8). They assert that this cultural transversalism also “produces new forms of identification that negotiate with national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries, thus allowing for the emergence of the minor’s inherent complexity and multiplicity” (8). In relation to Satrapi and *Persepolis*, it is this “emergence of the minor’s inherent complexity and multiplicity”—as well as her “creative inventions” and “innovative interference”—that showcase how this narrative has the potential to (re)frame our construction and understanding of literature, comics, cinema,
auto/biography, “culture,” and storytelling as well as reposition how we may come to think of “minor genres.”

Throughout her corpus, Satrapi succeeds in juxtaposing both word and image in such a way that she effectively revises not only the aesthetic of the comic strip or animated cinematic media but also negotiates a new understanding of affective memory and storytelling. She manages this complication through her sometimes startling, sometimes reassuring juxtaposition of the “major” and the “minor.” Satrapi, a diasporic Iranian woman writer living, writing, and drawing in Paris, France, mobilizes in both word and image stereotypes and generalizations of the Islamic Republic and cliche’s of Western ideology in manners that contest traditional ways of both being and seeing and their methods or processes of constructing meaning and identity. *Persepolis*, the graphic novel, is a four-volume text that recounts approximately sixteen years of Satrapi’s life between the ages of ten and twenty-six. The reader follows Satrapi’s experiences growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution of 1978 and subsequent secondary schooling in Vienna, Austria; her return to Tehran in her early twenties, her higher education experiences, and her first marriage; and finishes with her self-imposed exile as she is depicted leaving Tehran for Paris indefinitely.

*Persepolis*, the animated film, is a ninety-six-minute film that condenses the four volumes into one cinematographic text. However, the film is neither a strict adaptation of the graphic novels nor a simple animated filming of the comic strips. They are separate works, with the animated material originating in the collaborative efforts of both Satrapi
and Paronnaud and made especially for the film. Written in French, both her graphic novels as well as the animated feature-length film are hand-drawn in a striking and stark black-and-white style and rather flatly in the graphic novels and two-dimensionally in the animated film. In effect, these characteristics belie the shades of gray and the depth of her imagery that constitute Satrapi’s daily existence and identity formation in her narratives. Moreover, this black-and-white style helps to put us on the path to rethinking and reconfiguring the “minor,” a point to which I will return at the end of this essay.

Scholars have described and labeled Satrapi’s work in many ways: for example, as an archeological excavation, an autobiographical graphic novel, a graphic memoir, autographics, a narrative of trauma, political autobiography, autobiofictionalography, loiterature, commix, and lifewriting. These many descriptions and labels exist because Satrapi’s work ultimately escapes easy classification. The film is reportedly an entirely French production. Its funding came from French sources; it was made with an all-French technical animation team; and it uses the voice talents of Catherine Deneuve, her daughter Chiara Mastionianni, Danielle Darrieux, and Simon Abkarian. Persepolis, the film, begins at the Orly airport outside Paris, France where the twenty-something protagonist Marji is unable to board a plane to Iran. Spending the day in the airport sitting and smoking cigarettes, she remembers and recounts the key moments in her life that have brought her to Paris.

The opening scene is presented in color, and the film returns to this setting a few times throughout its duration, in-between Marji’s re-telling of different periods of her life. The film is overwhelmingly a series of black-and-white flashbacks of Marji’s personal
history, although the present-day Orly airport scenes are drawn in color. It goes without saying that graphic narratives are just as (if not even more) stylistically and ideologically complex as literature and live-action films. Animated films in particular present a rupture from the photographic realism of live-action films, which in turn has the potential to grant the filmmaker the ability to create a virtual world often more imaginative and magical but no less serious than the so-called realistic worlds constructed in live-action films (Giannetti 135–136). Comics or graphic novels and animated films are not mere hybrid forms of graphic arts and prose fiction or dialogue, moreover, but a unique process of production, literacy, and interpretation that transcends both, often through their innovative use of their technologies and aesthetic devices.

As productions of visual culture, both the comic book and cinematic media make use of a visible or invisible frame and produce images encapsulated by said frame. In my reading and engagement with this animated film, it is precisely the frame and Satrapi’s and Paronnaud’s creative use of the frame—especially in moments of transition in and out of scenes—that allows Satrapi to transcend both word and image in the telling of her story as well as realize her creative inventions and innovative interference in her “genre.” This is made apparent from the onset of the film, the opening credits, for which Satrapi and Paronnaud employ an invisible or open frame.

We may effectively call this type of frame employed during the opening credits of Persepolis the implied frame of filmmaking, which suggests the dividing line that exists between the edges of the screen image and the enclosing darkness of the theater. We see a
floating jasmine flower whirl and twirl its way in a derailed fashion across the screen, leading us through a series of whimsical vignettes in which the names of those involved with the making of the film appear next to fairytale- or storybookesque drawings of landscapes, diverse everyday objects, and various elements of nature. On a narrative level, the images clearly call attention to the “fictional reality” of the ensuing film and situate us in a nostalgic frame of mind. On a narrational or technical level, the invisible frame creates a sense of endless movement or wandering. Space is expansive and seemingly limitless. The two layers of imagery in these images—whimsical nostalgia and exoticized “other” lands—speak to transnational critical enquiry with regard to what Stuart Hall has called a diaspora consciousness or the feelings of a home away from home or of a being here and there at the same time.

For Hall and many other scholars working in transnational studies, this diaspora consciousness comprises constantly changing representations and subjectivities that provide an “imaginary coherence” for a set of malleable identities that are no longer strictly tied to the patterns or the experiences of migration (Vertovec 7). This is the context or framework for the story that the “borderless” cinematographic frame is working to create. We freely and seamlessly flow from one image (or one land or one point of reference) to the next. There is a fluidity of styling and imagery created in the opening credits of Persepolis that suggests something beyond the interfaces of the so-called local or so-called global and that attempts to span national, local, or global spaces and position a mode of expression that occupies multiple spatialities and multiple temporalities. Although there is certainly migratory-like movement throughout the opening sequence and the film as a whole, this
“imaginary coherence” is not strictly couched in terms of East-West dichotomies or East-West border crossings in the text.

Rather, as the film will develop, there is a stronger, almost Existentialist sense of a young woman’s personal struggle to understand herself and to be true to herself as she, her intellect, her interests, and the ways she identifies herself all change or are transformed through the encounters and experiences she has with others. This is further accentuated in other uses of invisible or open frames in the film. There are many times throughout the film where characters, at neutral or eye-level angles and mostly in the middle ground of the shot, enter and exit the shot horizontally; suddenly appearing screen-left, traversing the image entirely, and then exiting screen-right or vice-versa. There are also many moments throughout the film where characters—in the foreground, middle ground, and background and drawn from various angles—appear to float diagonally from one corner of the image to the opposite corner and then eventually float beyond the frame and out of the shot entirely.

These examples reaffirm the migratory-like movement in the film, as well as its multiple spatialities and multiple temporalities. In effect, the invisible or open frame as described in these examples helps to weave the spectator in and out of Marji’s narrative as she “wanders” through her life story. Yet, Satrapi and Paronnaud’s use of this implied frame also seems to textualize the “cultural transversalism” that Lionnet and Shih identify as producing those new forms of identification that negotiate with national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. Throughout our viewing of Persepolis, we constantly encounter national, ethnic, and cultural complexity and multiplicity through the eyes, voice, and experiences of Marji.
and through her relationships with the people from various nations, ethnicities, ideologies, and cultures with whom she interacts. Satrapi includes a number of diverging points of view, clichés, stereotypes, and discourses within the “minority” and diasporic cultures she represents in the film, especially in terms of ideology and politics of identity formation. However, very much like in the opening sequence in which the motif of cultural transvergence is established, the closing sequence of the film also points to an innovative and transversal use of the invisible frame.

The jasmine flower from the opening credits returns in this closing sequence. Against a completely black background of an imageless shot (in other words, all we see is a black screen), we hear a voice-over dialogue of the child Marji and her grandmother conversing together. Marji asks her grandmother how it is that she always smells so good. Her grandmother replies that every morning she picks fresh jasmine flowers and slips them into her brassiere for their pleasant perfuming effect. Marji replies, “Wow, c’est super!,” and the three-quarters of a single jasmine flower appear in the upper-left-hand corner of the frame. This flower, on a completely black background, descends vertically along the left edge of the frame, tracing it entirely, and eventually falls below the frame and out of the shot. Although it appears to be the same flower from the opening sequence, it does not move nearly as freely or wander nearly as much as in the beginning. The flower does spin on its axis, making one complete vertical revolution to the left, but it does not float in the derailed fashion as it did in the opening. In both sequences, the frame imposes order on the image and focuses our attention on important symbols both in the narrative and for Satrapi’s
FRAMING THE “MINOR” IN MARJANE SATRAPI AND VINCENT PARONNAUD’S *PERSEPOLIS*
Stacey Weber-Fève

project. Again, the aforementioned feelings of a home away from home and/or of a being here and there at the same time are reestablished.

In both the opening and closing sequences (as well as throughout the film) and as emphasized through the technology of the cinematic frame, the literal or metaphorical or even metonymical focus on characters and their states of being and seeing transgresses the conventional boundaries of the narrative to heighten our emotional involvement with our emotional investment in the text. Whether nostalgic, comforting, or heartwarming, I suggest that this focus and its articulation through the frame effectively serve as the aesthetic and narrative device upon which pivot Satrapi’s and Paronnaud’s abilities to draw the viewer into the story and to interlock the visual and narrative trajectories of their storytelling. The invisible or open frames establish an ebb and flow of movement in all directions that remains relatively constant in this film and that reveals an inherent complexity and multiplicity not only in the film’s visual stylization but in Satrapi’s “message” as well. As a result, Satrapi and Paronnaud manage a curious paradox of suspension and movement that feeds into the dynamic and poetic qualities of the narrative as well as effectively captures the essence of transnational experience, which could be conceived as a sense of a kind of “floating statics”; i.e., the aforementioned multiple spatialities and temporalities and feelings of being here and there simultaneously. It is this curious paradox of suspension and movement that brings this essay’s discussion back to the issue with which it began: Satrapi’s relationship to the “minor.”
Categorically speaking in terms of genre and medium, Satrapi's graphic narratives are undeniably “minor” texts in the word of film and literary studies. However, it remains unproductive and ultimately inaccurate to formulate her work in this manner; much as in the same way as viewing her black-and-white visual style as “simple,” a criticism Publisher’s Weekly has leveled against Satrapi. Through the lens of “minor transnationalism,” as Lionnet and Shih map it out, to engage in this line of thinking risks denying Satrapi’s cultural transversalism (her creative inventions and innovative interferences) as well as Persepolis’ integrity. Satrapi asserts that Persepolis is a story about integrity; and as she shows in her work, integrity, in her account, implies being true to one’s principles and living accordingly. Yet, integrity is an interesting concept. One may also effectively read Persepolis as a story about being true to oneself in whatever “major” or “minor” form or forms that self is constructed through both vertical and horizontal cross-cultural encounters with “otherness.” It is perhaps this “other” interpretation of integrity that may put us on the path to (re)framing what we mean when we think and talk about the “minor,” by finally integrating it with the “major.”

Works Cited


FRAMING THE “MINOR” IN MARJANE SATRAPI AND VINCENT PARONNAUD’S *PERSEPOLIS*
Stacey Weber-Fève
