

*Some viewing notes for Persepolis (2007),
written and directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud*

Main voice actors in the original French version

Marjane as a child: Gabrielle Lopes

Marjane's mother: Catherine Deneuve

Grandmother: Danielle Darrieux

Marjane grown: Chiara Mastroianni

Marjane's father: Simon Abkarian

Main voice actors in the English version

Marjane as a child: Amethyste Frezignac

Marjane's mother: Catherine Deneuve

Grandmother: Gena Rowlands

Marjane grown: Chiara Mastroianni

Marjane's father: Sean Penn

(+ a special cameo by Iggy Pop as Uncle Anoush!)

Back Story and Behind-the-Scenes:

The title refers to the ancient city of Parsa ("Persepolis" in Greek), the name of the empire's capital in ancient, dynastic Persia. Consider how the story works to maintain Persian/Iranian cultural identity as something separate from (maybe even a victim of?) 20th-century politics.

The film is based on a comic-book style memoir written and illustrated by Marjane Satrapi. After becoming an admirer of Paronnaud's work as a graphic novelist, the two became friends and decided to work together to adapt Satrapi's book to film (though she'd resisted previous proposals to option the book for film). While the comic format *seems* like a natural storyboard format, they found they actually had to distance themselves quite a bit from the published version to develop a narrative flow more appropriate to cinema. Several critics agree that the adaptation works primarily because Satrapi's strong sense of personal voice carries both versions.

The animation was done using traditional paper-and-ink methods, with a team of animators drawing or tracing, by hand, each element of the movement (sometimes up to 24 drawings to create 1 second of action). They felt strongly that computer illustration would render the drawings too perfect and they would lose the natural flaws and richness of having been drawn by a human hand. (Computers were used later, of course, in pulling the animated sequences together and in the editing.)

One could argue that the film's identity is both Iranian and French (like its creator), though technically it's a French production. The Iranian government was outraged when it was released, sending a letter of protest to the French Embassy in Tehran and working to get it banned from some international film festivals. Subsequently, Satrapi refused to comment on the political readings of the film and was reluctant to do interviews with Iranian journalists. She felt that, while politics have a presence in the storyline, it is not itself a political film and actively works to dispel stereotypes of Iranians

An important detail about religion that doesn't come through in film version: Satrapi's family was not Muslim. Her belief system followed Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion in Persia that pre-dated the influence of Arab cultures in Iran.

Some Tips for Thoughtful Viewing:

As you watch, consider how Satrapi effectively balances the serious themes of cultural oppression and clinical depression with humor.

Critic Stacey Weber-Fève argues that when lists of "great films" are created, animated films are seldom included, that it doesn't occur to most film critics to see animation as anything but "minor" or "cult." Satrapi was adamant, though, that a live-action version of her story just wouldn't work. She sees the simple drawings

and the use of black & white was an aesthetic choice (though it comes from the cost-effective printing she came to rely on in the underground comics scene!) Black & white for her is more abstract, more universal, so that people from any culture can more thoroughly engage the story.

Note other ways in which the use of a black & white palette functions: it reflects the ways memory works, converging her child and adult perspectives in the story; it's symbolic of the "black-and-white" ideology of the regime; and it visually highlights the power of the black *hijab* and *chador* to cloak the individual identities of women.



Impressive, though, is the rich variety in the black & white imagery. For example, look for the powerful use of silhouettes in various revolution and war scenes; the puppet-like, two-dimensional figures on layered backdrops in scenes about history; and the cartoonishly exaggerated linework in some of the self-deprecating humor.

A few short scenes in color (not in the original book) were added to the film version as a framing structure. Satrapi describes being "in a nostalgic phase" as they began work on film and thought the color framing would set up the nostalgic flashback. This also helped to adapt the story to screen by adding visual transitions between the various episodic periods of the story. She argues that the color is simply practical as a device and *not* symbolic, mostly because she sees the scenes in color (scenes of a permanent exile in progress) as the saddest, least hopeful scenes in the story.

The filmmakers were intentional and careful in how the city of Tehran is visually depicted. In their attempt to dispel stereotypes of Iranians, they wanted to avoid "exoticization" and try to make the setting more universal, with buildings that look like they could be in any city, anywhere. When Marji first arrives in Vienna, note the contrast, how Vienna is depicted as exotic to her.

Keep an ear out for the soundtrack, which has great aural texture—at times light and cartoonish; other times with dramatic tension that paces the narrative; sometimes an organ soundtrack with a silent-movie style montage. Much like the variety in the black & white visuals, the textured soundtrack captures the competing emotions in Marji's character and propels the narrative beautifully.