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AUTOGRAPHICS: THE SEEING "I" OF THE COMICS

Gillian Whitlock

The Child that Comics Built

In a recent polemical essay, Marianne Hirsch considers the work of visual images and argues that in these times it is necessary to consider anew visuality and visual-verbal conjunctions in literature and in the visual arts more generally. What drives her thinking about words and images and their expressivity in this specific cultural and historical context are the recent proscriptions on sight/seeing in these times of war. The dissemination of images from the Iraq war and from the area around ground zero immediately after 9/11 have been carefully controlled, and these restrictions shape a new and urgent context for the sustained discussion of words and images, of reading and looking, that Hirsch considers. Debates about visual images and the relation of visuality to the transmission of personal and cultural trauma are emerging elsewhere too—for example Judith Butler's discussion of Susan Sontag's work on the power of photographs to communicate the suffering of others; and Sontag's own rethinking of her earlier work on photography in response to images of occupied Iraq in the mass media.[1]

Abu Ghraib triggers all of these discussions about lines of sight. But they don't end there, for what is at stake are fundamental questions about the interpretation of visual images and about their power to relay affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others. The questions that arise are

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urgent and political. How can we do more than consume these images as passive spectators? How can we move on to recognize the norms that govern which lives will be regarded as human, and the frames through which discourse and visual representation proceed? Clearly we live in times when attending to the relation between visual cultures and the transmission of memories of trauma and violence is both urgent and necessary, and so questions that are triggered by Abu Ghraib ripple out to broader issues of visual and verbal literacy. It is Hirsch who identifies the particular importance of the comics in meditating on the conjunction of visual and verbal texts now, and she adopts the term "biocularity" to grasp the distinctive verbal-visual conjunctions that occur in comics. These discussions about the potential of the comics are occurring around and about this sequential art, and they are embedded within it as well, for current practitioners are also its theorists, its historians, and its critics. Two recent autobiographical comics in particular engage in this work of exploring the potential of graphic autobiography to frame a response to this historical moment: Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Marjane Satrapi's two-volume series *Persepolis 1* and *2*.

Spiegelman's graphic memoir of 9/11 at ground zero, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, is a brilliant (if controversial) example of this biocularity, "asking us to read back and forth between images and words . . . [revealing] the visuality and thus the materiality of words and the discursivity and narrativity of images" (Hirsch 1213). Spiegelman's earlier graphic memoir *Maus* still stands as the prime example of the extraordinary potential of the comics in autobiographical narratives of trauma, and it too reflects back personally on a time of violence, censorship, and war. By coining the term "autographics" for graphic memoir I mean to draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics—features of discursive frameworks that Leigh Gilmore discusses in terms of "autobiographics." Although Gilmore's ground-breaking study is not specifically directed to comic autobiography, it introduces a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood. The intertext of "autobiographics" lends to my thinking about "autographics" the insistence on the shifting jurisdictions and limits of autobiography that is a consistent feature of Gilmore's attention to the production and consumption of life story.

Spiegelman's graphic memoir suggests several reasons why comics have come into their own now. First he presents a brief social and cultural history of cartoon comics in America, beginning with its heyday and the first appearance of comic strips in the daily press in the

late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; a distinctive American graphic style was born right there in lower Manhattan, now forever "ground zero." *In the Shadow of No Towers* includes reproductions from Richard Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* and Rudolf Dirks's *Katzenjammer Kids*, recycled by Spiegelman with a view to their renewed currency and role in this "end-of-the-world" moment:

> The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the twentieth century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment. (11)

Second, Spiegelman includes an autobiographical extension of this cultural history of the comics in the US—a reflection on himself as a reader of cartoons both now, in a traumatic present, and in the past. This is a reminder of the complex associations and implications of the comics with juvenilia, and our earliest reading experiences. It suggests the power of comics to trigger nostalgic memory. This has also been affirmed by Edward Said, who uses his "Homage to Joe Sacco" (a brief autobiographical essay that prefaces an edition of *Palestine,* Sacco's work of comics journalism) to recall his adolescent reading of comics in Cairo. Here, in his memories of reading as a child in a sociopolitical context very different to Spiegelman, Said also argues that comics "seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures. . . . I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently" (ii). Together Said and Spiegelman consider that much more needs to be said about the association of the comics with juvenilia and nostalgic memory work. By recalling autobiographically the child that comics built, they return to earlier experiences that are formative and haunt our adult engagement with the comics. Arguably the format of *In the Shadow of No Towers*—heavy cardboard stock, and outsized—recalls those first experiences of reading nursery books somatically. All of this amplifies Hirsch's point that such books make particular demands on the reader in their engagement with memory practices, and perhaps they have extraordinary potential to—as Said suggests—free us to think and imagine differently in times of trauma and censorship. What is it that comics does differently? How does this difference produce the distinctive technology and aesthetics of life narrative that I call "autographics"?

Boxes of Grief

Spiegelman's cartoons are his "slow-motion diary of what I experienced" on 9/11, produced as a way of "sorting through my grief and putting it into boxes" (n.p.). These boxes are the first principle of the unique aesthetics of the comics as sequential art. Will Eisner emphasizes that this style of sequential art is a distinct discipline of drawing and design and writing, a unique combination that has received little attention in either literary or art curriculum, from either practitioners or critics. Presciently, given his remarks were made in 1985, Eisner suggests that thoughtful scholarly concern and serious intellectual work on the graphic technology of sequential art will probably not emerge "unless comics address subjects of greater moment" (5). Arguably, their time has arrived!

Although the distinctive montage of word and image in comics is deeply familiar and even beloved, as I have suggested above, the visual and verbal interpretive skills needed for scholarly work on the comics require literacy in the interpretive regimens of art and of literature. Ironically, work on these most familiar of texts requires the acquisition of new interpretive skills for many of us. The vocabulary of comics represents figures and objects across a wide iconic range from the abstraction of cartooning to realism; its grammar is based on panels, frames, and gutters that translate time and space onto the page in black and white; and balloons both enclose speech and convey the character of sound and emotion. This grammar makes extraordinary demands on the reader to produce closure. Spiegelman acknowledges the work of closure when he describes the dynamics of reading *Maus*:

> I didn't want people to get too interested in the drawings. I wanted them to be there, but the story operates somewhere else. It operates somewhere between the words and the idea that's in the pictures, and in the movement between the pictures, which is the essence of what happens in a comic. So by not focusing you too hard on these people you're forced back into your role as a reader rather than looker. (qtd. in Huyssen 77)

The work of closure draws the passive "looker" into the engagement (and demands) of reading. In his brilliant (and graphic) consideration of comics that builds on Eisner's work—in fact, another work of autographics—Scott McCloud suggests that no other art form gives so much to its readers while asking so much from them as well. Comics are not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction, but a unique interpretation that transcends both, and emerges through

the imaginative work of closure that readers are required to make between the panels on the page (McCloud 92). In this way, comics offer a unique mediation of trauma in "boxes of grief."

Part of the power of comics is that this mediation occurs now across cultures in a global network of sequential art. Although there are distinctive and readily identified national and cultural traditions of comics (and Spiegelman's history documents and celebrates one American trajectory) the vocabulary and grammar of comics are widely accessible and adaptable. After all, *In the Shadow of No Towers* was published in Europe initially, and has found its most receptive readers there. *Maus* and *Persepolis* also indicated the extraordinary reach of comics as they engage in traumatic memory work across languages, cultures, and generations. The Baghdad Blogger, Salam Pax, celebrates the power of Satrapi's *Persepolis 1*—a graphic autobiography translated from French into English that travels east to Baghdad to remind Pax that the Iraqis have much to learn from the experiences of Iranians. On 7 December 2003, Pax records in *Where is Raed?,* his weblog from Baghdad:

> I spent most of the day at home reading Persepolis . . . a comic book written by Marjane Satrapi. It is too scary how much we have in common, Iraqis and Iranians I mean. . . . Some of the things about the start of the Muslim revolution make me think about what is happening now in Iraq. It was my third attempt to go thru that "comic book," I tried once right after I bought it but it made me wince, this time I went through it in one single go. It is a beautiful book. I had the urge to start translating it and throwing copies of it on the streets of Baghdad. Why can't we learn from other people's mistakes?

Pax's "wince" and his celebration of the beauty of *Persepolis* as sequential art are both important for thinking about the pleasures and pain of reading autographics. Like Said and Spiegelman, Pax confirms the potential in comics for distinctive mediations of trauma and cultural difference and for innovations that open up some new ways of thinking about the ethics of life narrative as it moves across cultures. In particular, cartoon drawing in comics has produced some of the most widely recognized icons globally. McCloud emphasizes the power of cartooning in particular to move readers by commanding viewer involvement and identification through distinctive devices, vocabulary, and grammar. Like Hirsch's "biocularity" this recognizes the specific demands comics makes on the reader to produce "closure"—the work of observing the parts but perceiving the whole. As Pax suggests, comics require the reader to become a collaborator,

engaging in an active process of working through. As a medium of expression and communication, comics uses closure like no other. The panels of comics fracture both time and space, offering a staccato series of frames separated by what McCloud calls the "limbo" space of the gutters: "closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67).

The technology of comics draws our attention to the semiotics of sequential art, and its unique demands on the reader. Nevertheless the recent cartoon wars are a reminder that as critics we must go beyond Eisner and McCloud to place readers and texts in context, and to be wary of claiming universality in mediations of comics and cartoon drawings. Translating comics and "throwing copies on the streets of Baghdad" (as Pax enthusiastically suggests) is a euphoric gesture of cross-cultural communication that forgets the complex transits that must occur for comics to engage readers in very different contexts. Late in 2005 cartoon representations of the prophet Mohammed published in the Danish press caused outrage and initiated violent protests and death on the streets of some Muslim societies—as Spiegelman memorably remarks: they added more very real injury to an already badly injured world ("Drawing Blood" 43). This is a reminder, if we needed one, of how all kinds of images and representations are now caught up in the "war on terror" and lives are at risk, quite literally so. The cartoon wars indicate that graphic art moves as a commodity in a global market across various econo-, ethno-, and ideoscapes, but at the same time they are a cautionary reminder that difference is not transcended or resolved in these transits, and visual images are processed within vastly different communities of interpretation, and easily co-opted as propaganda. There is no essential or singular reading or reader of the cartoon, and Hirsch's insistence that we live in times shaped by the fearful and even paranoid treatment of images that requires renewed attention to reading and looking seems more than ever necessary. Can we, along with Said, Spiegelman, and McCloud, continue to imagine that comics can hold on to some freedoms in thinking and imagining now, when cartoons so obviously go to war? Can they use the distinctive technologies of comics to engage with cultural difference and the legacies of trauma? I want to argue that they can and they do, by way of a contrast between *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, two autobiographical texts that take up the issue of intellectual freedom in Iran following the Islamic Revolution of 1979; both are deeply engaged in questioning how we might think and read across cultures in times of trauma and censorship.

Autobiographical Avatars

Marjane Satrapi has pointed out that her own graphic memoir has been influenced by Spiegelman's *Maus*, and just as *In the Shadow of No Towers* prompts Hirsch to contemplate the biocularity of comics, so too the two volumes of Satrapi's *Persepolis* quite deliberately trigger thinking about form: the gutters and frames of comics. Eisner pointed out in 1985 that neither practitioners nor critics have paid enough attention to sequential art; however this charge is now countered by autobiographers (or auto-graphers!) such as Spiegelman and Satrapi. Both are self-reflexive practitioners in their use of cartoon drawing; their autobiographical avatars actively engage with the conventions of comics. Satrapi's cosmopolitanism is further evidence of the global transits of sequential artwork. She is an Iranian exile who works with the French collective L'Association in Paris, that specializes in the French tradition of the *bandes dessinées* comics for adults, and her graphic autobiographies have been translated and widely syndicated and distributed in Europe and America (and, as we see from Pax, they are recycled back to the Middle and Far East in English as well).[2] They can be classified as part of an extraordinary proliferation of Iranian exilic memoir in English in the recent past (including, for example, narratives by Azar Nafisi, Roya Hakakian, and Firoozeh Dumas, among others).

In their attention to discipline and form, *Persepolis 1* and *2* invite comparison with Nafisi's bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Both Nafisi and Satrapi recollect the experience of the Islamic revolution in Iran and its extraordinary impact on the lives of young women. These autobiographies are narratives of trauma that recall a loss of the self, an experience of estrangement and a loss of the known world as the force of Islamic fundamentalism was registered immediately and forcefully on the bodies of Muslim girls and women. In 1980 Satrapi was ten-years-old, and the revolution made an immediate impact. This is, in fact, where her first volume of *Persepolis* begins: a chapter called "The Veil," where Marji, Satrapi's autobiographical avatar, describes the Cultural Revolution. Her integrated and bilingual classroom was segregated, and young Iranian girls were required to wear the veil. For Satrapi's family, the turn to Islamic fundamentalism was particularly restrictive and threatening, for her parents were Marxist intellectuals, and her great-grandfather one of Iran's last emperors, who was replaced by Reza Shah in the process of British colonization after the first World War. Nafisi also recalls the loss of privilege for the liberal intelligentsia that followed the ascent of the Islamic Republic. Like Satrapi, she is descended from public intellectuals who were disenfranchised by regime change

in Iran—Nafisi's father had been mayor of Tehran. A graduate student in literature at Oklahoma at the time of the Revolution, Nafisi's memoir recalls her struggle to live as a teacher of literature and an intellectual in Tehran after her return to Khomeini's Iran. Both of these life histories are translated into memoirs that negotiate the cross-cultural relations between Iran and the West in a self-reflexive way. The intensity of this loss of the self and its place in the world engenders a resurrection through memoir as a Western metropolitan intellectual and a diasporic subject with a troubled and ambivalent relation to a lost homeland and to contemporary Iranian culture and society. Satrapi is very direct about this: "I am a foreigner in Iran. . . . Nowhere is my home any more . . . the book *Persepolis* I wrote for the other ones, not for Iranians" (qtd. in Tully 2). These recollections of the regime change in Iran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution that began with the exile of the shah in 1979, circulate now and bring traumatic memory into the present as troubled relations between the United States and Iran deepen, and new proscriptions on intellectual freedom and secularism in universities occur under the Ahmadinejad regime.[3]

Reading Lolita in Tehran is a literary memoir that becomes engrossed in the work of English literature, criticism, and the literary sensibility. In resistance to the proscriptions of Islamic fundamentalism, Nafisi begins a book group for her brightest students in the privacy of her own home in Tehran. Elsewhere I have considered the ways that autobiographers construct a sense of the self in and through their professional training as academics ("Discipling"). By this I mean to suggest that when public intellectuals write autobiographically their disciplinary training and affiliations can become a register that shapes their self-representation. We see this very clearly elsewhere, for example in Lorna Sage's academic memoir *Bad Blood* (2000). Here the narrating autobiographical subject, Lorna, selects memories that produce a strong sense of continuity between the competencies and characteristics of herself as a child and the profession of the adult self: a literary critic and academic. This shaping of the self in and through a discipline occurs quite specifically in Nafisi's memoir and, as in Sage's *Bad Blood*, the memoir is deeply embedded in literary culture, with constant allusions to the great tradition of English. This style of academic memoir allows a virtuoso display of literary scholarship in the authorization of the self. In Nafisi's memoir the reading group and the books they read under the tutelage of a didactic teacher of English literature are at the center of *Reading Lolita*. Remarkably, the rerouting of Nabokov (and Austen, James, Fitzgerald) via Tehran and the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran produces readings of Western canonical texts that enchant many readers in the

West, and the US most particularly. The diagesis of the narrative, and its textual politics, seem natural in this vivid story of a reading circle that defies totalitarianism and censorship. *Reading Lolita* is a passionate and polemical narrative about the novel, the reader, and cultural politics; however it offers little by way of a self-conscious practice or translation of the disciplinary protocols of English across cultures. Great books do not enter into a process of transculturation whereby they are remade in transit to other cultures and histories; as Nahibi and O'Malley point out, Nafisi's memoir places itself squarely within a Western canonical tradition.

This is not unexpected. To understand why this might be so we can turn to Simon Gikandi's consummate analysis of the privileging of English literary texts—and the disciplines that teach them—as exemplars (and vehicles) of globalization. Gikandi discusses the remarkably disciplined nature of the spread of English (the literature of England and the US) and makes the following remarks: "debates about literature in Africa throughout the 1960s and 1970s were not about the rethinking of the idea of the literary, but attempts to show that African literature in English could make the same exclusive claims that F. R. Leavis had made for English literature in England" (649). The privileging of English literature as an agent of moral meaning and humane values is repeated again in *Reading Lolita*, where it undergirds the resistance the Muslim women make to the Islamic theocracy—quite "naturally." To return to Gikandi: it "is my contention that Leavis's appeal in the colonial world, his global aura as it were, depended on both his aphilosophical method (which enabled him to represent the institutions of literature and exegesis as natural and commonsensical) and his refusal to make literary or cultural difference central to his concerns . . . by ignoring difference altogether, he created a grammar, which turned it into a free-floating cultural object" (650). As I have argued elsewhere (*Soft Weapons*), the grammar of English as it is rehearsed in Nafisi's memoir disciplines and centers this narrative, and affirms the consensual community of Englishness that binds texts, traditions, and readers. Young Muslim women in Tehran are trained to read for culture and morality in canonical texts in the same way as their peers are trained to read English literature in London or Baltimore.

The Other Ones

Not so in *Persepolis*. Here a different mediation of cross-cultural relations occurs, drawing on the capacity of comics to free us to think and imagine differently in times of trauma and censorship. We see this immediately in *Persepolis 1* which, as I have remarked, begins

with a chapter called "The Veil." Where else could a memoir that sets out to address cultural difference specifically begin in these times? The veil is, after all, one of the most intractable symbols of cultural difference between Muslim societies and the West. As Manuela Constantino points out, *Persepolis 1* was published in France in 2000, at a time when the country was struggling with the debate over veiled Muslim girls in public schools. In fact the French Ministry of Education has approved the book for inclusion in the literary curriculum of private schools in France, where it is promoted as an educational tool to represent and foster a liberal viewpoint on Muslim cultural practices. In the aftermath of 9/11, *Persepolis* circulates more widely in Euramerican networks as a strategically important book for inculcating cross-cultural dialogues and understanding. Satrapi uses cartooning to represent the figure of veiled Iranian girls and women distinctively. Like Nafisi's turn to the English tradition and literary modernism, the censorship of the Islamic theocracy in Iran elicits this as a tactical response; however, cartooning and comics mediate cross-cultural relations very differently. For both Nafisi and Satrapi, the censorship of the mullahs is figured (and experienced) most potently through and on the bodies of women. In *Reading Lolita* the freedom and liberation of reading canonical English literature are signaled at the door of the reading room, where most of the girls take off the chador and enter a female space where they become recognizable for the first time as vibrant individual women. On the streets of Tehran, they remain veiled by the chador: nondescript, obliterated, silenced.

The black and white drawings allow Satrapi to approach the politics and discourse of the veil otherwise. She contests the dehumanizing frame of reference that mediates representations of veiled women with the acquisition of a craft that the autobiographical avatar Marji explains explicitly in *Persepolis 2*, in a chapter called "The Socks." Here as an art student in Tehran after the Revolution Marji and the other women learn to draw in segregated studios, and the only model available to them is the chador-clad woman. In a single elongated frame, undisrupted by gutters, Satrapi draws the women students—themselves veiled—as they sit in a circle round the singular figure of the veiled model: the archetype of the silenced Muslim woman offered for them to reproduce (modeling this figure literally and metaphorically). The sequenced segments are silent: there are no balloons, just the remarks of the autobiographical narrator Marji in handwritten script across the top of the five panels: "We tried. We looked . . . from every direction . . . and from every angle . . . but not a single part of her body was visible. We learned nevertheless to draw drapes" (145). And so she does. In *Persepolis* drawings of veiled women refuse that stereotype of the nondescript archetypal

Muslim woman. Rather, Satrapi's female figures are human, and full of character and individuality even with the veil. The drapes are part of this characterization, and the distinctive art of cartooning—which both simplifies and amplifies, and encodes ways of seeing, as McCloud reminds us—draws the veil as part of the identity of these Muslim women. In this way Satrapi records and practices the tactics of subversion that many Iranian women of her generation deployed after the Revolution, and this is also the story of "The Socks." Marji wears red socks beneath her chador, the small detail that signals resistance; she explains this in a small frame where she addresses the reader in a balloon of direct speech: "It's only natural! When we're afraid, we lose all sense of analysis and reflection, our fear paralyzes us. Besides, fear has always been the driving force behind all dictators' repression. Showing your hair or putting on makeup logically became acts of rebellion" (148). We know who Satrapi addresses—"the book *Persepolis* I wrote for the other ones, not for Iranians"—and her intent is to honor the resistance of Iranian women, the small detail that announced singularity and agency. At the same time, Satrapi subverts the tendency of "the other ones" to dehumanize veiled women as massed figures indistinguishable one from the other. The art is to read for small difference. Satrapi's comics insist on it.

We learn more about this conscious and tactical practice of cartooning in another episode, "The Exam," where Marji sits for the drawing exam to enter the College of Art and study graphic arts after her return to Tehran. She knows that, in the wake of the Iraq-Iran war, when propaganda is rampant and 40% of university places are reserved for children of martyrs and those disabled by the war, one exam topic will be a representation of "The Martyrs." In a single large frame that dominates the page, Satrapi includes the image of the crayon and Marji's hand as it draws in the framed space. The image in the process of being drawn here is also extraordinary, and across the top of the frame the narrator describes her tactics: "I practiced by copying a photo of Michelangelo's 'La Pietà' about twenty times. On that day, I reproduced it by putting a black chador on Mary's head, an army uniform on Jesus, and then I added two tulips, symbols of the martyrs, on either side so there would be no confusion" (127). There is, of course, considerable "confusion" here! Satrapi has turned to the tradition of the pieta—artwork depicting the Virgin Mary cradling the body of the dead Christ—earlier, in *Persepolis 1*, to signify a moment of trauma when her mother collapses as the young Marji leaves Tehran for Europe. Here, on this second invocation of Christian iconography, the intent and meaning is different. Marji is subverting the political correctness required by the examiners by incorporating a Christian archetypal image of compassion and suf-

fering into an Iranian nationalist composition. She is also remarking that the tendency to glorify martyrdom and suffering in propaganda is not peculiarly Iranian or Muslim.

This pursuit of sacrilege defines the space of Satrapi's cartoons and marks the potential of comics to open up new and troubled spaces of representation. In *Persepolis* (to return to my earlier remarks on *Reading Lolita* and the traditions of English literature) canonical images and narratives are reconfigured in light of experiences of Islamic fundamentalism in Tehran. In the self-regarding art of graphic autobiography we can begin to recognize the norms that govern which lives will be regarded as human and the frames through which discourse and visual representation proceed. On this basis, Satrapi crafts a distinctive intervention in debates about that most intractable symbol of cultural difference, the veil. The distinctive devices of cartoon drawing in comics are essential to this intervention. Cartoon drawing is, to recall McCloud briefly, the vocabulary of comics. Cartooning abstracts an image, stripping back detail and focusing on specific features; as McCloud insists "cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it is a way of seeing" (31). *Persepolis 1* begins with a chapter called "The Veil," and this garment is represented in a highly iconic (as opposed to realistic) cartoon drawing of the newly-veiled Marji and her girlfriends Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, and Minna. For the Muslim girls, the first experiences of the Revolution were spatial segregation according to gender and faith, and this segregation included hijab. The *maghnaeh* (hooded head-scarf) that covers Marji and her friends frames and accentuates their childlike faces in stark black and white in the first pages of *Persepolis*. This produces a complex series of associations for implied readers who are placed (as Satrapi herself reminds us) not as Iranians but as "the other ones" in the West. There is a juxtaposition produced by cartooning the figure of the child here (in an image that is reproduced and framed in a cutout on the hardcover of *Persepolis 1*): the association of the face and the veil. As Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley point out, the visual image of the child that opens (and covers) *Persepolis 1* is a dissonant combination of the familiar (the iconic cartoonish figure of the child) and the strange (the veiled and radically other).

McCloud argues that cartoon imagery possesses universality. Now, in these times and in the aftermath of the cartoon wars, we think more cautiously about asserting universality. However his point remains that iconic drawings of the human face are particularly powerful in promoting identification between reader/viewer and image, and the more cartoonish (iconic) a face is, the more it promotes association between the viewer and image. The childlike cartoonish faces of Marji,Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, and Minna are, then, icons

through which even those of us placed as "the other ones," outside the frame, may feel an empathic association. Furthermore the girls are captured as they themselves initially experience the veil: as a foreign object. Satrapi's cartoon drawing sustains the individuality and agency of her autobiographical avatar and friends vividly, and with compassion. From the beginning of *Persepolis*, the distinctive result of cartoon drawing here is that dissonant combination that makes an intervention into the discourse of the veil just as it emerges in propaganda with new force.

There can be no simple universality in the associations produced by cartooning across very different relationships. Nevertheless this encounter with the cartoonish Marji and the veil is an opening, a distinctive mediation of cultural difference, and an interpolation of Western readers ("the other ones") into a frame of dissonance, association, and juxtaposition that troubles a sense of self and the norms that frame ways of seeing the self and other. We find this elsewhere in representations of trauma in autographics, where troubled memories are held in the boxes of grief of sequential art. For example in Andreas Huyssen's discussion of *Maus*—a precursor of *Persepolis* as Satrapi herself suggests—he draws attention to the mimetic approximation performed in Speigelman's comics memoir. In *Maus*, too, the reader is taken into an estranged space of association and dissociation in an image-text that deals with traumatic memory. Humans are translated into animal forms by the autobiographical avatar of *Maus*, Artie. Despite the risks of using animal imagery in the narration of a Holocaust memoir—in fact tactically avoiding representations of the human face—Spiegelman suggests that the cats and the mice are ciphers, and represented in this way "to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it" (qtd. in Huyssen 75). For Spiegelman, too, dissonance and estrangement (in his case achieved through taking representation across the human-animal boundary) are vital to the work of representing traumatic memory in the comics. Interestingly in *Persepolis* the reverse occurs: it is the device of the very cartoonish human face of the child that becomes a cipher of "an insuperable tension within mimetic approximation" that "couples closeness and distance, similitude and difference" (Huyssen 79).

Like Artie, Marji too is an autobiographical avatar of the artist working at the limits of representation in dealing with traumatic memory; they are dealers in images that remain intractable and overdetermined. These avatars enter the frame to draw attention to the struggle to shape tactical narratives that draw us into the hard work of performing closure across the frames of the comics. It is useful to recall that Artie is constantly frustrated by questions about the message of *Maus*: "a message? I dunno . . . I-I never thought

of reducing it to a message. I mean, I wasn't trying to CONVINCE anybody of anything" (202). The notion that comics free us "to think and imagine and see differently" drives these engagements with the pain and suffering of others, but the essence is the medium not the message. Naghibi and O'Malley call attention to the gutters of comics as aporia—blank spaces where new meanings can be generated and a distinctive cross-cultural translation can occur. This is a meaning produced in an active process of imaginative production whereby the reader shuttles between words and images, and navigates across gutters and frames, being moved to see, feel, or think differently in the effort of producing narrative closure. This labor of reading and looking for closure is at the heart of the opening that autographics might make in shaping affective engagements and recognition across cultures now. The idea that the unique vocabulary and grammar of comics and cartoon drawing might produce an imaginative and ethical engagement with the proximity of the other may seem to discount the recent sad story of the cartoon wars. Yet this controversy reminds us that the precariousness of life is at stake in debates about visual culture, and understanding the difficulties and demands of cultural translation to recognize the other is now more than ever important work in the humanities. Like Pax, we may wince, but we must continue the work of reading.

Notes

I am indebted to Marianne Hirsh, Nima Naghibi, and Andrew O'Malley for their work on comics, and to my colleague Jude Seaboyer for the invitation to work with *Maus*.

1. In *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag suggests photographs have the power to move us momentarily but they do not have the power and narrative coherence to build an interpretation or an alternative understanding. In her discussion of Sontag's reflections on photography in the wake of Abu Ghraib, Judith Butler argues that there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war (827). Sontag's own last thoughts on these issues were published shortly before her death in "Regarding the Torture of Others."

2. It was announced in 2006 that Sony Pictures Classics would be turning *Persepolis* into an animated film, to be released in 2007. Co-written and co-directed by Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, it will also be released in English.

3. In September 2006 Iran's hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad urged students to push for a purge of liberal and secular teachers

from universities, a sign of his determination to stamp a strong Islamic fundamentalist revival on the country.

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Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.

[Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]

Subjects:

- Spiegelman, Art. In the shadow of no towers.
- Satrapi, Marjane, 1969- Persepolis.
- Comic books, strips, etc. -- History and criticism.

Abstract:

Recently Marianne Hirsch has argued it is necessary to think anew about words and images and their expressivity in the specific cultural and historical context of the 'war on terror'. Here Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Art Speigelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* are read in terms of 'autographics': the distinctive technology and aesthetics of life narrative that emerges in the comics. Unique mediations of cultural difference occur in the grammar of comics, which make demands on the reader to navigate across gutters and frames, and shuttle between words and images, in an active process of imaginative engagement with others.

Versluys, Kristiaan.

- *Art Spiegelman's* In the Shadow of No Towers: *9-11 and the Representation of Trauma*

[Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]

Subjects:

- Spiegelman, Art. In the shadow of no towers.
- September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001 -- Comic books, strips, etc.
- September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001 -- Psychological aspects.

Abstract:

This paper demonstrates how in his graphic novel In the *Shadow of No Towers* Art Spiegelman reads the events of 9/11 through the conceptual screen of the Holocaust. The questions that are raised in this connection concern the legitimacy of speaking about catastrophes, the stylistic means necessary to avoid sensationalism and kitsch, and finally the role of political commitment in the process of mourning or working-through.

Chute, Hillary L.
Bechdel, Alison, 1960-

- *An Interview with Alison Bechdel*

[Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]

Subjects:

- Bechdel, Alison, 1960- Fun home: a family tragicomic.
- Bechdel, Alison, 1960- -- Interviews.
- Women cartoonists -- Interviews.

Review Essay

Chute, Hillary L.

Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction (1995), and has published articles on narrative in *Poetics Today*, *Narrative*, *Style*, and the *Blackwell Companion to Narrative Theory*.

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