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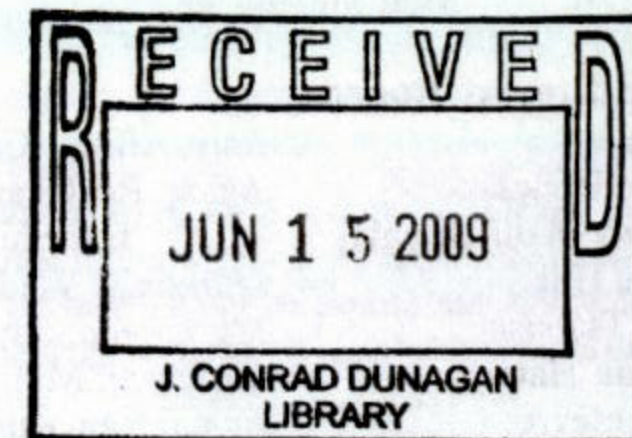
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Graphic Novel Decoded:
Towards a Poetics of Comics

Pauline Uchmanowicz

A globally popular publishing format in the inaugural decade of the 21st Century, the graphic novel emerged over the course of the previous one, evolving from comic book pulp to auteur sequential art -- from ephemeral to archival object. Three decades after Will Eisner re-coined the term "graphic novel" (attributed to Richard Kyle in Chute, 2008:453) to market his illustrated chronicle of tenement life, *A Contract with God* (1978), and subsequently owing to conferment of a 1992 Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman for his pictorial Holocaust account, *Maus* (1986-1991), widespread re-branding of comics under the graphic novel logo has redirected both product,commodification in the marketplace and genre identification in the academy. According to Mark Siegel, editorial director at New York City's avant-garde comic book press First Second, who spoke in a telephone interview, "More and more styles and possibilities are now available for graphic illustrators and writers whose works blur categories and span readership."

Alongside fiction of all kinds, the graphic-lit expanse presently includes memoirs, biographies, history, how-to guides, comics journalism, genre theory, and visual essays. A worldwide convergence of comics-lit supporters -- booksellers, newspaper and magazine editors, film directors, museum curators, librarians, and academics -- likewise has encouraged the medium's legitimation and mainstream acceptance (Wiener, 2004:54). Globalization meanwhile is enabling the graphic format's migration across the geopolitical literary landscape, as exemplified by Qajar dynasty-descended Marjane Satrapi's two-volume graphic memoir *Persepolis*, an Iranian-girlhood portrait originally written and published in French and widely translated in 2003-2004. "All this activity means that every major publishing house is jumping on the bandwagon. In the next couple of years there will be wave after wave of illustrated stories flooding the world," predicts editor Siegel.

Innovations in the cartooning idiom have accompanied the graphic novel tsunami and an accelerating visual-verbal semiotics surged around its sign, resulting in rededicated critical interest in reading and writing about comics. Once mainly undertaken on the fringes of popular culture by practicing cartoonists and comic book fans (Buhle, 2003), comics scholarship in North America has undergone significant development since the late 1960s, when Arthur Asa Berger unsettled the academic community by choosing "Li'l Abner" as the theme of his doctoral dissertation, next pioneering quantitative methodology in his monograph *The Comic-Stripped American*, published in

1973. To date, a grand narrative of the comic book-cum-graphic novel's history of proliferation has emerged, necessary for rationalizing its speculative position and relative significance in the enlarged narrative of literary studies. Other comics scholarship has tended to focus on the medium's sociological and aesthetic aspects, with comics pedagogy lately another burgeoning strand. Comics form has received less attention, Eisner's landmark *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and fellow cartoonist Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) notwithstanding. But both works "lack theoretical sophistication" and exist somewhat "removed from the scholarly traditions with which [either] might intersect," as Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen comment in introducing their recent English translation of French theorist Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007 [1999]:vii), an essential formalist study that adopts what I call *binomial rhetoric* to identify and describe the genre's visual-verbal multi-valences. Considerations of graphic novels appearing in the United States by Brad Prager (2003), Jeanne Ewert (2004), and Martha Kuhlman (2004) also have adopted formalist language that recognizes the graphic system's rhetorical complexity. Still in an inaugural phase relative to iteration of its disciplinary genesis, advancement of a comics poetics remains essential for acclimating the graphic novel's neo-formation and critical predication, and for mapping and sustaining the genre's position on the literary globe, a cause I will advance below, beginning in the second section.

That the graphic-logo's pivot into the new century appears incumbent upon understanding both its history and form warrants consideration in light of current debates in literary studies about the competing status of the two interpretive positions over the past 100 years. Put briefly, New Historicism and other interdisciplinary methods (steeped in identity politics and concerned with material conditions and power relations out of which texts arise) largely have displaced New Criticism (characterized as archaic, positivist formalism predicated upon textual aesthetics). Cataloguing parameters of this antagonism by conceding that knowledge of historical contexts is necessary to conduct formalist readings, Marjorie Levinson classifies strands of neo-formalism that either enable "continuum with new historicism" (activist formalism) or comprise a "backlash" against it (normative formalism) (2007:559). Marjorie Perloff, seeking to resuscitate the role of evaluation in literary studies, more directly critiques the predominance of hybrid methodologies divorced from considerations of form, positioning her remarks with an eye to growing "global literary activity," including the social function of the author worldwide (2007:653). Stephen Cohen, who favors reconciliation between "agonistic oscillations" through theoretical hybridization that retains "sight of the object of study," posits "historical formalism," which emphasizes mutual interactions that "illuminate at once text, form, and history" (2007:1, 5). According to Cohen, historical formalism "entails consideration not only of *what* literature says, means, and does, but of *how*," and "insists on attention to the shape and composition of the *text-as-container* and the impact they may have on the meaning and functions of [historical] content" (2007: emphasis in original, 14; emphasis added, 15).

In *The System of Comics*, Groensteen's methodology in some ways matches the criteria of historical formalism. Interpreting comics as a hybrid form, he applies "neo-semiotic criticism" in presenting "grand articulations" of textual examples from both Franco-Belgian and North American comics movements, guided by three concepts that help explain relations between what he conceives as "solidarity" of the iconic comics system as determined by ultimate signification of the panel (text-as-container) in totality with other components: spatio-topia (designating "precedence" of spatial and topological apparatus), his neologism arthrology (from the Greek arthron: articulation), and braiding (tressage in French, or the interaction of dialogic and recursive modalities) (2007 [1999]: passim). Exploring both *what* and *how* signs mean within the visual-verbal cartooning system (2007 [1999]: emphasis in original, viii), the author enunciates how comics are historically homologous and structurally normative across cultural frontiers. Chiefly an elaboration of the medium's spatial narratology (as executed through panel, page, and word-balloon layout, composition, size, function, and rhythm) that defends the primacy of image over word, *The System of Comics* may be likened to elucidation of both poetic architecture (as in stanzaic structure and arrangement or line placement) and prosody (as in recognition of "variation" and "substitution" in meter scansion, analogous to Groensteen's designation of rhythmic "aberration" and "irregularity" in structural progression otherwise homogenized by panel uniformity). Less emphasis is given to the formal functioning of imagistic-discursive figures and tropes that transmit historical, geographical, and sociopolitical signification, producing aesthetic meanings, or what I call the pattern of comics -- the *why* of graphic literature.

In mechanistic design the pattern of comics may be described as post-cosmopolitan, a concept reformulated from Andrew Dobson's articulation of global sustainability (2003). Configured out of the dialogic community of images and signs that proliferates through multimodal networks and across transnational frontiers, the pattern of comics frequently exposes what Dobson calls "daily life in an unequal and asymmetrically globalizing world" (2003:30). A neo-comics formalism that seeks to illuminate this semiotic matrix in 21st Century cartooning spaces requires extended application of binomial rhetoric to identify and interpret multiple potentialities of its images and words. As a demonstration I will decode Satrapi's *Persepolis,* then briefly compare examples of its comics patterning to examples found in recent North American graphic narratives.

Pattern Recognition

According to architectural and design theorist Christopher Alexander, archetypal "patterns" that occur throughout world civilizations -- from Turkish carpets to postmodern houses -- distill human environments, allowing people who live in them to take comfort in surrounding activities and social arrangements (Miller, 2004:25). In other words, we read the world through pattern language, a process that collapses or subverts the space between signifier (word) and signified (image). William Gibson explores this potentiality in his 2003 cyber-thriller, *Pattern Recognition*. Set during the months immediately following 9/11, the novel follows protagonist Cayce Pollard (a name partially derived from real-life mystic's Edgar Cayce, aka "The Sleeping Prophet"), an American "coolhunter" who evaluates logos for multinational corporations, a talent resulting from semiotic sickness in that she reacts to particular trademarks like Superman to kryptonite. Though "post-geographic" corporate branding is causing various international locations to resemble and feel more like each other, cultural parameters still enable semiotic slippage so that logos may be re-contextualized, intermittently buffeting or neutralizing her reactivity. For instance, pattern determinism in London, "mirror world" to New York City, is only slightly off-kilter; however, in Tokyo, Cayce's inability to read the verbal language causes her allergy to nearly disappear. "Street-level signage [that] offers snippets of the non-Cyrillic" suggests Moscow's relative position on her semiotic horizon; elsewhere in that cityscape, hybridization of visual-verbal pattern language results in "Cyrillic skater's tags, their letters bulging in clumsy homage to New York and Los Angeles" (Gibson, 2003:311). Twenty-first-century graphic novels similarly distill images and words into distinct cultural tapestries, resulting in visual-verbal expressions varyingly recognizable to audiences worldwide. Similar to Gibson's assessment of market potentiality for a rare calculator (a motif in his novel), the values of this cartooning semiotic fabric "as a global specialist environment...are only just being established" (2003:241). A survey of pattern language operative in Satrapi's *Persepolis* provides a starting point to illustrate how and why its textures continue to evolve.

Named for a ruined, ancient Persian capital city (circa the first millennium BCE) and framed in time by modern-day events pertinent to Iranian history, the *Persepolis* books chronicle aristocrat-descended Satrapi's life between the ages of six and twenty-five, relaying her child-eyed experience of Iran's revolution of 1979, her high-school years spent sans family in Austria, and formative period as a university graphic-arts student and young wife in Tehran following return to her homeland in the late 1980s. Geopolitical space, documentary perspective, and ontological outlook are simultaneously branded in *Persepolis* through a braided lexicon of symbols and signs, drawn and written completely in stark, black-and-white and announced on the opening

Fig. 1. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003:3).

page of volume one (**Fig. 1**).

The Story of a Childhood commences with a grid divided into four strips, comprising altogether six discrete zones, each keyed to the novel's exponentially unfolding pattern language like symbols on a map legend. Taken as a whole, the page provides directions for decoding the artist-author's visual voice as it encapsulates her ineffable formation relative to a particular Euro-Iranian, post-cosmopolitan experience. Narrator Marjane's pending cultural bifurcation is principally forecast through visual-verbal metonyms, foremost the veil (reproduced more than two dozen times) and the raised fist (repeated ten times). Three other patterned elements likewise contribute to expression

of nationhood and geopolitical mood: a unit of nesting figures, an inscription of calligraphy, and a single-frame horizontal strip that mimics a Persian miniature (Hajdu, 2004:32; McGrath, 2004:25), a style of small, detailed painting or portraiture often portraying religious themes and figures or historic stories of royal families. Often limned in contexts that signify Islam or otherwise arranged within visual rhymes (repetition or layering of same or similar images) that suggest an arabesque idiom or aesthetic as characterized by intricate, interlaced ornamental artistic patterns-floral, geometrical, and calligraphic -- these essential design components form the warp and weft of *Persepolis*, crisscrossing frontiers between old-world religious and modern-secular inscriptions of cartoon Marjane's identity, a binary reinforced through distribution of chiaroscuro, the treatment of light and dark shading. Finally, the grid's crudely executed artwork intimates a juvenile visual idiolect, both paralleling the chronicle's retrospective narration as well as its gradual transmission of images depicting political torture, exile, and assassination, which increase in complexity as narrator Marjane ages. While David Hajdu quips that "the cartoon girl in the first *Persepolis* could have been an exchange student in Charlie Brown's class" (2004:32), Patricia Storace suggests, "*Persepolis* renders human actions, idea, and feelings as having the vitality, quality of apprenticeship, and crudity of cartoons" (2005:40).

Polyphonic Epigraph

The memoir's première, single-panel strip serves as a polyphonic epigraph (the second term in this instance transposable to epigram and epitaph), which consists of an eye tilted in a triangle of white space, set in a heavily inked, coffin-shaped box (doubling as an insinuated chador) and reading like the opening glyph in a rebus that continues with the printed inscription: "THE VEIL." The eye that seemingly both "sees" and "reads" the adjacent printed word provides meta-discursive instructions, alerting decoders to the necessity of para-literacy, that is, the ability to parse juxtaposed words and images in relation to each other, a skill that extends to interpreting ancillary or additive texts embedded in a central narrative. Viewed epigrammatically, the head note (literally and literarily) may encode ideological dominance or schism between western and eastern values. For instance, through visual synecdoche the picture-word puzzle projects panoptic surveillance: the eye correlates to Big Brother's occidental gaze while the chador (subject to inflicting semiotic aversion as divorced from a would-be mirror world) indicates a mechanism of bodily closure and control. Furthermore, all-seeing eye plus veil as emblem of modesty and religious reverence binomially connote mystical or supernatural vision, represented throughout *Persepolis* in Marjane's dreams and conversations with God. Viewed as an epitaph engraving the end of innocence,

the logogram's simplistic drawing and lettering indicative of childhood primers semaphores didacticism like a mnemonic nursery rhyme or conundrum, posed to be rehearsed or solved as preface to Marjane's telic journey toward enlightened, transnational personhood, her epistemic learning later codified near the end of book two when a version of her young-adult self narrates, "Once again, I arrived at my usual conclusion: One must educate oneself" (2004:173). Reinforcing this elementary life lesson to come, directly beneath the head note, the memoir's initial panels are centrally set in Marjane's primary school.

Panels One And Two

The time and place of the page's second, two-panel strip is Tehran, 1980. Arranged side-by-side, its frames form a row of five headscarf-hooded schoolgirls -- each set of arms folded across midriffs in exactly the same pose -- subtle, minimalist variations in bangs and facial expressions their only distinguishing features. Isolated from the other children by lined perimeters separating the split images, Marjane appears alone in the first panel, a trace of her body reiterated in its companion, a "class photo." Hinting at the Satrapi family's political leanings, Marjane, not fully visible among her classmates, is "sitting on the far left," as she explains in an overhead text box. In visual layout, the two-panel sequence resembles a photo-booth-strip souvenir, a visual motif in the memoir that reinforces the context of documentary reminiscence as well as the force of counter-memory (Foucault, 1995 [1977]), incited through monumental history and removed from occurrences of actual events.

Panel Three

Repetitious coordination continues in the first panel of the third strip, a flashback to 1979 depicting a ten-figure nesting figuration of pro-Islamic revolutionaries (prior to enforced veiling for women and coerced beading for men), each gesturing with a raised right fist in identical postures. Multiply inscribed, the image's rhetoric, another iteration of visual synecdoche -- uniquely in this instance performing as part for the whole as well as whole for the part -- both counters and reinforces polysemic signification of the previous two panels. Individuated and simultaneously unified by the collective show of closed hands, the figures insinuate a range of political potentialities. Decipherable as a multinational glyph signaling confrontation, a single, lone fist may connote what Edward Corbett labels reactionary "physical presence and body rhetoric," suggesting "strategies of persuasion" at times non-

rationale, non-sequential, provocative, spontaneous, and disruptive (1989:98-99). Perceived as a multiplicity of single elements composed into a singular mosaic through intersections of its parts, the decade of revolutionaries is interpretable as sign of political unity, metonymically correlating to the literal overthrow of the Last Shah of Iran. The same visual rhyme could imply ideological conformity (diametrical in nature to the implied ideology of Marjane's family), indicative of enforced assimilation and crowd mentality, so that juxtaposed beneath the overhead row of identically grim schoolchildren it suggests foundations for discipline and correct training to which Marjane and classmates are currently being subjected, an indoctrination process metonymically corresponding to their veils.

At times accompanied by the veil, the fist will continue to migrate across Satrapi's graphic memoir, delineating diametrical factions as arisen in post-revolutionary Iran. For instance, the second iteration of the clenched hand occurs in a full-strip horizontal panel (its panoramic quality suggesting continuing unrest) in which veiled (hoisting right fists) and unveiled (hoisting left fists) female protesters face off (2003:5). Directly beneath on the same page, a replica snapshot of one then appearing in European newspapers shows Marjane's unveiled mother reenacting this confrontational body rhetoric; its signification presumably transferable and subject to re-contextualization across geopolitical frontiers, the souvenir causes the spotlighted protestant, fearing retribution, to immediately done a disguise in her homeland -- and to keep her arms down. Other snapshot-like panels dispersed throughout the first installment portray solitary figures hoisting a fist, including successful revolutionary Fidel Castro as well as Marjane's imprisoned and eventually executed Uncle Anoosh, a Leninist agitator deemed a Russian spy by the Islamic state (2003:12, 62). Indoctrinated to interpret physical rhetoric as a discursive sign system, child-Marjane is elsewhere pictured in the first Persepolis reading a book entitled The Reasons for the Revolution, its back cover stamped with a raised fist; a counter-scene provides levity, showing cartoon Marji (as she is nicknamed) reading her "favorite" pedagogical text, a "comic book entitled 'Dialectical Materialism'" (2003:32, 12). The daughter of Marxists who has yet reckoned with her personal belief in God, young Marji's divided state of mind may be further deducible in decoding the pattern language of the map legend's nesting unit in relation to her ideologically complicated piety towards her culture of origin.

Approximating arabesque tessellation, a staple of Islamic art in which designs are repeated and filled in and are interlocking (like patterns of bricks and many tiles), the image of nested revolutionaries with raised arms is layered like a palimpsest, resembling in design an elaborately carved kursi, the Qur'an lectern commonly found in mosques (comparative images referenced from Irwin, 1997:62-63). Reiterative, overlapping placement of the figures likewise echoes geometrical patterning developed and used in Muslim art to provide

"an alternative to prohibited depiction of live creatures" as a tenet of spiritual contemplation (Saoud, 2004:7-8). Panel composition overall suggests contradictory subject positions that Iranian citizenry -- and by extension, Marji herself -- might occupy: Amassed into a single rhyming unit so that through sameness individuality disappears, the bodies encode political domination as well as threat of state-sanctioned annihilation; disguised as tessellation, the figures also reflect cultural parameters associated with allegiance to Islam. An arabesque pattern modality that dialectically calls and responds -- including through variations and subversions -- across the spatial apparatus of Satrapi's The Story of a Childhood forms an oscillating chain of signification that reinforces the narrative's historical and political diegesis.

Among relatable imagery linked to this oscillating chain, a critical mass of fallen human figures -- male and female -- whose interlocking bicycles have crashed to the ground forms a comparative nesting figuration, operating through metonymy to demonstrate possible effects associated with the 1979 revolution's regime change (2003:10). Positioned opposite on the verso two frames later, a suite of visual rhymes historicizes that allusion to cultural contestation (or clash), encapsulating into four borderless (implying absence of telos in the legacy of invasion) strips an idealized vision of Persian dynastic ruin, vanquished by "'2500 years of tyranny and submission,'" as narrator-Marjane quotes from her father in a verbal preamble. In the tetralogy's penultimate position, Mongolians on horseback shooting arrows (compressed between distillations of early-Persian-emperor supplicants, Arabic soldiers, and modern-imperialist-army henchmen) reinforce the overall conquest motif through arabesque quotation in resembling interlocking hunt-scene figures from an 11th Century Egyptian ivory carving, its manufacture contemporaneous with the sacking and looting of the Fatimid palace in 1067 by "turbulent soldiery" (comparative image and caption quotation referenced from Irwin, 1997:114).

Panel Four

Continuing to decode Satrapi's acclimating map legend, a viewer-reader crosses the interstitial frontier (space between thin-lined panel frames, as Groensteen posits in 2007 [1999]:44) that separates the memoir's first enunciation of nesting revolutionaries from the time zone of 1980, "[t]he year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school," as Marjane recollects the decree. A possible interpretative destination terminates in ideological indoctrination, subtext of the third strip's final position. Its mise en scène indicates a tertiary boundary between a city street and Marjane's schoolyard, a liminal frontier formed by interlocked-brick walls and interrupted by an opening crossed with a lintel, upon which Persian cuneiform is inscribed like

contour lines on a relief map, charting the landscape beyond. Institutional entry is overseen by a chador-covered teacher-sentry (synecdoche for Guardians of the Revolution soon to infiltrate the memoir's dramatis personae), who exclaims, "Wear this!" as she hands a headscarf to each pupil about to pass beneath and through the passageway. Persisting in *Persepolis* as a visual symptom, garments henceforth will correlate thematically with the branding and policing of subjectivity.

Frequently catalogued in cartooning spaces to follow, the advent of state-sanctioned sartorial codes in post-revolutionary Iran is tellingly critiqued in *The Story of a Childhood* by placement of a para-textual annotated fashion primer, a schematic irregularity denoting a visual-verbal aside that features companion diptychs. Spread across equally divided quadrants, the units' four cartoon models contrast clothing and grooming habits then appropriated by "fundamentalist" versus "modern" men and women, for as narrator Marjane details viewer-readers via a quadrangular caption balloon: "In no time, the way people dressed became an ideological sign" (2003:75). Substantiating her rhetoric, visual-binary pattern repetition serves as evidence when the quadruplicated models replicate hundreds more times throughout *Persepolis*, including within sequences that pinpoint a hijab-wearing Marjane's physical encounters with Guardians of the Revolution (literally the fashion police), who gauge her loyalty to the cause from scrutinizing her manner of dress and makeup. After ten years elapses in spatial-topical time from insertion of the first fashion primer, a wardrobe-chart reiterative-diptych again incorporates contrastive simulacrum, its passant-like verso showing a headscarf-donning cartoon Marjane as if in left-footed approach while her back-to-the-viewer, recto-body double beats a right-footed retreat (2004:148). Ballooned within the twinned images, internal dialogue correlates to off-stage narrator Marjane's cause-and-effect analysis of the visual-verbal dyad, which as a whole explains that one who leaves her home absorbed by how a woman's appearance signifies "no longer asks herself" questions relevant to "freedom" and "livable" existence as social contracts (2004:148).

Braided into the pattern language of Satrapi's memoir, sartorial limitation constitutes a hyper-trademark, objective correlative for conformity as hegemonic demand, comparable to fashion-saturation in the global-marketplace as reckoned in the obverse world of Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*. Representing aberration in that oppositional system's accustomed order, protagonist Cayce, though an industry insider, suffers side effects from overexposure "to the reactor-cores of fashion" (the symptom) and "is, literally, allergic"; therefore she custom-pares down her clothing palette to black, white, and gray, becoming "a design-free zone" (yet inescapably signifying "relentless minimalism") (2003:8, 9). Gibson's caution is that sartorial limitation in extremity induces in the wearer a state of conscious and permanent visibility, a condition similarly and poignantly illustrated in Satrapi's recursion of fashion

codes in *Persepolis*, as when the chador mechanizes self-surveillance, the body acting as panoptic vessel.

Another patterned horizon encoding cultural limitation that is instigated in the fifth position of Satrapi's introductory schema in book one coincides with the appearance of cuneiform, scrolled across the schoolyard entrance. If apprehended in the manner of fictive Cayce's encounters with Kanji in Tokyo (à la *Pattern Recognition*) and thus contrastable with English translation (or with the original French), the Farsi operates as an occasion of expressive typography (manipulation of typeface for dramatic effect, as in a comic book "POW!") and also of verbal code switching (linguistic variations, as in insertion of foreign words or transliteration). Yet by deploying what Marianne Hirsch has called *biocularity*, that is, reading words as images or images as words (quoting Peggy Phelan, 2004:1212), viewer-readers may identify the cuneiform as Persian -- a perceived geographical brand. (Paraphrasing an Eisner dictum, Stephen Tabachnick writes "that even the words in a comic, since they are hand-drawn, are actually pictorial." 1994:146). Relatable to Muslim calligraphy, it may suggest "artistic lettering, sometimes combined with geometrical forms" and "used on dedication stones" of buildings not only for decorative ornamentation but also to acknowledge compulsory prayer and worship to Allah (Saoud, 2004:9,10). But as *The Story of a Childhood* approaches dénouement, a second iteration of Farsi displayed on a public brick wall *reproduces pro-government graffiti, implying rhetorical mutation as specifically* verbalized in distorted allegiance to Islam that has provided pretext for Iraq's invasion of Iran, resulting in a prolonged war that is propagandized through the pictured "belligerent slogans," according to narrator Marjane most memorably: "To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society" (2003:115).

In book two of *Persepolis*, code switching between English translation, French, and German corresponds to narrative relocation, where arabesque patterning all but disappears, signaling cultural defamiliarization for now adolescent Marjane, a foreign high-school student living on her own in Western Europe. When a singular instance of ballooned dialogue rendered in Persian chronicles a brief visit Marjane's mother makes to see her daughter in Vienna, the narrator-protagonist explains via overhead textbox, "It had been so long since I'd been able to talk to someone without having to explain my culture" (2004:52); the words resonate as meta-commentary, applicable to reading-viewing duration relative to diegesis as experienced by "someone" who does not know the language of the represented conversation. As a central element in Islamic artwork, calligraphy also assists in establishing literary subgenre, the latter portion of *The Story of a Return* reminiscent of an artist-novel of formation in recounting a four-year period begun in 1989 when Satrapi undertook university training as a graphic-design student, her first lesson -- Art History -- about the traditions of "Indian, Persian, and Mesopotamian

Art" (2004:139). Auguring this eventual narrative context, the künstlerroman's first-volume, first-page hyperframe ideograph (Groensteen writes, "The hyperframe is to the page what the frame is the panel," 2007 [1999]:30) includes calligraphy, contiguously juxtaposed among other patterns that create visual-verbal allusions to fine arts: photography, mosaic, and -- lastly -- Persian miniature.

Panel Five

Occupying *The Story of a Childhood*'s opening grid's final zone, the Persian miniature look-alike inaugurates homomorphism in panel design that encodes child Marjane's as yet uncritical consciousness, emphasized soon thereafter in her youthful obsessions with religious and historical personages as projected in more explicitly quoted Persian-miniature varieties, such as one glorifying Zarathustra, "the first prophet in [her] country before the Arab invasion"; and another lauding her grandpa, "a prince" (2003:7, 22). But as the inaugural-pattern version presages, such grand narratives are about to diverge, for in mimicking the map legend's nesting unit (of the third strip), both in numeric figuration and semiotic portent, the ten schoolgirls dispersed length-and-breadth across the anchor panel configure a doctrinal prophase in modern-Iranian history. Still ignorant in understanding the function of the veil, each figure capriciously wields hers in carnivalesque subversion in various schoolyard games, making of it a prop, including several with ominous connotations -- jump rope, horse harness, and monster mask. The miniature frame that encloses these transgressive enactments evokes protected childhood status and momentarily secures the schoolgirls from six frames immediately to follow, which enumerate in pictures and in words mounting political segregations: secular from religious schools, boys from girls, capitalist decadence from Islamic Republic idealism.

Ontological ambiguity as destiny in young Satrapi's life is summarily foreshadowed eight frames later by a split-down-the-middle panel depicting a frowning cartoon girl halved into two contrastive quadrants, the image signifying right to left (like a Farsi phrase) as well as left to right (**Fig. 2**).

The recto's veiled half-girl imposed against a decorative lattice of foliage morphs into a secular doppelgänger as generic emblems of progress and modernity (ruler, hammer, and gears) that also inscribe the birth of numeracy and geometry in the east bound her against the verso's terminus. Heightening visual drama, effects of chiaroscuro likewise telegraph Marjane's existential uncertainty, reinforced by the text-box hovering above the cartoon child like a visible voiceover: "I really didn't know what to think about the veil. Deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde." A nascent post-cosmopolitan dialectic thus announced, the image-

word dyad exemplifies what Ricío Davis calls real-life Satrapi's deepening identity as "a transcultural writer," one who in residing outside both her language and culture of origin creates "intermittent time and interstitial space" in literature, projecting comprehension of "migrant and ethnic identity...neither as purely assimilationist nor oppositional" (2005:264, 256, quoting Homi Bhabba, 266). Portrayed as inchoate and troubling in this panel, Marjane's bifurcated subject position will crescendo in the second installment of Satrapi's graphic memoir as arabesque patterns meet visions of the grotesque.

Fig. 2. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003:6).

Pattern Reversal

A synonym for gothic style -- ugly but grand -- the grotesque is dispensed in the European section of *The Story of a Return* through pattern reversal. Referencing Marjane's adolescent renunciation of Islamic tenets and inevitable spiral into depression, premarital sex, and drug abuse, select panels feature whirlpool-swirling lines that adhere to elements in the gothic as characterized by Guy Davenport (writing about Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 short story collection, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*), including "dreariness...melancholia, hyper-sensitivity, madness, [and] obsession" (1981:8). Satrapi's imagistic substitutions that reference gothic patterning likewise exhibit visual polyphony (Prager quoting Gene Kannenberg Jr., 2003:199), communicating both events

suffered through the narrator's dislocation as well as how they are psychologically experienced. Likewise reinforcing the theme of exile, gothic correspondences are visible in a photo-like portrait of Marjane surrounded by freakish, adolescent friends, including the macabre Momo, who is obsessed with death (Satrapi, 2004:13). Cartoon Marjane's geographical estrangement is further dramatized near the centerfold of book two with reintroduction of Islamic patterning, reproduced in a three-quarter-page panel that accents a close-up of her face as, preparing to leave Vienna, she "again puts on [her] veil" and confronts her eastern-doppelgänger reflection in a mirror (2003:91).

I FELT AS THOUGH I WERE WALKING THROUGH A CEMETERY.

Fig. 3. *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* (2004:97).

Five pages later, repositioned amid Iranian mimesis, Marjane's divided personhood is now denoted through pattern aberration and re-contextualized as a floating signifier, which vacillates between competing semiotic systems as filtered through sequences indicative of arabesque-grotesque metonymic slippage. For example, having grown accustomed to marketplace pattern

language of the west, Marjane finds herself readjusting to that of the east and Islam, such as depicted in her viewing and reading "sixty-five-foot-high murals" honoring martyrs that adorn the streets of Tehran alongside bombed out buildings; the intermittent artworks are difficult for her to decode, she admits, "[e]specially after four years spent in Austria, where you were more likely to see on the walls 'Best Sausages for 20 Shillings....'" (2003:96). The page opposite portrays Marjane imagining herself as walking above a gothic subterranean cemetery, where skeleton heads are piled like rubble (**Fig. 3**).

The verso-recto sequence, if perceived as an integrated image, resembles tessellated eastern-western mosaic, a mutagenized pattern language correlating to Marjane's altered psyche.

In the continuing course of *The Story of a Return*, psychological despair as inferred through melded pattern imprints (firmly established visual or verbal comics codes) shortly revisits the protagonist in her homeland, where a young-adult version of Marjane ultimately declares, "I was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. I had no identity" (2004:118). Binomial in form and function, visual-verbal imprints woven throughout *Persepolis* principally broadcast this cultural indeterminacy. Transposed and re-contextualized in alternate 21st Century cartooning spaces, comics patterns that resemble Satrapi's visual-verbal semiology do -- and do not -- also imitate its rhetorical effects, as brief analyses of examples from American graphic literature demonstrate.

Pattern Slippage

Polyphonic Eye

Returning once again to the map legend that inaugurates Satrapi's two-volume graphic memoir, consider the polyphonic epigraph. Angled in a white pyramid like the mirror-world (to Iran) eye of chief deity Ra in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics or like the western-inflected eye-in-the-pyramid symbol on the United States dollar bill (Trinitarian reference to the Christian God), the oscillating glyph that launches *Persepolis* signifies both metaphysical and material panopticism, linking cartoon Marjane's spiritual development to physical and mental (as in "seeing" as "understanding") hardships ahead. Variations on the pictorial-eye motif project similar and variant meanings when re-contextualized within 21st Century graphic novels respectively drawn and written by United States artist-authors Marisa Acocella Marchetto and Rick Veitch.

The eye appears as a visual metonym in comics-journalism innovator (the first ever to publish a regular cartoon feature in the *New York Times*) Acocella Marchetto's witty graphic hybrid, *Cancer Vixen* (2006), which recounts the artist-author's mid-life battle against breast cancer. Part recovery

memoir, part investigative exposé, *Cancer Vixen* (subtitled *A True Story*), also is a resistance postmodern text, presenting serious information about treatment to those facing a cancer diagnosis themselves, particularly the uninsured. (Acocella Marchetto donates a percentage of proceeds from book sales to underprivileged women seeking breast care.) The emblematic eye deposited within *A True Story* signifies the tripartite rhetorical schema of ethos (spirit), pathos (body), and logos (mind), similar to its signification in *Persepolis*, though cultural parameters and delivery of pattern language shift in the American memoir.

In a representative, periodic visitation, the universal panoptic emblem appears in *Cancer Vixen* as an over-sized third eye, stamped into the forehead of cartoon-narrator Marisa's metaphysical doppelgänger (**Fig. 4**).

Fig. 4. *Cancer Vixen* (2006:159).

A floating yogini whose geometrical corpus forms a pyramid, her ineffable presence is conjured through visual-verbal wisecracks, including one-frame-prior delivery of an epistemological, cartoon-expressive "SMACK!" to her incarnate double's head. The specter-like essence's then polysemous query ("Now how do you feel?!") encapsulates the protagonist's need for mental-emotional maintenance, given both the physical reality of her sickness and of her high-style New York City milieu, amid which real-life counterpart Acocella Marchetto -- collector of kitschy religious iconography and practitioner of trendy faiths -- works as a fashion-journalist whose self-professed industry obsession rivals fictive "sensitive" Cayce's "compulsive memory for brand names" in *Pattern Recognition* (Gibson, 2003:28). Synecdoche for the artist-author's existential forbearance, necessary for simultaneously living through and documenting her eleven-month ordeal from cancer diagnosis to cure, the polymorph identified in the contiguous panel as Marisa's "higher self" is

described as "looking down on" the narrator -- connoting physical, metaphysical, and psychological (as in ridicule inflicted through divine laughter) distance. The oversoul also metonymically corresponds to cartoon Marisa's need for supernal patience that extends to literal patients, those whom she catwalks among in designer stilettos on her way to chemotherapy sessions, her shoes a sly synecdochal acknowledgement of cancer's imperviousness to sartorial codes.

Rhetorically the third-eyed yogini also relates to what Hirsch calls "the experience and the transmission of personal and cultural trauma," perhaps unspeakable but communicable through "cognitive structures of the visual" (2004:1211). For instance, while over the spatial-topical course of her memoir Acocella Marchetto enumerates in drawn-to-scale likenesses the number of needles (29) inserted into her body, in a singular meta-narrative-discursive sequence she counts dozens of cancer victims by again conjuring metaphysical displacement. Drifting on heavenly clouds above her cartoon self as pictured at a drawing board, the departed provide "evidence" of why numerous cancer clusters have broken out across the nation, the four-page spread culminating in companion verso-recto splash pages that call for "a moment of silence" followed by the illustrated proverb: "When you light a candle, you illuminate a soul" (2006:36-39, passim). Elsewhere in *A True Story*, Acocella Marchetto reproduces a facsimile of her actual lumpectomy pathology report (2006:113), a para-textual insertion in keeping with the post-cosmopolitan project of exposing the often catastrophic consequences of asymmetrical economic or ecological distribution.

A mystical third eye again surfaces in Rick Veitch's breakthrough graphic meditation on 9/11, *Can't Get No* (2006). Executed in landscape format (half the height of standard comics; rendered in panoramic, quadrangular panels, and read wide and long instead of up and down), the novel's shape itself heightens the idea of dramatic seeing, a textual function additionally highlighted in severance of word and image, as in parallel construction verbal text scrolls like epic poetry across the pictorial apparatus but remains divorced from diegesis. *Can't Get No* follows the shifting fortunes of fictional, anxiety-medicated Manhattan executive Chad Roe. Head of a company that manufactures ultra-permanent sharpies, Chad's status implodes in a six-billion-dollar, city-imposed lawsuit against his firm in the wake of indelible, graffiti-defaced damage to valuable-building real estate. During an evening of binge drinking following the announcement of his company's stock crash, Chad winds up passed out with two guerilla artists, who use his product, Eter-No-Mark (trademark branded on giant billboards citywide) to decorate his body, imprinting it with an arabesque-grotesque patterned, full-surface tattoo, and later branding his forehead with an indelible third eye. Chad's graphic disguise both isolates him and points him out like the "grotesque dandyism" of the pachuco, an outcast adolescent figure (possessed of "an anarchic behavior")

whose duality as described by Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* adheres as well to Veitch's protagonist: "Everyone agrees in finding something hybrid about him, something disturbing and fascinating" (1961 [1950]:14, 16). Suddenly shunned in the corporate world, his strange appearance also provides protection; when he is forbidden entrance and misses a meeting at the World Trade Center, it ultimately saves his life. After the Twin Towers collapse, Chad's tattooed doppelgänger embarks on a shamanistic journey, his body surface limning the interstitial frontier between convention and nonconformity like lines on a relief map.

In a telling pictorial sequence, Chad, now a solitary, challenging figure again similar to a pachuco separated in time and space from the society from which he originates (Paz, 1961 [1950]:17), momentarily finds safe harbor along the roadside with a Lebanese-immigrant couple, who have fled the city in an RV. Functioning through dialogic integration and code sharing, Chad's graphic tag and the wife's headscarf personify the trauma of east meeting west in our contemporary, ongoing phase of geopolitics, where boundaries collapse and atomize on the world stage (**Fig. 5**).

Fig. 5. *Can't Get No* (2006:n.p.).

An allegorical figure metonymically corresponding to changing pattern language in a post-cosmopolitan, post-9/11 world, Chad Roe invites viewer-readers to interrogate our ongoing geopolitical developments and obligations, such as manifested in present-day American involvement in warring Iraq.

Code Mixing

Another element central to the post-cosmopolitan moment as offered by *Persepolis* is Satrapi's use of typographical code switching, which along with the relatable technique of visual (or verbal) code mixing may operate to polyphonically communicate cultural adversity. Such representation famously operates over a six-page sequence in volume two of *Maus*, which combines expressive typography and visual metaphor in presenting Artie, cartoon-version of artist-author Spiegelman, who confronts confusion about being a "survivor" of Holocaust survivors as he shrinks from adult- to child-size to visit his "shrink" Pavel (1991:41-46, passim). Reinforcing the analysand's therapeutic regression, the lettering likewise shrinks to include the lower case, a contrastive element compared to upper-case lettering throughout most of the series' remainder. A pictorial example of code-mixing polyphony occurs in *Cancer Vixen*, when the countenance of narrator Marisa shifts between relatively individuated mid-level realism to more highly iconic abstraction to suggest "putting on a brave face" when imparting news of her malignant tumor, as well as status as medically uninsured to fiancé Silvano (Acocella Marchetto, 2006:66).

Verbal code switching, lately a universalizing component in 21st Century graphic literature, also may function to signify transcultural or post-cosmopolitan slippage between linguistic codes, as demonstrated in Adrian Tomine's irreverent graphic novel, *Shortcomings* (2007). A semiautobiographical examination of vicissitudes associated with a particular Asian-American experience, its pattern imprints include shifts between English, Hangul, and Kanji, which even if foreign to viewer-readers may still be matched to corresponding languages through pattern recognition. Tomine's denotation of foreign dialogue (as compared to otherwise standardized English) through hand-lettered logograms and ideographs rather than horizontal chevrons (as in <word>), now iconic and normative in comics, not only expresses a particular transcultural subjectivity but also infers how borders of lived experience that contain or define cultural difference are collapsing. A trenchant display of this post-cosmopolitan formation in *Shortcomings* operates in a two-page sequence beginning with a subway (alluding to public transport as socioeconomic stabilizer) conversation that ensues in Japanese between a "rice king" (white male who dates only Asian women) and a Japanese-American woman whom he hopes to "score" (**Fig. 6**).

どこで食べようか？あの二階にある、「ビレッジ横町」にする？

そうね。でもなんでそんな風に私を見るの？

Fig. 6. *Shortcomings* (2007:90).

Verbal code switching in comics that similarly blurs and slips along imagistic-linguistic divides invites decoders to translate meanings that elude or bypass the symbolic order, a stylistic gesture that mirrors changing pattern-language demographics in the virtual world. (Recall for instance Gibson's allusions in *Pattern Recognition* to Kanji or Cyrillic as viewed by an English-only reader.) As the pattern of comics uniquely inscribes, the future of seeing-as-reading has arrived.

Towards a Comics Poetics

The graphic novel's acceptance and ascendance as a literary genre has skyrocketed since the turn of the 21st Century, when in a special millennial issue of *PMLA*, U. C. Knoepflmacher presented the satirical visual essay "A Strobe-Light History of the MLA," which includes a (meta) panel depicting a scholarly session, circa 1980, wherein Max, the protagonist of Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are* (soon to be a major motion picture), leads other familiar storybook characters in a parade for "Kid Lit," an ambiguous masked figure advancing in the sky of the distant background (2000:1728-1729, passim). Graphic literature's advancement as a serious genre studies during the presently ensuing decade may be traced to innovations in the pattern of comics, archetypal imagistic-discursive design that functions in cartooning spaces through visual-verbal rhetoric as partly arisen out of the semiotic galaxy of transnational symbols and signs. The global marketplace, meanwhile, seems extremely receptive to the neo-genre's arrival.

Marjane Satrapi's internationally renowned memoir is newly released in single-bound format, *The Complete Persepolis*, its cover touting the filmic version, co-directed by Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud and winner of the 2007 Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize. Acocella Marchetto's celebrated *Cancer Vixen* continues selling well in hardcover edition; a film adaptation starring Cate Blanchett is forthcoming. Adrian Tomine has become a celebrity contributor to tony *New Yorker* magazine. In true post-cosmopolitan fashion, his recent all-but wordless cover, "Book Lovers" (2008), features a sartorial-coded UPS deliveryman (possibly ethnically Asian) handing a package lettered with a trademark looking suspiciously like Kanji but discernibly that of Amazon.com to a young woman (ethnically Asian) whose apartment borders a bookstore, where a man (possibly ethnically Anglo) is in the act of unlocking the entrance. The mise en scène of the cover's hyperframe, like a black dress decoded by coolhunter Cayce Pollard in *Pattern Recognition*, "for all of its apparent simplicity, say[s] several things at once, probably in at least three languages" (2003:11). The same, multivalent rhetorical assessment applies to a typical American consumer's bodily surface, saturated with transnational sartorial branding.

An exciting neo-formation, the graphic novel continues to warrant identification and articulation of both its history and form. Though critics may find literary formalism antiquated, the pattern language of comics will require further articulation as it continues to develop in the twenty-first century. Moreover, while Perloff implores scholars "to trust the literary instinct that brought us to this field in the first place...." (2007:662), understanding form and function of the pattern of comics -- the why of graphic literature -- can reawaken that calling.

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