

Satrapi's Film *Persepolis* in the Social Studies Classroom: Exploring Culture and Identity

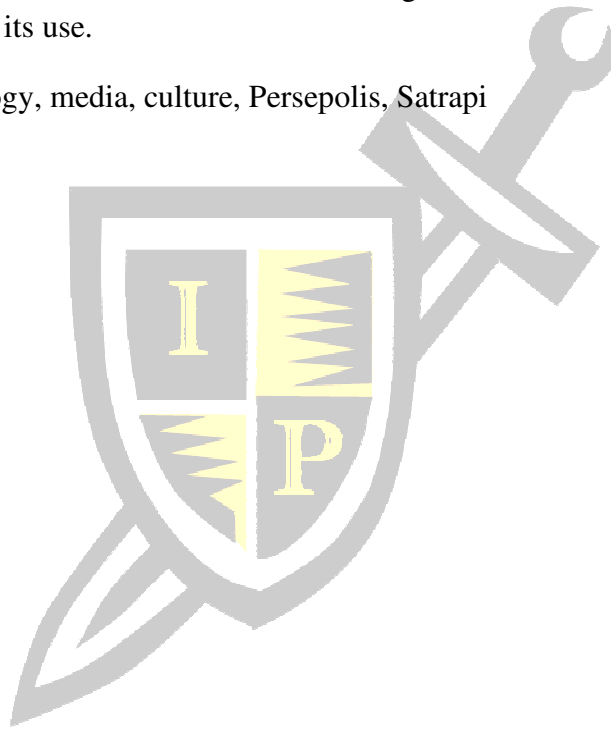
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Abstract

Film has been shown to be a useful tool in the social studies classroom for 1) depicting history (Rebhorn 1987) 2) presenting foreign cultures and international affairs (Kuzma & Haney 2001) and 3) provoking learning around themes such as culture and identity (Pegrum 2008). The following article presents the film *Persepolis*, winner of the Prix du Jury at the Cannes Film Festival (2007), as a forceful classroom tool for teaching about non-US culture and presents pedagogical support for its use.

Keywords: film, pedagogy, media, culture, *Persepolis*, Satrapi



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Introduction

Recent data indicates that U.S. students spend approximately 1,022 hours in school annually, averaging 5.7 hours per day over a 180-day school year. (Fordham Institute, 2024). The same children spend approximately 973 hours per year watching tv and videos (Statista, 2024; American Psychological Association, 2020). Much has been made of the negative aspects of television, film and overall media exposure's effects on children regarding exposure to violence (Huesmann et al. 2003; Robertson, McAnally & Hancox, 2013; Babvey, et al., 2021; Donnelly & Goyal, 2023), fitness levels, (Ford, et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick, et al., 2012) and sleep disturbances (Paavonen et al., 2006; Lund et al., 2021). However, some academics have recognized the effects of the media, particularly feature films, in the social studies classroom. Marcus and Levine (2007) state that "the influence of film, particularly Hollywood feature film, on historical knowledge and understanding is a reality of today's world." (p.1). This is a major factor to be taken into consideration by a teacher, given the fact that all of the media consumed by the child has been set in particular locations and eras, but not always in similar ways and not always with historical and cultural fidelity.

One important goal of the social studies teacher is to make their students aware of the world's many cultures and to learn how to navigate them. However, this is often not achieved and according to Subedi and Daza (2008), non-US perspectives on race, class, gender, nationality and sexuality are rarely discussed in US schools. Of particular concern to social studies teachers, especially since 9/11, is the representation of the Muslim world which was to a great degree ignored in US schools up until the time of the terrorist attack (Saleem & Thomas, 2011). These difficulties can be attributed to a variety of sources including teacher knowledge and the political climate in the US regarding the Muslim world for the past 12 years. Another difficulty for the social studies teacher is the possibility of preconceived notions of the Muslim world held by students based on media depictions. Jackson (2010) notes that "controversial minorities are vulnerable to stereotyping..[and negative media depiction] has at least an indirect influence on young people, and that must, therefore, be taken into account by multicultural educators as partly constitutive of students' background knowledge/experience." (p.3)

Given the powerful effect that media has on the development of children and adolescent's view of the world, this power has been harnessed as a tool in the arsenal of social studies teachers (D'Sa 2005; Marcus & Stoddard 2007, p.330; Nguyen, 2024), often being used to demonstrate important episodes of US history such as the Civil War and World War II. Hollywood films depicting these events are likely to be well known to teachers; however, depictions of the rest of the world, especially shown through the eyes of foreign filmmakers about their own homelands, are less likely to be known to social studies teachers. This is unfortunate, given the filmmakers' ability to depict their own country and possibly their own experience with a point of view not available to the creators of Hollywood blockbusters. For this reason, we present the film, *Persepolis*, as an excellent example of a film for use in the Social Studies classroom, not only for its historical and cultural depiction of Iran, but also for its themes of culture, identity and citizenship.

The film *Persepolis* (2007), written, illustrated and directed by Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, tells the story of Satrapi's life as a young girl growing up in Iran during volatile political times, her departure for Europe, and her eventual return to her homeland. It is based on Satrapi's successful set of graphic novels, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2004) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2005), written in the French language as Satrapi has made her home in Paris, and translated into several other languages.

The film's main character and narrator is the young Marjane Satrapi herself, called Marji in the film. Through Marji's eyes, the spectator experiences the Islamic Revolution of 1979, its aftermath, and its personal effects on Marji and her family. The film's suitability for use in a formal educational setting is due to both its great general appeal and its ability to meaningfully present political history from halfway around the world to a western audience. In fact, the *Persepolis* comic series, published in the US market between 2004 and 2005 had already been included on the syllabus of over 160 high schools and universities in the US alone in gender or political science classes in its year of release (Jones, 2004). Much of the success of *Persepolis* can be attributed to the author's ability to create a narrator who symbolizes neither the east nor the west, but youth itself, through the character of an endearing and curious little girl who represents an individual trying to make sense of the world around them, struggling to grow up in a quickly changing, complex world.

The film *Persepolis* is an animation made for the most part of simple, even stark, black and white images. The minimalism of the artistic style and the naiveté of the child provide rich grounds for the juxtaposition of war, domination and tyranny against which much of the film's story is set. The film provides a wealth of educational opportunities both appropriate and accessible to the western classroom. This paper will choose a limited number of these, focusing specifically on themes of culture, identity and citizenship, all topics for the social studies classroom.

About the film

The film's opening scenes relate the state of the government prior to the revolution through the eyes of Marji who attends elementary school in Tehran. While we see Marji at home with her mother and grandmother, shouting erupts from the streets outside where they hear chants of "Down with the Shah!". Her father rushes in, elated, picking Marji up in celebration of the political changes he foresees. As her family excitedly discusses the hopefully upcoming departure of the Shah, Marji announces that she herself likes the Shah, that he was chosen by God, and that her teacher told her so. Her father sits her down quietly and provides her with a brief and engaging history of this time in Iranian politics, with the Shah's father having overthrown the Qajar emperor to turn Iran into a republic, but then being influenced by English oil interests, instead becoming a monarchist dictator, while still doing some good for his country. Her father also describes how his son succeeded him but turned out to be "ten times worse" than his father. At this point, Marji learns that her own grandfather had been a Qajar prince as well as a communist and had suffered at the hands of the first Shah.

Marji goes to sleep in her bed that night with pride in her connection to her exotic grandfather. While revolution breaks out in the streets of Tehran, Marji puts on a headband, symbol of the revolt, and marches around her apartment shouting “Down with the Shah!”. With the crumbling of the old regime, the same teachers who had taught Marji to love and respect the Shah, now instructed her and her classmates to rip all the pictures of him and his family out of their schoolbooks.

After a period of euphoria in the country, the announcement comes that the Islamic Republican Party has been elected to rule the country with 99.99% of the vote. Then, as Iraq attacks Iran, the Iranian government takes advantage of the cover of war to increase the purging of the government’s own domestic enemies. Ensuing scenes show Marji’s family announcing that one after the other, friends and members of their extended family have either been found dead or have quickly emigrated, as the new government has turned against those who resisted the first Shah. Marji’s parents discuss leaving but find little value in the idea of a life where they could only find work as domestic workers and taxi drivers. Arrests and executions became commonplace. Marji’s favorite uncle, Anoush, is arrested and killed. We see Marji in her school, this time in a veil, lined up with her classmates and listening to pro-war speeches over a loudspeaker. Still, Marji’s resilience is clear as she jokes with her friends, throwing herself on the ground while shouting “martyr, martyr, put me out of my misery” sarcastically as her friends giggle. Other humorous scenes show her with female classmates looking at contraband 45s of the BeeGees while a teacher lectures them about the meaning of the veil and the necessity of hiding themselves from the gaze of men. Soon after, Marji witnesses her mother struggling to find enough food to feed the family in the nearly empty grocery store and then being harassed by a bearded man in the parking lot who approaches her, commanding her to adjust her headscarf.

These sequences, all in the first half hour of the film, provide rich opportunity to learn not only about the broad brushstrokes of political change and oppression, but also of how these changes affected school life, families and children. Marji’s life changes dramatically in a fairly short timeframe, but her inquisitive and rebellious spirit remain stable. The film addresses a large number of major themes which could be addressed within a social studies classroom. We will limit ourselves to a discussion of the use of the film to discuss culture, identity and citizenship.

Culture

A nation’s culture and its history are inextricably connected, and *Persepolis*, in its opening scenes, relates the state of the government before, during and after the revolution. This is as close as the film comes to a textbook, giving broad outlines of a series of governments along with their general behavior. However, these are not the only presentations of Iran, or of larger areas often referred to as the East, the Middle East or the Muslim World, with which students are likely to be familiar. Jackson (2010) makes the important point that “[e]ducators teaching about social difference and about minorities in society face a variety of challenges in effectively teaching students accurate and balanced understandings of different groups in society,

including, particularly, the competing influence of the mass media on young people's minds." It is likely that today's students in a US-based social studies classroom will be familiar with the media presentations Iran and surrounding nations which are highly influenced by events such as 9/11 and current conflicts between the US and Iran. News of Iran in relation to the western world in today's western media often consists of controversial actions by government leaders and threats of military force. Much rarer are media presentations of the individual in the street, and even rarer are the voices of children.

This very state of affairs lends itself to an interesting discussion of culture and its relationship to power. Do the government and its military reflect more of a nation's culture than the schools, the families, than the children? If not, why is the version of the military and governmental culture more likely to be familiar to those in the western world than the culture of the much more numerous public? Furthermore, what is the relationship of the family culture to that of the culture of the national leadership? Is the culture at the macro-level of the government representative of the micro-levels of families and individuals?

As *Persepolis* shows Marji explaining to her parents that she "likes" the Shah, and her family then explains to her their own point of view, Satrapi provides us with a major teaching moment. As we watch history in the making, the filmmakers also show the strong discontent of the adults in the family regarding the political situation in which they had been living. It is also clear that until this point in time, Marji was unaware of her parents' political beliefs, but had her own, or rather the teachings that her school has offered regarding political life in Iran. The father emphasizes the split between the views of the establishment, with Marji's school as part of it, and the truth when he says "That's what they tell us." and then goes on to tell her about the Shah's place in history. This marks a major event in Marji's life. In realizing the changes afoot, she also becomes aware of the history behind it, her family's views and perhaps most importantly learns that a difference exists between what the establishment is telling her and what the views of the people are. The political Marji for the first time experiences schisms and conflicts in political reality.

These scenes also offer the opportunity to explore the difference between the East and the West. Certain scenes, typical of stereotypes presented commonly in the media about Iran, such as bearded men shouting aggressively, using religious terminology, groups of women indistinguishable from each other due to the wearing of veils, etc. are juxtaposed with others more commonly linked with the West. In a nearly empty supermarket, for example, Marji is riding her empty shopping cart like a scooter. This is a much more western view of shopping compared to going to an outdoor market as might otherwise be imagined. And after being threatened by a man in the parking lot, Marji's mother is not saved by male family members, but instead by getting into her own car and driving home. Images of the West permeate the film, with Marji apparently more comfortable in the clothes and culture of the West. This juxtaposition of East and West in terms of both historical and cultural elements, leads viewers to question the separation of their expectations between typical depictions. The family of

Persepolis is small, with just a single child, with the family being best described as warm, honest, liberated, educated and loving.

Identity and citizenship

The notion of identity is a very important one that is suitably discussed in the social studies classroom. Part of the mission of the Social Studies classroom is to introduce students to other worlds in all their aspects. However, Kumashiro (2001) discusses the point of view that a presentation of the Other, despite an attempt to present the importance and validity of the Other, may result in a knowledge of the other that preserves their difference from the students' original view of the "norm". He states that the very act of presenting differences may reinforce the notion of the norm.

Both the choice of the main character and the way that she is depicted lend *Persepolis* to discussions of identity in a way that may move beyond this problem. On one hand, she is a veiled girl, looking nearly identical to her classmates and forced to exist within the confines of a strict Islamic government where she is closely watched. In this way, she is clearly a representative of the Other. On the other hand, she is no different from someone in our own classroom, our own family, or even our own self. *Persepolis* is the rare media outlet that allows an individual from the Western world to intimately connect with the Iranian individual, bridging the normally existing gap of East and West and building more upon what we have in common with this foreign character than what separates us.

Part of the film's ability to create this connection between the Self and the Other is the fact that the main character, Marji, is a child. Stockdill and Moje (2013) write that the best social studies teaching does not simply pander to youths, trying to "hook" their interest, but instead uses findings about "youths' interests, identities, and literacy practices to illuminate connections that can be made between their concerns and interests and the enduring problems or questions taken up by the social sciences." This deeper connection of potentially common interests between Marji and the viewer open a pathway to examining the question of identity.

At one point in the film, during times of harsh repression, Marji is on the streets of Tehran, buying an Iron Maiden cassette from an illegal street vendor while wearing tennis shoes, and wearing a homemade jacket with the wording "Punk is not dead" written on the back that she wears with her headscarf. When stopped by the religious police and accused of wearing inappropriate clothing including a pin on her jacket with a picture of Michael Jackson, a certain sign of Western decadence in their eyes, Marji claims to be on the basketball team and therefore in need of the shoes and that the picture of Michael Jackson is instead Malcolm X. Marji miraculously blends two very different identities into one. On one hand, she is the veiled schoolgirl, much like the others, living in Iran in an oppressive regime that attempts to control her thoughts and deeds. On the other hand, we see her rocking out to heavy metal music, trying to follow her favorite bands and expressing herself in rebellious ways through her clothes and words. To top it all off, she can think quickly on her feet and is funny in her rebellion, in the face of great danger.

These qualities allow children in the Western world not only to admire her, but to identify with her, to place themselves into her situation and hopefully ask themselves the all-important question of “what if that were me?”. This linking of identities provides an opportunity for the social studies classroom to examine questions such as: how is Marji like me, how is she different from me, what would she be like if she had been born where I was, what would I be like if I was born where she was, how would I behave in her situation, etc.

This conversation has clear links to citizenship in that beyond the realm of the personal, questions of national identity come into question. The exploration of all these questions deepen as further into the story, Marji’s family decides to send her abroad for her own safety. Marji is a product of both the East and the West. However, she is a legal citizen of Iran only. She is sent to live in Germany and experiences culture shock, despite her love of the West and her desire for freedom. Clearly, moving from one country to another is not as simple as taking up a place across a border. Instead, the difficulties of living in a foreign culture, regardless of which culture, are clearly depicted, leading to meaningful questions such as: what does it mean to Marji and her family to be Iranian, is she a patriot or a traitor to her nation, what does it mean to be a particular nationality in the best case, who creates the identity of a nation?

How to use film as a teaching tool

As discussed earlier, feature films are often used in classrooms for a wide variety of teaching aims. In particular, it has been shown to be effective in the Social Studies classroom for teaching in several areas such as history, culture, identity and citizenship. In films’ exploration of these areas, a potential benefit is the media’s ability to overcome negative stereotyping from other media outlets.

However, simply showing a film, even one very carefully chosen, is not enough. Instead, film, much like any other teaching tool, must be used with specific teaching outcomes and with targeted activities. In this case, *Persepolis* offers educators an opportunity to engage students in discussions about historical events, political upheaval, and personal narratives in ways that are both accessible and thought-provoking. Below are some strategies for integrating the film into a classroom setting:

1. **Pre-Screening Activities:** Before watching the film, students can be provided with historical and cultural background information on Iran, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War. This context can be delivered through brief lectures, assigned readings, or documentary clips to ensure students have a foundational understanding.
2. **Guided Viewing:** While watching the film, students can be given guided questions that focus on key themes such as cultural transformation, personal identity, and governmental authority. Educators can pause at significant moments to discuss Marji’s experiences and how they reflect broader socio-political realities.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Teachers can encourage students to compare *Persepolis* with other representations of Iran and Islamic societies in Western media. This could include news

reports, Hollywood films, or literary works that provide alternative perspectives on similar themes.

4. **Personal Reflection:** Assigning students to write reflective essays or journal entries on how Marji's struggles relate to their own experiences with identity and cultural change can foster personal connections to the material.
5. **Debates and Discussions:** Organizing debates on topics such as freedom of expression, the impact of revolution on citizens, or the role of women in different societies can encourage critical thinking and engagement.
6. **Creative Projects:** Students can create their own graphic novel pages inspired by Satrapi's work, illustrating aspects of their cultural heritage or personal identity. Alternatively, they can script and perform scenes that depict cultural clashes or moments of identity formation.

By using these strategies, educators can transform film from a passive viewing experience into an interactive learning process that deepens students' understanding of history, identity, and global issues.

Conclusion

Persepolis is a powerful film that brings to life the complexities of Iranian history, culture, and identity through the lens of a young girl's coming-of-age story. By incorporating this film into the social studies curriculum, educators can provide students with an engaging and emotionally resonant exploration of non-Western perspectives. The film not only contextualizes significant historical events but also highlights universal themes of self-discovery, resilience, and the struggle for personal freedom.

Through guided activities such as discussions, comparative analyses, and creative projects, students can critically engage with the film and deepen their understanding of culture and identity. The use of Persepolis in the classroom underscores the importance of diverse narratives in education, fostering empathy and global awareness in students. By leveraging film as a pedagogical tool, educators can create meaningful learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom, equipping students with the analytical skills necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

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