

Waltz with Bashir: Animation as Illumination in the Chasm between Memory and Reality



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Waltz with Bashir is a 2008 Israeli animated documentary film written, produced, and directed by Ari Folman. The film tells the autobiographical story of Folman's journey to unearth his repressed memories of his military service during the 1982 Lebanon War. The film begins in 2006 with a late-night conversation in a bar between Folman and his friend Boaz, a fellow Lebanon war veteran. Boaz tells Folman about a recurring nightmare he has where twenty-six dogs rampage through Tel Aviv before arriving at his door. The dogs, Boaz explains, represent the twenty-six dogs he remembers being ordered to shoot during his time in Lebanon in order to allow his unit to sweep through Lebanese villages at night undetected. In response, Folman remarks that he has no memories of his own time in Lebanon as a combat soldier. After they part ways however, Folman has his first vision of the Lebanon war in twenty years. He sees a foggy, yellow-washed scene of himself with two other soldiers laying in the sea. They rise slowly, as if in a trance, flare lights bursting in the night sky above them. The three soldiers walk into Beirut, where they are suddenly faced with a group of refugees. Folman understands that his vision is connected to the Sabra and Shatila massacre, but he is unable to remember anything else. Disturbed by the gaps in his

memory, he sets off on a quest to try to remember and, on the advice of a childhood friend, decides to interview others who were in Beirut at the time of the massacre in an attempt to retrieve his own memories. The result is a film which, through the use of animation, illuminates the chasm between memory and reality.



Waltz with Bashir (2008)

In a technical sense, Folman's choices of colour palette and simple, straightforward aesthetic play to the theme of memory versus reality. The scenes of him in Holland visiting his friend who served alongside him and his discussions with his friends in Israel have a lifelike, vivid, and varied colour palette which the viewer easily connects to reality. As he begins to remember his time in Lebanon however, the scenes are washed out, often with a yellow tone. In colour theory, yellow is sometimes associated with feelings of fear and anxiety. This theory is most clearly demonstrated by his recurring vision of the Beirut beach, a scene illustrated almost entirely in yellow and black. This minimalist palette separates these scenes from the viewer's understanding of reality – they are immediately understood to be visualizations of a Lebanon located in a space between Folman's memory and history. The imagery is real enough to be recognizable, but there remains a deeply unsettling feeling that, somehow, this Lebanon, washed in yellow and black, is not fully grounded in the real world.



Waltz with Bashir (2008)

The use of animation to bring memories to life is brutally effective. By creating physical visual realizations of scenes and stories previously known in the minds of only a select few, Folman forces viewers to become witnesses to and corroborators of not only his own memories, but also the memories of the various subjects he interviews about the war. Although illustrated simply, Folman's aesthetic choices only serve to make the story more impactful. At times, viewers get the sense that they are feeling the limits of Folman's memory. There is an urgency in parts of the film which gives the impression that he is rushing to document what he can remember, even if it is only the bare bones of the scene. An example of this is his great attention to detail as he describes remembering most of his brief return to Israel during his service; shop signs, faces of passersby and newsclips are all articulated in bright colours and sharp detail. Upon his return to Lebanon however, the same muted palette and simple imagery returns – shadowy figures and blown out dark buildings fill a landscape in memory held together by ever-present portraits of Bashir Gemayel.

As an artistic medium, animation is limitless in its ability to create imagery otherwise inaccessible to film, photography, and video. *Waltz with Bashir* makes full use of this characteristic, splicing together a film which is able to animate not only memories, but also described hallucinations and visions alongside delicately drawn figures set against neutral documentary staging. By maintaining animation throughout the majority of the film – with the exception of the final few minutes – viewers become fully engaged and absorbed in the story presented. The animation acts a common thread which allows every scene to exist on the same plane of believability; visions of a giant woman emerging from the Mediterranean Sea feel just as authentic as the scenes of the battle into Beirut.

One of the most emotionally impactful scenes of the film comes near the end. Commander Dror Harazi directs his soldiers to re-enter Sabra and Shatila alongside the surviving women and children after the massacre ends. Harazi describes the carnage that greets the Israelis as they venture further and further into the camp, and their process of starting to realize they are in fact bearing witness to unimaginable human devastation after a long night of violence. The commander walks on, and then suddenly stops, describing a child's hand and head peeking out from under a pile of rubble. He observes that the child has curly hair, much like his own young daughter back at home. Folman illustrates this scene heartbreakingly – every curl on the child's head, every line on their face etched so carefully and lovingly. The resulting image is profoundly moving, and one which perfectly captures the brutality of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The use of animation, a medium traditionally associated with bringing children joy, is jarring when it is instead used to bring attention to their suffering.



Waltz with Bashir (2008)

The film ends with a reel of actual footage taken shortly after the massacre. The reel finishes, and, as viewers expect comfort or, maybe, Folman's reassurance, none comes. Just as the film opened with unease and anxiety, the screen abruptly fades to black, the memory capsule closed. No comfort, no resolution, only feelings of grief. Tellingly, after watching nearly ninety minutes of animation, the archive footage feels disconnected from the story just told in the animated film. The question viewers must ask themselves is: how will you choose to bridge the chasm between Folman's memory and the reality of events?