

Waltz With Bashir: “Memory takes us where we need to go”

David Walsh
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This comment was originally posted here as part of the coverage of the Toronto international film festival in September 2008. The film is opening in a limited engagement in the US this week.

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon killed an estimated 18,000 people. The Israelis also collaborated with the fascist Phalangists in the massacre of some 3,000 Palestinian men, women and children at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. The brutal operation was part of a global counteroffensive by the ruling classes, initiated in 1979-80 under the Jimmy Carter administration and broadly extended by Ronald Reagan. 1982 also witnessed the Malvinas War, ferociously prosecuted by the government of Margaret Thatcher, elected in May 1979.

Israeli director Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir* was one of the most extraordinary and haunting films at the Toronto film festival this year. Folman has made an animated film that ends with the tragic events at Sabra and Shatila. The director says "it's a completely autobiographical film."

The film unfolds like this: a friend tells Folman of a recurring dream in which he is chased by a pack of 26 snarling, vicious dogs. The friend, Boaz, is certain it has something to do with his experiences as a soldier during the Lebanon invasion. When the Israelis were entering villages, they first "liquidated" the dogs, so they couldn't give warning. Boaz shot 26 dogs during the invasion of Lebanon.

Folman, however, discovers he no longer has any memory of the Lebanon fighting. "That's not stored in my system," he says. Only one image remains, of him and his comrades, naked, calmly swimming in the sea. The absence of memory disturbs him, and he determines to track down those he fought with and fill

in the blank space. "Memory takes us where we need to go," he explains.

He first visits an old friend, Carmi, who now lives in Holland and has made a fortune selling falafel. Carmi remembers one of his first experiences in Lebanon, he and his fellow Israeli soldiers "shooting like lunatics" at an old Mercedes, in which they later discover the bodies of a whole family.

Folman explains, "I can't remember anything." He retains this one image. "What image?" asks his friend. "You're in it." This is the image of the soldiers emerging from the sea. Carmi says he doesn't remember anything about the massacre at Sabra and Shatila. "That's not stored in my system," he says, echoing Folman.

In a taxi in the Netherlands, "everything comes back" to Folman. He continues to visit old comrades and they tell him about their experiences in Lebanon, many of them harrowing.

Folman eventually recounts how he and his unit marched into West Beirut, following the assassination of Phalange leader Bashir Gemayel (the "Bashir" in the title), and how they took up positions around the Sabra and Shatila camps. The Phalangist forces arrived and claimed they were entering the refugee camps to "purge" them of Palestinian fighters. However, the vast majority of the latter had been evacuated on ships to Tunisia two weeks earlier.

Folman's film makes clear that the Israeli command post was elevated high enough to see what was going inside the camps. For three days the fascist forces carried out their killings. A well-known Israeli television reporter learned of the massacre and telephoned Defense Minister Ariel Sharon. The future prime minister responded, "Thanks for bringing it to my attention. Happy New Year." Sharon was later

found guilty by an official inquiry of indirect responsibility for "ignoring the danger of bloodshed and revenge" and for "not taking appropriate measures to prevent bloodshed."

A friend, a therapist, asks Folman, "What did you do?" He explains that he and his comrades sent up flares, which helped the Phalangists in their murderous work. "You took on the role of a Nazi, unwillingly." The television reporter notes that the sight of Palestinians coming out of the camp with their hands above their heads reminded him of the famous image of Jews surrendering in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Waltz With Bashir is done with considerable artistry and intelligence. The images are deeply disturbing, hallucinatory, including Folman's recurring memory of the unclothed soldiers, armed, emerging from the sea in front of a row of Beirut high-rises, under a frighteningly yellow sky.

An exposure of Zionist crimes, or a film simply this painfully honest, would be almost unthinkable in the American film industry at present. It will be interesting to see what happens to the film when it opens in the US in late December.

In an interview, Folman explained that *Waltz With Bashir* "follows what I went through from the moment I realized that there were some major parts in my life completely missing from my memory. ... I discovered a lot of heavy stuff regarding my past and meanwhile, during those years, my wife and I brought three kids into this world. This makes you wonder, maybe I am doing all this for my sons. When they grow up and watch the film, it might help them make the right decisions, meaning not to take part in any war, whatsoever."

He added, "I believe that there are thousands of Israeli ex-soldiers that kept their war memories deeply repressed. They might live the rest of their lives like that, without anything ever happening. But it could always burst out one day, causing who knows what to happen to them. That's what post-traumatic stress disorder is all about."

For many people, over the past few decades, a variety of realities, social iniquities, crimes haven't apparently been "stored in the system." But they were there, nonetheless. Other processes, moods and illusions helped to exclude them from consciousness. What makes the truth about things come flooding in? A

complicated combination of subjective effort and external stimuli, perhaps in the form of new and shocking events (in Folman's case, perhaps a new war in Lebanon, the occupation of Iraq?). The subjective effort itself is objectively driven, an indication that whatever social facts underpinned and sustained the existing belief system have given way to something else.

Waltz With Bashir is one of the most conscious expressions of this complex process.



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