Dancing Solo in the Lebanese Mud

Waltz with Bashir
Written and directed by Ari Folman
90 minutes, 2008.

Reviewed by Ilan Avisar

Israeli cinema is in search of itself—a surprising fact, considering how far it has come. Indeed, in many ways, the trajectory of Israeli cinema coincides with the history of the Jewish national movement. Back when it was a mere gleam in Herzl's eye, the father of modern Zionism considered producing a film to further interest in his cause. Later, foreign crews and local photographers alike captured images from the first decades of Jewish settlement in the land of Israel. Jewish entrepreneurs with vision established film companies in the 1930s, which went on to become Geva and Carmel Studios, the country's leading producers of newsreels two decades later. But Israeli cinema truly came of age only in the 1960s, on account of the efforts of prominent filmmakers Uri Zohar, Menahem Golan, and Ephraim Kishon. The three withdrew from the local cinema industry at the end of the 1970s, however, with Kishon's move to Switzerland, Golan's to Hollywood, and Zohar's turn to Orthodox Judaism. Then, in 1979, the Israel Film Fund was established, and went on to shape local cinema in the decades to come. To this day, the vast majority of Israeli films are produced under its auspices. Since the fund appoints referees to select which films are worthy of production, the public's taste is rarely taken into consideration. Not surprisingly, then, most Israeli films are noticeably non-commercial and marked by a highly personal—and frequently political—tone.

Whether in spite of these conditions or because of them, Israeli cinema must constantly battle for both status and survival. For three decades

it has failed to turn out reputed filmmakers on even a local scale; so, too, has it failed to produce any films that might be considered true assets to Israeli culture. To be sure, in recent years Israel has seen its share of break-out films, relatively modest productions that have garnered significant attention abroad, even winning prizes at international film festivals—undoubtedly due, in large part, to their provocative political message. Yet it seems that Israeli cinema, hampered by a significant lack of funding, has difficulty aspiring to more than this, and perhaps for good reason: In the age of globalization, it faces stiff competition, not only from the Hollywood goliath, but also from the film industries of countries such as Japan, France, Italy, Russia, Germany, and China, all of which boast their own proud cinematic traditions.

Against this backdrop, it is clear why *Waltz with Bashir*, the 2008 animated documentary, caused such a stir at home. And not only here: After winning the 2008 Ophir Prize from the Israeli Academy for Film and Television, it went on this year to win both a Golden Globe and a César Award for best foreign film, along with numerous other awards and honorable mentions at international film festivals, making it the most celebrated Israeli film of all time. Nevertheless, Israelis will remember the film not only for its wins, but also for its losses: Although it was the frontrunner at Cannes for the Golden Palm award for best film, *Waltz with Bashir* lost out to the French film *The Class*; likewise, while it was favored to win at the Oscars, it lost out once again, this time to the Japanese film *Departures*.

Ari Folman, *Waltz with Bashir*'s writer, director, and producer, belongs to the generation of Israeli filmmakers born in the 1960s. His first film, the documentary *Comfortably Numb* (1991), dealt with the effects of the Gulf War on a group of people from Tel Aviv. Here, Folman focused on the myriad and mundane details of everyday life disrupted by war. The end result is an ironic—and almost comical—portrayal of a society that yearns for normalcy even as it accustoms itself to life under fire. In 1996, Folman's first feature film, *Saint Clara*, opened to both critical acclaim and financial success. A teen drama based on the novel by Czech writer Pavel Kohout, the film's central character is a thirteen-year-old girl who acquires supernatural powers, to catastrophic consequences. In *Made in Israel* (2001), Folman turned his attention once again to the malaise of Israeli reality, and dealt with sensitive issues of security, peace, and

Holocaust remembrance. The story of the extradition of the last Nazi on earth from Syria to Israel on the eve of the signing of a peace treaty between the two countries, *Made in Israel* quickly descends into an over-the-top comedy as a pair of criminals attempt to intercept the Nazi en route. They are charged with bringing him home to their Israeli boss, who seeks to kill him with his bare hands in revenge for the horrors suffered by his father during the Holocaust. Although it boasts impressive visuals and a number of profoundly moving scenes, *Made in Israel* is ultimately a cynical film, one that aspires to dismiss the notion that some topics are off-limits to criticism, and some cultural values above ridicule.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, Folman continues his journey into Israel's heart of darkness. That he does so by means of his own personal experience does not preclude the film's larger political significance; this journey, after all, also takes place in the nation's collective memory. And yet, it is precisely his politics that Folman has refused to concede openly, preferring instead to let his film make implicit, evasive statements for him. By focusing on his own subjective point of view and sense of alienation, Folman would have us believe that *Waltz with Bashir* is free of ideological baggage and overt moral didacticism. This oblique approach makes the film a cinematic work deserving of careful examination—and, as it turns out, serious criticism as well.

The hero of *Waltz with Bashir* is Ari Folman himself, who seeks to remember his experience as a young soldier in the First Lebanon War. Following his discharge from service, Folman made a clean break with his military past: Not only did he sever relationships with his fellow soldiers, but he also succeeded in suppressing all memories of his time in the army. *Waltz with Bashir*, therefore, turns this very process on its head: Now, Folman the director seeks to revisit the past and determine what traumas lie there. The psychological turmoil from which he suffers is made manifest by a string of remarkable images, beginning with the film's opening gambit: A pack of crazed, snarling dogs surge down an urban street, chasing after an invisible man. This, we learn, is the recurring nightmare that befalls an old army buddy with whom he meets up one night in a Tel Aviv bar after more than twenty years. During the war, the friend explains, he was charged with killing local dogs, whose barks might disclose the approach of Israeli soldiers on their

way to carry out missions in Lebanese villages. The number of dogs he killed was twenty- six—the same number that makes up the pack in his dream.

It is this meeting that provides the catalyst for Folman's journey into the past. This kind of journey, which invariably leads back to some formative event, is a common narrative device in war films; usually, the result is a dreaded confrontation with the painful experience that continues to haunt the characters in question until the present day. Among the more famous films that utilize this device are *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and *In the Valley of Elah*, to name just a few. As in these films, *Waltz with Bashir* deals with issues of increasing importance in today's cultural discourse, such as testimony, memory, and persistent trauma.

As if to stake its place among the heirs of a certain cinematic legacy, the film makes numerous referential nods to many of its well-known predecessors, primarily those depicting the Vietnam War. The song "Good Morning, Lebanon," for example, recalls the film *Good Morning, Vietnam*, and the image of an injured soldier sprawled in the center of an open plaza, sharpshooters waiting to pick off anyone who tries to pull him to safety, is reminiscent of a powerful scene from Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. A nod to *Apocalypse Now* is also felt in the bombardment scenes, which streak the skyline with rising flames; in the battle montages to rock-music accompaniment; in the absurd juxtaposition of soldiers surfing while helicopters pound Beirut in the background; and, finally, in the central image of the film, and the only one the hero remembers—three figures emerging naked from the ocean onto the shores of Beirut, a clear reference to the famous scene from *Apocalypse Now* in which the hero emerges from a jungle swamp to carry out one last murderous assignment. This imagery has been used—and abused—repeatedly in popular action films starring Sylvester Stallone (*Rambo*) and Chuck Norris (*Missing in Action*) and stirs, not coincidentally, associations with the great amphibious landings of World War II. Loaded with mythological and symbolic meaning, the motif draws its power both from the obvious contrast between the purity of the water and the horrors of the battlefield, as well as from the metaphor of birth: The shock of moving from the innocence and security of the womb to the brutal and bloody world of reality. This same motif is also clearly visible in the dream of

one of the film's soldiers, who sees himself jumping into water with a giant woman, and curling up on her stomach in a fetal position (the inspiration for which is the famous "penetration" scene in Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*).

But *Waltz with Bashir* is not a run-of-the-mill war film. It is also a documentary, and—perhaps its most innovative aspect—animated. The documentary aspect of the film comprises a series of interviews that Folman conducts with men who fought and served in Lebanon. While all but two interviewees speak in their own voice, the scenes in which they participate are converted into animation. Although at first glance the technique appears a bit awkward, it allows the film to jump easily between different states of consciousness: testimonies, memories, hallucinations, and dreams. The dominant shades of gray and yellow also intensify the sense of an imminent apocalypse, and the characters are portrayed as though floating through a fluid reality in which real horrors and nightmares co-mingle with ease. Deadened, emotionless faces elicit a strong expressionist effect and convey mental states of detachment and horror. Usually identified with children's tales, animation is here employed in the service of sophisticated (mature) art, and provides an unexpected means of coping with extreme psychological situations.

The oxymoron of documentary animation is a brilliant contribution by Ari Folman to the genre of war films in particular and the language of cinema in general. It also makes great practical sense: It permits Folman to present complex visual imagery that Israeli cinema, with its limited resources, would otherwise be unable to produce. Nevertheless, even the film's $1.3-million-dollar budget required numerous sources of foreign funding. In addition to four different Israeli production companies, *Waltz with Bashir* was produced with the help of two French companies, two German companies, and a British and American one. This level of foreign involvement in Israeli filmmaking usually has clear political implications. As we shall see, *Waltz with Bashir* is no exception.

Of the Israeli films produced with European funding in the 1980s and 1990s, many were what are known as "protest films," dealing with the Palestinian problem from a radical-left viewpoint. Then as now, a sizable number of Israelis were uneasy about this support; they believe, and frequently with good reason, that it is motivated by the anti-Zionist agenda

of certain groups on the European left. They also suspect that portraying Israelis as occupiers and war criminals helps the Europeans to salve their guilty consciences for the mass murder of Jews that took place on their continent a mere generation ago. Indeed, most of the political films produced in Israel with foreign support have portrayed Israeli society as both harshly militaristic and steeped in nationalist and fascist fervor. These films' protagonists are usually sensitive, artistic types—often, as in the case of *Waltz with Bashir*, fashioned in the image of the filmmaker himself—who are profoundly troubled by the nature and deeds of their country.

Folman thus travels along a well-trodden path. And yet, in public appearances, he has insisted that the message of *Waltz with Bashir* is not political, but rather simply "anti-war." Now, either Folman is being extremely naïve, or else he is putting us on: The glowing reception the film received both at home and abroad was hardly on account of its "apolitical" stance. *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott, for example, implied that the movie somehow completes the findings of the Kahan Commission, which placed indirect blame for the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre of Palestinians, carried out by Lebanese Christian Phalangists, on the occupying Israeli military command. "What no commission of inquiry can precisely define is the responsibility of the ordinary soldiers who were nearby, witnessing the slaughter and allowing it to continue," wrote Scott. "And this ethical question becomes more and more urgent as Mr. Folman's patient probing brings him closer to the awful facts his mind had suppressed for so long." In a similar vein, John Anderson argued in the *Washington Post* that the film reflects "an entire nation's guilt complex," and Peter Bradshaw commented in *The Guardian* that in *Waltz with Bashir*, "Folman submits to his very own 'Nam flashback: a memory of how the Israel Defense Forces, of which he was a part, effectively presided over mass murder."

For a film that professes to explore and document the Lebanon War, *Waltz with Bashir* nonetheless smacks of a clear bias. It contains no reference to the circumstances leading up to the war, its goals, the situation in and politics of Lebanon at the time, or the threats it posed to Israel. As a result, the Israeli invasion comes off as a heedlessly violent, destructive, and ultimately pointless campaign. Moreover, the conduct of IDF soldiers, if we are to go by the depiction provided in the film, was almost always atrocious. The first "combat" scene, for instance,

shows frenzied IDF soldiers firing at a passing car, killing the unsuspecting Lebanese family inside. Israeli tanks advance single-mindedly through the narrow streets, crushing parked cars with apathetic brutality. Military leaders display shockingly inhumane attitudes toward the wounded and the dead, as evidenced by the scene in which Ari is commanded to pile dead bodies onto a helicopter landing pad like so much refuse. Moreover, the only enemy combatant in the film shown aiming a weapon at Israeli soldiers is a young boy, who is summarily mowed down by intense IDF fire. Noticeably absent is even *one* instance of bravery, sacrifice, camaraderie, or devotion to the cause among Israeli soldiers—motifs that appear even in films that purport to be anti-war. Indeed, *Waltz with Bashir* grants the IDF not even a single, perfunctory iota of approbation.

Folman seems to believe that he can skirt the larger issues surrounding the First Lebanon War by means of the film's central, deliberately narrow question: "Where was I during the Sabra and Shatila massacre?" Yet the very choice to treat the infamous bloodbath, committed by Christian militias, as a formative event in *Israel*'s collective memory is itself of deep political significance. Yes, Ari's attempt to recall where he was during the massacre forms the film's motivation. Yet by its end, the hero's personal story is dwarfed by the accumulation of testimonies about what occurred in the camps, and what *all* the IDF soldiers present or nearby did or did not see.

Furthermore, it is impossible not to be vexed by the director's decision to assign Holocaust imagery to the events surrounding Sabra and Shatila. In one scene, Israeli journalist Ron Ben-Yishai, one of the film's real-life characters, recalls a picture of Palestinian women and children that reminded him of the famous photograph of the young boy with his arms raised in the Warsaw Ghetto. Another character notes that the trauma of the massacre is most likely connected to Ari's own family legacy, since both his parents are Auschwitz survivors. Finally, Ari himself wonders out loud what exactly Israeli soldiers in the refugee camps knew about the "genocide" that took place there.

Does the film strike this particular historical nerve in order to test the moral and emotional strength of a post-traumatic society? Or is Folman indeed trying to portray Israelis as the new Nazis? According to Ari's friend, who tells him, "You have been forcibly cast in the role of Nazi," the answer is far from ambiguous. Had any doubts remained, we need only look to the film's final scene: As an IDF officer announces an end to the war's operations, a group of

Palestinian women and children are instructed to return to the camps. The viewer's perspective follows the miserable women as they return to their homes, the site of the massacre. The "camera," or point of view, trails them from behind and zooms in on the direction they are headed. At the end of the street, they come face-to-face with Ari, whose terrified countenance fills the screen. At this point in the film, Folman cuts to actual archival images of Palestinian women in mourning, pointing to the rubble of their destroyed homes. The use of Folman's point-of-view shot, together with the real documentary footage, reveals that *this* is the picture missing from Ari's memory, the images that triggered the personal journey the film describes. The shift from animation to real photos is clearly intended to shock the audience, and to make a statement about the immense gap separating the animated, personal accounts of the Israeli characters and the real tragedy of the massacre's victims. And in this, it succeeds.

Yet, despite the undeniably one-sided picture that the film offers, Ari Folman refuses to carry the flag of political protest. He refuses to play the role of preacher, of the artist crying out to the world to save Israel from itself (and the Palestinians from Israel, as did filmmaker Keren Yedaya upon acceptance of a 2004 Cannes award for her film *Or*). It is doubtful that this decision stems from a kind of reflexive, ingrained patriotism; more likely, it is connected to the general mood of the film: alienated individualism, devoid of any feelings of belonging or any kind of ideological commitment.

Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the narcissistic aspect of Folman's film, which ultimately boils down to the story of one man's intense self-involvement. This narcissism is most readily apparent in Folman's choice of himself to play the film's hero, but is also revealed in more subtle fashion through the sense of both social and psychological detachment that permeates the film. The visual style of the dialogue scenes, for example, emphasizes the estrangement between Ari and the characters with whom he converses, and while the feeble conversation he has with his friend Uri Sivan sets the plot in motion, there is no hint of emotional reciprocity, and certainly not of real friendship. Throughout *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari gives nothing to his fellow man; he has no "comrades in arms," nor does he identify in any way with the Israeli side in the war. For Ari, this journey into memory is no waltz. He dances solo.

It is, perhaps, on account of this display of blatant individualism, this focus on personal redemption

through obsessive self-examination, that the film angered the "hard-core" Israeli left. While the right protested the negative depiction of Israeli soldiers, the left's radical fringe condemned *Waltz with Bashir* as a demonstration of futile hypocrisy lacking any substantive criticism of Israeli aggression. Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, for example, that weariless provocateur, went so far as to call the film, in an article in *Haaretz*, "an act of fraud and deceit, intended to allow us to pat ourselves on the back, to tell us and the world how lovely we are." Likewise, on the popular news show *London and Kirshenbaum*, the Israel Prize-winning director Yehuda "Judd" Ne'eman, a staunch anti-Zionist, accused the film of attempting to cover up Israel's responsibility for Sabra and Shatila. In both cases, these radical leftists were incensed by what appeared to them as an offensive attempt at catharsis, and a shameful effort to bring the circle of historic guilt to a close.

Nevertheless, the majority of Israelis appear to have received the film positively. Its success at international festivals, culminating in its candidacy for an Oscar, generated immense enthusiasm, and even—somewhat ironically—an eruption of patriotism at home. Indeed, it seemed at times as though the Israeli media, so desperate for Folman to "bring home" the gold statue, had forgotten that they were dealing with a film—especially one consumed with self-criticism—and not with a national football team heading off to a prestigious international tournament. Certainly, Folman himself—a sincere man with a pleasant sense of humor and an unassuming personality—has aroused nothing but empathy: In countless interviews he has repeatedly expressed his most fervent hope that his own children will not have to undergo the same experiences that he did—and who would argue with that? What Israeli *wouldn't* identify with such a noble aspiration, even one so patently banal?

But *Waltz with Bashir*, it must be said, is not a banal film. It is an important artistic creation that conveys a harsh and serious statement. As a cinematic work, it is deserving of all the praise it has received, and may rightly be considered a breakthrough of a sort. As a political text, however, it is both problematic and dangerously manipulative. Our appreciation of the former should not distract us from our recognition of the latter.

Ilan Avisar is an associate professor in the film and television department at Tel Aviv University.