

WALTZ WITH BASHIR: DOCUMENTARY, ANIMATION AND MEMORY

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I. INTRODUCTION

It was an unprecedented event in the history of the Academy Awards. In 2009, nominated for the Oscar for best foreign language film was *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), an animated documentary from Israel based on a dark episode in the 1982 Lebanon War: the massacre of thousands of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Although the Oscar ultimately went to the Japanese film *Departures* (Okuribito, Yôjirô Takita, 2008), the success and public profile of the Israeli picture, which in addition to the Oscar accolade had received a BAFTA nomination and had won a Golden Globe, highlights the extraordinary impact currently being generated by documentary projects that make use of animation as a representational strategy.

In this respect, *Waltz with Bashir* can be analysed as an extraordinary example that encapsulates some of the most significant developments

taking place in contemporary film and television in general and in the realm of the documentary in particular. On the one hand, it shows how the documentary genre has been spilling over into the much more blurry but at the same time more inclusive territory of non-fiction. Propelled by the revolution that began with the widespread use of digital technology, Folman's film is located at the decisive moment of the breaking of the traditional pact with the truth that the documentary traditionally maintained with the event it documents, based on the idea of its supposed direct contact with reality. And this is because, as Jeffrey Skoller suggests, the animated documentary seems to have demonstrated a "profound awareness that the truth proclaimed by non-fiction forms are no longer located in the 'reality effects' of the photographic print" (Skoller, 2011: 207). It is no accident that the Israeli film is founded on certain modes of engagement with the animated image which, as Honess Roe has pointed out, place the debate

beyond the testimonial and documentary value of the photographic image (basically, by pursuing non-mimetic substitution and evocation, Honess Roe, 2013: 23).

On the other hand, *Waltz with Bashir* exemplifies the importance that “subjectivisation” and the power of memory in the social reconstruction of the past have acquired in documentary storytelling. Ever since *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) offered its monumental exploration of the terrible historical wound of twentieth century society through the voices of its survivors, the “legitimacy of subjective expression to documentary” (Winston et al., 2017: 2) has been gaining widespread acceptance in recent decades, to the point that, as Michael Renov suggests in his landmark study, “the subject in documentary has, to a surprising degree, become the subject of documentary” (Renov, 2004: XXIV).

It is through the strategic combination of these two developments that the Israeli film offers a profound reflection on the horror of war and of how individuals can become involved in barbaric acts in contradiction to their interests. The orchestration of audiovisual resources brought into play, together with a spiralling narrative architecture that attempts to fill in a painful absence (the absence of an image, of a trace that would confirm the protagonist’s time in Beirut during the invasion and the massacre), allows the film to effectively mobilise the viewer’s emotional reaction to a barbaric act. It is surely here that the filmmaker’s aesthetic approach acquires its most political dimension: the expressive and symbolic use of the “cut-out” animation technique and a clever formal management of narrative material establishes a cognitive and emotional dialectic in relation to the events recreated in the film that fosters the adoption of a particular ethical position with regard to warfare (Murray, 1995).

2. FROM HISTORY TO MEMORY, FROM VICTIM TO PERPETRATOR

In the general context of an increasing number of documentaries exploring barbaric acts, two basic elements evident in *Waltz with Bashir* are worth noting: the paradigm shift that has privileged the use of testimonial sources and narrated recollections in the reconstruction of historical events; and the progressive public visibility of the figure of the perpetrator as an alternative (albeit highly problematic) source of information on those events. The interweaving of these two elements is facilitating the construction of new discourses that have put the subject back at the heart of the historical events while at the same time highlighting the importance of social factors in major conflicts.

2.1. From history to memory

In the contemporary debate over the confrontation of our present with the past, cinema is positioned as a privileged mediator in the construction of our memory, and therefore as a decisive instrument in the definition of our contemporary identity (Kilbourn, 2010; Sinha and McSweeney, 2009). Indeed, the construction of identity on its different, interconnected levels (individual/collective; cultural/social; national/international) depends largely on the relationship we establish with the past, that temporal space on which we project ourselves in our search for meaning. This dialogue draws on the inversion of the temporal principles that underpinned the project of modernity during the first half of the twentieth century. While modernity was founded on a blind faith in the future that represented a radical break with what came before, post-modernity has turned its gaze back towards the past (Huyssen, 2002; Radstone, 2000; Rossington and Whitehead, 2007). This veritable *volte-face* had a lot to do with the historical consciousness developed in Western society upon the revelation of the Nazi barbarism

and the essential role that the witness took on as a mediator between the “absolute event” (Blanchot, 1990: 46) and a society reluctant to confront that event directly.

A rich debate thus developed in an effort to define the complex interrelations between history and memory (Namer, 1987; Le Goff, 1988; Ricoeur, 2000; Traverso, 2007; Berger and Niven, 2014). The central idea of this confrontation rests on a distinction that is material and thematic as well as enunciative: while history is supposed to be an exhaustive interpretation of a past viewed as something completed, memory conceives of the past as something open, intimately connected to our present, and as such always capable of exerting its power over us.

This epistemological shift was consolidated emblematically in the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence in the social sciences of memory studies, a field of research that recovered and reformulated much earlier propositions by authors of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, such as the philosopher Henri Bergson (2006) or the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and his well-known concept of the “collective memory”, which would subsequently be developed by Adeila and Jan Assmann with their notion of “cultural memory” (Assmann, 2011). At the turn of the millennium, the concept of memory appears to have entered a new phase in which the centrality of the Shoah has been overshadowed by the appearance on the stage of other traumatic memories: the globalisation of the Shoah represented the foundation for a new international policy on human rights, while also facilitating the cultural visibility of other barbaric acts (Levy and Sznajder, 2005).

In this respect, considering the importance of cinema in the cultural processes involving the recovery of the past, it is clear that this visibility has found its best ally in documentary making. An example of this can be found in the Israeli context and the appearance of a “new wave” (Morag,

2016; Yosef, 2011) after the Second Intifada (2000–2005), which, in addition to *Waltz with Bashir*, resulted in films as significant as *Z32* (Avi Mograbi, 2008) and *To See If I’m Smiling* (Tamar Yarom, 2007). Other cases can be found in regions like Latin America, where filmmakers have revisited the dictatorships of the 1970s, such as Albertina Carri with her exploration of the murky intricacies of Videla’s Argentina to uncover the mystery of her parents’ murder in *The Blonds* (Los rubios, 2003), or María Inés Roqué with *Papá Iván* (2004), which tells the story of her father, a founding member of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) rebel group that operated in Argentina during the 1970s. Another example can be found in Southeast Asia, where Rithy Panh has attempted to find closure through the painful act of delving into the atrocities perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in many of his films, like *The Missing Picture* (L’image manquante, 2013) and *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge, 2003). And even Spain is turning its gaze back on its painful past, with films like *Nadar* (Carla Subirana, 2008), *30 años de oscuridad* [30 Years of Darkness] (Manuel H. Martín, 2009), or the false documentary *Tierra encima* [Buried] (Sergio Morcillo, 2005).

2.2. From victim to perpetrator

Along with this new engagement with the past has come another recent development in memory studies, related to a shift in focus from the figure of the victim to that of the perpetrator. Without undermining the essential role of the victim’s story, the voice of the perpetrator has begun challenging the dichotomy inherent in the victim/perpetrator binary to view it instead as a bipolarity, as extremes on a spectrum that is never definitive and that would thus allow for the emergence of a grey area between the two (Baum, 2008; Üngör, 2012; Hochberg, 2013; Canet, 2018, Sánchez-Biosca, 2018).

This shift in focus is facilitating the assessment of the perpetrator's role in major conflicts more precisely. On the one hand, most human beings could end up being executioners in certain circumstances, as Christopher R. Browning starkly concludes: "If the men of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" (Browning, 1993: 189). On the other hand, the traditional emphasis on individual responsibility in studies of genocides has tended to sidestep the question of collective responsibility, thus overlooking the structural violence that underpins a society and legitimises the barbaric acts (Roth, 2004; Bloxham, Kushner, 2005; Morag 2016).

The phantom represented by the perpetrator, which cultural memory does not wish to see, is now being rendered visible in various media forms, although the documentary has again emerged as the genre that interrogates this figure most actively and with the greatest degree of complexity. *The Last of the Unjust* (Le dernier des injustes, Claude Lanzmann, 2013), for example, is located in that grey area of the Shoah in its portrait of the last President of the Jewish Council in the Theresienstadt ghetto; *Standard Operating Procedure* (Morris, 2008) interviews the soldiers responsible for the "infamous images" of Abu Grahb; the diptych made up of *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) and *The Look of Silence* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014) exposes the killings perpetrated in Indonesia after the coup d'état of 1965; *Terra de ninguém* [No Man's Land] (Salomé Lamas, 2013) explores Portugal's colonialist past from the perspective of one of its mercenaries; and *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, *Enemies of the People* (Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath, 2009) and *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell* (Rithy Panh 2012) examine the horror unleashed by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. And of course, *Waltz with Bashir* reflects on the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian and Lebanese refugees in the Sabra and Shatila refu-

gee camps in Beirut, perpetrated between the 14th and the 16th of September 1982 by the Lebanese Christian Phalangist militia in retaliation for the assassination of Lebanon's recently elected president, Bashir Gemayel.

3. WALTZ WITH BASHIR: MEMORY, TRAUMA, PERPETRATOR

Ari Folman's film offers a perfect illustration of the two elements described above. On the one hand, it places the role of memory at the heart of the reconstruction of the past, while on the other it does so from the perspective of a perpetrator who, far from being depicted in the coarse outlines of a monster, is presented as an individual caught up in a set of social dynamics that exert a powerful pressure on his behaviour and actions.

Ari is a young soldier who has only just turned nineteen and has no prior battle experience ("I still hadn't started shaving" he remarks at the very moment he recalls his first day of combat), who is sent into a war in which he is faced with the horror of its terrible consequences from the outset: the actions he becomes caught up in cannot be explained by the logic of warfare. The conflict that torments the protagonist at this moment can be understood more clearly with reference to the cognitivist analysis developed by Albert Bandura (1999) on the moral disengagement necessary to act inhumanely. Put simply, the young Ari could not effectively disengage his moral inhibitions in relation to the actions he was required to commit in the context of war. Indeed, at the root of the protagonist's trauma is the disjunction between his moral principles and the social factors that conditioned the situation of conflict. The young soldier's mind was incapable of articulating any of the moral justifications that are normally used for military action (such as fighting oppression, preserving peace, saving humankind from subjugation, or fulfilling your patriotic duty). Ari was therefore unable to sanction his presence in the

war as something good or at least necessary, in keeping with the situation he had been thrust into. Instead, the excesses committed against the civilian population during the campaign, as well as the recognition and final acceptance of his passive participation in the vicinity of the refugee camps where the massacre took place, severely affected his moral principles and decision-making capacity.

When the protagonist begins his investigation, his friend and lawyer, Ori Sivan, explains it to him with perfect clarity: in the invasion, Ari identified with his role with that of the Nazi criminals, an unbearable idea for an individual whose personal and cultural memory is profoundly marked by the Shoah. As a result, the journey towards remembering taken by the

protagonist only serves to dig deeper, from one sequence to the next, into the terrible and devastating truth of war. There are no heroic or noble acts at any moment, but quite the opposite. The rampant shooting spree that takes the lives of a family after landing at a beach, the transportation of dead and wounded soldiers in a tank firing constantly at nothing, his comrade-in-arms Ronny Dayag's feeling of guilt after surviving a confrontation with enemy forces, the randomness and constant errors in the military objectives that end the lives of countless innocent civilians, the permissiveness and neglect of duty in the face of the atrocities committed by the Christian Phalangists, or the wild and pain-filled faces of the mothers crying over the deaths of their children after the massacre, are all scenes that expose the irrationality and meaninglessness of war.

In psychiatric terms, Ari's memory is debilitated by the excessive influx of stimuli he experienced in the war, which buried his recollections

in the deepest recesses of his subconscious. Ari is a traumatised individual who must face up to certain historical events that lie latent in his psyche, but that come back to the surface like the return of the repressed (Laplanche and Pontalis, 2004). In this sense, and in the words the filmmaker places in the mouth of Boaz in the form of a question ("Can't films be therapeutic?"), *Waltz with Bashir* operates as a kind of rehabilitation that the protagonist must undergo until what has been buried deep is reconstructed and reintegrated into his moral experience: only when he can recall what

happened in September 1982 and accept his part in the military operation that allowed the massacre to happen can he begin on the path to healing.

This therapeutic journey is expressed in the film in an especially ac-

tive way on two complementary semiotic levels: the narrative level and the figurative level. On the narrative level, the plot to *Waltz with Bashir* is constructed as a kind of investigation in the first person to deal with an obvious gap: Ari in the present doesn't remember what part he played in the military operation in the past; he can't recall any of what happened. This is the function performed by the first sequence: the conversation with his old comrade Boaz and his story of a recurring nightmare that has plagued him for years serves to reveal that the protagonist is suffering from an absence; there is a gap in his memory that he needs to fill in order to solve the mystery posed at that very moment: did Ari take part in the First Lebanon War?

However, in contrast with a classic detective story, the protagonist's investigation follows a curved rather than a linear trajectory. Because it is a traumatised memory, the reconstruction of the event proves more complex and labyrinthine.

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As a result, as Maureen Turim observes in relation to films that narrate traumatic events, *Waltz with Bashir* also makes use of fragmentation, breaking up the sequences because “the dislocation inherent in modernist storytelling serves as an analogy for psychic damage” (Turim, 2010: 299). The relationship established between the past and present in Ari’s story thus differs from the causal order that governs the classical narrative. Instead, the two time periods are juxtaposed in a much more complex and ambiguous way, constructing a fractured and dispersed kind of spatio-temporal universe in which the past begins to exert its pressure on the present, gradually contaminating it as Ari’s investigation progresses. Indeed, there is nothing accidental about the regular presence of past and present on the screen from the moment that Ari’s interview with Boaz triggers his first memory-image; in a wide shot, Ari looks out over the sea on a seaside promenade that we will subsequently recognise is in Beirut [Image 01]. A sideways pan following the character’s gaze as he turns his head brings some flares into view in the background, descending slowly and bathing the scene in a yellow hue with a markedly dreamlike quality [Image 02]. From this moment, in a kind of spiral motion, the story progresses while returning on three occasions to this original image, which assumes, with clearly psychoanalytical logic, the displaced and condensed features of the traumatic image: the flares light up the seashore where a young Ari is bathing in the water with some other soldiers; they walk up to the seaside promenade and cross streets devastated by bomb blasts until, turning a corner, they come upon a crowd of women dressed in black who are crying out in grief, although we cannot hear their words (a plaintive tune floods the soundtrack).

The importance of this image, and of the search for an image that will enable Ari to overcome his amnesia (that will enable him to find meaning), is fundamental to the film’s figurative approach, a second level in the textualisation of



Image 1 and 2. *Waltz with Bashir*

the protagonist’s therapeutic journey. Drawing on the work of Freud (2001), Gil Hochberg suggests that trauma is intimately tied to the inability to view the event that caused the psychic wound; the excessive stimulus of the traumatic event leads to a “momentary shutdown of all sensory organs, most notably the eyes. The witnessing of a trauma survivor event is, more accurately speaking, a failed witnessing” (Hochberg, 2013: 45).

This is why Ari Folman, as the agent of events that he cannot reintegrate into his moral system, has also suffered a failure of perception. *Waltz with Bashir* exhibits an extraordinary awareness of the importance of this failed condition in the film’s construction, to the point of including a sequence that exposes the failure clearly: the filmmaker’s interview with a psychiatrist who talks

about the experience of a previous patient. It is the story of a young amateur photographer who dealt with the horrors of war by imagining it as a big trip that he was watching through an imaginary photo camera. Thanks to this screen, he was able to make himself feel as if he was outside the situation despite being



Image 3. *Waltz with Bashir*

in the middle of it, until one day, the psychiatrist explains, his camera “broke”: the sight of some Arabian horses abandoned to their fate, dead or wounded at the Hippodrome, shattered the lens of his imaginary camera [Image 03] and plunged the young man into a state of madness.

In any case, this problematic issue of witnessing spills beyond the phantasmal enigma-image to encompass the whole visual universe of the film. We should not forget that as a story based on memory, much of what we see on the screen is through the consciousness and the first-person recollections of the protagonist. These are recollections that cannot yet draw out the secret that has been buried deep, memories subject to the relentlessly repetitive dynamics that characterise a trauma, displaced and juxtaposed fragments that come back again and again at the very moment of sensory and emotional breakdown. It is here that the use of animation in *Waltz with Bashir* acquires its full meaning, becoming an essential ally in the figurative formalisation of the condition that afflicts the protagonist’s experience. Indeed, while in theory animation seems ill-equipped to portray external reality, it is for this very incapacity that it actually possesses “the potential to expand the realm of documentary epistemology from the ‘world out there’ of observable events to the ‘world

in here’ of subjective experience” (Honess Roe, 2009: 323).

Thanks to a particular expressive texture that rejects the idea of a faithful reconstruction of a past brought whole into the present, the animation in *Waltz with Bashir* explicitly exhibits its distance from the real image: the dark masses of

shadows that envelope the bodies on numerous occasions, the sourness of a colour range that expresses the character’s discomfort with his own memories, evade a mimetic appearance to effectively underscore the subjective experience that underpins the film (Mansfield, 2010).

The animated screen is thus established as a kind of veil masking what happened in reality, only perceptible in a displaced way as an enigma-image that emerges when Ari has his “first flashback in twenty years”. This is why he needs to return repeatedly to this image and try to decipher it, and why it is only at the end, when he acknowledges his participation in the siege on the Sabra and Shatila camps, that the missing image can emerge (Yosef, 2010), that blurred image that has been hovering constantly in the protagonist’s memory and that can finally come out into the light, although it is the light of a TV news report: the reverse shot to the close-up of the young Ari’s face (a shot that systematically closes the protagonist’s memory-images) [Image 04] is filled with the devastated faces of numerous women, old and young, searching for their loved ones, howling in horror over what they have suffered [Image 05] [Image 06]. The animated image that established a distance from the event, together with the soundtrack of dreamlike chords that muffled the

impact of reality, gives way now to a truth served up raw to confirm the protagonist's sensory recovery and his acceptance of responsibility in the massacre. The harrowing television images that

Image 4, 5 and 6. *Waltz with Bashir*



now fill the screen (and that do nothing to conceal the fact that they are TV images) constitute the painful end-point of both the investigation and the film.

4. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Apart from its commercial success, the significance of Ari Folman's film can be confirmed by the recent appearance of a number of animated documentaries which, while set in other regions and using different stylistic criteria, similarly explore the power of animation for depicting traumatic historical events. *Little Voices* (Pequeñas voces, Oscar Andrade and Jairo Eduardo Carillo, 2010), which gives a voice to children who have suffered first-hand from the conflict in Colombia; *Another Day of Life* (Raúl de la Fuente and Damian Nenow, 2018), an animated adaptation of the book by Ryszard Kapuscinski about the horrors of the civil war in Angola in 1975; or *Chris the Swiss* (Anja Kofmel, 2018), which tells of the death of Swiss journalist Christian Würtenberg in the Balkan War, all reflect the increasing awareness among some filmmakers of the expressive power of animation.

Waltz with Bashir, however, continues to be an essential milestone in the evolution of a genuine pedagogy of horror for this new century: the depiction of all acts that contradict the heroic narrative of war propaganda, the investigation of a protagonist who relives a dramatic experience contrary to his moral integrity, culminating in his acknowledgement that he participated in a barbaric act, and the filmmaker's extraordinary capacity to exploit the sensory logic of animation, were all turned into strategies that contributed to the creation of a powerful audiovisual discourse capable of mobilising the spectator's emotions and eliciting a moral response on two levels (Bandura, 1999): injunctive, in that it teaches us to refrain from inhumane behaviours; and proactive, in that it encourages us to adopt attitudes

inclined towards empathy and understanding of others. Only through discourses that succeed in emotionally engaging viewers, as *Waltz with Bashir* does, can the personal truth of the individuals portrayed be placed in relation with the collective, social truth of the spectators—a connection that is essential to the construction of a better world. ■

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WALTZ WITH BASHIR: DOCUMENTARY, ANIMATION AND MEMORY

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of a contemporary animated documentary that has been unanimously recognised as an extraordinary ethical and aesthetic example of the depiction of war through the personal recollections of a perpetrator: *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008). To this end, an examination is offered of the narrative, thematic and expressive strategies of the film and their effect on the ethical engagement of the spectator in response to a barbaric act. In this way, through a clever combination of expressive effects characteristic of animation that deliberately distance the film from the hyperrealistic codes of classical filmmaking, and a heavily fragmented narrative structure that gives shape to a traumatic event experienced in the first person, *Waltz with Bashir* offers a powerful audiovisual discourse that elicits a profound degree of empathy from the spectator, encouraging a critical response to the events depicted.

Key words

Barbarism; Documentary; Animation; Trauma; Memory; War; Perpetrator.

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VALS CON BASHIR: DOCUMENTAL, ANIMACIÓN Y MEMORIA

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza un reciente documental de animación que ha sido reconocido de manera unánime como un extraordinario ejemplo ético y estético en la representación bélica a través de la memoración en primera persona de un perpetrador: *Vals con Bashir* (Waltz with Bashir, Ari Folman, 2008). Para ello, se ponen en valor las estrategias narrativas, temáticas y expresivas del film y sus consecuencias en la implicación ética del espectador ante un acto de barbarie. Así, gracias a una sabia conjugación de los efectos expresivos derivados de la animación, que se aleja de manera consciente de los códigos hiperrealistas de la cinematografía clásica, y una articulación de la narración fuertemente fragmentada que da forma a un acontecimiento traumático que vincula la memoria individual y la memoria colectiva, el film israelí propone un potente discurso audiovisual que activa una profunda empatía con un espectador que reacciona de manera crítica frente a los acontecimientos escenificados.

Palabras clave

Barbarie; documental; animación; trauma; memoria; guerra; perpetrador.

Autor

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