

Waltz With Bashir

Vals Im Bashir

18 Israel / France / Germany / USA /
Japan / Finland / Switzerland / Bel-
gium / Australia 2008

90 m sub-titles

Crew

Director	Ari Folman
Screenplay	Ari Folman
Animation Director	Yoni Goodman
Art Director	David Polonsky
Editor	Nili Feller

Cast

(Interviewees)

Ori Silvan, Ronny Dayag, Shmuel, Frenkel,
Prof. Zahava Solomon, Ron Ben-Yisai,
Dror Harazai, Boaz Rein-Buskila, Carmi
Can'an

Synopsis

Israel, the present. Film-maker Ari Folman meets his friend Boaz, who's haunted by memories of the first Lebanon war, when both men served in the army.

Ari travels to Holland to meet Carmi, who shares some of his own war memories, including his dream of a giantess in the sea.

Another ex-soldier, Ronny, tells of when his own tank was destroyed and his friends killed. He escaped, swimming down the Lebanese coast, but he was burdened by guilt. The next speaker, Frenkel, remembers when his group came under rocket attack from a young boy. Frenkel says Ari was there but Ari can't remember. Professor Solomon, a woman psychiatrist, describes how some combatants detach themselves from the reality of war. Ari and others remember the build-up of events following the assassination of Bashir Gemayel, the Phalangist leader. The Israelis enter Beirut, coming under fire. Frenkel takes the snipers on, 'waltzing' between the bullets.

Abridged from Sight & Sound, Dec.08



Review

Ari Folman's broodingly original *Waltz With Bashir*—one of the highlights of the last New York Film Festival—is a documentary that seems only possible, not to mention bearable, as an animated feature. Folman, whose magic realist youth film *Saint Clara* was one of the outstanding Israeli films of the 1990s, has created a grim, deeply personal phantasmagoria around the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. *Waltz With Bashir*, named for Bashir Gemayel, the charismatic hero of the Christian militias that allied themselves with Israel, is an illustrated oral history based on interviews that Folman conducted with former comrades, which mixes dreams with their incomplete or conflicting recollections.

Waltz With Bashir opens with a pack of slaving dogs rampaging through nocturnal Tel Aviv—the dramatization of a recurring nightmare experienced by one of Folman's friends. His assignment, when entering a Lebanese village, had been to silence the dogs because "they knew I couldn't shoot a person." One dream triggers another: Folman, who claims to have forgotten everything about his wartime experiences, has his sleep disturbed by a vision of soldiers, naked save for their dog tags and Uzis, drifting zombie-like out of the ocean onto Beirut's posh hotel strip. That which has been repressed returns with startling ferocity.

Although it can be highly explicit in detailing war's horror, *Waltz With Bashir* is mainly concerned with the recollection of trauma. There's a therapeutic aspect to the project...Folman's dream prompts him to roust an analyst friend at 6:30 a.m. and then, encouraged by the analyst's suggestion, begin tracking down the men with whom he served, as a means of recovering or even re-implanting his own memories of the war.

"Uncontrollable fear" merges with megalomania. A tank rolls into a Lebanese city, casually crushing parked cars and backing up into buildings, until the commander is shot—at which point the soldiers abandon their weapons and flee in total panic. One former soldier recalls his terror-induced vision of a beautiful giantess who rose out of the sea and allowed him to float away nestled on her body as the transport boat was incinerated. Experience is scarcely less fantastic: the sole survivor of an ambush crouches for hours behind a rock until, under cover of darkness, he swims south and is washed ashore, only to be found by the regiment that abandoned him.

Abetted by Max Richter's ominous martial score, *Waltz With Bashir* matches a grim sense of estrangement with a distinctively alienated look. The thick-lined, near-monochromatic animation is frequently bathed in an eerie yellow light. Folman has said that his documentary was always intended to be an animated feature—the first ever made in Israel. The interviews were staged and videotaped, with the animators basing their drawings on the video material rather than using a rotoscopic process to transform the original into animation.

The tension inherent in Folman's method is reproduced throughout the film; *Waltz With Bashir* takes ambivalence as a formal principle. Lebanon 1982 not only merges with present-day Israel but also with an earlier generation's memories of World War II. The war's hallucinatory aspect is heightened by the home front's surreal proximity to the battlefield, both in Tel Aviv and Beirut where Israeli soldiers take sniper fire as civilians watch from hotel terraces. Folman's unresolved guilt is at once personal and socially symptomatic—and either way, an internal Israeli issue. *Waltz With Bashir* nevertheless inexorably builds to the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, an atrocity which the Israeli army tacitly enabled but didn't commit and which Folman believes he has repressed but never actually experienced.

Linking the slaughter of the Palestinians to the experience of Folman's parents in Auschwitz, the filmmaker's analyst-friend points out that "the massacre has been with you since you were six." In its final convulsive minutes, *Waltz With Bashir* goes to graphic news footage—breaking the subjective spell with the full, awful weight of TV images that constitute collective memory.

J Hoberman, The Village Voice