

Animated Recollection and Spectatorial Experience in *Waltz with Bashir*

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Ohad Landesman and Roy Bendor

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), Ari Folman's animated war memoir, combines a commentary on memory with a moral stance on war. The authors argue that the film exemplifies the capacity of animated documentaries not only to show what is otherwise difficult or impossible to represent in non-animated documentaries, but to serve as a vehicle for fostering new relationships between the viewer and the documentary text. In this vein, the authors argue that *Waltz with Bashir* synthetically produces a rich, consistent, and thus trustworthy sense of reality for its viewers not despite but *because* of its unique aesthetic choices – its innovative animation techniques and mixing of reality with fantasy. Accordingly, the authors weave together analyses of the film's content and form with accounts of their reception, discuss how the film evokes certain somatic responses with individuals, and consider the political significance these responses may engender.

Keywords

animation, documentary, experience, Israeli cinema, Lebanon, memory, phenomenology, trauma, Walter Benjamin, war

We know that they are ... drawings, and not living beings.

We know that they are projections of drawings on a screen.

We know that they are ... 'miracles' and tricks of technology, that such beings don't really exist.

But at the same time:

We sense them as alive.

We sense them as moving.

We sense them as existing and even thinking. (Sergei Eisenstein, 1988: 55)

Corresponding author:

Ohad Landesman, Department of Cinema Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, 721 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, USA.

Email: ohad.landesman@nyu.edu

Is a digital image, consisting of dots and lines and digital information, more real? Is a drawn image, talking, with real sound, less true? Who can say? Who is to judge? (Ari Folman, 2008a)

‘I’m of the world’ or, introduction

Waltz with Bashir (2008), Ari Folman’s animated war memoir, opens with a pack of 26 ferocious dogs storming the streets of Tel Aviv at night in search of revenge. A literal dramatization of a recurring nightmare experienced by Boaz Rein, one of Ari Folman’s closest friends, the scene shows these hounds of hell forcing their way from an unknown point of origin, disturbing the serenity of a typical urban street in Israel, onto their immanent destination, the apartment where Boaz now sleeps. It establishes right from the onset the basic thematic contradictions that epitomize Folman’s film: the unresolved tension between dream and reality, the absurdly short distance between sanity and psychosis, and the need to bridge cinematically between what must be shown and what cannot be represented. It also, however, introduces the viewer to a formal strategy that is largely unfamiliar within the language of the animated documentary. Lushly animated in clashing shades of cobalt and orange, and accompanied by a meticulous audio landscape comprised of 102 different sound channels (which also include wolves, lions and tigers) (see Guillén, 2009), the opening sequence creates an unmooring audio-visual spectacle that assaults the audience’s senses, shakes them out of their comfort zone, and immediately immerses them in the film’s world. It is no wonder, then, that the film was received with both amazement and horror, awards and admonishment.

When it comes to animated documentary films, such spectatorial responses are not trivial. This is because the animated documentary is locked into a tenuous relation with the world it represents, a relation expressed in the mixing of ‘realistic’ themes with fantastic forms. In other words, it seems rather preposterous to attribute a film that deploys an array of non-realistic stylistic devices with the capacity to make powerful truth claims about reality – the essence of documentary film according to Nichols (1998: 20). Nonetheless, in what follows we will argue that the strong spectatorial responses that *Waltz with Bashir* evokes are in fact inseparable from the film’s method of interrogating reality: the film’s cognitive and embodied effects, a product of its unique aesthetic strategies, are essential for its disclosure of reality in all its complexity, ambiguity and multifacetedness. In this sense, *Waltz with Bashir* exemplifies the ways in which the animated documentary exceeds its utility for showing what is otherwise difficult or impossible to represent in non-animated documentaries (stream of consciousness, unconscious elements, dreams, imagination, affects, etc.), to also serve as a vehicle for fostering a new relationship between the viewer and the documentary text.¹ This relationship is one that moves away from *faith* – having faith in the image because it represents reality with photographic indexicality – to *trust* – trusting the documentary text to be making truth claims that reflect the world in sophisticated ways (Strøm, 2003: 61–62). In this mode, animated documentaries ‘create the real’, as Ward (2008) suggests, *despite* their shattering of the conventional indexical bondage between the image and reality in documentary.² To paraphrase Michael Renov (1993: 30), the animated documentary validates its truth claims by assuring its viewers, ‘believe me, I’m of the world.’

In this vein, we will argue that *Waltz with Bashir* synthetically produces a rich, consistent, and thus trustworthy sense of reality for its viewers, not despite but *because* of its unique aesthetic choices – its innovative animation techniques and mixing of reality with fantasy. Its trustworthiness, it follows, relies on its capacity to create meaningful experiences for its viewers, exemplifying Vivian Sobchack’s (1999: 241) remark that the documentary is ‘less a “thing” than “an experience”’ – an experience that is distributed across text, viewer and world. Accordingly, this

article weaves together analyses of the film's content and form with accounts of their reception, combining a discussion of how the film evokes certain somatic responses with individuals with a consideration of the political significance these responses may carry.

'Memory is fascinating' or, factual and factical memories

In a key conversation that takes place early in the film, Folman's friend and collaborator, psychologist Ori Sivan, helps him understand the entanglement of reality and fantasy that girds our memory. Sivan says:

Memory is fascinating.

Take this famous psychological experiment: a group of people were shown 10 various childhood photos. Nine were really taken from their childhood, depicting real experiences that actually took place, but one picture was fake: their portrait was pasted into a picture of a fairground they never visited.

Eighty percent recognized themselves in the picture, identifying the fake photo as real! The other 20 percent that couldn't remember themselves in the fake picture, went home, and then returned to the researchers and said, 'now we remember!' ... They remembered a completely fabricated experience.

Memory is dynamic. It's alive.

Even if some details are missing, these 'black holes' are filled by our memory until there is a fuller remembrance of something that never happened.

Our memory includes events and experiences that took place factually, and events and experiences that did not. Together, the real and the imagined, the actual and the fantastic, construct the fabric of memory, or what we will call here the *mnemic contexture*. Importantly, both forms of memory are inseparable from our experience of reality, our inhabiting what phenomenologists call *world* or the *lifeworld*: the background structure that allows entities, relations and identities to become meaningful. 'Unnoticed, presupposed, encompassing, world is always present, transparent and eluding every attempt to grasp it as object' (Palmer, 1969: 133). The lifeworld makes experience intelligible, but at the same time remains intangible. In this sense, the 'world of actual experience' is never reducible to the empirically validated, 'objective world'. As French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962[1945]: x) puts it: 'The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgment before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination.' This world of actual experience subtends and exceeds empirical accounts and includes non-empirical elements such as latent potentialities, *telois* and imagined states of affairs that, while they remain beyond empirical verification, are still very much part of the way we experience and respond to reality.

Martin Heidegger (1962[1927]: 174) calls that which lends itself to empirical validation 'factual' (or *ontic*) and that which does not 'factual' (or *existential-ontological*):

Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something present-at-hand, but a characteristic of Dasein's Being – one which has been taken up into existence, even if proximally it has been thrust aside. The 'that-it-is' of facticity never becomes something that we can come across by beholding it. (emphasis in original)

Heidegger's distinction is meant to call attention to the paucity of scientific–empirical accounts of reality in comparison to the richness of phenomenological accounts, and does not pertain directly to the mnemonic contexture. However, it is still quite useful for expressing the *epistemological* status of mnemonic components without recourse to terminology that poses the difference between real and imagined (sometimes understood as objective and subjective) as *ontological* hierarchy. In this vein, and by using Heidegger's terminology, we argue that *Waltz with Bashir*'s depiction of the mnemonic contexture includes both *factual memories* that can be empirically (ideally or in practice) verified and *factual memories* that remain beyond empirical verification. While referring to reality in different ways, they are both *equally important parts of the way the film's protagonists inhabit and remember the lifeworld*, that is, the way they experience reality and retrieve its mnemonic traces. In this sense, we concur with Harald Stadler's (1990: 46) argument that 'What is particular about a given film ... is not *that it records a reality or creates a fiction* – an either/or decision – but *how it fuses* a necessary degree of recognizable reality with a desirable quantity of illuminating illusion' (emphases in the original). As *Waltz with Bashir* testifies, the 'illuminating illusion' itself is an integral component of the way we experience the world and not just a fictional add-on.

Sivan's explanation of the organic and processual nature of memory is emphasized visually by the imposition of the experiment's fairground's ferris wheel and hot-air balloon on the landscape behind Folman as he listens to Sivan's words in the next scene (see Figure 1.1). In a visual synecdoche, the factual and the factual are already mixing; the mixing itself is not an indicator of delusion but a natural part of mnemonic retrieval. This movement between factual and factual memory is the quintessential marker of a process of remembering. In this sense, *Waltz with Bashir* is as much about memory itself as it is about the retrieval of specific memories.

As a meditation on memory, *Waltz with Bashir* straddles the boundaries between past and present, dreams and reality, recollection and hallucination. In some scenes the factual and the factual co-exist and intermingle, giving visual representation to the way they are entangled in the mnemonic



Figure 1.1 Present-day Folman in conversation with Ori Sivan (note the ferris wheel and hot-air balloon in the background).

contexture. This is the case with the ferris wheel and hot-air balloon mentioned earlier, the airliners in Beirut's international airport (which we discuss in more detail later), and the seamless inclusion of two dubbed interviews along with six that use the interviewees' own voice. In other scenes, the movement between the factual and the factical is foregrounded and expressed through a series of seamless or dissonant transitions. In both cases the relation between the factual and the factical is marked aesthetically by the creative use of different styles of animation, different colour schemes, sound and music. These, at times, provide the only clues to the ontological nature of the events depicted: factual or factical?

The most obvious marker of temporality and factuality is Folman's use of colour, where different colour schemes and filters indicate different temporal locations (images from the Second World War in blue, images from the 1973 Yom Kippur War in washed-out brown, etc.) Folman's conversations with friends, along with different segments of the talking heads interviews, obey a conventional documentary format and use realistic colour schemes. They are sketched in a more realistic and straightforward way, placing the camera in standard (mostly frontal) positions, and remain relatively faithful to the original setting. On the other hand, scenes whose content is more factical than factual are characterized by an overly aestheticized, spectacle-like quality, sketched with extremely contrasted colours, spatial disproportions, slow movement and three-dimensional inserts. In this respect, as mentioned earlier, the dogs scene that opens the film sets the standard with its stark orange-grey chromatic filter. Carmi's recollection of the sea voyage to the war zone follows suit with a dreamy blue filter. In the film's recurring, motivator scene in which a young Folman and two other soldiers float at night in the flare-lit sea opposite Beirut, open their eyes, rise up naked from the water and walk toward the shore in a zombie-like manner, the colour scheme provides the only indicator of the transition from the factical to the factual. While the viewer may not be aware of this transition (despite the colour change) the first time the scene appears (the 8th minute), by the time the sequence reappears in full (60th minute) colour provides the clue to solving the conundrum that drives Folman's 'search of time lost': as the group of soldiers rise from the waters and navigate their way from the beach through the narrow streets of Beirut, the film shifts from the orange-grey scheme that indicates facticity to a monochromatic grey that indicates factuality (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

In other instances, it is sound and not colour that provides cues to distinguish the factual from the factical. The film's original score, composed by Max Richter and featuring classical music, 1980s pop music and political Israeli rock 'n' roll, injects an ironic twist to the otherwise startling juxtapositions of bloodcurdling war scenes with the playful, surreal and perhaps naïve perspective that Folman, as an 18-year-old soldier, brings to the events. Take, for example, the pairing of the sequence in which soldiers are engaged in leisurely activities such as surfing under fire, camping on the beach or firing rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) at civilians with the song *Beirut* ('Yesterday I bombed Beirut'). The disjunction between the uplifting soundtrack and the horrifying images of senseless violence – reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's use of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) or Francis Ford Coppola's use of Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) – charges the sequence with irony, and thus attests to the absurdity of war – a perspective that was considerably denied to Folman at the time of the events. In this sense, the scene represents *a rendering of past memories through Folman's current perspective*, evidencing the way the mnemonic contexture serves as a site for the imbrication of past and present (cf. Connerton, 1989). Sound, however, also *sharpens* the movement between factual and factical memories, making the transitions more powerful. Take, for instance, Chopin's dream-like waltz that accompanies Frenkel's dance with a machine gun amidst a fierce gunfight in downtown Beirut. The music amplifies the surreal tone of the scene, boosting the tension between Frenkel's commentary and the images – between the factual and the factical.



Figure 2.1 Folman and fellow soldiers rising from the water (note the orange-grey colour scheme).



Figure 2.2 Folman and fellow soldiers walking down Beirut's narrow streets (note the monochromatic grey colour scheme).

The film's sound design, by Aviv Aldema, creates the opposite effect during interview sequences. Whenever images shift to depicting memories, which, as noted earlier, can be factual or factical, the sound maintains a trace of indexicality. In this regard, while images may expound the blurring of fact and fiction, sound often furnishes animated documentaries with indexicality, lending a sense of legitimacy, corporeality and three-dimensionality to the documented subject. As Ward (2005: 98) notes: 'There is "realism" or indexicality to the sound that does not reside in the image, and it is this more than anything else that helps to make animated documentaries of considerable critical importance'. When sound emanates from an unseen place as an imprint of the real, it anchors the non-fiction facet of the representation and provides it with what Michael Renov terms 'acoustic indexicality'.³ This is also evident in the film's use of real-life interviews. Folman invited more than 100 veterans of the first Lebanon War to speak about their experiences, and decided to record the interviews in a studio (rather than on location) in order to minimize the input of extraneous sounds. An audience watching animation, he claimed, will not be tolerant to the messy noise of street scenes or location sound.⁴ While the interviews were recorded faithfully in clean high-fidelity sound, their filmed footage was used only as a visual reference to inspire the animation (which was not rotoscoped, but made entirely from scratch). Although only six of the eight interviews in the film use the real voices of the interviewees, their structure invites the viewer to regard them as indisputable audial evidence, mainly because interviews seem to provide their own validation (Nichols, 1998: 25). The interaction between factual interview sound and factical animation creates a '*multiplication* of what was originally *there*' (Ward, 2006: 125–126, emphases in the original), expressing the interplay of presence and absence – the traffic between several layers of representation: original events, taped interviews, and their animated rendition. The use of sound, in this context, gives sequences that feature both factual and factical elements a sense of unity.

Sound, however, is also used to create mnemonic puzzles and ambiguities, undermining the seemingly evident differentiation of fact from fiction. In the scene in which Folman arrives at Beirut's International Airport just after the Lebanese President-Elect Bashir Gemayel had been assassinated, Folman's voice-over simultaneously discloses *and* conceals the way his memory of the situation is saturated with factical elements. At first, we see him disembarking the military helicopter amidst parked civilian airplanes and bustling military activity (see Figure 3.1). In voice-over he describes how the overwhelming excitement in seeing civilian airplanes amidst the war zone triggered an hallucinatory fantasy: walking through the empty terminal he admires the luxurious duty-free stores, taking in their cosmopolitan air. Then, the voice-over tells us, he suddenly realizes that all the shops were abandoned and looted, and that even the noticeboard for arrivals and departures was completely frozen. As the hallucination is blasted open to reveal the reality whose existence it denied, Folman is pulled out of his daydream and thrown back again into the harsh reality of war. As we see one tail section of a civilian airliner loosely attached to a completely bombarded fuselage, the slippage between the factual and the factical becomes apparent (see Figure 3.2). The parked civilian airplanes that populated the establishing shot were never really there – at least not in the state Folman's voice-over and corresponding animation described them. The sequence's voice-over may have disclosed the shift from the factual to the factical, but it also concealed the true depth of their entanglement. Only when we see the airplane's tail along with its shattered body are we able to retroactively invest the establishing shot with its proper ontological value.⁵



Figure 3.1 Folman disembarking the military helicopter in Beirut's international airport (note the intact civilian airliners at the back).



Figure 3.2 Tail section of bombed civilian airliner in Beirut's international airport.



Figure 3.3 BombarDED airliner in Beirut's international airport, 1982. Photo by Phan Robert Feary (Wikipedia Commons).

'My own movie' or, cinesthetic subjects

The series of juxtapositions, transitions and dissonances just described do more than facilitate the textual movement between the factual and the fictional, the two dimensions whose mutual articulation is crucial to the film's depiction of the mnemonic contexture. Dissonant juxtapositions (whether by montage or by the co-presence of residual elements) trigger visceral, embodied responses in the viewer. This has become evident from viewer accounts of their spectatorial experience. In an article published in the Israeli daily *Haaretz* six months after the release of the film in the country, war veterans from the first Lebanon War attested to the degree to which watching *Waltz with Bashir* had created experiential resonances with their own memories of the war. Here are just two examples among many. Nir Melamed, who was only 19 years old during the war, confessed to experiencing strong flashbacks from the war while watching the movie 25 years later:

As far as I'm concerned, I didn't watch an animation film, but a completely realistic movie, *my own movie*. It was done from my own point of view, made exactly according to the way I have seen the war. I saw the same roads, the same beach, the same orchards which I crossed in Lebanon. The film connected me in a very tangible and powerful way to my memory. (Ben-Simchon, 2009, emphasis added)

Nathan Baruch, who was a military reservist during the war, describes a similar physical reaction:

My experience of watching the film was not normal. My body was shaking, but I couldn't stop. I felt a sense of belonging to the characters in the film, as if 26 years have not passed, as if the war just happened yesterday ... I felt that I was participating in the film ... and then, I suddenly felt I was choking, my heart was beating faster, I was out of air. Suddenly I remembered a dog I saw in the war

with a human hand in his mouth, I recalled the smells from Lebanon; the film brought me back to what I was doing there. I was carried away. (Ben-Simchon, 2009)

Upon reading these accounts by veterans, several questions emerge: is it the *content* of the common memories represented in the film that is responsible for the strong somatic responses these viewers report, or, rather, is it the particular *form* of the mnemonic representations that elicits and amplifies the affective intensities with which viewers encounter *Waltz with Bashir*? Would *any* cinematic depiction of an RPG shot at soldiers, or a bullet hitting a tank commander elicit the same visceral responses from viewers?⁶

Similar questions motivate phenomenological accounts of cinema. These reject *linguistic hermeneutics* that theorize cinematic signification by adhering to codes and textual systems for *material hermeneutics* that explain how meaning is *experienced* as a series of somatic effects produced by the cinematic medium. It follows that phenomenological accounts of cinema focus on the way the visceral immediacy of sensorial effects produces a form of experienced meaning that can be understood as the proper domain for the film's 'truth'. As Dudley Andrew (1976: 249) writes: 'film is a hyper-natural object where truth exists only in the experiencing of it.'

From a phenomenological perspective, filmic texts are inseparable from the way they are experienced by an active, embodied spectator 'who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification' (Crary, 1990: 5). Of course, every viewer is located in a particular social and cultural environment, and every filmic text is viewed in a particular setting, both of which influence singular viewing experiences. Nonetheless, the strength of phenomenological approaches lies precisely in their capacity to extract the more universal traits of a viewing *experience* from the contingent features of singular viewing *experiences*. As Walter Benjamin (1968b[1935]: 222) writes:

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.

While the relation between the senses (the human sensorium) is prone to continuous cultural and technical re-calibration (cf. McLuhan, 1962), vision itself can never be completely severed from an embodied viewer. Just like the blind person's cane becomes part of his or her embodied sensorium, compensating for the lack of vision with an acute sense of touch (as Merleau-Ponty, 1962[1945]: 143, famously shows), so does the screen become part of the spectator's extended body. Thus, Vivian Sobchack (2004) understands the embodied cinematic spectator as a 'cinesthetic subject', characterized by its ability to pre-consciously translate seeing to touching and vice versa. Describing her own sensual experience watching the scene where Baines reaches out and touches Ada's flesh through a hole in her black woolen stocking in *The Piano* (Campion, 1993), Sobchack argues that cinesthetic subjects are able 'to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience as onscreen or offscreen' (p. 71). Her diagnosis thus unfolds a complex dynamic by which the viewer, responding to events on the screen, is able 'both to sense *and* to be sensible, to be *both* the subject *and* the object of tactile desire' (p. 66, emphasizes in the original). This duality not only frames cinematic spectatorship in explicitly embodied terms, focusing the theoretic gaze on cinematic materiality and texture, but also calls attention to the ways such metaphysical categories as 'subject' and 'object', 'inner' and 'outer', 'I' and 'the world', lose their definitional purity in the act of cinematic experience.

The way cinesthetic subjects experience filmic texts is not exclusive to live-action cinema. Writing about animated cartoons, Joanna Bouldin (2000) argues that, despite the lack of

versimilitude between animated and ‘real’, ‘natural’ flesh and blood bodies, of which the cartoon viewer is well aware, there still exists an essential link between animated and real bodies – a certain resonance between the animated body with its impossible physicality and the viewer’s own body. In this sense, cartoon viewers experience a kind of ‘supplemental materiality’ that allows them to experience their bodies in augmented, hyper-real ways. In fact, she argues, it is precisely because of this lack of immediate indexicality of the animated image, in virtue of its physical law-defying materiality, that animated bodies offer viewers ‘amusing, exhilarating and potentially radical embodied experiences’ (p. 57). Insofar as the animated film can be understood as a ‘lazy machine’ that requires viewers ‘to do some of its work’ (Eco, 1994: 3), the extended degree of cognitive filling-in demanded by the animated film includes a visceral, preconscious process of comparison between the viewer’s body and the animated one. Cartoon viewers thus experience the animated body vicariously, as a form of excess that may potentiate transgressive material meaning-making.

The accounts given by Sobchack and Bouldin exemplify Merleau-Ponty’s (1962[1945]: 25) articulation of the body as a ‘*system of possible actions*, a virtual body with its phenomenal “place” defined by its task and situation’ (emphasis added). Our embodied sensorium extends beyond its factual boundaries to interact with the world in modalities that reflect our factual embeddedness in the lifeworld. The cinesthetic subject, therefore, can be understood as a *continuous, dynamic process of sensorial simulation, translation, and assimilation that straddles the factual and the factual*. This is the case in the scene where Folman receives a detailed demonstration from Frenkel on how to use Patchouli scented oil, whose scent has remained incredibly vivid in Folman’s memory years after the war, and now functions as a sensorial stimuli for mnemonic recovery. The meticulous movements of Frenkel’s hands as he rubs the oil on his skin, along with the sound of him sniffing his body afterwards, address the viewers’ senses and entice them to simulate both smell and touch. This is also the case when we are invited to experience a bullet’s trajectory as it hits the neck of a tank commander amidst the pastoral Lebanese scenery. We may lack direct experiences of projectile movement yet this does not result in a disembodied response but in the opposite. As attested by another veteran: ‘at that moment I immediately felt as if the bullet hit me. I felt anxious and terrified’ (Ben-Simchon, 2009).⁷ The outcome of this diegetic spillover is an uncanny, intense, and explicitly embodied feeling of ‘being there’, despite the lack of realistic verisimilitude. As such, *Waltz with Bashir* asserts the value of visual *experience* over visual *representation* and thus challenges the mainstream subordination of the image’s capacity to produce sensuousness and affective resonances to its indexical fidelity. In this sense, and in Susan Sontag’s (1966: 11) words, the film exhibits a ‘directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret’.

‘An instrument of ballistics’ or, dialectical images

As cinesthetic subjects, as described earlier, we are moved somatically by diegetic events, manifesting the sensorial continuum that links filmic bodies to our own. In this sense, our spectatorial experience reveals a form of bodily mechanics that take place preconsciously, as ‘unthought’ phenomena. At the same time, this visceral immediacy does not take place in a vacuum; even our most primal embodied responses to the filmic text are mediated by socio-symbolic, linguistic and material structures, evidencing the entanglement of individual and collective experiences in the mnemonic contexture. Insofar as cinematic spectatorship weaves together individual and collective experience, it also affects our political consciousness. In this sense, *Waltz with Bashir*’s articulation of the processual dynamics of memory with affective resonance – a product of its form and aesthetic choices – can be understood as instances of what Walter Benjamin (1999[1927–1939]: 388) calls ‘dialectical images’, an opaque yet highly evocative component of his ‘technique of awakening’.⁸

Benjamin's technique of awakening is set against what he perceived to be the 'atrophy' of modern experience. By this, he meant that the surplus sensorial shock typifying modernity derails the natural process by which momentary, immediate experiences (*Erlebnisse*) sediment into more elongated, mnemically retrievable experience (*Erfahrung*).⁹ As present consciousness is severed from past memories, modern man is effectively 'cheated out of his experience' (Benjamin, 1968a[1939]: 180): locked into the always-new he is condemned to a fragmented life, living in a time that 'is outside history' (p. 184). This temporally fragmented existence enables capitalist hegemony to gloss over the harsh social realities it breeds with a phantasmagoric veneer of endless sensorial stimuli, mass-produced dreams and consumerist desires. Modern man's impaired capacity to cluster episodic experience into an elongated understanding of socio-historical contingency allows the capitalist substitution of an image of smooth continuous history (historicist progress) for a reality scarred by the frustration of utopian hopes, effectively keeping citizens in a perpetual state of political slumber.¹⁰ It is in this sense, then, that Folman can be seen to share Benjamin's quest for awakening – to find ways to penetrate the phantasmagoric enveloping of traumatic events, to gather episodic images into a consistent narrative and thus to enable a progressive transformation of consciousness. But while Benjamin targets a collectively shared trauma (and thus aims to innervate the entire body politic), Folman insists that his journey is a very personal one (Guillén, 2009).

For Benjamin, dialectical images – images in the sense of mental ideas and not optical representations – provide the means to interrupt the re-enchantment of the social world as a capitalist dreamworld (Buck-Morss, 1989: 253). Dialectical images are ideational, monadological snapshots – an interplay of subjective and objective elements whose combination of experiential intensities with a measure of material and historical 'truth' brings to light the contradictions underlying capitalist culture and history. In this mode, dialectical images 'carry over the principle of montage into history' by evoking 'flash-like' moments of understanding: stirring constellations in which utopian hopes are juxtaposed with their frustrated (un)realization to produce an 'awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been' (Benjamin, 1999[1927–1939]: 461, 458).

The capacity of dialectical images to produce a moment of deep historical understanding – their revolutionary significance – is premised in the way that they may manufacture 'a unique *experience* of the past' (Benjamin, 1968c[1940]: 262, emphasis added). They do so by functioning as temporal/kairological 'correspondences' on two accounts: first as momentary alignments of the utopian and realized elements that co-exist in the objects of capitalism in such a way as to immediately reveal (or 'actualize') their inner truth. In this mode, dialectical images bind together 'what could have been', 'what is', and 'what can be' – effectively illustrating the ideological folding of the factual and the factical. Second, dialectical images encode momentary alignments of experiential triggers and mnemonic residues that lie dormant and irretrievable, very much in the same way Proust understands involuntary memory (*mémoire involuntaire*). On both accounts, dialectical images evidence Benjamin's (1999[1927–1939]: 389) conviction that 'remembering and awakening are most intimately related', and where they also become emblematic of Folman's attempt to provide himself and his viewers with mnemonic-somatic triggers.¹¹ It is only in a particular moment, what Benjamin calls the dialectical image's 'now of recognizability' (p. 464), that the dialectical tensions latent in an image can be felt, and thus may charge its truth 'to the bursting point with time'. The moment is triggered somatically. The visceral trigger – the corporeal path into the mnemonic residue – the smell, texture, sound or image – instantly consummates a form of unified, holistic and embodied knowledge – what Weigel (1996) calls 'imagistic knowledge'.

Looking at *Waltz with Bashir* through the lens provided by Benjamin allows us to glimpse the mechanism by which the film articulates memory, embodied responses and political consciousness. As explained earlier, the movement between factual and factical memories, between surreal and brutal imagery and sound, creates affective, visceral responses with the viewer. These, in turn,



Figure 4.1 Folman staring at wailing women outside the refugee camps following the massacre.

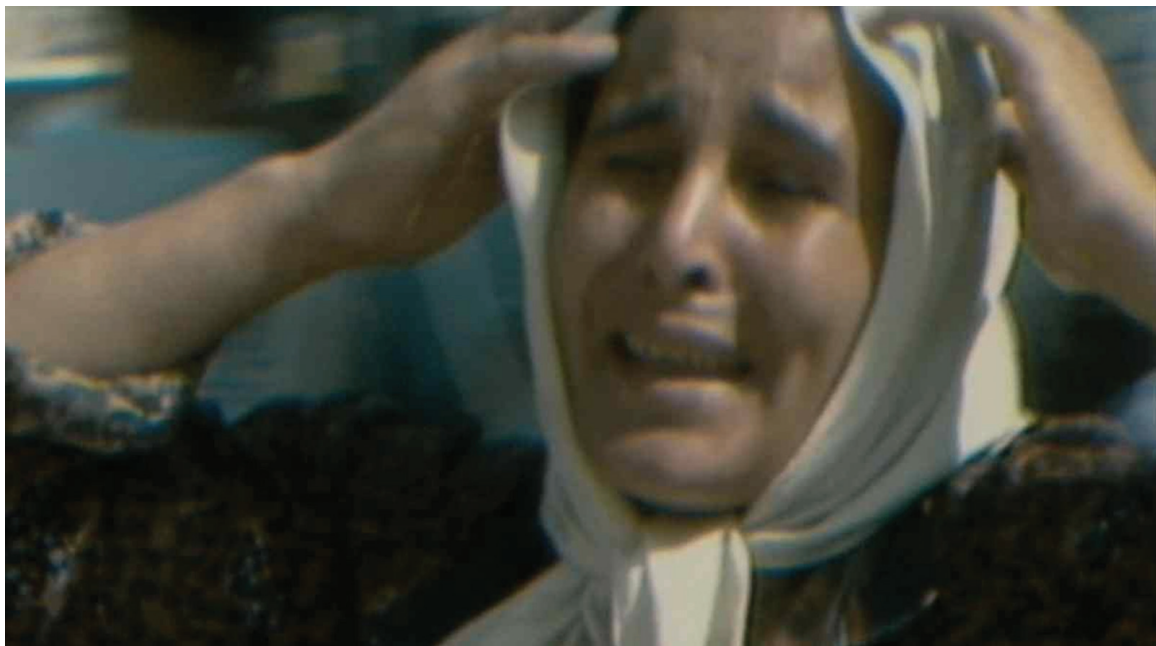


Figure 4.2 Real-life footage of Palestinian woman in the massacre's aftermath.

trigger mnemonic responses for those who, like Folman, have experienced the war but could not (or would not) remember it. But even for those who have never witnessed war first hand, they provide 'lightning flashes' of shock that challenge, destabilize and ultimately shatter distancing effects that may be associated with the film's animated form. The result resembles what Gaines (1999: 90) calls 'political mimesis', manifesting the ways in which individual bodies and the body politic

interpenetrate and extend each other in documentary film spectatorship. *Waltz with Bashir*'s animated form catalyzes and amplifies this effect.

Take, for example, the orchard scene in which the soldiers encounter 'RPG kids' who proceed to launch a rocket at the troops' armoured vehicle. The surreal atmosphere of the scene – the piano music and the soft light filtered by the trees – clashes with the concrete brutality of the acts of violence, perpetrated by both the RPG launchers and the soldiers that respond with fire and kill one of the kids. The combination of children and war, innocence and ruthlessness, surreal ambiance and bloody imagery produces an intense shock that evokes embodied-mnemonic resonance.¹² This is nowhere more evident than in the film's last sequence, 80 seconds of live-action footage that establish the film's final act of remembering. Folman and a fellow soldier stand at their post outside the Palestinian refugee camps following the massacre, where they face a tidal wave of wailing Palestinian women pouring out of the camps. After the camera zooms in on Folman's face and keeps him in a closeup for 10 seconds or so (Figure 4.1), we cut to a reverse shot made of real-live footage of the same women whose voice we heard superimposed on the animation (Figure 4.2).

Understood as a dialectical image, the shift to live action functions as *the ultimate act of awakening*, hitting the viewer with immediate force like 'an instrument of ballistics' (Benjamin, 1968b[1935]: 238). Despite the sound serving as a bridge between animation and live action – the film's only use of location sound with animated images – the transition is sharp and startling.

In a sense, the transition from animation to live action is facilitated (and to some extent mitigated) by the lengthy shot of Folman's face in close-up. Breathing heavily, eyes jittering, lips parting gently, his anxiety is palpable. Watching him absorb and reflect the sights and sounds of the women's anguish prepares the viewer (unknowingly) for the transition to live action: given the time to internalize Folman's anxiety, we end up feeling it too – even before the next (live-action) shot arrives. Nonetheless, we cannot help but feel shocked when the reverse shot reveals the Palestinian women in live-action footage. This is an unexpected dénouement, a final chord providing the spectator with an eye-opening, rude awakening. Any layer of shielding distanciation that may have persisted due to the animated form's beauty and melding of the factual and the factical is peeled off to disclose the naked, visible evidence. Folman's use of well recognizable footage (as is his use of the iconic image of the bombed airplane in Beirut's airport, see Figure 4.3) links his personal process of recollection to collective memories of the war. The film's commentary on memory is thus augmented by a commentary on war.¹³

'Not my war, but our war' or, conclusion

Interviewing Ari Folman for *Twitch* magazine, Michael Guillén (2009) makes the following observation:

Waltz with Bashir is a subjective statement by which you have created an understanding of yourself. Its intense subjectivity has thinned the membrane between the personal and the political and, thereby, has engendered a historical document about how a nation or a culture has created an understanding of itself.

As our analysis shows, *Waltz with Bashir*'s 'membrane thinning' is achieved by deploying a series of somatic triggers that serve as cues for mnemonic processes. As the film waltzes between dream and reality, recollection and hallucination, it weaves the viewers into its nightmarish mnemonic web, drawing their body into the viewing experience with an intensity uncharacteristic of documentary films. In a particular sense, the spectator's somatic response to the film mirrors Folman's own experiences: as Folman lets his senses guide him from amnesia to awakening so do we, the viewers, thus making Folman's mnemonic journey very much our own. *Waltz with Bashir*'s depiction of

reality, then, as an object for embodied cognition and deep identification is not at all devalued but rather expanded by its lack of commitment to mimetic realism. This is how the film forges a new relationship between the viewer and the filmic text based on trust and not indexical fidelity: *Waltz with Bashir* offers its viewers a rich, compelling and trustworthy depiction of the lifeworld as comprised of both factual and factical elements.

At the same time, individual responses to the film need to be considered in relation to societal processes of history- and identity-making. It is in this context, and as Benjamin (1968a[1939]: 159) knew, that collective and individual memories are intractably articulated in the mnemonic contexture: 'Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past.' Thus, despite Folman's insistence that the film is predominantly a personal account of subjectively mediated events, it inevitably retrieves entities, images and situations that modulate collective memory and identity. As we now briefly discuss, the dynamic by which *Waltz with Bashir*'s effects collectivize individual spectatorial experiences rests on the film's capacity to channel the somatic responses it evokes toward particular moral dispositions.

In *How Societies Remember* (1989: 72), Paul Connerton explains that embodied practices are crucial components in the formation, communication and maintenance of social memory by their relation to commemorative ceremonies and habituated performativity. To a certain extent, to remember collectively means to do things with our body, for 'In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body.' When we engage in embodied practices collectively, the shared experience is distributed, so to speak, across all the participating bodies. We may register the experience in particular, individually specific ways for, after all, our experience of our body is always singular, but the shared experience nonetheless sediments somatically *as a collective experience*. In this sense, shared embodied experiences serve as the medium in which a community congeals (Benjamin, 1968d[1936]). *Waltz with Bashir*, through this lens, can be understood as a form of *mnemonic ritual*; our embodied engagement with the filmic text constitutes an active participation in the war's collective perception. By viewing the film, we perform its recollection – inflected by our individual mental and somatic dispositions. This participation, however, is not unidirectional. Just as much as the spectator's experience of the film is mediated by socio-symbolic, linguistic and material structures (past memories, canonical images, etc.), the act of spectatorship affects and inflects those very same structures. This assumption lies behind Benjamin's belief that dialectical images can indeed innervate the body politic: individual responses to filmic texts may transform the social structures that mediate filmic-spectatorial experiences, thus potentiating radical change. This is how the sensorial/experiential link between filmic (on-screen) and spectatorial (flesh and blood) bodies discussed earlier may become the nexus for political engagement.

In the case of *Waltz with Bashir*, scenes that can be understood as instances of dialectical images (leisurely activities on the beach, the RPG in the orchard, the bombarded airplanes in Beirut's airport, the switch to live-action footage, etc.) aim to channel the somatic responses they produce into powerful moral statements about the brutality, absurdity and, ultimately, the futility of war. In this sense, the film's representation and rendering of the first Lebanon War as a mnemonic object does not rest on its provision of new factual (or forensic) evidence or, alternatively, on its making explicit Folman's personal responsibility for the events.¹⁵ Folman's, and our own, collective moral responsibility for the heinous acts in Sabra and Shatila is *not intellectualized* but *experienced*. As explained by a viewer who served in the war:

Despite the differences between my experience of the massacres and that of Folman, it was my war on the screen in *Waltz with Bashir*. But it was also his, and that of the people he portrayed. *Not my war, but our war*. And suddenly, almost miraculously, I am not alone. (Norman, 2008, emphasis added)

Deliberately avoiding didactic messaging, the film delivers its moral critique by its melding and molding of factual and factical memories into a powerful spectatorial experience. It is up to viewers, if indeed the film succeeds in providing them with a set of potent dialectical images, to make conscious the links between Folman's war memories and more current political events such as the second Lebanon War (2006) and the more recent conflicts in and around the Gaza strip (culminating in what the Israeli Defence Forces termed 'Cast Iron' operation in 2008).

In conclusion, *Waltz with Bashir's* aesthetic choices – its style of animation, use of colour schemes, innovative sound design, and juxtaposition of factual and factical elements – help make the first Lebanon War a collective experience that can be shared by *all* of the film's spectators – those who actually witnessed it and those who did not.¹⁶ By its investment of spectatorial experience into the rearticulation of a historical narrative, the film becomes a politically creative process. As such, *Waltz with Bashir* makes a meaningful and important contribution to the continuous shaping of the first Lebanon War's collective memory and the formation of Israeli identity.

Notes

1. For an excellent in-depth discussion of the different ways in which animation expands the documentary's epistemological realm, see Roe (2009).
2. One can argue that *Waltz with Bashir* moves in the same direction that other, non-animated documentaries are taking in terms of complicating and even undermining the traditional assumption that a documentary's epistemological value resides in its indexical mirroring of reality. See, for example, Paul Greengrass's use of re-enactment in *United 93* (2006), and the doc-fiction hybrid format used by Abbas Kiarostami in *Ten* (2002) and by Pedro Costa in *In Vanda's Room* (2000).
3. This situation may even overturn the traditional relationship between image and sound in documentary. While the all-knowing and omnipresent narrator of the Griersonian documentary has been often regarded as the interpretive component that guides the viewer and controls the image, it is now possible to think of an animated image as an accompanying add-on that interprets indexical sound.
4. In the Q&A session accompanying the DVD version of the film, Folman admits: 'I thought that the human ear is completely non tolerant towards location sounds in animation' (Folman, 2008b).
5. Keen-eyed viewers may be able to spot Folman's trickery even before the sequence spells it out for them. Interestingly enough, the image of the bombarded plane was drawn based on an iconic picture from the first Lebanon War (Figure 3.3).
6. As far as we can tell, neither one of the few Israeli films that depict the first Lebanon War, including *Ricochets* (Cohen, 1986), *Time for Cherries* (Bouzaglo, 1991), *Cup Final* (Riklis, 1992), and *Beaufort* (Cedar, 2007), have evoked such strong spectatorial responses. *Lebanon* (Maoz, 2009) is somewhat different in the way most of the film takes place within the confinements of an Israeli tank, evoking palpable claustrophobic responses from the audience. Wendy Ide, *The Times*' film critic, called *Lebanon* a 'truly extraordinary film with a visceral impact that leaves the audience staggering from the cinema, gasping for air' (Ide, 2009).
7. These somatic responses can be partly explained by the unique capacity of the animated form to isolate different audio/visual elements from the world represented in order to emphasize specific ingredients of the a-filmic and induce spectatorial reactions toward them.
8. Cf. Pensky's (2004: 178) note that the centrality of dialectical images to Benjamin's later work is matched by the obscurity of the notion itself.
9. Benjamin (1968a[1939]: 160–163] relies here on Freud's description of the consciousness as a defence shield against the potentially traumatic effects of sensorial stimuli.
10. Historicism, in this context, is the type of approach that, under the teleological view of historical progress, claims to recognize and represent the past 'the way it really was' (Benjamin, 1968c[1940]: 255). It is a non-reflexive revisionist reconstruction of the past from the present.
11. See, in particular, Folman's interview with *Twitch* (Guillén, 2009).

12. As veterans make clear in their testimonies, encountering the dreaded ‘RPG kids’ in the orchards of Lebanon was one of their most traumatic war experiences, revealing the sharp contrast between their survival instincts and their moral imperatives, and making the war’s moral justification much more ambiguous.

Most of all I remembered the orchard patrols, and the ‘RPG kids’. In the film, a child does fire an RPG – a rocket-propelled grenade – and is killed by the soldiers. In my war, the black, fist-sized object the child threw at our armoured vehicle was a plum rather than a hand grenade, and although I pulled the trigger on my machine gun aimed at his chest, I stopped a few ounces short of the pressure required to release the hammer and fire. Watching that scene did cause me to gasp in pain. The memory came back in vivid Technicolour. (Norman, 2008)

13. In his sharp criticism of the film, *Haaretz*’s Gideon Levy (2009) argues that the switch to live action is the film’s ‘first and only moment of real truth and pain’. Levy’s comment can be interpreted as sharing Folman’s own concerns about the difficulty in shedding animation’s distancing effects. In a conversation with David D’Arcy, for example, Folman says: ‘I didn’t want anyone anywhere to walk out of the theater saying that this was just a cool animated anti-war movie with beautiful drawings and great music’ (D’Arcy, 2009). However, as our argument thus far makes clear, we strongly disagree with Levy’s assertion that the film’s animated depiction of the war lacks ‘real truth’. In other words, Levy is overly (and politically) committed to a sense of documentary truth as exclusively relying on photographic indexicality.
14. As Folman tells Guillén (2009): ‘When you go on a very personal journey, in the end you hit all the political points that you didn’t think you would. It’s true.’
15. In Folman’s words: ‘I don’t think the film brings any news with regard to what happened at Sabra and Shatila’ (O’Hehir, 2008).
16. In his interview with *Twitch*, Folman discusses being repeatedly approached by women viewers who confess that the film provided them with an opportunity ‘to understand a lot of things about their husbands, about their sons, and about the little children who might be soldiers someday’ (Guillén, 2009).

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Ohad Landesman is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University, from which he holds a Masters degree. His dissertation project focuses on the aesthetics of digital technology in new documentary cinema, and deals with essay films, animated documentaries and doc-fiction hybrids.

Roy Bendor is a doctoral candidate at the School of Communication, and member of the Applied Communication & Technology Lab at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. Drawing on the philosophy of technology and critical media studies, his research focuses on the experiential dimensions of new media.