Unveiling the Disguise of Trauma in
Waltz with Bashir

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Ari Folman and David Polonsky’s animated documentary film, Waltz with Bashir, recounts the experience of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) men during the First Lebanon War. The focus of the film is the fragmented mind of an IDF veteran who cannot recall any tangible memories about his role in the war, especially the events surrounding the atrocities that took place at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp. The documentary unearths the traumatic memories that Folman and his fellow army comrades repressed for over 20 years. The response to psychological trauma takes the form of repeated and intrusive dreams, hallucinations, or thoughts and behaviours which stem from the event itself (Caruth 22-25). A defining feature of trauma lies in its delay: the situation cannot be comprehended by the victim at the time it occurred. The event is repressed and delayed until it returns to the consciousness at a later time. In Freudian terms, this is referred to as deferred action or Nachträglichkeit (Novick and Novick 43). Critics argue that Folman and Polonsky’s documentary is a film about the Israeli people’s quest for redemption from feelings of guilt concerning their complicity in the massacre. However, the core narrative revolves around the human mind and notions of its protective nature and fallibility in the face of psychological trauma. The film uses carefully intertwined narratives, dreams, and flashback sequences to focus on the repression and recovery of memories. It does this through an audio-visual medium that frames a story about the journey to the realization of the atrocities of war.

Memory repression functions to subdue what the consciousness cannot handle at the time of a traumatic event (Caruth 91-110). In Waltz with Bashir,
dreams are frequently addressed, and often revisited, to emphasize the tangled, maze-like nature the mind possesses when past memories resurface into consciousness. The opening sequence of the film presents a striking visual: savage yellow-eyed dogs hurtle through the streets at night under the backdrop of a yellow-toned sky. A menacing soundtrack accompanies their race through the streets as they knock over tables and chairs near a cafe and people retreat in fear. The pack suddenly halts in front of a building, barking up to a window, at which point a man emerges from the shadows holding a rifle. The voice of Boaz, Folman’s comrade, interjects that this is a recurring dream he has been having for the past two years. During his military service he was ordered to kill the dogs, and now they are resurfacing in his dreams after twenty years. He relays this information to Folman in the hope that he can provide comfort and therapeutic relief to his troubled conscience.

The trauma of the war is visually reenacted in the nightmare of the dogs, where only now, in a delayed response, it takes on legible meaning. Several elements of this opening scene attest to the fractured, dream-like quality of the film presented by the characters throughout the narrative. The scene points to the unsettledness of Boaz’s mind and it points to his need to unearth a memory that has been placed in an inaccessible corner of his consciousness. As is the tendency of traumatic memories, the massacre of the dogs inadvertently returns to his consciousness many years after its occurrence in the form of a recurring dream. The trauma of the war is visually reenacted in the nightmare of the dogs, where only now, in a delayed response, it takes on legible meaning. Boaz wanted to forget the tragic experience of the murder after it took place. After subduing it for so long the threatening experience returned to haunt him years later. This dream marks the departure of the film from its concern with the empirical details of war; instead, it places emphasis on the subjective, ambiguous dimension of an individual’s mind as it is affected by trauma (Yosef 315-320). Boaz’s dream sets the stage for the theme of uncovering mental repression, acting as a key moment in triggering the unsettledness of Folman’s mind. His repeated denial in recalling his war experiences is a manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder, and it signifies the presence of a psychological defense mechanism. Until this point, these
experiences were actively subdued from the realm of consciousness by *deferred action*.

Central to this portrayal of the repression and eventual recovery of memory is Folman’s flashback. It resurfaces and is reiterated several times throughout the narrative. The flashback is externalized as he stands on the beach at night, accompanied by melancholy music, which exposes the uneasiness and disturbance in his mind. The use of animation in this scene recreates the past, showing Folman reliving an experience in the present. The boundaries of time and space are crossed as present-day Folman sees flames emanating from the sky and his repressed memory resurfaces. A young Folman and two soldiers are seen emerging from the ocean watching the same flares light the night sky. An animated approach allows the structure of the film to focus on a psychological genre where memories and hallucinations can be reconstructed, replayed, and interwoven into the narrative. Seemingly unrelated events in the narrative, such as conversations with friends and interviews with experts, act as a catalyst for the resurfacing of this particular flashback and subsequent memories from the war. The legitimacy of the memories can be called into question by viewers because the film deviates from concrete facts and moves towards notions of the uncertain and abstract. It depicts a distancing between memory and objective history. Viewers are only ever shown a subjective memory, whose validity is further called into question when none of Folman’s comrades can confirm that it actually happened. As with Boaz, Folman chooses to give a description of his hallucination, which shows that memories and dreams can act as evidence in place of eyewitness testimonies of war experiences. Consequently, the focus of the film shifts from justifying the actions of Israelis in search of redemption to the psychological toll that war has on not only one group, but on all those involved.

This rejection of “remembering” parallels war veteran Carmi Can’an’s rejection of his war memories when he claims that they are “simply not stored in his system” (*Waltz with Bashir*). Like Folman, he cannot recall any concrete events that led up to the days of the massacre at Sabra and Shatila. Mental barriers have prevented access to the true memories of the incident. His dream aboard the Love Boat is clearly shown to be a working of his mind: a striking blue woman emerges from the ocean, picks up the slumbering Carmi, and submerges him in the water. With Carmi riding on top of her, she swims gracefully as the boat is
bombed with all his fellow soldiers on it. The same mental mechanisms that hinder Folman from remembering anything surrounding the massacre are at work in protecting Carmi’s psyche. This traumatic event elicits an out of body experience for Carmi, who admits that at his young age he was unable to fathom the situation mentally. As in the case of Boaz’s dream and Folman’s flashback, there is no direct association between the trauma and its representation in memory. Here, the fantastical nature of the subconscious plays an important role in shaping a representation of the traumatic moment (Walker 17-22). Symbolically, the blue woman who seemingly brings Carmi to safety acts as a mother figure, nurturing him as he watches his friends get bombed aboard the Love Boat. To amplify the eeriness of the situation a heart is heard beating in the background. Evidently, this is a fabrication of Carmi’s mind created in order to buffer the horror of the situation. A trauma specialist in the film recounts the experience of a soldier who claimed to have tolerated the horrors of the war by merely imagining that he was viewing everything from behind a camera. It was only when the imaginary camera broke down that the reality of the situation struck him. Like this soldier, Carmi’s mind is shown to have converted the unbearable atrocities into an artificial construct that he can bear and comprehend. By using animation, the workings of his filtering mechanism are symbolically represented through the woman who comes to save him. Eventually, however, the filter is not enough.

Freud’s theory of deferred action comes into play and a mental barrier is, finally, not enough to resist the reality leaking into the conscious mind. A comparison of the Nazi concentration camps to the massacre that occurred at Sabra and Shatila is likewise used to explain why the mind is preventing the unconscious from fully entering conscious awareness. Moreover, animation is used in these dreamscapes and hallucinations as a way of symbolically distancing viewers from the real. It functions like the imaginary camera that
initially protected the soldier from experiencing reality. Despite their initial denial, any mention of war events taps into a previously undisturbed unconsciousness, prompting the reactivation of “lost” memories which the characters previously rejected. In the animated film, these memories are highly surreal and artistic, making them safer to explore: a soldier is seen waltzing with his gun as bullets fly past him, an RPG is fired at a child in slow motion under the backdrop of classical music, and a comical scene depicts a speeding car that just cannot be blown up. The scenes are nothing more than the representations of a mind’s attempt to buffer the true horrors of war. But as the characters examine these memories the aesthetic and symbolic status of the visions evaporates. Reality sets in; the mind’s defense mechanisms break down, which is reflected through the loss of attractiveness in the audio and animation.

_Waltz with Bashir_ creates a surreal atmosphere in which several narratives are interwoven around Folman’s search to recover his lost memories of the war. In effect, the film is detached from actual historical images until the very end, where footage of the massacre is shown to symbolize the recovery of memories that the protagonists have buried for years. The end of the film marks a stark divorce from its highly aestheticized beginning. Folman’s imaginary lens breaks down, and reality is at the forefront of his consciousness. To the viewers, the gradual appearance of realism brings both Folman and the audience closer to unveiling the reality of his repressed memories, as well as those of his comrades. Despite appearing therapeutic on the surface, the highly stylized manner of the animation in which the film is delivered causes it to depart from being a film about the denial of responsibility and self-redemption. Instead, the careful entwining of narrative, dream and flashback sequences in an animated framework work together to demonstrate the fluid, abstract workings of the mind. This theme is particularly relevant in the present, where war and unsettlement continue to devastate the Middle East. It is important to consider the effects that these atrocities have on the human psyche as it attempts to comprehend reality.
WORKS CITED


