

An Ex-Soldier is Rooted in the Past – *Waltz with Bashir*

Haaretz Film Review, 27.8.08

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During one of the three nightmares in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990), a recently released prisoner of war makes his way home. He enters a dark, menacing tunnel reminiscent of a throat. A dog trained in anti-tank warfare races toward him, explosives strapped to his body. It bares its teeth in the gloom of the tunnel and barks, the sound like that of a machine gun. The soldier is frightened. A long shot shows him exiting the far side of the tunnel, a miniature against the enormous opening. But the terror of the "mad dog," as Kurosawa calls it in his screenplay, is replaced by the sound of marching. The officer's platoon of dead soldiers marches out of the tunnel. Facing the ghosts outraged by their fate, he confesses his guilt and then orders them to return to where they came from; they turn their deathly blue faces and march back into the darkness. The officer collapses next to the tunnel entrance, his back turned to the lights of his home, flickering in the distance. The echo of steps is replaced by the sounds of wind instruments playing *The Requiem*, which in turn are replaced by the dog. Illuminated in red, it again bares its wolf-like teeth at the commander and barks.

In *Dreams*, the Japanese commander confronts his guilt from having survived the battle, his responsibility for the defeat, and the enormity of acknowledging them. The incident remains imprinted on the mind, and must be returned to and continually banished; its sounds never ceasing. Despite his acknowledgement of guilt and responsibility, the nightmare continues. Twenty-six years after the trauma of involvement in the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, Ari Folman's autobiographical film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) primarily charts the director's quest to recover memories he lost after the war. The dogs running through Tel Aviv during the opening scene, barking, eyes gleaming, wait under the apartment of Boaz, a former soldier, until he comes to the window. We experience with him the rush of the never-ending nightmare, the sound of the barking of the dead: dogs shot before battle to prevent them revealing the movements of Israeli troops entering a Lebanese village. The yellow-gray colors, the neon-likeness of traumatic memory, the menacing voices, and the stormy night flood Ari (and maybe even the Israeli viewer) with the repressed memory of the Lebanon War.

Folman uses documentary animation – based on documentary video photography – in order to create distancing that will allow the Israeli audience exposure to post-traumatic stress disorder, and to reconsider the events surrounding the massacre at Sabra and Shatila. He goes on a search for lost time, the last three days of the war. The question is, will the film present the riddle of amnesia as one which demands only a practical solution to pacify the distress of the protagonist (and ours as Israelis) regarding the missing days, or will it present an identity-construction solution?

The film fails to offer a new sort of contract with the audience. *Waltz with Bashir's* animation does not succumb to its conventional ability to stretch the boundaries of reality or the laws of physics and physiology. The melting of cinematic language and visual art language is exploited as a graphic parallel to past events. The visual richness and the dramatic graphics allow accessibility to the trauma of the massacre, while they bring the audience closer to other traumatic events experienced by soldiers during the Lebanon War: being left behind during battle, evacuation of the wounded and dead, the death of friends, loss of a commander, sniper ambushes, war against children, and the murder of civilians. If this were a traditional documentary film dealing with loss of memory resulting from Sabra and Shatila or other traumatic incidents in Lebanon, it is likely that its distribution would have been limited to a one-time television screening. Thus, *Waltz with Bashir* makes a decisive contribution to the Israeli collective memory and to acknowledgement of the enormity of post-traumatic stress disorder. It must be emphasized, however, that while documenting how post-traumatic memory fluctuates between the real and the pseudo would seem to create new insights resulting from the innovative docu-animation, this does not happen in the film.

The film is limited to resolving the enigma of post-traumatic memory and the reasons for Folman's forgetfulness and fails to offer a bridge between his personal experience and implications for the public at large. *Waltz with Bashir* fails to turn the events surrounding Sabra and Shatila into a transformational event in the Israeli mind. If the witness is distraught and burdened as a result of the massacre and his implicit guilt, it is not suffice to switch to archival footage, horrific as it may be. The ethical position of being witness to atrocities can not be limited to showing archival footage;

especially since the footage is the protagonist's (and our) redemption from the nightmarish quest. The archival footage of the massacre, which ends the film, does not extend beyond the cathartic solution. What is the difference between a witness and a witness-participant? Between a willing witness and reluctant one? Between a victim, and a perpetrator and/or an indirect complicit perpetrator? These questions hover over the film and disappear.

Making the search for a solution the climax of the quest and the aim of the narrative misses the point, since both the protagonist and the film are rooted in the past. The illusion of a new language (documentary animation) invites us to waltz with Bashir as the bullets whistle by, but does not bring us any closer, as Agnon wrote about the mad dog in *Only Yesterday*, to recognizing that the face of the current generation resembles the face of the dog.