War is often portrayed as a battle of good versus evil, an ordeal we must undertake to command nobility, honor, and power. Ari Folman’s animated memoir Waltz with Bashir depicts none of these bombastic ideals—it instead mourns the loss of a young Israeli man’s identity in the chaos of the horrors inflicted during the Lebanon War. It is a discussion of moral responsibility that painstakingly traces Folman’s mental and physical path through the conflict until his final moments of self-reconciliation, ultimately calling into question the principle of truth.

Folman creates this film to link the man he once was with the man he is now—a concept he cannot grasp since he has suppressed all of his memories from the 1982 conflict. It is, in essence, a quest to uncover what kind of responsibility he bears for the atrocities committed at the end of the war. In order to do this, he must explore not only personal, historical events, but also the memories, hallucinations, and dreams of the common soldier, all illustrated digitally. For this reason, Waltz with Bashir is labeled a documentary, but critics and audiences have kicked up a storm debating the possibility that an animated film can really be a documentary. If real events are not actually recorded as they occur, how can their animation be called reality?

To this question, Folman’s easy response is, “Well, what is real?” Are emotions and memories—even those tainted by human perception—just as real as the truth? Even further, what is true in the ambiguity of war? Folman had difficulty in securing funds for the film because no one understood how such a formula could make sense when it did not adhere to the typical constructions of what a war documentary was (Esther). His visual portrait creates a world of chaos where drawing a definitive line between good, evil, and historical fact is nigh impossible. There is no impeccable construction of war. To the filmmakers, the war existed in their memories and dreams decades after their numb march into Lebanon.

The animation of Waltz with Bashir affords a kind of surrealism that mirrors the madness and scars the war left behind. Buildings, people, and landscapes often seem larger than they are. Euphemisms cloud harsh reality: women, children, and men living in Beirut are not “people” but “suspected terrorists.” Contrast between the guerilla battlefield and the soldiers’ idyllic beachfront camp rings with alarming irony. In one particularly bucolic, peaceful scene in an apple orchard, the shadow of a person fires a rocket straight into a battalion of troops. Seconds later, the audience discovers that it was a child who pulled the trigger.

The music and cinematography are also key to creating the nightmarish atmosphere. The cinematography itself is characteristic of a live-action blockbuster; certain shots would be impossible to frame in a typical documentary: some shots are from miles above looking down on Lebanon, some are quick tracking transitions from a forest in Denmark to a battlefield in Lebanon, and still others are shot in the middle of a fire-fight from an all-encompassing angle. It is dramatic and larger-than-life. The music adds not only to the surrealism and visions in Folman’s mind, but also to the name of the film. Battle sequences are not arranged to...
deep, rousing cinematic overtures, but instead to ominous, drawn-out notes, or lilting piano music. This is the case when one of Folman’s comrades, pinned down by enemy fire, sprints into the street and fires at random in a mindless frenzy. The waltzing music that drowns out the kick from his gun is quick and melancholy—a final waltz following the assassination of Bashir.

Folman manipulates chronology to construct the twisting sequence of events he traces through his head and the minds of other soldiers. The film itself begins with a dream: twenty-six fanged, slobbering dogs are running through the dark, rainy streets of Tel Aviv, snapping at pedestrians’ ankles. The dream belongs to a friend who has called Folman to a bar to discuss his nightmares. Over the course of the conversation, Folman realizes the holes in his memory about his own stint in Lebanon, and so his project begins. Whereas the point of some filmmakers’ projects is abstract or hidden, Folman’s is distinct and purposeful.

Folman’s own hallucinations of the Lebanon War begin with three soldiers, including himself, wading from the ocean onto the beach. It is an eerie scene of skeletal buildings and crumbling debris, highlighted with a dingy orange glow. From there, he recalls bits and pieces of his first days at war, and the near-death experiences of his friends—either in reality, or in the realm of morbid fantasy. Folman eventually describes landing in Beirut and subsequently realizing that all he wanted was to be anywhere else.

Garrett Stewart, a professor of film, fiction, and textual theory at the University of Iowa, discusses Folman’s methods in an essay exploring “screen memory.” He writes, “As a psychic topography, [the film] amounts less to an autobiographical through-line than to the layering of a collective unconscious” (58). There are no stated facts, only the subconscious—or conscious—submersion of a generation’s memories. Folman remembers the sounds of bombs and sirens. He remembers a firefight in the streets, but then nothing more. The rest of his memory is blank. Again we see his hallucination, the dingy light, and the excruciatingly slow movements as if these young men are still wading under the water.

It is revealed that Folman himself did not take part in the massacre. So then why continue the film? After reconstructing the night in question over a series of interviews, he is finally able to place himself in the scene of events: on a rooftop, firing off flares so that the Phalangists (the murderers) could continue their massacres throughout the night. And suddenly, just at the moment of realization—when we are in the midst of watching the last part of Folman’s elusive hallucination morph into reality—the animation turns from monochrome orange and black to live-action footage. Women are screaming, tearing at their hair, and children lie dead among the rubble.

What is the reason for the abrupt switch? What did the animation accomplish, aside from lending a surreal, grotesque ambiance to the war? In the context of memories and dreams, live-action footage would not have the same impact. Folman would have had to rely heavily on
interviews and stories to recreate the horror and confusion; it was more effective to create a new world—a world in which these young men were confronted with something ambiguous, mind-numbing, and mortifying. The animation is an illustrative coping mechanism meant to filter the images into another light or perspective, so to speak. The designs are simple but bold, and the use of color signifies the gravity of the situation—all is normal inside Folman’s friends’ houses and offices, but in his memories, everything has a monotone or lurid hue to it.

Animation also allows the filmmaker to extend beyond the literal to the subjective, given that all memory submits to subjectivity. Between the colors and the cinematography, a certain degree of idiosyncrasy is achieved. In “The Animated Text: Definition,” Raz Greenburg, drawing on the work of Nelson Goodman, discusses the representational quality of animation, in which “the animator aspires to remove the object from the ‘representation as’ mode, to reach total abstract representation, the core concept behind the image” (5). Folman’s use of animation also serves to soften the blow of harsh reality. It is less disturbing to see mangled corpses lying in the street rendered through a sketch than it is to see bloody corpses displayed openly. Jane Gaines explores the relationship between the audience and the subject in her essay “Political Mimesis,” where she explains that very few documentaries do, in fact, “change the world,” but still manage to inspire (94).

The theory of political mimesis states that film is an “agitational spectacle,” a mirroring effect of some kind within the body—for instance, the reaction of laughter, or horror, or sympathy (Gaines 88). Simply put, it is inspirational pathos because it inspires the viewer to react in some way. Rhetoric maintains a relationship with the audience and manipulates their reactions by selectively choosing which person to interview, which events to cover, the language used, and the pacing of the narrative. While Waltz with Bashir oozes pathos, it deliberately dulls the relationship between audience and subject, making the audience dig deeper into the context to sort out meaning or intention. Robert Terrill describes similar acts of mimesis as “creative reenactments” not meant to instruct, but to create a point of view (136). When Folman shifts from “abstract representation” to reality, there is no more “creative reenactment,” only shock and, again, the flagrant, concrete reiteration of senseless destruction. These last two minutes of the film are the culmination of Folman’s search for truth and responsibility in an ethical warzone.

After throwing around the terms “abstract representation” and “reenactment,” can it still be said that Waltz with Bashir is intrinsically truthful? Can Waltz with Bashir still claim to be right if its truth stems from personal consequence? This is a question that extends beyond film. As philosopher Donald Davidson suggests, “how to relate truth to human desires, beliefs, intentions, and the use of language…Mimesis,” where she explains that very few documentaries do, in fact, “change the world,” but still manage to inspire (94).

Essentially, truth is as subjective as memory. Waltz with Bashir’s animation, of course, relies on a certain amount of reenactment for dreams and past events, and some would use this to discredit it as a documentary. However, consider James Marsh’s Project Nim, a film about a chimp
adopted and raised by a group of researchers in the 1970s. When archival footage wasn’t available, Marsh dressed an actor as a chimp and recreated scenes so well that the audience was unaware they were, in fact, sometimes watching a human in a monkey suit. Marsh’s film is undoubtedly considered a documentary. Drawing on the work on Bill Nichols, Sybil DelGaudio reminds us that all documentaries are, to some extent, fabrications (189).

Waltz with Bashir is by no means a complete fabrication, but neither is it an explicit documentary or Folman’s analysis of mental trauma. The film is not infused with any particular drama, aside from the surreal visions found behind the animation. War is prominent, but not in the typical fashion that emphasizes heroes and gore; it is a tedious thing that wears on the audience’s patience at times. It is a simple thing—almost mechanical, almost lifeless.

In an interview with film critic John Esther, Folman says, “I made a lot of effort to show war is really stupid. It’s a useless idea. It has none of the glamor or glory you sometimes see in American movies. Other than that, there is nothing there in terms of statements.” Because there was no “glamor or glory,” the film dragged for the audience in exactly the way it dragged for the common soldier. Folman’s concept of war as “stupid” is expressed in the scene where various soldiers, helicopters, rockets, and bombs are all aimed at destroying a single car meandering down a tiny road in Lebanon. Every shot misses, taking out buildings and passersby instead. Did this actually happen? We can never be sure. Does it express Folman’s idea of what war is—simply put, stupid? Exactly: it is Folman’s body of proof, so to speak.

A documentary in itself does not constitute absolute truth—but it can reveal individual truths to an audience. Ari Folman has taken a chance to prove this. We watch in awe as a young, silent Folman speaks through the hallucinations and events of history, offering an alternate face to war—the singularly faceless being that confronts every soldier on the battlefield. Through Ari Folman’s mimetic analysis of his memories, he worked to solidify the link to his past and his own truth in the wake of the 1982 Lebanon War, and to possibly inspire a new creation of truth in his audience.

Works Cited

https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol21/iss1/9