LOSS AND MOURNING CINEMA'S 'LANGUAGE' OF TRAUMA IN

WALTZ WITH BASHIR

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Abstract: This paper seeks to analyse Ari Folman's 2008 animated film *Waltz with Bashir* from the perspective of psychoanalysis. The aim with any form of story telling is to meaningfully convey a narrative to an intended audience. This paper seeks to address the ways in which the audio/visual characteristics of film allow it to present narrative in terms that are unavailable to the written word. In this case, the form and style specific to animation, provides further avenues for exploration with regard to the narration of trauma. The focus of this paper is the representation of traumatic memory, from the perspective of middle aged men, recalling their teenage experiences of war: in this case the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut. The organising framework of *Waltz with Bashir* is the exploration of memory. It reconstructs experiences of war from a distance of approximately twenty years, using multiple perspectives in order to regain a sense of history. As a result, there are many strategies the film employs to try to weave together the various different narratives into an impression of events coherent enough to engage the audience and lead to some clarification of memory, and yet disparate enough to retain the idea of history as shifting and personal. The analysis also questions the difference in perception between the distance created by an artistic representation of reality through the talents of animators, and the distance created through the lens of a camera.

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   Waltz with Bashir is a 2008 film directed by Ari Folman. A mixture of classic animation and animation with 3D support, it also contains a single episode of live documentary footage at the end of the film. The film tells the semi-autobiographical story of Folman's role as a former Israeli soldier, in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut. It charts Folman's quest to 'fill in' the gaps in his memory relating to events at the outbreak of war. The film is based on interviews given by various soldiers who were linked through their experiences of the massacres at the Sabra and Shantila refugee camps in Beirut. The main character in the film is Folman's avatar.

The film opens with a cityscape at night, yellow clouds and dark alleyways, suddenly a fierce Rottweiler comes hurtling around a corner and runs towards the audience. Tongue out, panting and drooling, a sound track resembling the rhythmic beats of a helicopter's propeller keeps pace with the dog's stride. The dog's yellow demon eyes reflect the clouds in an unearthly, vision of Hell. Another dog joins the hunt, and then another, and another, until a drum beat kicks in, signalling the sound of contemporary Western culture. The dogs tear past a mother desperately clutching a young child in her arms, they knock over tables and chairs outside a café causing fear and mayhem until eventually they come to a halt outside the window of a tall building. The viewpoint changes to that of the person looking down on these ferocious dogs. A voice-over announces: 'I see their mean faces. They've come to kill.'

The opening scene turns out to be a dream being relayed to the character of Ari, in the hope that he (in his role as filmmaker) might be able to provide some explanation and relief: 'Can't films be therapeutic?' Having provided little relief other than a sympathetic ear, the friend's angst somehow taps into Ari's previously untroubled unconscious.

The chronology of the film, allows it to externalise the various subjectivities of its characters. It achieves this in a number of key ways: Through sound – the noises of war mixed with youth culture, music designed to reflect the mood of various characters as well as providing a continuation motif, and the use of suggestive visual imagery that in some way relates to an internal experience. These devices allow for a fluid movement between subjectivities that jump back and forth from one consciousness to another. Whilst one character relays his narrative, something within it sparks the memory or bears some relation to another subjectivity which then takes over. The collective 'remembrances' are therefore represented in the film in a way which parallels the traumatised workings of a single, fractured consciousness where memories or flashbacks can be triggered by seemingly unrelated incidents that nevertheless share common features, be it a particular shade of colour, or a sudden noise. Folman is presenting us with a traumatised generation by paralleling the representation of multiple narratives, with the recognisable manifestation of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) in a single consciousness. In this way, Folman narrates the experiences in a way that highlights the universally human condition, thus blurring any judgments that could be made with regard to the opposition of trauma as experienced by the victim to that experienced by the perpetrator.

In the car on the journey home after listening to his friend's woes, Ari's silence conveys a troubled mind; melancholy stringed music accompanies him as he drives through intermittent flashes of light from the streetlamps, a visual motif suggesting he is struck by sudden and brief illuminations of memory. The stylised nature of this animation enables Folman to emphasise such techniques as they adhere to the drama inherent in such art and draw on traditions of the supernatural, which in turn opens the viewer to the possibility of strange happenings. A voice over begins: 'The meeting with Boaz took place in the Winter of 2006. That night for the first time in 20 years, I had a flashback of the war in Lebanon. Not just Lebanon, West Beirut. Not just West Beirut, but the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.' Ari is next seen standing, at dawn, by the open door of his car, as if consumed by a sudden internal impulse which is externalised on screen via flash-back. A bright yellow light, reminiscent of a flare in the distant sky, provides the visual link to cross time and space and return Ari to the war.
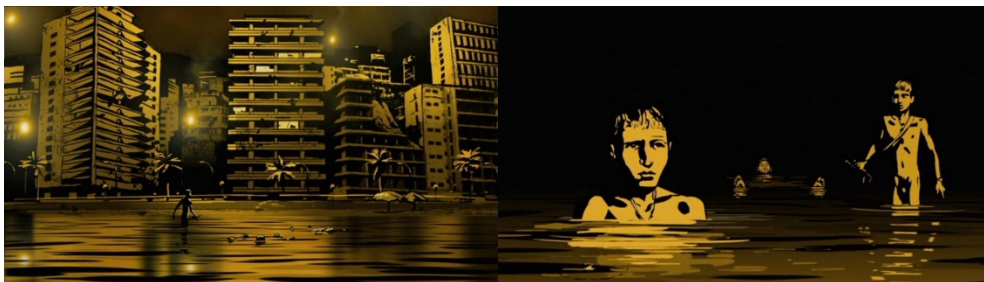

fig. 1.　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　fig. 2.

The vision he sees recurs throughout the film as he struggles to make sense of what happened: It is just before dawn, the colours reduced to yellow and black, flares fall over the buildings as Ari lies on his back in the water, wearily watching his feet bob up and down in front of him. Other men begin walking out of the water towards the shore, largely naked but for machine guns and dog tags (figs. 1 and 2). The same piece of orchestral music that accompanied Ari's first stirrings of memory, now plays again as the men walk to shore and begin to dress themselves. The sun begins to rise and the brilliant yellow becomes the startlingly realistic muted grey of early morning, momentarily confusing the viewer as to the 'reality' of what they are watching – a constant reminder of the uncertainty of memory, whilst also highlighting the historical basis for the narrative. The almost photographic quality of the animation then turns more stylised again as the soldiers, in slow motion, look about

deserted streets. They turn a corner and suddenly are confronted with a swarm of women screaming and crying desperately. There is no voice-over or sound other than the despair and grief of these women. These unworldly cries, devoid of the slightest background commotion, lend the scene a surreal, dream-like quality. By allowing the sound recordists to lift the sound of grief and place it within silence, Folman has externalised the ability of shock to control and focus one's senses. Whilst on the surface appearing to move further away from the representation of reality Folman, in fact, is able to present a far more 'real' account of subjectivity. Ari stands motionless as the people stream past him, we watch him stare at what it is the people are running from, but, like the conscious Ari, are denied that knowledge ourselves. This dream turns out to be the only 'memory' that Ari has of the massacre, and so his search begins to try and piece together the truth of what actually happened. The truth, however, is not as readily available as Ari would have wished. He tracks down former soldiers who he believes may be able to help him, but history is revealed as a series of subjective remembrances shoot off in disparate directions then honing in on brief episodes with immense clarity. The resulting 'illumination' that Ari was hoping for, turns out to be rather more akin to a shower of sparks bursting intermittently from an exploding firework, than a coherent chronological explanation of events.

This fracturing of time and space that makes up the narrative structure of the film, reflects the chaos of a fractured consciousness where memory is flawed, broken, partial and indecipherable. The past bursts in on the present, which in turn affects the interpretation of the past. This is symbolised in the aesthetic style of the film which is composed of multiple perspectives all linked by the act of narration as the interviewees relate their tales to Ari. There is no sense of chronology to events, a person's story will begin, falter, be interrupted by a different narrative, and then pick up the thread again some time later. David Martin-Jones sees this as indicative of times of historical transformation, for example, in the various New Wave cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s which can be read as a comment on the changing post-war conditions relative to each nation:

> A jumbled, fragmented, multiplied or reversed film narrative then, can be interpreted as an expression of the difficulty of narrating at a time of historical crisis or transformation. Such narratives formally demonstrate a nation's exploration of its own 'national narrative', its examination of the national past, present and/or future in

search of causes, and possible alternatives, to its current state of existence. (Martin-Jones 2006:1)[1]

The exploration of narrative is a central theme of *Waltz with Bashir*, the apparent lack of memory that Ari experiences does not result in the cessation of history or a loss of the past, rather, the action of addressing this absence results in renewal and regeneration - a re-writing of history. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian follow Walter Benjamin's assertion that the apprehension of loss can be a creative, even hopeful experience:

> According to Benjamin, to mourn the remains of the past hopefully is to establish an active and open relationship with history…. a continuing dialogue with loss and its remains – a flash of emergence, an instant of emergency, and most importantly a moment of production. (Eng and Kazanjian 2002:1)[2]

Eng and Kazanjian go on to link this interpretation of mourning with Freud's changing theorisation of mourning and melancholia. They note the distinction Freud holds initially, of mourning as the completion of history where 'the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead'.(Eng and Kazanjian 2002:3)[3] In contrast, melancholia is seen to be the failure of the individual to complete the mourning process, it is the refusal to withdraw from the lost loved object, but instead to identify with it allowing the 'shadow of the object' to fall upon the ego.(Freud 1917e[1915]:25)[4] In his later work *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud re-works his theory concluding that mourning and melancholia are very much connected, and that the work of mourning could not be completed without melancholia. In fact, he concluded that it was the very identification and withdrawal of the lost loved object into the ego that enabled the acceptance of the loss itself. As Judith Butler writes: 'The turn from object to ego is the movement that makes the distinction between them possible, that marks the division, the separation or loss, that forms the ego to begin with.' (Butler 2002:4)[5]

The nature of melancholia, as Eng and Kazanjian interpret it, allows for a continuous engagement with the past, with the loss and its remains. This creates the space for what Benjamin envisages, a rewriting of the past and a 'reimagining of the future. (Eng and Kazanjian 2002:4)'[6] This, I would suggest, is the outcome of the film – what is revealed is not a definitive, closed chapter of history, but a meshing together of diverging and converging viewpoints into an organic, fluid conception of its remains. The memories that

Ari's questioning raises, often emphasises the emotional and fantastical within the traumatic experience. In the story of Carmi Can'an, a schoolmate recognisable to Ari as one of the soldiers exiting from the sea in his dream, Carmi shares his memories of himself as an eighteen year old boy aboard the "love boat" and its incongruous presence amongst such destruction:

> 'Strange as it seems we were transported to war on a little "love boat", leased by the army or God knows what. They wanted to mislead the army and launch a surprise attack.'

> 'For eighteen you seemed pretty bright to me. I never took you for a fighter.'

> 'Frankly it was important to me for a fairly practical reason. I felt like everyone else was screwing like rabbits, and that I was the only…How can I put it? The only nerd, good at chess and maths, but with masculinity problems.'

His conversation is accompanied by images of drunkenness, music and dancing – a party in full swing. Carmi is seen being sick over the side of the boat before collapsing asleep on deck. He says: 'I puked like a pig! I wondered what the enemy would think…. I sleep when I'm scared. To this day I escape into sleep and hallucinate.' The film cuts to the sight of Carmi slumped on the deck of the boat, a watery, ghoulish-green light floods everything, the soundtrack of a heart beating amidst soft music adds to the feeling of hallucination (fig.3). Slowly the image focuses in on Carmi raising the levels of tension and anticipation; we hear a gentle splash like a mermaid's tail, then see a swimmer slowly, but surely engaged in the backstroke. The boat appears in a misty haze as seen from above accompanied by peaceful, lilting yet mournful music. A beautiful naked woman climbs out of the water and boards the boat, and the sound of a heart beat once again infiltrates the calm. The spectator observes from Carmi's viewpoint as she walks towards him, leans forward and scoops Carmi (now the size of a baby but with his adult face) up in her arms. She steps off the railings of boat and dives into the water still holding the infantilised Carmi. She swims off supporting him and as he turns he sees the love boat bombed by aircraft and his best friends go up in flames (fig. 4). He wakes up from this dream just before docking.

fig. 3 fig. 4

The dream emphasises the incongruity of Carmi's youth and inexperience set against this backdrop of war and destruction. He is eighteen, a virgin, has made himself feel even more foolish through his inability to tolerate alcohol, and is dreaming of his first sexual encounter. What his dream really suggests is the fear he is trying suppress. The female he dreams of is a surrogate mother-figure who can take him away from the fearful uncertainty and protect him with her love. His fear manifests itself in the vision of his friends dying – a representation that is 'manageable' to his unconscious as it is suggestive of the danger he is in, without forcing him to witness his own 'death'. The overall impression is of a boy on the cusp of manhood, finding the socially (and professionally) desirable role he has cast for himself as capable and manly, to be at odds with the boy inside who is struggling to face the tasks now required of him. This dream becomes, for Carmi, the abstraction of his memory of being an active participant in war. It becomes a representation of experiences and feelings too traumatic to acknowledge:

'I don't remember anything about the massacre.'

'But you were in Beirut when the massacre took place.'

'Yes, I can remember being there. I'll never forget us marching into Beirut. But the massacre…how did you put it? That's not stored in my system.'

It seems that the same brain function which has allowed Ari to 'forget' his experiences has affected Carmi in a similar way. This tiny fissure, however, within the tightly drawn curtain of Carmi's memory is enough to trigger a similar awakening within Ari's memory, of vivid

and unexpected clarity. He remembers being nineteen; like Carmi his youth is emphasised with the admission that he had not even begun shaving. It was the first day of the war and Ari was charged with collecting the dead and wounded and loading them into trucks. 'I had never seen an open wound or any kind of bleeding before. Now I was in command of a tank, full of the dead and wounded, looking for a bright light, salvation.' They drive over to the helicopters and see dead and wounded everywhere. 'We unloaded mechanically, as if we're not even present. Then we turn around and drive off.' This almost out of body experience recalls Cathy Caruth's discussion of the paradox regarding the possession of trauma knowledge:

> The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge…. Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a "narrative memory" that is integrated into a completed story of the past. (Caruth 1995:153)[7]

This, however, leaves some questions unanswered as ultimately, some form of narrative memory was recovered for Ari. The film's attempts to integrate fantasy life and the unconscious into the traumatic memories means that the processes implied in the film have more in common with ideas suggested by theorists such as Ann E. Kaplan or Janet Walker. In an article for *Signs* in 1997 entitled: 'The Traumatic Paradox: Documentary Films, historical Fiction and Cataclysmic Past Events', Walker claims that, particularly when traumatic events are repeated over and over such as in the case of sexual abuse or attacks during war time, the experience can produce fantasies, misperceptions and interpretations that are created by the event if not realistically representative of it. (Walker 1997:809)[8] Walker's words provide real insight into the choice of animation as the film's medium and its relation to the experience of trauma. It would seem, also, to be a fitting explanation of the multiple subjectivities displayed in the film; the fantasy or misperception element is clearly demonstrated by Ari as he remembers landing at Beirut's international airport: Cocooned in the ghostly quiet of the disused airport with its innate potential for escape, Ari's mind fantasises about the destinations he could travel to; commodities, colours and images for sale in the duty free whir around his head until the sight of a burned out plane on the runway jolts him back to reality. The film is pervaded with this sense of the unreal, the logical and the understood is turned on its head leaving these young men in a position of bewilderment and disbelief.

Perhaps the most vivid scene in the film, and the one from which the film takes its name, is a scene depicting the chaos in the streets as warfare takes place. A soldier named Frenkel hiding at a junction with his fellow soldiers is frustrated at their inability to cross the street due to shots being fired at them from all directions. He suddenly realises the frailty of his position and in a moment of furious madness runs out into the road, turning and firing in all directions as though dancing a strange waltz of death. Piano music floods into our senses, slowing the action and distancing both the spectator and remaining soldiers, whose viewpoint we share, from reality.

Whether an eternity or just a minute, there was Frenkel at the junction with bullets flying past him in every direction. Instead of crossing the junction, I saw him dancing as if in a trance. He cursed the shooters, like he wanted to stay there forever. As if he wanted to show off his waltz amid the gunfire, with the posters of Bashir above his head. And Bashir's followers preparing their big revenge just 200 yards away. The Sabra and Shatila massacre.

Judith Butler, again commenting on the work of Walter Benjamin, draws attention to his discussion of loss as a narrative of figural, spatial and simultaneous qualities. Where the 'collapse of sequence into simultaneity seems to imply both spatiality and figuration.'[9] The disruption to chronological, closed history by the traumatic rendering of memory does not result in a cessation of narrative movement. Rather, Butler notes, it takes on a choreography of movement. 'The loss of history is not the loss of movement, but a certain configuration (figural, spatial, simultaneous) that has its own dynamism, if not its own dance.' (Butler 2002:469)[10] The figure, therefore, of Frenkel waltzing in the bullet-strewn street could be seen as the condensation of time and space, even an entire army (figs. 5 and 6). It is emblematic of the dance of war, human achievement in the context of madness that is singular in its outlook, individual to the extent of failing to heed the warnings that a massacre was taking place.

fig. 5   fig. 6

Waltz with Bashir may appear to sympathise too readily with the plight of the young Israeli soldiers who found themselves at the ages of eighteen and nineteen, confronted with tasks and sights that the most mature adult would cower from. Distance from the 'crimes' of the war is created in the fact that none of those who gave testament were directly involved in the massacres. The film – and specifically Ari Folman himself – also questions the difference in perception between the distance created by an artistic representation of reality through the talents of animators, and the distance created through the lens of a camera:

> Another question, and it's a philosophic question, is a drawing, done by very talented artists like the guys who did this film, less real than a camera that is shooting now at us, and still now it is … the image is done by pixels, and by lines, is our image coming out of the camera more real than the drawing? Because the voice is the same, and who decides? (Folman 2008)[11]

The suggestion is that spectator's preconceptions will assume a level of distance which, in fact, is denied in the actuality of viewing. Folman implies that it was due to animation being the chosen method of representation that the interviewees agreed to give him their stories. That by somehow abstracting their appearances and their subjectivities, they believed they would escape from any true recognition of themselves and their experiences. His observations of their reactions on first viewing the film suggest how wrong they were to make the assumption that an animated representation of themselves would provide some level of anonymity or protection both from themselves (their consciences) and others. Indeed, the opposite could be claimed, that in fact the animation allowed them to, in a sense, 'draw deeper', revealing the unconscious in a most affecting way. This is in part due to the style of

voice-over, which far from coming across as 'actorly' (and therefore fictionalised), very much assumes the conventional style of documentary interview. Following in the footsteps of Freud's 'talking cure', it is as though the physical speaking, as well as a practical way of externalising thoughts and feelings, is inherently necessary to the process of 'working through' the traumas the interviewees had undergone, turning the film itself into a form of therapy. This recalls in a circuitous manner, the opening scene of the film, previously quoted, in which Ari's friend relates his recurring dream and questions: 'Can't films be therapeutic?'.

Waltz with Bashir ends with the stark truth of war – human suffering, and yet its message does contain hope. The work of mourning embodied by the film is not necessarily complete, yet it facilitates a creative and inclusive model of mourning that allows for the revision of history whilst foregrounding humanity - its weakness but also its potential for change and self-knowledge. I would suggest that despite its therapeutic implications, the film does not have as its undercurrent, a denial or disguising of responsibility – indeed the need for redemption from within oneself must imply some sense of personal responsibility. It seems to me more an accusation against all those who possessed any knowledge – however fractured – and failed to communicate their knowledge effectively, thereby passively allowing it to occur. This admission of guilt is reinforced by the shocking documentary footage of the aftermath of the massacre which concludes the film. Ari's crime, as he comes to recognise, was the unknowing facilitating of the massacre through the provision of flares to light the refugee camps. Despite references made to the holocaust and the issue of transgenerational guilt raised by Ari's actions, the main theme of the film, as I understand it, is the importance of narration. The attempt to communicate our stories however hard that might be, must be undertaken in order that we as human beings do not stand by passively whilst atrocities take place.

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About Author: Natasha Mansfield is completing a PhD at the University of Essex. The title of Natasha's thesis is 'Existence in Conflict: Contemporary Fiction(s) of the Middle East' and deals with questions of everyday survival amidst war and political upheaval with a focus on children and young adults. Natasha explores this theme with a view to contrasting the personal "trauma and the self" with the representative which depicts a "valid traumatic experience" designed for Western readers. Natasha deals with texts from a variety of countries within this region, and genres that range from animated film to the graphic novel, short story to novel and prison narrative.
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NOTES

[1] D. Martin-Jones (2006) *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.1.

[2] D. L. Eng, D. Kazanjian (2002) *Loss:The Politics of Mourning* Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, p. 1.

[3] ibid p. 3.

[4] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917e [1915]) in *On Freud's Mourning and Melancholia* p. 25.

[5]Judith Butler, *The psychic Life of Power* as quoted in D. L. Eng, D. Kazanjian, *Loss:The Politics of Mourning*, p.1.

[6] D. L. Eng, D. Kazanjian, *Loss:The Politics of Mourning* p. 4.

[7] Cathy Caruth, (1995) ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, p.153.

[8] Janet Walker, 'The Traumatic Paradox: Documentary Films, Historical Fiction and Cataclysmic Past Events' in *Signs 22*, no.4 (1997), p.809.

[9]Judith Butler, 'Afterword' in David Eng and David Kazanjian ed. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, p. 469.

[10] Butler, 'Afterword' p. 469.

[11] Taken from an interview with Ari Folman by Daniel Graham, and filmed as part of the 2008 DVD *Waltz with Bashir*.

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