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Studying Waltz with Bashir. By Giulia Miller. Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017. 111 pp., ISBN 9-781911-325154, US \$15.00.

Israeli cinema has experienced unprecedented success on the global stage in recent years, with many fiction and documentary films winning prizes at major festivals and receiving widespread international distribution. Of these films, arguably none have had a greater impact, not just on Israeli film history but on film history in general, than Ari Folman's 2008 "animated documentary" *Waltz with Bashir*: a film which recounts the filmmaker's attempt to recall his experiences as an Israeli Defense Forces soldier during the First Lebanon War, specifically the Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982). Testament to this noteworthy impact may be found in the recent publication of Giulia Miller's concise volume on the film, one in a series of comparable monographs published by Auteur and dedicated primarily to notable contemporary cinematic works (including *Chungking Express* [Wong Kar-wai, 1994], *Fight Club* [David Fincher, 1999], *The Matrix* [The Wachowskis, 1999], *Talk to Her* [Pedro Almodóvar, 2002], and *Pan's Labyrinth* [Guillermo del Toro, 2006]). To be included in such an illustrious list seems to go a long way in responding to one of Miller's guiding questions: "Is [*Waltz with Bashir*] as significant now as it was when it was first released?" (8). More than providing proof to such significance, however, the author appears particularly interested in breaking down its causes, as they relate to features she considers "unique to *Waltz*

with Bashir" (17): in particular, the film's reliance on documentary and animation techniques, its manipulations of story chronology and their effects, its relationship to the Holocaust and the Conflict, its intertextual references to non-Israeli War cinema, and its negotiation between "local" meaning and "universal" appeal.

Following a brief introduction (which includes a synopsis and some production context), the chapters mobilize the aforementioned features to provide a comprehensive account that "get[s] to the heart of *Waltz with Bashir*" (105). The first of these tackles arguably the most hotly discussed aspect of the film—its status as an "animated documentary." In this context, Miller notes the discrepancy between the fact that the film was not initially promoted as a documentary and the overwhelming desire of critics to define it as such, over and against its potential conceptualization as animated fiction. The appellation "documentary" is evoked, according to the writer, in response to Folman's use of interviews with real-life figures, orchestrated around "a well-meaning quest for *truth*" (26 [emphasis added]). In certain respects this term, at least in the mode of "interactive documentary," does not neatly fit *Waltz with Bashir*, whose interviews are hypercontrived (and occasionally substitute the voices of actual interviewees with those of actors), as is its quest for truth, which in lieu of "a confused Folman, . . . is really showing Folman pretending to be confused" (30). This leads Miller to foreground the role of animation in the text, especially its highlighting of subjectivity, its ahistorical "presentness," and its general fictiveness.

The discrepancy between the film's chronologies of story (fabula) and plot (syuzhet) form the center of the next chapter. Here Miller first points to Folman's choice to show interviewees in their current state before going into their flashbacks, arguing that the reason behind this strategy is "to emphasize the link between present day Israeli trauma and Israeli army experience during the First Lebanon War" (49). The erasure of the intervening period between the war and the present supports the overall disjointedness of the plot ordering, which in turn allows us to perceive the whole film as an expression of a traumatic mind-set. This understanding of the filmic structure as "traumatic," for Miller, raises questions as to its desired function and effect. Is *Waltz with Bashir* really meant to provide historical insight, even in the limited context of Israeli culpability to the massacre? Or is it set up as a form of therapy, allowing characters and audience members to come to terms with their war trauma(s)?

These questions pertain directly to *Waltz with Bashir*'s position on war and its relationship to the (anti)war film genre. In the fourth chapter, a range of

intertextual connections is established between Folman's film and key examples from the Israeli "Lebanon War cycle" and the American "Vietnam War cycle" (especially *Apocalypse Now* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1979]). With this juxtaposition, Miller locates in *Waltz with Bashir* several themes common to an antiwar film: "moral confusion; internal conflict; dissociation from any historical context; and the dynamic between the innocent recruit and the tough commander" (60). Going through these themes one by one, doubt is raised as to the radicalness of the film's antiwar message, particularly around how it places the blame for the massacre squarely on the shoulders of the Christian Lebanese phalangists, how it celebrates the ethos of military brotherhood, how it erases the historical context surrounding the reasons for Israel's entrance into the war, and how it replaces a focus on the victims with a depiction of wide-eyed recruits whose only true crime was being thrown into a situation over which they had no control. The writer concludes this section by comparing *Waltz with Bashir* to animated war films *Barefoot Gen* (Mori Masaki, 1983), *When the Wind Blows* (Jimmy T. Murakami, 1986), and *Grave of the Fireflies* (Isao Takahata, 1988). This comparison enables her to show how, in contrast to these previous films, Folman's film uses animation to penetrate the characters' troubled minds (rather than showing unimaginably horrific events) and produce surreal visions (rather than providing a realistic depiction of war occurrences).

The fifth chapter addresses the oblique Holocaust references found in *Waltz with Bashir*, and the measure by which they can be a key for the film's interpretation. These references offer viewers the possibility of reading Folman's amnesia as contingent on his traumatic alignment as the son of Holocaust survivors with the role of a Nazi-like victimizer. The implications of this role reversal (the so-called Judeo-Nazi analogy) are far-reaching in terms of evaluating Israeli (war) history, but as Miller explains, "both the Folman character, and therefore *Waltz with Bashir* are seemingly noncommittal" (82) in validating this line of inquiry. This avoidance raises concerns regarding the film's historical-political perspective, which at the same time prevents "a full engagement with the trauma and the significance of the Holocaust," and, "by aligning the Sabra and Shatila massacres with a distant European past, . . . inadvertently closes off any considerations about the present and future tense of the Palestinians" (90).

The final chapter details public reactions to *Waltz with Bashir* in Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Arab world, which can arguably be "categorized into four groups: admiration for Folman's 'bravery'; accusations

of hypocrisy; accusations of negative misrepresentation; and praise for the film's representation of war, and war trauma" (93). Although most of the discussion focuses on the writing of journalists and bloggers, the author concludes with a section devoted to scholarly responses, which she deems most effective in comprehending why Folman's film "has had, and still has, such a powerful effect on the viewer" (105). Miller is right to acknowledge the plethora of scholarly writing on *Waltz with Bashir* (including "numerous articles and essays" [103] as well as a couple of books) that has potentially made it the most-talked-about Israeli film in cinema studies.¹ Yet this acknowledgment inevitably forces us to question the necessity of Miller's contribution to this oversaturated conversation. Seen through this lens, we may find fault in *Studying Waltz with Bashir*, which does not offer a radical intervention as much as it covers familiar territory that previous scholarship has already treaded. Nevertheless, perhaps it is also too much to ask from a study guide to break new ground. Perhaps there is value in what Miller can accomplish in this constricted format: foregrounding relevant social, historical, and filmic contexts; tying together strands of discussion in a cogent and lucid manner, without getting caught up in jargon; providing different critical perspectives while forging a meaningful position in relation to them. To these accomplishments, we may add one other benefit this volume offers: its emphasis on the transnational dimensions of *Waltz with Bashir's* aesthetics and reception, which are often overlooked or underplayed in Israeli film studies.² Operating outside the strict confines of this field of investigation, the author exposes its overdetermination by the "national cinema paradigm" and confronts us with the query—what exactly is "Israeli" in "Israeli film"?

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Notes

1. Miller mentions, among others, Raz Yosef, "War Fantasies: Memory, Trauma, and Ethics in Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9.3 (2010): 311–326; Garret Stewart, "Screen Memory in *Waltz with Bashir*," *Film Quarterly* 63.3 (2010): 58–62; N. J. Mansfield, "Loss and Mourning: Cinema's Language of Trauma in *Waltz with Bashir*," *Wide Screen* (2010); Paul Atkinson and Simon Cooper, "Untimely Narrations: *Waltz with Bashir* and the Incorporation of Historical Difference," *Screening the Past* 34 (2012); Katrina Schlunke, "Animated Documentary

- and the Scene of Death: Experiencing *Waltz with Bashir*,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110.4 (2011): 949–62; Raya Morag, *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013); Selena Ann Dickey, *Animating Trauma: Waltz with Bashir and the Animated Documentary* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University Press, 2010). Other sources not mentioned by Miller include Vassilis Kroustallis, “Failure to Think, Failure to Move: Handicapped Reasoning in *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Jewish Film and New Media* 2.2 (2014): 132–152; Nicholas Hetrick, “Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* and the Limits of Abstract Tragedy,” *Image and Narrative* 11.2 (2010): 78–91; Ohad Landesman and Roy Bendor, “Animated Recollection and Spectatorial Experience in *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Animation* 6.3 (2011): 1–18; Gitit Holzman and Gilad Zukerman, “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?: Comparative Analysis of the Israeli films *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and *Halfon Hill Doesn’t Answer* (1976)” [Hebrew], *Slit* 7 (Fall 2013): 82–95; Anna Ball, “‘Looking the Beast in the Eye’: Screening Trauma in *Waltz with Bashir* and *Lebanon*,” in *The Ethics of Representation in Literature, Art, and Journalism: Transnational Responses to the Siege of Beirut*, ed. Caroline Rooney and Rita Sakr (New York: Routledge, 2013), 71–85; Philip Hollander, “Shifting Manhood: Masculinity and the Lebanon War in *Beaufort* and *Waltz with Bashir*,” in *Narratives of Dissent: War in Contemporary Israeli Arts and Culture*, ed. Rachel S. Harris and Ranen Omer-Sherman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 346–363; Shmulik Duvdevani, “‘As Long as You Draw and Don’t Shoot, It’s Fine’: Issues of Ethics and Responsibility in *Waltz with Bashir*” [Hebrew], *Mikan* 13 (October 2013): 50–67; Eleanor Kent, “Perpetration, Guilt and Cross-Genre Representation in Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Holocaust Studies* 17.2–3 (2011): 305–329.
2. See also Alison Patterson and Dan Chyutin, “Teaching Trauma in (and Out of) Translation: *Waltzing with Bashir* in English,” in *Media and Translation: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Dror Abend-David (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 221–241.