



Waltz with Bashir

Ari Forman. 2008

A pack of slavering, tautly muscular, yellow-eyed dogs run wild through an urban landscape, spreading fear and destruction in their wake. From where does this image come? Director Ari Folman's quest to recover memories of the Lebanon war of 1982, in which he participated as a young Israeli soldier, begins with this dream vision. The film uses animation to tell his story and those of the ex-comrades whom he tracks down and interviews. He remembers that his first task was to shoot all 22 dogs in a Palestinian village, so that they would not raise the alarm as Israeli troops approached. In conversation with a psychologist friend, Ari realises that he has blanked out most of this period of his life - but the memories are beginning to re-surface in his dreams. The quest to recover his memories and the making of the film can be a kind of therapy for himself.

For anyone interested in the concept of traumatic re-enactment (what Freud called 'the compulsion to repeat') and its potential re-negotiation in psychotherapy (more of this below), this is a fascinating film.

It is the use of animation that makes this film such a powerful testimony. The story is told using voiceovers, scenes of Folman talking with his ex-comrades, and flashbacks to their remembered war stories. Their memories and inner emotional states come to life before our eyes as cartoon images so that, as they speak, we are drawn into the landscape of their experience. We are there with one young soldier as he travels by boat to Lebanon - a young man of 18 travelling into a war zone. We are with him as he vomits with fear on the troop boat, as he enjoys high-spirited banter with his comrades, taking photos of themselves in their seemingly invulnerable tank. And then with him as his tank, incongruous on a beach, is hit by rocket-propelled grenades, his comrades suddenly killed before his eyes. Seemingly a lone survivor of the ambush, he hides behind a rock until darkness falls, then swims south under the stars until, at the point of total exhaustion, he swims up on to a beach and is, incredibly, re-united with his own brigade.

The animation has the counter-intuitive effect of making these experiences *more*

real - or perhaps of communicating how surreal they are, how war destroys every attempt to narrate and make sense. We are told how the young soldier keeps himself psychically intact - by maintaining himself in dissociation, in a kind of camera perspective: he frames what is happening in front of him as scenes, as if from a film.

Peter Levine, well known for his pioneering psychotherapy work with trauma, suggests that traumatic experiences, if unprocessed, will press into our lives as (occasionally uncanny or synchronistic) re-enactments:

'The drive to complete and heal trauma is as powerful and tenacious as the symptoms it creates. The urge to resolve trauma through re-enactment can be severe and compulsive. We are inextricably drawn into situations that replicate the original trauma in both obvious and unobvious ways. The prostitute or "stripper" with a history of childhood sexual abuse is a common example.... Re-enactments may be played out in intimate relationships, work situations, repetitive accidents or mishaps, and in other seemingly random events.... Much of the violence that plagues humanity is a direct or indirect result of unresolved trauma that is acted out in repeated unsuccessful attempts to re-establish a sense of empowerment.'

Levine, 1997: 173-1752 (1)

One of the most striking stories in Levine's book is that of a Vietnam veteran. At 6.30 am on July 5th in the late 1980s, this man was arrested for 'armed robbery'. Holding his finger in his pocket to simulate a gun, he attempted to rob a convenience store. At the police station it emerged that he had committed 6 other robberies over the past 15 years, all of them at 6.30 in the morning on July 5th. He was admitted to a veteran's hospital where he was seen by a psychiatrist, who specialised in post-traumatic stress disorder. They discovered that his platoon was ambushed in Vietnam, with all his comrades being killed, except him and his friend Jim:

'Darkness fell and helicopters were unable to evacuate them. They spent a terrifying night together huddled in a rice paddy surrounded by the Viet Cong. At about 3.30 in the morning, Jim was hit in the chest by a Viet Cong bullet; he died in his friend's arms at 6.30 on the morning of July 5th.'

After returning to the States, every July 5th (that he did not spend in jail), the man had re-enacted the anniversary of his friend's death. In the therapy session the vet experienced grief over the loss of his friend; he then made the connection between Jim's death and the compulsion he felt to commit the robberies. Once he became aware of his feelings and the role the original event had played in driving his compulsion, the man was able to stop re-enacting this tragic incident.

Ibid: 82

In *Waltz With Bashir* the use of animation foregrounds both the process of dissociation and the route back to remembering and re-negotiating trauma. We are drawn into something much more clearly personal, constructed, and therefore intimate, than the apparent 'reality' of cine photography. There is also an implicit reference to Art Spiegelman's graphic book *Maus* (1995) (2), which uses the cartoon or graphic novel format to describe the experience of a family of mice in Hitler's Germany, with the Nazis depicted as cats.



As the story of the massacre of 3,000 Palestinian civilians by Phalangist militias, ostensibly avenging the assassination of their revered President Bashir Gemayel – and the Israeli army's unconscious and passive complicity in this massacre – unfolds before us, the link between the Jewish experience of atrocity and trauma is made: as those Palestinian women and children streamed out of their refugee

camp, 'it looked just like those photos of the Warsaw Ghetto', says one of the Israelis interviewed by Folman.

At this point, the cartoon suddenly changes into cine film. But our usual dissociative distancing has been removed, so that we now encounter these images in a shockingly immediate way. Like soldiers, we are numb to the images on our TV screens because they register in much the same way as any other screen killings, whether 'real' or fictional. For these survivors of atrocity there will be, as yet, no comparable process of therapeutic remembering and coming to terms.

Of course there are more than individual and collective psychological factors at stake in the conflict between Israel and its neighbours – there are also deep-rooted and intractable religious, cultural, historical, political and economic obstacles in the way of finding a peaceful resolution to the problems. But this is an

immensely powerful and moving film, which brings home the psychological mechanism of war - in particular the cycle of trauma and revenge and its devastating human consequences. Yet the message of the film is not dispiriting. For me – a secular Jew- the film is hopeful: for here we have an Israeli Jew who is doing the work of conscious remembering, making the link between the Jewish experience as victims of atrocity, and the Israeli army's inaction in Sabra and Shatila, which did nothing to prevent a parallel atrocity against Palestinian civilians (3).

As I'm writing this review, Israeli jets are again bombing Gaza. The tragic cycle of trauma and retaliation continues. If there is a way forward, it might be through remembering our common fragile and mortal humanity. This humane and thoughtful film makes an important contribution to that remembering.

Steve Silverton



¹ Levine, P.A, (1997) *Waking The Tiger*, North Atlantic Books

² Spiegelman, A (1995) *Maus: v. 1 & 2: A Survivor's Tale - My Father Bleeds History/Here My Troubles Began*, Random House

³ The Kahan Commission of enquiry into the events, established by the Israeli Government, found the Israeli authorities indirectly responsible for the massacre, having ignored 'the danger of bloodshed and revenge when [they] approved the entry of the Phalangists into the camps as well as not taking appropriate measures to prevent bloodshed'. The full report can be read at:
<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign%20Relations/Israels%20Foreign%20Relations%20since%201947/1982-1984/104%20Report%20of%20the%20Commission%20of%20Inquiry%20into%20the%20>