



Waltz with Bashir – an animated feature film portraying director Ari Folman’s journey to retrieve his own repressed memories of the 1982 Lebanon War – received international acclaim, somewhat unpredictably considering the peripheral profile of both Israeli cinema and animated, realistic psycho-dramas.

The new graphic novel adaptation allows a more reflective assessment of why *Bashir* is a unique piece of art; where it emerged from within Israeli culture, and why it is likely to remain unique.

Perhaps the most important achievement of *Bashir* the graphic novel is that it deepens that very aspect of the film which made it both artistically important and emotionally moving. This is its unflinching willingness to deal with the complexity of the personal experience of a situation, no matter how controversial or politically inflammable it is from the perspective of Israeli history and collective memory. That situation is the massacre of Palestinian refugees – men, women and children – in the Lebanese camps of Sabra and Shatila at the hands of Christian Phalangists. IDF’s soldiers, Folman among them, were witness to it.

A quarter of a century later, *Bashir* the film revealed that the trauma of Lebanon is still resonant and the political debate still polarised (similar to American cinema and Vietnam). While international accolade and major awards (a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination) accumulated, the Israeli public remained torn. Many felt proud of the success of an Israeli film, specifically a film that, in light of increasing hostility towards Israel’s position and actions on one side of a conflict, reveals reflection, self-criticism and remorse.

Many others felt ashamed of its success, believing that the same introspection panders

Dealing with complexity

Ari Folman’s award winning 2008 animated film has now been published in book form and on DVD. AVI PITCHON considers the impact of *Waltz with Bashir* on Israel’s cultural scene.

to external pressures, or worse, serves as a weapon in antisemitic propaganda. Refusing clear-cut agendas, *Bashir* was attacked by dogmatists of both right and left – those rejecting complexity in favour of a black and white worldview.

The right accused Folman of treason. The left accused him of acquitting the soldiers who stood by and did nothing, portraying them, not the slaughtered

somewhat Gothic sensibilities. Twelve years later, Folman chooses animation as the medium in which to tackle the founding trauma of his age-group. He taps the aesthetic, cultural rhythm and attention span which expressed itself throughout the late ‘90s and early ‘00s, in increasingly potent and successful works in the medium of graphic novel, and in comics and animation. This is exemplified by seminal ‘90s author Etgar

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Palestinians, as the real victims of the situation. Both sides were wilfully or ignorantly blind to a simple truth: thrown without warning into the sheer insanity of war and the sudden disappearance of civil law, order and morality, most people react by collaborating, through fear, confusion, helplessness and paralysis. This collaboration claims its price: psychological trauma and subconscious compensation, from shellshock to amnesia.

Here again the book re-establishes Folman’s agenda-free, unpretentious focus on his own experience. Reading it in one’s own rhythm takes the film’s overwhelming effect down a notch or two, accentuating that uncannily blurry line between dream and reality, memory and fact, all set against the surreal nature of war itself. *Bashir* is nothing short of Israel’s *Apocalypse Now*, which Folman achieves thanks to a singular combination of his belonging to the age group that experienced Lebanon first-hand and a rare sensitivity to the perspectives and cultural state of mind of younger generations.

As shown in the home leave scene, Folman belonged to a group of young Israelis who reacted to the experience of war by escaping to a nightlife based mainly on punk, new wave and heavy metal music from the UK. That cultural milieu gave birth to a new generation no longer motivated by Zionism but by its own individuality – a sober, perhaps cynical, generation, seeing itself as part of the West rather than the Middle East.

Attentive to the voice of this generation, Folman’s debut feature film, *Saint Clara* (1996) is a graceful ode to its self-absorbed,

Keret’s collaboration with graphic artists on the adaptation of his stories. Folman managed to make a film about 1982 that is wholly 2009 in approach and feel. That’s why, alongside its integrity and complexity, it was so successful. The psychological inner journey leading to an understanding of the political (and not vice versa), carried on in the language of contemporary animation, is what made *Bashir* accessible to a wide audience.

Folman’s stance – one leg in his generation, the other in the next – is a rare position, in the arts and elsewhere. Younger artists in this field usually focus either on the inner self or on a wholly globalised outlook. Folman’s own next project is a sci-fi adaptation of Stanislaw Lem’s *The Futurological Congress*.

Speculating on how the newest generation, which served in Operation Cast Lead and voted for Avigdor Lieberman’s ultra-right platform, would express itself, brings grim visions. Public debate in Israel is currently hysterical, extremely intolerant to critical voices, even moderate ones. *Waltz with Bashir* might well be the last bold attempt to deal with complexity for some time to come in a country drawn towards the simplicities of fanaticism.

WALTZ WITH BASHIR

BOOK: ARI FOLMAN AND

DAVID POLONSKY

Atlantic Books, 2009, pb, 128 pp, £12.99

DVD: ARI FOLMAN, *Artificial Eye*, 2009,

87mins, £15.99