READING FILM

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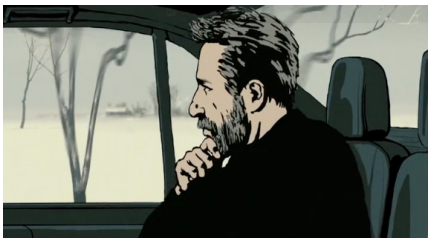
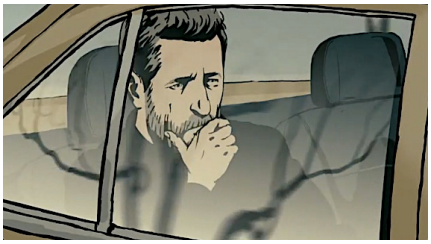
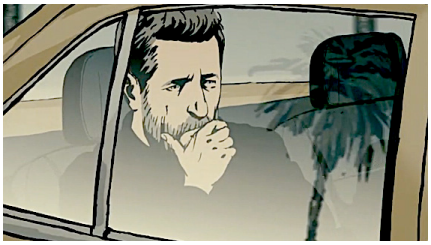
Visualizing the Invisible: How Animation Elevates *Waltz with Bashir*

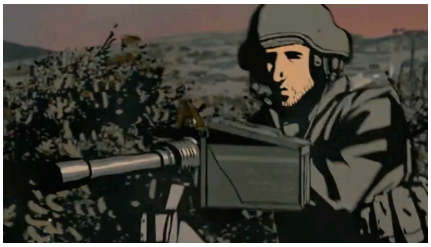
Maryn Davenport

It's difficult to explain just how excited I felt when, while watching the opening credits to Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2009), I saw the words "Director of Animation" on my screen, because even though I had just seen several seconds of an illustrated dog racing through the streets, my brain hadn't fully registered that I was watching an animated documentary. Underneath my enthusiasm, however, simmered a curiosity about the ethics of using drawn art to convey real-life experiences. Documentary claims to represent its subjects objectively and honestly, and audiences presume that a film in this genre will strive for authenticity in its portrayals. Animation, in contrast, is plagued by assumptions that it represents reality through a childish or fantastical lens, and drawings are seen as less "real" than footage of live-action events. But the fact is that imagery in any film is manipulated to create a desired effect in the viewer. A documentary might demand unconventional methods when its subject matter cannot be sufficiently represented through conventional filming. *Waltz with Bashir*'s storyline is driven by Folman's quest to recover a specific memory, but his true subject is memory itself, making this film one such instance.

In "Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary," Annabelle Honess Roe proposes that animation functions in three key ways: mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution, and evocation. *Waltz with Bashir* best exemplifies the evocation function, which, she writes, "allows us to imagine the world from someone's perspective" (227) and to visualize invisible aspects of life, such as ideas, emotions, and states of mind. Unlike live-action documentaries, animation is not restrained by equipment or by having to be at the right place at the right time. It grants a filmmaker like Folman far more control over how to tell his story through colors, lines, motion, and transitions while still mimicking the movement of a camera to approximate filmed footage. Folman's mental and physical journey to uncover his

suppressed past unfolds, like many documentaries, through a series of interviews with others who shared similar experiences. Since their experiences were also never captured on camera, presenting animated interpretations of their accounts allows Folman, as well as the audience, to interrogate how trauma might also be affecting them. In defense of the animated approach, then, *Waltz with Bashir* serves as an evocative documentary study of how memory works.

The sequence in which Folman details a memory of his first day in the war is a prime example. Instead of unfolding as a reenactment or mimetic substitution of his audible description, it begins with a medium shot of present-day Folman in a taxi driving him away from an interview with his friend Carmi. As he ruminates, the reflections on the car window's surface shift from the bare trees of wintertime Amsterdam into palm trees, while the sky turns from wintry blue to dusk orange. As he turns, surprised, to look out on the transformed landscape, a tank appears to the side of the taxi. We then cut to the tank in what is presumably the past, and finally to the figure shooting from its top, whom we realize is Folman as he says "Suddenly, all the memories came back." Rather than being posited as an authentic rendering of the scene, the visual transition animates how the missing memories creep up on him. This is followed by wide shots of him barreling down a road in a tank with orchards on one side and the sea on the other while he shoots in all directions. His narration recounts how he reached a post at nightfall and was told by an officer to collect and dispose of the dead and wounded. Animated high-angle shots of the bleeding bodies that surround Folman on the floor of the tank flow into long shots of him driving the tank to a collection point, where more high-angle shots show a line of bodies wrapped in shining metallic covers before more long shots show him driving away again. The sequence maintains almost uninterrupted visual distance from 19-year-old Folman, thus aligning the viewer instead with present-day Folman recollecting these painful events. Here, evocation is exemplified not by recreating an initial war experience that was never captured on camera, but by marking how it became a recovered memory.

Folman doesn't just animate his own experiences; he also evokes the experiences of other people, allowing us to imagine the world from their point of view. One example accompanies his interview with a trauma expert about dissociative events. She tells him about one of her patients, an amateur photographer, who viewed the war as if through a camera in order to protect his mind from its brutality, until he saw starving horses in the

Hippodrome in Beirut and was forced to accept that he was experiencing real life, not shooting action scenes. As audio of the expert's interview plays, the animation symbolizes how this dissociative experience must have felt for the man. First, we see still drawings of poverty and violence: bound men kneeling in a line, a tank pointing at an elderly man carrying groceries, a building struck by an explosion, a man's bleeding body in a sunny field. The stills imitate how the patient was looking at scenes he witnessed as if considering how to capture them in the best light or at the best angle. Then the animation stops and appears to rewind from one of these still images, then play forward again as a film when the horses are introduced. In contrast to the still frames, the animated horses neigh, tremble on their hooves, fall over, and get swarmed by flies. Their realistic movements, compared to the still shots, indicate how the man's dissociative "camera" broke and he realized he was there, participating in the horror. The animation punctuates this realization—and the expert's point about it—with an extremely aestheticized final shot of the soldier reflected back through the lens of a horse's eye. Animation here offers a multi-layered documentation of trauma and how it warps the mind that wouldn't otherwise be possible, even through reenactment.

On the surface, documentary and animation seem like opposing mediums—one known for authenticity and the other for artistry—but when combined, they can reach deep beneath the surface of storytelling and create something truly memorable. Folman's quest to recover his missing memories from the war was one like I had never witnessed on screen before, and because the subject is almost entirely an invisible one, its combined intellectual and emotional impact could not have been evoked but through animation. ❦

Maryn Davenport is a Professional Writing and Publishing major with minors in Creative Writing and Film Studies at UW-Whitewater. This essay was written for a Documentary Films *course in Fall 2024.*

Folman, Ari, director. *Waltz with Bashir*. Sony Picture Classics, 2009. DVD.

Roe, Annabelle Honess. "Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 3 (2011): 215–230.