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Waltz with Bashir's Animated Traces

Troubled Indexicality in Contemporary Documentary Rhetorics

Yotam Shibolet

C13.P1 Recent developments in the affordances of digital media problematize the rhetorics and spectatorial experience of “truth” in video representation, perhaps now more than ever before. Waning faith in indexical evidence (evidence providing tangible traces that point toward past occurrences) provided by photography and historical archives may be cited as a key cause of this trouble, which has been a central point of inquiry in media research long before terms such as “alternative facts” and “fake news” took central stage in public debate. The contemporary state of affairs is particularly challenging for the practice of documentary filmmaking, whose foundational aim, we are told, is to meaningfully capture something “true” about reality.

C13.P2 In this chapter, I aim to reflect on the meaning of this challenge and on documentary strategies of adapting to it. In this context, I suggest an analysis of the animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008, dir. Ari Folman). By employing animation to represent traumatic war memories, *Waltz with Bashir* constructs a system of documentary rhetorics that rely on spectatorial trust in the authenticity of creatively depicted experiences, rather than faith in indexical, observational evidence. My reading focuses on the film’s final sequence, which concludes and presumably substantiates the animated narrative via appropriation of archival footage. In the context of the film’s representational rhetorics, this transition from animation to archival footage may be understood as a reversal of the aforementioned strategy of animated documentaries—a return to reliance on captured indexical photographic truth. I will explore *Waltz with Bashir's* critical approach to truth claims in both personal memory and photography in order to lay the ground for an alternative, somewhat subversive reading of this final sequence.

C13.S1 **Documentary Rhetorics in the Age of Suspect Indexicality**

C13.P3 In a 2018 article in *The Atlantic*, “The Era of Fake Video Begins,” Franklin Foer addresses deepfake videos, a video manipulation technology aided by deep-learning AI, which allows a near-seamless synthesis of different videos and/or images in a new integrated video—effectively masking the superimposition. This technology allows video manipulators, for example, to convincingly plant a person’s face on another’s body. In combination with voice-mimicking tools, it is already theoretically possible to produce convincing video representation of public figures saying things they have never said in situations they have never been in. Such extreme manipulations are expected to become increasingly commonplace as the technology proliferates (and already have to an extent since the publishing of Foer’s piece).

C13.P4 Foer’s argument leads to a very grim and hyperbolic conclusion: “The digital manipulation of video may make the current era of ‘fake news’ seem quaint. Fabricated videos will create new and understandable suspicions about everything we watch . . . [and] ultimately destroy faith in our strongest remaining tether to the idea of common reality.”¹ While deepfake technology is indeed concerning, such “understandable suspicions,” are hardly a unique problem of the digital age—as Tom Gunning asserts: “The claim that the digital media alone transforms its data into an intermediary form fosters the myth that photography involves a transparent process.” Gunning reminds us that photography has always been a deeply mediated process, involving multiple layers of framing and filtering of imagery, rather than a transparent capturing of “a direct imprint of reality.”² This position is substantiated by “The Voice of Documentary,” a pivotal text on the documentary form written two decades earlier, where Bill Nichols states that “documentaries always were forms of representation, never clear windows onto ‘reality’; the film-maker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning.”³

C13.P5 If we take a broader historical view, the exceptional state is not the precarious truth-value of visual imagery in the new age of seamless digital manipulation—the exception, rather, is the era in which the moving images of documentary footage were culturally acceptable as “naked evidence” of what took place in the past. In no other era did humanity have access to this sort of “cutting proof” of moments gone by. To paraphrase Google scientist Ian Goodfellow, quoted in Foer’s piece, it has been quite a historical fluke that we were able to treat video representation as “evidence that something really happened” to begin with. If the era of video evidence was just a temporary fluke, though, Foer’s treatment of its presumed reliability as our “only

thread of common reality” should be dismissed as hyperbole. Our notion of “common reality” hinges first and foremost on far more sustained and fundamental factors (such as a shared sense of being in the world). Representational media have always been about doing something *with*, or expressing something *about*, this underlying experience of shared reality—rather than about producing it afresh.

C13.P6

The preceding sentiments are evident in Nichols’s definition of the essential documentary practice, which can be paraphrased as “making powerful truth claims about reality” through “creative treatment of actuality” (a claim that can be traced back to John Grierson).⁴ This definition, largely, still holds in light of the contemporary situation. The only meaningful caveat imposed on it by the aforementioned issues is an increased doubt that the *source* of cinematic material can be considered a piece of “actuality.”

C13.P7

According to the canonical semiotic analysis of cinema via Charles Sanders Peirce’s typology of signs, cinematic footage is, simultaneously, an iconic sign—it looks and sounds *like* reality (like a realistic painting)—and an indexical sign, a captured tangible trace *of* reality (like a footprint).⁵ This duality can be described as the key axiom behind the concept of cinematic “actualities”: the footage captures a trace of a real event by resembling it, and resembles the past event by capturing it. Cinematic actualities can therefore be said to *look* like what they *are* (or were), as pieces of events detached from delimitation to occurring at a particular space and time. One could even argue that footage is, in a sense, a piece of actuality even when the source event is fictionalized: as Roland Barthes asserts in his concept of *punctum*,⁶ even a staged photo inevitably captures a material occurrence (actors perform real actions, scenery is composed of real objects), and contains tangible traces of that past that are partially beyond the authors’ control. Even accepting that a piece of actuality is never the full transparent truth of the event, but a perspective on it, and suspecting the ways in which captured actualities were pieced together into a film, the actuality itself remains, in a partial but crucial sense of tangible *thereness*, beyond doubt. Truth is, literally, in (the mechanism of) representation.

C13.P8

The potential for seamless, ubiquitous digital rendering and manipulation of cinematic material casts a skeptical shadow upon this axiom of cinema’s grounding in indexicality. Given a sufficiently advanced toolbox, the filmmaker can control not only the extent to which footage resembles reality, but also the extent to which it hinges on reality at all. As the affordances of computer-generated imagery expand, images that could once only be represented via animation may now be rendered in highly realistic aesthetics (as the new “live” versions of classic Disney films testify). Computer-generated

imagery is therefore becoming indistinguishable from live footage, and the days when it will be feasible to treat any video imagery as computer-generated animation until proven otherwise are fast approaching.

C13.P9 If we are indeed entering an age where tangible cinematic presence can be digitally manufactured from start to finish, spectatorial skepticism must go beyond questioning the ways in which events are creatively treated, and begin to also question whether events were ever *there* to begin with. The dominant understanding of “real” footage could be in the process of turning from an encounter with actuality to an encounter with *quasi-actuality*, that is: in doubt until we feel sufficiently justified to trust it—much as our trust of written reportage is determined on per-case, context-dependent basis.

C13.P10 Crucially, though, this potential paradigm shift in the treatment of cinematic indexicality does not seem to involve any substantial change in immediate spectatorial experience: footage continues to *feel* like reality, even when we know it does not necessarily bear any tangible trace of it. The degradation of validity in conflating iconicity and indexicality may be urging us to face the full scope of an uncomfortable realization: the degree to which an image is experienced as realistic is not necessarily correlated with the degree to which it captures reality. The sense of immersive, “life-like” experience the cinematic medium can produce is ever on the rise, but audiences should, in parallel, become more hesitant to conflate this experienced sense of hyper-reality with a judgment that the representation constitutes a transparent capturing of reality. Such hesitancy to accept “real” footage as transparent capture poses a severe issue for traditional documentary rhetorics, which implicitly demand unmitigated faith in precisely this notion.

C13.P11 In summary, the new media landscape, with its ever-expanding arsenal of manipulation affordances and skeptical discourse, accentuates both the severity of shortcomings in the cinematic claim to capturing reality, and our cultural awareness of these shortcomings. Nonetheless, relinquishing the documentary aim of representing reality altogether as a result of this justified suspicion of indexicality would be a costly and hasty conclusion. Experienced reality has not ceased to exist, nor has the cultural and artistic value of human attempts to portray it and to access the traces of times gone by. If the need to represent reality through film remains persistent as ever, the newfound reasons to suspect the classical strategies through which it was addressed call for a new set of strategies, also relating, perhaps, to a new or more refined notion of what “reality” consists of.

C13.P12 In short, then, the challenging task of the contemporary documentary film is to continue telling us something meaningful about *actuality*, despite acknowledging that we cannot take for granted that it is composed out of

actualities. In other words, if indexical connection to past reality can no longer be validated by photography's iconic resemblance alone, we must inquire after additional means of substantiating a meaningful representation of the traces of the past. I will now turn to analyze *Waltz with Bashir*, in an attempt to develop a reading of the film's documentary rhetorics as a unique and exemplary strategy for meeting the challenges posed by this contemporary state.

C13.S2

Reflexive Narrative Framing through Exposition Sequence

C13.P13

"Isn't filmmaking also a form of therapy?" *Waltz with Bashir*'s opening sequence raises this question and effectively frames the narrative as an answer in the affirmative. First, we witness a harrowing dream haunting the character of Boaz, featuring specters of the dogs he was commanded to kill during his Israeli Defense Force (IDF) service in the First Lebanon War (1982). Next, Boaz meets his army friend, the main protagonist, Ari, in a bar for consultation and explains his dream. In reply, Ari blatantly denies being affected by his own war memories and recommends his friend see a psychotherapist. Boaz, in turn, poses to him the question I have quoted. In the very next scene, Ari begins to experience a harrowing, recurring dream of his own, where he emerges naked from the sea near the bombarded city of Beirut. The film frames its own making process as Ari's attempt to cure himself from this haunting dream.

C13.P15

In the final expositional scene, Ari spontaneously visits his "therapist friend," Ori Sivan, for consultation. Sivan tells him of an experiment in memory planting: a group of subjects were shown nine real photographs from their childhood, alongside one contrived photo depicting them in a theme park they never visited. The majority of subjects "recognized" the false photo as a childhood memory instantly, and the 20 percent who did not came back for a follow-up interview convinced they had recovered an authentic memory of the event in the interim.⁷ Ori tells Ari (and more importantly, the spectator) that this experiment demonstrates something fundamental about the structure and functionality of memory: "Memory is a dynamic, living thing, capable of filling gaps and black holes it encounters to the point of full 'recollection' of something that never even occurred." Ori then encourages Ari to try to learn more about his missing memories from others so he can come to terms with them; assuring him that there is a mental mechanism that will make sure his process of memory recovery will take him "exactly where he needs to go."

C13.P16

This expositional sequence efficiently packages Ari's process of remembering as a catharsis narrative: the recovery of Ari's repressed memory, embalmed and triggered by his dream, ultimately places Ari as an early witness at the site of the Sabra and Shatila massacre (September 18, 1982)—a ruthless butchering of defenseless Palestinian refugees by Phalange militia, committed as retaliation for the assassination of newly elected Lebanese president Bachir Gemayel, enabled by the passive support and willful blindness of the IDF. The dream specters of the first act thus travel full circle, eventually leading into Ari's "waking up" to the repressed horror of his proximity to the atrocity in the final act. The narrative is thus essentially organized in a "predetermined acceptance of traumatic foreclosure":⁸ every event sets up the stage for, and seems edited in keen awareness of, Ari's ultimate recovery of traumatic memory. As Paul Atkinson and Simon Cooper argue, this cleanly knit narrative framing makes it safe to assume that *Waltz with Bashir*'s authorial position is reflexively distant from the dissociative mind-state of the depicted director-protagonist. That is to say, we should perceive a degree of distance between Ari, the film's protagonist, and the authorial position of Ari Folman, the director, who consciously employs his own avatar and orchestrates his personal story as the central arc of his film's memory puzzle, carefully constructed to address a larger theme. We might say that while Ari the animated protagonist is shown making something closer to a traditional documentary, Folman's overlying directorial approach to the documentary process is more reflexive and meta. The film, then, is not a raw or transparent portrayal of recovery from post-traumatic repression, but rather a utilization of the post-traumatic recovery narrative for the purpose of exploring the ways by which the troubled war past is actively remembered and actively forgotten.

C13.S3

An Approach to Memory, History, and Cinema

C13.P17

I propose distinguishing three closely related points—already evident in *Waltz with Bashir*'s exposition—that define the film's approach to memory, historical fact, and photographic representation. These points form the basis for the reading I later develop:

C13.P18

(1) *Waltz with Bashir* primarily aims to authentically represent memories and cares relatively little about representing facts through them. Its perspective on the past focuses on its echoes in present lived experience rather than on fidelity to historical precision or political contextualization. This defining choice is addressed to some extent by all academic writing on the film, but its implications tend to become blurred in discussions of the film's message: the

shortness of historical and political contextualization is often taken as a failure to provide the audience with substantial political revelations⁹ rather than a direct result of having a different aim than a “classic” antiwar documentary.

C13.P19

While Raz Yosef is correct to point out that the experience and trauma of the Lebanon war was somewhat repressed from the collective memory of Israeli society and that *Waltz with Bashir*'s political ambition revolves around this issue,¹⁰ Ari (like any educated Israeli of his generation) still goes into his research already aware of general facts surrounding the film's culminating event, the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Hence, while there is clear political significance in (re-)exposing audiences inside and outside of Israel to this event—and the film provides sufficient explanation for the “uninformed” spectator—*Waltz with Bashir* makes no claims to any groundbreaking revelations regarding the historical facts of the massacre. As Ohad Landesman and Roy Bendor reiterate, the film's political message is “not intellectualized but experienced.”¹¹

C13.P20

(2) *Waltz with Bashir* approaches memory as an intermingling of past reality and creative narration. As portrayed by the psychological experiment scene, the film is skeptical in advance about the extent of objective truth value that the recovery of distant memories can produce. “So tell me, Frenkel, was I there?” Ari asks later in the film when a comrade depicts a surreal story of shooting down a young teen as he assaults their unit with a rocket launcher (portrayed to the contrasting tune of harmonic classical music). “Oh, good to know. Of course I was there,” he quickly concludes—and while recovering from post-traumatic dissociation is one explanation *Waltz with Bashir* provides for this kind of statement, I believe the similarity to the memory-planting scenario cannot be accidental. While there is no reason to assume the core experience to be false, we can detect quite some creative liberty in Ari's attempt to absorb Frenkel's interpretation of it into his own memory.

C13.P21

The memory of the past, in other words, is addressed as an open, writable—and thus revisable—text, inherently related to both past lived experience and present narrative needs, rather than something like a site of archaeological excavation that guarantees the precision and exactness of its findings (as in the classic psychoanalytical model of post-traumatic recall). As stated by Landesman and Bendor, *Waltz with Bashir* “is as much about memory itself as it is about the retrieval of specific memories,”¹² and its exposition sets the tone for an approach to memory that “straddles the boundaries between past and present, dreams and reality, recollection and hallucination.”¹³

C13.P22

(3) *Waltz with Bashir* is a highly reflexive film, which parallels its exploration of memory with a more implicit critical examination of narrated truth in documentary filmmaking and photography. Despite the clear differences

between photographic capture and human memory, both mechanisms are treated as indexical representation systems that simultaneously record and interpret, and whose meaning is to a large extent constituted by framing and subjective experience rather than “objective data.” Tellingly, after suggesting filmmaking as a form of therapy related to dreams and memories, *Waltz with Bashir* proceeds to cast a filmmaker in the role of a therapist: Ori Sivan is not actually a psychologist, but rather a colleague, who co-wrote and co-directed Ari Folman’s first feature film, *Saint Clara* (1996). His closest connection to psychology is being the executive producer of the Israeli series *In Treatment* (*Betipul*, 2005–8). It is thus fitting that his described experiment deals with personal recollection triggered by *photography*, and reveals the ambivalent truth value of both: photography too is inherently malleable and hence capable of taking advantage of memory’s own inherent manipulability, for example by triggering the creation of false or inaccurate recollections. Photography is a crucial component of the way contemporary individuals and societies store and produce memories, but our tendency to perceive it as a “higher source” of indexical evidence of the true reality can be problematic, particularly when this evidence often fails to corroborate lived experience or confirm a single, fixed interpretation of historical events.

C13.P23 This skeptical position is implied in several scenes, perhaps most explicitly when Professor Zahava Solomon, an expert in post-trauma, tells Ari of an amateur photographer recruited to the war who used his camera as a sort of dissociative defense mechanism: documenting the horrors of war as if they were special effects in an action flick or an achievement of his photojournalistic prowess, allowing him to perceive events from a distant, professionally uninvolved perspective that denies much of the sting of their reality.¹⁴

C13.P24 When the camera finally breaks, the sudden necessity to face the truth of the situation—namely, his presence and active involvement in the scene he was (“just”) photographing—makes his experience all the more traumatic. The scene displays the soldier’s act of “factual” documentation as a performative fashioning of reality into a work of fiction, which enables a repressive detachment from his subjective experience, even in the present of living it.

C13.P25 In essence, *Waltz with Bashir* depicts two opposed reflexive paradigms of positioning the act of photographic documentation: the uninvolved observer, who collects photographic “evidence” to affectively enable a reporting of events from the position of supposed objective detachment, and the involved maker, who employs representations in a therapeutic attempt to reclaim a meaningful relation to the past (his own past, the past of the interviewees, and the collective historic past). The film can be read as suggesting the second

C13.P56 paradigm as means of absolution for having once chosen the first. This choice is particularly meaningful, of course, in the context of witnessing violent acts. At one point, Ari describes his role during the night of the massacre—shooting flares into the sky from the outskirts of the refugee camp, ignorant of what is going on inside—with a Hebrew term (*heramti teourot*) more commonly employed in the jargon of his filmmaking profession as setting up cinematic lightning. This position of cinematically setting the scenery—passively yet directly enabling the atrocity, while in denial of fully “being there”—is the strongest source of individual and collective traumatic guilt portrayed in the film.

C13.S4 Rhetorics of Reality's Representation

C13.P26 Taken together, the three points—paragraphs (1), (2), and (3)—explain something of *Waltz with Bashir's* idiosyncratic documentary strategy, and the unique approach through which it channels the animated representation of personal war experiences into meaningful truth claims (in Grierson's and Nichols's term) on the reality of the Lebanon war and its afterlife in Israeli memory. The foundational element of this documentary strategy is the choice to use animation. As also expressed by Folman himself, this decision was meant to do much more than merely translate the real: indeed, it was animation's capacity for the surreal, for personally stylized representations, that made it a suitable choice. Many of the film's key moments—such as the absurd, waltz-like dance performed by an IDF soldier in a “duet” with his rifle amid raining enemy fire (and along the way giving the film its name)—could only have been animated.¹⁵

C13.P27 This defining choice was not the only instance of the film opting for a significantly decreased reliance on the indexical or “real source”: many spectators assume, for example, that the interview scenes are rotoscoped, when in fact the entire film was made by digital animation of cutouts based on handmade drawings.¹⁶ Crucially, some of the interviews were never photographed at all.¹⁷ Moreover, all of the dialogue is studio recorded—as well as scripted—based on an earlier version of the interview process. Still more, two of the eight interviews were dubbed by voice actors.¹⁸ Thus, *Waltz with Bashir* reflexively restages not only its depicted memories and sequence of exposition,¹⁹ but in fact, to some extent, nearly every part of the film. Since both the structure of memory and the cinematic restaging of it transform the “source material,” the entire film becomes a reflection upon reflection—a model for *mise en abîme* in metadocumentary.

C13.P28

Despite this slew of meta strategies, *Waltz with Bashir* does not merely “dress up” as a documentary to critique and comment on the form, the way a docufiction²⁰ film would—as the text makes zero attempts at intentional misleading, or at epistemological supplementation (or confusion) for its own sake. It is very much a documentary not only in form—as it appropriates many of the genre’s rhetorical and aesthetic tropes,²¹ such as intercutting between talking head interviews and enactments of the memories described in them—but even more distinctly in its aim: for a film that treats photographic representation with explicit suspicion,²² it is highly ambitious in its dedication to authentically represent memory. Its central aim of capturing the lived experience of subjective, traumatic memories is in significant affinity with its suspicion of indexical, objective truth claims. Animation, as argued earlier, allows the film’s truth claims to revolve around authentically representing creative re-enactments of the past freed from the pretense of objectively capturing or witnessing it.²³

C13.P29

Though there is always a prior, missing source event at the root of the creative interpretations provided by *Waltz with Bashir*, the film never intends nor pretends to fully capture that source or act as its replica. Rather, the film aims to capture the core of how the memory of that source event is truly experienced—that is, what about that experience authentically matters to the subjects who had it, rather than how the events would have “really” appeared. It then creatively interprets this core set of insights and the tone of their narration, to make it available for the spectator. Jeanne-Marie Viljoen defines a similar view of the foundation of the film’s truth value as a reclamation of “the invisible of the visible” (in Merleau-Ponty’s term) in representation of experience²⁴—or even more precisely perhaps, a reclamation of the liminal territory in which memory operates. From this perspective, the challenge to distinguish between facts and interpretations in documentary film spectatorship, which haunts canonical documentary strategies, transforms from a curse into an asset. The utilization of this challenge also shapes *Waltz with Bashir*’s unique temporality, as analyzed by Atkinson and Cooper: the film’s present is inseparable from the past it reflects upon, and its past is inseparable from the living present perspective through which it is unfolded and restaged.²⁵

C13.P30

There is substantial support for the assertion that despite its ambivalent and complex structure, the film succeeds in being experienced as a trustworthy representation by the majority of its spectators: regardless of how it is critiqued in other senses, *Waltz with Bashir*’s capacity to reflect the Israeli experience of the war is highly praised in the vast majority of academic writing on it. It is also one of the best-reviewed, most commercially successful (a rare

achievement for any documentary), and prize-winning Israeli films of all time—both inside Israel and outside of it. Perhaps most tellingly, Landesman and Bendor provide several testimonies of Lebanon war veterans touched to their core by the film who cite it—likely precisely (also) because of its disjointed structure and anti-indexical inventions—as the most authentic depiction of the war they have ever seen.²⁶

C13.P31

Waltz with Bashir's success in generating such positive spectatorial experiences substantiates the claim that the film manages to effectively tap into some vital aspect of the Israeli collective “lived memory”²⁷ of the Lebanon War. These stories, however, do not integrate or coalesce into a coherent whole but rather form an assemblage of hallucinatory and fragmented individual experiences. The relation of this disjointed corpus we call *Waltz with Bashir* to collective Israeli memory thus functions similarly to what Ann Rigney calls “counter-memories”²⁸—a recovery of memories that have been lost or hidden from the canonical narrative of collective memory (essentially the collective-memory equivalent of the process Ari is depicted as going through). The majority of depicted memories are not explicitly critical of the mainstream Israeli political narrative, but function as counter-memories because they are out of touch with the heroic canonical narrative of what being an IDF soldier participating in a war is supposed to feel and look like. Yosef defines them as “disremembered memories . . . constructed through forgetting and marked with traces of fantasy . . . [thus] allowing soldiers to represent events that are too threatening to be experienced directly.”²⁹ In other words, *Waltz with Bashir* fashions a trustworthy animated archive that taps into Israeli soldiers’ traumatic memory of what being in the war *felt* like, and what having been there feels like now, precisely by relinquishing the claim to indexical fact, and seeking instead to “document”—by these alternative means—the surreal state of dissonance between reality and experience.

C13.S5

Indexicality Strikes Back?

C13.P32

Having established a reading of *Waltz with Bashir's* unique approach to truth in representation, I now turn to address the film’s final sequence—perhaps its most powerful, haunting, and commented-upon part—which appears to function as a complete breach of that approach.

C13.P33

Waltz with Bashir culminates in a juxtaposition of its animated aesthetics with appropriated archival footage from the Sabra and Shatila massacre. As Ari finally recovers a memory that places him among the first to witness the aftermath of the massacre during the following morning, the film transitions

from the animated universe into the realm of archival footage, and of far stronger indexical claim to truth. At this point, the film spatially links an animated close-up of past-Ari's dissociative expression to footage of a wailing, grief-stricken Palestinian woman situated to fit his point-of-view perspective, that is, as a proxy shot-reverse-shot cut that transitions between the animated and archival.³⁰ After bringing across this metaphorical engagement in "shared space" between the photo-archived atrocity and animation, the film cuts to footage of brutalized dead bodies, and then fades to black.

C13.P34 Most academic writing on *Waltz with Bashir* analyzes its political message and the degree to which it is pertinent and effective, leaning to a large extent on assessing the statement of this final scene. The "optimistic" readings (e.g., Landesman and Bendor; Garrett Stewart;³¹ and to a lesser degree Viljoen) celebrate *Waltz with Bashir*'s success in making the experience of the Lebanon war accessible to the spectators and leading them, along with the protagonist, to go through "an eye opening rude awakening"³² regarding Israel's collective moral responsibility for the heinous massacre. In this final scene, it follows, "Any layer of shielding distancing that may have persisted due to the animated form's beauty . . . is peeled off to disclose the naked, visible evidence."³³

C13.P35 Atkinson and Cooper provide a strong refutation to this reading: Given *Waltz with Bashir*'s suspicion of indexical footage and emphasis on creative restaging of the past over objective evidence, it seems naive to treat the ending of the film as capable of "carrying the burden of genuine historical recognition."³⁴ Their own account ultimately concurs with Yosef's political criticism, according to which Ari's struggles with his post-traumatic state allow him to cast himself as a victim, thereby forced to become a bystander to historical horrors,³⁵ while the actual Palestinian victims are left out of the picture.³⁶ Ari's helplessness and loss of agency is thus a downplaying of Israeli responsibility,³⁷ and rather than relating to the experience of the Palestinian Others, *Waltz with Bashir* appropriates their suffering to provide a catharsis for its protagonist's process of personal healing.³⁸

C13.P36 However, if we support Atkinson and Cooper's own previous argument that *Waltz with Bashir* utilizes trauma and the tropes related to it as "a storytelling device"³⁹ to enable reflexively staged re-enactments, it is quite strange that *Waltz with Bashir* would end with a reclamation, through indexical "naked visible" evidence, of the absolute truth of Ari's restored memories—rather than with another such (animated) re-enactment. Much like the opening sequence, the cleanly knit and masterfully crafted narrative structure of this final part can be read as another reflexive restaging of the post-traumatic recovery process, cleverly employed to bring the narrative to a unique, carefully sutured closure. The emotional tone of *Waltz with Bashir*'s final fade to

black, which refrains from offering closure back in the animated world of the shocked Ari, leaves further space to question this interpretation that the film intended to frame its endings as a perfect catharsis to Ari's process.

C13.P37

It is entirely possible to maintain that *Waltz with Bashir* employs the archival imagery as representing a rude awakening of the buried (suppressed or forgotten) truth of Ari's memory of the atrocity—a cinematic choice that certainly offered a powerful, spectatorial experience, and appeared to substantiate the horror of the Sabra and Shatila massacre by an imposed contrast with non-indexical animation. This result certainly appears to be what the final sequence is telling us (as reflected, for instance, in my own experience upon first viewing), and it is also the consensus reading of *Waltz with Bashir* in previous academic writing. But if we accept this reading of the ending, it should be understood, in the context my earlier discussion, as a somewhat disappointing de-radicalization of the film's treatment of documentary representation and indexical truth: the main narrative conflict is cathartically solved by reclamation of the facts of buried memories via photographic documentation, whose truth value appears superior to the ambivalence of animation and of subjective experience—a notion that previous parts of the film are keenly suspicious of.

C13.P38

Upon reflection, the canonical reading of Ari's remembrance is entirely feasible, but should come attached with the concession that it somewhat weakens the film's aesthetic message and philosophical underpinnings. Additionally, a contemporary reading of the film in these times of indexical suspicion must not allow us to forget the immense ontological gap being skipped over in this "solution" of the plot through the cut from animation to archival footage. As a compensation, I would therefore like to suggest an alternative subversive reading, according to which *Waltz with Bashir* maintains its skeptical approach to facts and indexicality up to and including its ending.

C13.P39

The setup of the final sequence provides some evidence for this suggestion. In the beginning of the final sequence, Ari declares that he regained—via his process of self-inquiry through conversations with others—all of his memories except for the most pivotal one, relating to both his recurring hallucinatory dream and his whereabouts at the time of the massacre. Despite having no factual knowledge of his whereabouts and no leads on whom to reclaim this memory through or from, Ari is assured by Ori Sivan—in a second appearance as a narrative instigator—that his hallucination is real "because it reflects his real emotional concern with the massacre." We are reminded of Ori's earlier promise that the journey will take Ari "exactly where he needs to go." Ori then advises Ari to seek out the true, specific details of the event so that he can position his personal memory in relation to them. Once again, Ori's

choice of words to describe the therapeutic/cinematic process he suggests that Ari undertake differs from the classical Freudian psychoanalytic portrayal of recovering traumatically repressed truths by excavating buried memories: Ori seems far less concerned with Ari's memories being factual than with his experience of remembrance being true to his narrative needs. He is never enthusiastic about "organic" recollection, but rather treats memory as fluid and malleable. His only promise is that Ari's search would eventually recover a more cohesive story.

C13.P40 After hearing some reports of the willful blindness of Israeli leadership about the severity of events at Sabra and Shatila as the massacre was taking place, Ari finally restores his crucial memory by relating to the perspective of Ron Ben-Ishay, a charismatic news reporter who was among the first Israelis to witness the scene. Ron was already portrayed earlier in the film (from a soldier's perspective) as he confidently toured an active battleground—as if protected from any danger by an invisible, protective shield imposed merely by virtue of press membership. Thus it is notable that by giving Ron the final interview, the film appropriates the classical documentary approach: the switch to Ron's perspective emblemizes the classical, more journalistic documentary rhetoric of witnessing truth through careful objective observation—that is then emblemized by the production of indexical footage/evidence.

C13.P41

The film's aforementioned last animated shot that cuts into the archival massacre footage—which we can safely assume was taken by Ron's crew—begins from a point of view depicting Ron's perspective, then dollies in, through faceless Palestinian women, into Ari's close-up that cuts into the archival footage. The audio track⁴⁰ facilitates the appearance of almost-seamless continuity between the two radically different cinematic materialities and character perspectives. Based on all of the preceding, I contend that it is quite conceivable that Ari plants (implants) himself in the scene of the massacre's aftermath by means of Ron's footage and subsequent story about the events. As further explored in what follows, the film provides us with all the necessary elements to support this reading.

C13.P42

Let us compare the depiction of Ari's cathartic scene of remembrance to the film's aforementioned depiction of the memory-planting experiment: every single person who did not recognize themselves in the theme park photo has "restored" that memory within a week, when provided relatively slight motivation to do so. Ari has a much stronger narrative need to "restore" his memory, and just as in the experiment, "objective" footage that documents the events he needs to relate that memory to (in his case, delivered by the authoritative journalistic figure of Ron Ben-Ishay

rather than the lab psychologist). While his character is not planted in the footage as some clever manipulation designed by another, planted memories are in fact most often self-planted, and Ari has an extremely strong circumstantial desire to plant himself in the scene of the massacre: he has reclaimed the knowledge that he actually was somewhere within the general vicinity of Sabra and Shatila that morning, suffers from a recurring, haunting dream urging him to trace back his exact deeds and whereabouts, and begins his questioning of others following his filmmaker/psychologist friend's advice to inquire after the details of where he was in order to arrive "where he needs" to go. It therefore makes sense that Ari, by means of almost the exact same memory-planting mechanism the exposition goes out of its way to explain, would unconsciously cling onto the documentary footage he finds to fill the gap in his own organic memory, culminating in his experience of sudden "authentic" remembrance that he was right there, at the very scene of the (indexical) traces captured by the journalistic cameras. This cathartic realization of having been *right there*, and the position of moral responsibility entailed in directly witnessing, and therefore passively enabling, the atrocity, is where Ari needed to go. But we, the spectators, are not in a position to confidently conclude that this is where he actually was.

C13.P43

Whether or not this ambiguity was intended by the filmmaker, I argue that the strong epistemological doubt that hides behind the affective ontological shift invites a skeptical reading of *Waltz with Bashir*'s reflexively staged ending, and thus of the truth value of Ari's remembrance. The revelation of truth occurs through a suspicious mechanism – the planting of archival data in animation, and by proxy, the self-planting of documentary footage as a reclamation of personal memory —and therefore should be understood as uncertain. Furthermore, I do not mean to substantiate this as a new privileged reading: it is sufficient to accept my reading as one possibility, in order to have cause to reinterpret the meaning of the film's end: even if the protagonist experiences a perfect catharsis, keeping this doubt in mind should prevent us from exiting the film with one. The film gives us no cause, of course, to doubt the horrifying truth of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, but it provides us with ample tools to doubt the "recovery" of Ari's whereabouts during the massacre, and its narrative role as the clean and clear ending of Ari's inner search.

C13.P44

Examination from my proposed perspective opens the door to an awareness of a more radical knowledge gap in the ending: Yosef is correct to point out the film's distance from the lived experience of the Palestinian Other. The sight of the mutilated bodies and weeping women is undeniably horrific, but

we are given no narrative tools to see from their point of view, to meaningfully treat them as characters in the story. The sudden burst into the (animated) scene of the archival footage of inconceivable violence initially leaves us in the same state as young Ari: under dissociative shock, unable to fully contextualize or process the relationship between the two realms.

C13.P45

That conflict, I believe, is exactly the point of the archival appropriation: to flood the immense gap between facts and their meaningful comprehension, between a “merely factual” experience of horrific footage and an authentically meaningful one. While audiences are likely to experience the image as far more poignant and affective than if they had viewed it in isolation, even that experience remains removed from an ability to fully comprehend the “true” victim’s perspective. Such a judgment is part of a politically troubling situation, and at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the vast majority of people on both sides lack the capacity to meaningfully engage with the experience and suffering of the other, as “the enemy’s” lived experience and perspective are constantly banished and repressed from collective memory. In other words, rather than downplaying Israeli responsibility, I view the ending as authentically portraying the difficulty in meaningfully perceiving it when focalized through an Israeli perspective—most particularly when that responsibility is indirect or grounded in fleeting genuine contact. The presence of Palestinian refugees—including the millions who were not killed in Sabra and Shatila, and therefore must remain unseen—is far removed and constantly repressed from Israeli lives. The vast majority of Israelis therefore fail to experience a direct, embodied proximity to, and therefore a more tangible sense of complicity in, the suffering of Palestinians. Even the minority who view themselves as largely responsible for the occupation and the past and present suffering of Palestinians it entails, struggle to grasp such direct relationality to the struggles of a people they largely cannot truly know and never truly encounter.

C13.P46

Ari’s supposed remembrance of “having been there,” of personally witnessing the atrocities depicted in the footage, bridges over a significant portion of this distance: he gains the ability to “dolly in” on his presence in the traumatic moment, from his re-focalized present perspective. He can now feel ethically driven to contemplate his involvement, rather than remain in a dissociative limbo or paralyzed by memory gaps. Ari certainly has not gained the ability to fully grasp the Palestinian experience of the atrocity, yet the reframing of his memory may nonetheless be a personally and politically substantial shift in his (inevitably Israeli) perspective—constituting a capacity to more directly and meaningfully acknowledge the Palestinian suffering, and thereby potentially pursue further understanding and action.

C13.S6 **Conclusion: *Waltz with Bashir* as a Call for Involved Spectatorship**

C13.P47 *Waltz with Bashir* ends with a moment of powerful transition, where horrifying historical footage literally cuts into the film's unique animated world of muddled and creative personal recollection. While Folman's original intention with this transition was likely to achieve narrative closure through the powerful truth claim of the documentary archive (even at the cost of weakening the film's stylistic message), rewatching the film in this age of suspect indexicality draws our attention to the stitches in this masterfully crafted yet far from seamless transition. From this perspective, my subversive reading argues that the film's broader approach to memory, authenticity, and documentation provides us with ample reason to doubt the factuality of Ari's final reclamation of memory.

C13.P48 Considering what Ari gains from this experience of reclamation, however, how much does it truly matter (in terms of assessing the film's message and effect) whether or not the "recovered" memory is factual or, as it were, merely filmic? Given unavoidable doubt in determining even this memory's truth value, we could view it as an imaginative act of remembrance—one that transforms Ari's spectatorship of the atrocity footage from a passively distant to an actively engaged experience, and thus allows him to develop an authentic relation to the event and the people involved. The character of Ari, who spends most of the film "spectating" memories (including those of others) and attempting to relate himself to them, essentially goes through the spectatorial paradigm shift that Folman's film ideally seeks to invoke in its own spectators.

C13.P49 By revolving its narrative around the unfolding structure of how the traumatic past is narrated in both footage and memory, *Waltz with Bashir* requires both its protagonist and spectators to actively attempt to form a reading of this past, to ponder their experience of the film and its meanings. The film's own creative representations are received as trustworthy largely because they restage and demystify truth in representation, forming a tertiary space in which the depicted hallucinatory scenes can be experienced as authentically representing the intensely personal structure of lived traumatic memory.

C13.P50 Indexical proof is thus not presented as inherently deceitful, but rather as inherently partial and dependent on the context of its creation and interpretation. The film's strongest critique, in my opinion, is not of the indexical goal of relating to an objective (and therefore true) past—it does not dispute or deny the existence of objective facts about the past—but rather of the pacified perception that automatic, naive acceptance of this kind of truth claim can evoke.

Waltz with Bashir expresses a strong performative opposition to the stance of passive, detached spectatorship—of war atrocities, of personal and collective memories, of cinema, and of present experience.

C13.P51 As argued by Atkinson and Cooper, “the realism of the photo is a lifeless process”:⁴¹ documentary and archival footage can only produce meaningful knowledge through authentically relating to a narrative that resonates in lived experience in some form or another, and *Waltz with Bashir* shows us how this statement holds even for the documentary representation of significant and horrifying historical facts. In that sense, the film’s approach to archival practices can be said to be in line with Eric Ketelaar, who views them first and foremost as storytelling devices, mechanisms for making images seen through tacit narrative framing.⁴² *Waltz with Bashir* can thus be considered as a reassertion of Vivian Sobchack’s claim that “the documentary film is “less a ‘thing’ than an experience,”⁴³ as well Paul Ward’s assertion that animated documentaries “create the real.”⁴⁴

C13.P52 Similar to Tom Gunning’s assertion that “a photograph can only tell the truth if it is also capable of telling a lie,”⁴⁵ *Waltz with Bashir*’s message on the documentary medium, in my reading, is that documentary film and photographic documentation at large can only forge meaningful relationalities to the traces of our past because they are equally capable of denying these relationalities by claiming a position of objective detachment (much like the amateur photographer/soldier described by Zahava Solomon). Within this scope, the film can be understood as a call to switch between the two reflexive paradigms mentioned in this chapter’s second part: namely, a call to “break the camera” through which we protect ourselves from an experience of active involvement in the world we are depicting or recording, and instead wield a more “animated” camera, through which this involvement—and the constant entanglement between the world we inhabit and our creative acts of interpreting and remembering it—can be actively acknowledged. It is only through the wielding of this “animated” camera, and the new authorial position of creatively processing traces of the past despite relinquishing the premise of transparent indexical documentary truth, that filmmaking can indeed (as Boaz ponders in the opening sequence) act as a form of therapy.

C13.P53 We may no longer be—in the near future of ubiquitous and seamless video manipulation technologies, and likely already in present times—able to interpret cinematic footage as “naked evidence” of the past. But should this loss be taken to mean that the capturing and relating to traces of the past is now any less of a crucial or valid pursuit? *Waltz with Bashir* provides us with a fitting case study to argue for the opposite. The film’s patchwork of post-traumatic memories draws its truth value and significance first and foremost from its

insightful exploration of active and creative relation to the past. *Waltz with Bashir* marks an inevitable gap between present and past, between “the way things were” and memories or photographic representations of these “things,” between historical events and subjective attempts to relate to them. Yet it finds great value in the search to partially bridge or fill these gaps, despite the foregone conclusion that any such connection is prone to skepticism.

C13.P54

Therefore, as traditional documentary rhetorics are losing their sway over contemporary spectators, *Waltz with Bashir*'s alternative strategies for making powerful (though troubled) truth claims about reality can be viewed as a valuable source of inspiration for future documentary works—whether animated, filmed, or digitalized.

Notes

1. Franklin Foer, “The Era of Fake Video Begins,” *The Atlantic*, May 2018 (theatlantic.com).
2. Tom Gunning, “What’s the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs,” *Nordicom Review* 1–2 (2004): 40.
3. Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 18.
4. John Grierson and Forsyth Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).
5. Johannes Ehrat, *Cinema and Semiotic: Peirce and Film Aesthetics, Narration, and Representation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan, 1981).
7. While I was not able to find academic citation of this precise experiment, I strongly suspect it to be a synthesis of very similar experiments run by Elizabeth Loftus and her laboratory at the University of California, one of which involves planting a memory of meeting Bugs Bunny (a Warner Brothers character) in Disneyland. See Elizabeth F. Loftus, “Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30-Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory,” *Learning & Memory* 12, no. 4 (2005): 361–66.
8. Paul Atkinson and Simon Cooper, “Untimely Animations: *Waltz with Bashir* and the Incorporation of Historical Difference,” *Screening the Past* 34 (2012): 269.
9. Nicholas Hetrick, “Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* and the Limits of Abstract Tragedy,” *Image & Narrative* vol. 11, no. 2 (2010): 79. Raz Yosef, “War Fantasies: Memory, Trauma and Ethics in Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 315.
10. Yosef, “War Fantasies,” 312–13.
11. Ohad Landesman and Roy Bendor, “Animated Recollection and Spectatorial Experience in *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Animation* 6 (2011): 15.
12. Landesman and Bendor, “Animated Recollection,” 4.
13. Landesman and Bendor, “Animated Recollection,” 4.
14. Atkinson and Cooper, “Untimely Animations,” 273.
15. Atkinson and Cooper, “Untimely Animations,” 261.

290 Metadocumentary, Experimental Film, Animation

16. Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 4.
17. In one instance, a friend of Ari agrees to tell his story only as long as it is sketched rather than filmed—but the animated sketches seem able to cut deeper into their subject's psyche than direct photographic representation could hope to.
18. Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 5.
19. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 269.
20. Ohad Landesman, "Lying to be Real: the Aesthetics of ambiguity in Docufictions," *Contemporary Documentary*, eds. Daniel Marcus and Selmin Kara, Routledge (2015), 9.
21. Landseman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 7.
22. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 260.
23. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 262.
24. Jeanne-Marie Viljoen, "Waltz with Bashir: Between Representation and Experience," *Critical Arts* 28, no. 1 (2014): 45.
25. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 261.
26. Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 9–10.
27. Ann Rigney, "Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory," *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 12.
28. Rigney, "Circulation of Cultural Memory," 13.
29. Yosef, "War Fantasies," 318.
30. Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 14.
31. Garrett Stewart, "Screen Memory in *Waltz with Bashir*," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2010): 58–62.
32. Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 14.
33. Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 14.
34. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 267.
35. Yosef, "War Fantasies," 323.
36. See Holger Pötzsch, "The Ubiquitous Absence of the Enemy in Contemporary Israeli War Films," in *The Philosophy of War Films*, ed. David LaRocca (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 313–33.
37. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 268.
38. Yosef, "War Fantasies," 324.
39. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 258.
40. The diegetic sound of the post-massacre footage that is assumed by many (e.g., Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 14) to substantiate Ari's vicinity to the footage, in fact, first appears earlier in the shot, that is, from Ron's point of view.
41. Atkinson and Cooper, "Untimely Animations," 260.
42. Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 133–40.
43. Vivian Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, vol. 6, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 241. See also Landesman and Bendor, "Animated Recollection," 2.
44. Paul Ward, "Animated Realities: The Animated Film, Documentary, Realism," *Reconstruction* 8, no. 2 (2008): 1–28.
45. Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?," 42.