



Gideon Levy / 'Antiwar' film Waltz with Bashir is nothing but charade

There's only one single moment of truth and pain in Oscar-nominated Israeli film about first Lebanon War.

By [Gideon Levy](#) | Feb.19, 2009 | 3:23 PM

Everyone now has his fingers crossed for Ari Folman and all the creative artists behind "Waltz with Bashir" to win the Oscar on Sunday. A first Israeli Oscar? Why not?

However, it must also be noted that the film is infuriating, disturbing, outrageous and deceptive. It deserves an Oscar for the illustrations and animation - but a badge of shame for its message. It was not by accident that when he won the Golden Globe, Folman didn't even mention the war in Gaza, which was raging as he accepted the prestigious award. The images coming out of Gaza that day looked remarkably like those in Folman's film. But he was silent. So before we sing Folman's praises, which will of course be praise for us all, we would do well to remember that this is not an antiwar film, nor even a critical work about Israel as militarist and occupier. It is an act of fraud and deceit, intended to allow us to pat ourselves on the back, to tell us and the world how lovely we are.

Hollywood will be enraptured, Europe will cheer and the Israeli Foreign Ministry will send the movie and its makers around the world to show off the country's good side. But the truth is that it is propaganda. Stylish, sophisticated, gifted and tasteful - but propaganda. A new ambassador of culture will now join Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua, and he too will be considered fabulously enlightened - so different from the bloodthirsty soldiers at the checkpoints, the pilots who bomb residential neighborhoods, the artillerymen who shell women and children, and the combat engineers who rip up streets. Here, instead, is the opposite picture. Animated, too. Of enlightened, beautiful Israel, anguished and self-righteous, dancing a waltz, with and without Bashir. Why do we need propagandists, officers, commentators and spokespersons who will convey "information"? We have this waltz.

The waltz rests on two ideological foundations. One is the "we shot and we cried" syndrome: Oh, how we wept, yet our hands did not spill this blood. Add to this a pinch of Holocaust memories, without which there is no proper Israeli self-preoccupation. And a dash of victimization - another absolutely essential ingredient in public discourse here - and voila! You have the deceptive portrait of Israel 2008, in words and pictures.

Folman took part in the Lebanon war of 1982, and two dozen years later remembered to make a movie about it. He is tormented. He goes back to his comrades-in-arms, gulps down shots of whiskey at a bar with one, smokes joints in Holland with another, wakes his therapist pal at first light and goes for another session to his shrink - all to free himself at long last from the nightmare that haunts him. And the nightmare is always ours, ours alone.

It is very convenient to make a film about the first, and now remote, Lebanon war: We already sent one of those, "Beaufort," to the Oscar competition. And it's even more convenient to focus specifically on Sabra and Chatila, the Beirut refugee camps.

Even way back, after the huge protest against the massacre perpetrated in those camps, there was always the declaration that, despite everything - including the green light given to our lackey, the Phalange, to execute the slaughter, and the fact that it all took place in Israeli-occupied territory - the cruel and brutal hands that shed blood are not our hands. Let us lift our voices in protest against all the savage Bashir-types we have known. And yes, a little against ourselves, too, for shutting our eyes, perhaps even showing encouragement. But no: That blood, that's not us. It's them, not us.

We have not yet made a movie about the other blood, which we have spilled and continue to allow to flow, from Jenin to Rafah - certainly not a movie that will get to the Oscars. And not by chance.

In "Waltz with Bashir" the soldiers of the world's most moral army sing out something like: "Lebanon, good morning. May you know no more grief. Let your dreams come true, your nightmares evaporate, your whole life be a blessing."

Nice, right? What other army has a song like this, and in the middle of a war, yet? Afterward they go on to sing that Lebanon is the "love of my life, the short life." And then the tank, from inside of which this lofty and enlightened singing emanates, crushes a car for starters, turning it into a smashed tin can, then pounds a residential building, threatening to topple it. That's how we are. Singing and wrecking. Where else will you find sensitive soldiers like these? It would really be preferable for them to shout with hoarse voices: Death to the Arabs!

I saw the "Waltz" twice. The first time was in a movie theater, and I was bowled over by the artistry. What style, what talent. The illustrations are perfect, the voices are authentic, the music adds so much. Even Ron Ben Yishai's half-missing finger is accurate. No detail is missed, no nuance blurred. All the heroes are heroes, superbly stylish, like Folman himself: articulate, trendy, up-to-date, left-wingers - so sensitive and intelligent.

Then I watched it again, at home, a few weeks later. This time I listened to the dialogue and grasped the message that emerges from behind the talent. I became more outraged from one minute to the next. This is an extraordinarily infuriating film precisely because it is done with so much talent. Art has been recruited here for an operation of

deceit. The war has been painted with soft, caressing colors - as in comic books, you know. Even the blood is amazingly aesthetic, and suffering is not really suffering when it is drawn in lines. The soundtrack plays in the background, behind the drinks and the joints and the bars. The war's fomenters were mobilized for active service of self-astonishment and self-torment.

Boaz is devastated at having shot 26 stray dogs, and he remembers each of them. Now he is looking for "a therapist, a shrink, shiatsu, something." Poor Boaz. And poor Folman, too: He is devilishly unable to remember what happened during the massacre. "Movies are also psychotherapy" - that's the bit of free advice he gets. Sabra and Chatila? "To tell you the truth? It's not in my system." All in such up-to-the-minute Hebrew you could cry. After the actual encounter with Boaz in 2006, 24 years later, the "flash" arrives, the great flash that engendered the great movie.

One fellow comes to the war on the Love Boat, another flees it by swimming away. One sprinkles patchouli on himself, another eats a Spam omelet. The filmmaker-hero of "Waltz" remembers that summer with great sadness: It was exactly then that Yaeli dumped him. Between one thing and the other, they killed and destroyed indiscriminately. The commander watches porn videos in a Beirut villa, and even Ben Yishai has a place in Ba'abda, where one evening he downs half a glass of whiskey and phones Arik Sharon at the ranch and tells him about the massacre. And no one asks who these looted and plundered apartments belong to, damn it, or where their owners are and what our forces are doing in them in the first place. That is not part of the nightmare.

What's left is hallucination, a sea of fears, the hero confesses on the way to his therapist, who is quick to calm him and explains that the hero's interest in the massacre at the camps derives from a different massacre: from the camps from which his parents came. Bingo! How could we have missed it? It's not us at all, it's the Nazis, may their name and memory be obliterated. It's because of them that we are the way we are. "You have been cast in the role of the Nazi against your will," a different therapist says reassuringly, as though evoking Golda Meir's remark that we will never forgive the Arabs for making us what we are. What we are? The therapist says that we shone the lights, but "did not perpetrate the massacre." What a relief. Our clean hands are not part of the dirty work, no way.

And besides that, it wasn't us at all: How pleasant to see the cruelty of the other. The amputated limbs that the Phalange, may their name be obliterated, stuff into the formaldehyde bottles; the executions they perpetrate; the symbols they slash into the bodies of their victims. Look at them and look at us: We never do things like that.

When Ben Yishai enters the Beirut camps, he recalls scenes of the Warsaw ghetto. Suddenly he sees through the rubble a small hand and a curly-haired head, just like that of his daughter. "Stop the shooting, everybody go home," the commander, Amos, calls out through a megaphone in English. The massacre comes to an abrupt end. Cut.

Then, suddenly, the illustrations give way to the real shots of the horror of the women keening amid the ruins and the bodies. For the first time in the movie, we not only see real footage, but also the real victims. Not the ones who need a shrink and a drink to get over their experience, but those who remain bereaved for all time, homeless, limbless and crippled. No drink and no shrink can help them. And that is the first (and last) moment of truth and pain in "Waltz with Bashir."

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