



Scrutiny2

Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa

ISSN: 1812-5441 (Print) 1753-5409 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rscr20>

Representing the “unrepresentable”: The unpredictable life of memory and experience in Waltz with Bashir

Jeanne-Marie Viljoen

To cite this article: Jeanne-Marie Viljoen (2013) Representing the “unrepresentable”: The unpredictable life of memory and experience in Waltz with Bashir , Scrutiny2, 18:2, 66-80, DOI: [10.1080/18125441.2013.828413](https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2013.828413)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2013.828413>



Published online: 08 Aug 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 616



View related articles [↗](#)

REPRESENTING THE “UNREPRESENTABLE”: THE UNPREDICTABLE LIFE OF MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE IN *WALTZ WITH BASHIR*

JEANNE-MARIE VILJOEN

Department of English Studies

Unisa

Viljoensincyprus@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I wish to explore the apparent unrepresentability of some forms of extreme experience. Following a line of thought expressed by Steiner (that some experiences must remain unspoken because they are too traumatic for words) and Caruth (that some experiences cannot be represented), Van Alphen (1999: 24) asserts that some “experiences” are not representable through discursive means and so cannot occur successfully. This is because he views experience as a symptom of discourse. According to Van Alphen, this implies that those who have lived through extreme experiences sometimes cannot represent anything more to themselves than having *lived through* events, but they do not feel that they have actively been there and taken part in them in any more meaningful way. Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* text is a particularly rich example of the representation of the extreme experiences of war, which, although lived through by the main protagonist and author, have not yet been experienced by him, because at the time of starting to compose his text, he initially has no memory of these “experiences”. These events only become constructed as experiences through his narrative, as he unearths archival footage along with his own and other people’s partial and often garbled representations of the events. These he compiles into an unconventional narrative (represented in a comics-style graphic narrative and an animated documentary film form), which becomes his own story and his present experience of being involved in these extreme events.

Key words: representation, language, experience, discourse, self-conscious, memory, forgetting, image, trauma, subjectivity, *Waltz with Bashir*

The struggle to represent in the context of the Lebanese war

Raz Yosef’s recent article, “War fantasies: Memory, trauma and ethics in Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir*” claims that the Folman’s 2008 animated documentary film about the 1982 Lebanese war represents the decline of representations of historically accurate Israeli collective memories of the First Lebanese War

and the rise of more expressive individual representations depicting memories that Israeli Defense Force soldiers have of the war. Yosef describes the plot of Folman’s film thus:

The film is a hallucinatory quest into the depths of director’s consciousness as he tries to reconstruct

three days of the war that have been entirely erased from his memory. Specifically, Folman attempts to locate his repressed traumatic memory of the massacre in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. The film is an animated documentary – an animation based on documentary video footage – comprised of conversations that Folman conducted with friends and journalists who took part in the war, as well as with psychologists who specialize in post-traumatic stress disorder and who tried to help the filmmaker reconstruct those missing days from his distant past. (2010: 311)

Yosef points out that this is not the first time that the drawn-out, controversial and traumatic First Lebanese War has been represented in Israeli film. He argues that recent Israeli films such as *Waltz with Bashir* tend to depict the personal psychological struggles that the Israeli left had to contend with when considering their complicity in the war, because this was not accommodated in the greater Zionist collective memory. Thus such films grapple with

one of the most interesting phenomena in contemporary Israeli cinema: films that explore repressed traumatic events from the First Lebanon War, events that have been denied entry into the shared national past. (Yosef 2010: 313)

Yosef points out that what such filmed representations still fail to do is to engage with the experience of the (often Palestinian) Other.

Another set of representations that is relevant to *Waltz with Bashir* is Lebanese film. The Lebanese film industry, like its Israeli counterpart, has also made enormous strides of late, featuring prominently at prestigious film festivals around the world. It is interesting to note that in the context of Lebanese cinema, until recently, methods of representation have tended to be depictions of personal perspectives on political events (most notably the “civil” war) and have also tended to be primarily realist (Khatib 2008). Lebanese film maker, Samir

Habchi, offers a possible explanation for this pervasive theme: “I don’t remember a time in my childhood where there was no war” (Khatib 2008: xxi). However, as much as organizing itself around the war, “Lebanese cinema also hides the realities of wartime ... shying away from representing the society’s inherent fragmentation ... the cinema is as much concealing as it is revealing” (Khatib 2008: xviii). As with the Israeli films listed by Yosef that represent the Lebanese war, this also points to a struggle to represent and engage with the experience of the war within Lebanese film, although for different reasons. It may also point to some of the general predicaments in representing extreme, “forgotten” and contested events, most especially the issue of collective and personal memories and how this drives both what is represented in narratives and how narratives represent.

The meaning of experience and representation in *Waltz with Bashir*

Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* narrative describes the extreme experience of how Folman and others dumped corpses mechanically during the 1982 Lebanese war “as if we weren’t there” (Folman and Polonsky 2009: 33). In *Waltz with Bashir*, these and other traumatic experiences that are narrated via different modes of representation are initially only partially “experienced” as if the protagonists were absent. But their horrific experiences are (re) created via the act of narration as they come into being in a text. In this way, *Waltz with Bashir* not only suggests, but in fact demonstrates that experience may be “fundamentally discursive”, as Van Alphen has claimed.

[E]xperience depends on discourse to come about; forms of experience do not just depend on the event or history that is being experienced, but also on the discourse in which the event is expressed. (Van Alphen 1999: 24).

In this article I explore the shifting predicament inherent in the concept of experience-representation in this text, via Kahneman's and Foucault's models of memory and experience-representation. Although Van Alphen and others, including Cathy Caruth, have claimed that some extreme events are not representable, my contention is that Folman's text is an example of representing extreme experiences through discourse in a way that allows the author (and possibly readers/viewers too) to integrate the traumatic events that s/he has lived through into a representation that s/he can experience in the present. The *Waltz with Bashir* text is thus an instance of a performance of transforming lived events into experience. In this way it goes further than theoretical texts that simply consider this possibility from a meta perspective. As a work of art, *Waltz with Bashir* lays bare how, through unconventional narrative means, such "failed" experiences/events that have only been lived through (Van Alphen 1999: 26), can actually become successful experiences when they are represented in discourse.

I argue that this is because of the extraordinary way in which *Waltz with Bashir* does not tie itself down to conventional narrative techniques and "languages" of representation. It is, rather, through innovative and irregular "languages" of representation that *Waltz with Bashir* manages to express some of Folman's extreme experiences, precisely because these do not offer an accurate or linear representation of reality.

Waltz with Bashir is, among many other texts that it draws into its frame, a Hebrew-language film written and directed by Folman. It is also a graphic novel, titled *Waltz with Bashir: a Lebanon war story*, based on the film and co-authored by Folman and Polonsky (the illustrator and art director of the film). Animated documentary is a recent sub-category in the documentary genre. In its struggle for authentic representation of reality, the documentary genre has always been torn between those who

skillfully edit already existing archival material to compose "new" texts of their own and those who eschew previous representations and insist on "being there" themselves (Baron 2007: 13). *Waltz with Bashir* is composed of archival material (photographic and the written reports of journalists), other "ordinary" people's accounts of the war and Folman's own recollections of being in Beirut. This further enhancement of the illusion of documenting reality is achieved by using an animation technique to produce the film that was made to look like rotoscoping (an animation style that uses drawings over live photographic footage).

Although representation through photography may appear "real", it obviously also masks a portion of reality. Photography is, though, unlike animation. In animation the reader/viewer does not expect there to be any referent in the real world beyond the representation. The viewer/reader is happy to settle for what s/he sees as being all there is. As Rozenkrantz asserts in his analysis of animated documentary, "[T]he only existence that an animated image can ever attest to is that of the drawings that constitute it" (2011: 10). The conflation of these seemingly disparate ontologies of animation, comics-style drawing, and the documentary aspects of photography make animated documentary and *Waltz with Bashir* ideal for probing issues of representation and experience.

The content of *Waltz with Bashir* focuses on a "real" person, Ari Folman, now an artist, who was once an Israeli soldier. When he wanted to leave the army more than twenty years later, he heard from his superiors that he had apparently taken part in the First Lebanese War in 1982. Folman had, however, no memory of the war. *Waltz with Bashir* depicts him in search of his lost memories and gives, among other things, a complex account of the nature of memory, placing the exploration of memory within a striking nexus of remembering and forgetting.

A significant incident near the beginning of *Waltz with Bashir: a Lebanon war story* by Folman and Polonsky succinctly demonstrates the complex conception of experience-representation, memory and forgetting performed by the text. Folman visits his best friend, who is a “shrink”, after his first flashback of the war in more than twenty years. This flashback occurs in the context of the construction of a shared narrative when the author converses with a friend about the events they have both lived through (Folman and Polonsky 2009: 14).

In this incident, Folman uses an expert opinion to show that memory fills in the gaps that forgetting leaves and thus has the potential profoundly to change the way we represent (and thus have) experiences. The expert opinion itself, which forms part of Folman’s narrative, also becomes part of Folman’s understanding, as he transforms the events in the flashback into experience. What he remembers and what he has forgotten, as well as the context of the narrative in which it is placed, thus become part of his experience of the event. In order to experience, Folman needs to remember or represent himself taking part in the event and relating to it in the present, not just living through it in the past. Folman does this by managing to approach the event through the distancing device of the expert opinion of his friend.

In the first place, this scenario from the *Waltz with Bashir* text establishes a striking tension between experience and memory, in which the relationship of both to reality becomes less significant than what part of the event can be brought into the scope of present experience. For Folman, his present self-conscious representation of himself to himself, which includes his forgetting – in the narrative present of the text – is the only “experience” he is aware of and it is therefore all-important in terms of understanding what happened and to whom it happened (Folman and Polonsky

2009: 26). This discursively constructed “experience” is necessarily bound up with representation, memory and self-consciousness, without which full experience is not possible. Trauma, by its nature, disrupts what we think of as “experience” because it is an extreme event beyond the boundaries of what we can easily accommodate as real or verifiable. Following Caruth (1995), Yosef writes that trauma thus presents “a crisis of knowledge and representation” (2010: 317). In this way, the existence of trauma calls into question categories of “memory”, “representation” and “experience”. It is these categories that need to be re-negotiated in the narrative.

According to Van Alphen, experience is clearly distinct from merely “living through” an event, where, especially in the case of traumatic events, merely living through an event, without reflecting on it and representing it through memory or otherwise, cannot allow it to be experienced (Van Alphen 1999: 27). Thus it follows that there is no experience without representation; experience is “a linguistic event” and “subjects are the effects of the discursive processing of their experiences” (Van Alphen 1999: 25).

This implies that if traditional forms of discourse do not accommodate the representation of trauma then trauma cannot be experienced in the ordinary sense and must indeed be a kind of “failed experience” (Van Alphen 1999: 26). Thus, in this idiom, the discrepancy is between what we live through and our experience/representation of it and not between representation and experience.

In the *Waltz with Bashir* text, there is initially no possible narrative of the event that Folman’s military superiors claim he has lived through, but only a narrative construction of the process of the interplay of forgetting and remembering and re-presenting the self’s story to the self. This arrestingly foregrounds forgetting as an indispensable part of the ex-

perience of memory and representation, and is contrary to the popular conception of memory as having a clearly definable relation to reality, which can, at some point, be exhaustively uncovered through the functioning of memory as a reliable identifier of “authentic” experience. It also demonstrates that this narrative is an instance of the fundamental role that discourse plays in “the process that allows experiences to come about” and that discourse (representation) can no longer be seen as “a subservient medium in which experiences can be expressed” (Van Alphen 1999: 25). By this token, it seems more and more likely that Folman merely lived through the war, as his superiors claim, but that through constructing the *Waltz with Bashir* narrative he comes to *experience* it. In other words, I am implying that experience, as a verb, means more than merely to “live through” an event or series of events. It is inextricably bound up with self-conscious narrative; indeed this is what Van Alphen means by calling experience a “symptom of discourse” (Van Alphen 1999: 24).

This is a valuable way to construct knowledge/experience out of traumatic events that have been lived through. It is a specific production of knowledge that allows us to come to experience. Caruth has valuable insight into knowledge production through trauma. First, she mentions the importance of finding out “how we might perhaps find a way of learning to express this truth beyond the painful repetitions of traumatic suffering” (1995: vii). Second, she eloquently insists that “This task ... calls for different ways of thinking about what it means to understand and what counts as truth and experience” (1995: viii). Finally, she emphasizes that

what is particularly striking in this singular experience is that its insistent reenactments of the past ... a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred ... precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned. (1995: 151)

The past that, for Caruth, is never fully experienced is redolent of Van Alphen’s “failed experience” (1999: 26) or merely living through events without experiencing them. Fully owning experience seems to be echoed in Van Alphen’s idiom as experience coming into being through discourse. This suggests that traumatic events, such as those Folman recalls and forgets in *Waltz with Bashir*, are a unique case of extreme events that have been lived through, registered in full force, but, in accordance with Van Alphen and Caruth, not yet fully experienced. My contention is that by creating the *Waltz with Bashir* text, Folman preserves some of the forceful quality of the particular events he lived through and then owns and fills out that “experience” through his self-conscious expression of some of it in his narrative. We can learn much about the process of experience-representation through an analysis of this text, which can show that it is possible to represent trauma.

The film-maker/author is at pains to suggest that, even as a possible witness to some real and traumatic events, his knowledge and his memory of having lived through this reality is only a small part of it. This implies that the experience of these events, what makes them live, comes about when we question, think about or represent them. He claims that his story is not about the historical events of the war, to which, in some sense, he will never have access. Instead, it is about “[M]emory – where do our memories go when we suppress them – *the question* of whether memories still live inside us or have their own way of living” (Folman in Vallorani 2009: 444, italics added). The most important implication of this statement is that treating experience and memory in this way entails that, as constructions of discourse, they become more than merely individual structures and thus the individual subject is no longer the “bedrock of evidence” for the fact that the events happened (Van Alphen 1999: 24). This point will be taken up later.

I also want to place Folman's text in the context of Kandel's recent neuro-scientific discoveries about the physiological basis of memory. Kandel's work suggests that there is no biological reason for forgetting events (a process that does not allow us to construct them through discourse and thus seems to defy experience) since these have necessarily been imprinted in our long-term memories, especially traumatic events that are imprinted into our neurons with the help of accompanying emotions and the hormones they cause to be released (Kandel in Seeger 2009). In fact, Kandel suggests that biology cannot adequately account for the struggle we have to recall traumatic events from our long-term memory. Accordingly, events that we have lived through are not lost to us but require some catalyst, such as representation through discourse, to become experience. If we follow Van Alphen's claim that we can only experience events that we can represent, then this would explain why we cannot recall events that are held in our long-term memories, until we have represented them.

In a self-conscious film titled *In search of memory* (director: Seeger 2009) about his own personal journey towards the representation of his experience of the trauma of Nazi-occupied Vienna during his childhood, Kandel declares that "[M]emory is everything. Without it we are nothing" (Kandel in Seeger 2009). This again suggests that representing the events we have lived through to ourselves in our memories is what makes us experience our identities. Merely living through an event without reflection on it is an inadequate condition for experience to take place.

The inadequacy of conventional narrative frameworks

Self-consciousness is linked to memory and representation and apparently lost in forgetting, which seems to work against experience.

Van Alphen asserts that discourse – although a necessary condition for experience – does not always provide adequate structures to express particular traumatic events, in fact there is a particular kind of “discontinuity between reality and discursive experience” at the time the events were lived through and a narrative frame for the events sometimes only offers itself retrospectively (Van Alphen 1999: 34). Van Alphen notes that narrative frameworks often “allow for an experience (of life) histories as continuous unities” yet “[I]t is precisely this illusion of continuity and unity that has become fundamentally unrecognizable and unacceptable for many survivors” of trauma. For this reason, conventional narrative frameworks fail them as a means of expression. Traditional narratives also fail as a means of reconciling what they have lived through with the inevitable self-consciousness and representation required to craft an experience out of the available discourse (Van Alphen 1999: 35). Van Alphen goes as far as to state that “in principle representation does not offer the possibility of giving expression to extreme experiences” (1999: 26).

In this interplay of remembering and forgetting, not the continuity and unity of traditional narrative frameworks, Folman attains experience. This leads Folman to seek other, unconventional “languages” in which to represent his experiences that can accommodate this interplay of self-presence and absence. He finds that non-traditional narrative forms are best suited to give expression to traumatic experience. Here Folman is a survivor, for whom traditional narrative frameworks have failed, but who has managed, through laying claim to less conventional and individually owned narrative frameworks, to craft experience out of the traumatic events he has lived through. The alternative languages of representation in *Waltz with Bashir* are able to accommodate the qualities that Folman comes to experience, such as absence and confusion, fracture and disjuncture.

Nietzsche, the great philosopher of language and representation and renowned wielder of the literary style (Deleuze 2001:65), has claimed that we forget in order to shield ourselves from the pain of being victims of the inadequacy of language to represent our experiences and that this profoundly limits and distorts our sense of being (1989). Although Van Alphen has recovered being by claiming that experience is constructed through discourse, he still proposes that there are some instances in which experiences fail, in which we cannot represent what we have lived through. While Nietzsche advocates ironic distance, laughter and sometimes revenge as a way to cope with this limited mode of experience (Nietzsche 1989), Kristeva claims that literature can go some way towards remedying the situation. According to Kristeva, literature provides a horrific, painful and transgressive space in which we may approach the (discursive) experience of our most intimate and abject crises (1982: 207). This space is disturbing even as it connotes a space of reflection; and here, art such as *Waltz with Bashir* can expand our repertoire of experiences and assist us to express, reflect on, and include into our sense of being some of what we have lived through.

A recipe for analyzing *Waltz with Bashir's* construction of experience

The complexities of the *Waltz with Bashir* text require a simple model of analysis to allow us to identify its representational techniques. In his recent lecture, “The riddle of memory versus experience”, Daniel Kahneman (2010) provides us with a simple practical model of how to understand the relationship between memory, experience and its story. He identifies aspects in terms of which representations can be analyzed in order to elucidate their relationship to experience.¹ Kahneman suggests that, in order to understand the nature of memory and experience, the story the self tells of its

experiences needs to be analyzed in terms of endings, significant moments and changes in the narrative. These three aspects of narrative have the greatest impact on the representations that our memories compose and they help the representing self to make selections from the myriad material available in memory.

All that is missing from Kahneman’s model of analysis to allow us to identify *Waltz with Bashir’s* representational techniques is the aspect of self-consciousness. In *Language to infinity* (1977) Foucault articulates the necessary self-consciousness of language that inevitably draws attention to its own construction each time it is used to tell a story. Foucault argues that when we use language to represent disastrous events that we have lived through, and thereby turned them into experiences, it is so that they will not be fully “experienced”, but rather “so that they will be averted in the distance of words” (Foucault 1977: 54). At first glance this may seem to be the opposite of what Van Alphen claims, namely that experience is actually constituted through discourse. But Foucault also describes the place where words operate as a dangerous space where language has the power to invoke the experience of terror – and he declares

[I]t is necessary to approach always closer to the moment when language will reveal its absolute power, by giving birth, through each of its feeble words, to terror. (1977: 65)

This suggests that, according to Foucault, it is necessary to involve oneself in the process where language transforms events merely lived through into experience, however terrifying this may be. This process allows enough distance and self-consciousness. This aspect of Foucault’s work impels a scrutiny of how the necessarily self-conscious language of representation or discourse of experience is itself constructed. This is what makes the space of literature a transgressive and terrifying space, according to Kristeva, because it is here that

we can approach the “intimate crises” (1982: 207) that we have lived through and preserve part of their unsettling quality as we evolve them into experience. Perhaps, in Caruthian terms, we may say that it is through constructing events we have lived through in discourse that we may avert the full force of the trauma that we have registered and then come to experience the event in a less concentrated way that we are more easily able to manage.

Foucault’s scrupulous analysis of language also provides us with a way of understanding the necessity of self-consciousness manifesting within representation: “[s]elf representation in language ...” is the “possibility for language ... to stand upright as a work ... constitutes its being as a work, and the signs that might appear from this must be read as ontological indications” of experience (Foucault 1977: 57). In addition, Foucault maintains that the self-conscious aspects of representation often present themselves as the apparently futile elements or slight imperfections on the surface of a work. He describes them as involuntary openings in what may seem to be a relatively straightforward narrative into an inexhaustible depth of serious ambiguity (Foucault 1977: 57, 63). This ambiguity seething beneath the surface of self-conscious representations, intermittently erupting and spilling out of such narratives, allows such language to accommodate the “terms and positions” (Van Alphen 1999: 27) in which to experience chaotic and forceful lived through events, in the structure of the representation.

A heady brew: an analysis of *Waltz with Bashir* in terms of Kahneman and Foucault

In the following section I will analyze one part of the *Waltz with Bashir* text in terms of all four critical factors in remembered stories or representations identified by Kahneman and

Foucault, namely changes in the narrative, significant moments in the narrative, the ending of the narrative and the self-consciousness of the narrative. Through this close reading, I shall show that Folman *is* able to construct experiences out of what he has lived through by representing events in unconventional ways that are not ordinarily available to him in conventional narrative frameworks. He uses these extraordinary narrative constructions to devise an experience for himself of the war that his superiors claimed he had taken part in. The part of the text that forms the basis for my analysis is largely taken from the last five pages of *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon war story* (the graphic novel).

The ingredient of a significant moment of change in the narrative

The final section of the text begins with a picture, drawn from archival footage, provided by Ron Ben Yishai, which does not form part of Folman’s own initial encounter with the massacre. Ben Yishai has been called “[I]srael’s most distinguished military correspondent” and, because of his considerable journalistic accolades and his relationship to the Israeli military, he had the dubious honour of being the first journalist to be allowed to enter the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps after the massacre (Ginsburg 2009). But Ben Yishai is also a character in the text, whom Folman interviews and represents as someone who did not take the opportunity of doing something to stop the massacre from occurring when he found out about it. Prior to this representation, Ben Yishai is depicted as enjoying a dinner party in his Beirut apartment with some Israeli army officers, where he is informed for the second time of the unfolding massacre. Only after this second alert does Ben Yishai phone Sharon, the then Israeli minister of defence, who assures him that things are under control. Thereafter, Ben Yishai is depicted as going to

sleep and, according to Ginsburg, “neglecting his duty as a journalist to investigate whether the former defence minister was lying” (Ginsburg 2009). Ben Yishai is portrayed as going to the camps the following morning, after the massacre has already occurred.

This picture represents a change and a significant moment in the narrative in that it is the last representation in the text that involves words as well as images. This implies that it is the last time that it is possible to say, or accommodate within discourse, anything about the traumatic events in an ordinary narrative, in which the “distance of words” (Foucault 1977: 54) can operate. Analysing the text in this way brings to our attention the different “languages” of representation that Folman is using as avenues to represent his experience. Whereas previously he could not remember anything of these events, now he has the possibility of representing them through still photographs and drawings and words (in the graphic novel) and moving pictures, a sound track, spoken language (in Hebrew) and English sub-titles (in the film). The possibility of representing these events in multiple and multi-layered ways, begins to open up an avenue for Folman to experience what he has previously only lived through.

The ingredient of self-consciousness

It is also at this moment in the story that these last words in the text, which are obviously self-conscious, are presented: “[A]nd then it came over me: what I was looking at was a massacre”. In this instance of representation the simplicity of the words seems to echo the language of the drawing almost perfectly and there is nothing more to say.² This heap of dead bodies of ordinary people is the last time in the narrative in which experience is represented at all in this way. Here the inadequacy of words to represent experience is actually being *performed* at this significant moment in the text.

Yet this is not the only avenue that Folman has opened for himself in this narrative in which to express his experience.

The reader’s awareness that the “language” of representation is changing at this point in the text, as words leave the stage, seems to be an example of Foucault’s notion of language drawing attention to its own construction “at the surface of the work” while underneath there churns an “inexhaustible depth of serious ambiguity” (1977: 57, 63). The reader is left with the notion that, although words are now becoming an inadequate means of representation, the narrative is still engaged in representation in other ways. This is also a clear example of Van Alphen’s contention that experience only comes about when we can represent events we have lived through within discourse. Up until the moment when Ben Yishai represents this in discourse, he has not yet experienced the massacre. He utters these words as the event of the massacre becomes his experience. But it is also at this moment that words leave the stage in terms of Folman’s representation of his experience. The “language” of words begins to fail in Folman’s narrative and he must insert this part of someone else’s experience (Ben Yishai’s) – in the form of drawn pictures (not photographs) – to construct his own experience of the events of the massacre. Folman is depicting Ben Yishai’s remembering-self constructing Folman’s memory of an event Folman cannot remember. This construction of Folman’s experience also suggests that we can no longer understand his experience as individual in the ordinary sense, since it already consists of both his and Ben Yishai’s representations. In Kahneman’s idiom, Folman’s remembering-self selects this particular moment to form part of his narrative and thus part of his experience of these events. Yet it is not even, strictly speaking, his “own” memory, or a record of the events that he himself lived through, but an experience-representation belonging to another self, and one with whom

readers/viewers struggle to identify positively. Significantly, this blurs the boundary between selves and individual experiences-representations profoundly in this narrative, suggesting that selves are also constituted within the contrivances and convolutions of discourse. Stunningly, it seems to be precisely this possibility for the chaotic nexus of individual and collective recall within the narrative – what has been referred to as “cultural memory” (Bal 1999: vii) – that allows Folman to experience the events of the massacre for himself, through the representations of another.

A profound irony is revealed at this moment in the text, where an apparently rare moment of clarity – the last moment in the narrative when experience comes into being through discourse – is not really a moment of clarity at all. It is one that is abstracted and deferred by the inevitable complexity of representations-experiences. This also implies that the boundary between Kahneman’s remembering self (the self that represents) and his “experiencing” self (the self that lives through events) can be blurred. This seems to support the notion that the one who merely lives through events can transform this encounter into experience through representation, as long as discourse provides an avenue for this representation. In this instance Folman could not find a path through which to represent his own encounter and so he used someone else’s, which then became his experience.

It also suggests that it may not be all-important to the remembering, experiencing self that the story it tells enables a “real” placement of the experiencing-self inside the events. It may simply be important that there is a story for the remembering self to draw on, which can provide self-consciousness and experience to the self who is telling the story in the present. This understanding provides the potential for a language of representation that lies outside the confines of accuracy. It also preserves our understanding of the quality of experience

(and discourse) as multi-layered, confusing and fractured.

The ending of the narrative

The last two pages of drawn pictures in the graphic novel come directly after the significant moment just discussed, immediately after the words have left the stage. Following these drawings, the last two pages of the narrative change to archival photographic imagery of the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. These photographs appear to be a stunning example of what Barthes insists are rarely occurring photographs of trauma. Barthes asserts: “[T]ruly traumatic photographs are rare, for in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene ‘really’ happened” (1977: 30). Clearly, although these scenes were lived through, it is not quite so clear who experienced them and what was experienced. Yet, they too form a part of Folman’s experience as represented by his narrative, just as the testimony of the expert witnesses in his text do. Once again, this reconstitutes our understanding of the individual subject as the basis of evidence for experience.

The way Folman’s narrative sequence changes at the end from drawn pictures/animations to still photographs of the aftermath of the massacre is also significant. On the first level, the death, stillness and the end of a particular experience in a literal sense are emphasized by this language of representation, since here the reader/viewer is presented with still photographs as opposed to the previous animations of the film. In both the film and the graphic novel, these life-like photographic images are conspicuously motionless. As these representational languages change at the end of the text, evocatively, the face of the distressed victim from the drawn graphics immediately before the photographs is easily associated with the photograph that follows it. The face of this woman is emblematic of other similar faces

that appear in the sort of work that influenced Folman in the construction of this text, such as the following depiction of a woman's face from Sacco's *Palestine*, which Folman claims as one of his major influences.

Once again Folman's construction of his experience is shown to come partly from sources outside himself. Readers already know this woman by the time we "read" her photograph in the archival footage because we have met her earlier in the sequence of drawings immediately prior to the photograph. We also assume that this real, now-familiar, woman was not only part of the event that the author lived through but that she is experienced by him, and now accommodated in this discourse of the event. Although, on the one hand, the image powerfully links our perception of the author's experiencing self with this particular victim, we are also profoundly aware of the complexities of such linkages because the author's experience is *drawn* rather than photographed, suggesting that it is constructed, and his story has been pieced together from bits of other people's experiences (as represented in the discourse by the archival photographs) as well as his own.

It is as if Folman is haunted by a nightmarish experience of myriads of these tormented women, even though he had not yet experienced all of them directly himself. It is this multi-layered, "collective" experience that Folman has opened a space for in his unconventional narrative. This has allowed him to represent his experience in a discourse that previously did not allow for such possibilities.

Also, the reader/viewer is struck by the contrast between the foregoing images of the massacre and this photograph. Up to this point in the narrative the drawings have drawn attention to their own construction – the brush on the page – rather than to an accurate and realistic memory of the objects they depict. In this context, these photographs crown the

foregoing, drawn representations with the illusion of objectivity, accuracy and a close link to reality.³ But the reader, having encountered the drawn version of some of these photographs before in the texts, is simultaneously confronted with the notion that they are images linked to subjective experiences. This again opens up the space within the narrative for the representation of clashing experiences, perspectives, understandings and representations, all of which Folman can now include within his experiential repertoire.

In his essay, "The photographic message", Roland Barthes alleges that because, of all images, only a photograph seems to transmit a message that is directly related to "the scene itself, the literal reality" (1977: 17) and is not embedded in a code that the viewer must decipher, a photograph appears to be the only kind of image in which there is no duality in the message it transmits. Indeed, in a literal sense, photographs appear to be two-dimensional pictures, as opposed to drawings, which are textured and three-dimensional. At first glance, this makes drawings appear to be a richer, more ambiguous language of representation than photographs.

But Barthes stresses (1977) that a photograph is still *interpreted* by the reader/viewer: it is decoded as one of a stock of already established representations and it represents an artificially discrete moment in the life of the object that did not exist in reality. Also, as we have seen, the reader's/viewer's stock of already established tools for interpretation has been made up by a similar *drawn* picture of this woman now seen in the photograph. Thus the text shows that the photograph is yet another image-rich representational language that provides a vehicle for Folman's traumatic experience.⁴

Barthes' further comment that "in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene 'really' happened: *the pho-*

tographer had to be there” (1977: 30, original italics) is particularly relevant for Folman’s story. In Van Alphen’s idiom this is a claim that in the case of the discourse of photography, the author must have lived through the event that is being constructed as experience in discourse. If this is so and the photographer was there and is proved to have lived through the events depicted in the photographs, then photographs would be a clear example of a case in which memory is not fluid. But, in Folman’s case, the notion of the ambiguous flux of memory and experience is preserved and expanded through the use of photographs alongside other languages of representation.

Folman’s case is extraordinary. He finds himself in the predicament that he has no memory of being there and indeed, these are not “his” photographs at all. So, in some sense he was not there and did not directly live through what he is representing as an integral part of his story or experience. Yet, the startling images still form part of his self-conscious memory and thus part of his narrative experience of the war. Folman was impossibly both “there” and “not there”. The text captures both conditions and remains unresolved. This reads like another instance of the self-conscious opening at the surface of the work into Foucault’s “inexhaustible depth of serious ambiguity” (1977: 57, 63). It has the effect of enriching the experience represented with an intense and chaotic quality provided by the structure of the representational languages themselves. This effect, brought about by reflection, would seem not to be present when one merely lives through traumatic events without experiencing them.

Change in the narrative

Another example of a significant moment of change in Folman’s narrative is to be found on pages 58 and 59 of the graphic novel. On these pages the regular arrangement of the graphic

elements (frames) is noticeably changed and the frames appear to be broken apart and scattered across the pages. This is the setting for a further salient example within the text of a discussion of the relationship between photographic representations and living-through events. It is also a visually rather jarring point of inclusion in the narrative of the opinion of another expert witness as part of Folman’s representation of his own experience. In this excerpt Folman depicts himself, through comics-style drawings and words, speaking to a known expert on combat trauma. This expert tells him of a case where the photographer was able to keep living through traumatic events, precisely because he did not experience their trauma. He did this by imagining that he saw everything “through the lens of an imaginary camera” (Folman and Polonsky 2009: 58). In Barthes’s idiom, this would prove that he had to be there, yet he used it precisely to distance himself from what he saw. One day he could no longer imagine this and he began to experience what he saw. The implication is that he was severely traumatized. But the text depicts this trauma in drawn graphics, contrary to Van Alphen’s claim that some extreme experiences remain, in principle, unrepresentable. This indicates that traumatic events can be successfully recapitulated into experience when discourse offers some possibility for representing them.

It is interesting to note that the possibility offered for the representation of these traumatic events is, once again, largely wordless, like the last pages of the graphic novel where traumatic scenes are also depicted. However, there are no photographs in this representation, just drawings, with their implied link to subjectivity and fabrication, and only the notion of imagined photographs, which may be associated with objectivity (on page 58). This suggests that, for Folman, it is his imagination that helps him to construct irregular avenues within discourse for him to call his experiences into being. He is thus able to represent to him-

self that he was both there and not there, an important part of his experience. The frames on page 59 are noticeably disturbed from their usual neat arrangement across the page. It is as if each image depicts a distinct, unintegrated event, untidily thrown together with others, without the seemingly clear and unmistakable meanings that words or photographs might offer. However, Folman has integrated them into his narrative and thus represents them as part of his own experience.

For more than twenty years Folman found no language in which to represent to himself that he was there and therefore he did not experience himself as being part of the events of the war. This is an example of how merely living through traumatic events fails as a system within which to represent experience. In the face of this initial failure to bring his lived events into the scope of discourse and thus experience them, Folman self-consciously co-opts other languages of representation and sometimes even other people's languages of representation. Sometimes these languages are drawings – a form of representation that focuses our attention on the process of their construction and the multiple opportunities for interpretation. This gives Folman the opportunity to represent his experience as intense yet baffling. In adopting these sometimes conflicting and obtuse languages of representation, Folman manages to bypass the need to represent himself as being linked to reality in an individual, ordinary or strictly accurate way and he thus broadens his experiential repertoire.

Conclusion

My article began by establishing the context of the struggle to represent the traumatic experiences of the Lebanese war in 1982 both in Lebanese and Israeli cinema. It pointed out that often, traditional forms of discourse do not accommodate the representation of trauma

and that the effect of this is that then it is assumed that trauma cannot be experienced. This is despite the fact that scientists such as Kandel have insisted that there is no biological basis for “forgetting” in the event of traumatic events. I then explored some possible explanations for this predicament of representation and experience of traumatic events, by referring to Caruth's view that trauma cannot be represented and Van Alphen's related notion that experience is merely a symptom of discourse. I then began to suggest, via a detailed analysis of Folman's innovative *Waltz with Bashir* text within the animated documentary genre that there are some novel possibilities for representing extreme experiences that have been hitherto thought of as unrepresentable. My argument has been that this is because of the unexpected way in which *Waltz with Bashir* does not tie itself down to predictable narrative techniques and ordinary languages of representation. It is rather through inventive and irregular methods of representing, which do not only consist of words, that *Waltz with Bashir* manages to express some of Folman's extreme experiences, precisely because these are not necessarily an accurate, linear representation of reality.

I have offered some explanations for this by referring to Kahneman's conceptual tools of the remembering-self as distinct from the experiencing-self and Foucault's cogent discussion about the necessary self-consciousness of language and, at the same time, the inevitably distancing effect of words. Kahneman's and Foucault's ideas were applied to an exploration of the representation of memory and experience in *Waltz with Bashir* by isolating four critical factors in remembered stories and identifying how these work in the primary text. These four critical factors in representations are changes in the narrative, significant moments in the narrative, the ending of the narrative and the self-consciousness of the narrative. Ultimately, my analysis of *Waltz with Bashir* and the way it deals with memory,

experience and representation has shown how the possibilities for representing traumatic experiences may be expanded through unconventional narrative means.

Notes

- 1 This view of experience is what Van Alphen calls the common sense view, where “experience is something subjects have, rather than do” (1999: 24). This view of experience assumes that it is unmediated and does not depend on discourse to come about. However, if for the sake of argument, one re-interprets Kahneman’s view in terms of experience as a “symptom of discursivity” (Van Alphen 1999: 24) then Kahneman’s experiencing self is the self that only lives through events and his story-telling, remembering self is actually the self in which experience is constituted.
- 2 It must be remembered that Folman authored (and Polonsky drew) this representation from Ben Yishai’s archival photographs of this event. Here Barthes’s commentary, as applied to the “original” photograph, is relevant. According to Barthes, “a description of a photograph is literally impossible” because “however much care one takes to be exact” the description of the photograph cannot but be inadequate (1977: 18). This suggests that any re-representation of the “original” photograph will be a new creation.
- 3 Although this is true in both the film and the graphic novel, it is particularly striking in the film. In his article, “Towards a theory of animated documentary”, Rozenkrantz discusses the claim that the photograph (perhaps the quintessential image-rich form of representation) is a special case of representation because it can only exist as a representation of an object that “really” exists (2011: 9).
- 4 The implicit distinction between the quality and the accuracy of an experience referred to in this article is discussed by Barthes in “The photographic message” (1977), where he celebrates the accuracy of a photographic representation, but points out that this very accuracy necessarily prohibits a representation of the quality of the

experience of encountering the object because it merely represents one artificially discrete moment in the life of the object, which is not experienced that way in reality (1977).

Works cited

- Baron, J. 2007. Contemporary documentary film and “Archive fever”: history, the fragment, the joke. *Velvet light trap* 60: 13–24.
- Barthes, R. 1977. “The photographic message”. In: Barthes, R. *Image music text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Paperbacks, 15–31.
- Caruth, C. (ed.). 1995. *Trauma: explorations in memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Deleuze, G. 2001. *Pure immanence: essays on a life*. Trans. A. Boyman. New York: Zone Books.
- Folman, A. and Polonsky, D. 2009. *Waltz with Bashir: a Lebanon war story*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews*. Ed. D. Bouchard, trans. D. Bouchard and S. Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Ginsburg, S. 2009. Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* in *Zeek*. <http://zeek.forward.com/articles/115561/>. First accessed 1 March 2012.
- Kahneman, D. 2010. “The riddle of experience versus memory” on TED talks (www.ted.com) First accessed 8 March 2012.
- Khatib, L. 2008. *Lebanese cinema: imagining the civil war and beyond*. London and New York: IB Taurus and Co Ltd.
- Kristeva, J. 1982. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Miri, M. 1973. Memory and personal identity. *Mind* 82 (325), 1–21.

- Nietzsche, F. 1989. *On the genealogy of morals and Ecce Homo*. Trans. W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.
- Rozenkrantz J. 2011. *Colourful claims: towards a theory of animated documentary*. Posted by Film International 6 May 2011.
- Seeger, P. (dir.) 2009. *In search of memory*. Icarus films.
- Steiner, G. 1967. *Language and silence*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Vallorani, N. 2009. Voids of meaning: images and war memories. *Textus XXII* (2009): 443–456.
- Van Alphen, E. 1999. Symptoms of discursivity: experience, memory, and trauma. In: Bal, M., Crewe, J. and Spitzer, L. (eds). *Acts of memory: cultural recall in the present*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 24–38.
- Yosef, R. 2010. War fantasies: Memory, trauma and ethics in Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*. *Journal of modern Jewish studies* 9(3): 311–326.

Jeanne-Marie Viljoen is a Lecturer in English Studies at the University of South Africa. She is currently on study leave in Adelaide reading for a doctorate in cultural studies at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, at the University of South Australia.