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Waltz with Bashir: between representation and experience

Jeanne-Marie Viljoen

Abstract

How to represent extreme, traumatic experience has long been a predicament in social science and literary criticism. This quandary is sometimes dealt with by claiming that such experiences are forgotten or leave their victims claiming they have had experiences that are too horrific to represent. This explanation leads to the position that representation is distinctly different from experience, and indeed insufficient by comparison. *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman 2008) is a recent text (at once a feature-length animated documentary film and a graphic novel) that deliberately employs a riotous combination of 'languages' of representation to probe the apparent inadequacies of language for representing extreme, traumatic experience. The aim of this article is to utilise Folman's text to challenge this apparently rigid distinction between experience and representation, and demonstrate the possibility of representation standing in for or becoming experience. Profoundly blurring the boundary between experience and representation in this way facilitates a richer explanation of the case of memory loss due to trauma and allows the recouping of some experiences that have previously been thought of as too horrific to represent. As a representation of an experience that he cannot remember, Folman's text, constituted largely through others' representations of the same events, becomes a substitute for his own lost experience. This text becomes both Folman's experience and his representation of events that were too traumatic for him to integrate at the time of their occurrence (the Lebanese War of 1982). Žižek's insistence on representation as a necessary part of the experience of violence and the experience of violence as needing to be indirect and inclusive of distance are drawn upon to enrich the explanation of what happens in memory loss. Here memory loss after 'unrepresentable, horrifying experiences' is referred to, where access to experience is usually thought of as hindered by the inadequacies of representation. As such, the representational techniques used in *Waltz with Bashir* combine to form a lavish literary trace – somewhere between experience and representation. This enables the construction of an inaccurate and fractured, yet intense and authentic version

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of well-known traumatic events that can be utilised in seeking a meaningful account of these occurrences.

Keywords: experience, memory loss, representation, violence, *Waltz with Bashir*, Žižek

***Waltz with Bashir*: between experience and representation**

As an animated documentary and a graphic novel,¹ *Waltz with Bashir* is an example of a contemporary text that deliberately attempts to present the reader/viewer with representations that allow for an encounter with the tentativeness, incompleteness, fracturing and surreality of trauma in the narrative context. As such, it seems to stand somewhere between experience and representation. The narrative of the text focuses on a ‘real’ person, Ari Folman, a former Israeli soldier who apparently took part in the First Lebanese War in 1982. When Folman wanted to leave the army, more than 20 years later, he found that he had no memory at all of the war, although the Israeli army claimed he had taken part in it. *Waltz with Bashir* depicts him in search of his lost memories. It offers, among other things, a complex account of the nature of memory, its relation to ‘real’ time and space, other human beings and ‘realistic’ narrative representations of the same events.

Waltz with Bashir uses a remarkable display of written and spoken text, graphic images, colours, sounds and silences – which refer to reality, dreams and half-conscious memories – to narrate the author’s experience of representing his possible horrific involvement in the First Lebanese War and in the ensuing Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps massacre.

Ari Folman: between the experiences and representations of others

Waltz with Bashir depicts a war in which the Lebanese Phalangist Militia perpetrated the now infamous Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps massacre – where rape, decapitation and the bodily mutilation of victims (mostly civilian Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese women and children) were particularly prevalent. Ari Folman, the filmmaker and co-author of the graphic novel, was a young Israeli Defence Force Officer stationed in Beirut at the time. He helped ignite illuminative flares fired into the night sky, which allowed the Phalangist Militia to kill with greater precision. For Folman, however, the trauma coagulates around his association of the horror of this incident with his parents’ treatment as Auschwitz victims. His subsequent flash of identification with the perpetrators of his parents’ misery makes the massacre too traumatic for him to recall, and initially also too horrific to represent. Folman overcomes this conundrum of having experienced something that is ‘lost’ to him by

representing it through the narratives of others. He does this by means of an intricate overlaid trace, until his representation becomes his experience – an experience that he can integrate to some extent.

Succinctly describing how the plot of Folman's film is made up of the experiences and representations of others, Raz Yosef (2010: 311) writes:

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.

The film makes liberal use of the technique of animating real images of interviews, battles, authentic conversations and archived photographs of the massacre captured on video (rather than rotoscoping²).

In its final scenes/pages, the animation in the *Waltz with Bashir* text gives way to journalist Robert Moyer's jarring, still photographs of massacred corpses lying in pools of blood and the excruciating pain on the face of a female survivor who, one assumes, witnessed this scene. These photographs at the end of Folman's text form part of Ron Ben Yishai's³ archival footage taken of the massacre shortly after it occurred (Ginsburg 2009).

In her enthralling book on Lebanese cinema, Lina Khatib (2008: 153) notes that history always consists of a hybrid of public and private knowledge and that 'public and private recollections both often work together to form what is known as collective memory'. She points out that one of the crucial implications of this is that our knowledge of history and our memories must thus necessarily be composed of gaps and inaccuracies. This is because some experiences of war and conflict are disallowed by popular memory, and thus are never recognised as part of the 'reality' of the conflict (Khatib 2008). *Waltz with Bashir* allows us to experience this idea from Folman's perspective. It is a record of how Folman's own memory and reality have been made up of other people's memories and recordings of history. Folman fills the gaps in his own memory not by remembering everything himself again in a series of expedient flashbacks, but by inserting parts of other people's private and collective narratives into his own, and making them part of his own experience. Without this 'language' his experience of events is unavailable to him, and forgotten by him.

Representational 'languages': between fantasy and reality

In the text the author explicitly sets up a connection between the representational languages of dream and memory, fantasy and reality. The author shows himself conversing with a friend who, he suspects, may have shared his experiences in the

war with him, despite the fact that the friend cannot remember anything of the war either. Folman bases his suspicions on the fact that he is disturbed by recognising the youthful face of his friend in a sepia image of them swimming naked in the Mediterranean Sea in Beirut. Folman is unable to categorise this haunting image as fantasy, dream or reality. Despite Folman's inability to remember the war, the friend states that both then and now, his (the friend's) representations of the war have always been constructed of 'escape[s] into sleep and fantasies' (Folman and Polonsky 2009: 22).

This representation demonstrates that the boundary between dreams, memories, desires, fantasies, consciousness and 'what really happened' can remain unresolved – suspended somewhere between experience and representation. This occurs throughout the text and is especially noticeable when the representational 'language' of surrealism is used. An effect of representing experience in terms of surreal visuals in the creation of an animated or comic-book documentary is to create the feeling of a noticeably dreamlike, drug-induced or seemingly 'unreal' and disturbing structural quality in the narrative.

The surreal is inexact, splintered, uncertain, incongruent and surprising. *Waltz with Bashir* is a warring text that enters the fierce fray between representation and experience, and heaves out contrasting meanings. On the one hand, the combination of the slow-moving gait of the characters in the film, the unrealistic colours, the sometimes out-of-place soundtrack and the occasional sudden jumps between frames give the viewer a distinctly 'unreal' experience. On the other hand, the recognisable cityscapes of Beirut during the period, the transcripts of 'real' sessions that Folman had with his psychologist (a known expert on trauma), statements by notorious politicians and an account of the same events by the renowned journalist, Ron Ben Yishai, all help to create an impression of authenticity, especially given that Ben Yishai was the first journalist to be allowed into the Sabra and Shatila camps after the massacre.

The effect of emphasising the surreal along with the real is to foreground the enduringly confusing and fluid quality of both experience and representation, rather than to clarify the relationship between real and remembered events with any precision. In terms of storytelling, the violent content of the *Waltz with Bashir* narrative provides a valuable site from which to probe the relationship between experience and representation. It repeatedly demonstrates that experience and representation are co-dependent and often also co-incident, especially in cases where trauma has been forgotten and subsequent representation and reflection become experience. Following Cathy Caruth (1995), Raz Yosef (2010: 317) writes that trauma thus presents 'a crisis of knowledge and representation'. In this way, the memory of trauma and violence spectacularly calls into question the often interwoven categories of understanding, such as 'memory', 'representation', 'dream', 'desire', 'fantasy',

‘consciousness’ and ‘experience’. These categories are constantly intertwined and respun by Folman in his narrative and contribute to a notion of experience as confusing, inconclusive and represented, yet intense and genuine. Ernst van Alphen (1999: 24) puts forward a somewhat similar position in his assertion that experience is composed of discourse, although he claims that many experiences remain too horrible to represent and thus fail as experiences. Folman seems to manufacture a notion of experience and representation that can accommodate such failure as well as a certain intensity – an interstitial zone where experience and representation seem, to some extent, to merge.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, the representation of ambiguous (and often surreal) aspects such as memories, dreams and desires serves to break down the binary opposition between representation and experience, and suggests that representation and experience are mutually dependent or, at least, necessarily coalesce. This suggests that the full quality of experience that the author so struggles to represent does not pre-exist experience, but is inherent in the representation of the experience itself, just as the struggle to represent is.

Žižek: between the visible and the invisible

That fact that *Waltz with Bashir* accesses a breach in the boundary between the experience of violence and its representation makes it an ideal candidate for the application of Slavoj Žižek’s (2008) theory of objective violence, as propounded in his six sideways glances at the topic. According to Žižek, violence may be divided into subjective (or visible) violence and objective (or invisible) violence. The former manifests as those cases most obviously seen (and often shown by the media) in incidences of war and conflict reportage. Strikingly, he refers to objective violence as the invisible violence lurking like an unapproachable backdrop to visible violence. According to Žižek, invisible, objective violence is a menacing system which, if unchecked, perpetuates visible violence. He proposes coming to grips with invisible violence in order to intervene imaginatively in the never-ending cycle of war violence, and suggests that the best way to access the invisible realm is through the indirect method of exploring art and aesthetic traces of such violence. According to Žižek, employing an indirect method of observation allows one to avoid the mystification of the common-sense method of looking directly at obvious violence in a way that keeps masking what must remain indistinct. Thus the indirect method paradoxically brings us closer to the object of investigation, but changes the goal of the investigation, which is no longer clarity. According to him it is only by preserving this lack of plainness and accepting that representation is an integral part of the experience of violence, that one can begin to access the zone of invisible, objective violence.

Exploring *Waltz with Bashir* through this Žižekian lens allows one to claim the significance of blurring the boundary between experience and representation, in order to more closely represent and experience violence. It also assists in describing what it might mean to be ‘between experience and representation’ in this context. It intimates that to have the potential to significantly intervene in its context, *Waltz with Bashir* should represent experience that is necessarily distant, inaccurate and indirect, yet simultaneously spectacularly visible, intimate and tangible. *Waltz with Bashir* is a text fraught with such tensions. It at once provides a strikingly close-up and poignant encounter with the Lebanese War, while providing a self-conscious look at the perspective of the author in what sometimes looks like a struggle to superimpose himself on the ‘outside’ events he is trying to own and make sense of.

Also, probing the relationship between the experience and representation of violence in this way allows for a richer description of cases where memory has been ‘lost’ due to trauma, or experiences are ‘lost’ because they are so horrendous they cannot be represented. According to this view one does not merely have to write these experiences off as inaccessible and ‘unrepresentable’, or to brand representation as hopelessly inadequate. It is possible to recapture these ‘lost’ memories and experiences in the zone where the boundary between memory and representation is indistinct. This is where experience is accepted as necessarily being inclusive of representation, and where indirectness and intensity, inaccuracy and visibility, distance and intimacy all coalesce in a dynamic conglomeration.

Photography: between presence and absence

In its final scenes/pages, the animation in the *Waltz with Bashir* text gives way to Robert Moyer’s archival photographs of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps massacre. These are the type of photographs that Žižek claims are often employed in documenting the visible violence of war. Interspersed amongst animated and drawn images, these archival photographs shock the viewer into reality. Yet, Roland Barthes (2000) warns that photography is not such a direct and realistic form of representation as it may seem, and is still interpreted by the reader/viewer: it is decoded by the reader/viewer as one of a stock of already established representations, and it represents an artificially discrete moment in the life of the object.

He claims that photography functions in ‘that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless before the eye’ (ibid: 59). Still photographic images are unlike the moving images of cinema: in cinema, the referent moves in front of the eye and does not remain ‘there forever’, but ‘is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images’ that keep assailing the eye (ibid.). This appears to emphasise the absence of the original experience from photographic images, rather than the continuing presence necessarily contained in them.

A further nuance to this insight is provided in the interpretation that a photograph may be seen as a trace (or the continuing presence) of the real entity that has been. Indeed, as Judith Butler (2009: 97) remarks about Barthes' argument in 'Camera lucida', '[t]he photograph relays less the present moment than the perspective ... on the absolute pastness of life'. In this sense war photographs, for all their stark gore, function as traces of absence and are still a startlingly indirect representation of reality, and one that necessarily gestures towards its own incompleteness and distance. Photography is a language of representation with an intimate connection to experience, but it still carries within it a distance and an indirectness. When framed in this way, even the representational language of photography has the potential to reach the invisible, because the representational 'language' of photography seems to be a distinctive mix of experience and representation. The reason for this is that it is often seen as direct and objective evidence, especially in the context of war and conflict that paradoxically only allows it to capture the visible, subjective violence that Žižek mentions. For this reason the incomplete, perspectival, absent, indirect, distant and invisible in what a photograph represents should receive some focus when considered as a 'language' of representation.

Placing these known images in the context of Folman's representation emphasises their presence as distinct representations in their own right. It also serves to highlight the constructed nature of Folman's experience and shows that in this instance he wholly relies on pre-existing representations to construct his own personal experience. Also, these real, photographed 'objects' within the context of an animated film mean that the images now form part of a moving *sequence*. As such, they simultaneously foreground the opposite, the stark absence, the death and stillness of their 'objects' of reference. This harsh juxtaposition of apparent presence and absence has a forcefully unsettling effect on the viewer, and as such is another example of how the 'language' of representation employed in *Waltz with Bashir* becomes part of the experience of the events it conveys.

Film: between meta and material

Waltz with Bashir is a story of a real war and of authentic, horrific experiences represented through still and moving drawings, which are obviously not factual or accurate accounts.

Describing the effect of horror on the experience of the viewer, Vivian Sobchack (2009: n.p.) coins the notion of oblique space to describe that moment, while watching a film, when one becomes aware of one's "newness" and "hereness" in the theater as well as the assault on [one] from the screen'. This suggests that film is a representation that is both direct and indirect in the Žižekian sense. Sobchack describes the experience of the viewer being in this oblique space in which one is both aware of the 'unreality' of the film *and* the bodily reality of the content of the film.

With regard to *Waltz with Bashir*, Sobchack's explanation of the viewer's experience of the film can be used to emphasise that Folman's film facilitates experiencing in a way that allows one to engage in a meta-analysis of the process of representation, as well as the intensity of the content of the horrific events being watched. The viewer may be said to enter Sobchack's oblique space through Folman's chaotic and varied representational languages, and may thus simultaneously experience both the film's meta and material reality. This creates a situation where experience and representation may be described as co-incident.

Animated documentary: between subject and object

Although Sobchack (1992) claims that film in general is a unique form of representation – precisely because it seems to capture reality while simultaneously being perceived as mediating reality – the burgeoning collection of animated documentary films about trauma (see note 1) goes even further. These animated documentary films seem paradoxically to show that the subjective, the strange, the fractured, the confusing, the personal, the inaccurate and the distant, represented, indirect and narrated, are all crucial to the experience of violence.

An understanding of animated documentary as a representational form pivots on the relationship between representation and reality. As such, the animated documentary is an established genre and from 'early on, animation was seen to have a unique representational function for the non-fictional moving image, one that could not be fulfilled by the conventional live-action, photographic-based alternative' (Honesty Roe 2011: 219). Recently, a number of animated documentaries, in addition to *Waltz with Bashir*, were produced to represent trauma (for example, Farkas' *The illustrated Auschwitz* and Yadin's *Silence*). The definition of the animated documentary, as a genre which is able to represent what live-action images cannot, is pertinent. This is because one may already have seen so many live-action war films, accurately depicting war and leaving a stock of now-established photographic images in one's mind, that the original significance of such signs is no longer wholly grasped. Thus, as Anabelle Honess Roe (ibid: 217) states, the 'animated documentary broadens and deepens the range of what we can learn from documentaries'. This is because it can show subjective states of mind, that are not filmable, as if they were part of reality. In this manner, the documentary is able to capture what is invisible to live-action films, and to establish contact with the invisible.

Comics: between words and images

Part of Foucault's analysis of the relationship between experience and representation is captured in his assertion that when one speaks of extreme experience, it is done so that it will not be fully realised, or so that it can be realised in a way in which it can

be dealt with or successfully experienced. Thus, according to Foucault (1977: 54), we represent disasters in language ‘so that their fulfilment will be averted in the distance of words’. This implies that the indirectness which Žižek suggests is such a necessary part of experience, may be sought in the representational language of words.

If the representational language of images provides a more direct link to (extreme) experience than other representational languages do, it is imperative that these images of violence be coupled with words – if they are to facilitate access to the invisible and to escape the mystification of the direct. Žižek (2008) claims that it is often the media’s image-rich portrayal of exclusively visible violence that conceals the objective, invisible violence seething below the surface, and which should receive attention. The implication here is that combining the representational language of words and images, or not solely using images to report the violence of war, could assist the viewer in accessing invisible violence, rather than locking him/her in a state of perpetually only intervening on the visible level.

Folman does not confine himself to representing extreme experiences solely in his narrative in drawings or photographs, but skilfully combines these with the representational language of words. Consider, for example, the drawn image of a pile of corpses, viewed through a gap in the rubble. The last image in the graphic novel, it also features words, before the narrative gives way to a series of wordless images, depicted variously as realistic and unrealistic. This image is coupled with Ron Ben Yishai’s actual words, which he claims to have used while having his experience, ‘and then it came over me: what I was looking at was a massacre’ in which he represents his experience (Folman and Polonsky 2009: 113). In this instance, Ben Yishai’s representation seems to be co-incident with his experience, or at least seems to fill out his experience and make it what it is.

Nicoletta Vallorani (2009: 445) puts forward an account of how the tradition of war reportage relies on images to carry meaning ‘directly’ to the subject:

The tradition of conflict reportage heavily relies on images Words on wars are normally coupled with images that are supposed to provide the public (readers and/or audience) with a more precise and reliable perception of the conditions of war.

Vallorani’s presentation of the argument that images, rather than words, seem to provide more direct access to experience, is similar to Barthes’ (1977) assertion that words are parasitic, that they try unsuccessfully to intensify access to meaning. Both of these arguments, however, run counter to Žižek’s, namely that indirect representation is an essential part of experience because it facilitates access to the otherwise invisible.

What is particularly incisive and relevant for Folman’s story is Barthes’ (ibid: 30, emphasis in the original) comment that ‘in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene “really” happened: *the photographer had*

to be there'. In view of this proclamation Folman's case is remarkable, since he finds himself in the predicament that he has no memory of being there and thus has no language with which to represent to himself that he was there or was even indirectly present. In this instance, memory fails as a system with which to represent experience. Other languages of representation – the combined language of words and images – become necessary to incarnate the indirect link between Folman and his experience, and Folman and his representation, where his representation and his experience are co-incident.

Conclusion(s)

Representation is an inextricable part of experience, and experience is an inextricable part of representation. Experience and representation are mutually constrained and inhabited. The text *Waltz with Bashir* is a representation of its author's involvement in violent experiences which he initially found too traumatic to represent, and his experience of these events. However, the author's representation of these events stands in for his lost memory of this violence and becomes his experience of these events. His representation and experience are thus co-incident and mutually defining. It is in this interstitial space where the boundary between experience and representation falls away that the author is able to access what was previously invisible. The article has analysed this in-between space and the multiple languages of representation that provide access to this realm.

It is imperative to consider Žižek's argument, that it is only by accessing the invisible realm of subjective violence that one may arrest the perpetual cycle of violence. Žižek claims that access to this invisible realm is best facilitated through indirect forms of representation that eschew the mystifying force of directness. Only after escaping from the erroneous and fruitless burden of providing direct access to one's experiences only through all-too-often inadequate representations of them, does one begin to realise that representation is an essential part of the experience of violence. This understanding enables one to represent what may hitherto have been thought of as unrepresentable.

Notes

1 A graphic novel is a long fictional work with comic content, but which is not a comics periodical. McCloud (1994: 20) defines comics as juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or cause an aesthetic response in the reader/viewer.

2 Rotoscoping is an old-fashioned animation technique predating the extensive use of computers in animation. It was generally used to add a touch of realism to animated sequences and was a process in which animators traced over (often live action) footage projected onto a frosted glass panel, which was then re-drawn by the animator.

3 Ben Yishai, arguably Israel's most celebrated military correspondent, is also a character in Folman's text.

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