

Waltz with Bashir

Kate McCurdy

Nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, *Waltz with Bashir* is attracting audiences from all over the globe, if not just for the fascinating content of the film, but for the way it has been presented.

The film is the true story of filmmaker Ari Folman's journey to recover missing pieces of his memory from the days of the Lebanon War in the mid 1980s. It was first shot as a live action documentary of interviews with Folman and his old friends and comrades from around the world. However, the surreal and unreal images conjured up by the recollection of these events meant that for Folman, it was 'only natural to transform the quest into animation, full of imagination and fantasy'.

From live-action to animation

Yoni Goodman, Director of Animation on *Waltz with Bashir*, recalls that the initial interviewing process of the film took about 18 months, while the animation time extended the project's production time by a year. Folman interviewed ten people who were present during the war, and wrote a script based on their responses. He then interviewed these people a second time, this time filming them and using the script as a guide, and the footage was edited down to a 96 minute video.

'Once the edited version was ready,' explains Goodman, 'David [Polonsky] and myself joined Ari and together we sat down on storyboard meetings, breaking the movie into scenes and shots, deciding which part would be a reconstruction of the memory, which part would be a "talking head", and which would be a dream or fantasy scene. After those meetings I translated them to storyboard, and my crew created the animatic, which is a sort of high-detailed sketch of the animation. At the end of that process Ari edited the animatic and we sat down and watched the whole movie as an animation sketch, detailed enough for us to give feedback and see if our initial ideas worked or not. After that part was approved, David and his crew began designing and breaking [down] the illustrations for the cutouts animation process.'





The animation team

Yoni Goodman's crew began with six animators, but grew to ten, in addition to David Polonsky's crew of three illustrators, although Goodman describes Polonsky as having 'drawn eighty percent of the movie by himself'. Responsible and invaluable to Polonsky's crew was Yaara Buchman, who broke every illustration down into thousands of pieces so that they could be moved and animated.

Waltz with Bashir. Dir: Ari Folman
2008. Source: Sharmill Films.
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Rotoscoping vs the Bashir technique

Contrary to industry rumours, the animation in *Waltz with Bashir* was not achieved through rotoscoping techniques and Goodman actively fights this misconception whenever he can.

'I'd like to state that the movie has absolutely zero percent rotoscope. Every time one of my animators hears or reads about someone on the other side of the planet saying the movie was in rotoscope, I get a phone call, regardless of the hours.'

Rotoscoping is an animation technique where animators trace over live-action footage, frame-by-frame, to create an animated version of the film movement. The original process involved the projection (rotoscope was the name given to the projection equipment) of images onto a frosted glass panel and these were then redrawn by the animator by hand. These days through the use of digital visual effects, rotoscoping now refers to the technique of manually creating a matte for an element on a live-action plate for compositing over a background. The animators behind *Waltz with Bashir* feel that the misconception that their animation was created with this technique diminishes the quality of their work. Goodman says that, in a way, this is true.

'Every movement in this movie was created and invented in the animator's head, and not copied over live footage. Sometimes we watched the interviews for reference, but we never drew over them. Instead we tried to stylise and re-create them.'

Goodman describes the technique he and his animation team devised for *Bashir* as being a lot of hard work, but ultimately achieves the effect that aligned with Folman's vision of his film.

'While rotoscope is a legitimate technique, I'm not very fond of how it's used in most cases,' Goodman explains. 'Most of the time it feels a bit like a Photoshop filter over live footage, and it lacks some spontaneity. Cutout was really our only option in terms of budget and manpower, and we tried to harness the disability of the cutouts technique to our advantage, making a simple and stylised movement, which allowed us to get different and rich results.'

Software used

The animation crew used Flash for the cutouts animation technique which was specially designed for this project, combining it with traditional animation processes to create the overall effect. A few shots also used 3D for camera movements in some scenes, but this was only used in a limited way. Effects such as smoke and explosions were added by the visual effects department later in the process.

Why animation – Folman's previous work, and conscious decision for animation

'*Waltz with Bashir* was always intended to be an animation,' Goodman says. 'This was Ari's vision from day one, we just sort of gave him the tools to do it. Like he says, if he had done it like an ordinary documentary, it would have been another talking heads and archive footage movie. We wanted to recreate the actual events, and to do more; to give the sense of anxiety, of fear, to really bring out the horrors of war through nightmares and hallucinations, and animation is really the best, and in my opinion, the only way of telling the story as it should be told.'

The effect of the animation style employed in *Waltz with Bashir* lends the film a surreal and dreamlike quality, while at the same time adding a chilling and moving reality, as well as a sense of history, to each story told by the interviewees. The simple and stylised movement of the characters over the backdrop of war gives the film a gentle pace which allows the audience to absorb and consider what they have seen, before moving on to Folman's next interview. The film builds towards the end, where the shock of realisation by Ari Folman's character is akin to the horror of waking from a nightmare only to find that it is real. *Waltz with Bashir* is intensely powerful with strong subject matter. However it is to the filmmaker's and particularly his animation team's credit, that it is also a very watchable and memorable film.

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