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## Waltz with Bashir (Vals Im Bashir)

William L. Blizek

University of Nebraska at Omaha, [wblizek@unomaha.edu](mailto:wblizek@unomaha.edu)

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## Waltz with Bashir (Vals Im Bashir)

### **Abstract**

This is a review of *Waltz with Bashir* (2008).

Ari Folman's animated film, *Waltz With Bashir*, has been a smashing success and it is easy to see why. Various elements of the film work in ways that no other way of telling the story would. To "waltz with" means to select a dance partner and to engage with that partner in a dance – a continuously changing, swirling motion of two people working together but with no particular purpose in mind other than the dance itself. Waltzing is not marching. Waltzing is not moving in a straight line toward an end point. Waltzing is moving together for the sake of moving together. On June 3, 1982, a Palestinian opposed to the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) attempted to assassinate Israel's ambassador to London. Three days later Israel invaded Lebanon in an effort to wipe out Yasser Arafat's PLO, an organization that had created an imbalance in the political forces of Lebanon, an imbalance that presented a serious danger to Israel. After reaching the goal of forty miles, the Israelis selected as its dance partner, Bashir Gemayal, a Maronite Christian who soon became President of Lebanon. Given its early military success, however, Israel went beyond the forty mile goal and came to the outskirts of Beirut. Here the dancers stumbled. The Israeli army surrounded the camps of Sabra and Shatila, the home to Sunni refugees. The Phalanges militia then entered the camps and slaughtered many of the inhabitants. While Israeli soldiers did not do the killing, they did stand by as the massacre occurred. It was one of Israel's darkest hours. On September 14, 1982, Bashir Gemayal was killed by the Syrians and the dance between Israel and its Christian partners came to an end.

*Waltz With Bashir* is the story of one Israeli soldier (representing other Israeli soldiers) and his effort to deal with his own experience in the war, but especially at Sabra and Shatila. It is a story about trauma, dissociation, and war. It is a story about memory and how the suppression of memory protects us from the ugliness that is ourselves. All of this is a result of the conflict between religions. Whether religion is the source of the conflict or an excuse for the conflict whose source

lies outside of religion remains an open question. But, religious conflict and cooperation continue to play a significant role in the failure to bring peace to the Middle East.

One of my colleagues said that he would not go see an animated film. However well done the movie might be or however important its message, it was still a “cartoon.” It is interesting, then, to see that the use of animation in the film is exactly what makes the movie work. The audience can empathize with the cartoon characters in a way that it could not with real actors, no matter how good their performance. The animation draws us into the film and its topic in a way that would not otherwise be the case and we are drawn into the heart of the film before we know it. The animation also gives the ending of the film much more power than it would otherwise have. It would not be the same movie with live actors and it would not have the same effect. In one important sense the animation gives the film a parallel to the problems faced by the soldiers themselves as they try to remember and cope with the experience with a massacre.