

**MEMORIES OF THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR. AN ANALYSIS  
THROUGH THE WORKS OF JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE,  
AND THE FILM *WALTZ WITH BASHIR* (2008), BY ARI FOLMAN**

*Memórias da Guerra Civil Libanesa. Uma análise através de obras de Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, e do filme Valsa com Bashir (2008), de Ari Folman*

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**Abstract**

In this article we discuss a series of video installations and two films by Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, whose career together has been strongly marked by the images and memories of their country's recent history, especially those of the long Civil War (1975-1990), followed by an analysis of the film *Waltz with Bashir* by Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman, which is thematically related to one of the bloodiest episodes of that war and offers an interesting counterpoint. Before this approach, in order to better contextualise the works analysed, we begin with an introduction in which we try to recall in general terms some of the background, data and stages of that war, which also involved two other regional powers, and the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation).

**Resumo**

No presente artigo abordamos uma série de instalações vídeo, assim como dois filmes, dos artistas libaneses Joana Hadjithomas e Khalil Joreige, cuja carreira em parceria tem sido fortemente marcada pelas imagens e memórias da história recente do seu país, sobretudo as do período da longa Guerra Civil (1975-1990), passando de seguida a uma análise do filme *Valsa com Bashir*, do cineasta israelita Ari Folman, que está tematicamente relacionado com um dos episódios mais sangrentos daquela guerra, e oferece um interessante contraponto. Antes dessa abordagem, para melhor contextualizar as obras analisadas, começamos por fazer uma introdução onde procuramos relembrar em traços gerais alguns antecedentes, dados e etapas dessa Guerra, que envolveu ainda outras duas potências regionais, e a OLP (Organização para a Libertação da Palestina).

**Keywords:** *Lebanese Civil War; Israeli invasion; Sabra and Chatila massacre; traumatic memories; PTSD.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Guerra Civil Libanesa; invasão israelita; massacre de Sabra e Chatila; memórias traumáticas; DSPT.*

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## INTRODUCTION

“And anything I remember now will hurt, memory is a vast wound” (Chico Buarque, *Leite derramado*)

In this article, we look at some artistic works and a film that have dealt more or less directly with the theme of the long and bloody Lebanese Civil War, which was caused by inter-religious disputes between various Maronite Christian and Muslim factions, and which, in addition to the Lebanese themselves, also involved, to their misfortune, the intervention of two regional powers that border this country, Syria and Israel, and that of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) – the political and military organisation considered by the Arab League to be the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people since 1964 - each supporting its own faction. Before moving on to the works analysed, however, we need to look back in general terms at some of the background, data and episodes of this armed conflict, in the course of which an entire society broke down, divided into armed militias and ethnic-religious enclaves.

After the so-called Six Day War in 1967, more than 300,000 Palestinians took refuge in Lebanon, a very high number for a country with just over 3 million inhabitants. This presence, which brought with it the PLO, changed the ethnic composition of the "Land of the Cedar" and disrupted the already fragile balance between the existing political forces. The Palestinians were supported by sectors of the left, Muslims and nationalists, and openly harassed by conservatives and the Christian minority. The accumulated tensions would eventually give way to open confrontation, which pitted a left-wing Druze-Muslim coalition (allied with the Palestinians) against a right-wing Maronite Christian alliance: the three main military factions were then the Druze militia (the strongest and best organised, under the command of Walid Jumblatt), Amal (Shiite) and the Phalange (Christian); the Lebanese Army itself would end up fragmenting into rival factions.

The Civil War essentially took place in the following main stages: from 1975 to 1977, bloody clashes between the various religious communities, which resulted in the intervention of the Syrian army – in 1976, faced with the imminent victory of the left-wing coalition, Syria invaded the country, albeit at the request of the Lebanese parliament, thus initially allying itself with Israel in supporting the Christians; between 1977 and 1982, Israel intervened in the south of the country to control the presence of

the PLO, which had established itself there in strength; the stage between 1982 and 1984, perhaps the dirtiest phase of the war, is essentially marked by the Israeli invasion from 6 June 1982, to expel the PLO from Lebanese territory, and the siege of Beirut, where the PLO had established its headquarters, which led to a United Nations intervention; finally, the last one took place between 1984 and 1990, despite the fact that the three main military factions had signed a ceasefire agreement in Damascus in 1985.

The *Taif Accords*, signed in 1990 in Saudi Arabia, put an end to the conflict: in the meantime, the city of Beirut, once known as the "Paris of the Middle East", had been left in complete ruins. Since then, in accordance with a 1989 constitutional amendment, the three highest political offices in the country have been held by representatives of the three most important religious communities: the office of President of the Republic is always obligatorily held by a Maronite Christian, that of Prime Minister by a Sunni Muslim, and that of Speaker of Parliament by a Shiite Muslim.

However, despite the end of the Civil War, Syria - which changed allies several times during the conflict, as did the various warring parties, in a confusing game of alliances and betrayal – maintained a military occupation of Lebanese territory and dominance of Lebanese institutions, and only withdrew its troops definitively in 2005, when it was accused of involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which took place on 14 February 2005 in Beirut, as a result of a major attack with the explosion of a booby-trapped car<sup>2</sup> –, after the combined pressure of large popular demonstrations and the diplomatic intervention of the US, France and the United Nations. For its part, Israel maintained its military presence in the south of the country, establishing a kind of "buffer zone", and would only definitively leave it in 2000.

Numerous atrocities were committed during the war, and none of the parties have clean hands - be they the Lebanese or Christian Phalanges, Israel or the Muslim groups and the PLO - but none will be as well known as the *massacre in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila*, perpetrated between 16 and 18 September 1982 by the militias of the Maronite Christian Phalange led by Elie Hobeika, allied with Israel -

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<sup>2</sup> Hariri, a prominent Sunni Muslim businessman and politician, served as Prime Minister for two periods: from 1992 to 1998 and between 2000 and 2004

which was totally complicit in what happened - which took place in revenge for the assassination on 14 September of the newly elected President of Lebanon (and Phalangist leader) Bachir Gemayel.

## **JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE**

Both from the city of Beirut, where they live, Joana Hadjithomas (b. 1969) and Khalil Joreige (b. 1969) have been working together for around twenty years, either through installations, videos or photographs, presented in galleries and museums, or as filmmakers, making fiction and documentary films that have been shown at numerous festivals, where they have won several awards. They are also professors at St Joseph University in Beirut.

His career as a partner has been strongly marked by the images and memories of his country's recent history, in which he has focussed his interest. Among other things, his work demonstrates, if it were necessary, the difficulties of making *apolitical* art in a socio-political environment that is often in a *state of emergency*. Here, we will focus on four video installations from a set of six, all of which were presented at the *Wish We Could Tell* exhibition, which took place in a large hall of the renovated Vila do Conde Municipal Theatre, and was part of a retrospective that the 17th/CURTAS Vila do Conde Festival (4-12 July 2009) dedicated to these Lebanese artist-filmmakers in its programme. Just one comment: it's a pity that this relevant exhibition, by artists from a country that usually has little visibility in the art world, only took place during the short period of the festival.

In addition, we will take this opportunity to make two brief references to two of his feature films, which are thematically related to two of the installations, and which we had the opportunity to see (in one case, review) on the same occasion.

### ***Distracted Bullets* (2005)**

*Distracted Bullets* is a 15-minute video installation made up of a series of five different and independent segments, presented in a loop. Each of them corresponds to a static shot, filmed from a viewpoint (similar in all of them) in a position overlooking the

city of Beirut, which allows for a wide panoramic view of it. These shots were filmed at the time of successive events - during festive or political events - that were celebrated there on precise dates, with fireworks and gunfire (something quite common in the Arab world): *13 September 2003*, the Feast of the Cross, Beit Mery, Metn; *3rd September 2004*, the re-election of Maronite Christian Emile Lahoud as President of the Republic – son of Jamil Lahoude, one of the leaders of Lebanese independence, he held office from 24 November 1998 to 23 November 2007; *31st December 2004*, the New Year's Eve; *28th June 2005*, Shiite Muslim Nabih Berri is re-elected President of Parliament – since 1992, Berri has been elected to successive mandates; *26th July 2005*, Maronite Christian Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces (since 1986), is released after 11 years in prison.<sup>3</sup>

**Figures 1, 2 and 3** - Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *Distracted Bullets* (2005).  
Images from three segments of the video.



**Source:** photographs by Carlos Trindade.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Samir Geagea was the only Lebanese militia leader to have been convicted and imprisoned for crimes committed during the Civil War. After the Syrian troops finally left Lebanon, the newly elected parliament voted to grant them amnesty on 18 July 2005.

More than first appears, this installation is a deeply political work. What the viewer sees and hears, and the artists try to make perceptible, is the result of a kind of topography of the city, which remains deeply divided after the end of the Civil War in 1990, into distinct zones (basically, a Christian Beirut and a Muslim Beirut), which you can realise if you pay attention to the spatial location of the of the sparkle and sparks from fireworks – the only movements we see [see figures 1, 2 and 3] –, as well as the accompanying sounds of gunfire ripping through the night, their quality and orientation: while some parts of the city are celebrating a particular event, in contrast, others remain completely alienated and quietly.

It is clear, however, that for a viewer unfamiliar with the topography of Beirut it is difficult to identify which zones correspond to each faction; this identification will only occur from the moment it establishes the link between a particular segment and the filmed event. Sound, in the case of this installation, is very important.

#### *Always with you* (2001-2008)

In the installation *Always with you* we are taken on a seven-minute walk through the streets of Beirut during the election campaign for the 2000 parliamentary elections. The video documents the huge overload of posters [see figures 4 and 5] and messages that "invaded" the city at the time, causing a veritable saturation of images, a real visual pollution: paradoxically, this saturation can have the opposite effect to that intended, leading to "invisibility" through *indistinction*. The title of this video refers directly to an unusual particularity of election campaigns in Europe; most of the political slogans displayed use language with sentimental connotations, such as the one used to name the installation, or others of the same kind: "For your eyes", "I'm not alone, you're with me".

*Always with you*, in a way, prolongs *Distracted Bullets* because, as TessTakahashi points out, both

...draw attention to social, religious, and political divisions within Beirut. These works capture minor events and ephemeral occurrences in order to challenge dominant, official histories. These works also make a gesture toward the cyclical nature of political life in a city that has been torn apart by civil war for much of the past 30 years. (Takahashi, 2009, p. 113).

**Figures 4 and 5** - Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *Always with you* (2001-2008). A profusion of posters on a street in Beirut, and posters on a ruined building.



**Source:** photographs by Carlos Trindade.

### ***Khiam 2000-2007*** (2008)

This installation, shown on two television screens next to each other [see figure 6], focuses on the history of the *Khiam* detention camp - a kind of concentration camp whose outer perimeter was completely mined - in the village of the same name in southern Lebanon, during the occupation by the Israeli army. The camp - under Israeli command but run by the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a militia made up of Christian mercenaries trained by Israel, acting "by proxy" - was used to imprison Lebanese men and women guilty of the "offence" of resisting the occupation, imprisoned without charge and without the right to a trial. As far as we know today, in this prison camp<sup>4</sup> the conditions were truly inhuman, the prisoners were subjected to systematic torture, according to Amnesty International and the International Committee of the Red Cross: it seems that beatings and electric shocks were part of the daily routine.

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<sup>4</sup> It was originally a military complex built by the French in the 1930s.

The two screens show different recordings made eight years apart. One shows interviews with six former camp inmates, of both sexes, carried out in 1999 shortly after their liberation. The artists were very interested in record their testimony about the experience of being imprisoned in Khiam [see figures 7 e 8], for a long time, and in particular wanted to know how they had managed to survive: many others, in fact, were not so lucky. In order to properly assess the importance of this first recording at the time it was made, we have to take into account the following fact: in that year, southern Lebanon was still under Israeli military occupation, and there weren't *any* known images of the detention camp, even though it was known to exist.

**Figure 6** - Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *Khiam 2000-2007* (2008). General view of the installation.



**Figures 7 and 8** - One of the men interviewed (1st recording). One of the women interviewed (1st recording).



**Source:** photographs by Carlos Trindade.

In the course of the interviews, we learnt that their survival was largely due to the fact that they had managed to maintain a creative activity on the sly - in very difficult circumstances, and added to this resistance action, because in that place any tools were forbidden, even a simple pencil – which strengthened his spirit and made his daily life



more bearable. The final part of this recording shows some material traces of this precarious and clandestine activity; small, fragile decorative objects that they managed to keep with them, such as a carved comb or a crocheted flower. And, given the value attributed to these objects by the former prisoners during their interviews, they are given a dignity equivalent to that of their creators, through framing shots that favour a central point of view in close-ups, which also allow the viewer to better realise the sweat and patience required to make them.

In May 2000, Israel suddenly withdrew from Lebanese territory, and the Khiam camp was hastily abandoned with its prisoners, who were freed by the population<sup>5</sup>. Later, this prison symbol of the Israeli occupation - which, curiously, is also known among the Lebanese as the "Bastille" - was converted into a kind of museum. However, when Israel invaded southern Lebanon again on 16 July 2006, in a war against the Shiite militias of Hezbollah ("Party of God" in Arabic) on the pretext of the kidnapping of two of its soldiers - known as the *July War* in the Arab world, and as the *Second Lebanon War* in Israel, lasted 34 days and ended in an unexpected defeat and withdrawal of the Israeli army - the Khiam camp was completely destroyed after the Israeli air force bombed it in an attempt to erase the traces of the crimes committed there.

Because of this event, the Lebanese artists met again with the same six prisoners interviewed in the first recording, eight years later, in order to remember their liberation and collect their opinion on the destruction of the camp. Older, they now share a new perspective on the detention camp. Through their testimonies we learn that they regret the destruction of the camp, and they would have liked, if it had been possible, for the same camp to have remained as they had known it<sup>6</sup>. The focus of the interviewees' attention shifts this time to the camp itself, where they spent part of their lives, so this recording shows us images of the state of the camp after the bombing [see figures 9 and 10], which now looks more like a rubbish dump.

**Figures 9 and 10** - Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *Khiam 2000-2007* (2008). Images of the destruction of the Khiam camp.

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<sup>5</sup> About this camp and its liberation, visit also the following website: <https://samidoun.net/2022/05/the-liberation-of-khiam-the-liberation-of-south-lebanon-memories-and-struggle-continue/>.

<sup>6</sup>It may be that his wish will come true because, it seems, there is an intention - according to a Hezbollah project - to rebuild it exactly as it was.



**Source:** photographs by Carlos Trindade.

Also in 2008, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige shot the 35 mm feature film *Je Veux Voir*, which is set against the backdrop of the *July War* and its aftermath, in a kind of journey that is both geographical and spiritual. This time, we've refrained from giving a summary of the film, because we prefer to replace it with an explanatory statement from the directors themselves about why they wanted to make this film:

July 2006, a war breaks out in Lebanon. A new war, but not just one more war. A war that crushes the hopes of peace and the momentum of our generation. We no longer know what to write, what stories to recount, what images to show. We ask ourselves: "What can cinema do?" That question, we decide to translate it into reality. We go to Beirut with an "icon", na actress who, to us, symbolizes cinema, Catherine Deneuve. She will meet our preferred actor, Rabih Mroué. Together, they will drive through the regions devastated by the conflict. Through their presence, their meeting, we hope to find the beauty which our eyes no longer perceive. It is the beginning of an unpredictable, unexpected adventure... (Hadjithomas & Joreige, 2009, p. 122).

### ***Lasting Images* (2003)**

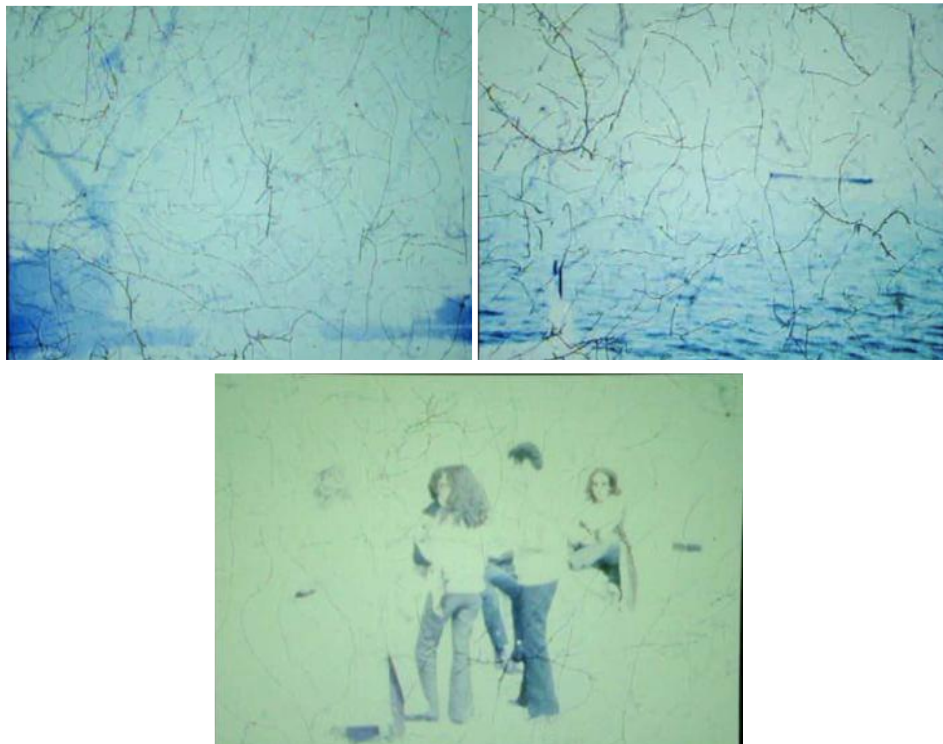
We'll leave the video installation *Lasting Images* for last, which is inhabited by *ghosts*, it can be said with all propriety, and where the personal memory and the collective memory of the conflict are more clearly intertwined. It highlights an unfortunately very common problem that has occurred during many civil wars (as well as conventional conflicts) or, for example, during dictatorial regimes: that of the *missing people*. The tragedy for relatives of the absence of a *body*, making it impossible to mourn, leads them to cherish the hope (sometimes for long years) – in most cases unrealistic, but as a common saying goes "hope is the last to die" – that one day their loved one will return, preventing them from carrying on with their lives as normal.

In fact, in this installation the artists use the transfer of a short film in colour film (only 3 minutes long), originally shot in Super 8 by an uncle of Khalil Joreige – Alfred Junior Kettaneh (b. 1937) – minutes before he was kidnapped in 1985, suffering the same fate as an estimated 17,000 other Lebanese: nothing has been known about him since.

It starts off looking like a completely abstract film, in which we only see scratches running across the celluloid film, followed by stains and curious linear webs [see figure 11], but little by little we begin to distinguish other, figurative shapes, which, although ethereal, are recognisable and stubbornly compete with the abstract "beings" that are superimposed on them [see figure 12], and at the end we can recognise a group of people no longer with any difficulty, despite the film's rather deteriorated state [see figure 13].

**Figures 11 and 12** - J. Hadjithomas & K. Joreige, *Lasting Images* (2003). Before the final segment, figurative shapes appear.

**Figure 13** - Hadjithomas & K. Joreige, *Lasting Images* (2003). Still from the end of the film, with a group of people.



**Source:** photographs by Carlos Trindade.

Joreige and Hadjithomas only discovered the small film, which had yet to be revealed, many years after its author's disappearance. Luckily, it had survived a fire, which caused the irretrievable destruction of many other objects. The artists refer to their process of recovering the *latent* images (complex and time-consuming, to be sure) – while retaining the traces of their deterioration, which emphasise the effects of time and memory – in two statements:

The film remained latent for more than 15 years. When we had it developed, after all these years, it appeared fogged, all white. Through a lot of work on color correction, images appeared progressively through the whiteness of the film. We can distinguish some places, ghostly silhouettes, a small part of the sea, a faraway boat... (Hadjithomas & Joreige, 2009 b, p. 117);  
We searched within the layers of the film itself, attempting to create the reappearance of lasting images. (Hadjithomas & Joreige, *apud* Takahashi, 2009, p. 113).

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige returned once again to the theme of the *missing people* in the Civil War in their excellent feature *A Perfect Day* (2005), enthusiastically received by international critics, which is also a film about *love*. It tells us, with great sensitivity, the story of a mother, Claudia, who refuses to accept the disappearance of her husband during the war 15 years ago, and of her son Malek, who suffers from a syndrome that stops his breathing when he sleeps. While Claudia doesn't leave the house, always waiting in the vain hope that one day, improbably, she will see her husband walk through the door, Malek drives around the streets of Beirut in his car, trying to see Zeina, the woman he loves. Malek and Zeina's relationship is clearly in crisis: although he desperately insists on contacting her through messages he sends from his mobile phone, she, on the other hand, is not interested in seeing him again.

Both mother and son then live "suspended" in the emptiness of a lost love. However, a day of decisions arrives, the day on which almost the entire fictional narrative is centred – hence the film's title – and Malek manages to convince his mother to accompany him, albeit reluctantly, to declare officially with the competent authority, finally, her *dead* husband, despite the body's absence. In fact, everything seemed to come together on that "perfect" day to appease the *ghosts*. On the evening of that same day, to Malek's delight, Zeina seems willing to give him a new chance to start their relationship again.

### **THE FILM *WALTZ WITH BASHIR* (2008), by ARI FOLMAN**

Directed by Israeli Ari Folman (b. 1962, Haifa), *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) was perhaps one of the most unexpected films of the 2008/2009 season, and also one of the most important. After its premiere on 13 May 2008 in the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival, it was a huge success internationally, including in Israel. In 2009, it was nominated for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, which it lost after winning the Golden Globe in the same category.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari Folman drew on his personal experience as a soldier during the invasion of Lebanon by the Israeli army in 1982 - during the darkest period of the bloody Civil War that ravaged that Middle Eastern country - when he was just 19 years old. The Israeli filmmaker has always insisted on describing his film as an "animated documentary", because he doesn't consider there to be any fiction in it. And, in fact, the film is made almost entirely in animation, with the exception of the final minutes in which we are shown real images of dead Palestinians<sup>7</sup>. The choice of animation was due to Folman's opinion that otherwise it would be difficult to bear the violence of the images and narration, and after seeing the film we have to agree with him.

Although it is animated, it still respects the investigative structure and the formal model of the traditional, participatory documentary, because it is essentially based on the testimonies that he recorded on video of various stakeholders (friends and former army colleagues, a journalist) that he interviewed: it should be emphasised that of the nine main characters, seven – including the easily identifiable director himself – were inspired by real people and two were invented; what's more, in the conversations we see during the film, the voices are almost all those of real people (there are two important exceptions, those of Boaz and Cami, who were dubbed by professional actors).

The film is set against the backdrop of the culmination of the Israeli invasion, which took place with the siege of Beirut, and in particular the *massacre of the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila* – even today the number of victims is still unclear, with estimates ranging from several hundred to several thousand –

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<sup>7</sup> According to Fanny Lautissier (2009, w. p.), this final sequence with archive footage, taken by a press agency and perhaps broadcast by the BBC, was described by Folman as a "hardcore documentary".

committed in September 1982 by the militias of the Maronite Christian Phalanx led by Elie Hobeika, to which we referred in the introduction.

The case is all the more serious because this area on the outskirts of Beirut, to the south of the city, was then under the "protection", i.e. directly controlled by the Israeli army, which surrounded it and did nothing to prevent the massacre; in fact, it could only have happened with its complicity: even today, however, the Israelites and the Christian militias blame each other for what happened. Israel's future Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was Defence Minister at the time of the regrettable episode, and as the person directly "morally" responsible, he was forced to resign from his post (he was found guilty by an official commission of enquiry appointed to determine responsibility for the massacre) after hundreds of thousands of Israelis spontaneously demonstrated in the streets after learning about what had happened in Sabra and Chatila.

After finishing his military service and returning home, Folman forgot his war experiences in Lebanon, some of which had been traumatic – the director's doubts about his possible complicity in the Sabra and Chatila massacre hang over the film – or at least he believed he had managed to do so, although it wasn't easy:

I made a great effort to erase everything that had to do with the war. It was difficult, I assure you (...) But if you try very hard to forget something, you can. I remember the day my military service came to an end. I knew I didn't want to have anything more to do with it, I cut off all ties with the people who had been with me in the war, I worked hard at it. But I think that oblivion it's not a bad survival method (Folman, *apud* Coelho, 2009, p. 9, own translation)<sup>8</sup>.

Everything was to change when, one night in a bar in 2006, a friend and former soldier in Lebanon like Folman told him about a nightmare that had been tormenting him for twenty years. It is precisely with images of this nightmare that the film begins, because it was the story of this friend, named Boaz, that triggered his interest and made him start his reminiscence research: a pack of 26 dogs running wildly and barking, eyes blazing, knocking down everything in their path, until they finally stop in front of a building, from where a man is watching them through a window; at that moment "I wake up", as his friend told him. Boaz, we learnt during a conversation in the pub [see image 14], was charged with killing the dogs in Palestinian villages – because they

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<sup>8</sup>All the director's statements were given to Alexandra Prado Coelho via telephone interview from Israel. About the film, which contains a lot of information about the director, his friends/characters, the context of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and other aspects, it is useful to consult the official website, which is interesting: <<http://walthwithbashir.com/>>.

didn't think he was capable of shooting people – to prevent them from alerting their populations when the Israeli army decided to invest in the dead of night. All those years later, Boaz still claimed to remember every one of the dogs he killed in Lebanon, exactly 26.

When Boaz told him about his nightmare, Folman thought that, unlike him, he had no memory of the war. However, he was wrong (or he hadn't realised it yet), because it wasn't long before a mysterious image started appearing in his dreams, always the same, persistent, disturbing him. In it, three scrawny boys slowly emerge from the water naked, in front of a sandy beach on the waterfront of a night-time deserted Beirut, and advance half hypnotised towards the silent buildings of the city. In the film, among these three boys, you can easily identify the features of the director's young face, the one that, at one point, faces the viewer [see figure 15] with an empty, sad look. Why that image? The director has found a plausible explanation for it, and not just any other:

"Water is the perfect escape space for me," he explains. "I have a great connection with the sea, I love boating, the sea is part of me. When I need to escape, it's always to the sea, and that can happen in real life as well as in visions and dreams. The sea is always there. For me it was the perfect escape, creating this image that I was at sea while the massacre was happening in the city, right next door" (Folman, *apud Coelho*, 2009, p. 10, own translation)<sup>9</sup>.

As the film unfolds, we follow the director's journey to try to recover everything he has tried so hard to forget – the lost memories of the traumatic events that marked his youth – which forces him to look for someone who can help him with this task. He begins by consulting his best friend Ori Sivan (a film and TV series director); the latter, in the role of a psychologist, gives him some basic explanations about how memory works, and encourages him to continue his anamnesis effort by suggesting, given its importance to him, that he go and meet former military colleagues with whom he lived through the same experience.

Figure 14 - Ari Folman, *Valsa com Bashir* (2008). Folman, in the pub with Boaz.

Figure 15 - Ari Folman, *Valsa com Bashir* (2008). Folman's dream image.

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that in the film, when this image is shown, one of the boys emerges from the water armed with a machine gun. And flashes of what appear to be military signs, the kind used to mark positions, are seen falling from the sky.



**Sources:** <http://www.rlslog.net/waltz-with-bashir-limited-dvdrip-xvid-dmt/> e  
[http://spectrum.weblog.com.pt/arquivo/2009/01/valsa\\_com\\_bashi.html](http://spectrum.weblog.com.pt/arquivo/2009/01/valsa_com_bashi.html)

Therefore, following, Folman contacts former comrades who were with him in the same war scenarios, in the hope of gradually gathering information that can help him *unblock* his memory. But, as it turns out, they all have "blind spots" in their memory that prevent an objective reconstruction<sup>10</sup>, as with Cami, one of the other two boys in "his picture", whom he had to visit in Holland, where he had emigrated to in the meantime. That trip wasn't fruitless, however, because on the way back after meeting Cami, in a taxi on the way to Amsterdam airport, all his memories suddenly resurfaced.

<sup>10</sup> The circumstance that victims of a traumatic event are sometimes unable to remember specific aspects of it is explained by *dissociation*, caused by an altered state of consciousness. The concept of dissociation was introduced by the French psychologist and neurologist Pierre Janet (Paris, 1859 - Paris, 1947), a disciple of Jean-Martin Charcot and contemporary of Sigmund Freud (Příbor, 1856 - London, 1939), who in his work *L'automatisme psychologique* (1889) defended the existence of "functional amnesia" (or *psychogenic amnesia*) for traumatic events associated with violent emotions which, instead of being integrated into the stream of consciousness, were instead stored implicitly, in a more or less prolonged way, in the subconscious – as opposed to Freud's unconscious; despite the analogies, and although they shared some ideas, Janet and Freud developed their works in parallel, maintaining various disagreements over the years –, and revealed through dreams and behaviour. The concept is similar to that of *repression*, enunciated by Freud and Josef Breuer in *Studien über Hysterie (Studies on Hysteria)* (1895), which results in cognitive inhibition or the suppression of "taboo" impulses, leading the person to an amnesiac state in relation to the traumatic event. The two concepts, Janet's and Freud's, are often used synonymously, although Janet defended the idea that the division of consciousness was a primary factor (due to an "innate" deficiency in the capacity for psychic synthesis), which Freud secondaryised. For further clarification, see Daniel L. Schacter (1996, pp. 225-26, 229-30, and 232-235), who states (*idem*, p. 223) that "Psychogenic amnesias often serve the purpose of temporary escape from an intolerable situation", which seems to be very much the case with Folman. See also Jean Cambier (2004, pp. 63-65) and Nuno Gaspar (2011, p. 166).



Before we continue with the film, a digression is in order to shed some light on the illness of Folman and his friends, who suffer, to a greater or lesser degree, from what is known as "post-traumatic *stress* disorder" (PTSD), in which there are disorders of varying degrees of severity. The symptoms of PTSD can begin to make themselves felt soon after a traumatic event<sup>11</sup> or only appear after a few months, and even, in some cases, years later: sudden *flashbacks* – sometimes in the form of fragmented memories (such as intrusions of decontextualised sensory aspects of the original episode) – or nightmares, reactivating the same emotions (such as fear) experienced during the original situations, memory disorders, abnormal reactions to startles of any kind, a certain emotional numbness, with its consequences.

The term "combat *stress* reaction" – a phenomenon that began to be studied during World War I – is generally applied to a range of physical and mental symptoms that are relatively short-lived, such as a state of hypervigilance or unusual physical exhaustion, but when they persist over the long term, the disease classified as PTSD is diagnosed, from which many ex-military personnel suffer.

Scientific research in the field of this disease has revealed abnormalities in the brains of these patients, both in the areas involved in memory and in those associated with the processing of emotions, as well as in the reaction to *stress*: the amygdala (which is involved in memory and emotions) is normally hyperactivated while, in contrast, the prefrontal cortex is less reactive than usual to frightening stimuli, which may explain its failure to inhibit the amygdala<sup>12</sup>, and the traumatic memories<sup>13</sup>. In some cases, the thalamus may also be involved, due to a particular genetic makeup that causes some people to have an "enlarged thalamus", which seems to be somehow associated with uncontrolled reactions to frightening memories, predisposing them to a greater natural susceptibility to PTSD.

Some studies have shown that it is possible, within certain limits, to choose to forget. Some studies have shown that it is possible, within certain limits, to choose to forget. In fact, people affected by traumatic events have a strong motivation to "erase" them from their brains through explicit efforts, and everything suggests that the human

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<sup>11</sup> PTSD can originate from various external causes to which those involved have been subjected or exposed: rape or violent physical aggression of any kind, participation in military combat - the one most in evidence here - experiencing or witnessing natural disasters or terrorist attacks (in more modern times), serious accidents, or any other disturbing realities.

<sup>12</sup>As Nuno Gaspar (2011, p. XXXIII. own translation) points out, "In current literature, the term *amygdaloid complex* is becoming more common." However, the two terms can be used synonymously.

<sup>13</sup> See Rita Carter et al. (2009, p. 233).

brain has its own mechanisms that make this possible. Some scientific experiments carried out by specialists – with monitoring of brain activity and images – have shown that the brain is capable of *blocking* memories if it wants to: the results of these experiments suggest that deliberate forgetting can be achieved through activity in the frontal lobe, which inhibits the process of forming lasting memories. Memory is active and, in practice, while the memory of an episode with emotional content activates the hippocampus and amygdala, its suppression causes less activity in these areas of the brain and in others that recreate the sensations associated with the evoked episode.

The film doesn't tell the story, but when Folman was tired of having to do that period of compulsory military service that Israelis are subjected to every year, he asked the army to release him from this burden, a request that was accepted on the condition that he see a psychoanalyst. Since then, his *extinct memories* have resurfaced. It's important to make a distinction here between *forgotten memories* and *extinct memories*. While the former cannot be recalled, extinct memories remain latent, and in certain appropriate circumstances they can be acquired:

(...) as the presentation, in a very precise way, of the stimulus (situation) used to acquire them and/or with a greatly increased intensity (...) Extinction takes place in the hippocampus and basolateral amygdala and requires gene expression, protein synthesis and various other biochemical processes and has a clear therapeutic application in the treatment of phobias: panic syndrome, generalised anxiety and, above all, post-traumatic stress. Thus, if a patient is exposed to a softened version of the situation that caused the phobia or trauma, accompanied by appropriate psychotherapy, it can lead to the eventual extinction of the memory of that situation (Barros, 2004, w. p., own translation)<sup>14</sup>.

The film takes its title from a long, symbolic scene in which we see one of Folman's fellow soldiers during a firefight in Beirut, in the middle of a street with a machine gun firing everywhere, in a real dance (to the sound of a waltz on the soundtrack), where a large poster with Bashir Gemayel's portrait can be seen next to a

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<sup>14</sup> In fact, we know that traumatic events are often followed by amnesia, but it is also true, as Noelma Viegas d'Abreu (2001, p. 64, own translation) says, that "'...in recovery processes, the more emotional the material, the greater the tendency to recover details. (...) All these processes differ from individual to individual and from the conscious or non-conscious strategies they use to search for memories or forget them. Ultimately, they also depend on the desire to experience them and the defence mechanisms for forgetting them. (...) At certain stages of our lives, certain types of information become unconscious, being a defence mechanism that can function as a natural growth process. (...) But above all, in order to enjoy life, it is often essential to forget what has hurt physically or psychically."

building [see figure 16]. Memory is subjective by nature, and the director says the following about this key scene:

(...) More precisely, the waltz scene serves to show how time is distorted in combat situations. I don't know how long my comrade was in the middle of the firefight, who can say? I, who was there, couldn't say. Probably no more than five or ten seconds. What I wanted to show the viewer was the perspective of the soldier who is there, in whose eyes he spent an eternal time in the middle of the road, dancing and shooting with his rifle under sniper fire. This is the film's point of view. I didn't want to reproduce reality in an abstract way. I wanted to tell the perception of the soldiers watching this scene. For this, animation was decisive, because it allows you to move very easily from one dimension to another (Folman, *apud* Renzi e Schweizer, 2008, pp. 26-31, own translation)<sup>15</sup>.

This soldier's attitude is also reminiscent of another important scene in the film – with which, it seems, many veterans of that war in Lebanon identified – in which we see a group of young soldiers, terrified, inside a tank that is advancing through the middle of a territory situated in nowhere, shooting wildly in the direction of an invisible enemy.

**Figure 16** - Ari Folman, *Valsa com Bashir* (2008). Image of the scene that gives the film its title.



**Source:** <http://www.ufscan.br/rua/site/?p=1879>

Scenes like the two described, and there are many others, emphasise one of the great qualities of *Waltz with Bashir*: it doesn't give us a heroic view of the war – it contains scenes of extreme cruelty, even though it's made in animation – which is never

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<sup>15</sup> Portuguese translation of the interview excerpt by Atalanta Filmes, the film's distributor in Portugal. Available at: <https://hojetemcinema.wordpress.com/2010/05/15/entrevista-de-ari-folman-para-cahiers-du-cinema/#more-953>.

depicted, far from it, with the "glamour" of many other films of the genre, and in particular American ones for which the director has little appreciation (the exceptions are films by Samuel Fuller, who fought in World War II, and satirical films such as Robert Altman's *Mash*), creating a tense atmosphere from start to finish, superbly underlined by an appropriate soundtrack by Max Richter, and approaching a certain dimension of madness and absurdity that always takes place in all wars:

(...) *Waltz with Bashir* is built like a trip, in the sense of drugs. We invested a lot of time and effort so that, from the very first scene with the dogs, the viewer is immersed in an imaginary as if deformed by drug use. There were 98 sound tracks just for the dogs. But there was another risk here: that the viewer would get lost in the journey, the music, the beauty of the images, and forget the massacre. That's also why I knew from the start that the film should end with these documentary images. In the end, it was necessary to wake the viewer up from the trip and show them these shocking images (Folman, *apud* Renzi e Schweizer, 2008, pp. 26-31, own translation).

*Waltz with Bashir* has great political relevance because Folman had the courage to tackle head-on the collective trauma generated by a massacre, which is still very present in the Israeli imagination, denouncing the warmongering policy of his state, and had the audacity, at one point in the film, to compare it to the Nazi concentration camps. The attitude is not insignificant, because it must be deeply painful for the first generation born in Israel, to which the director belongs, for children of Holocaust survivors (as is the case with Folman), to see what their country has become, with the "Palestinian question" eroding the very foundations of Israeli society. As the director said at the time,

We don't talk much about this war in Israel, there's nothing about it to be proud of. It's not like the previous ones, which were fights for survival, with glorious stories of courage and brotherhood. Nothing like that happened in Lebanon. There were civilians involved, cities, real people, children. It's not the kind of thing we want to live with in our lives. The best thing is to forget (Folman, *apud* Coelho, 2009, p. 11, own translation).

In fact, as film critic Jorge Mourinha (2009, p. 42, own translation) said, the film leaves us, at the end, "...asking the question that the director himself must have asked himself at some point: how could he have forgotten? The hardest thing is not that Folman asks the question: it's the answer he gives".

## FINAL REFLECTION

Israel's invasion of Lebanon – unsurprisingly, given that its entire national strategy over the years has been based mainly on preventive wars<sup>16</sup> (and disproportionate retaliation for terrorist and other attacks) and continuous efforts to redraw the map of the Middle East – marked a turning point in its public image abroad, which has since deteriorated noticeably, as historian Tony Judt (a Jew, it should be noted) has rightly pointed out:

Following the invasion of Lebanon, and with increasing intensity since the first intifada at the end of the 1980s, the public impression of Israel has become darker. Today Israel displays a sinister image: a place where 18-year-olds with M-16 machine guns mock defenceless old men ("security measures"); where *bulldozers* regularly raze entire residential blocks ("collective punishment"); where helicopters fire *rockets* into residential arteries ("target killings"); where subsidised settlers frolic in swimming pools with lawns, paying no attention to the Arab children who, a few metres away, languish and rot in the most miserable neighbourhoods on the planet; and where retired generals and acting ministers openly talk about putting the Palestinians in a bottle "like drugged cockroaches" (Rafael Eytan) and cleansing the land of its Arab cancer (Judt, 2009, p.p. 182-83, own translation).

What has been said above cannot fail to bring up the situation that is currently being experienced in the same region, following the coordinated surprise attack (and invasion) on Israel by the Hamas terrorist movement on 7 October 2023, unprecedented both in terms of its scale and the unusual/imaginative means it used, as well as certain horrific circumstances involved (which we refrain from mentioning), which we must condemn without any lukewarmness whatsoever. In its aftermath, we have undoubtedly witnessed the deadliest armed conflict in recent years in the Gaza Strip (and also in the West Bank), under Hamas rule, as a result of Israeli retaliation - at the time of writing, with many thousands already dead, and thousands more wounded, mostly children and women (in other words, *unarmed civilians*) - with great risks of spreading to the whole of the Middle East.

Without questioning Israel's right to defend itself – this time, it's not a war by choice, because it has in fact suffered an attack – and to recover the many hostages that Hamas took with it when it withdrew – the author of this article is not antisemitic, on the contrary – it seems to us (in line with the position of many others around the world)

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<sup>16</sup> With the exception of the *Yom Kippur War* in 1973, which was not a war fought by choice.

that, once again, the Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is carrying out a *disproportionate* retaliation, which does not take due care of the majority of the Palestinian civilian population of the Gaza Strip, and will only further damage Israel's reputation abroad, and foster the growth of antisemitism, which is already beginning to show.

We believe that the works we have analysed in this article demonstrate art's ability to address uncomfortable issues of memory (collective or personal), including the most traumatic ones related to armed conflicts, which leave deep scars and have a major impact on people's daily lives. This is also the understanding of the American psychologist Daniel L. Schacter, considered one of the world's leading authorities on the study of memory, who categorically states in his book *Searching for memory: the brain, the mind, and the past*, right in the introduction:

All art relies on memory in a general sense – every work of art is affected, directly or indirectly, by the personal experiences of the artist – but some artists have made the exploration of memory a major subject of their work. I have come to appreciate that artists can convey with considerable potency some of the personal, experiential aspects of memory that are difficult to communicate as effectively in words. Scientific research is the most powerful way to find out how memory works, but artists can best illuminate the impact of memory in our day-to-day lives (Schacter, 1996, p. 11).

It's very likely, and we hope so, that artists like the ones we've discussed here, or others that emerge, will continue to produce works that critically reflect on the complex "state of things" in this part of the world, which is constantly changing and boiling over. If nothing else (because it is not the mission of art to offer solutions), and this is no small feat, to denounce and publicise unjust situations - such as the ongoing violation of human rights - that deserve everyone's attention.

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