Ari Folman's debut *Waltz with Bashir* is Israel's first animated feature. Based on soldiers' memories of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, this haunting, hallucinatory treatment peers into a dark corner of recent history. **By Ali Jaafar**

A soldier's tale

Writer-director Ari Folman unleashes the dogs of hell in the very first frames of *Waltz with Bashir* as rabid canines with blazing yellow eyes hurtle towards the viewer in Folman's excoriating autobiographical account of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. By the film's harrowing denouement, the howls of the dogs will recall the thousands of Palestinian women and children Christian Phalangist militia killed at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Lebanon with the acquiescence of the Israeli command.

Waltz With Bashir is a rarity: an animated documentary that combines dreamlike imagery with the ugly truth of urban warfare. The film was inspired by Folman's attempts to come to terms with his memories of serving as a foot soldier in Israel's advancing army. After his discharge from the army reserve some five years ago, Folman was offered counselling. He attended a handful of sessions, only to discover he couldn't remember anything. "It's not that I thought I had gone through something extraordinary but I did think, where the hell were all those memories for 20 years?" says Folman. "Then came my friend's dream about dogs, our ideas started rolling and we went for it with this film."

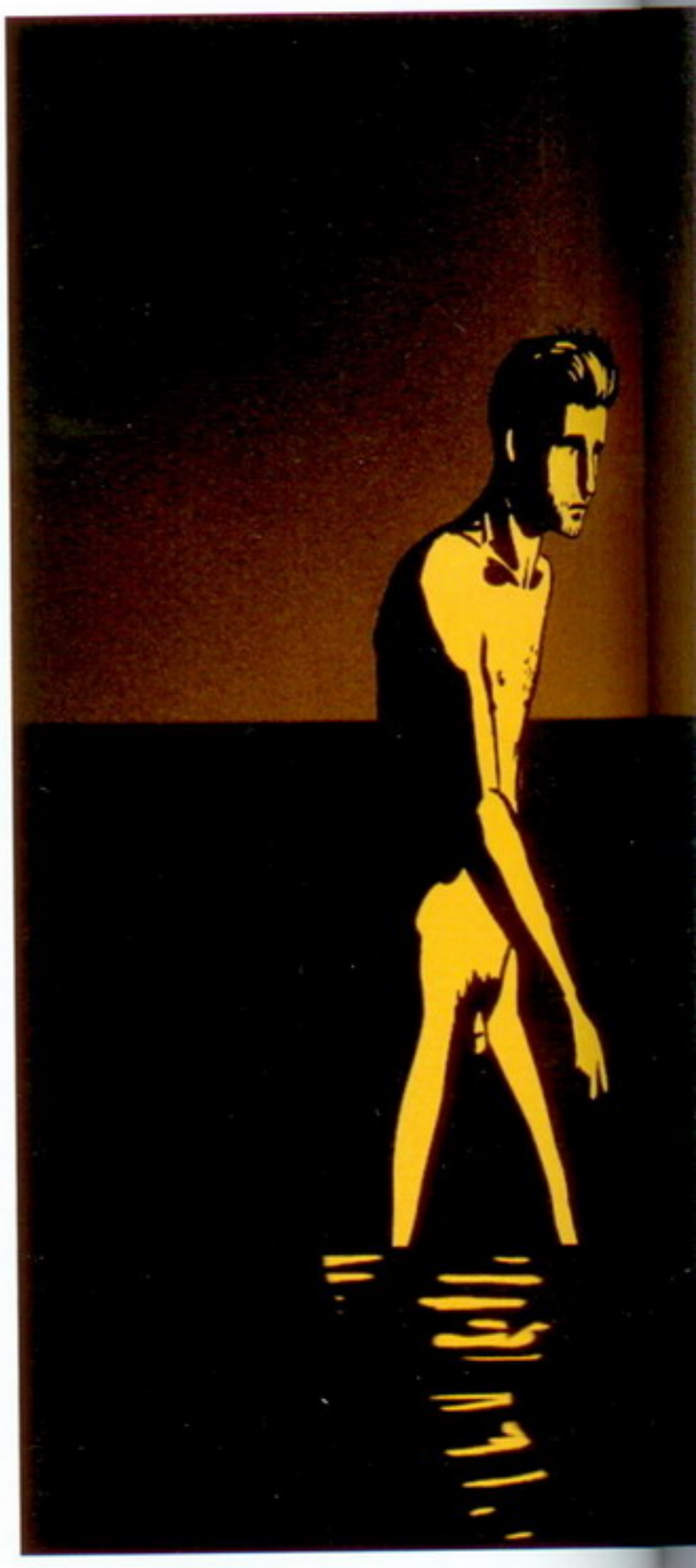
Veering between past and present, hallucinatory dreams and, at times spectacular, battle sequences, Folman envisaged *Waltz with Bashir* as an animated film from the start. (It is Israel's first-ever animated feature). He had first experimented with mixing live-action and animation for a documentary series he produced for Israeli television called *The Material That Love Is Made Of*. Each episode opens with a three-minute animated scene using basic Flash software, and features scientists discussing the science of love. After testing the effectiveness of the technique, Folman decided to develop it further for *Waltz With Bashir*.

Together with his director of animation Yoni Goodman and art director David Polonsky, in 2003 Folman set up the animation studio Bridgit Folman Film Gang to make *Waltz* in a country which had little animation infrastructure. Live-action footage for the film consisting of standard documentary interviews with members of Folman's former platoon combined with fantastical dream sequences, was shot on a sound studio and cut as a 90-minute feature on video.

Folman and his team then animated the sequences in a painstaking process involving 2,300 illustrations and a combination of Flash, 3-D and classical animation techniques. Folman is keen to clarify that he did not use any rotoscoping, the technique used by Richard Linklater in *A Scanner Darkly*, whereby live-action footage is painted over to give a shimmering, hybrid effect. "At the peak, there were 10 animators. It's not like a Linklater film where you draw over the video," says Folman. "It was edited as a full-length feature documentary, with sketches and titles inbetween. We then took this video as a reference and started drawing the film from scratch. It's a combination of Flash animation, which is what you see on the internet, classic Disney animation like *Bambi*, and the 3-D animation which Pixar uses."

The process took five years. When *Waltz with Bashir* finally received its world premiere at this year's Cannes Film Festival, it did so on the 60th anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel. That coincidence only emphasised the film's political content. Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon – at the time wracked by a civil war between right-wing Christian militias and left-wing militias allied to Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation – was initially intended as a limited operation designed to push P.L.O forces away from the south of the country. But led by Ariel Sharon, the minister of defence at the time, Israeli forces kept marching up the country, eventually reaching Beirut and laying siege to the city for seven weeks, during which food and water supplies were cut off and the Israeli army launched attacks from land, sea and air.

A multilateral agreement, sponsored by Ronald Reagan's U.S. administration and other western governments, was eventually signed in August 1982 – the Israeli army would pull back its troops in return for Yasser Arafat and his forces leaving Beirut for Tunisia. The U.S. government gave assurances that the remaining Palestinian civilian population, who resided mostly in massive refugee ➡



SCENE BY SCENE WITH ARI FOLMAN

NIGHT FLARES ON THE BEACH

We call this 'the super scene' because it's the establishing shot of the whole film. You see it three times. We put this image on everything from the posters to the logos. It should be hallucinatory but also realistic. There is something about the combination of the sea and the city. In some places, the beach is separate from nature, but in cities like Beirut and Haifa where I grew up, the beach is like the city itself. You put the night flares, which for anyone who has ever been in battle are something you'll never forget, on top. It colours everything, bathes everything in deep orange. We wanted to make a realistic scene in a very dreamy way, so that you would be confused until the very end about whether it really happened or not. If we went one step too far with the colours, if we'd made it too orange, for example, you would feel that the film wasn't true.

OPENING DOG SEQUENCE

The language is so different in the film. As a spectator you have to choose whether to go with it or not, because we're pretty used to classic Disney animation and current Pixar animation but this is something new. So I said the first thing we have to do is stun the audience. We didn't start by animating this scene. I told my animators I didn't want to work with the dogs at first. Only after about 15 months, when I saw that the animators were really qualified, did I go back to this scene.

Waltz with Bashir

ICONOGRAPHY OF BASHIR GEMAYEL
A middle-aged man came up to me after the film's premiere in Paris in June. He turned out to be the nephew of Bashir Gemayel and said that the way that Beirut was drawn was amazing. The film's only mistake was that there weren't any posters of Bashir at the time of the massacre because the presidential elections had taken place a month before and there were no photos of him any more.

camps in the city, would be protected. Two weeks later, and days before he was due to be sworn in as Lebanon's new president, Christian Phalangist leader Bashir Gemayel, the ally of Israel whose name is in the film's title, was assassinated by a bomb blast. In revenge his Phalangist gunmen stormed the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila on the nights of September 15 and 16 and killed an estimated 3,000 Palestinian civilians, with the Israeli army repeatedly firing flares that lit up the camps. Sharon was later forced to resign his post after an Israeli commission found him indirectly responsible for the massacre.

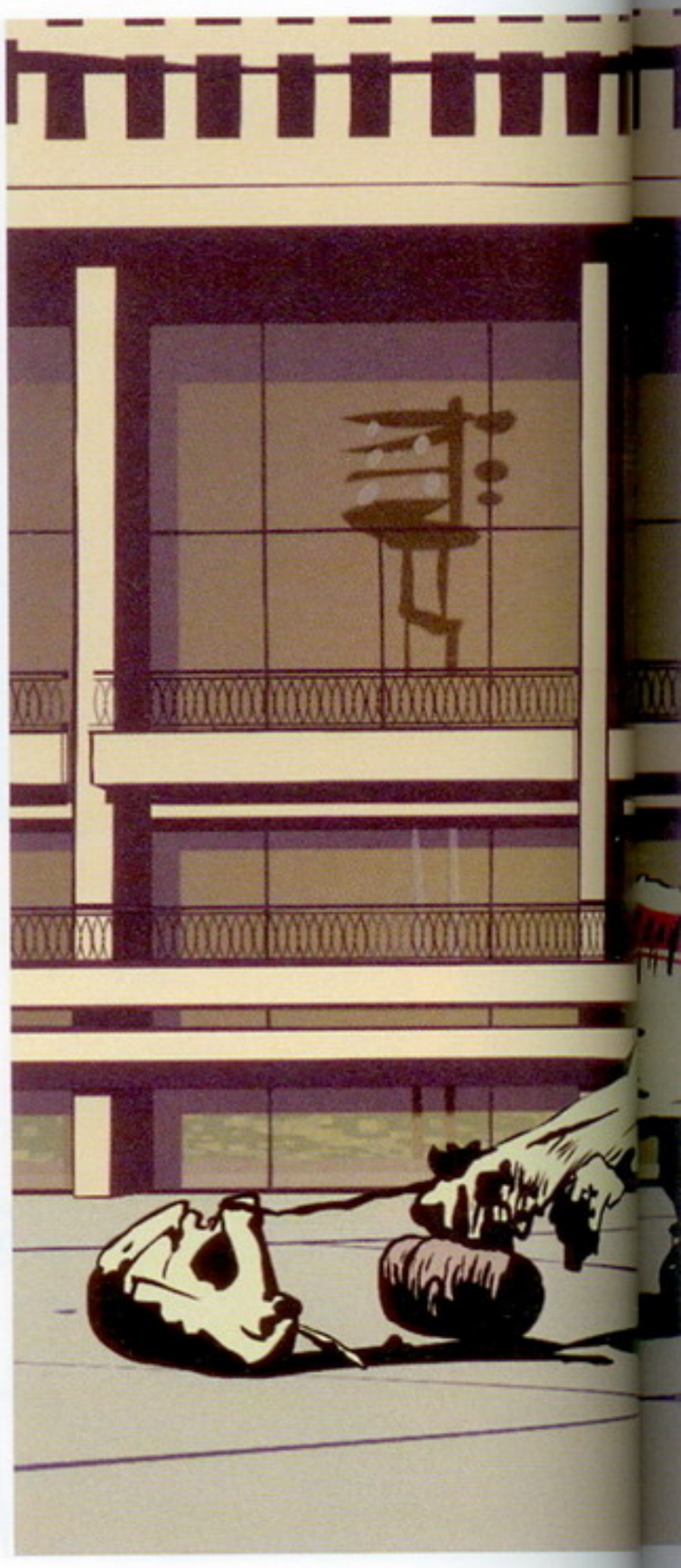
Waltz with Bashir never deals directly with Israel's culpability for the Sabra and Chatila massacres. Instead, Folman uses the events to uncover his own part in the tragedy. In a recurring scene his younger self emerges naked on to a Beirut beach, bathed in the phosphorescent orange light of night flares. As the character drifts towards revelation, the film moves ever more ominously towards its own devastating climax.

The opening sequence demonstrates the extent of the film's ambiguity on the subject of Israeli culpability. While the meaning of the phantasmagorical dogs has a literal explanation (they are part of Folman's buddy's recurring nightmare about the dogs he had to kill before entering a Lebanese village), the dogs can also be read as a metaphor representing the Phalangists on their killing spree or the Israeli troops invading Lebanon.

According to Folman, "The film is not entirely about the massacre. It sheds no new light on the partnership between the Phalangists and the Israeli government. Only in a country like Israel could a man like Sharon be banned as minister of defence and come back as prime minister 20 years later. That history is known and there's nothing more I could say. For me, the film is about memory – 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. The massacre is just one stop along the storyline."

That storyline does not shrink from depicting the surreal horror of war. The drabness of the contemporary interviews with Folman's former comrades, illustrated in black and white, stand in contrast to the vividly remembered journey through Lebanon. We see Folman's platoon attack what turns out to be a car carrying innocent civilians. There is a deadly ambush on an Israeli tank that culminates in one soldier's escape via the Mediterranean Sea at night. One hallucinatory sequence shows a young private who finds himself in the warm embrace of a giant, floating woman's breasts.

For all the power and beauty of *Waltz with Bashir*'s images – which at times feel like a cross between computer game *Grand Theft Auto*, and the films *Blade Runner* and *Full Metal Jacket*, all laced with the uncertainty of a bad acid trip – nothing in the film is more shocking than the final scenes which show live-action documentary footage of the massacre. A child's bloodstained limb is briefly glimpsed from the rubble, a distraught Palestinian woman screams at the camera asking where are the Arabs to protect them. "I didn't want you to go out of the theatre just thinking this was a cool movie, with beautiful animation and a cool score," says Folman. "I wanted you to realise that behind those drawings there were people slaughtered. Children, women, old people in their thousands, real people, died there. It would be a completely different film without the ending."



'Waltz with Bashir' is released on 21 November and is reviewed on page 81

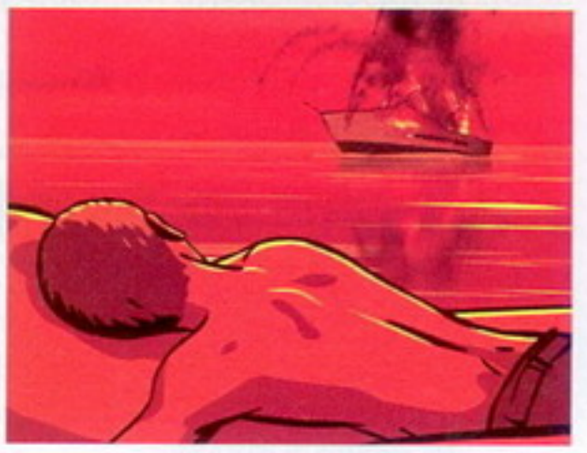
CARRYING WOUNDED AT NIGHT
This is how war looks. It's not a look I was trying to achieve; I was there, this is reality. I was at lunch a week ago with Ehud Bleiberg who produced 'The Band's Visit', and he told me his war story. This is my life now: I can't go to a wedding, a party, a dinner, without ending up in a corner listening to horrific war stories. Bleiberg told me about the aluminium blankets that we have in the scene and it was exactly the same. I didn't take it from a film, I took it from my memory. It probably looks the same everywhere. This scene is probably happening in Iraq right now.

INTERVIEWS WITH SUBJECTS

We shot the interviews, and everything we could dramatise beforehand on video then edited it as a full-length documentary film, with the animators using the video as a reference and drawing the film from scratch. There were about 3,000 key frames and those frames were then moved with animation which is basically flash cut-out animation supported by classic and 3-D animation. So if you have a character who is walking in the water, he would be cut to eight major pieces, then each piece would be cut into 15 more. Then we have 200 pieces which are all moved separately. The lower part of the leg, for example, doesn't move very well from the knees to the toes, so you have to do it frame-by-frame in classic animation. It's a really frustrating technique. Our animation director Yoni Goodman invented it.

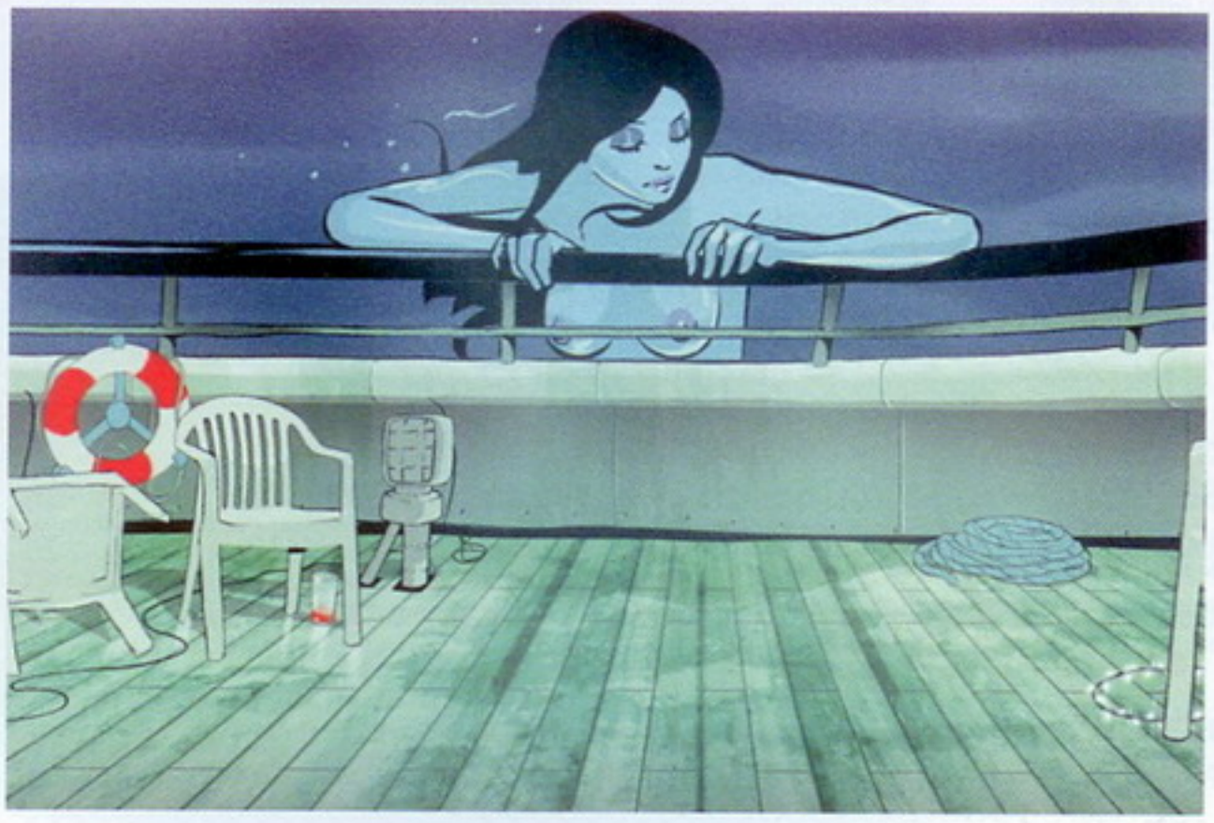
DESTROYED PLANE

We worked off a photo for this. You can Google 'Beirut 1982 Terminal' and find this image on the internet. The MEA plane, which is totalled on the runway, is based on a real photograph.



DREAM SEQUENCES

War is like a bad acid trip. There are a lot of ups and downs, hallucinations, dreams. A lot of the time you're not focused, but there is one storyline that takes you forward. In that sense we have the basic design, the realistic design of the characters and then the dream sequences, which are freer and consist of a melancholy palette of orange and black, in contrast with the ending which I treated as a hardcore documentary.



SUNSETS AND REDS

Before getting into animation, I was obsessed with low-key light, and sunsets and sunrises. When you shoot it in live action you have only 15 good minutes a day because the sun is so tough depending on where in the country you're filming. I told our team at the first meeting that I was obsessed with these colours, the reddish colours, and now I didn't have to run after them with a camera. I wanted to draw 85 per cent of the film like that, and they did it. I fell in love with animation because of the freedom it gave me.