

Waltz with Bashir

Study Notes



Directed by: Ari Folman

Certificate: 18

Running time: 87 mins

Suitable for: AS and A2 Film/Media Studies, History, RE, Politics and Psychology

Synopsis:

Based on a true story, *Waltz with Bashir* charts the journey of Ari, an Israeli Army veteran who is trying to recollect his experiences of the Lebanon War in Beirut. He visits a range of former comrades who recount their own stories, inevitably pushing Ari closer towards some devastating realisations. With the aid of a psychiatrist, Ari will recall stories full of daring escape, surreal humour, violence and inhumanity that he thought were long forgotten.

The film uses real interviews combined with unique animation techniques to achieve its mesmerising and groundbreaking effect.

Before Viewing: Considering Genre

An Israeli animated war film, in Hebrew with English subtitles, could be a difficult feature to sell to a western audience. The decisions made by the film distribution company in marketing any film will be crucial to audience reception to, and perception of, the film in advance of their viewing experience. After the cinema release window, other factors – reviews, word of mouth, and online awareness – start to come into play.

1. What have you heard about *Waltz with Bashir*? How has it been described to you in terms of genre? Have you heard conflicting opinions about the film?
2. View the trailer and posters for *Waltz with Bashir*. Are you interested in seeing it? Why/why not? What do you think you will like or dislike about the film?
3. List the war films you have seen or have heard of. Which battles do these films depict?
4. Which countries and faiths are involved in the conflicts in the films that you know of, and from which perspective is the story told?

Documentary form

Over the last decade, documentary films have been increasingly common in the cinema: Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Sicko*, and Morgan Sprulock's *Super Size Me* and *Where in the World is Osama Bin Laden?* are just a few examples. Documentaries in part rely on events being captured as they happen, and then on the events being reflected on, or re-told. Despite the concept of documentary as a 'truthful account', documentaries always have a narrative structure and a story to tell.

Find out how the following documentaries create a sense of narrative: *Man on Wire*, *Touching The Void* and *Super Size Me*

After Viewing: Initial Response

This film may have been a real departure from your normal viewing experiences: the closing seconds of the film, in particular, have been noted for their powerful and emotional images. Aim to reflect on your personal opinions of the film as soon as possible after watching.

1. How did the film make you feel? Explain your responses, making reference to moments from the film to illustrate your points.
2. How closely did the film match the expectations you had from the trailer and the poster?
3. How would you categorise this film if you were to describe it to someone who hadn't yet seen it?
4. Now consider the film in terms of genre. In what ways does *Waltz with Bashir* qualify as a documentary? What generic conventions do you remember seeing in the film? Beyond war and documentary, what other genres could *Waltz with Bashir* be placed in?

Representations

Waltz with Bashir features some potentially controversial representations of particular faith groups.

1. How are the Christian – Phalangists and the Palestinians represented?
2. Did you feel sympathetic towards any particular characters or groups? What factors do you think affected the way your sympathies lay?
3. What comparable characterisations and stereotypes do you recall from other war films?

Mise en Scène

Waltz with Bashir creates memorable and haunting images through a mix of Adobe Flash cutouts and classic animation. It has been said that the film resembles a graphic novel more than a traditional animation.

1. Aside from any economic considerations, do you think animation was the best way to tell this story? Would it have worked as well if it were live image throughout?
2. How is each 'interview' and flashback differentiated visually? Consider backgrounds, lighting and signifiers.
3. How effective do you think the film's use of real-life footage was?

Psychology

The film addresses the idea of the 'unreliable narrator' and gives an interesting representation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as Ari's memory is gradually restored through certain psychiatric techniques.

1. How does the film's ending suggest closure for Ari?
2. Which of the following statements do you think best describes the presence of psychiatry in the film:
 - a plot device
 - a narrative framework
 - central to the plot
 - over-simplified?
3. Would you say that Ari's therapy sessions helped or prepared him for the future, or have they only served to help him recall the past?

Conflict and Faith in Context

Watching a film such as *Waltz with Bashir* may raise your awareness of, and interest in, the events and the politics it portrays. You can find further details on the political situation that underpins this film by searching a news website, such as the BBC's news site, which also has details on the history of these conflicts.

1. Does *Waltz with Bashir* bring anything to the current political debate concerning Israel and Palestine?
2. Has the film altered or challenged your own political stance on this conflict?
3. To what extent does the film chart the origins, history and cause of this particular war?
4. Does religion or faith have an overt impact on the plot or the decisions of the characters?
5. How do Hollywood films about the conflict (like *Munich* and *You Don't Mess With The Zohan*) compare to this film that was written and directed by an Israeli national?

Suggested Activities for Teachers

Check the IMDB for the film's box-office takings in various countries. Show these figures to the class and have them guess which countries took which amounts. Ask how the students would account for its reception in different areas across the world. Ask also whether they think *Waltz with Bashir* would have been successful or unsuccessful in the Middle East.

Have students create a thoroughly westernised poster or ad/radio campaign for *Waltz with Bashir* that would make it appeal to a wide general audience.

Search the net. What controversies did the film attract? List these controversies down one side of the board. Then as a class come up with counter-arguments or artistic justifications for these opinions on the other side of the board.

Further resources

Visit Film Education's homepage for resources on other documentary films, including this overview of documentary:

www.filmeducation.org/resources/secondary/documentary/

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