

moody and surreal images that, in combination with the eerie soundtrack composed by German composer Max Richter, give the film a texture with the look and feel of dreams and disquieting memories.

The connection between the malleableness of animation and the mercurial nature of memory is underlined early on in the film, when Folman is depicted talking with Ori Sivan, a longtime friend. Sivan tells him about a scientific experiment in which psychologists proved how shaky the foundations of memory can be. In the experiment the subjects were shown actual photos from their childhood along with fabricated photos, showing them in situations that never happened. Some of the subjects came to believe that the fabricated photos showed true events and, later on, began to discuss the events as though they were part of their memories. "So you see, memory is something that is really quite dynamic," says Sivan.

As Folman starts to delve into his wartime experiences, he becomes aware of the pitfalls involved with dealing with memories. He suddenly has a bizarre flashback, remembering himself and his comrades wading in the sea in the Beirut harbor. The 19-year-old Folman and his fellow soldiers are all completely naked and have rifles slung over their shoulders. Did this really happen? To find out, Folman travels to Holland where Carmi, one of the soldiers standing beside him in the flashback, now lives. Carmi says that it never did.

As Folman interviews his army buddies, a wide variety of wartime episodes, real or imagined, rise to the surface. Folman hears how one friend, after his tank is ambushed, escapes by floating away in the sea, and he discovers the connection between Buskila's nightmare and the dogs that guarded Lebanese villages.

Folman's own long-suppressed memories begin to appear. Some are deeply personal, such as when he recalls, in the height of battle, feeling satisfied with knowing that Yaeli, his girlfriend who has just broken up with him, will feel sorry at his funeral.

Other memories lead Folman closer to political events, including the assassination of Lebanese president-elect Bashir Gemayel, who led Israel's Lebanese Christian allies in the war, and whose name gives the film its title. The Phalangists, inflamed with anti-Muslim feelings after the death of their leader, carry out a massacre against the Palestinians living in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

In the massacre the Phalangists killed an estimated 700-800 Palestinian civilians. The extent to which Israel's military leaders and soldiers were aware of the massacre has long been hotly debated. An Israeli commission of inquiry found that then-defense minister Ariel Sharon and then-chief of staff Rafael Eitan bore partial responsibility.

When Folman realizes that it is his personal connection to this event that has been suppressed, it is clear that the underlying cause of his blocked memory is a form of post-war trauma.

THE TRAUMATIC EFFECT OF WAR ON SOLDIERS IS A theme that is common to many Israeli films, including last year's Academy Award nominated film, "Beaufort", which is also about the first Lebanon war," notes Tel Aviv University film professor Judd Ne'eman, in an interview with The Jerusalem Report.

However, as Ne'eman points out, "Waltz With Bashir" differs in a significant way.

"We are used to seeing films about war traumas but usually, like in

Beaufort, the trauma is the result of soldiers witnessing injuries or killings inflicted on themselves or their comrades. But here the trauma is about the encounter with the bodies of the enemy and not with his [Folman's] own soldiers," observes Ne'eman, who was one of Folman's university mentors.

Ne'eman believes the reason audiences tend to perceive the film more as a drama than a documentary derives from this twist. "The real victims of course are the people who are killed, but Folman himself has become a sort of victim because throughout most of the film the cause of his trauma is hidden from him," says Ne'eman. "That's the complexity of the situation. He is someone who feels guilty and takes action to find out what he did or what he witnessed on that day. For the audience it is very much a cathartic moment when you see his moment of realization. So even though the materials of the film are documentary and the costume is animation, the essence is drama. And it is the combination of the three that makes the film so unique."

Another reason for the film's wide appeal, according to Israeli film historian Pablo Tau, is the indirect and ambiguous way in which the story's political themes are presented. "It does not at first present itself as a political film," he says. "It draws the viewer into the narrative by

dealing with intriguing questions relating to memory and through highly aesthetic surrealistic images. Little by little, a political message is brought into the film, but because the message isn't made directly, people read the film differently and viewers end up interpreting the ending according to their own point of view." Tau is the author of a book that came out in Hebrew last year, "Icebergs in Hamsin-Land: The New Israeli Cinema 2004-2007."

Tau suggests that the film's dramatic ending leaves the question of the extent to which Israeli soldiers are accountable for the Sabra and Shatilla massacre unanswered. "Does he in the end admit that what Israel did, what he did, was awful and immoral?" Tau asks. "Or was there nothing that he could have done and does he cleanse himself from any guilt that he might have had about what happened there because he wasn't the one who did it and he couldn't have known what was going on?"

Tau observes, "There are those viewers who think that he does take responsibility for what happened and say this is a very frank and candid film that is critical of Israel. And then there are those who say no, there was nothing that he could have done and therefore we are not responsible for what happened and, as such, it is a film that is not critical of Israel. Viewers can watch the film and see in it what they want."

Folman himself has declined to comment on this issue. "My job finished when I completed the film – everything else is up to you. I am really tolerant of any kind of interpretation people give to the film, because it's up to them now," he said in a media interview.

The debate over "Waltz With Bashir" is likely to continue long after the Academy Award decisions are announced on February 22. To win the Best Foreign Film Award, notes Yair Raveh, it will have to set three precedents. "No Israeli film, no documentary and no animation film has ever won," he points out.

In the meantime, the movie continues to set precedents elsewhere. It was recently shown at a private screening in Beirut and Folman reports that negotiations are under way with a Gulf State film distributor. ●

'The innovative combination of documentary, animation and dramatic elements sets it apart from any other film made not just in Israel but anywhere in the world'

– Yair Raveh, film critic