

REMINISCENCES OF MORALS

A socio-psychological analysis of bystander unconsciousness in *Waltz with Bashir*

Author: Nahal Sheikh

Abstract In atrocities, bystanders might find themselves in a limbo-like state where it is extremely difficult to react responsibly to an occurring injustice. This article investigates the complex character of a bystander through a social-psychological analysis of Ari Folman's animated documentary film, *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). Theories of norm learning and delinquent behaviour are used to understand the unconscious self-perception of the protagonist, Ari, of his bystander role in the Sabra and Shatila Massacre of 1982. It is claimed that since Ari unconsciously sees himself as a perpetrator of the massacre, his behaviour as an innocent witness who bears no ethical responsibility creates a tension that continues to haunt him.

I Introduction

As humans, our feelings of empathy allow us to share another person's sense of distress. As Charles Darwin (1871) explained, when pain or distress is witnessed by a person, the witness experiences the subject's discomfort. Because of this reason he or she tries to alleviate another person's agony, which in turn reduces the witness's own empathetic misery. However, Darwin does not explain the ori-

gin of such compassion and why it fails to exist in some human beings in certain times of need (Ekman, 2010). The present article attempts to unravel the complex dynamics of empathy by analysing Ari Folman's (2008) animated documentary film, *Waltz with Bashir*. The analysis borrows from a larger theoretical framework of the so-called Atrocity Triangle in which the role of three essential 'actors' – that of the perpetrator, the bystander, and the victim – are assumed to act in relationally interconnected ways during a conflict (Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011). Through *Waltz with Bashir*, the bystander nature is explored from a micro-level perspective in order to investigate the protagonist's subjective self-perception of his or her role in an atrocity. For the sake of clarity, the name 'Folman' is used to refer to the film's director, whereas 'Ari' is used for the protagonist since the director himself poses as the main character. Focusing on Ari, a micro angle examines how he internalizes the 1982 Sabra and Shatila Massacre as traumatic, and how this influences his experiencing the event as a collaborative perpetrator rather than an uninvolved witness who bears no ethical responsibility.

By analysing Ari's actions in such a way it is possible to escape from deterministic stereotypes that label bystanders as either innocents without any agency or as active perpetrators supportive of atrocious policies. Instead, this article's peculiar approach allows for a complex analysis of the above two perspectives to understand the very tension bystanders may face subjectively. With the help of Schwartz (1968) and Sykes and Matza (1957), a comprehensive theoretical framework for Folman's film is laid out. Schwartz's work sketches out the 'Norm Activation Model' which explains how an actor fails to perform responsibly in a morally sensitive situation, otherwise known as in-action. Sykes and Matza add several environmental conditions which shape delinquent behaviour to Schwarz's theory. Through these, this article explores how Ari experiences his bystander role in the Sabra and Shatila Massacre through the constant tension he faces between his conscious and unconscious mind. Beginning with a brief case study of the massacre, *Waltz with Bashir* is analysed theoretically mapping out his apathetic behaviour during the incident. In conclusion, it is found that although the theoretical framework helps understand Ari's in-action during the atrocity, it fails to acknowledge the suppressed deterred trauma he experiences that haunts him years after the incident. The various faces of a bystander are revealed, presenting a personalized perspective to the massacre.

2 Case Study

2.1 The Sabra and Shatila Massacre of 1982

In June 1982, Israeli forces invaded South Lebanon to remove Palestinian fighters who were attacking northern Israeli towns (Malone, 1985). The mission was to occupy Beirut and appoint a Christian Phalangist ally, Bashir Gemayel, as the President of Lebanon (Anziska, 2012), thereby eradicating the ongoing threat to Israel. Suspicious of Israel's acts, the Lebanese tried to negotiate while the fighters penetrated Beirut's outskirts (Malone, 1985). Finally, a treaty was signed allowing Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to evacuate all Palestinian combat fighters from the city to Tunisia. In return, Israel would not invade further (Lormand, 2008). Simultaneously, Bashir Gemayel became President of Lebanon, but was subsequently assassinated in a bomb explosion. It was assumed this was done by Palestinian conspirators who stood against the Lebanese puppet leader (Waltz with Bashir, n.d.). The same afternoon, IDF entered Beirut and surrounded a Palestinian refugee camp called Sabra and Shatila. Massive Phalangist forces, driven by revenge for their dead leader, entered to wipe out Palestinian combat fighters, who in fact had already been evacuated to Tunisia two weeks earlier. Those left were innocent men, women, and children (Waltz with Bashir, n.d.). For three whole days, the Christian forces massacred everyone in the refugee camps with utmost brutality, leaving approximately 3,500 civilians dead (IMEU, 2012). During this incident, the IDF stood aside knowing thousands of innocent lives were being attacked night after night (Lormand, 2008; Anziska, 2012).

2.2 Waltz with Bashir: Diving into Ari's unconscious

Woken up in the middle of the night by friend, Ari hears about a recurring nightmare his friend, Boaz, is haunted by – being fiercely chased by twenty-six dogs. They both conclude the nightmare has a connection to their Israeli Army mission in the 1982 Lebanon War. Triggered by this, Ari has the first flashback of his presence at a beach in Beirut during the night of the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. Deeply shocked at this being the only recollection he has of the time, he remembers himself, pale and gloomy, slowly rising from the sea's dark waters with two other soldiers, naked, holding machine guns while watching the sky lit up in flares (See Fig.1) (Adams, 2016; Lormand, 2008).



Figure 1 Ari in the flared up sea (Folman, 2008, 08:01)

Folman made the animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* driven by an exploration into his twenty-six-year-old historical role during the Sabra and Shatila Massacre (Yosef, 2010). Is the fogged memory of the Mediterranean Sea's gloomy shores from the massacre? Was he an accomplice in the killings? Or did he just stand there as the Phalangist militias eradicated the refugee camp? He has no answers.

Troubled by inconsistent reminiscences in the form of dreamy images and flashes, Ari meets and interviews several of his old comrades around the world to find out whether he was present during the massacre and what role he played. Folman (2008) narrates this wrestling journey through hallucinatory animations that takes the viewer outside the realms of ordinary documentaries. Such techniques can be interpreted as a way to highlight the puzzling contextual paradigm of a bystander to a crime finds himself in, subsumed by the constant tension between his conscious behaviour and unconscious thought – discussed further below. The friends Ari meets, the conversations he has, and the buried obscurities he provokes are all visualized in equally mystifying forms. It becomes difficult for the viewer to differentiate true memory fragments from imaginary ones, just as it is for Ari himself (Yoshida, 2014). In the following section, an extensive theoretical framework is laid out to grasp the very real but inaccessible tension Ari experiences.

3 Theoretical Framework: norms & delinquency

Shalom H. Schwartz (1968) describes an individual's decision-making process in a situation which objectively requires him to act rather than not act. Schwartz proposes the 'Norm Activation Model', which suggests that behaviour depends on how an individual defines his "moral choice situation" (p. 355). If he perceives it as relating to moral norms, then these are activated and influence behaviour by engaging in the setting. However, if the individual perceives the situation as not requiring moral evaluation then he will not act. In the latter case, the event's nature falls into any of these three categories: the event does not require ethical assessment, the event requires it but the witness misinterprets the situation as not requiring assessment, and the event requires it but the witness intentionally denies that this is the case.

In the event of a crisis, the last two categories come into play. For example, if there is a situation in which a person finds another person drowning in a lake, it is clear that this is a moral choice situation which requires the witness to help the victim. The witness can either misinterpret this event, believing that the victim knows how to swim and will not drown, or the witness can intentionally ignore the event. In the latter category, he realizes the victim is drowning and could die if not rescued, yet he chooses to walk away. Schwartz (1968) claims that such an analysis of the nature of a "moral choice situation" (p. 355) depends on two conditions: (1) the witness must be aware that his actions will have consequences for the welfare of others, and (2) the witness must assign himself a degree of responsibility for his actions.

This article focuses on the third category, intentional ignorance, in which the above two conditions are not met. This occurs because of the nature of existing societal ethics. Activation of moral norms arise from cultural specifications which socialize the witness. What his society considers good or bad is what he understands as good or bad. In Schwartz's well-functioning community, it would make no sense why the witness would refuse to help a drowning victim. The witness's healthy and empathetic environment encourages helping others in need, and should therefore make him dive into the water to rescue another. So then why does the witness not jump?

Skyes and Matza (1957), in their works on criminology, discuss the concept of "Delinquent Sub-culture" (p. 664). Here, rules of the broader societal normative system are reversed by a sub-group who create a unique "norm-holding" (p. 665). If the sub-culture perceives the act of not rescuing a drowning victim as good then this moral norm is activated causing the witness not to help. When, according to his proximate surroundings, he acts in a way that realistically falls outside

any objective larger societal moral discourse, the link between his personal existence and that of his exclusive social environment becomes very clear and definite – he subsumes himself entirely within it. He lets go of the true ethical consequences of his actions and removes any degree of responsibility he possesses to help the drowning victim (Schwartz, 1968; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

This subsuming allows the witness to intentionally ignore or deny the crisis by defining it as something external to him which transforms him into a collaborator-bystander. Consequently, in Schwartz's (1968) well-functioning society, objective moral norms are not activated causing the witness not to act in a situation that required him to do otherwise. Thus, emotions that these norms elicit – guilt, shame, fear, anxiety – fail to generate. However, in their place, opposing emotions of pride, joy, and content are prompted for a bystander, as not rescuing the drowning victim was morally good within his sub-culture. Therefore, by combining the Sykes and Matza's (1957) Delinquent Sub-culture theory with Schwartz's (1968) Norm-Activation Model, the article develops the latter further to incorporate bystander behaviour in atrocities. Through this, it is found that Ari activated his army's subjective norms, which morally allowed victims to be killed during the 1982 Sabra and Shatila Massacre. However, interestingly it is found that the above theories' combination only applies to Ari temporarily. This means that his objective moral norms – the ethical appeal of knowing innocent people are getting killed – were *unconsciously* activated, which label the event as traumatic. This is visible through his uneasy mental state and behaviour throughout Waltz with Bashir that urge him to dig into his past and confront himself with the reality of events.

4 Ari's normative system

4.1 IDF subculture in the 1982-85 Lebanon War

In order to understand the Ari's past, it is crucial to identify the character of his sub-culture during the Lebanon War of 1980s. Kelman (1973) claims sanctioned massacres often take place in an environment that is devoid of moral evaluation or justification for the violence being perpetrated. They occur in larger socio-political contexts of war, be it civil or international, revolutionary struggle or an ethnic conflict. The US violence in Vietnam, Nazi atrocities in Germany, and the Pakistani killings in Bangladesh are all historical examples of massacres. The common situational variable among these is not only their war-based cultivation but also that war breeds a genocidal policy (Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011). To destroy a set of people defined as ethnic, religious, racial and so forth is the purpose. This genocidal norm makes clear to a group of people that the civilian pop-

ulation is “expendable” and their arbitrary killing is “central to the strategy of the war” (Kelman, 1973, p. 32). This way, killing a man, woman, child or an elderly person becomes permissible.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari is situated in the social and historical context of the 1982 Lebanon War. As a soldier, he is deeply entrenched in a normative of violence in contrast to an ordinary Israeli citizen. The selective set-up of the IDF is then defined as a delinquent sub-culture (Sykes & Matza, 1957). One of Ari’s friends, Roni Dayag, describes the time they first crossed the Rosh Hanikra border to reach Lebanon – it “felt like an excursion... we took photos, we told jokes [...] we had time to fool around before going into action” (Folman, 2008, 26:53-27:06). The viewer is able to indulge in this memory reconstruction, beginning with a song called ‘Good Morning Lebanon’, and appreciating Lebanon’s beauty. The atmosphere slowly turns aggressive as the soldiers enter Beirut in a tank where everything is in ruins. Another song, “I Bombed Beirut Today” plays and in an instant, the bloodbath begins. The scenes show the everyday routine of IDF soldiers – jumping in helicopters, a car driving by shooting at them while they’re having lunch, bombing a car from an aircraft as it escapes, leaving them destroyed. Within such a violence-oriented environment, reinforced by the physical infrastructure of a grey and lifeless town, it became normal and acceptable to participate in acts of brutality (see Fig. 2). Roni describes: “Our daily routine was this: get up in the morning, prepare for breakfast on those frying pans... potted beef and eggs. Take a swim, get back into uniform then go after some terrorists” (Folman, 2008, 41:16-41:36).



Figure 2 *Bombed Beirut Today* (Folman, 2008, 37:47)

Therefore, the grander normative system of society perceiving violence and killing as something negative does not apply to IDF's sub-culture. It becomes clear that the moral norms of society are flexible, in that they are not "a body of rules held to be binding under all conditions" (Sykes and Matza's, 1957, p. 666). So, Ari was swallowed in the war-centric milieu of the 1982 Lebanon War allowing him to intentionally deny and then ignore the atrocities taking place at the time, specifically during the Sabra and Shatila Massacre (Latane & Darley, 1969).

4.2 Ari's moral norm activation & trauma

By merging Sykes and Matza's (1957) Delinquent Sub-culture theory with Schwartz's (1986) Norm Activation Model, it becomes possible to understand how Ari acted as a bystander during the massacre. Ari substituted the societal moral norms of helping others in need with his specific environment's morals on violence as something acceptable and good. Thus, he was not fully aware of the consequences of his in-action on the welfare of the Palestinian and Lebanese victims, nor did he feel responsible for their deaths. This resulted in his sense of ignorance of his moral responsibility towards the entire massacre (Latane & Darley, 1969). Ari did not feel instant shame or guilt for not rescuing the innocent civilians. Rather, he must have felt joy or pride in doing something that was expected of him from his sub-culture.

However, Folman wishes to communicate a different story to the audience through Waltz with Bashir. The film centres around Ari's buried psychological experiences of the massacre. It shows that he is subject to "hard-to-understand scrambled memories" derived "from multi-layered collections of unconscious remnants" (Yoshida, 2014, p. 82). Beginning with the first flashback he has of coming out of the sea in Beirut, he is unsure whether that is a night from the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. He has a hunch and wants to investigate further but at the same time he is afraid of finding out the reason *why* his mind has completely blocked out that phase of his life.

As Ari examines this period it becomes clear that by acting as a bystander to the massacre the event was very traumatic for him. If it was not, he might have had an accurate memory of it and his unconscious mind would not feel the need to suppress his experiences. Dori Laub (1992) points out that a traumatic experience often fails to be properly processed at the moment of its occurrence. The "uncanny structure" of a trauma has "no beginning, no end, no beginning, no during, and no after" (Yoshida, 2014, p. 83) because it falls outside the boundaries of normal reality. Ari did not authentically identify himself with his IDF sub-culture during the Lebanese War, as Sykes and Matza (1957) would claim. Rather, he identified with it on a superficial level. This means that instead of

replacing the larger society's objective moral norms with activating his sub-culture's subjective morals, the former were activated but momentarily repressed by his unconscious. Therefore, temporarily, Ari believed that not intervening to help the refugees against the Phalangist militias was the right thing to do. This happened because at the time of the event, it was too soon to comprehend its full meaning – that *innocent civilians are being slaughtered while I, Ari, am doing nothing to stop this*. However, on a deeper level he was partially acting within the normative system of society which condones violence and encourages empathy (Yosef, 2010). This caused the process of realizing the event's true meaning and implications as a deferred action to his consciousness (Stohl, 1987). So, the massacre's tremor took a longer time to be realized by Ari through a process of probing at his "disremembered memories" (Yosef, 2010, p. 318) which enabled him to deal with events that were too terrifying and difficult to experience in the first place.

5 Identification with the perpetrator

Over the course of the film, Ari realizes that he did not take an active part in the slaughter, yet the film poses the question of the entirety of his ethical role in the event. Even as an inactive bystander, Ari sees himself liable. When he visits his psychologist friend, Ori Sivan, in search of help to solve the problem of his lost memory, Ori explains that the memory has been suppressed because Ari identifies himself with the Phalangist perpetrators (Folman, 2008; Yosef, 2010). The temporary repression of the activated objective moral norms helped him bury the guilt he felt in not rescuing the victims. In reality, he levelled himself to the same status of those who physically perpetrated the killings. So, the trauma's deferred implication revealed his sense of awareness to the welfare of the victims and the responsibility of actions towards them. By uncovering this, Ari was no longer able to ignore the massacre intentionally or unintentionally (Schwartz, 1968).

His situation is comparable to that of some of the friends he meets. Boaz, with whom this entire journey began, is also haunted by the twenty-six dogs who want to kill him. However, unlike Ari he already knows the root of this. In an incident when the IDF was searching a Lebanese village for Palestinians, he was ordered to kill all the dogs because their barking would alarm the "fugitives" helping them flee. Boaz describes: "They told me, "go ahead and shoot the dogs!" Twenty-six dogs, I remember every single one every face, every wound, the look in their eyes. Twenty-six dogs" (See Fig. 3) (Folman, 2008).



Figure 3 Twenty-six dogs chasing Boaz (Folman, 2008, 02:12)

The dogs haunt him to not only avenge their murder but to also demand ethical responsibility for the terror he enforced upon them. So, the similarity between Boaz and Ari is that they attempt to "emerge from their blindness and accept the moral responsibility in reality" (Yosef, 2014, p. 321). They do so by waking up from their dreams, hallucinations and memories and become accountable to the immoral actions they committed in the past.

6 Conclusion: The many faces of a bystander

The film successfully identifies the intertwined relationship between a perpetrator, a bystander, and a victim. The relationship is not highlighted in a classic way of how each actor influences the other, but rather emphasizes how an individual can act as a perpetrator and at the same time play the role of a bystander whilst feeling victimized himself. Ari showcases these complex dynamics well in Folman's (2008) film, *Waltz with Bashir*. By using Schwartz's (1968) Norm Activation Model it becomes possible to see that grander societal normative systems exist, influencing a bystander's actions. Simultaneously, Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory on Delinquent Sub-culture portrays that a secondary normative system exists which also plays an equally important role in a witness's decision-making process to either remain a tacit bystander or intervene and rescue the victims.

By combining the two theories, the expected finding was that Ari would not activate society's objective moral norms by substituting them with his IDF sub-culture's subjective norms. This would result in his failure to be aware of his actions' consequences for the welfare of others *and* in his failure to take responsibility for his action (or in-action). However, this article's purpose was to show that in fact the above theoretical framework was insufficient in understanding why Ari experienced moral uneasiness years after the 1982 Sabra and Shatila Massacre. Rather, this uneasiness was better comprehended by an endless tension that existed between his conscious and subconscious experiences of the incident. This way, the article found that Ari did in fact activate objective moral norms, but that he did so unconsciously; in fact, he repressed them. So, by failing consciously activate these – which would ideally lead to a sensation of guilt –, guilt was in fact not experienced as a mechanism to cope with the event's trauma at the time. As a temporary substitution, he adopted the IDF sub-culture's subjective morals which allowed him to perceive violence and killing as something normal and good. This allowed him to intentionally ignore the incident. However, the suppressed objective morals that discourage such actions and instead encourage empathic behaviour were realized as a deferred action years later in the form of fragmented memories and hallucinations. Thus, he is in fact aware of his actions' consequences and his responsibility towards others, helping him label his role in the atrocity – that of a collaborative perpetrator than an innocent bystander.

Folman's animation style is able to capture this ambiguous temporal nature of Ari's traumatic past; one that cannot be truly accessed any longer, yet is indelible. The film helps portray the ethical responsibility a bystander possesses. As Yosef (2010) points out, "The ethical responsibility that he (Ari) wishes to examine is that of the very repression of memory: what is the meaning of not wanting to remember? What is the meaning of not wanting to see? What is the meaning of not seeing in time?" (p. 320). In conclusion, the micro-level social-psychological dynamics of how a bystander perceives themselves is crucial to the understanding of his role in an atrocity. He is not at the level of a perpetrator unless he puts himself there, but at the same time he victimizes himself by understanding the crime as a trauma.

References

- Adams, B. (2016). 'Waltz with Bashir': The fallibility yet persistence of memory. Retrieved from <http://www.documentary.org/feature/waltz-bashir-fallibility-yet-persistence-memory>
- Anziska, S. (2012, September 16). A preventable massacre. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/opinion/a-preventable-massacre.html>
- Darwin, C. (1871). The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex. New York: D. Appleton & Co.
- Ekman, P. (2010). Darwin's compassionate view on human nature. *JAMA*, 303(6), 557-558. Retrieved from <https://www.paulekman.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Darwins-Compassionate-View-Of-Human-Nature-2010.pdf>
- Folman, Ari. (Producer & Director). (2008). Waltz with Bashir. [Documentary animated film]. Israel: Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Les Films d'Ici, & Razor Film Produktion.
- Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU). (2012, September 17). The Sabra & Shatila massacre. Retrieved from <http://imeu.org/article/the-sabra-shatila-massacre>
- Kelman, H. (1973). Violence without moral restraint: Reflections on the dehumanization of victims and victimizers. *Journal of Social Issues*, 29(4), 25-61. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1973.tb00102.x
- Latane, B., & Darley, J.M. (1969). Bystander "Apathy". *American Scientist*, 57(2), 244-268. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27828530>
- Laub, D. (1992). 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', In S. Felman & D. Laub (Eds.), *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (pp. 57-62). New York and London: Routledge.
- Lormand, R. (2008, May). Waltz with Bashir: An Ari Folman film. [Professional interview]. *Festival De Cannes*. Retrieved from <http://www.the-match-factory.com/films/items/waltz-with-bashir.html?file=assets/downloads-public/films/w/waltz-with-bashir/waltz-with-bashir-pressbook.pdf>
- Malone, L.A. (1985). The Kahan Report, Ariel Sharon and the Sabra-Shatilla massacres in Lebanon: Responsibility under international law for massacres of civilian populations. *Faculty Publications: William & Mary Law School*, 587, 373-433. Retrieved from <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/587/>
- Schwartz, S.H. (1968). Awareness of consequences and the influence of moral norms on interpersonal behavior. *Sociometry*, 31(4), 355-369. doi:10.2307/2786399
- Smeulers, A., & Grunfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations*. Leiden & Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Stohl, M. (1987). Outside of a small circle of friends: States, genocide, mass killing and the role of bystanders. *Journal of Peace Research*, 24(2), 151-166. doi: 10.1177/002234338702400205
- Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociologist Review*, 22(6), 664-670. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2089195>
- Waltz with Bashir. (n.d.). Waltz with Bashir An Ari Folman Film. Retrieved from <http://waltzwithbashir.com/home.html>

- Yosef, R. (2010). War fantasies: Memory, trauma and ethics in Ari Folman's Waltz with Bashir. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 9(33), 311-326. doi:10.1080/14725886.2010.518444
- Yoshida, Y. (2014). The return to unreachable spaces in Ari Folman's Waltz with Bashir. *Image [&] Narrative*, 15(3), 81-92. Retrieved from www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/download/628/457

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Folman, Ari. (2008). *Waltz with Bashir*. [Film still].

Figure 2: Folman, Ari. (2008). *Waltz with Bashir*. [Film still].

Figure 3: Folman, Ari. (2008). *Waltz with Bashir*. [Film still].