



How To Win A Cosmic War meets Waltz With Bashir

REZA ASLAN in conversation with ARI FOLMAN

Instigated by Paul Holdengräber

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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FLASH ROSENBERG: Hello everyone. Welcome to the New York Public Library, to LIVE. I'm Flash Rosenberg, the artist in residence. I put together the animation you saw earlier. **(applause)** Thank you. And what I'm trying to do with these animations is be a part of you, give us a voice, so that these presentations here are not just about oh, we're watching smart people, which in fact they are, say brilliant things, but in fact what it's like to be a listener, because we're all engaged in this conversation, in this particular

LIVE series. And so tonight what I'm going to be doing is often I just draw them and then we put together these animations later, but tonight I'm going to be drawing it, and you'll see it on the screen while the speakers are engaged. And sometimes I'll get it wrong and sometimes I'll, you know, be like you are, perplexed by it, and what I'm trying to do is not so much feature the speakers but have—not contradict them, either. I'm featuring kind of the ideas as they mingle in the air and land inside of us, so, you know, I'm not trying to make fun of it, I'm trying to have fun with it, fun meaning that kind of adventure of being able to think things in a way that are deeper and more significant than we may have thought about it before.

Next I would like to introduce Paul, who asked me to say one word to introduce him, but one word for Paul Holdengräber does not yet exist. His name alone requires five syllables. I think a good way to describe him will be he's an energized vision for how our minds might speak with each other. He's Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. Here's Paul Holdengräber.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I will just say one word. Watch this.

(clip from *Waltz with Bashir*)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ari Folman and Reza Aslan! It's a real pleasure to have you both here tonight. Reza, I'm going to ask you quite simply to react to what we just saw.

REZA ASLAN: Well, I mean, this is a beautiful film [*Waltz with Bashir*], as so many people have said. It's incredibly moving, it's gorgeously done, beautifully written. To me the really fascinating thing, particularly about the clip that we saw and with regard to the discussion that we're having here this evening, is this issue of, you know, film and can film be therapeutic and what role can film and the media play, particularly with issues that are so charged and polarized as conflicts involving Israel and particularly the Israeli/Palestinian issue? It's interesting to me because, you know, as somebody who also works with film and works with media, I do believe that, in some ways, film provides a universal language that other mechanisms for dealing with these kinds of crises just simply do not.

Certainly when it comes to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, this is an issue that is so infused with religious trauma. It's an issue in which political and national and ethnic concerns have created a problem that seems almost unsolvable. And then the question becomes, you know, can we rely on the arts and film to succeed where politics and where religion have failed? And that is to actually create some sense of bridge, a means of communicating certain values and ideas through metaphors that are perhaps more familiar and less burdened with the baggage that politics and religion has.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I would say let's stop there, not give an answer to your question.

REZA ASLAN: Good, cause I don't have one.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And perhaps this evening will be an evening of questions and no answers. Maybe also we will pontificate in the true Latin sense of the word—we'll build bridges between. Now, let's build a bridge from Ari Folman's work we saw just now, the beginning of his extraordinary film *Waltz with Bashir*, and your own work, and so what I will ask you to do in fairness and so that we have great parity here, since my role here is to adjudicate and make sure that both of you have a fair chance to express your views. Why don't I ask you to—I'll give you, I'll hand you over your own book and have you read a couple of pages of the book to give people a sense—I think the book just came out—

REZA ASLAN: Tuesday.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tuesday. So here you. *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization and the End of the War on Terror*.

REZA ASLAN: All right, thanks. I'll stand up if you don't mind.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I don't mind.

REZA ASLAN: It will make it a little bit easier. I have this headset on, so I can do a little dance routine, perhaps, a little bit later on if you'd like. **(laughter)** I'll just read a couple of pages from the first chapter, entitled "The Borderless Self."

"Ben Gurion International Airport is a brash, beautiful, strikingly confident construction that like much of Tel Aviv looks as though it might have sprouted fully formed from the desert sands of the old Arab port city of Jaffa. Named after the surly general and chief architect of the state, the airport is a testament to Israel's self-described position as a bastion of social and technological advancement amid a sea of enemies. In fact, Ben Gurion's primary function seems to be to filter out these very enemies by tightly controlling access to the state. This is true of all international airports, I suppose, as anyone who has undergone the humiliation of being scanned, fingerprinted, and photographed to be allowed entry into the United States post-9/11 can attest. In the modern world, airports have become a kind of identity directory, the place where we are most determinately defined, registered, and cataloged before being apportioned into separate queues, each according to nationality.

Still, Israel has, for obvious reasons, taken this process to new and unprecedented heights. I am not two steps off the plane when I am immediately tagged and separated from the rush of passengers by a pimply immigration officer in a knitted yarmulke. 'Passport, please!' he barks. 'Why are you here?' I cannot tell him the truth. I want to sneak into Gaza, which has been sealed off for months. In 2006, when Palestinians were offered their first taste of the free and fair election, they voted overwhelmingly for the religious nationalists of Hamas over the more secular, yet seemingly inept politicians of Fatah, the party founded by Yasser Arafat in 1958. Despite having promised to allow the Palestinians self-determination, Israel, the United States, and the European powers quickly decided that Hamas, whose founding charter refuses to recognize the state of

Israel and whose militant wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam brigades, has been responsible for countless Israeli military and civilian deaths, would not be allowed to govern.

Gaza, that silver fallow of land which has become Hamas's de facto stronghold, was cut off from the outside world. International aid dried out up and a plan was put in place to, as the *New York Times* put it, 'starve the Palestinian Authority of money and international connections to the point where new elections would have to be held.' This resulted in a violent rift between Hamas and Fatah that split the Occupied Territories in two: the West Bank, governed by Fatah with the aid of Israel and the Western powers, and Gaza, ruled by Hamas and isolated from the rest of the world. A prison with one and a half million hungry, fuming inmates.

I wanted to visit the ruined village of Umm al-Nasser in northern Gaza, some miles away from lush Tel Aviv. A few months earlier, a number of villagers, including two toddlers, had drowned in what the press was calling a sewage tsunami. The deluge had been triggered by the collapse of a treatment facility just above the village that had been slowly and steadily leaking sewage. For months, the villagers of Umm al-Nasser had pleaded with Israeli authorities to allow the importation of the pumps, pipes, and filters necessary to stem the flow. But Israel, rattled by a ceaseless barrage of crudely constructed rockets launched daily from Gaza, some of which were—in the sort of grim irony that exists only in this place—constructed from old sewage pipes, refused. The villagers built an earthen embankment around what was fast becoming a giant lake of human waste, but the embankment would not hold. On the morning of March 27, 2007, while most of the villagers of Umm al-Nasser slept, the embankment gave way. The village was inundated.

This is what we talk about when we talk about Gaza, that human beings—men, women, children—could literally drown in shit.

'Why are you here?' 'To visit the sights,' I say. It is not a satisfactory answer, and I am taken into a windowless room, where the question is repeated, this time by a slightly

older officer. An hour passes, and a third officer walks in with the same question: ‘Why are you here?’ Thereafter the question is repeated, in the sterile immigration office, in a smaller, even more sterile, office inside the first office, in an even smaller office inside that office and later at the immigration queue, at the baggage claim, at customs, until I come to think of ‘Why are you here?’ as a form of greeting.

All of this is understandable. I resent none of it. Although I am a citizen of the United States, I was born in Iran and have spent a great deal of time in countries that do not even recognize Israel’s right to exist. Countries that, were I to have an Israeli stamp on my passport, would not allow me to enter their borders, would maybe even cart me off to jail. Israel has every reason to be cautious, considering the battering it has received at the hands of people who look just like me. The problem is not with Israel; the problem is with me, with the sum of my identities. My citizenship is American, my nationality Iranian, my ethnicity Persian, my culture Middle Eastern, my religion Muslim, my gender male. All the multiple signifiers of my identity, the things that make me who I am, are in one way or another viewed as a threat to the endless procession of perfectly pleasant, perfectly reasonable immigration officers, whose task it is to maintain a safe distance between people like them and people like me.

Even so, throughout the entire exercise I could not help but think of the famed French theorist Ernest Renan, who once defined the nation as ‘a group of people united in a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbors.’ Nowhere is that sentiment borne out more fully or with more force than among the nations scattered along the broad horizon of the Middle East. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that the region in which nationalism arose so late and so often through the will of others is the region in which it is now being most unmistakably subsumed by the tide of globalization.”

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Could you please reread that line of Ernest Renan?

REZA ASLAN: “The famed French philosopher who said, one moment here, I’ve got it here somewhere. Yes. The nation is ‘a group of people united in a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbors.’”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ari Folman, could you comment on that sentence?

ARI FOLMAN: First, I just want to tell you, Reza, you should consider yourself lucky. Because I have German partners who produced *Bashir* with me, and every time they come to Israel they take their laptops at Ben Gurion airport. Did they take your laptop?

REZA ASLAN: Fortunately, not. For a writer—

ARI FOLMAN: You’re just asked why are you here? I mean, they go out without a laptop because they coproduced a film called *Paradise Now* that you probably know. It’s a Palestinian film, so—And I think it’s more complicated than the sentence that you just put, which is, I mean—It’s much more complicated, at least in our region, and I don’t think that hatred is something universal or something that unites the nations and make them nations as they are. I think it’s part of a bigger system. I think it’s part of education. I think it’s part of belief. I think it’s part, mainly part, of leadership and politics, and, trying to answer the first question that was raised here, I must say, no. I don’t believe that arts can change the world, I don’t believe that films can change the world. I don’t think that films can change the current situation. I think it’s all about leadership and politics and leaders that people can trust and go with them for major changes, but art or film or

filmmaking or a film like I did can build small bridges between people but they are very tiny. And—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You need them to be of some capacity to be able to walk on them, so that even if they're tiny, small feet can cross from one part to the other. You know, there is a wonderful line of Pascal, who when he was trying to describe war, he said, ““Why do you kill me?”” And the answer is, ‘But don’t you live on the other side of the river?’” So the bridge may do something, it may bring the two sides—

ARI FOLMAN: Yeah, but the bridge is kind of artificial, you know. My film was not screened in any Arab country.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Except Lebanon, right?

ARI FOLMAN: Except for downloading in Lebanon, which is good, which is good. I mean, the only responses I got from the Arab world were from Palestinians living in Europe. It's something, but it will not make a major change.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I recall in a conversation we had that Ari, that Reza, you believed strongly—we're getting to this part of the conversation very quickly, but we'll go back and forth. I do believe that, as I've often said, that digression is the sunshine of narrative, but you said that you actually had a strong belief that art could have a powerful effect in changing society, to which you immediately answered, without even letting

Reza really finish his thought, by saying, “But you are such a romantic.” And I thought it was really interesting that the artist was calling the political scientist a romantic.

(laughter)

ARI FOLMAN: Can I define artist?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I’ll leave that to you.

ARI FOLMAN: So, will you say something about it?

REZA ASLAN: I think that question was directed to you—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I can sort of divert this from—

ARI FOLMAN: We have—we have now how long has it been? One hundred and nearly fifteen years of film history—can you mention one film that changed the world?

REZA ASLAN: Yes.

ARI FOLMAN: Which one? *Battle of Algiers*? Which one?

REZA ASLAN: Well, *Gandhi*. Before *Gandhi* was made in the U.S. and before all the accolades that came of it, very, very few Americans knew who Gandhi was and now Gandhi sells Apple computers. And in a sense, in a sense, you know, there were, it's not as though there weren't books about Gandhi, it's not as though, you know, Gandhi wasn't somebody who was discussed in certain circles, but it wasn't part of our social consciousness. It wasn't part of our language. The narrative of nonviolence—it didn't have a story behind it to give it substance, and I think in some ways the same is true, circling back to this issue of Israel/Palestine, because in the United States we talk about this question a lot within certain circles, which is why is it that Americans simply cannot accept the Palestinian narrative in this conflict, whereas the Israeli narrative has become wholly absorbed? It has become part of the American narrative in many ways, there's this covenantal relationship between the U.S. and Israel and I think part of it has to do with the fact that the story of Israel is such a powerful one, and it's one that I think most Americans can understand and absorb and relate to, but there is no story for the Palestinians—there's nothing for Americans to grasp on to.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's work with your *Gandhi* idea and apply it to your film. I will speak from the stronghold of ignorance and say that before seeing your film, Ari, I was only slightly aware, much to my shame, of, about the massacre that you describe in the film. And in a way this massacre was made real by watching this film of yours. It overtook me in some way and so that is something that I think has great value. Now, I will ask you the following question. First of all, for you, what was the massacre of Sabra and Shatilla before you made the film and what was it after you made the film?

ARI FOLMAN: First, I just want to say that for me, I mean, one of the greatest things of making the film is, you know, if I screened this film wherever it was, in Minnesota or in Bosnia or in Belgium or in Mexico, and five people out of the audience went back home and Googled “Sabra and Shatilla” and read for an hour what was it all about, I did my job, you know. It’s enough. As I said before, it won’t change the world, but for me it’s great. Now, as for Sabra and Shatilla, I, you know, I went through a process while making this film and then I went through another process while traveling with this film, realizing a lot of things that I didn’t realize while making this film. Just giving you an example that is not an answer to your question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That’s all right.

ARI FOLMAN: While I was traveling in the U.S. in that Sundin Hall tour I was making here, fourteen cities in seventeen days, I read an article in the *Newsweek*. It was about a soldier coming back home from Iraq, an American soldier, and I realized for example that just you know between the lines it was said it took him six days to come back home from the front, I don’t know where it was, somewhere in the Midwest. And then I was trying to figure out how long did it take me to come back home and I realized that you know being in Western Beirut in terrible situation and coming back home was twenty minutes’ difference. You walk on a helicopter and my parents lived in Haifa. We landed after twenty minutes and I was in the middle of apartment, okay, and think about making this transformation in twenty minutes. It’s something that your mind can’t really understand.

And I never thought about it while making the film and if I did, of course, I would have put it maybe in the voice-over, maybe in a scene, just as an example how surreal war is and, of course, in that kind of war, like the Lebanon war, when you come back home, nobody really gives a damn about what's happening in the front, that's why it was so frustrating, so think about this transformation in twenty minutes.

Then the Sabra and Shatilla issue. I realized, while traveling with the film, to be honest, and not while making the film that a little bit while making the film, meeting the people who were with me, but just while thinking and answering questions of people I realized, for example, that when we came back home after the massacre, it was the Jewish New Year's eve, Rosh Hashanah, and we had a leave back home, and there were demonstrations in the country because of the massacre, left-wing demonstrations, and the country was really boiling because of the event.

We were busy—we were all—we were visiting the families of the dead that died in Western Beirut and we had a forty-eight or seventy-two hours leave and we went to see the families of the dead. Which is for a nineteen-year-old guy, it's quite traumatic to meet the parents and feel the guilt that you are alive and their son's dead, for example. And then we went back to the army and we didn't deal at all with the massacre, at all, we didn't discuss it, because we were in a different zone, completely different zone. Now, when I've been asked while traveling, "What were you thinking back then? What were you discussing with your friends?" We were—I mean, we were fighting our very private war, which was an everyday war, okay? So in the eye of a twenty-year-old guy, I was,

you know, busy, being busy surviving and then the grief of friends who died, okay, and then being really—putting a lot of effort in forgetting everything. And then with the process more than twenty years later of making the film, it was like discovering this massacre again. It's not that we didn't know the facts and it was not there, but we were disconnected emotionally from the event, totally, because we were busy with other things.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We will come back to the work of re-membering, truly in the sense of putting the members back together in some way. Your movie is a *Speak, Memory* of movie. I think in a way what links both of you, quite naturally and not artificially, is your relationship to proximity and distance. In some way, Reza, you talk about cosmic wars, not local wars as we have here, but cosmic conflicts. Tell us a little bit what this term means and how and if it can be perhaps be applied to what Ari just was describing.

REZA ASLAN: A cosmic war is a war of the imagination. It's a ritual drama in which participants believe that they are acting out on the earth a conflict that's actually taking place in the heavens, and that we human beings are nothing more than just pawns in the hands of God or actors in a divine script written before time began. It has a very real element to it, obviously. I mean, the carnage is quite real and material. but at the same time it has this—this kind of imaginary moral encounter that supersedes whatever is taking place in the real and concrete world. And I think, particularly when it comes to the Middle East—I mean, part of the argument of the book is that you know the War on

Terror has become a cosmic war in the sense of a good-versus-evil for the future of civilization, but this is by no means a purely American phenomenon or a purely Islamic phenomenon. It is in many ways a universal human impulse to place one's actions and decisions on earth in a cosmic realm to give it some cosmic significance. And nowhere is this more true obviously than in the Middle East, particularly, again, talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has taken on this conception, this territorial conflict over land and resources, which has become—in even the most common telling of this story has taken on these cosmic dimensions in which this has become more than anything else a contest over the divine favor of God.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I think what Ari was describing is so interesting—the difference between fighting a war so far away and fighting a war where you arrive back home within twenty minutes.

REZA ASLAN: It's startling.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In terms of a global world.

REZA ASLAN: It is startling, but at the same time I have to say that we are fast approaching a world that is quickly becoming a single space. You know with apologies to Thomas Friedman, the world is not flat—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You don't have to apologize.

REZA ASLAN: It's the first time I've ever actually apologized.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Please, he's been on this stage many times. **(laughter)** As far as I'm concerned, don't apologize.

REZA ASLAN: It's not the world that's flat, it's our conception of the world that has flattened. It's not the world that has changed, it's our sense of self that's changed, and, in a sense, distance—whether it's twenty minutes or twenty hours—is becoming increasingly irrelevant, because the days in which we divided ourselves according to nationality and the days in which geography played a role in defining our identities are fast becoming a thing of the past.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But still you're stopped at Ben Gurion Airport.

REZA ASLAN: Yes, it's the airports, isn't it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So the airport does stop you.

REZA ASLAN: The airports, yeah, the airports have become sort of that final place in which—in which, you know, as I say, kind of the identity catalog in a way. It's where we are still to this day most determinately defined by our nation-state.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tell me, Ari, why is it that your film didn't provide the context about what brought about this mess of a massacre?

ARI FOLMAN: What do you mean?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We don't really understand what brought about this carnage.

ARI FOLMAN: Well, I did try. To try and explain all the groups, armies, and parties in Lebanon, we take six hours. It's impossible to do it. Every religious cult had an army and, you know, the allies were changing by the day. You can go to a checkpoint and you don't know if these guys are now on our side or they used to be on our side yesterday, and today they can shoot you, so we decided it's too complicated, I decided, of course. And then we had just to go to the structure of the script which will explain the massacre itself, meaning there was Israel, there were the Palestinians, the Israeli allies were the Christians, for all the wrong reasons, of course. And we made their leader the president of Lebanon. The Christian leader. He was their god. He was a rock star. He was a handsome, charismatic man, he was shot, they got mad, they went to the camps, they seek revenge. They killed, okay, they slaughtered three thousand people. Israeli government know, they did nothing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How much did they know?

ARI FOLMAN: The government? Well, who am I to say? There was a Kahan Committee, and they were all banned. I mean, Sharon was banned from being a minister of defense, but they forgot to put the clause that he can't come back as prime minister, so he just came back later as prime minister, they didn't think about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They also forgot.

ARI FOLMAN: Yeah, they forgot. And the generals were out, so they knew, obviously they knew, and they didn't give a damn. So this kind of structuring the story is in the film. I took the decision not to waste four years of my life investigating politicians. You know, I just didn't want to do this kind of film, so I did not. I got a lot of criticism for that, of course. From the extreme left in Israel. They hate me for not doing it, and not taking the responsibility, but this is the decision I took.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In the film, in real life, you could see yourself both as a perpetrator and as a victim. Is that correct?

ARI FOLMAN: In real life or in the film?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In real life.

ARI FOLMAN: Taking it out of the film, myself and the story, I think that in many ways any soldier wherever he goes—he doesn't have to be an Israeli soldier, it's very

universal film, in my opinion—is a victim of his leaders. I think there is a very clever, for example in my country, education system that makes you go to the army and want to fight when you are eighteen. And you're not very mature at eighteen and very cynical leaders that send you to die or get wounded for the cause of most of the time nothing, in the past thirty-something years at least. And that goes both sides. It's the same with the Palestinian side. It's the same with their leadership. I just believe they don't give a damn about human life, about their people's life, and I think the only change we'll be seeing is when leaders will take responsibility not only for their people but for other people as well. They will understand, you know, it's a cliché but I truly believe in it, that sparing human life and saving human life is much more important than any kind of religion or real-estate conflict.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How likely is that to happen, Reza, and do you believe that there is such a thing as a just war?

REZA ASLAN: Yeah, I do believe that there is such a thing as a just war. I think that it's a complicated question because categories are constantly in flux. We brought up Ariel Sharon—so this is a man who went from war criminal to prime minister. That's a fairly common transition in that region. Yasser Arafat went from terrorist to, you know, head of state. Menachem Begin went from terrorist to prime minister. And in a sense, you know, this is sort of the—

ARI FOLMAN: I think this is the problem—they all are ex-terrorists, ex-generals—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's how you start.

ARI FOLMAN: No one is just a human being, you know, and becomes prime minister.

REZA ASLAN: This is really the problem and—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So if you want to become prime minister—

REZA ASLAN: Yes, well, maybe that's not the lesson to be learned, yeah—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I just was, I just was, you know—

ARI FOLMAN: You follow it—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One way to become prime minister—

ARI FOLMAN: The fastest way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The fastest way.

ARI FOLMAN: Be a general, a war criminal—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Relying on the possibility that people will forget.

REZA ASLAN: Well, what happens is the geopolitical sands shift. Before Israel is a state, its militants are terrorists. Then Israel declares itself a state, gives uniforms to its militants, and now they're an army.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you in agreement with this narrative?

ARI FOLMAN: No, no, no, no.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wouldn't think so. Why not?

REZA ASLAN: The IDF is made up of members of the Stern Gang, of Haganah, of people who, by any modern definition of the term, engaged in terrorist activities. And whose leaders became political leaders—

ARI FOLMAN: The liberation regime, they're not terrorists. They were seeking for their independence. It's different.

REZA ASLAN: I've heard that phrase before.

ARI FOLMAN: Depends who you bomb, you know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You've heard that phrase before and how have you answered it before, and how will you answer it now?

REZA ASLAN: Well, I'll answer it, you know, the only way to answer it is with a shrug.

ARI FOLMAN: What's a shrug?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A shrug is—

REZA ASLAN: This is a shrug.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think you can do better.

REZA ASLAN: You know, we talk about Hamas as terrorists, and certainly the film refers to the enemy in two terms, either Palestinian or terrorist. I would say that from the perspective of the Palestinians, that they are a liberation army fighting for, you know, their sovereignty against what they see as an occupation. "Terrorist" is a wastebasket word.

ARI FOLMAN: By the way, I would agree with you totally as long as they fight the army like they did, I have no problem with that. Know what I mean?

REZA ASLAN: Well, the Stern Gang—neither the Stern Gang nor Haganah fought only militants, as you know.

ARI FOLMAN: It was still pretty much different. And I basically agree. I agree that this liberation war the Palestinians are fighting is a justified war. But, as I said before, I don't think they have respect even for lives of people of their side, as well. I didn't see all those leaders in Gaza when Israel did do a terrible thing like the last operation in Gaza, which I was definitely against, and I think it was a cruel, savage operation, I didn't see the leadership of the Hamas at all. I was just watching them sending their people to die for the sake of PR or whatever it was. I didn't think they acted so great. They didn't go and fight, did they? Did I miss anything?

REZA ASLAN: Well, certainly, no not the leadership in Syria, no, absolutely not.

ARI FOLMAN: No, not in Syria. I said in Gaza.

REZA ASLAN: But in Gaza—

ARI FOLMAN: How did you bring Syria?

REZA ASLAN: Well, no because, of course, Hamas leadership—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why did you bring Syria?

ARI FOLMAN: Why did you bring Syria?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because we are talking about Gaza.

REZA ASLAN: Because there are two leaderships for Hamas. There is an external leadership—

ARI FOLMAN: No, but we were talking about Gaza—did they go and fight the enemy?

REZA ASLAN: The internal leadership—and this is sort of what’s interesting about the Israeli perspective of Hamas—is that, of course, Hamas is more than just a militant organization. It’s a political organization. It’s a social organization. So it essentially infuses every aspect of life in Gaza, which allows Israel to, with a clear conscience, bomb government buildings, civilian infrastructure, police headquarters and call that all Hamas, call it all “terrorists.”

ARI FOLMAN: I agree. I agree with you.

REZA ASLAN: So in a sense to say the leadership of Hamas did not take part in this war, is I think a little bit disingenuous, because the leadership of Hamas is the political leadership of Hamas, and politicians don’t take up guns, usually, and join the front lines

of any conflict. But in this case the politicians were considered fair game. In fact, freely elected parliamentarians were considered fair game, because they—there was no attempt to differentiate between Hamas as either a political organization or as a militant organization and hence the report that came out from the Israeli army essentially wiping the slate clean in this war and saying that everything that—

ARI FOLMAN: I won't argue on the Gaza issue at all. Okay? I won't. And in addition to that, I would say that in my very personal opinion there is no other way to do it rather than sit and talk. And it doesn't matter to me whether it's Hamas, if it's Fatah, I don't do the separation at all. But, unfortunately, I'm a very small minority in my country, and it doesn't have to do anything with the fact that the Palestinian people are suffering a lot because the Hamas is their leadership and you can't ignore it.

REZA ASLAN: Well, they're suffering as a consequence of Hamas's free—

ARI FOLMAN: Don't be a diplomat, you know. Say the truth.

REZA ASLAN: Well, they're suffering as a consequence of the embargo. That's why they're suffering. They're suffering because of one and a half million people are enclosed in the world's most packed place, you know, on Earth.

ARI FOLMAN: This is true, but don't you think that if they had a different leadership things could have been better for example?

REZA ASLAN: I think that if their leadership was given the opportunity to do what we promised they would get the opportunity to do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The we is who here?

REZA ASLAN: The international community, including the United States. Especially the United States. Then I think we would see a different form of Hamas and we would see a different Gaza. I think we would see a different relationship right now. I mean I just sort of want to remind everybody that for many, many, many years, Fatah was a terrorist organization until it was allowed to actually run for office. Then it was a political organization.

ARI FOLMAN: This guy, I mean, he's great. He should go to, you know, work in diplomacy. I asked you a simple question and you talk about globalization.

REZA ASLAN: There are no simple answers.

ARI FOLMAN: I asked you if the Palestinian people suffer less if they had Fatah in leadership and not Hamas in leadership.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Reza, answer it without—

ARI FOLMAN: Can you answer it without talking about the U.S.?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just take off your jacket and answer it, you know—

ARI FOLMAN: Like a man.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: As strongly as you want. Like a man, you said. I wasn't going to use that.

ARI FOLMAN: Just answer it.

(boos)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: As strongly as you want.

REZA ASLAN: Would the Palestinians suffer less if they had voted for Fatah instead of Hamas? Yes, because the consequences would have been different, yes. They would be suffering less now. But the reason for their suffering is because the consequences have been given to them by outside forces, not by inside forces. It's not Hamas that's making Gaza suffer. It's the U.S., the UN, the EU, and Israel, and Egypt that's making Gaza suffer.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Does this satisfy you?

ARI FOLMAN: What?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That answer?

ARI FOLMAN: I think it's the best I can get out from this guy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For the moment! For the moment!

REZA ASLAN: Let me ask a question now.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes. Ask him a question.

REZA ASLAN: Would the Israelis be in a better position now vis-a-vis the international community, particularly the United States if they had not voted for Netanyahu?

ARI FOLMAN: Definitely yes. Definitely.

REZA ASLAN: And do they deserve the consequences of voting for a government that refuses to recognize UN 242, to accept the Oslo Accords, the road map to peace?

ARI FOLMAN: Unfortunately, yes. There is no discussion about it. Totally agree.

REZA ASLAN: All right.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, let's move a little bit into the realm of film if we could **(laughter)** for a moment. We'll come back. We'll come back. We'll come back. I'm interested, as is everybody seeing this film, in a form that is not very familiar to me. I'm not quite young enough to have grown up with it, but I know that in some way your choices were made so as to attract a younger audience, perhaps. I'm interested in the work you did with animation. And I'm interested particularly, might I say, in the way in which animation seems to me to be in the service of memory.

It seems that you chose—I might be wrong about this—you chose animation as a way of really reconstructing this painful past that was obliterated for you, or forgotten or shed aside, post-traumatic syndrome. You tried in some way to keep it as far removed from you as possible for a long time and then something triggered—and maybe you will talk about about this—something triggered in your mind, a memory, actually, of someone else brought you to remember your own past, and you made a strong directorial decision to use animation to reconstruct—reconstruct the shards of memory that had been forgotten. In some way to put the members back together. So I'd like you to talk a little bit about the work of memory and the work of animation and if you think there's any connection

between the animation and the work of memory as you portray it in the film. A long question. I hope that you will remember what I'm asking.

(laughter)

ARI FOLMAN: No. Just to make one thing clear. The decision was not taken. It's not that in one step of the process of making *Waltz with Bashir*, decided "oh this is going to be an animated film." It's an animated film. You know, they didn't take a decision to animate Wally. [Inaudible] As funny as it might sound. Wally [Inaudible] is an animated character, and *Waltz with Bashir* is an animated film and it was always meant to be animated film. When you make a film you try to imagine it in your mind while jogging, sleeping, I don't know what you're doing, taking a bath. And for me the characters were always drawn and they were animated.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because?

ARI FOLMAN: Because I couldn't see any other method, any other way, to bring the story of memory, lost memory, hallucinations, subconscious, conscious war, which is probably the most surreal that I can think about and put it all in one storyline that won't be animated, or won't be drawn. The drawings they gave me freedom to do whatever I want.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And served nearly as a protective device?

ARI FOLMAN: No, not really. I know that people think that it did but it was I didn't intend it to be as a protective thing. You know, I read a very interesting article a couple of months ago in Haaretz back home. The journalist he interviewed five different post-traumatic Israeli soldiers from different wars, and they all went to see the film. And the film was really—they were reexperiencing the traumas really strongly, and they all said in the article that if it hadn't been animated, it wouldn't have happened to them. If it was actors that they know the actors from different roles that they play and the fact it was animated and they could see real people, although they were drawn—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And it creates a distance—

ARI FOLMAN: It *didn't* create a distance.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay.

ARI FOLMAN: It made them connect more easily than actors that they saw you know an evening before in a comedy on TV. And it was much more stronger for them. So the thing that it's kind of a wall between the audience and the film is not correct. You know, when I started the project, I had a lot of problems because film establishment is really narrow-minded and they couldn't figure out this term "animated documentary." So I couldn't raise any money. And I had to try and convince them that it can work out. I mean, if you look at it this way, if it was real people being interviewed by a digital

camera and they were here on screen at the beginning of the evening. And still it was not them on the screen; it was a digital camera frame that consists of lines and dots that make one frame. And why is it more true than a beautiful drawing that David has made in four months' time while the voice-over is just the same? And I tried to explain, you know, to funds in Europe and back home in Israel: It's the same truth. Who decides what is more realistic, what is more truth? This frame of the camera or the drawings?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Werner Herzog talks very interestingly about the notion that the filmmaker is after not the truth that the cinema verité is looking for but for what he calls “ecstatic truth.”

ARI FOLMAN: There isn't any truth in filmmaking. There is only being, you know, pretending for seeking the truth, but in any frame, the filmmaker takes a decision. You know, it's incredible. Nobody's looking at us. They're all looking at you. It's just incredible. No one is looking at us at all. We can do the conversation—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe it's too distracting.

ARI FOLMAN: We can sit in the green room and make faces, you know, and talk and they will see that. You know what I mean? It's incredible.

REZA ASLAN: I'm just trying to figure out which one is me. **(laughter)** I can't really—it's hard to say.

ARI FOLMAN: It's just incredible. All faces are up. Let's walk there. So I just don't believe that there is any objectivity or truth in filmmaking. Nothing. I mean. Just the decision that you have to take in documentary film. You go into editing room and you have 240 hours to make a ninety-minute-length film. So who decides? You decide. So is it objective? Just the angle of the camera that you're putting while you're being shot here. There is nothing true here.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you agree with that statement?

REZA ASLAN: Well, I do think that it's interesting what Ari was saying about how animation does the opposite of what you think it does. Far from creating distance, it actually breaks down that—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Permits you to feel.

REZA ASLAN: Yes, because there is a sense that, you know, you can identify yourself somehow more with these animated characters than you would if they were actors. There's this wonderful scene in the film, and those who've seen it know what I'm talking about where the therapist is talking about a trauma patient who experienced the war as though through the lens of a camera. And then there's a moment in which that—the camera suddenly breaks and the trauma hits you in a very, very—in a very real sense. And it reminds me a lot of what Ari is talking about here with regard to that wall between

the observer and the film. Whether I agree about the issue of truth in film—I mean, I don't. I think that really, I mean the only truth that is—that is worth—that is really worth anything is the truth of art, and I think of film as art. It may seem silly and romantic. And I do appreciate that healthy Israeli cynicism, which I have come to love from all my Israeli friends, but, I mean, where else do we find truth except in art? I mean, where else would we find it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Where else would you look for it?

ARI FOLMAN: I would never look for it. **(laughter)** I don't mind. Honestly. **(laughter)** I couldn't care less.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you saying to me clearly that you are not a seeker of beauty and truth?

ARI FOLMAN: Beauty? I didn't say beauty. Beauty is one thing, truth is another. I just don't believe in one truth.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yet your film is—

ARI FOLMAN: I believe in storytelling and I believe in agenda in storytelling and I just wouldn't waste my time arguing about what is true and what is not true.

REZA ASLAN: I am not speaking of absolute truth, of course.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I am sure nobody is. But yet your film, one might say, using a well-rehearsed line of Speak, Memory is a search for a truth, your truth, the attempt, the remembrance of what happened, of discovering, in a way, the way one might write an autobiography and in the process of writing it, one rediscovers, one reignites. And you were seeking, I think, in your film—

ARI FOLMAN: I did.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: To find out what happened.

ARI FOLMAN: I did my best, but to tell you that this is the accurate truth, I don't know. And this is the truth that was, you know, was present while making this film, and I got really tired from the discussion, the after-effect discussion if it's the truth or not-truth. Is it a film that was done from a political angle and this is a political truth? And if someone with a different political vision would have found a different truth? This is very tiring. **(laughter)** It's a waste of time. What's so funny? It's a waste of time. It's a piece of art and this is it. You want to believe, believe. If you don't want, it's up to you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you sometimes worry that seeing a film such as a film you have made, and I wonder if I can ask you the same question—you see it, you experience it, and then you go home.

ARI FOLMAN: Home.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Home. You know and is that sentence the “Yorim u-vokim” you know, they shoot and they cry—

ARI FOLMAN: I’m sick of that sentence.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I know, but I read about that recently and I found it quite—

ARI FOLMAN: It’s boring.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, but I’m just wondering how sometimes works such as yours. You can see them. You relive perhaps some of the vicarious memories of the director that made that film and then you kind of, it permits you in some way to cry a bit—

ARI FOLMAN: Well, I want you to feel. I want you to feel. This is important that you feel—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I’m happy you say that.

ARI FOLMAN: Oh, this is the most important thing. That you feel, that you think, okay, that you go with it, okay, and you discuss it, and if I did something emotionally to you as an audience and not to me, to you. This is very important. But if you want to believe me or don't want to believe me, it's up to you, you know. Emotion is one thing and truth is another thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'd like us to run at this particular moment the last sequence of the film.

(film clip from *Waltz with Bashir*)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I've seen this I think five or six times and I must say the emotional content of it is undiminished each and every time, so the feeling part is very strongly at least with me at this moment as it is every time. The eyes blinking, you can't quite believe your eyes. We go from animation to what passes for reality and I'm just wondering why that choice was made.

ARI FOLMAN: I don't consider it an artistic decision at all. I consider it more an ideological decision.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ideological?

ARI FOLMAN: Yeah, in filmmaking if there is something like that. I just wanted to prevent a situation that someone, I don't know where, would walk out of the theater and think it's a very cool animated antiwar film with great score and nice drawings and this is it. And I think those fifty seconds they put the whole film into proportion.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And they are jarring.

ARI FOLMAN: And they put my personal story in proportion, they put memory issues in proportion and, you know, they tell you that it's not just an animated world and war it's more than three thousand people were slaughtered there, and they were all unprotected. Most of them were women and kids. And maybe those fifty seconds will make people go home and read a couple of hours more about what happened. And I'm not sure that my personal story about memory would have done the same. Actually I'm pretty sure it wouldn't have.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So now you are coming around full circle, aren't you? You actually slowly converting to the idea that your film has an impact.

ARI FOLMAN: Of course it does.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And can actually change and that art may in fact at particular moments take us out of our contingencies and slightly make them change. Maybe that ideological choice was a choice that you made precisely because—

ARI FOLMAN: Yes, Paul, but it won't change the situation in the region, you know?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I know. And I know that this evening tonight won't either change the situation.

ARI FOLMAN: Maybe the evening yes.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The evening maybe.

ARI FOLMAN: That's because of Reza. But the film won't change the situation in the region and I tell you more than that. I wish that it could change just in my small country just a few opinions. You know, just a few people that would say, "you know what? Maybe I understand better now what war really is all about."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And war really is all about what?

ARI FOLMAN: War is the—I think—the most stupid idea on earth. I think it's—**(applause)**. It's—I mean, maybe it's a prosaic thing to say, but this is it—it's cynical people—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There's nothing romantic about it.

ARI FOLMAN: With big egos. I put a lot of effort to show that there is no glamour in war. There's no bravery in war, there's no this bullshit as brotherhood of man in war. This is good for big American movies, that when a sixteen-year-old kid sees them, they say, "yes, war is crap, but I want to be the guy in the Marines and go fight the fucking Iraqis," you know what I mean?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Goodness, what language.

(laughter)

ARI FOLMAN: And that won't happen to a sixteen-year-old guy who watches *Waltz with Bashir*, because nobody wants to be the guy in this movie, because the guys in this movie, they don't know where they're going, they don't know why they're going, they don't know who's the enemy, they don't know where's the enemy, they don't know what the hell are they doing a hundred kilometers from home in a place that has nothing to do with their family life, their love life, the history of the family, nothing whatsoever, they just don't know, okay? And that goes for any American soldier I believe in Iraq, in Vietnam, a Russian soldier in Afghanistan. It's the same story. It's just the same story and there is nothing more, you know. Maybe war is I think that I don't know, I just—I after participating in one and spending four years of my life making a film about one, I just—I understand less and less. It's not that I understand more. I just understand less

what war is. I can't understand the idea of two kids, you know, shooting each other for a piece of land. It seems insane. And I can't understand how leaders and that goes for Hamas leaders, Fatah leader, Likud leader, I don't care who they are, how can they go to sleep at night, honestly, knowing that they are responsible for the death of so many people? It's—it's I don't know how they can just function. I don't know how they can function.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Reza, I'm going to give you nearly the last word. A response to Ari and also a question together with that response, which is: Does these lack of memory—these holes in our memory, this ability to forget, actually perpetuate in some way cosmic wars?

ARI FOLMAN: I must say one thing. You see, I am a delayed person. You can see by the film—it took me twenty-five years, I think, so— **(laughter)**. For your first, your second sentence of the evening you said now that Paul was commenting about twenty minutes versus the six days, you know, and you said that war now, it's like we're all one village and everything. I personally think it hasn't changed since First World War. It looks the same, you know. They look the same, the soldiers, they fight the same stupid way, you know, face-to-face. Maybe, I don't know—the missiles are better, the aircraft are better, but basically it is just the same.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The leaders are not better.

REZA ASLAN: Worse.

ARI FOLMAN: Just the same, that's what I think. And you know, nothing has changed, I mean—So what? In the mid-90s, and I screened this film in Bosnia, it was the most incredible screening I've had, in Sarajevo, because what those people went through, and in the mid-90s the Bosnian War—which place how long, three years?—was broadcasted live on CNN for three years and nobody gave a damn anyhow, so I don't know what has changed. I think it's all the same, all the time. It's all the same.

REZA ASLAN: I think what has changed is our identities. The difference between the Second World War and what's taking place now is that we're not fighting for any kind of nationalism any longer. And this is true even of the Israelis. The sense of an obligation to a nation-state is very slowly and gradually being supplanted by obligations to far more primal forms of identity, whether it's—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Such as—

REZA ASLAN: Such as religion or ethnicity—tribe—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which you believe is on the rise.

REZA ASLAN: Yes.

ARI FOLMAN: Religious?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, you believe that—

REZA ASLAN: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You strongly believe that.

REZA ASLAN: And I think that this—the war between Israel and Gaza is a very good example of this. Not just because of the infiltration—Well, maybe “infiltration” is the wrong word, but the—the increased presence of cosmic warriors on both sides. Israelis whose obligation is not to the state but to the land. And Gazans whose conception of this conflict has less to do with any kind of territorial battle than it does with, you know, some sense of existential identity, a sense of self. I think *that’s* what’s changed. But going back to the previous thing that Ari said about, you know, can a film change the situation in the Middle East?

I mean, I understand that sentiment, but at the same time, then what are we left with? Politics? I don’t think politics—I think politics has proven that it can’t change. We’re in a situation right now in which 80 percent of Israelis want a two-state solution and yet they voted for a party that explicitly rejects that. Eighty percent of Palestinians want a two-state solution and yet they voted for a party that rejects that. The political leaders have proven themselves, repeatedly, on both sides, that they are far more interested in short-

term gains than in any kind of long-term stability or security. Religion? I mean, if anything we need a lot *less* religion in this region and not just because of what's taking place on the ground there, but because of this overwhelming messianic apocalyptic lens that has been placed on this conflict by—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And to replace it? In its place, what will come?

REZA ASLAN: I don't know. I don't know. I mean, this is not just about resources and land any longer. This is about changing minds. This is about changing the narrative of this conflict, and maybe the way to do that is with five people at a time who watch a film and who realize war is bullshit, this is all bullshit, that we get nothing from this. To me, those five people, I think, those five minds that have been changed are much more effective than any kind of political coalition that can form, you know, out of this area. So if not for art, then we are lost.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you have a hopeful last word, Ari?

(laughter)

ARI FOLMAN: He's a very romantic guy. **(laughter)** Five people change here, change there. I do believe in leadership, and I think this will bring change, but I basically feel that roughly the world, you know, in my mind, is divided in two: those who believe in nonviolence and all the others. And those who believe in nonviolence will do everything

to prevent the next conflict, because they believe that saving human life is much more important than anything else.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And they are less powerful.

ARI FOLMAN: Unfortunately they are less powerful. And they will never find an excuse for the next conflict. The other side is this and we are like that and history is like this. They just believe in nonviolence.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which the movie made you become in some—

ARI FOLMAN: No, the war made me become many years ago, not the movie. And, listen, I didn't go personally through transformation. I was, you know, after a few hours in the war, I understood everything what it was all about, this is what I said a couple of minutes ago and this was it, you know? Since then, I have my belief and I still hold it. And nothing has changed. And I never really changed my mind. Through the second half of the war or whatever has happened, I couldn't figure it out. So we just need more people that believe in a nonviolent agenda. This is it and I do believe—I do believe that if there will be leaders that could be trusted, that people will follow them like that and this is it. And one day maybe it will happen. I don't think it's a matter of religious—religion. I think it's a matter of leadership.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One day it may happen. Thank you very much, Ari Folman and Reza Aslan.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We're going to take a few questions. I insist on the notion of questions rather than comments. There's a mike there, so we'll pass it around. Yes, if you could stand up, that's wonderful.

Q: Great talk. Could—you mentioned art not as a vehicle for truth, but, you know, you want someone to feel something and that's more important. Could both Mr. Aslan and Folman give an example of art in any medium—film, painting, whatever—that changed your mind in some respect about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Mr. Folman something that came from—for lack of a better term, the Muslim world and Mr. Aslan something that came from, for lack of a better term, the Western world. Outside of this film. Thank you.

ARI FOLMAN: I would say I would answer a question and then I will give my recommendations but—I would say *Paradise Now* as a film. I think it took a very brave, very brave agenda to bring the everyday life of a suicide bomber and the last days of a suicide bomber before he goes to Tel Aviv and bombs himself in a bus and not in a political level but in a personal level, being with you know his family, his love, small details of life, and this film was screened, of course, in Israel and it made a discussion

and it made people think, and I think it was like Reza said building bridges. It was a bridge because it made people think, maybe it didn't make them change their life but it made them think.

A film I saw recently which is for me the best film I've seen in years is *Hunger*, by Steve McQueen. I know it will have an American release or it already was here. It is about the IRA strike, hunger strike, in jail in 1981 with their leader Bobby Sand and this is an incredible piece of art and the guy's not a filmmaker, he's a construction art, great artist that made his first film. And this film as well made me think for weeks about political struggle and how those guys achieved something that they couldn't achieve by planting bombs and gave their life for it and it's an incredible film. I do recommend it. They have it here because they have IFC as distributors.

REZA ASLAN: This is kind of a difficult question. Well, if it comes specifically when it comes to this conflict, but both of them I think people are going to make fun of me for. The first is *Exodus* and the second is probably *Schindler's List* and I'll explain why those two films. The reason is that as I said at sort of the very beginning of this, the story of Israel is a compelling story. It's an amazing story, that the narrative is one that I think you can't help but be moved by. Forget about the context, forget about the history and the politics involved in it. I'm talking just as a pure form of narrative, and in a sense for an outsider to feel as though they have you know a connection you know this nation it requires an acceptance of that story because I don't have access to the history or the memory and so for me to be able to understand why it is that the Holocaust has become

the prime metaphor for almost every experience, it's the lens through which so much of Israeli identity and actions and concepts are framed, both for good and bad. I don't think it's necessarily a positive thing for this kind of ur-symbol, this ur-metaphor to dictate so much of Israeli policy. I don't believe that it's necessarily healthy that every enemy is a Hitler and that every, you know, every dove is a Chamberlain and that every threat is an existential one, but I do recognize, in a very visceral way, where that narrative comes from.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you feel similarly about *Schindler's List*?

ARI FOLMAN: No, I hate the film. But I rarely, because the Holocaust, I mean, it really runs in my DNA. Both my parents are Holocaust survivors. There are some things I can't see in slow motion black and white being so beautiful and *Schindler's List* is one of them. I do respect what this film has done, you know, and how many minds it opened and brought the story because it was such a Hollywoodic film, but personally . . . And I do agree completely with Reza about the use that has been done regarding the Holocaust and it's a long discussion, education and everything that brings Israel sometimes to be so aggressive as it is for the sake of the Holocaust, but this is a different discussion.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A discussion we actually had here not so long ago with Avraham Burg and Omer Bartov, something that we might bring back for, but another question, just wait one second, two hands raised there, if you could stand up.

Q: I know Ari addressed this very briefly, but—this question of course is for Ari Folman. There's a point in the film where I believe you're visiting your friend in Holland, if I'm not mistaken. The snow is falling, his son is playing in the snow, and you're asking him all these questions and he says to you that you can draw but you can't take pictures. And I wanted to go back to that and talk about—or ask you if you think—I know you might disagree, but, I mean, if you think in retrospect, because of how charged this issue is it was easier to treat as an—or easier to depict as an animation or easier to deal with, when it's slightly removed, and was it easier to get people to agree to doing all these interviews that were so revealing when you mentioned, “Oh, it's just a cartoon, I'm just—it's just an animation”?

ARI FOLMAN: Yes, it was, although this specific story is interesting, because the guy in the end he got cold feet in the last moment, and he gave his story, but it's not him. We have an actor doing his monologue and we invented him new face, although he—when he saw it in the theater in Tel Aviv he thought it was him, but it's not him. **(laughter)** No, something really strange happened, because just before I traveled to shoot him there, he surprised me back home in Tel Aviv, he told me, “listen, I can't do it.” Two guys didn't do it and we had replacement for really, I mean, stupid reasons. One didn't want the guys at work to know that he's a pot smoker and the other guy his wife thought it was bad for him, I don't know, and then he divorced her **(laughter)** anyhow. **(laughter)** This is true. This is the story of this guy. When he came to see the film, he said, “I divorced her. I should have done the film anyhow.” **(laughter)**

But then I told David the story, he never saw pictures of this guy, and he drew him and I thought it was quite incredible that he drew him, I mean, there was a lot of resemblance, and I kept it, I kept it in the film, but it did give me a lot of freedom, although I don't know, for example, the journalist, Ron, talking about truth. He's being interviewed in Israel for a year now about the film and every time I hear him interviewed I am astonished that he said it took me a year to convince him to take part in the film. I remember me proposing him and he was there, committing, so—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why do you think it's in his interest to lie?

ARI FOLMAN: Being hard to get, you know, it's pretty cool **(laughter)** and so, you know, even when we meet he says, "You know, I want to thank you for convincing me, took you a year," **(laughter)** and I always say, "yeah, it was worth it. It was worth running after you," you know. **(laughter)** I wouldn't argue his truth anyhow. It doesn't matter. But I truly don't believe he understood that it's going to be drawn, but—

Q: I'd like to ask a little bit of a provocative question. And I want to start by asking it of Reza, because I know how articulate you are, and I'm excited, by the way, to see you speak in the next couple days at the Muslim leaders of tomorrow concert uptown. But I wanted to ask Reza, if you had to make Ari Folman's film, how would you make it

differently? And I want to then turn that around on Ari Folman and ask how are you— I'm sure you're aware, of course, of the prominent criticisms that have been written, the prominent critiques that have been written of your film, both in *Haaretz* by Gideon Levy and some other papers as well and I'm wondering how you would respond to them and whether or not you believe that they're valid and whether or not they speak well of the Israeli left.

REZA ASLAN: Well, let me just say that I have an enormous amount of sympathy for the problem of making a film like this, because, you know, as a—it's a piece of art and not a sort of a political tract, and while I understand and, for the most part agree with, the criticism about the lack of context that is provided in this film for the massacre and the sense that there is this kind of, well, that there's a sense of victimization on the part of the soldiers themselves, that somehow they are as much victims of—well, maybe not as much, but they are also victims of this massacre, rather than I think, historically speaking, you know, very much a part of it.

I think that at the same time, though, that when you do a film like this, that touches on these hot-button issues, you're bound to elicit these kinds of criticisms, so, you know, I don't know that I can say that I would do it any differently, because, you know, I appreciate it as a work of art, and as a work of art, it really can't be done any differently than it was, but I do recognize that there is a vacuum in the film, that there is something, as an outsider, for me, that leaves me cold and wanting and I think it has to do in a metaphorical way, really, about the distance that the subject of the film has from the

massacre, he's physically a hundred yards, two hundred yards, three hundred yards away, and that sense of distance provides, I think, security perhaps or—I'm trying to think of a word that's less problematic than an excuse or an alleviation of responsibility and guilt. But again, it's hard—it's hard to sort of talk about art in these kinds of ways.

ARI FOLMAN: To answer the question. You know, I was sitting in the Beverly Wilshire in LA trying to kill time before the Oscars ceremony, which I was told I was going to win, **(laughter)** so I was checking, I was checking my speech that had to be forty-five seconds, and I had a clock I was doing and then I got tired so I—and I saw on the Internet all this criticism about me and about the film, and it was just before the ceremony, and in different words, I read Gideon Levy from the extreme left, basically he said that I am a Nazi war criminal who killed people in war and then got money from the Israeli government to clear my conscience and then I turned a few pages and different paper and I read Menachem Ben, who wrote that I am a Kapo, okay, that sold the country cheap to the European Christians, Catholic Christians, in order to win prizes, and both of them—the extreme left guy and the extreme right guy—prayed that I was going to lose, Okay? So—their prayers were answered—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For once.

ARI FOLMAN: For once they succeeded and they were collaborating. **(laughter)** So this is what I have to say. You know. What can you do, you sit there, you say, “Am I a Nazi? Am I a Kapo ? Am I going to win the Oscar?”

(laughter)