

"SHIT HAPPENS":
FORREST GUMP AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Vivian Sobchack

In 1994, *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis), the immensely popular film about a simpleton hero triumphing over (by ignoring) the vicissitudes of three decades of recent American history, was second only to Disney's animated *The Lion King* at the box office.¹ Indeed, that year it not only captured the hearts (if not the minds) of most Americans, but also the major Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor. Wondering at its immense popularity, *Premiere* magazine noted: "Before it was all over, *Forrest Gump* would gross more than \$300 million in the U.S. alone, commanding whatever portion of the national attention span that O.J. Simpson did not. Was the film a paean to serendipity, an attack on the counterculture, an unabashedly romantic tearjerker, a monument to morons, or what Quentin Tarantino called 'a really funny movie filled with more irony than any Hollywood movie I've ever seen in my life'?"²

Many reviewers and most intellectuals did not share in Tarantino's reading, focusing instead on the film's contributions to the "dumbing down" of America or on its complex and reactionary sexual politics (which keeps its hero nearly "pure" in sexual, historical, and political terms while aligning its doomed and sacrificial heroine with all the burdens and pain of historical consciousness, political activism, promiscuity, and AIDS). Roger Angell, for example, in a review for the

relatively sophisticated *New Yorker*, tells us that *Forrest Gump* is a “moony” and “fantastic” dream in which ignorance and niceness win out over historical consciousness and meaning: the film presents “the shambles and the horror of our recent American past made harmless and sweet because the protagonist doesn’t understand a moment of any of it.” He goes on to note, however, that at the same time, the film contains nary a trace of “what used to be called without irony the American dream: the faith that we all belonged somewhere in a rational and forgiving system” that provided not only one’s just desserts, but also historical and ideological surety.³ In essence, Angell does not grant the film credit for its own irony and contradictions, and does not acknowledge that the “sweet” and sentimental *Forrest Gump* also presents a not-so-sweet vision of both the nature of history and one’s “rational place” as an historical actor within it. Indeed, the complexity of diverse individual trajectories and their nodal coalescence in the massive “historical events” we see foregrounded as the film’s background are ironically revealed as nothing less (while something more) than confusion. That is, notions not only of historical agency, but also of both rationality and system are undermined by the film’s visible evidence that “History” is merely the concatenated and reified effect of incoherent motives and chance convergences.

Ultimately, what may have made *Forrest Gump* so successful is its very ambiguity—an ambiguity that offered a field for the significant play of ambivalent attitudes currently held by many contemporary Americans about the meanings of “history” and the nature and morphology of the “historical event.” In this regard, I would argue with Tarantino that the film is less simple (or single) minded than its Candide-like hero—who, unlike Candide, in the long run learns nothing he did not know when he began his journey. (This experiential “long run” is not only literalized as Forrest runs across the United States, but it is also ironized both by Forrest’s accumulation of followers awaiting revelation and by the fact that, when he abruptly stops his run, nothing has been learned and there is nothing to reveal.)

In terms of its story, then, *Forrest Gump* tells us with great sincerity "not to worry": one can be in history, can make history, without paying attention and without understanding. Like the feather that begins and ends the film, the historical actor is blown by the winds of chance, must of existential necessity be somewhere at some time, engaged in some act that may or may not be considered remarkable or historically motivating in a present or future moment. Thus, reflection and reflexivity are a waste—rather than an expansion—of time: there is no point to comprehending the overwhelming complexity of motives and acts and material causes that make up history since, in the long run, with or without our understanding, history will comprehend and confer meaning on even the most simple-minded of us. In terms of its emplotment, however, *Forrest Gump* constitutes a meta-text and provides a knowing gloss on its simpleton hero. With a reflective and condensed bumper-sticker irony that is also literalized (and with something akin to the "long view" of the *Annales* school of history that deals with "long-term equilibriums and disequilibriums" through the minute detailing of everyday life and its "conjunctures"⁴), the film tells us: "Shit happens." That is, rather than ignoring or denying history, *Forrest Gump* suggests that the temporally inflated notion of something we might once have called the "historical event" is in some fashion now deflated—its specificity reduced to generalized matter not because events are now considered merely trivial, but because they have become indeterminate in their boundaries and undecidable in their "eventual" historical importance.

Thus, on the one hand, *Forrest Gump*—the character, not the film—denies the hermeneutic necessity (perhaps even the hermeneutic possibility) of understanding the significance of that "larger" temporal spread we live and narrativize socially (rather than individually) as "History" or "histories." Since history can't happen without us, the film seems to say through its putative hero, we've played our part simply by "being there." That is, we don't have to know or care what history is or means. (And, in this regard, the film reminds us of a progenitor,

Being There [Hal Ashby, 1980], with its mentally-retarded gardener Chance functioning much like Forrest as the wise simpleton.) On the other hand, however, one could argue that *Forrest Gump*—the film, not the character—is historically conscious to an extreme degree: ironic and playful, its thematics, mise-en-scene, and modes of representation make explicit and visible the breakdown of the segmentation that, in a previous age, secured for us the borders and value between “significant” and “trivial” events, between fact and fiction, between past and present, between experience and its representation. The paradox of the film’s narrative is that it both makes a sharp distinction between the personal and historical event, the historically trivial and significant action, and it simultaneously collapses this distinction, pointing to the conflation and confusion of personal and historical, trivial and significant. Furthermore, this narrative paradox is figured also as a representational paradox. Digitally inserting its fictional hero into documentary newsreel footage and into an interactive relation with “real” historical events and personages, *Forrest Gump* conflates and confuses the fictional with the historically “real” in an absolutely seamless representation. Nonetheless, the film does not, for a second, presume its audience will be at all categorically confused. Indeed, *Forrest Gump* depends for its humor upon the audience’s conscious recognition of the distinct terms of this conflation and confusion.

In sum, *Forrest Gump* stands as both symptom of and gloss upon a contemporary—and millennial—American moment in which history (with either upper or lower case “h”, in the singular or plural) and historical consciousness have been often described on the one hand as “at an end,” and on the other hand have been the object of unprecedented public attention and contestation. One could, in fact, suggest that *Forrest Gump* is a one-joke movie, absolutely dependent for its humor upon historically (self) conscious viewers who have been immersed in questions about the boundaries, meanings, and place of history in their daily lives, and who have been sufficiently distanced by the media from these same daily lives to ponder their own potential

place in history. While one can certainly argue that *Forrest Gump* marks the dissolution and "end" of history (as well as the responsibility for it), one can also argue that the film marks (and is dependent upon) a novel, pervasive, and ironic self-consciousness about individual and social existence as an "historical subject."

In this regard, it is important to note that 1994, the year in which *Forrest Gump* appeared in American theaters, was also a year noted for heated national debates about History and histories. It was a year in which a set of "national history standards" for secondary school students was proposed by UCLA's Center for History in the Schools and immediately met with charges of "leftist" revisionism and "political correctness." It was a year in which ordinary citizens (most of whom had probably watched every episode of Ken Burns's nostalgic 1990 PBS epic *The Civil War*) and academic historians united in a vigorous and successful campaign to defeat the Disney empire's "sacrilegious" plan to build, near "real" historic Civil War battlefields in Virginia, a theme park based on American history. It was a year in which charges of historical revisionism were leveled by veterans at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum's planned (and somewhat apologetic) exhibition surrounding the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. And 1994 was also the year in which television gave us the O. J. Simpson murder case—the "trial of the century" (as the media told us again and again) in which a beloved American sports figure was charged with and acquitted of the brutal murder of his ex-wife and her male companion, in which the mobilized discourses of race, spousal abuse, celebrity, and science were dramatized in the simultaneously exciting and stultifying context of daily broadcast television. The trial proceedings dramatized the intertwining and conflation of traumatic and trivial "events" and "evidence" not only in scenarios that questioned what should count as mattering in the case, but also in the simultaneous representation of these scenarios as on the one hand "special" and "historic" and on the other hand diurnal and temporally repetitive. Finally (if less notoriously), 1994 was also the

year in which The History Channel appeared on American cable television, its promotional material telling us, "If you couldn't be there the first time, here's your second chance," its trademark slogan promising "All of History. All in One Place."⁵

Forrest Gump, the Disney theme park controversy, the O. J. trial coverage, The History Channel, all tell us something about our present moment and the relatively recent escalation in the American public sphere of a qualitatively new self-consciousness about history. Indeed, one might say we are in a moment marked by a peculiarly novel "readiness" for history among the general population. That is, people seem to carry themselves with a certain reflexive phenomenological comportment toward their "immediate" immersion in the present, self-consciously grasping their own objective posture with an eye to its imminent future possibility for representation (and commodification) as the historical past.

In a recent essay, Hayden White has discussed the particularly novel and magnitudinous events of the 20th century such as the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima-Nagasaki, and the Challenger spacecraft explosion. All, he maintains, are events that have challenged traditional and coherent historiographic narratives and all have been entailed with new modes of representation and narrativization afforded by the mediation of cinema and television.⁶ Indeed, extending White's argument, one could argue that major historical "events" considered unique to the 20th century are less inherently novel than the novel technologies of representation that have expressed and narrated them—transforming the scope and content of their significance in the process. That is, first cinema and then television have brought to such "events" a unique and unprecedented visibility and magnitude, and also have narrated them in ways that have made the very mechanisms of their narration both explicit and visible. Over the course of the century, at an accelerating pace and on a grand scale, cinema, television, camcorders, and digital media have brought both the arbitrary and motivated segmentation of time and its ascription in

significant moments to public awareness. The possible manipulation of events through representation and narration, their editorial potential as trivial or traumatic, their abstraction as "shots" or "bits," and their inherent underdetermination even as they are overdetermined through use are all, by now, common knowledge. Thus, the American audience—who recognized the amateur Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination used in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), who sat at home through the many uses and interpretations of the videotape showing the Los Angeles police brutally beating Rodney King, and who recognized the recreation of documentary Holocaust footage in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993)—is always in on the joke of *Forrest Gump*. The once arcane lesson of Hayden White's *Metahistory*—that historiography is about arranging and telling stories, not about delivering objective truth—is, by now, common knowledge. And it is this common knowledge, perhaps, that explains the public's current fascination and playfulness, as well as its cynicism and suspension of all belief, with the "status" of the historical event and the "event" of historical representation.

Furthermore, by virtue of their increasing representational "immediacy" to the events they would represent, the new media technologies of the 20th century (most significantly, television) have increasingly collapsed the temporal distance between present, past, and future that structured our previously conceived notion of the temporal dimensions of what we call history (as the latter is differentiated from experience). That is, the event and its representation, immediacy and its mediation, have moved increasingly toward simultaneity. Early in the century, most people thought history was something that happened temporally "before" and was represented temporally "after" them and their own personal and immediate experience (which was not only "present" but also of smaller dimension than "before" and "after"). For an event to "become" History, an "appropriate" and expansive period of time for reflection upon it and for its accumulation of significance seemed necessary; this safe and

interpretive time was a “present” perceived as outside of history, or not yet history. This perception seems no longer to be widespread. Today, history seems to happen right now—transmitted, reflected upon, shown play-by-play, taken up as the stuff of multiple stories and significance, given all sorts of “coverage” in the temporal dimension of the present as we live it at the time. Correlatively, there seems a sense in which we now believe we can go right out and “be” in history. Hence, the people who flocked to the sides of the freeway to watch—and be in—the “historic” and stately parade led by O. J.’s “escaping” Ford Bronco (where, under the eyes of television and the American public, could it possibly have escaped to?); these cheering on-lookers knew that they—as well as O. J.—would make the 5 o’clock “news.” The people who stood outside of Nicole Simpson’s Brentwood condo where the murders had taken place had similar motives, telling reporters they were there because they wanted to be “part of history.”

It is easy to think such actions and such desire pathetic or deluded—or to reduce and explain them away in terms of Andy Warhol’s comment that, in such a highly mediated and media-filled world, anyone can achieve celebrity for fifteen minutes. It is harder to think of the more positive aspects of such actions and such desire, but these aspects can—and perhaps must—be conceived if we are to admit the value of what we call history to the present moment, and if we are to see any viable future in the representation of the past. From a phenomenological perspective, the popular location of history as possible “at any moment” in the present and the self-consciousness of one’s comportment as an historical actor can be seen not only negatively as illusionary subjection to simulation and reification, but can also be seen positively as a real redemption of subjective agency. That is, despite their negative effects, the novel forms of mediation and representation born of the 20th century also redeem to us the possibility of a vibrant connection of present to past and some sense of agency in the shaping of human events. Furthermore, the popular apprehension of the traumatic and grand “historical event” as a potentiality in the trivial temporality of the

everyday (common and extensible enough to "include one in") can be seen as signaling not merely the "end" of History as a distinct temporal category, but also (and alternatively) an emergent and novel form of historical consciousness—in sum, a very real and consequential "readiness" for history.

What is both poignant and heartening about this novel form of historical consciousness is that it has no determinate "object." In great part, the effects of our new technologies of representation put us at a loss to fix that "thing" we used to think of as History or to create clearly delineated and categorical temporal and spatial frames around what we used to think of as the "historical event." In the age of television, camcorders, and seamless digital manipulation, when anyone can be caught and filmed and interviewed or digitized into a "historic" crowd scene, or riot, or significant event, the boundaries between the private and the public, personal temporality and social temporality, the trivial and the significant, the quotidian and the historic, won't hold. This loss of a "fix" on History and of the stable temporal and spatial framing of events as "historical," this loss to historical consciousness of a determinate object, can also be seen as a gain. That is, the loss of a firm grasp of an historical object forces into the foreground of our current existence the constitutive quality of consciousness as it engages and makes meaning in and of the objective world. Now objectively indeterminate, History cannot be "taken up" by consciousness as if a given, but, rather, must be subjectively "made out." This is not to deny the world its spatial solidity nor the temporal event its reality—that is, its material causes and consequences. (There is a difference, after all, between "making something up" and "making it out.") It is, rather, to recognize—as I think most people do today—that we are subjectively implicated in and responsible for the histories we tell ourselves or others tell us and that, while these are only representations, their telling and their significance has both value and consequence to our lives. Hence the contemporary and wide-spread contentiousness around categories,

boundaries, exclusions, and inclusions, ordering and re-membering History, history, herstory, histories.

At the present moment, the loss of a determinate historical object and the correspondent and conscious hunger for history has led to the most disheartening and hopeful of conditions in the American context. On the one hand, for the most cynical, History has become a commodity—something to be “fixed” according to maximum consumer desire (that is, not only made secure, but also “neutered, ““altered,” and “doctored up”). Exemplary is Disney’s recent animated feature *Pocahontas* (1995), “which for the first time in the history of Disney animation is based on American history.” Prior to the film’s release, *Entertainment Weekly* not only listed the commonly expected consumer product tie-ins with the film: “Nestlé• (candy bars), Mattel (*Pocahontas*, Barbie-style), Payless Shoesource (moccasins), and Burger King (kids’ meals).” We were also told of Disney’s emphases on certain aspects of the “story”: Pocahontas “cooling the tempers of her Virginia tribe and the British settlers because of her love for Capt. John Smith (voice by Mel Gibson).” Most cynical of all however—and most indicative of Disney’s awareness of the contemporary public’s heightened historical consciousness (if not of historical accuracy)—were the reports of Disney’s attempts to forestall potential criticism: “Since any film dealing with history is a target for controversy in these PC times, Disney has buffered itself against attack. It consulted with historians and Native American groups during the making of the film, and recruited Russell Means (*The Last of the Mohicans*) to provide one of the voices.”⁷ Here, it is clear that the contemporary loss of a determinate and fixed historical object has been replaced with an overdetermined and reified commodity. Furthermore, that Russell Means is cited not for his actual historical contributions as a Native American activist, but rather for his appearance as a fictional character in a film adaptation of an historical novel seems the ultimate confirmation of Guy Debord’s critique of the 20th century “society of

the spectacle" in which "everything that was lived directly has moved away into a representation."⁸

On the other hand, there does seem reason to counter cynicism (which is usually unproductive and self-congratulatory) with a certain degree of hope. While it is true that the hunger for a lost historical object has led to the wide-spread production of History as commodity, to both *Pocahontas* and The History Channel ("All of History. All in One Place."), it is also true that such hunger has led to a wide-spread recognition of history and its representation as process, to both *JFK* with its multiple constructions of a traumatic national event and C-SPAN cable television with its uninflected coverage of geologically-paced, momentous and trivial, legislative negotiations. Thus, while they often "buy" History in the reduced fixity of its commodity forms, popular American audiences also have increasingly demanded a part in "making" history. That is, they have increasingly come to understand the stakes in historical representation, to recognize "history in the making," and to see themselves not only as spectators of history, but also as participants in and adjudicators of it and its representation. The irony of the new media technologies that increasingly mediate history in the 20th century is that they no longer make the present a separate temporal zone from the past or future. The temporal proximity of their representations to the events they narrate creates a phenomenological sense of immediacy—and, phenomenologically speaking, insofar as it is acted upon and has material consequences, this sense is no illusion. Thus, while historical consciousness has lost the non-historical "time" in which it once critically contemplated and reflected upon past events (that is, it has lost the "present" as a temporal mode of distancing history), historical consciousness has gained the historical "time" in which to act (that is, it has gained the "present" as a temporal mode of making and experiencing history). Current debates around the nature, shape, and narration of history are no longer only the province of contemplative academic historians and scholars of film and literature. "History happens" now in the public sphere where "shit happens"

and where the two are not clearly separable. "History happens" here in the present where the search for a lost object has led not only to the purchase of cheap substitutes but also, in the process of that search, to the quickening of a new historical sense and the potential for a more active and reflective historical subject.

Notes

- 1 This essay is adapted from the Introduction to my edited collection, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-14.
- 2 Kristen O'Neill, "Gumption," *Premiere*, April 1995, 154.
- 3 Roger Angell, "Two Dreams," *The New Yorker*, March 13, 1995, 7.
- 4 Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 5.
- 5 Advertisement in the *TV Guide*, March 18, 1995, 9.
- 6 Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, pp. 17-38.
- 7 Pat H. Broeske and Jessica Shaw, "The Pocamotion," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 3, 1995, 9. ["PC" stands for "politically correct."]
- 8 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), n.p.