

# New Man, Old Brutalisms? Reconstructing a Violent History in *Forrest Gump*

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*Forrest Gump*, the tale of a man with an I.Q. of seventy-five traversing three turbulent decades of US history, was one of the biggest box office successes of 1994. The film earned more than \$300 million in the US alone, spawning a mini-industry of merchandising (just call 1-800 LUV GUMP to place your orders) and winning six Academy Awards (including Best Picture, Director and Actor).

Despite its commercial success, *Forrest Gump* received a mixed reaction from critics, not least because the film's re-visioning of recent US history proved so contentious. In exploring the film's version of history, this article will be centrally concerned with how this re-visioning depends upon actual and metaphorical violence, an aspect of the film that has, so far, been somewhat neglected. As *Forrest Gump* went head-to-head at the box-office and Academy Awards with films like *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994) and *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) with their controversial portrayals of violence, the critical silence on *Gump's* more muted violence is perhaps not surprising. This context is briefly considered in the next section. Following this, the article is divided into five sections, beginning with a discussion of the use of "destiny" as a means of negating white men's responsibility for violence. This leads into a consideration of the narrative structure and the conflation of Forrest's version of the American Dream - his-story - with US history. The implications of this narrative structure for the telling of alternative histories are then explored, firstly in relation to Forrest's sweetheart's journey through the counter-culture and, secondly, through a consideration of the racist and militarist strategies of revisionism. Finally, the film's treatment of disability and "wounding" is briefly considered.

## **Brutalisms Old and New**

As already indicated, the politics of *Forrest Gump* divided critics both in the US and UK. The disabled son of a single mother with an African-American best friend, Forrest Gump was seen by some as a "politically correct" figure, appealing to liberal America (Freedland, 1996). A profile in the *Observer* located this "liberal" appeal in Gump's "innate goodness and studied anti-racism" and the film's "deeply Protestant message that virtue is simple and effective." (19 February 1995: 24) However, as Jennifer Hyland Wang argues in a recent article (Wang, 2000), the film was most consistently *used* in the US by politicians on the right, for whom the film dramatised the American Dream and demonised the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, for example, hailed *Forrest Gump* as, "a conservative film [...] a reaffirmation that the counter-culture destroys human beings and conservative values," (quoted in Byers, 1996: 420) Similarly, Bob Dole declared that his presidential campaign would be based "on the message that has made *Forrest Gump* one of Hollywood's all-time greatest box office hits: no matter how great the adversity, the American Dream is within everybody's reach." (quoted in Wang, 2000: 107) The filmmakers rather unconvincingly countered these appropriations, claiming that the film

was apolitical. In director Robert Zemeckis's words, *Forrest Gump* was a presentation of the baby-boomer generation which, because of Forrest's "blankness" offered no comment or explanation: "everybody could sort of bring their own bottle to the party." (quoted in the *Observer*, 19 February 1995: 24)

The stance taken in this article is that *Forrest Gump* presents an extremely conservative re-visioning of recent US history. In this, the article shares ground with previous academic work on the film, particularly Thomas Byers' 1996 article, "History Re-membered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminism Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counter-culture." Like Byers, I am concerned with the film's historical revisionism and the reconstruction of white masculinity through this process. As Byers argues, the film's historical project is twofold, "the forgetting and/or emptying out of history on the one hand, and its re-membering and rewriting on (or in) the other" (1996: 421), processes also explored in this article. However, this article departs from Byers' analysis in its focus on the centrality of actual and metaphorical violence to the film's historical project.

This concern with the violence of *Forrest Gump* arises from the cultural context in which the film was released. Hitting screens in the summer of 1994, Forrest faced off competition from Arnold Schwarzenegger in *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994), Harrison Ford in *Clear and Present Danger* (Noyce, 1994) and from *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994), Oliver Stone's controversial film of a Quentin Tarantino story. Come the Oscar nominations, *Forrest Gump*'s nearest rival was Tarantino's own *Pulp Fiction* and the popularity of *Gump* was hailed by some as a reaction against the "new brutalism" (the term is Shelley's, 1993a, 1993b) which Tarantino's films, in particular, were seen to represent. "New brutalism" describes films of the early to mid nineties which shared a preoccupation with violence towards the individual, and, in terms of style, an explicit representation of violence *and its consequences*. Films of the "new brutalism" were controversial both for their explicit on-screen portrayals of violence and their alleged off-screen effects. Most notoriously, *Natural Born Killers* was linked to a succession of real-world violent crimes, including at least 15 murders. While the evidence linking these films to specific violent crimes was spurious at best, the extensive press coverage given to these cases increased the films' notoriety and perceived threat to the social order (Boyle, forthcoming; Hill, 1997). Against this backdrop, *Forrest Gump* emerged as a paean to (and for) conservative family values (Wang, 2000). Of course, this opposition between family-values *Gump* and his new brutalist challengers conveniently ignored the reality of "old brutalisms" such as family-violence and implicitly accepted, indeed normalised, *Forrest Gump*'s violence.

In *Forrest Gump*, violence - albeit a decidedly sanitised violence - is an inevitable and unexceptional aspect of Forrest's story. Interpersonal violence (bullying, incest, domestic violence, assassination) and violent struggle (Ku Klux Klan uprisings, the Vietnam war, antiwar protests) are central to Forrest's revisionist history. Thus, *Forrest Gump* represents not only a *metaphorically* violent revision of history but a reconceptualisation of white masculinity in and through iconographic scenes of violence. Further, this article will argue that the film diegetically positions white men as *victims* of history whilst forgetting or reinterpreting the significance of non-diegetic white male violence. Of course, while Forrest's story does take in violent events (attempted/assassinations, political protest, the Vietnam war) we know to be real, his inability to understand what is going on around him provides a source of "comic insulation" (Palmer, 1987) which is decidedly irony-free. While *Forrest Gump* is not a "comedy" - it has been described as a "male weepie" (Richard Corliss, quoted in Taubin, 1994: 93) and as a "docufable" (Dawson, 1994: 105) - the use of comedy arguably

works to make this violent history appear painless as Forrest's naïve and intensely personal narration empties events of their socio-political significance and consequences. In other words, it provides a new way of (*not*) looking at old brutalisms. The analysis of *Forrest Gump* presented in this article thus attempts to open up questions about these "old brutalisms" that have been largely ignored in the furore over the pleasures and perils of "new brutalism".

## **"The world will never be the same once you've seen it through the eyes of Forrest Gump."**

Turning now to the film itself, the discussion of destiny running through the film provides a means of negating Forrest's responsibility for the violent history in which he is embroiled, as we will now see.

The film opens as a white feather gently wafts across the screen and the town, passing a young woman, pausing on the shoulder of a businessman and lightly caressing the shining bonnet of a car before landing at Forrest's muddy sneaker. Forrest picks up the feather, studies it, then deposits it in the *Curious George* book from where, at the film's end, waiting at another bus stop with his son, he releases it back into the sky.

This brief sequence sets up a contrast between the businessman too busy reading the *Wall Street Journal* to notice the world around him, and Forrest, who appreciates and preserves the feather. Maurice Yacowar reads this as the promise of a different, innocent and implicitly more authentic perspective on corporate America (Yacowar, 1994: 671). However, while Forrest, as the comically-naïve narrator, offers a *different* perspective, women are still relegated to the position of by-standers in this male drama. Although I am wary of reading too much into a brief sequence, it is notable that the feather touches only the male characters in the scene, foreshadowing the treatment of Jenny's story in the narrative that follows.

As Yacowar notes, the final image of the film is of the feather moving directly towards the camera/ audience, "as if to confront us with the question of its meaning" (Yacowar, 1994: 671). Yacowar suggests that the feather can be read as a symbol for Forrest, "a drifting, insubstantial, mindless victim of the winds of time," and/or for "an angelic spirit that seems to watch over Forrest, turning his every affliction into a blessing" (Yacowar, 1994: 671). Although Yacowar does not make this explicit, both scenarios position Forrest as passively accepting of a destiny randomly or spiritually determined and for which he cannot, therefore, be held accountable. This negation of individual responsibility, is, of course, encapsulated in the film's mantra - "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get" - and is reiterated in Forrest's graveside address to his sweetheart:

Jenny, I don't know if Momma was right or if it was Lt. Dan. I don't know if we each have a destiny or if we're all floating about accidental like on a breeze. But I think, maybe it's both. Both happening at the same time.

In juxtaposing Momma's view of the randomness of human existence with Lt. Dan's view of a predetermined destiny, Forrest negates the more interesting contradictions of his Momma's philosophies ("life is like a box of chocolates...." *and* "you make your own destiny Forrest") to emphasise his own lack of agency and responsibility. Further, Forrest's learning disability provides an alibi for his failure to engage with the major political debates of the period and, thus, arguably, for the film's historical revisionism. As Byers argues:

Sweet, innocent, polite, and chivalric child-man; devoted son to his mother; brother of the nice Black male (Bubba's bubba); best friend and savior of the disabled veteran; patient, all-forgiving spouse and hospice nurse to his wayward Jenny; and nurturing Mr. Mom to his own son, Forrest represents a liberal myth (in Barthes's sense in "Myth Today" [143]) of the boomer as "new man," egalitarian, sympathetic to the marginalized, and in touch with his "feminine side.") The fact that he is *naturally* this way functions in part to make the cultural history of struggle in the sixties and seventies, and particularly all calls for white men to change, superfluous: if the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements demanded of this subject that he give up oppressive power and show greater sensitivity toward others, and yet he was already unprejudiced, innocent and nurturing by nature, then the movements seem redundant and the "others" who participated in them suspect. (Byers, 1996: 431)

The opposition which is set up between Forrest "unprejudiced, innocent and nurturing" - and these "suspect" others, has the effect of displacing histories of white male violence onto the marginalised groups who were, in reality, the targets of this violence. That this re-writing of history reaches its conclusion in Forrest's comments at Jenny's graveside is, therefore, entirely fitting. As we will see, Jenny is associated with a variety of counter-cultural movements during the course of the film. Forrest's reflections on the randomness of human experience at her graveside thus neatly negate both Jenny's assertion of independence and the validity and *necessity* of her counter-cultural politics whilst making her eventual "punishment" appear random and hence more palatable. Jenny can be remembered precisely because the threat her independence poses to *Forrest Gump's* reassertion of family values has been safely contained. The revelation that it is the dead Jenny - Jenny *Gump* - to whom Forrest has been speaking thus emphasises that "their" story is his-story. It is to the process of his-story-telling that I now turn my attention.

### **(His-) Storytelling**

Forrest's story unfolds through a series of chronological flashbacks narrated by Forrest to strangers at a bus stop. This device privileges Forrest's voice-over even as it highlights the humorous discrepancies between his literalist understanding of events and their socio-historical significance. Forrest's story should be that of an outsider, his learning difficulties placing him outside the mainstream (as evidenced by his Momma's fight for his right to education, for example). However, for most of the film, Forrest's impairments are simply exploited for their "comic" potential, he is unaware of or unhampered by prejudice, and, crucially, has none of the difficulties in everyday independent living experienced by learning disabled adults in the real (and disabling) world. Forrest is thus only ever a partial outsider and his voice-over places him firmly at the *centre* of events and, indeed, at the centre of three decades of US history.

Considering Forrest's "outsider" status, Byers suggests that the character's "very incapacity to analyze or interpret events makes him a fit figure for the subject who has a stake in not grasping them" (Byers, 1996: 425). Interestingly, however, Forrest's on-screen story-telling addresses individuals who do have a stake both in grasping the significance of the events he recounts and of those he omits. Their failure to offer analyses or interpretations to challenge Forrest's perspective thus strengthens the legitimacy of his tale.

Forrest's first companion at the bus stop is a young African-American nurse who resists his attempts to draw her into conversation. It is not that Forrest deliberately ignores her-story - and, indeed, his attempt to draw the nurse into conversation establishes his non-racist credentials from the outset - but that she *chooses* not to participate in the telling. By ignoring Forrest and leaving him just as he finishes his account of the integration of the University of Alabama, the African-American woman is complicit in her his-storical marginalisation. Integration is something that happens *to him*.

Forrest's narration continues as a white woman and her child move into the space vacated by the nurse. Although they too are largely silent, the woman does validate Forrest's story with her own memory of the assassination attempt on Governor Wallace which, as argued later in this article, is given a privileged position within the film. However, unlike Forrest and the "great men" making guest appearances in his-story, the woman is only ever a witness, she does not *make* history. When we return to the park bench some time later, the woman and child have been replaced by a middle-aged white man. The man stays with Forrest through Vietnam and its aftermath - appropriately the most homosocial period in Forrest's life - validating Forrest's sanitised version of the war with occasional comments. However, as Forrest recounts his Bubba-Gump successes, the man laughingly takes his leave. The only one of Forrest's listeners to openly voice their disbelief in any aspect of his-story, it is Forrest's *personal* triumphs and not his re-visioning of war and liberation struggle, which the man finds implausible.

The man leaves behind an elderly white woman who weeps at Forrest's heartbreak, shares in his joy and wishes him well in his reunion with Jenny. The elderly woman has, like his other listeners, lived through the events recounted by Forrest, but remains a silent witness, content to *react* to Forrest's re-construction of history. However, it is in his final, graveside, address to his dead wife that the logic of Forrest's exclusionary narrative is (unwittingly?) revealed. Women have no autonomous existence in Forrest's version of history.

Thus, for Forrest's female audience - both on-screen and in the cinema - the film's publicity has an uneasy resonance: "The world will never be the same once you've seen it through the eyes of Forrest Gump" precisely because Forrest's story marginalises their own experiences. The his-story-telling thus mirrors the historically revisionist content of the stories told, in which, as we will now see, the alternative histories and liberation struggles of the period are re-appropriated through Forrest's naïve narration.

## **Chivalry and the "Othering" of Violence**

The co-option of alternative, marginal histories within his-story is most thoroughly realised in Forrest's re-telling of Jenny's story. Throughout the film, Forrest's often-comic narrative of success against the odds is contrasted with Jenny's self-destructive journey through the counter-culture. Thus, Forrest is awarded a place on the All-America football team and a college degree, while Jenny (Robin Wright), supposedly the smarter of the two, is thrown out of college for posing for *Playboy*. Forrest's career progresses from college to the army, whilst Jenny graduates from pornography to performing folk music naked for leering male customers. Forrest goes to Vietnam and is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, while Jenny takes drugs, goes to San Francisco for the summer of love, joins the antiwar movement and is beaten up by her antiwar boyfriend. As Forrest becomes a national celebrity *again*, this time playing Ping-Pong for his country, Jenny takes more drugs and is beaten up by her boyfriend, *again*. As Forrest becomes a multi-millionaire, Jenny becomes a suicidal, disco-

dancing, cocaine addict. Finally, whilst Forrest runs across America, becoming an unwitting guru to a hoard of followers, a reformed but doomed Jenny waits tables and supports their young son. By the time Jenny realises where true happiness lies, her body has been invaded by a deadly virus, punishment for her years of promiscuity, drug taking and her repeated abandonment of Forrest. Jenny's death is implicitly from AIDS, although, as Lavery notes (Lavery, 1997: 20), her only physical symptom appears to be that she grows more beautiful as death approaches. This sanitising of an AIDS-related death seems intended to make the "ugly brand of theology" (Byers, 1996: 443) which implicitly marks Jenny's death appear more reasonable to a broad audience. She dies a sacrificial victim for the sins of the counter-culture, leaving Forrest to bring up their son within the dominant culture which she has wasted her life resisting.

The assignment of all these roles to one man and one woman is more symbolic than realistic. As Byers notes, this symbolism is perfect for a revisionist version of the counter-culture which collapses together, as "liberal", "evil" (and "doomed") any and all behaviours that deviate from the traditional values concerning gender, family and nation which Forrest embodies:

in this view the idea of sexual liberation or a woman's control over her desire, the "free love" sexual experimentation of bohemians and hippies, the sex industry, and AIDS are all of a piece; Playboy bunnies and antiwar activists are cut from the same cloth; and the cultures of acid rock and discomania, LSD and cocaine, are utterly continuous. Once again all historical distinctions are blurred. (Byers 1996: 432)

In this respect, what is perhaps most striking about Jenny's journey through the counter-culture is the fact that she is never presented as a feminist, and, indeed, that the existence of the women's liberation movement is denied. The repression of a feminist "her-story" is essential to *Forrest Gump's* illusion of universality (his-story as history) and its redemption of white masculinity. As Byers argues, the film's overt suturing of the viewer into Forrest's position constantly translates her-story into his as Forrest takes the role of narrative voice, mediator and, ultimately, the *subject* of Jenny's experience (Byers, 1996: 434) a process that would clearly be denaturalised by any acknowledgement of women's liberation. Even Jenny's off-screen death is something that happens primarily to Forrest, a moment he relives at her graveside where, despite the briefest of marriages, she is buried as Jenny *Gump*. Significantly, as Jenny lies dying she does not reflect on her own (wasted) life, but on Forrest's experiences, wishing she had been there with him. Forrest's comment that she was with him is the final erasure of her independent life and the reformed Jenny is complicit in Forrest's appropriation of her-story. His-story thus becomes their-story, to be kept alive in the stories he tells his son, Forrest Gump Jnr.

Just as Jenny dies when Forrest Jnr. is about to start school, Forrest Snr.'s voice-over reveals that Jenny's mother died when she was five. However, here the similarities end. While Forrest Snr. is an ideal and idealised father, Jenny and her sisters were left with a drunken and abusive father. Interestingly, Jenny's sisters never appear on screen and there is only one brief mention of them in the film. Indeed, it is puzzling that Forrest mentions Jenny's sisters at all, unless to suggest, through their absence, the limits of "sisterhood" both familial and political. Even in childhood, it is Forrest and not Jenny's absent sisters or her briefly glimpsed grandmother who is the constant figure in Jenny's life, a positive male protector to replace the abusive father. Forrest's protection of Jenny continues into her adult life when she remains

isolated from other women (the only time she even talks to another woman is to discuss childcare arrangements for her son) while Forrest stays devoted and loyal, the only true friend or family Jenny ever has.

Not only does Forrest's telling of Jenny's story erase all but the faintest traces of sisterhood but, more importantly, in making the violence which Jenny suffers at male hands a function of his-story, the need for a politicised sisterhood is arguably displaced. In particular, feminist analyses of violence against women become redundant, firstly because the response of the relevant authorities to allegations of abuse is shown to be swift and effective and, secondly, because good white men like Forrest are challenging the abusers, making their actions appear individually aberrant rather than socially-sanctioned.

Jenny is first abused by her father. As with the men who abuse her in later life, Jenny's father - drunk, unemployed, implicitly working class - is "othered", a deviant individual whose behaviour is challenged by the authorities when a policeman removes Jenny from his care. (What happens to her sisters is unclear). Further, Forrest's incomprehension of child sexual abuse - he describes Jenny's father as "a very loving man," always kissing and touching Jenny and her sisters - displaces the realities of abuse (which take place off-screen) and the effects on the survivors (whose perspectives we are never given access to).

Forrest may have a more critical perspective on Jenny's adult experiences of abuse, but as with Jenny's eventual death, this abuse is something that happens primarily to *him*. The significance of the violence thus lies in Forrest's chivalric response and Jenny's lack of gratitude. Not only does Forrest repeatedly come to Jenny's rescue, physically attacking those who attack her, but he is also openly critical of male violence against women, explicitly stating, "he should not be hitting you Jenny". Forrest's chivalry is juxtaposed not only with the immorality of the abusers (who, as we will see, are associated with the counter-culture) but with the complicity of the victim as Jenny makes excuses for her antiwar lover, arguing, "he doesn't mean it when he does things like this, he doesn't". Of course, Forrest does not articulate his critique in terms of women's rights or male violence, but through an old fashioned chivalry that has clear affinities with the codes of honour adhered to by the heroes in Westerns and action movies. Such codes of honour protect women and children not because they have the right to live a life free from violence but because they are loved and cherished objects of male heroes.

When Jenny is attacked, both at the strip club and at the antiwar rally, her rescuer is wearing army uniform, his identification with the dominant culture - and his difference from Jenny's attackers - visually underlined. Thus, in one of the film's more bizarre ideological twists, the antiwar movement is characterised by violence while the American army is characterised by unassuming, non-violent, heroism. As Byers argues:

That any of America's finest young men might have opposed the war, or that any of our GIs might have used the f-word or have done violence to women as Wesley does to Jenny, or that American soldiers might not have been the war's chief victims - all of these possibilities are excluded in the film's rewriting of history, and particularly of masculinity. (Byers, 1996: 435)

The mass destruction and human cost of the Vietnam war is displaced by the interpersonal violence of the *antiwar* protestor (Wesley) who cannot even take responsibility for his actions, blaming his violent outburst on "that lying son of a bitch Johnson". Further, while the

antiwar protestor's violence is clearly shown, the violence in the Vietnam scenes is indiscriminate, impersonal and US soldiers are the only casualties. Importantly, the effects of American aggression on the Vietnamese are never shown. Indeed, the Vietnamese are never visualised as either perpetrators or victims, making a nonsense of Wesley's description of Forrest as a "baby-killer". The indiscriminate nature of the violence, combined with Forrest's incomprehension of the war and his role in it, does arguably serve as a critique of the war in itself. Yet the contrast between Forrest's unwitting heroism and the cowardice of an ideologically incoherent antiwar movement ultimately validates US involvement in Vietnam.

The ideological contradictions in the representation of counter-cultural movements are considered in more detail later in this article. What I want to highlight here, however, is the effect of this displacement in terms of male violence against women. Most importantly, in representing the counter-culture as a violently dangerous place from which women must be rescued by an old-fashioned knight in shining armour (or army uniform), the film re-presents male violence as the *cost* of female independence. This is a cost that Jenny realises too late to save herself, although repeated returns to Forrest's Alabama home do provide some respite, reinstating "home" as a place of safety for emotionally and physically abused women. With Jenny's final return as Forrest's wife, the traumas of the turbulent sixties and seventies are smoothed over by the patient and forgiving patriarch who welcomes his wayward sweetheart and their son home. In Jenny's final days, family values replace public struggle.

### **His-story and the Whitewash of a Violent History**

While interpersonal male violence against women is first individualised and then displaced onto the counter-culture, the racist violence of recent US history is not so much displaced as dismissed.

Although my focus thus far has been on Forrest's life-story, Forrest's his-story begins, not with his own childhood in the fifties, but with the American Civil War when one of his ancestors - "General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the great civil war hero" - "started up this club called the Ku Klux Klan". In praise of the film, Peter Chumo argues that Gump thus, "carries in his very name America's racist history, and, by making him the redeemer of the nation, the film suggests that America itself, with the same racist roots, can transcend the ugly aspects of its past." (Chumo, 1995: 3) However, while Chumo and Republicans jumping on the Gump-bandwagon (see Wang, 2000) may have seen this transcendence of America's racist history as laudable, along with Byers (Byers, 1996), I argue it is deeply reactionary. Central to this argument is the way in which Forrest's "comic" incomprehension erases the violent actuality of the Klan and the consequences of their violence for African Americans. Thus, Forrest describes how the oddly attired Klan members acted, "like a bunch of ghosts or spooks or something", riding around on their bedsheet-clad horses. His Momma, Forrest concludes, named him after General Forrest to remind him, "that sometimes we do things that, well, just don't make no sense". As Forrest also claims his ancestor as a *hero* this is unconvincing as a critique of the Klan. With Forrest Gump as the narrator, history becomes, precisely, that which cannot and implicitly need not "make sense" (Byers, 1996: 431) and its victims become invisible.

The visuals during this voice-over are doctored clips from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, a technical milestone in cinema history and "perhaps the definitive example of Hollywood's repressive reinscriptions of history" (Byers, 1996: 419). The insertion of Hanks/ Gump into the 1915 film as General Forrest gives the Klan an acceptable, friendly face, underlining

Griffith's own reinscription of America's racist past as white heroism in a manner consistent with Forrest's claims of ancestral heroism. Further, the use of a fictional film as historical memory emphasises the importance of cinema as history while foregrounding the technical achievements of *Forrest Gump* in "doctoring" Griffith's film. Forrest's other achievements (inspiring Elvis and Lennon, meeting presidents, appearing on television news bulletins and chat shows) similarly draw attention to the technical achievements of the filmmakers in placing Hanks/ Gump in archival footage whilst emptying that footage of its broader socio-cultural significance.

The Ku Klux Klan "flashback" sets the scene for Forrest's own story and, specifically, for his erasure of the history of white oppression of African Americans. Indeed, in the pre-integration days of Forrest's early schooling, it is the young Forrest with his low IQ and visible physical disability who is explicitly and violently discriminated against. As Forrest's Momma - who is never given a first name, reinforcing her emblematic status - fights for her boy to receive "the *same* opportunities as *everybody* else," there is no acknowledgement that "*everybody* else" is white or that Forrest has different educational needs than his peers. The film's conception of "equality" is clearly a liberal one, that everybody should be judged according to the same (white, male, non-disabled) norms. As Thomas Leitch argues, *Forrest Gump* is based on the principle that "Everybody is basically alike, except for people who aren't really people" (Leitch, 1997: 12). Forrest's version of the American Dream is a triumph over inequality only to the extent to which his difference can be denied and he can be assimilated into the dominant culture, an issue I will return to later in relation to the film's portrayal of disability.

The conception of equality as "same-ness" results in a negation both of oppression and of liberation struggles. At the integration of the University of Alabama, for example, Forrest miscomprehends a fellow student's racist comments about "letting coons into college", explaining how his Momma chases racoons off their porch, deflecting the threat of violence in his fellow student's words. As Governor Wallace makes his televised anti-integration speech, Forrest's uncomprehending face edges into the frame and onto the television screen. Byers notes:

In one of the few instances where the film allows an explicitly political discourse to be heard, George Wallace is seen in close-up, claiming that "we are awakening the American people to the dangers that we have spoken about so many times, which are so evident today - the trend toward military dictatorship in this country." Thus, in his own words - words that, the film is careful to show, elicit the applause of the crowd gathered around him - Wallace becomes not an apologist for state-enforced racism, but an early prophet of contemporary Republicanism (of course he was in fact both). While one who brings to the film a prior sense of the historical link between Wallace's words and the racism for which he was standing can see the scene in that light, the film itself does not make the link; moreover, its erasure of racism from this point on is consonant with Wallace's own concealment of the issue. (Byers, 1996: 429)

This concealment of racism is underlined as Forrest replaces the Governor in the portals of the University, running after Vivian Malone with the book she has dropped. Waving from the steps where moments earlier the Governor had stood, Forrest's first television appearance undercuts the newscaster's commentary ("Governor Wallace did what he promised to do...").

Just as Hanks/Gump in his white bedsheet made nonsense of the Ku Klux Klan, Forrest's stand at the schoolhouse door makes non-sense of a report of an infamous display of white racism. Forrest's subsequent description of Wallace as "that angry little man at the schoolhouse door" may make Wallace sound faintly ridiculous but at the cost of ignoring the *targets* of Wallace's anger and his very real power and influence over their lives. Wallace's apparent powerlessness is further underlined by the representation of his attempted assassination. Unlike the other attempted/ assassinations scattered through Forrest's history - John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, John Lennon and the attempts on Ford and Reagan - the attempt on Wallace's life is shown, unmediated by a diegetic television set and verified by Forrest's audience. Such prominence reinforces Wallace's victim status.

By prefacing his accounts of the attempted and actual assassinations with the phrase, "for no particular reason," Forrest empties these acts of meaning, divorces them from their highly charged political context, and divests the male perpetrators of both motive and responsibility. Nevertheless, despite Forrest's incomprehension, the necrology within *Forrest Gump* is deeply political. What Yacowar describes as an "American necrology" (Yacowar, 1994: 680) is a necrology of *white, male* America, positioning white men simultaneously as the makers of history and its victims. That the assassination attempt on Wallace should be included while the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jnr. and Malcolm X are ignored is, as Byers argues (Byers, 1996: 427-8), incomprehensible other than as a means of reinforcing the victim status of white men while covering over any systematic exploitation of others by them.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that Forrest's only encounter with Black activism - when he accompanies Jenny and the abusive Wesley to a Black Panther meeting - positions the activists as both dangerous and misinformed. Like the other antiwar protestors (the man who "uses the f-word a lot", the woman who pushes Forrest into line), the Black Panthers are foul-mouthed, loud and aggressive. Further, the Black Panther analysis of the war simply does not square with Forrest's experiences in Vietnam or with the history of *white* male struggle with which *Forrest Gump* is preoccupied. One of the Black Panthers tells Forrest that their purpose is, "to protect our black leaders from the racial onslaught of the pig who wishes to brutalise our black leaders, rape our women and destroy our black community". However, in the world according to Gump, there are no black leaders or community to protect and it is the allies of the Black Panthers who are responsible for brutalising the (white) women involved in the struggle (here, represented by Wesley's attack on Jenny at a Black Panther meeting). The Black Panthers' subsequent indictment of Vietnam as a war "where black soldiers are sent to the front line to die for a country that hates them" is similarly at odds with the film's portrayal of the war and the antiwar movement. Forrest and his black-buddy Bubba are sent to the front-line *together*, and, as Chumo notes, the complementary relationship between them is so strong that it is twice suggested that they are brothers (Chumo, 1995: 3). Forrest risks his own life to try to rescue Bubba and when a dying Bubba asks Forrest "why'd this happen", Forrest's unintentionally comic answer - "you got shot" - displaces the ideological issues around American involvement in Vietnam and the Black Panther critique. In his last words Bubba himself validates America's inclusiveness with his simply stated desire for "home". As Davies and Smith argue, Forrest's commitment to Bubba in Vietnam and his financial support of Bubba's family after the war, "not only particularises the war as individual tragedy rather than national failure or imperialist misadventure, but removes any need to show the post-Vietnam black struggle for civil rights." (1997: 148). With Bubba gone, the film's most visible casualty of war is the white double amputee, Lt. Dan. Meanwhile, Bubba's family prospers, centuries of slavery

overturned thanks to the benevolent white man whose financial support enables Bubba's mother to employ a white maid.

Significantly, although the film makes frequent use of diegetic radio and television broadcasts to contextualise Forrest's story, there is no mention of the end of the Vietnam War. Thus, as Forrest never returns to the front after injuring his "butt-ocks", his-story of Vietnam is ultimately one of personal triumph, symbolised by the Congressional Medal of Honor and his Ping-Pong victories. In his voice-over, Forrest takes up the story:

I thought I was going back to Vietnam. But instead they decided the best way for me to fight the Communists was to play Ping-Pong. So I was in the Special Services travelling around the country cheering up all the wounded veterans and showing them how to play Ping-Pong. I was so good that some years later, the army decided that I should be on the All America Ping-Pong team. We were the first Americans to visit the land of China in like a million years or something like that. Somebody said world peace was in our hands. But all I did was play Ping-Pong.

The never-mentioned American defeat in Vietnam is transformed into sporting triumph which not only achieves a reconciliation with "the Communists" but promotes "*All America*" as a unified male-team. On a personal level, Forrest's experience of loss and injury is translated into national celebrity and financial success, as a sponsorship deal gives him the money to start the Bubba-Gump shrimping business. In this respect, *Forrest Gump's* treatment of Vietnam has discomfiting parallels with the action films of the mid-eighties which re-staged the Vietnam war as a "personal" war in which American defeat and shame was transformed into victory, most notoriously in *Rambo: First Blood Part 2*. (Cosmatos, 1985) (On Hollywood's re-inscriptions of Vietnam, see Jeffords, 1989; Traube, 1992 and Wood, 1986).

Thus, Forrest's Ku Klux Klan heritage, his perspectives on racial apartheid, his experiences of the army, the antiwar movement and Black activism, erase the existence of systematic racial oppression within the US and sanitise the effects of US involvement in Vietnam both on African-American soldiers and on the Vietnamese. Secondly, and as a result of this whitewash of history, the need for Black activism is obscured and the anger and aggression of Black activists seems unjustified and destructive. It is the counter-cultural movements that are characterised by violence while, with Forrest as our narrator, American history is whiter than white, both literally and metaphorically.

## **The Politics of Disability**

Having discussed *Forrest Gump's* treatment of gender and race, I want to briefly address the film's representation of disability. I have already argued that Forrest's disabilities and the film's "humour" seem to provide a certain degree of "deniability" against the kind of political critique attempted in this article and, further, that Forrest's learning difficulties are far from the reality of impairment and social disablement experienced by his real-life counterparts. However, the film's treatment of disability is of particular interest in the context of this article precisely because the disability of Forrest's Vietnam commanding officer, Lt. Dan Taylor, is the one semi-permanent reminder of the personal costs of American involvement in Vietnam.

At first glance, Lt. Dan's story seems to undercut Forrest's revisionist triumph. Forrest saves Lt. Dan's life, making him the first in a long-line of Taylor-men not to die honourably fighting for his country. However, as a result of his injuries, Lt. Dan has both legs amputated at the knee, transforming the commanding officer into a stereotypically maladjusted and helpless disabled person (Longmore, 1985). For Lt. Dan, adjusting to life after Vietnam means adjusting to disability, vulnerability and dependency - in other words, to reconceptualise what it means to be a man (Morris, 1991: 93-97). Lt. Dan's post-Vietnam story of maladjustment is in stark contrast to Forrest's own unquestioning acceptance of his physical and mental disabilities. While Forrest's disabilities may initially appear emasculating, his successes confirm Morris's equation between masculinity and the celebration of strength, or perfect bodies (Morris, 1991: 93-97). The adult Forrest is not *visibly* disabled and, indeed, the leg braces he wears as a child strengthen his legs making him an exceptional runner, a skill that brings him a college scholarship, a place on the All-America football team and a Congressional Medal of Honor. Thus, *Forrest Gump* presents disability as a state of mind and once Lt. Dan has overcome his disabling mindset he can overcome his disability, just as Forrest's unquestioning acceptance of his disabilities means that he is never disabled by them. As Longmore argues, such portrayals, "suggest that disability is a problem of psychological self-acceptance, of emotional adjustment. Social prejudice rarely intrudes" (1985: 34). There is no *community* of disabled veterans in *Forrest Gump* and, therefore, no political analysis of the war, of disability or of the appalling lack of resources for disabled veterans. Indeed, Lt. Dan's eventual re-adjustment paradoxically reinforces the film's re-presentation of the Vietnam war as personal triumph as, having gone to Vietnam expecting to die, he not only lives, but is rewarded with wealth, love and a new pair of legs.

Forrest calls Lt. Dan's new legs his "magic legs", arguably drawing attention not so much to the medical technology which makes it possible for him to walk again, but to the cinema "magic" whereby the non-disabled Gary Sinise has been able to play the part of a double amputee. This "magic" is consistent with the film's treatment of disability as metaphor and its erasure of the long-term effects of violence and the daily realities of living with prejudice. Notably, in Winston Groom's original novel, Lt. Dan also has facial scarring but this more visible physical difference is omitted from the film. As Susan Sontag notes: "Our very notion of the person, of dignity, depends on the separation of face from body, on the possibility that the face may be exempt, or exempt itself, from what is happening to the body." (Sontag, 1991: 126) That Lt. Dan's face is not permanently marked arguably facilitates the audience's acceptance of his rehabilitation and, of course, ensures that Lt. Dan is not permanently marked as "visibly different" (Sutherland, 1993). Given the historical re-visioning of Vietnam which *Forrest Gump* enacts, it is supremely fitting that Lt. Dan's wounds should be illusory.

It is also significant - if hardly surprising - that the angry and maladjusted Lt. Dan so closely resembles the antiwar protestors with his long hair, beard and scruffy clothing. During his period of maladjustment, Lt. Dan is openly scathing of Gump, he is almost permanently drunk and is lewd and abusive to women, traits that are, as we have seen, associated with counter-cultural outsiders throughout the film. His eventual rehabilitation thus not only involves the acquisition of "magic legs", but a make over (haircut, shave and suit) and a re-integration into the world of work as a successful capitalist. Finally, Lt. Dan's engagement to an Asian woman completes both Lt. Dan's and America's healing process, a process facilitated, of course, by the invisibility of the broken bodies of the Vietnamese. Instead, Lt. Dan's impending marriage suggests, "a reconciliation with Vietnam, a union of East and

West" (Chumo 1995: 7) that evades the actual damage done by American troops and thorny questions about the experiences of disabled veterans in a disabling society.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that *Forrest Gump's* stated project of looking at the world differently is an historical re-vision which sanitises white men's violent role in US history whilst writing out or writing over alternative histories. For women, African-Americans, antimilitarists and/or disabled men and women, to look at the world through the eyes of *Forrest Gump* is to look at the world through a distorting mirror. Further, I have demonstrated that the film's much discussed historical revisionism depends upon iconographic scenes of violence whose actual effects are denied and emptied of socio-political significance. So, for example, we see the Ku Klux Klan riding into battle, but their racist motives and the impact on their victims are disguised. Similarly, we hear about the attempted and actual assassinations of white men but are told that they happen "for no particular reason", increasing the apparent vulnerability of white men in power, making them the victims as well as the makers of recent US history. Finally, Forrest's incomprehension and unwitting heroism renders American involvement in Vietnam harmless and the Vietnamese casualties invisible, while Lt. Dan's disablement is a semi-permanent reminder of the cost paid by white men. Thus, what is negated in Forrest's re-vision is not so much white men's involvement in violence, but the significance and the consequences of that involvement for others (women, African Americans, the Vietnamese), particularly in the face of the continual victimisation of white men.

Next to the archetypal gangsters given a new and brutal lease of life in *Pulp Fiction*, *Forrest Gump's* "innocent" eponymous hero might look like a "new" man but he is undoubtedly embroiled in "old brutalisms" - chivalry, racism, militarism. The central concern of the film appears to be to make these "old brutalisms", and the inequalities on which they depend, invisible, sanitising the role played by white men in recent US history and thus making liberation struggles redundant. The bloodless violence of *Forrest Gump* may be a far cry from the graphic scenes of *Pulp Fiction* but its message is, if anything, far more dangerous and far more widely accepted.

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## **Filmography**

*Clear and Present Danger*, Dir. Phillip Noyce. Paramount Pictures. 1994.

*Forrest Gump*, Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Paramount Pictures. 1994

*Natural Born Killers*, Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Brothers. 1994

*Pulp Fiction*, Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Miramax. 1994.

*Rambo: First Blood Part 2*, Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Anabasis N.V., Carolco Entertainment. 1985.

*True Lies*, Dir. James Cameron. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Universal. 1994.

Forrest Gump: Academic Resource: Karen Boyle "New Man, Old Brutalisms? Reconstructing a Violent History in Forrest Gump". Sabine Moller "Blockbusting history: Forrest Gump as a powerful medium of American cultural memory". Journalistic Resource: Roger Ebert's review about Forrest Gump. Textual Evidence: YouTube clip YouTube clip. Primary Resource: The trailer of this movie and this interview from the director. Forrest Gump is itself a mirror of a specific postmodern consciousness that reflects questions of how history and memory are represented. As Vivian Sobchack (1996, p.3) writes, "one could, in fact, suggest that Forrest Gump is a one-joke movie, absolutely dependent for its humor and irony upon historically (self-) conscious viewers who have been immersed in questions about their own possible place in history." In postmodern readings, the iconisation in Forrest Gump could also be interpreted as a filmic examination of mass media-created societal or historical consciousness. Viewed from this perspective Forrest Gump was the biggest film of 1994, winning six Oscars, forever establishing a box of chocolates as one of the most mysterious objects in the known universe, and using cutting-edge special effects to offer audiences a new perspective on some of the most pivotal moments in modern American history. Millions of film fans hold special places in their hearts for Forrest, Jenny, Lieutenant Dan, and the rest of the movie's unforgettable characters, but what happened to the members of the ensemble cast that made Forrest Gump so famous? We've taken a look back at more than 20 years of film and Forrest Gump is a classic movie about a simpleton who goes on to accomplish great things. However, through powerful symbolism, the movie tells a much bigger story about the opposing forces that shape America's destiny. As its name stipulates, Forrest Gump revolves around the life of a slow-witted yet kind-hearted man from Alabama who goes on to accomplish great things. In fact, he ends up taking part in most major events in American history between the 1950s and the 1980s. That's a lot of accomplishments for one person. That's because Forrest Gump represents more than a single person. He represents a force, a spirit that characterized America, defined its people, and fueled its history. There's also another force that defined American history.