

the  
modernist  
event

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"History does not break down into stories but into images."  
—Walter Benjamin

"The coming extinction of art is prefigured in the increasing  
impossibility of representing historical events."  
—Theodor Adorno

It is a commonplace of contemporary criticism that modernist literature, and, by extension, modernist art in general, dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot which provided the staple both of the nineteenth-century realist novel and of the historiography from which nineteenth-century literature derived its model of "realism." In particular, the tendency of modernist literature to dissolve the event has especially important implications for understanding the ways in which contemporary Western culture construes the relationship between literature and history. The invention of a subject-less and plot-less historiography in the twentieth century has amply demonstrated

that modern research and writing could get by without the notions of character and plot.<sup>1</sup> But the dissolution of the event as a basic unit of temporal occurrence and building-block of history undermines the very concept of factuality and threatens therewith the distinction between realistic and merely imaginary discourse. This dissolution undermines a founding presupposition of Western realism: the *opposition* between fact and fiction. Modernism resolves the problems posed by traditional realism, namely, how to represent reality realistically, by simply abandoning the ground on which realism is construed as an opposition between fact and fiction. The denial of the reality of the event undermines the very notion of "fact" informing traditional realism. Therewith, the taboo against mixing fact with fiction, except in manifestly "imaginative" discourse, is abolished. And, as current critical opinion suggests, the very notion of "fiction" is set aside in the conceptualization of "literature" as a mode of writing which abandons both the referential and poetic functions of language use.

It is this aspect of modernism that informs the creation of the new genres, in both written and visual form, of *post-modernist*, para-historical representation, called variously "docu-drama," "faction," "infotainment," "the fiction of fact," "historical metafiction," and the like.<sup>2</sup> These genres are represented by books such as Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Doctorow's, *Ragtime* (1975), Thomas' *The White Hotel* (1981), De Lillo's *Libra* (1988), and Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976); the television versions of *Holocaust* (1978) and *Roots* (1977); films such as *The Night Porter* (Cavani, 1974), *The Damned* (Visconti, 1969), *Our Hitler* (Syberberg, 1976-77), *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Vigne, 1982), and more recently Stone's *JFK* (1991) and Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). All deal with historical phenomena, and all of them appear to "fictionalize" to a greater or lesser degree the historical events and characters which serve as their referents in history.

These works, however, differ crucially from those of their generic prototype—the nineteenth-century historical novel. That genre was born of the interference between an "imaginary" tale of romance and a set of "real" historical events. The interference had the effect of endowing the imaginary events with the concreteness of reality, while at the same time endowing the historical events with the "magical" aura peculiar to the romance.<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the historical novel and its projected readership was mediated by a distinctive contract: its intended effects depended upon the presumed capacity of the reader to distinguish between real and imaginary events, between "fact" and "fiction," and therefore between "life" and "literature." Without this capacity, the affect in which the familiar (the reader's own reveries) was rendered exotic while the exotic (the historical past or the lives of the great) was rendered familiar could not have been produced.

What happens in the postmodernist docu-drama or historical metafiction is not so much the reversal of this relationship (such that real events are given the marks of imaginary ones while imaginary events are endowed with reality) as, rather, the placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated. Thus, the contract that originally mediated the relationship between the nineteenth-century (bourgeois?) reader and the author of the historical novel has been dissolved. And what you get, as Gertrude Himmelfarb tells us, is "History as you like it," representations of history in which "anything goes" (to the detriment of both truth and moral responsibility, in Himmelfarb's view).<sup>4</sup> This is exactly the sort of accusation which has been so often directed at Oliver Stone since the appearance of *JFK*.

Stone was criticized by journalists, historians, politicians, and political pundits for his treatment of the events surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In part, this was a result of the "content" of his film. He was accused, among other things, of fostering paranoia by suggesting that President Kennedy's assassination was a result of a conspiracy involving highly placed persons in the United States government. But also—and for some critics even more seriously—Stone's film seemed to blur the distinction between fact and fiction by treating an historical *event* as if there were no limits to what could legitimately be said about it, thereby bringing under question the very principle of objectivity as the basis for which one might discriminate between truth on the one side and myth, ideology, illusion, and lie on the other.

Thus, in a review of *JFK* which appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, entitled "Movie Madness," Richard Grenier wrote:

And so Oliver Stone romps through the assassination of John Kennedy, inventing evidence that supports his thesis [of conspiracy], suppressing all evidence that conflicts with it, directing his film in a pummelling style, a left to the jaw, a right to the solar plexus, flashing forward, flashing backward, crosscutting relentlessly, shooting "in tight" (in close), blurring, obfuscating, bludgeoning the viewer until Stone wins, he hopes, by a TKO.<sup>5</sup>

Note that Grenier objects to the ways in which Stone slants evidence concerning the assassination, but he is especially offended by the form of Stone's presentation, his "pummelling" and "bludgeoning" style which apparently distorts even those events whose occurrence can be established on the basis of historical evidence. This style is treated as if it were a violation of the spectator's powers of perception.

Another film critic, David Armstrong, was also as much "irked" by the form as he was by the content of Stone's movie. He excoriated what he called Stone's "appropriation of TV car commercial quick-cutting" and reported that, for him, "watching *JFK* was like watching three hours of MTV without the music."<sup>6</sup> But Armstrong disliked "the film as a film" for other reasons as well, reasons more moral than artistic. "I am troubled," he says, "by Stone's mix'n'match of recreated scenes and archival footage..." because "young viewers to whom [Stone] dedicates the film could take his far-reaching conjectures as literal truth." Armstrong suggests, in a word, that Stone's editing techniques might destroy the capacity of "young viewers" to distinguish between a real and a merely imaginary event.<sup>7</sup> All of the events depicted in the film—whether attested by historical evidence, based on conjecture, or simply made up in order to help the plot along or to lend credence to Stone's paranoid fantasies—are presented as if they were equally "historical," which is to say, equally real, or as if they had "really happened." And this in spite of the fact that Stone is on record as professing not to know the difference between "history" and what people "make up," in other words, as viewing all events as equally "imaginary," at least insofar as they are *represented*.<sup>8</sup>

Issues such as these arise within the context of the experience, memory, or awareness of events which not only could not possibly have occurred before the twentieth century but the nature, scope, and implications of which no prior age could even have imagined. Some of these "holocaustal" events—such as the two World Wars, the Great Depression, a growth in world population hitherto unimaginable, poverty and hunger on a scale never before experienced, pollution of the ecosphere by nuclear explosions and the indiscriminate disposal of contaminants, programs of genocide undertaken by societies utilizing scientific technology and rationalized procedures of governance and warfare (of which the German genocide of 6,000,000 European Jews is paradigmatic)—function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.<sup>9</sup>

The suggestion that the meanings of these events, for the groups most immediately affected by or fixated upon them, remain ambiguous and their consignment to "the past" difficult to effectuate should not be taken to imply in any way that such events never happened. On the contrary, not only are their occurrences amply attested to, their continuing effects on current

societies and generations which had no direct experience of them are readily documentable. But among those effects must be listed the difficulty felt by present generations of arriving at some agreement as to their *meaning*—by which I mean, what the facts established about such events can possibly tell us about the nature of our own current social and cultural endowment and what attitude we ought to take with respect to them as we make plans for our own future. In other words, what is at issue here is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing.

The distinction between facts and meanings is usually taken to be a basis of historical relativism. This is because in conventional historical inquiry, the "facts" established about a specific "event" are taken to *be* the "meaning" of that event. Facts are supposed to provide the basis for arbitrating among the variety of different meanings that different groups *can* assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons. But the facts are a *function* of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have. It is the anomalous nature of modernist events—their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning them meanings—that undermines not only the status of facts in relation to events but also the status of "the event" in general.

But to consider the issue of historical objectivity in terms of an opposition of "real" and "imaginary" events, on which the opposition of "fact" and "fiction" is in turn based, obscures an important development in Western culture which distinguishes modernism in the arts from all previous forms of realism. Indeed, it seems as difficult to conceive of a treatment of *historical* reality that would not use fictional techniques in the representation of events as it is to conceive of a modernist fiction that did not in some way or at some level make claims about the nature and meaning of history.<sup>10</sup> And this is true for a number of quite obvious reasons. First, the twentieth century is marked by the occurrence of certain "holocaustal" events that bear little similarity to what earlier historians conventionally took as their objects of study and do not, therefore, lend themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry nor even to representation by the techniques of writing typically favored by historians from Herodotus to Arthur Schlesinger. Nor does any of several varieties of quantitative analysis, of the kind practiced in the social sciences, capture the novelty of such events.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, these kinds of events do not lend themselves to explanation in terms of the categories underwritten by traditional humanistic historiography, in which human "agents" are conceived to be in some way fully conscious and morally responsible for their actions and capable of discriminating clearly between the causes of historical events and their effects over the

long as well as the short-run in relatively commonsensical ways—in other words, agents who are presumed to understand “history” in much the same way as professional historians do.

But beyond that, the “historical” event, by which one used to mean something like “the assassination of the thirty-fifth president of the United States,” has been dissolved as an object of a respectably scientific *knowledge*. Such events can serve as the “contents” of bodies of *information*, but as possible objects of a *knowledge* of history that might lay claim to the status of scientific lore, they are of interest only as elements of a statistical series. Indeed, such singular events as the assassination of a head of state are worthy of study only as a hypothetical presupposition necessary to the constitution of a documentary record whose inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and distortions of the event presumed to be their common referent itself moves to the fore as the principal object of investigation. As for such singular events *of the past*, the only thing that can be said about them is that they *occurred* at particular times and places.<sup>12</sup>

An event such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy will inevitably continue to generate the interest of “history buffs” and even of professional historians as long as it can be made to seem relevant to current political, ideological, or group- or individual-psychological concerns, as the case may be. However, any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; and the other is that the “context” of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the historical event, traditionally conceived as an event which was not only observable but also observed, is by definition an event that is no longer observable, and hence cannot serve as an object of a knowledge as certain as can a present event which can still be observed. This is why it is perfectly respectable to fall back upon the time-honored tradition of representing such singular events as the assassination of the thirty-fifth president of the United States as a story and to try to explain it by narrativizing (fabulating) it—as Oliver Stone did in *JFK*.<sup>14</sup>

But this is where the distinction between the “fact” as opposed to the “event” of modernism must be addressed. The notion of the “historical event” has undergone radical transformation as a result of both the occurrence in our century of events of a scope, scale, and depth unimaginable by earlier historians and the dismantling of the concept of the event as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge. The same is true however, for the notion of the “story”; it has suffered tremendous fraying and an at least potential dissolution as a result of both that revolution in representational

practices known as cultural “modernism”<sup>15</sup> and the technologies of representation made possible by the electronics revolution.

On this last point, we can consider the power of the modern media to represent events in such a way as to render them, not only impervious to every effort to explain them but also resistant to any attempt to represent them in a story form. The modern electronic media can manipulate recorded images so as literally to “explode” events before the eyes of viewers. The uses made in courtroom presentations of television images of Los Angeles police beating a black man (Rodney King) had the effect of making this seemingly unambiguously documented event virtually unintelligible *as an event*. The very precision and detail of the imagistic representation of the event are what threw it open to a wide variety of interpretations of “what was really going on” in the scene depicted. The contingency of the videographic recording of the event (the videographer “happened” to be within sight of the scene with camcorder available, loaded, functioning, etc.), precluded the fiction that the events recorded followed a specific “scenario,” script, or plot-line. It is no accident, as it used to be said, that accidents have traditionally served as the very archetype of what historians formerly thought of as “events.” But the “accidents” in question were always of a certain kind, namely, the sort that yielded to the imperatives of storytelling and followed the rules of narrativization.

But not only are *modern* post-industrial “accidents” more incomprehensible than anything earlier generations could possibly have imagined (think of Chernobyl), the photo and video documentation of such accidents is so full that it is difficult to work up the documentation of any one of them as elements of a single “objective” story. Moreover, in many instances, the documentation of such events is so manipulable as to discourage the effort to derive explanations of the occurrences of which the documentation is supposed to be a recorded image. “It is no accident,” then, that discussions of the modernist event tend in the direction of an aesthetics of the sublime-and-the-disgusting rather than that of the beautiful-and-the-ugly.

An example of what I have in mind is provided by an article published in a recent issue of the periodical *1-800*. Here Michael Turits analyzed the hermeneutic gymnastics inspired by media coverage of two amply documented techno-air disasters: the collision of three Italian MB 339A (*Frecce tricolori*) jet planes in an air show over Ramstein, Germany, in August 1988, killing 50 and injuring 360; and the explosion in 1986 of the NASA Challenger space shuttle just after lift-off, in full view of a live “audience” and millions of television viewers. In his analysis of the media’s presentations of these events, Turits likens the impact of their endless re-presentations on TV to the ambiguating effects of those televised “replays” of crucial events in sporting contests. Turits observes that “when the [Challenger] blew up and the *Frecce*

*tricolori* collided, ... the optical geometries yielded by endless replays far outran the capacities of the network techno-refs to make a call." What had been promised to be a clarification of "what happened" actually produced widespread cognitive disorientation and a despair at ever being able to identify the elements of the events in order to render possible an "objective" analysis of their causes and consequences. Thus Turits notes:

Like an out-of-control computer virus somehow lodged in the network's video editing desks, the Ramstein collision and the Challenger explosion could do nothing but frantically play themselves over and over.... The frame-by-frame re-runs that followed [the Challenger explosion] for months served the same purpose as the media's obsession with the deep-sea recovery of the shuttle and astronaut remains—to reconstruct the too brief event as a *visually intelligible* accident.<sup>16</sup>

The networks played the tapes of the Challenger explosion over and over. In response to the question of why they had done so, the news commentator Tom Brokaw said: "What else could we do? People wanted answers."<sup>17</sup> But as Turits remarks, the tapes certainly provided no answers. All that the "morphing" technology used to re-present the event provided was a sense of its evanescence. It appeared impossible to tell any single authoritative story about what really happened—which meant that one could tell any number of possible stories about it.

And this is why the issues raised in the controversy over *JFK* could be profitably set within a more recent phase of the debate over the relation of historical fact to fiction peculiar to the discussion of the relation between modernism and postmodernism. For literary (and for that matter filmic) "modernism" (whatever else it may be) marks the end of storytelling—understood in Walter Benjamin's sense of "the tale" by which the lore, wisdom, and commonplaces of a culture are transmitted from one generation to another in the form of the followable story. After modernism, when it comes to the task of storytelling, whether in historical or in literary writing, the traditional techniques of narration become unusable—except in parody.<sup>18</sup> Modernist literary practice effectively explodes the notion of those "characters" who had formerly served as the subjects of stories or at least as representatives of possible perspectives on the events of the story; and it resists the temptation to "emplot" events and the "actions" of the "characters" so as to produce the meaning-effect derived by demonstrating how one's end may be contained in one's beginning. Modernism thereby effects what Fredric Jameson calls the "de-realization" of the event itself. And it does this by consistently voiding the event of its traditional narrativistic function of indexing

the irruption of fate, destiny, grace, fortune, providence, and even of "history" itself into a life (or at least into some lives) "in order to pull the sting of novelty" and give the life thus affected at worst a semblance of pattern and at best an actual, transsocial, and transhistorical significance.<sup>19</sup>

Jameson shows how Sartre, in a typically modernist work like *Nausea*,<sup>20</sup> thematizes the experience of time as a series of instants which either fail to take on the form of a story or fall apart into shards and fragments of existence. The thematization takes the form of a representation of the ineradicable differences—indeed, the opposition—between "ordinary" life and a putatively "adventurous" one. Thus, in a scene analyzed by Jameson, the protagonist Roquentin reflects to himself:

I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But no adventures.... I had imagined that at certain times my life could take on a rare and precious quality. There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little precision.... [F]rom time to time, for example, when they play music in the cafes, I look back and tell myself: in the old days, in London, Meknes, Tokyo, I have known great moments, I have had adventures. Now I am deprived of this. I have suddenly learned, without any apparent reason, that I have been lying to myself for ten years. And naturally, everything they tell about in books can happen in real life, but not in the same way. It is to this way of happening that I cling so tightly. (53–55)

Roquentin's problem is that, to him, in order for an event to have the meaning of an adventure, it would have to resemble the kinds of events met with in adventure *stories*. Events would have to be "narratable." Here is how Sartre represents Roquentin's desire for story-events:

This is what I thought: for the most banal event to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives somehow surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.

But you have to choose: live or tell.

Roquentin's melancholy stems from his realization that:

Nothing *happens* while you live. The scenery changes, people come and go out, that's all. There are no *beginnings*. Days are

tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition.... That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that *people talk about true stories*. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning: "It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a notary's clerk in Marommes." And in reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning. (56-7; my emphases) ... I wanted the moments of my life to follow and offer themselves like those of a life remembered [as in Proust!]. You might as well try to catch time by the tail. (58)

And this realization leads him to conclude:

This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events: I have proved it. It's rather the way in which the moments are linked together. I think this is what happens: you suddenly feel time is passing, that each instant leads to another, this one to another one, and so on; that each instant is annihilated, and that it isn't worth while to hold it back, etc., etc., And then you attribute this property to events which appear to you in the instants: *what belongs to the form you carry over to the content*. You talk a lot about this amazing flow of time but you hardly see it.... [my emphasis]

If I remember correctly, they call that the irreversibility of time. The feeling of adventure would simply be that of the irreversibility of time. But why don't we always have it? Is it that time is not always irreversible? There are moments when you have the impression that you can do what you want, go forward or backward, that it has no importance; and then other times when you might say that the links have been tightened and, in that case, it's not a question of missing your turn because you could never start again." (80)

These passages from Sartre today seem dated, melodramatic, even hackneyed—as the *recent* past always does—but they usefully point out the modernist apprehension that the meaning, form, or coherence of events, whether real or imaginary ones, is a function of their narrativization. Jameson concludes that the modernist de-realization of the event amounts to a rejection of the historicity of all events and that this is what throws the modernist sensibility open to on the one hand the attractions of myth (the myths of Oedipus, Ulysses, Finnegan, and so on), or on the other hand the extravagances of melodrama (typically institutionalized in the genre of the detective, spy,

crime, or extraterrestrial alien story), in the otherwise unimaginable events is seen to reside in their resemblance to timeless archetypal stories—like the death of the young hero-leader, JFK. In the latter case, meaning is rendered spectral, seeming to consist solely in the *spatial* dispersion of the phenomena that had originally seemed to have converged only in order to indicate the occurrence of an event.

Sartre's treatment of the event is a representation (*Vorstellung*) of a thought about it, rather than a "presentation" (*Darstellung*) of the event itself. A similarly modernist presentation of the event is found in a passage from Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*.<sup>21</sup> The title itself indicates a typical concern of High Modernism, namely, an interest in what, if anything, goes on in the "intervals" between those rare instants in our lives in which something "eventful" seems to be happening. But the story thematizes the insubstantiality not only of the intervals between events, but also of those events whose seeming occurrence renders possible the apprehension of what comes between them *as an interval*.

In *Between the Acts*, the life of the Oliver family seems to be as orderly as the pageant which is to be performed by the villagers on the family estate on that single "day in June in 1939" which frames the non-action of the story. The pageant is depicted, however, as differing from the real world by its possession of a discernible plot; its intervals mark the "acts" which themselves represent identifiable "periods" of English history from the Middle Ages to the present. In the intervals between the acts of the pageant, the members of the Oliver family and their guests disperse and recombine in moments of what always turn out to be failed epiphanies, so that in reality the events which might have served to mark out a plot in their lives never quite occur. What happens "between the acts" is nothing at all; indeed the difference between the acts and the intervals which occur between them is progressively smudged and finally erased. The principal difference we are left with is that between the pageant, with all its acts marked by events, and the real life of the spectators, in which no events whatsoever occur. An eventful instant of time would have been one that collected and condensed the vagrant events that are experienced more as intervals than as occurrences, and endowed them with pattern and cohesion, if only for a moment. But there are no such events in this story. All of the events that take place before, during, between, and after the "acts" of the pageant itself are shown to have been as insubstantial as what takes place between the individual frames of a movie film and as fictitious as those "historical" events depicted in the pageant.

The passage I referred to as exemplifying the typically modernist approach to the representation of an event appears in the second "scene" of the story (there are no chapter designations). The central figure of the novel, Isabella

(Mrs. Giles) Oliver, has just entered the library of the family house, located "in a remote village in the very heart of England," on the morning of the pageant. Her father-in-law, Bart Oliver, a retired civil servant, is already there, reading the newspaper. As she enters, she recalls a phrase uttered by a woman visitor to the library some years earlier:

"The library's always the nicest room in the house," she quoted, and ran her eyes along the books. "The mirror of the soul," books were.... *The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake's *Crimea*; Keats and *The Kreutzer Sonata*. There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age—the age of the century, thirty-nine—in books? Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation; and gun-shy, too. Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person's life; a county's. *The Antiquities of Durham*; *The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science—Eddington, Darwin, Jeans.

None of them stopped her toothache. For her generation the newspaper was a book; and, as her father-in-law dropped the *Times*, she took it and read: "A horse with a green tail ..." which was fantastic. Next, "The guard at Whitehall ..." which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: "The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face ..."

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer.

She advanced, sidling, as if the floor were fluid under her shabby garden shoes, and, advancing, pursed her lips and smiled, sidelong, at her brother. Not a word passed between them as she went to the cupboard in the corner and replaced the hammer, which she had taken without asking leave; together—she unclosed her fist—with a handful of nails. (19–20)

Notice that quite a few (and for the most part mundane) "events" are registered here: Isabella "peruses" the bookshelves for a possible "remedy" for

the ills that afflict her generation—significantly marked by a date: 1939. She "considers" poetry, biography, history, science, and turns away from them all to the newspaper where she "reads" an account of an event, a rape, an event so surreal that she "sees" it "on the ... panels" of the library door. But the image of the event, which happened in the past, metamorphoses, without a break in grammar or syntax, into that of Mrs. Swithin, Bart's sister, "entering" the library in the fictive present: "... and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer."

The image of the girl being raped leaks into that of the quite ordinary event of Mrs. Swithin entering the library and contaminates it, endowing it with a sinister, phantasmagoric aspect: Mrs. Swithin "*advanced, sidling*, as if the floor were *fluid* under her *shabby* garden shoes, and, *advancing, pursed her lips and smiled, sidelong*, at her brother. Not a word passed between them and she went to the cupboard in the corner and replaced the hammer, which she had taken without asking leave; together—she unclosed her fist—with a handful of nails." (My emphases.) The two events, the rape of the girl and the entrance of Mrs. Swithin into the library, are endowed with an equal measure of significance, or rather of ambiguity, of meaning. There is no way of distinguishing between their respective phenomenal aspects or their different significances. Both events flow out of their outlines and flow out of the narrative as well. The effect of the representation is to endow *all* events with spectral qualities. Mrs. Swithin's replacement of the hammer leads to an exchange between herself and her brother that Isabella recognizes—uncannily—as having taken place every summer for the last seven years.

Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other. The same chime [of the clock] followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: "The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer." (22)

The outside phenomenal aspects, and insides of events, their possible meanings or significances, have been collapsed and fused. The "meaning" of events remains indistinguishable from their occurrence, but their occurrence is unstable, fluid, phantasmagoric—as phantasmagoric as the slow-motion, reverse angle, zoom, and rerun of the video representations of the Challenger explosion. This is not to say that such events are not representable, only that techniques of representation somewhat different from those developed at the height of artistic realism may be called for.

Contemporary discussions of the ethics and aesthetics of representing the Holocaust of the European Jews—which I take to be the paradigmatic “modernist” event in Western European history—provide insights into the modernist view of the relationship between history and fiction. With respect to the question of how most responsibly to represent the Holocaust, the most extreme position is *not* that of the so-called Revisionists, who deny that the event ever happened;<sup>22</sup> but rather, those who hold that this event is of such a kind as to escape the grasp of *any* language even to *describe* it and of *any* medium—verbal, visual, oral, or gestural—to *represent* it, much less of any merely historical account adequately to *explain* it. This position is represented in George Steiner’s oft-quoted remark, “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason.”<sup>23</sup> It is also represented in the remark of the philosopher Emile Fackenheim: “The Holocaust ... resists explanation—the historical kind that seeks causes, and the theological kind that seeks meaning and purpose.... The Holocaust, it would appear, is a qualitatively unique event, different in kind even from other instances of genocide. One cannot comprehend [the Holocaust] but only confront and object.”<sup>24</sup>

The historian Christopher R. Browning addresses questions and assertions such as these in a remarkably subtle reflection on the difficulties he had to face in his efforts to reconstruct, represent, and explain a massacre of some 1,500 Jews—women, children, elders, and young men—by German Army Reserve Battalion 101 on July 13, 1942 in the woods outside the Polish village of Jozefów. Browning has spent years pondering the documents that attest to the facts of this event and interviewed 125 members of the battalion who, neither regular soldiers nor members of the SS, took on the role of “professional killers” in the course of their service as anonymous executors of the genocidal policy conceived and implemented by their Nazi leaders. Browning’s aim was to write the history of one day in the life of the “little men” who were the perpetrators of specific crimes against specific people at a specific time and place in a past that is rapidly receding from living memory and passing into “history.” And in his report on his research, Browning asks:

Can the history of such men ever be written? Not just the social, organizational, and institutional history of the units they belonged to. And not just the ideological and decision-making history of the policies they carried out. Can one recapture the experiential history of these killers—the choices they faced, the emotions they felt, the coping mechanisms they employed, the changes they underwent?<sup>25</sup>

He concludes that such an “experiential history” of this event, all too typical of all too many events of the Holocaust, is virtually impossible to conceive.

The Holocaust, he reminds us, “was not an abstraction. It was a real event in which more than five million Jews were murdered, most in a manner so violent and on a scale so vast that historians and others trying to write about these events have experienced nothing in their personal lives that remotely compares.” And he goes on to assert that “Historians of the Holocaust, in short, know nothing—in an experiential sense—about their subject.” This kind of “experiential shortcoming,” Browning points out,

is quite different from their not having experienced, for example, the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia or Caesar’s conquest of Gaul. Indeed, a recurring theme of witnesses [to the Holocaust] is how “unbelievable” [that event] was to them even as they lived through it.<sup>26</sup>

This experiential shortcoming pertains to the *nature* of the events under scrutiny; these events seem to resist the traditional historian’s effort at the kind of empathy which would permit one to see them, as it were, from the inside; in this case, from the perpetrators’ perspective. And the difficulty, Browning argues, is not methodological. It is not a question of establishing the facts of the matter, but of *representing* the events established as facts in such a way as to make those events believable to readers who have no more “experience” of such events than the historian himself.

Browning, in short, draws back from suggesting what appears to me to be the obvious conclusion one might derive from this problem: namely, the problem is indeed not one of method but rather one of representation, and this problem of representing the events of the Holocaust requires the full exploitation of modernist as well as pre-modernist artistic techniques for its resolution. Browning draws back from this possibility because, like Professor Saul Friedlander and other experts in the study of representations of the Holocaust, whether in writing, film, photography, monuments, or whatever, he fears the effects of any “aestheticization” of this event. By making the Holocaust into the subject matter of a narrative, it becomes a story which, by its possible “humanization” of the perpetrators, might “enable” the event—render it fit therefore for investment by fantasies of “intactness,” “wholeness,” and “health” which the very occurrence of the event *denies*.

According to Eric Santner, the danger of yielding to the impulse to “tell the story” of the Holocaust—and by extension any other “traumatic” event—opens the investigator of it to the danger of engaging in “narrative fetishism,” which is, in his view, a “strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere.”<sup>27</sup> In short, the threat posed by the representation of such events as the Holocaust, the Nazi Final Solution, by the



assassination of a charismatic leader such as Kennedy or Martin Luther King or Gandhi, or by an event such as the destruction of the Challenger, which had been symbolically orchestrated to represent the aspirations of a whole community, is nothing other than the threat of turning these events into the subject-matter of a narrative. Telling a story, however truthful, about such traumatic events might very well provide a kind of "intellectual mastery" of the anxiety which memory of their occurrence may incite in an individual or a community. But precisely insofar as the story is identifiable *as a story*, it can provide no lasting "psychic mastery" of such events.

This is why the kinds of anti-narrative non-stories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of "unnatural" events—including the Holocaust—that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the "history" that has come before it. In other words, what Jameson calls the "psychopathologies" of modernist writings and film, which he lists as "their artificial closures, the blockage of narrative, [their] deformation and formal compensations, the dissociation or splitting of narrative functions, including the repression of certain of them, and so forth,"<sup>28</sup> might offer the possibility of representing such traumatic events as being produced by the monstrous growth and expansion of technological "modernity" (of which Nazism and the Holocaust are manifestations) in a manner less fetishizing than any traditional representation of them could ever be.

What I am suggesting is that the stylistic innovations of modernism, born as they were of an effort to come to terms with the anticipated loss of the peculiar "sense of history" which modernism is ritually criticized for not possessing, may provide better instruments for representing "modernist" events (and for pre-modernist events in which we have a typically modernist interest) than the storytelling techniques traditionally utilized by historians for the representation of those events of the past that are supposed to be crucial to the development of their community's identity. Modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically. This de-fetishizing can then clear the way for that process of mourning which alone can relieve the "burden of history" and make a more, if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible.

It is fortunate, therefore, that we have in the work of one of the greatest of modernist writers a theorization of this problem of representing events in the narrative. In four lectures entitled *Narration*,<sup>29</sup> delivered at the University of Chicago in 1936, Gertrude Stein reflected on the unreality of the "event" in contrast to "things which have really existed." An event, she suggested, was

only an "outside without an inside," whereas a thing which has "existed" has its outside inside itself. When "the outside is outside," she said, "it is not begun and when it is outside it is not ended and when it is neither begun nor ended it is not either a thing which has existed it is simply an event." She went on to contrast both journalistic and historical treatments of events with a specifically modernist artistic treatment of them, on the basis of the failure of the former kind to put "the outside inside":

In real life that is if you like in the newspapers which are not real life but real life with the reality left out, the reality being the inside and the newspapers being the outside and never is the outside inside and never is the inside outside except in the rare and peculiar cases when the outside breaks through to be inside because the outside is so part of some inside that even a description of the outside cannot completely relieve the outside of the inside.

And so in the newspapers you like to know the answer in crime stories in reading crime and in written crime stories knowing the answer spoils it. After all in the written thing the answer is a let down from the interest and that is so every time that is what spoils most crime stories unless another mystery crops up during the crime and that mystery remains.

And then there is another very peculiar thing in the newspaper thing it is the crime in the story it is the detective that is the thing.

Now do you begin to see the difference between the inside and the outside.

In the newspaper thing it is the crime it is the criminal that is interesting, in the story it is the story about the crime that is interesting. (54)

As for historical representation, she has this to say:

Anyone can see that there is more confusion that is to say perhaps not more confusion but that it is a more difficult thing to write history to make it anything than to make anything that is anything be anything because in history you have everything, you have the newspapers and the conversations and letter writing and the mystery stories and audience and in every direction an audience that fits anything in every way in which an audience can fit itself to be anything, and there is of course as I have been saying so much to trouble any one about any one of any of these things. (54)

It was, Stein argued—or rather poetized—because of the specifically “modern” awareness of the exteriority of events that their narrative treatment was so difficult:

We talked a great deal all this time how hard it is to tell anything anything that has been anything that is, and that makes a narrative and that makes history and that makes literature and is history literary.

Well how far have we come.

Can history be literature when it has such a burden a burden of everything, a burden of so many days which are days one after the other and each has its happening and still as in the newspaper what can make it matter is it is not happening to-day, the best thing that can happen about that happening is that it can happen again. And that makes the comfort of history to a historian that history repeats itself, that is really the only comfort that a historian can have from anything happening and really and truly it does not happen again not as it used to happen again because now we know really know so much that has happened that really we do not know that what has happened does not happen again and so that for poor comfort has been taken away from the historian.

What I mean is this, history has gotten to be so that anybody can if they go on know that everything that happened is what happened and as it all did happen it is a very serious thing that so much was happening. Very well then. What would be the addition to anything if everything is happening, look out of any window, any window nowadays is on a high building if it happens right and see what is happening. Well enough said, it is not necessary to go on with recognition, but soon you do know anybody can know, that it is all real enough. It is all real enough, not only real enough but and that is where it is such a difficult thing not real enough for writing, real enough for seeing, almost real enough for remembering but remembering in itself is not really an important enough thing to really need recalling, insofar as it is not seeing, but remembering is seeing and so anything is an important enough thing for seeing but it is not an important enough thing for writing, it is an important enough thing for talking but not an important enough thing for telling.

That is really the trouble with what history is, it is important enough for seeing but not important enough for writing, it is important enough for talking but not important enough for telling. And that is what makes everybody so troubled about it all about what history is, because after all it ought to be important

enough for telling for writing and not only important enough for talking and seeing, it really ought to be, it really ought to be, but can it be. Cannot it really be. (59)

Now the same thing is true when the newspaper tells about any real thing, the real thing having happened it is completed and being completed can not be remembered because the thing in its essence being completed can not be remembered because the thing in its essence being completed there is no emotion in remembering it, it is a fact like any other and having been done it is for the purposes of memory a thing having no vitality. While anything which is a relief and in a made up situation as it gets more and more exciting when the exciting rises to being really exciting then it is a relief then it is a thing that has emotion when that thing is a remembered thing.

Now you must see how true this is about the crime story and the actual crime. The actual crime is a crime that is a fact and it having been done that in itself is a completion and so for purposes of memory with very rare exceptions where a personality connected with it is overpowering there is no memory to bother any one. Completion is completion, a thing done is a thing done so it has in it no quality of ending or beginning. Therefore in real life it is the crime and as the newspaper has to feel about it as if it were in the act of seeing or doing it, they cannot really take on detecting they can only take on the crime, they cannot take on anything that takes on beginning and ending and in the detecting end of detective stories there is nothing but going on beginning and ending. Anybody does naturally feel that that a detective is just that that a detective is just that that it is a continuity of beginning and ending and reality nothing but that. (42)

I will resist the impulse to comment on this passage since it is composed in such a way as to collapse the distinction between its form and its semantic content on which the possibility of commentary pretending to clarify what the passage “means” is based. But as I write this essay, the newspapers are filled with accounts of another “trial of the century,” in this case, preliminary hearings in the case of a famous Afro-American athlete and movie personality, O. J. Simpson, suspected of brutally murdering his (white) wife (mother of his two children) and her male companion (a male model and aspiring actor, white and Jewish). These court proceedings were themselves preceded by a bizarre incident in which Simpson, apparently contemplating escape from the country, led police on a slow-moving “chase” on the freeways of Los Angeles to the accompaniment of television cameras, nationwide radio and TV coverage, and the same kind of “commentary” as that which attended the

explosion of the Challenger or the very athletic events in which Simpson had made his fortune. Few events of such notoriety have been so amply documented as this chase, which featured live spectators who had rushed to the route of the flight to cheer Simpson, thereby being transformed into "actors" in the "scene" by the television camera's eye.

What is the "inside" and what the "outside" of this "event"? What the "beginning" and what is the "end"? Although the trial of Simpson, which is imminent, is intended to determine the specific role played by him in the crime of double murder, it is evident that this trial will be a separate "event" rather than a continuation of the event that it occasioned it. Interestingly, the prosecuting attorneys have announced that they will not seek the death penalty for Simpson if he is convicted of the crime, indicating that, given the American public's affection for this hero, any effort to seek the death penalty would prejudice the possibility of a jury's convicting him. The crime-event is already being detached from the trial-event, almost as if to suggest that they belong to different universes of occurrence. In fact, the trial will have the purpose of providing a scenario compatible with a commonplace of the discourse of justice, namely, that everyone is equal under the law but that the law of the rich and famous is one thing and that of the poor and obscure quite another.

#### notes

This paper is a version of the Patricia Doyle Wise Memorial Lecture annually commissioned by the American Film Institute and delivered at UCLA on Wednesday, April 8, 1992, in co-sponsorship with the UCLA Film and Television Archive. I want to thank the Institute for inviting me. I am especially grateful to Vivian Sobchack, editor of this volume for her introduction to the lecture, her great conversation over the ten years we were colleagues, and her counsel for the subsequent development of this essay.

1. Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary [1971]," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-86* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), ch. 1.
2. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 76. Hutcheon notes that in Postmodern novels, the focus is on the "process of event becoming fact." Reflecting on Hutcheon's remark, I could not help but relate it to Linda Williams's description of what she calls "the new documentary" film, which, like *Shoah* or *Roger and Me*, are less about "facts" than they are about the filmmaker's search for the facts. She points out also that these films "are, as Stone's film isn't, documentaries...." This suggests that *JFK* ought not be assessed by the criteria we would use to evaluate documentaries. I would suggest that *JFK* is neither factual nor fictional but rather "figurative" and should be assessed as a "figure" first and foremost. Cf. Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 13.
3. Cf. Jameson, "Magical Narratives," in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), ch. 2.
4. Cf. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "History as You Like It," *Times Literary Supplement*, October 16, 1992, 12-15.

5. "Movie Madness," *Times Literary Supplement*, January 24, 1992, 16-17. Grenier goes on to report that: "Never in the history of Hollywood has a motion picture been slammed so vehemently by America's political class. Politicians and political writers of every political hue have condemned *JFK* as irresponsible and even crazed: hard left, right, centre." He then remarks on the difference between the responses of politicians and political writers and that of "film critics, who identify with the country's 'artistic' class." "On the whole," he says, these critics "have rather liked the movie, which sets them conspicuously apart from other American commentators, columnists, journalists, who, with truly extraordinary unanimity, have been absolutely appalled by the film." And from this contrast of responses, he concludes that "Perhaps one should not buy a used car from a film critic." (16)
6. David Armstrong and Todd Gitlin, "Killing the Messenger," *Image*, Sunday, February 16, 1992, 14. These are separate essays, published under a single title and with the questioning subtitle "Why Did The Press React So Furiously Over Stone's Movie?" See also the remarks of Michael Rogin, "'Make My Day!': Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics," *Representations* 29 (Winter 1990): 99-123.
7. Armstrong and Gitlin, "Killing the Messenger." The critic's concern for the sensibilities of the young is telling; when critics start expressing concern for the corruption of youth, it is always a good sign that a work of art has hit a collective nerve.
8. Stone presumably knows the difference between the events of the Vietnam War and various representations of it. He does not seem to be arguing that the events of the war did not happen, only that in representations there is little difference between factual and fictional accounts of those events. His views of "history" are another matter. In an interview, Stone is quoted to the following effect: "What is history? Some people say it's a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire. They say such and such happened. They create, they make it bigger, they make it better. I knew guys in combat who made up shit. I'm sure the cowboys did the same. The nature of human beings is that they exaggerate. So, what is history? Who the fuck knows?" (*Esquire*, 116, no. 5 [November 1991], 93).
9. The inclusion of the Holocaust in this list may be questioned by scholars of that event who insist on its uniqueness, if not in all of history, then at least in the history of genocides. In my view, all historical events are *by definition* unique, one of a kind, but still comparable with other events of the same species. The other events in my list are similarly unique of their species. My point is that the events in this list are all *uniquely twentieth-century* and belong, therefore, to the same *genus*.
10. Cf. Sidney Monas, "Introduction: Contemporary Historiography: Some Kicks in the Old Coffin," in *Developments in Modern Historiography* ed. Henry Kozicki (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 1-16.
11. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 122.
12. Cf. Krzysztof Pomian, "Evento," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1978), VIII, 972-993; and Edgar Morin, ed., *Teorie dell'evento*, Italian translation of *Le retour de l'événement* (Milano: Bompiani, 1972)
13. I have discussed the problem of context in "Geschichte erklären. Formalistische und kontextualistische Strategien," *Neue Rundschau* 105, Heft I (1994), 41-56.
14. And here we may note that posters for Stone's film, not mentioned by any of the reviews I have read as having any particular significance present the title as: "*JFK: The Story that Won't Go Away*." Taken literally, then, the title indicates that the "subject" of the film is not an event but a "story"—a story, moreover, that insists itself into the consciousness of a whole generation as a response to a trauma and that can therefore be neither closed and forgotten nor precisely remembered as *merely* an event of the past.
15. Thus, Jameson defines literary modernism as a product of a double crisis: on the

one hand, a "social crisis of narratable experiences" and on the other, a "semiotic crisis of narrative paradigms." Fredric Jameson, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 211. I want to make clear that by the term "modernism" I am not referring to that program of dominating nature through reason, science, and technology supposedly inaugurated by the Enlightenment; I refer, rather, to the literary and artistic movements launched in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries against this very program of modernization and its social and cultural effects—the movement represented by writers such as Pound, Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Woolf, and so on.

16. Michael Turits, "Moment of Impact: Three Air-Crashes," *J-800* (Fall, 1989): 34
17. Turits, 35.
18. Craig Owen has argued that postmodernism is characterized by a revival of allegorical representation, though of a kind quite different from that repudiated by Romantic aesthetics in the name of the Symbol in the nineteenth century. See "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a New Theory of Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 52ff.
19. Jameson, "The Nature of Events," *Sartre*, ch. 2.
20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated from the French by Lloyd Alexander (Norfolk: New Directions, [1964]). Page references are inserted parenthetically in the text.
21. Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace, 1970). Page references are inserted parenthetically in the text.
22. I want to stress the difference between the modernist problematization of the "event" and the effort on the part of a group of parahistorians known as "Revisionists" to deny that the event known as the Holocaust ever happened. It should be noted that the Revisionists have a very traditional notion of both historical events and evidence. What they wish to establish on the basis of a very literalist interpretation of the evidence is that the occurrence of the Holocaust cannot be proven. They are rather like Fundamentalist Christians interpreting the evidence for evolutionism.
23. George Steiner, quoted in Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 151.
24. The literal import of Steiner's remark is echoed in the answer to the question; "How is the unspeakable to be spoken about?"; proposed by Alice and A. R. Eckhardt: "Certainly," they say, "we ought to speak about it, but how can we ever do so?" See also George Kren's assertion that "The meaning of the Holocaust can never be grasped from the historical record"; and Elie Wiesel's, "We shall never understand how Auschwitz was possible." All quotations are taken from Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Meyers, eds., *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).
25. Christopher R. Browning, "German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, Historical Reconstruction," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27
26. Browning, 25. Cf. Martin Jay, "Experience Without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel," in *New Formations*, 20 (Summer 1993): 145–155.
27. Eric Santner, "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Probing the Limits of Representation* 146.
28. Jameson, *Sartre*, 210.
29. Gertrude Stein, *Narration: Four Lectures, with an Introduction by Thornton Wilder* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Page references are inserted parenthetically in the text.

cinematic

shots

t w o

the narration

of violence

janet staiger

In the essay opening this volume, historian Hayden White tackles the issue of how to represent history in moving images, dealing in part with Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*.<sup>1</sup> Previously, White asked whether moving images could represent historical *thinking*, concluding that moving images can do just so.<sup>2</sup> Now he is interested in considering whether a particular time period (the twentieth century—or at least what he marks as certain "modernist" moments in it) can be represented. He wonders, for instance, if the twentieth century has witnessed events unlike those that nineteenth-century historians had as their subjects, events such as massive famines, ecological disasters, nuclear explosions, or the Holocaust. These violent experiences are not only difficult to describe verbally but also impossible to explain in terms of traditional human agency. The nature, scope, and implications of these events give them a new dimension.

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the  
persistence  
of  
history

cinema,

television,

and the

modern event



edited by

vivian sobchack

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