

FORREST GUMP (1994)

by

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*Forrest Gump, Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Written by Eric Roth. From the novel by Winston Groom.
Distributed by Paramount Communications Co., 1994*

On a bus bench, Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks) recounts the story of his life to various strangers, willing and unwilling. In a slow-talking, slow-witted way, he tells of his childhood in the South, where his mother (Sally Field) had to prostitute herself to get permission to send him to public school. This was followed by a successful football career in college – because of his unique ability to run. He then became a war hero in Vietnam – because of his unique ability to follow orders. After the war, he becomes wealthy in the shrimp fishing business, has an illegitimate child, and finally, marries his true love who is dying of AIDS.

If you see this film, you will realize that the telling of the story (as I have described it in the summary above) sounds like the ultimate two hours of depression, yet the film is positive and uplifting. This chasm between the actual tale told – depressing – and the subtext – uplifting – is an interesting place to explore.

Minimalist Painting's motto of "Less is More" is taken as a dictum regarding intelligence in *Forrest Gump*. Born with an IQ of about 75, Gump just barely makes it through life as we know it – but clearly surpasses us in *living* his life. While the film is at times maudlin, over-sweet, and, like all of Robert Zemeckis' films, a little over-done and hysterical. The questions it

poses are actually quite interesting, perhaps more interesting than the film itself. First, what is the role of what we call "intelligence" in the successful living our lives, in what we call fulfillment? Second, and perhaps even more fascinating, what is the connection between religion and innocence in these contemporary times?

As a "simpleton," Forrest Gump is a pawn of society, he lives his life looking for someone to tell him exactly what to do. We would expect an anonymous life of nothingness – a career dishwasher. This is not to be. Because Forrest Gump is a pure and simple individual without any opinions or politics of his own, he moves through the highest levels of recent history meeting with and sometimes even inventing our culture. He meets Richard Nixon, John Kennedy and LBJ. (To the latter, he publicly shows his scars. So . . . that's where Lyndon got the idea.) (Reminiscent of *Being There* [1979].) He teaches Elvis how to swing his hips; produces mottoes for bumper stickers and designs for T-shirts. He makes others wealthy, and they, in turn, make him rich. Forrest Gump retains his innocence while America is losing hers. (Reminiscent of *It's a Wonderful Life* [1946]).

Gump's journey through life can be charted through several clever symbol systems. Perhaps because I particularly enjoy watching the kimonos in many Japanese Samurai films, in which the patterns the characters wear often reflect their innermost thoughts (sometimes reinforcing the text of the film,

sometimes undercutting it), I tend to enjoy the same thing in Western films. One is occasionally delighted when, for instance, Ingrid Bergman's clothes in *Casablanca* [1942] work very hard to explain her state of mind – she goes from confident solids, to conflicting stripes, to paisleys of confusion, and finally returns to solids when all has been resolved. Forrest Gump's shirt, despite 89 costume changes, remains plaid (with two important exceptions). Plaid is like graph paper – repeating, rectilinear, regular, totally predictable. Gump's graph-paper patterned shirts are the schema of his life. He wants to know what to do; he abhors decisions. He desperately searches for lines and tracks to follow. He wants to find himself in a clearly defined space, preferably squarely symmetrical. He wants to act, not think.

The exceptions to the plaid of his shirts are fascinating. For sleeping wear, Gump wears stripes. Are we to take these, in contrast to the plaids, as long, linear roads that, when he sleeps, he accesses through his unconscious? When he meets his son, we soon see father and son dressed in similar stripes. Are the stripes here representative of connectivity, something that he seeks throughout the film? In the final scene, when he sends his son off to school and completes the cycle of his life, we see him dressed, for the first time in the film – and in exquisite appropriateness – in a solid blue shirt.

And then there is the feather. The film begins with a feather floating about a city street, never quite touching down, yet making its presence clearly felt. A natural object in an urban environment, a bit of insignificance that has proven its uselessness by no longer being needed by its bird owner, it elegantly dances before our eyes. Our fascination with it is echoed by the camera which follows it everywhere in a long crane shot. Just as in Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* [1958] we followed a bomb planted in the trunk of a car for a single, thirteen-minute shot with growing expectation of doom, we now similarly follow this itinerant feather with expectations of joy and transcendence.

There is also the book that Gump treasures throughout the film. As a more than obvious hint as to what is going on in the film, he carries around a copy of *Curious George*, a popular children's book. *Curious George*, by H. A. Rey, is, appropriately enough, the story of a not-too-bright monkey acting naturally, on instinct. His nature, that is, his "natural" curiosity gets him into trouble and gets him out of trouble the same way – naturally. He follows his unsophisticated, monkey instinct – and winds up happy.

And this brings us to the heart of the film – the concept of the "natural being." Symbols guide us through the film, but at its core is the idea of a mentally handicapped man functioning – at several levels – in our society.

But first we must note what Forrest Gump is not: we do not see him at the bottom of his high school class, we never see him in a college classroom, we do not see him in special education classes, we never see him in a situation where he cannot function adequately. In a sense, this becomes a satire on certain aspects of our culture. He succeeds despite his lack of classic intelligence, both in college and in the army. He is the very opposite of what we consider to be an accomplished man in terms of our culture. He is bumbling, vulnerable, and feeling-centered; he is caught in a web of relatedness to both the animate and the inanimate world around him.

Innocent is perhaps the best term to describe Forrest Gump. "Innocents" are traditional figures found in the mythologies of all cultures. Often, The Innocent is a person so stupid, he does everything right; so unconscious that his judgments are pristine; so undervalued by the outside world that he achieves transcendence without effort. He is pure of heart. Like the clown, he plays the innocent to the hero, the effeminate to the manly, the maudlin to the composed leading man. He leads us to enlarge our concepts of male identity to include many aspects that our culture often disparages as "feminine." The Innocent breaks down ego boundaries, he collapses the distinctions between the I and the not-I. The Innocent makes us question what is real and what is illusion because he functions so well with the illusory while we fumble with what we think is real. If we are willing, the Innocent

can lead us beyond reason, beyond personal consciousness, beyond the ephemeral nature of history. In the Tarot deck, the innocent's outsideness is signified by his card being unnumbered. Thus, he is external to order and system; in fact, he is outside of psychology, beyond transformation. In him, opposites are juxtaposed rather than integrated, there is no attempt at reconciliation. Despite underlying despair, he can engage life passionately. And for these reasons he is often seen as a "holy" innocent.

Innocents of various complexions can be found throughout film. The "less-than-normal" are common in comedies of all sorts – Chaplain, Keaton, Lloyd, Jerry Lewis, Laurel and Hardy, all play various types of fools. More sophisticated than the fool is the innocent. The film master of the innocent is Preston Sturges in films like *Sullivan's Travels* [1941], *The Great McGinty* [1940] and especially *The Lady Eve* [1941]. The central character, played by Henry Fonda, to the end of the film does not realize that the Barbara Stanwyck he loves and the Barbara Stanwyck he married are one and the same. Much rarer is the innocent who transcends our world into another, more positive, one.

The outstanding example of the transcendent Innocent is Hal Ashby's *Being There* [1979]. Here Peter Sellers plays Chance (AKA Chauncy Gardiner), a man who neither reads nor writes and learns all from watching

television. Everyone takes his "gardening" responses to almost every question – the only thing he knows – as brilliant metaphors. He winds up advisor to the President and about to become the head of one of America's largest corporations. You can see the relation to *Forrest Gump*. At the end of *Being There*, Chauncy the Gardener takes a stroll on a lake – apparently walking *on* the water. This blatantly religious allusion comes as a bit of a shock, since the film does little to prepare us for this revelation, and seriously damages much of what has gone before. The filmmakers seemed compelled to at least show us the "holy" aspect of the innocent, even in this seeming afterthought. By contrast, the religiosity of the innocent in *Forrest Gump* is no afterthought.

Forrest Gump is perhaps the greatest film portrayal of the Holy Innocent archetype in recent memory. His innocence is obvious, but what of his "holiness?" Gump's purity, innocence, wisdom, and transcendence are seen throughout the film. However, we first become aware of the strong religious metaphors when he decides – for no other reason than that he feels like it – to run. After running for three years, we see Gump with long hair and curly beard – an image straight out of a Renaissance painting of Jesus! On this seemingly pointless journey, he begins to gather followers – not by his own doing, rather, the followers identify their alienation with his. This, of course, is a mistaken idea, since he cannot feel alienation from a culture with which he feels totally integrated, and yet from which he remains an outsider.

His followers want him to lead them – they tempt him. Just as Jesus was tempted in the desert by the Devil, so Gump is tempted in the desert to abandon his mission and become the leader of a small band of men and women seeking something better. But it is not to be – Gump's mission is to revel in the status quo.

Forrest Gump's parallel with Jesus is further brought out in the film in several ways. His father is absent and apparently has little to do with his birth. Gump's mother is named Marion. She, like the other Mary, prostitutes herself so that Forrest can go to school. And Forrest becomes a fisher, not only of fish, but of men.

In one hilarious sequence, while running, he wipes his face in a T-shirt and the mud from his face forms a "happy face" on the shirt. The owner markets the shirt and becomes rich and famous. On the way to the crucifixion, Jesus was given a towel with which to wipe the sweat from his face. That towel retained his image. The woman who gave it to him has become known as Veronica (Vera = true; icon = image). (*Forrest Gump* opened the week of July 12, Veronica's Saint day – a coincidence, of course.) In Gump's case, it is not his physical face that is transferred to the shirt, but – appropriately for the holy innocent – it is his true nature, his inner face that becomes an icon of our culture, a face happy and empty.

An inept simpleton-saint is an apt metaphor for the frustrations of a society that always demands the most from us. This film assuages our hesitancy of being told what to do, and the implied loss of personal freedom and identity. But *Forrest Gump* achieves happiness exactly because he is told what to do. This slower, simpler man is a clear embodiment of nostalgia for a slower, simpler America of days gone by. While this film may be glib and shallow, it is reassuring. It posits that if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable – and the feebleminded are ultimately vulnerable in our society – we will survive. The braces on our legs, rather than restricting our movement, will allow us to become championship runners. Magical victories are available to us all, all we must do is to connect with the Holy Innocent within.

But there is another side to *Forrest Gump*. This film is fascinating because of a glaring, yet almost invisible, conceptual flaw. Let me first outline the flaw, and then consider the consequences of the public's blindness to it.

Forrest Gump is a movie at war with itself. It is a high-tech think piece whose text advises us not to think. This movie admonishes us to be stupid and ignore the modern world, to take everything at the most basal level. If we are to believe its message, then the film denies its very existence – for it parades

its electronic wonders in a way that touts itself as smart – and shares that smartness with us. Gary Sinise, who plays the amputee Lieutenant Dan Taylor, has legs – and we know it. Feathers and Ping-Pong balls are computer generated – and we know that too. And the film makes sure we know it.

But *Forrest Gump's* electronic high point is when Tom Hanks appears in the same frame with Richard Nixon, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson. Interestingly, these are all media images – newsreels, TV, and so on. I understand that the crudeness of these media images (compared to direct film) makes their electronic manipulation far easier. But this is little different from what was done in 1941 when Orson Welles inserted the image of Charles Foster Kane into newsreel imagery, with about the same finesse. (And now, on the electronic front, we have *Farenelli*, another electronically primitive film. Two voices, a male alto and a female soprano, are blended together to become a 19th century male castrato.) But more than being simply technically easier, these forgeries cast doubt on the veracity of the media – all media, including the very movie we are watching.

What is interesting, and significant, is that the public either seems unaware of these filmic oxymorons or ignores them. Perhaps the messages this film ultimately offers are so needed, so desired by the public, that they will be devoured regardless of the cinematic cholesterol attached. The

industry recognition and the public acceptance of *Forrest Gump* indicates that what we desperately want to be told is: no matter how damaged we are, we will succeed; it is best not to understand what is happening around us, especially in matters political; that good deeds are inevitably rewarded by investing in the correct stocks; and so on.

In a time when the general consensus is that at best America is in serious difficulty and at worst is going down the tubes, *Forrest Gump* advises that everything will be fine, as long as you don't look or try to understand. And at the same time, *Gump* warns us not to trust the very media through which we gather the information on which we base our opinions and actions. I guess the answer is somewhere in the *Forrest Gump Cookbook*.

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