

**Forrest Gump:**  
On the Narrative in a Postmodern World



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## **Forrest Gump: On the Narrative in a Postmodern World**

*"My momma always said, life is like a box of chocolates  
you never know what you're gonna git."*

Much the same can be said concerning the reviews of *Forrest Gump*. It's like opening the ubiquitous Whitman's Sampler and plunging right in. Each review is a different flavored exegesis. There are the dreaded orange-creams that need only be poked on the underside for one to see the obvious agenda within. There are chocolate-melt-aways that seem interesting on the outside but when bitten into just dissolve. There are also the miscellaneous-nougats that seem all too logical but when you try to figure out the argument you are left with only...well, nougat. Then, if your sweet tooth hasn't quite been satisfied, you could stumble onto the chocolate covered cashews, pecans, and macadamia nuts. There is meat to these arguments, there is substance. Herein I shall try to sort through the sampler and analyze some of the curious confections. In the end I shall give you the recipe for what I think is the true Gumpian-exegesis.

### **Gump as Cultural Confection: Nostalgia Incarnate**

*Forrest Gump* has taken reviewers by surprise. How could this oddball movie about a man of below average intelligence making it through life be so appealing? And yet appealing it is, *Gump* has grossed over \$300 million and is currently the most successful drama ever produced. This fact alone may suggest why there is such an interest in determining the allure of *Gump*.

One possibility is its appeal to the baby-boomer generation looking to relive the good old days. There is no debate that *Forrest Gump* is indeed a syrupy movie. It is set

in the south with all of its enchanting colloquial dialogue and picturesque scenery. Momma and Forrest are at once charming. Our hero, Forrest, makes it through some thirty years of tumultuous American history and comes out ahead.

Many reviewers have not been able to get past *Forrest Gump*'s sticky sweet appeal and obvious nod to nostalgia. "*Forrest Gump* is the history of the baby-boomers as candy-coated by Disneyworld," says *Sight and Sound* magazine. "This is a film which would make saccharine taste sour. It goes beyond the further shores of the glutinous, with just enough historical wit to dampen the nausea."

*Gump*'s nostalgic marketing is seen as key to its enormous success. *The Economist* suggests, "The heart of *Gump*'s appeal...is generational." Another critical assumption is that the general masses need critics to understand works of art. If, however, the masses can see merit in a film without the studious insights of the critical voice then it must be somehow trite. *Harper's* comments on the running theme in *Gump*. It represents, "the way this country just mindlessly goes," suggesting the mindlessness of an audience that would swallow this candy-coated fable.

### **Gump as Just Another Idiot Savant**

*"Stupid is as stupid does." - Forrest Gump*

"There's talk of another Oscar for Tom Hanks, who is unforgettable as the sweet-natured, shabbily treated simpleton of the title. The Academy is a sucker for honoring afflicted heroes. In Hollywood it's always raining rain men," says *Rolling Stone* (Travers). There seems to have been a glut in the idiot savant market as of late. We have been introduced to *Rain Man*, *Zelig*, *Awakenings*, *Phenomenon*, and even a remake of *Of Mice and Men*.

With the recent arrival of Jim Carey with his *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and *Dumb and Dumber* there has been national concern about the glorification of dumb. This

concern exists primarily in the ever-changing political arena. The rhetoric of dumb has been suggested as our national vice and a sure sign of our soon downfall. Sight and Sound remarks, "*Forrest Gump* is the cultural emblem of that isolationist mood. The myth of the Ugly American is giving way to the Stupid one, who believes that everything works out fine if you just stay home" (Walker).

*The National Review* says, "It is by running away from unfairly superior persecutors or from undeserved predicaments that Forrest achieves his prodigious success..." What kind of nation will our children inherit if we run away from the problems facing us? *The National Review* concludes by stating that, "the movie itself, like its hero, is rather idiot savantish" (Simon).

### **Partisan Gump**

Always vying for more influence on the American political scene certain candidates hop on the *Forrest Gump* bandwagon and claim Forrest for their own. First to jump on board were the conservatives with Pat Buchanan asking, "Is there some tiny cell of conservatism burrowing deep inside the Hollywood cultural elite? For this film...is a morality play, where decency, honor and fidelity triumph over the values of Hollywood. It is, at core, a conservative film." (Kehr).

The liberals wanted in on the action too claiming *Forrest Gump* was attacking war, racism, male sexism, the sexual abuse of children, all the while upholding the pride and decency of single mothers (Walker). At the same time ultra-conservative Charles Moore condemned Buchanan for failing to realize that, "the movie reeks of political correctness." Here are some of Moore's PC observations:

- It opens with a spurious scene showing KKK clansmen...
- We have a protective, nurturing mother who has been deserted by her no-good husband.
- The mother is subjected to sexual harassment.

- Typical Southern rednecks display the Confederate Battle Flag in a derogatory manner.
- Jenny...leads a life of shame - but the enlightened know it was only because she was sexually molested by her alcoholic, sharecropper father.
- Jenny's boyfriend hits her - but it is only one more example of the abusive, oppressive males who seem to dominate her life.
- Forrest was the best in his platoon at basic training because he had the lowest IQ-the dumber you are, the better you will fit into the military.
- There are no good, healthy white males in Gump's life. All sympathy and understanding comes from women...*Forrest Gump* is typical Hollywood propaganda with excellent stealth PC packaging (Walker).

The liberals had similar outburst such as that by Jonathan Rosenbaum who called *Gump*, "the most pernicious movie of the year...an orgy of forgetfulness and media glibness where obliviousness parading as purity, stupidity parading as honesty, and xenophobia and narcissism parading as patriotism triumph over gross misrepresentations of the countercultural values of the Sixties and Seventies" (Kehr).

Although members of both parties have embraced *Gump* wholeheartedly, it seems just as many would like to disown any link to *Forrest Gump*. So what is *Gump's* party affiliation? When Forrest finally gets a chance to speak his own political views the public address system is turned off by conservative forces (Chumo). It is just this non-peggable factor that I think makes *Gump* accessible to so many.

### **Gump as Savior: Juxtaposition & Reconciliation**

*"I think the viewing of Forrest Gump has become an almost religious experience for a grieving nation, for an America that still hasn't come to grips with the last thirty years of political assassinations, White House corruption, a war that wasn't won, sexual abuse scandals, and drive-by shootings. The national mood is 'Woe is me. Woe is us. Tell me, tell us a nice bedtime story,' and I think Forrest Gump is that story, that parable, that story of a sweet American who survives that very same thirty years of pain."*

- Gene Siskel (Chumo)

Another trend among reviewers, the largest in fact, see *Gump* as performing a mystical national reconciliation. Chumo goes even further than Siskel in his assessment of *Gump* stating, "He is largely the agent of redemption for the society's divisions. Specifically, he becomes a mediator who can reconcile oppositions and heal the nation in the process: he can bridge the gap between races, between culture and counterculture, even between opposing philosophies."

Gump is there to pick up the black school girl's book during the racial crisis in Alabama. He is alluded to twice in Vietnam as a brother to Bubba, his black army buddy. And as Chumo points out so pointedly concerning the union of military man and flower child, "Their meeting in the waters of Washington suggests a national baptism, the beginning of a spiritual regeneration that will find its fullest expression later in their wedding scene."

Forrest is seen as savior and Jenny as the one in need of salvation. "In a rather misogynistic displacement, the character of Jenny becomes the vessel which carries all the 'nasty' habits of her generation, like drug abuse and promiscuity" (Sharman). In his savior role Gump takes on qualities of the Christ. When he runs cross country his hair grows long and he gathers disciples. Also, as Bubba is dying Gump cradles him in inverted Pieta-like fashion on the banks of a Vietnamese river alluding to Christian iconography (Chumo).

Another character in need of salvation is Lt. Dan Taylor. Gump saved Lt. Dan's life in Vietnam now Dan has joined Gump to be his first mate on the shrimp boat. When their attempts at shrimping prove futile Dan demands "Where is this God of yours Gump." Of course God appears as a storm and Dan rails heavenward and challenges God to a showdown. While Dan is atop the mast he is juxtaposed with the American flag. Gary Sinise says Dan represents the crippling of America brought on by Vietnam and this time period (*Eyes*). Dan's survival through the storm suggests a

national redemption (Chumo). Dan is now at peace with God.

Not everyone has found this theme of national reconciliation to be comforting. Frost in *Harper's Bazaar* believes, "The story becomes a sentimental fable about collective guilt and our need to return home. Suddenly, we're meant to take Gump as a savior-he's our inner child. Are we really meant to think that innocence will solve America's problems-AIDS, homelessness, and crime? As Hollywood messages go, this is one to give you the willies." (Frost, 40)

### **Deciphering Gump**

Although *Forrest Gump* seems like a simple sweet story, it has proven to be rather an enigma. I have presented the four categories to which the vast majority of Gumpian-exegesis has fallen. There are those critics, however, that have forged some rather unique interpretations. A few of the more "interesting" are: Lt. Dan as Captain Ahab, Forrest as O.J. Simpson, Forrest as Charles Manson, and Jenny as a Manson chick.

I think much can be said for Walker's insight that "The film has become a palimpsest, on which audiences may inscribe whatever message they choose." Zemeckis himself said he intended "to present this generation without commenting on it...Because of Forrest's blankness, everybody could sort of bring their own bottle to the party" (Walker).

Interestingly, for a movie that received such widespread audience appeal most of the reviews of *Forrest Gump* are anything but laudatory. One of the few encouraging reviews closes with these lines, "there is something of Forrest that Zemeckis would like to see rub off on us: his capacity for hope. It's an ambitious goal in this age of rampant cynicism. Godspeed."

## **Gump as Narrative in a Postmodern World**

Excluding the outlook that *Gump* is some sort of contrived political statement, I feel the other three viewpoints have merit. Yet, I see them functioning in very different ways than those discussed above. The nostalgic position, although truly a wonderful marketing strategy, also serves to draw the movie together as well as to fragment it. This use of nostalgia will be mentioned later in this section and discussed in more detail in the section entitled, "Dynamic Range."

The other two viewpoints, Gump as idiot savant and Gump as savior, seem to play a more integral part. Could it be that much of the reason that "intellectuals" have harbored a distaste for Gump is his reveling in naiveté? Could it be that Gump is meant to be taken as a vicarious representation of ourselves? Rather than Gump serving as some mystical savior could it be that our salvation rests within each of us (Rushing).

It is my interpretation that Forrest Gump is set in a postmodern context; that many of the devices used by Zemeckis are devices to fragment the viewer; and that Forrest Gump himself is representative of the narrative form and stands in direct juxtaposition to the postmodern age in which he lives.

Who among us doesn't feel like an "idiot" much of the time. We live in a world where our information doubles every year; where we are constantly barraged by information and media; where truth and honesty are foreign concepts to public office (Goodnight). I think that we are Forrest Gump—both a stranger to the postmodern world we live in and our only salvation. We are confronted daily with destiny and chaos, shall we choose a particular path? In the end does it make a difference? We live in a world filled with futility and fragmentation. What is our purpose in this world?

Kehr says *Gump*, "belongs to the genre its director has never ceased to explore: the dark social satire, fixed in an epic vision of American history as a series of con games and power plays." Kehr goes on to state that all of Zemeckis' films contain,



“individuals caught up in nightmarish worlds beyond their control or understanding, where the only hope of survival lies in surrendering to the dark forces of the culture, and protest means immediate destruction.”

Hampton sees a postmodern dichotomy between *Forrest Gump* and *Natural Born Killers*;

“*Forrest Gump* and *Natural Born Killers* are movies that converge as they assume diametrically opposed positions. Secret sharers, they constitute the magnetic poles of America’s mania for order: on one hand, the hunger to impose it at all costs in the form of a fanatically policed “innocence”: and on the other-like “love” and “hate” tattooed on a televangelist’s knuckles-the insatiable appetite for the carnival of violation. In *Gump* we have a back-to-the-future attempt to perform the cosmetic reconstructive surgery of “reillusionment.” As a virtual *Born Again on the Fourth of July...Gump* grafts severed American verities back onto maimed scar tissue and presents the result as wholeness, to say nothing of wholesomeness: the war as family entertainment.”

Unlike fellow Academy Award contender *Pulp Fiction*, *Gump* is not a postmodern tale. It is however a reaction to postmodernism. It is the need to see meaning in life that pervades in *Forrest Gump*. In looking back over the past thirty years of national and social unrest we can see no pattern or purpose. White suggests that for history to have meaning to us it must contain a moral judgment. History told as a mere series of unrelated and interrelated events holds no meaning for human beings. We are story telling creatures, narrators *per se*. As Siskel suggested earlier, we need a good story and one with a moral underpinning.

One way narration and purpose is pursued in *Gump* is through the reconciliation of ancestry. Dan, Bubba, Jenny, and Forrest change the course of family history. It is shown in a montage early that a forefather of Dan had died in every American war. Dan seems stuck on this idea but Forrest comes along and saves him from his destiny. Dan ends up surviving the war and ironically marries a young Asian woman. Thus the cycle is broken and enemies are resolved. Bubba’s foremothers have all been servants

to white folk. After Bubba's financial affiliation and success with Gump his mother ends up hiring a white maid. Jenny's father abused her as a child. As an adult Jenny abused herself. In the end she turns out to be a great mother to little Forrest. Even Forrest himself is saved from stupidity. His namesake General Nathan Bedford Forrest founded the KKK. Gump himself is an idiot, albeit a rather bright idiot. He revels in his son, little Forrest, being so smart. Thus we see that each of these characters have contributed favorably to the eternal cycle of things, thus giving meaning to their lives - narrative.

Much of *Forrest Gump* is concerned with the individual making it through life with the ever-present nod to the question of fate and chaos. In a strange juxtaposition while Gump is running cross country he is asked for help in creating a bumper sticker and a T-shirt. If one considers the two catch phrases Gump coins one can somehow see the center of the film's appeal: "shit happens" and "have a nice day" (Chumo).

Here we are at the close of the millennium existing in an undeniably postmodern world where chaos is rampant - "shit happens." Yet Gump makes it through by sheer will or dumb luck and things work out in the end - "have a nice day." I think it is this exhortation to have a nice day when everything is falling down around you that may be the appeal of *Gump*. Kehr comments, "There is a stillness at the center of the film-a sense of permanence and peace-that accounts for much of the emotional power."

One of the endearing qualities of Gump is that he isn't looking to be someone else (*Eyes*). "You ever dream, Forrest, who you're gonna be," asks Jenny. Forrest replies, "Who I'm gonna be, aren't I gonna be me?" Later after Dan has been crippled he says in anguish "I had a destiny, I was Lt. Dan Taylor." Gump bewildered replies, "You still Lt. Dan." Gump possesses a Pooh-like quality of acceptance of his and others character. "My name's Forrest, Forrest Gump, people call me Forrest Gump." As Winston Groom puts it, *Forrest Gump* is, "a story about human dignity, and the fact that you don't have

to be smart or rich to maintain your dignity even when some pretty undignified things are happening around you” (Grimes).

### **Dynamic Range**

Both the soundtrack and visuals in *Gump* possess incredible dynamic range. It is my belief that this dynamic range operates both to unify and to fragment the film. We begin with a string of nostalgic references introduced by Elvis. Throughout the movie we are kept abreast of politics, particularly the presidency. The clips shown of each presidency concern disgrace, illness, or assassination. Some of these references are: the attempted assassination of George Wallace; the assassination of John and Robert Kennedy; Nixon’s resignation; Ford being shot at; Carter fainting from heat exhaustion and Reagan being shot. Is it just a coincidence that each of these references cause fear and uncertainty among the viewers? There is no good news. Thus these presidents act as a nostalgic timeline but also instill the mistrust and chaos exemplified in postmodernism.

Nostalgia is also used to place Gump in context with the presidency as he meets: Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. And even goes about playing a key role in the reporting of Watergate. Other nostalgic events are also shown: Bob Hope’s Christmas tour to the troops; the restoration of the statue of liberty in 1986; Dick Clark’s New Year’s Eve; and Gomer Pyle, an obvious allusion to Gump himself. The most overdone piece of nostalgia portrays the moon landing on television while “Age of Aquarius” is playing in the background and Gump is the center of attention playing Ping-Pong.

Another factor containing dynamic range is that of sound. The movie goes from near silence to droning intensity. I still remember the first time I saw Gump and the film cut to the scene in Vietnam with the chopper roaring and “Fortunate Son” blaring. This sonic jump is a perfect example of the use of sound to fragment and cause a postmodern sense of detachment.

The movie's musical montage is yet another obvious use of nostalgia to chronicle and form cohesion and fragmentation. 57 songs are credited on the film. Each song is related, however nebulously, to a particular scene or fragment of a scene. By the end of the film this continuous procession of songs becomes grating.

## Constructing Gump

*I imagined Norman Rockwell painting the baby boomers - Robert Zemeckis*

There are three primary techniques used in the construction of *Forrest Gump*. They are repetition of themes, movement and verbal styling. *Gump* is all over the place Greenbow, Vietnam, Washington D.C., and running cross country. To keep us somewhat on common ground while traversing this disconnected territory, familiar themes are kept throughout. Here are a few of the repeated themes and my interpretation of them:

- The Bus - This is where the adventure begins. It is uncommon ground with which we must introduce ourselves. It is repeated with little Forrest. Another theme within this theme is "Seat's Taken'." This occurs twice to Forrest once when just a kid starting to school and once in the army. I see this as representative of acceptance and rejection.
- The Tree - This image is used exclusively to show the union of Forrest and Jenny. They play there as kids, return as adults and Jenny is buried there in the end.
- Running - I have yet to find a satisfactory encompassing symbolism for running. It may represent the blind will of human diligence. Running saves him from the bullies; puts him through college; saves himself and his buddies in Vietnam; and in the end saves him from emotional loss and despair. I think, however, it is used inconsistently, and possibly to a fault.
- The House - This is home. This is stability, a place to return to and recoup. It has been in the family forever. It was here that Jenny returns to stabilize her life and again when she was ill.
- The Pond - Seems to represent reflection and bonding. Forrest and his mom sit beside it before leaving for Vietnam. Forrest and Jenny sit there during what Forrest describes as the, "happiest days of my life." And Forrest and little Forrest sit there after Jenny's death and go fishing in its waters.

This is possibly a metaphor for remembering Jenny together and forging new bonds as father and son.

- Brothers - Forrest mentions that being brothers is difficult when discussing the Kennedy's assassinations. Lt. Dan mistakes Gump and Bubba for relatives. And Gump and Bubba sit back to back in the mud in Vietnam Bubba says "we is like brothers Forrest."
- The Bed - Symbolic of conception, rest, and death - the cycles of life. Both Jenny and Forrest's Momma die in the same bed.
- The Monument - Forrest visits the graves of Bubba and Jenny. Here he addresses them and receives closure.
- The Feather - Representative of the central theme of destiny and chance. The feather embodies both qualities. It is blown about by whim but in the end has a particular destiny.
- The Bird - Jenny is the bird from the outset. She wishes to fly away from her abusive father. She then asks Forrest if he thinks she could fly off the bridge. Later she considers suicide on a ledge to the tune of "Free Bird" playing in the background.

There are also two instances of what I consider to be combination symbols that may communicate an enhanced or alternate meaning. First is the bird and tree metaphor at the end of the movie when Forrest has just finished addressing Jenny's grave concerning destiny and chance. As Forrest walks away he glances back to see a flock of birds fly up from the pond through the sunset and into the tree under which Jenny is buried. This represents for me that Jenny is finally free and yet forever in union with Forrest.

Second is the combination of bird and feather. The feather representing destiny and the bird representing Jenny may be seen as representing the same thing. It is when the feather floats in and Forrest neatly places it in "Curious George" that he finally comes into "possession" of Jenny for he is but minutes away from finding out about his child and her love for him. The feather remains safely in his satchel through their marriage and time together. Then when she is gone the feather is released again into the heavens.

Another of the three primary techniques used is that of movement. There is motion in most every frame of the film at the beginning. This motion is rather smooth from slow trucks and dollies to zooms. Many things are revealed slowly especially the character of Forrest himself. This movement tends to set an emotional pace and give impact to the visuals.

The movement stops and we go primarily to cuts at the very first attempted assassination, that of Wallace. We stay in this cut mode with some jerky movement through Vietnam. It is on the banks while Bubba is dying that the slow movements are reintroduced and are then used throughout the rest of the film.

Verbal styling is the third primary technique. This is used for consistency, humor and as a cutting device. The phrase "Stupid is as stupid does" is used frequently by Gump to justify his actions and understanding. Another line is that which Forrest uses to exit any particularly sad story he is telling. The phrase, "and that's all I have to say about that," is used when Bubba and Forrest's mother die.

Another stylistic technique is used to cut between narration and remembrance. Basically what Forrest says as narrator is repeated in the scene we cut to. Some examples of this technique are:

- "Remember Forrest you're no different" (momma);  
"Your boy is different Mrs. Gump" (principal).
- "Momma was so proud" (Forrest);  
"I'm so proud of you Forrest" (momma)
- "There must be something we can do" (momma);  
(sex sounds from window)

### **Mythos: Gump**

*"I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floatin' around accidental-like on a breeze. But I, I think maybe it's both. Maybe both is happening at the same time."*

Thus, through the use of symbolic themes and both visual and verbal styling *Forrest Gump* is constructed as a contiguous narrative. Through the use of dynamic

range in sound, motion, nostalgic references and national fears *Forrest Gump* is set within a postmodern context. It is the juxtaposition of Forrest Gump as narrative against this postmodern backdrop that I believe makes *Gump* so accessible and endearing to the modern audience. It is not so much what Forrest Gump does but rather who he is that is the center of the film. If we compare Winston Groom's novel with Zemeckis' film we find Forrest doing vastly different things. It is not then important that Forrest was raised in the South, that he fought in Vietnam, that he was a Ping-Pong champ or a shrimp boat captain. Truly, these particular events are of no importance, rather, what is of importance is that Forrest Gump, a simple man, persevered through the last thirty years of tumultuous history, changed the lives of those he came in contact with for the good, and came out ahead.

*Forrest Gump* is not about national redemption, religious dogma, nostalgia, or the virtue of stupidity. *Forrest Gump* is the myth each of us desires to enact. We are the simple man or woman trying to make it through life the best we can. *Forrest Gump* gives meaning to this journey. *Forrest Gump* imposes the mythos of narrative over a tumultuous and disparate landscape.

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