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*Forrest Gump*: A Poststructuralist Analysis

Winner of the 1994 Academy Award Best Picture and hugely popular within American popular culture, *Forrest Gump* follows the life of an intellectually disabled but good-natured man as he navigates America's political and social landscape throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet, below the surface of its seemingly simple and heartwarming narrative lies a complex set of political assumptions. From a poststructuralist perspective, *Forrest Gump* operates within a framework that treats arbitrary and oftentimes problematic American values as natural and enforces a political binary meant to justify them: passive, neutral acceptance of the American capitalist status quo is rewarded, while resistance and subversion are punished.

According to Baudrillard, most of reality has been replaced by signs and symbols which stand in for actual objective concepts; in other words, objective reality precedes the cultural associations we give to things, but does not survive it (1556-1558). America, with its specific cultural mythos, government systems, and values that are arbitrarily decided by the needs of its capitalist economy, is an example of a hyperreal landscape. *Forrest Gump*, from its opening scenes, presents this hyperreal version of America: shots of Forrest's childhood create a nostalgic image of a rural, simplistic pre-desegregation White American South. More importantly, though, the film's representation of the American hyperreal goes beyond that of widely-recognized aesthetic markers and symbols and extends to its historical narrative. Major historical events never seem to have a discernible cause; in fact, they are intentionally presented out of context through the lens of someone too naive to understand nuanced political and social relations.

Forrest is present for turning points in American history from desegregation (*Forrest Gump* 22:28-23:54) to the Vietnam War (*Forrest Gump* 01:04:08-01:06:40) and comes out of them none the wiser. This is not just the result of Forrest's character, but is baked into how the film wants to present its worldview. Within Marxist thought, *ideology* refers to the set of assumptions under which a society governed by a certain economic system operates; these assumptions and values, though arbitrary and determined by the needs of the system, are treated as natural conditions of life and prevent the members of its society from understanding their real material conditions (Bertens 71-74). For example, under a capitalist society, it is culturally taken for granted that one becomes wealthy through hard work and that one's success is proportionate to their effort; this view, of course, does not take into consideration the conditions of material reality that often play a much bigger role in these matters, such as generational wealth, discrimination based on race or gender, or workplace exploitation. Since ideology misrepresents reality but is interacted with as if it were fact, it can be seen as an extension of the hyperreal. *Forrest Gump's* reconstruction and simplification of history is intentionally "fragmented and one-dimensional, separated from personal, political, and social contexts" (Wang 95). When historical events and American society in the film are presented in such a chaotic manner with no real background or outcome, they are being treated as the ideological reality of the film's world: war, inequality, and social upheaval are natural facts of life, and though they are unpleasant, there is nothing one can do to seriously challenge them. Under this assumption, Forrest's policy of passivity and non-questioning conformity seems like the most sensible one, while those who actively challenge the system are only doing so in vain. Forrest comes out on top of practically every situation he is in and becomes wealthy and successful, while subversives are made to look

foolish, make only a brief and obscure appearance in the narrative, or, in the case of the character of Jenny, are depicted as unhappy because of their beliefs.

Considering America's violent history of racial divide, one of the bigger concerns about the hyperreal is how it attempts to obfuscate this history in order to sustain the mythology of freedom and equality. To this end, it is notable how a false dichotomy is created specifically between the Black characters in the film: the Black Panthers that Forrest meets through Jenny compared to his late friend Bubba and his family. The Black Panthers, with their organized meetings and political jargon, are depicted as aggressive, unpleasant, and, perhaps most importantly, as unhappy themselves, unable to have fun or view anything outside the lens of racial inequality (*Forrest Gump* 01:07:53-01:08:50). On the other hand, Bubba and his family are presented as hard, earnest workers who welcome Forrest's friendship and help with open arms and have no qualms about him being White. They are rewarded when Forrest's shrimping company becomes incredibly successful and Forrest decides to give them half of the profits, immediately elevating them to wealth (*Forrest Gump* 01:42:37-01:42:57). Because Forrest and Bubba's assimilated family are presented as naturally kind-hearted and sympathetic in the face of the radicals' aggression, the civil rights movement's demands that the white man examine his privilege and "give up oppressive power" become "redundant and the 'others' who participated in them suspect" (Byers 431). The myth of a colorblind America that has evolved past the racial violence and divides of slavery and segregation is perpetuated further in a scene where Bubba's family, previously employed as servants by a White family, are served food by a White maid (*Forrest Gump* 01:42:54-01:42:57). In the film's vision of the hyperreal America, wealth and social status are equally open to everyone regardless of their race, and old power dynamics

between races have been completely equalized despite the enduring bitterness of radical groups. In reality, Bubba's family is only able to rise in social rank because of the whims and generosity of a White man, who himself only acquired the wealth through random chance. The reality, however, does not matter, because the audience is presented with an *image and simulation* of racial harmony and equality, and the simulation is ultimately what determines the world of *Forrest Gump*.

The binary between social assimilation and rebellion is most clearly communicated through Jenny, Forrest's love interest and narrative foil. During their childhood, Jenny is Forrest's only friend, and though she is loyal and caring, she is revealed to have had a troubled background of sexual abuse at the hands of her father (*Forrest Gump* 17:54-18:18). In adulthood, the two go their separate ways, and though Forrest continues to be in love with her, she is constantly out of his reach and he is only able to see her occasionally. As an adult, Jenny is depicted as participating in a variety of countercultural movements, from being a hippie protesting the Vietnam War (*Forrest Gump* 01:07:11-07:52) to becoming embroiled in the drug-addled, promiscuous music subcultures of the 70s (*Forrest Gump* 01:29:20-01:30:00). The constant throughout Jenny's appearances in the film is that she is always unhappy: as a hippie, she is in a relationship with an abusive boyfriend (also a hippie, in contrast to the more conservative Forrest, who tries to protect Jenny from him) (*Forrest Gump* 01:08:15-01:09:20); in a later scene, she balances on the edge of a balcony as she contemplates suicide (*Forrest Gump* 01:30:20-31:16). The audience is made to view Jenny in an unsympathetic light as she repeatedly rejects, mistreats, and abandons the kind-hearted Forrest, who always has her best interests at heart and is endlessly patient in the face of her self-destructive behavior. However, she is

“redeemed” by the film’s narrative towards the end, when Forrest visits her after years of no contact. Having settled down after quitting her former lifestyle and drug usage, she reveals that she has had a son by Forrest; however, she also tells him that she has “some kind of virus” which doctors are unable to cure (*Forrest Gump* 02:00:00-02:04:11). Despite this, she agrees to move back to Forrest’s childhood home with him and their son and finally marries him (*Forrest Gump* 02:04:15-02:07:10). The three live a peaceful, happy life together until Jenny’s death, and though Forrest grieves her death, he is able to continue having a fulfilling and loving relationship with his son (*Forrest Gump* 02:07:11–02:14:46). The implicit message in this is that, had Jenny chosen the path of subservient housewife and mother from the beginning, she would have avoided her own tragedy. As Thomas B. Byers notes, Forrest and Jenny’s marriage is symbolic of Forrest’s triumph over a wayward woman and the restoration of the patriarchal order, or “the ritual confirmation that all along he was right and she was wrong, and that she owed him the apology she offered before she proposed” (437). It is also crucial to note *how* the narrative kills Jenny off. Though the choice of an unnamed disease may seem neutral, given the time period the film is set in, the film’s attitude towards Jenny’s lifestyle, and the taboo and incurable nature of the disease, it is not unreasonable to assume that “some kind of virus” is a stand-in for AIDS. AIDS, with its stigma of being sexually transmitted and associated with minority groups like the LGBT community, is an extremely fitting choice for a moral lesson in line with the film’s conservative worldview—Jenny did not simply succumb to an illness, she brought it on herself through her sexual promiscuity and debauched lifestyle, and her death is “implicitly a consequence of her loose behavior” (Byers 437). Jenny’s downfall lies in her living outside of the status quo and the myth of a “normal” American citizen, whether it be involuntarily (her

childhood of sexual abuse) or voluntarily (through her decision to align herself with radical groups). Though she needs to be punished for the film's moral message on the dichotomy between assimilation and rebellion to be fully effective, the audience is consoled with the ultimate victory of the nuclear family and established order over the chaos of counterculture.

*Forrest Gump*, in its apparently simple and straightforward presentation, is actually a complex collection of the symbols and narratives that make up the American hyperreal. History is rewritten to make the political upheaval of the mid-twentieth century appear like chaotic disruptions to an ordered society rather than movements arising from social inequality and oppression; as a result, the protagonist's passive acceptance of the status quo and conformity to the old order seem like the only reasonable courses of action. Within this framework, which is treated as an objective order, a clear binary that works in favor of the American cultural narrative is presented: obedience is the "correct" end of the binary, while subversion is the "wrong" end.

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