



**IVONE DO CARMO
RODRIGUES DE
ALMEIDA**

***FORREST GUMP: REPRESENTAÇÕES DA HISTÓRIA
AMERICANA NO PASSADO RECENTE***

***FORREST GUMP: COMIC REPRESENTATIONS OF
THE RECENT AMERICAN PAST***

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas (Variante de Estudos Ingleses), realizada sob a orientação científica do Doutor Anthony David Barker, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro.

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agradecimentos

Agradeço a cuidadosa supervisão e apoio do meu orientador, o Prof. Dr. Anthony Barker.

palavras-chave

Comédia, História, América, filme, *Forrest Gump*

resumo

O presente trabalho propõe-se pesquisar a abordagem histórica das décadas de 50, 60 e 70 nas comédias americanas contemporâneas. Deste modo espero destacar os acontecimentos da história americana no passado recente que se prestaram a uma abordagem cinematográfica e foram retratados em comédias. As reacções a esses filmes permitem ainda reflectir sobre os valores culturais transmitidos nos filmes de comédia. Esta dissertação também aborda as características e funções da comédia enquanto género cinematográfico. Na fundamentação teórica também são abordadas algumas questões ligadas à adaptação cinematográfica. A vertente prática da dissertação centra-se no filme *Forrest Gump*, explorando a sua relevância histórica, e a adaptação ao cinema.

keywords

Comedy, History, America, film, *Forrest Gump*

abstract

This dissertation is intended to research historical approaches to the fifties, sixties and seventies in contemporary comedy films. Doing so, I expect to cast some light on recent American events that have proved to be cinematic and likely to be explored in a comic perspective. Viewers' response to these films is also to be analysed so as to reflect on the cultural values rendered in comedy forms. Moreover, this dissertation includes some thought on the narrative and generic features of comedy as a film genre. The theoretical section also covers some issues raised by film adaptation. The practical research section focuses on the film *Forrest Gump*, exploring both its historical significance, and the precise nature of this adaptation.

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Introduction

Why write a dissertation on comedy? At the edge of the 21st century, Horton (2000:2) predicted that comedy would flourish on film, television and stage, in print, on the streets, and in our lives because, he claimed “comedy delights and it definitely sells”. Indeed, comedy has proved to be a contemporary film genre popular across generations and nationalities all over the world. I decided to explore this subject so that I could deepen my knowledge of cinema studies and do some research on comedy films produced in the nineties, such as *Forrest Gump*. My reasons for choosing this film in particular are related to its popularity, my own resources and its availability, besides the personal appeal of the subject for me. Back in 1994, the release of this film on cinema caught my attention as being a wholly new way of looking at History and interpreting some of America’s most remarkable events. Indeed, its gross revenues of over six hundred million dollars turned *Forrest Gump* into a powerful and influential pop culture statement.

Directed by Robert Zemeckis in 1994, *Forrest Gump* is an example of popularity both in the US and abroad. This tale of a man with a low IQ traversing three turbulent decades of American history was one of the biggest box office successes of 1994, earning more than three hundred million dollars in the US alone, generating a mini-industry of merchandising and winning six Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Director and Actor. Despite its commercial success, there were mixed reactions to *Forrest Gump*, as the film’s reconstruction of recent American history has proved to be very controversial. Since it deals with American social history, the foreign viewer needs a lot of exposure to American culture to get the nuances of the film. Politics, family, gender, race and identity are some of the subjects emerging from the film.

“Hello, my name is Forrest, Forrest Gump.

Do you want a chocolate?

My mum always said: life is like a box of chocolates;
you never know what you’re going to get.”

This is how screenplay writer Eric Roth sets the tone for *Forrest Gump*, which Davies and Wells (2002:10) consider to be the seminal comic film of the mid-1990s. Based on the 1986 novel with the same title by Winston Groom, Barker (2004:184) claims

Forrest Gump to be the most ambitious comedy film of the nineties. This film's success is measured not only by critical acclaim (of which the Oscar awards are fairly indicative), but also, or even more importantly, by commercial success, which in turn, adds Paatero (2005), is often increased by the approval of the critics. Hinson (1994) comments that, in a way, *Forrest Gump* has become the pop-culture hero of the nineties and Paatero praises this film's combination of good cinematography, amazing visuals, catchy soundtrack and remarkable acting, stressing the contribution of the narrator/main character played by Tom Hanks. The director Robert Zemeckis combines pieces of American history in the form of places, events, songs and famous faces while telling the story of an educationally subnormal southerner and his journey through life, meeting with historical figures, influencing popular culture and experiencing first-hand some major historic events of the 20th century. *Forrest Gump* is generally acknowledged to be a superbly imaginative retelling of the American era from the 50s to the early 80s. Indeed, Forrest seems to brush up against these historical events and we see through his eyes American history as it unfolds. Indeed, Forrest's story unfolds through a series of flashbacks narrated by his voice-over to strangers at the bus stop. This ironic device highlights the gap between his misunderstanding of events and their socio-historical significance.

The first chapter of this dissertation is intended to consider ways in which cultural values are constructed, transmitted and sometimes contested in comedy films. Beginning with the premise that contemporary American comedy is informed by issues of ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, I believe that the forms and language of comedy are deployed to invoke serious social matters in contemporary American life: prejudice, racism, class biases, war, and other issues of the day. I have selected this field to research because I believe comedy to be an important aspect of contemporary American culture and a significant presence in film. Such is the case of *Forrest Gump*, considered by critics to be a thoroughly American movie, about American life and history, produced for a mainstream American audience. The pedagogical potential of historical films is also given relevance and Metzger (2007:67) even wonders whether historical feature films might be "the most powerful force shaping how people think about the past". Indeed, the visual media may have become the chief conveyor of public history, as millions of people are likely to encounter an historical topic on screen. Metzger goes further, to consider the influence commercial history movies has had on how adolescents and young adults learn and think about the past. He considers this to be a fundamental issue in education.

Chapter II is intended to describe comedy as a genre within commercial cinema, its narrative and generic features, and to reflect on the characteristics of the comic character or persona in respect of gender, age, physical appearance, motivations... Moreover, this chapter focuses on the historical approach to the fifties, sixties and seventies in contemporary American comedies, e.g. *Forrest Gump*, *Back to the Future*, *Blast from the Past*... I have felt the need to broaden my research to other comedy films, besides *Forrest Gump*, in order to get a wider perspective on the historical themes and cultural values focused on American comedy films, and to compare the techniques applied by the directors and producers of those films.

In chapter III, I intend to review the importance of adaptation and its recent appeal for film studies. Indeed, a decade ago Cartmell and Whelehan (1999:3) mentioned the increasing interest in the process of adaptation from text to screen from the eighties on, which had emerged with the popularity of films based on works of fiction and especially its role in the development of the Hollywood film industry. The elements of *mise en scène* are also analysed in this chapter which includes a general overview of the adaptation process.

After this theoretical approach to my research topic, the following chapters are aimed at providing a detailed practical analysis of *Forrest Gump*. Chapter IV deals with *Forrest Gump*'s representation of the recent US past and Chapter V is about the nature of the adaptation of *Forrest Gump*, so as to compare textual narrative with the film's. Besides the main research question (how the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s have been represented in contemporary American comedies) specific aspects regarding the adaptation of *Forrest Gump* have been considered, such as: character development, faithfulness, exclusions in the film version, pictorial possibilities and digital technology, soundtrack, etc.

In this way, I hope to offer a general, but rigorous perspective on the importance of historical films and to focus on comedy films in particular. My approach to the subject is intended to move from the theoretical principles of comedy as a film genre and film adaptation, to specific aspects of *Forrest Gump*'s historical relevance and this particular adaptation of Winston Groom's novel.

Chapter I

Representing US history and the recent past on film

Belton (1999:1) remarks that, on the one hand, aspects of the American character and culture surface in the movies and, on the other, movies play a key role in this construction, representation and transmission. Coyne (2008:8) adds that “film-makers have consequently used the movies to consolidate powerful national myths that are instructive to citizens, reflective of individual and societal aspirations, and – not insignificantly – exported for consumption by the rest of the world”. Horton (2000:15) also describes comedy as “one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself”, considering comedy a barometer of a social, economic and cultural context. For instance, one of the best ways to discover what happens in any country is to watch the pop comedies of that nation, either on film or in their hit television series. Furthermore, Horton considers comedians and comic writers “privileged members of society, for the nonthreatening nature of comedy allows them to say whatever they wish and get away with it”, concluding that “comedy is very strongly culture-bound” (16). However Hughes-Warrington (2007:18) refers to “a shortcoming in film as a medium for communicating history as well as in the practical arrangements that see historians and filmmakers drawn together” and Davies and Wells (2002:10) argue that “Hollywood cinema may be viewed as the embodiment of the shifting agendas in the postwar period”. From a political point of view, in articulating postwar history, *Forrest Gump* was open to the process of discursive appropriation by both liberals and conservatives, not to mention the fact that it is open to multiple political perspectives abroad.

Generic features of historical films

Having reflected on the features of the historical genre, Hughes-Warrington notices that film advertising rarely uses generic classifications such as the term historical film. As a result, Hughes-Warrington admits that “it is sometimes difficult to judge on the basis of print advertising alone whether a film has anything other than a contemporary setting” (38). Furthermore, setting a film in the past is more likely to result from visual and aural information such as costumes, sets and modes of speaking, even though she notes, “those

elements are generally combined with others that stress contemporary appeal or the presence of other genres” (38). Besides, scholars and film producers and distributors have different opinions about the functions of generic classifications, which is not surprising, given the commercial nature of much film production.

When reflecting about what historical films depict, Hughes-Warrington remarks that “history serves as a signifier of issues contemporary with filming, ranging from ethical beliefs to political aspirations” (58). A number of 20th century writers consider film to be a medium of the present tense, that is to say film images are claimed to be always in the present, transforming what is represented through contemporary codes and conventions of narration. In Hughes-Warrington’s words, cinematic time is “figurable and malleable”, shaped through the use of editing, film colour, music and elements of *mise en scène* (61). Nevertheless, she remarks that “the relationship of *mise en scène* and cinematic time remains scarcely examined by film theorists” (67).

Beginning with the premise that editing is “the creation of ruptures in the spatio-temporal continuity of shots through splicing and the removal of unwanted footage”, historical films employ jump shots to explicitly suggest ellipsis (61). For instance, a series of shots connected by fades suggests Forrest Gump’s marathon run across the United States in *Forrest Gump* (1994). But flashback is the editing device most commonly associated with historical films. Hughes-Warrington defines it as “an image or a filmic segment that is believed to represent temporal occurrences anterior to those in the images that precede it”. She clarifies that “flashback is signalled when an older character’s memory of the past leads to a cut to a scene or series of scenes representing that past” (64). Flashbacks are often used in historical films to emphasize the past as the root of the character’s motivations. For instance, after telling his story to the bus stop passers-by, Forrest Gump re-unites with his beloved Jenny, just as Marty McFly (*Back to the Future*, 1985) travels back to the past to assure his future existence.

In Hughes-Warrington’s opinion, the shaping of cinematic time is largely seen in terms of editing because “many editing devices operate in conjunction with elements of *mise en scène*. Costume, make-up, settings and props, for instance, help viewers to distinguish flashbacks” (68). Indeed, making visual differences in costuming between the implied periods readily obvious, it is possible to signal flashback without voiceover narration or titles. Moreover, “elements of *mise en scène* might suggest forward temporal movement in the diegesis” (68), as in *Forrest Gump*. In fact, there are many examples

where elements of *mise en scene* support the line of the diegesis. Hughes-Warrington stresses that “digital images are now commonly used to add to, remove from, substitute for or enhance elements of filmic images. For instance, in *Forrest Gump* digital processes made it possible to show Gary Sinise as an amputee without having to conceal his limbs through binding or loose costuming” (105). Some film scholars have warned of the ethical problems that the use of screen technologies might create, while others argue that digital technologies enhance beauty and emotions. The fact is that filmmakers change all sorts of phenomena through the use of a wide range of technologies and processes and digital technologies belong to a range of special effects that include make-up, lighting, camera lenses, editing, etc. Nevertheless, some filmic elements are likely to be manipulated and enhanced more than others, as is the case of sound.

Problematic features of historical films

Rosenstone (1995:56) argues that “the first problem with mainstream films is that they package history as romance or comedy, in which individuals either escape from, or triumph over a particular situation or problem”. Indeed, no matter how apparently tragic the setting in romantic or comedy films, some form of positive outcome always seem to follow. For instance, although Guido (Roberto Benigni) in *Life is Beautiful* (1997) dies, the viewer is left with the impression that it has been for the good: the end of the Holocaust. Moreover, mainstream film is said to present history as the story of individuals, focusing attention on individuals, which “becomes a way of avoiding the often difficult or insoluble social problems pointed out by the film” (57).

Furthermore, film often emphasises the emotional dimensions of human experiences, highlighting and intensifying the feelings of the audience through close ups of faces, juxtaposition of images, music, and sound effects. According to Rosenstone, film is also believed to be prone to so called “false historicity” on the grounds that the “look” of the past presented through costumes, make-up and sets often “takes precedence over any consideration of the ideas, beliefs and actions of historical agents (59). That way, characters and incidents are made up so as to make the past *merely look* more interesting to the viewer. Then, in Hughes-Warrington’s words, “the past becomes a warehouse that is plundered for aesthetic rather than historiographical reasons and history making is collapsed into the activity of getting the details right” (21). Mainstream film is also

believed to offer “a closed, completed and too simple version of the past” (21). What is more, there is the assumption that “historical film lacks breakthrough knowledge, and thus if we want to be up to date in our understanding of the past, we should concentrate on the efforts of professional historians” (23). What is more, film is said to be characterised by the constant recycling of images, as the choice of topics in historical films seems to be quite conservative, with few representations of historical agents, events and phenomena. Hughes-Warrington claims that there is a noticeable absence of research and studies of the representations offered in historical films. Moreover, written history is usually attributed the positive qualities of rigour and access to true meaning, while film is given secondary derivative status because “its meaning is opaque, mediated and open to perversion” (24).

It is undeniable that movies dealing with historical themes and personalities have aroused public interest through much of the twentieth century. Both critics, historians and the viewing public have argued about the way movies reconstruct the American past (Toplin, 1996). Critics of historical movies agree that Hollywood’s version of the past can make a significant impact on the viewers, helping to shape the thinking of millions. Indeed, motion pictures featuring famous stars in the roles of historical characters, presenting vivid scenes through sophisticated cinematography, are most likely to make strong impressions. Nevertheless, Toplin argues that only a few scholars have examined film’s role as a popular communicator of historical interpretations, and it is to be regretted that film as interpreter of history remained relatively neglected in the modern age of abundant movie presentations of the past. Oliver Stone, for example, is widely considered to be a Hollywood filmmaker who has addressed important historical questions and has attempted to make contributions to public thinking by moulding interpretations of the past, thus bringing history to the masses through the medium of popular cinema. Toplin expresses his conviction that these filmmakers might perform the role of the historian, even though their productions are different from the products of traditional written history. The role of film as a communicator of historical understanding implies that such movies spark interest in historical questions, suggesting a level of authenticity, although the products seem to be essentially personal perspectives on the past.

The pedagogical dimension of historical films

Metzger (2007:67) wonders: “how can feature films contribute to historical literacy and be put to effective pedagogical uses?” I strongly believe that historical films can be used in class, combined with other usual pedagogical tools, to help students develop and exercise skills for historical literacy. Indeed, many teachers seem to have realised the pedagogical potential of using movies as a resource for teaching about historical facts. Such is the case of Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* (1993), which has often been used as a resource for teaching about the Holocaust. But to what extent can a film not only entertain but also engage students in meaningful historical thinking? To start with, since movies are commercial products, they are part of youth culture and are appropriated in young people’s everyday life. Metzger adds that historical literacy in our age demands “an ability to reflect on how historical representations in popular media influence historical thinking and public discourses about the past” (68), and he points out five historical-literacy competences that history feature films may address. These competences reflect major proficiencies in historical thinking endorsed in research literature on history education: content knowledge, narrative analysis, historical-cultural positioning of a text, historical empathy and discernment of “presentism” (67). History feature films are recognized to be “powerful tools for engaging students with historical content knowledge”, since they “contain numerous details about the past as well as fictionalized elements that are used to build the narrative story” (69). Thus, in a film-based lesson students are given the chance to perceive significant historical information, distinguish fictional elements and regard the film as an historical statement designed to present particular themes and interpretations of the past. Indeed, history feature films are narratives about the past, which convey both explicit meanings and implied (subtexts), giving students a great opportunity to analyse historical narratives.

The historical cultural positioning of a text implies that they are culturally situated. So, viewing a history movie from a critic’s point of view involves considering how it has been produced and received by a specific culture. Metzger remarks that “while history movies start out as texts *about* the past, over time, they themselves become documents *of* the past” (70), both influencing and reflecting how an earlier generation built its own historical past. Such is said to be the case of *Forrest Gump*, released during the energetic years of the Clinton Administration. Wineburgh *et al.* (2000:55) point out that *Forrest*

Gump “reinforces liberal iconic memories of America in the 1960s (hippies, protests against the Vietnam War) while forgetting dissonant counter-narratives like pro-war rallies”. So, how the themes and images of a film conform to or contrast with the broader culture of its time can be explored by considering the cultural positioning of a history feature film. As to historical empathy, Metzger describes it as “an emotional and psychological competency that requires the viewer to recognize and respect potentially foreign perspectives” (71). History movies are said to offer ways for students to experience both rational examination of past perspectives – attitudes, beliefs and intentions – and making personal connections to history. One must take into account that the personal connection students can achieve through history films become even more critical when dealing with representations of race and minorities.

Metzger believes that “forming emotional responses to people and events in the past through present-day attitudes and assumptions is often reflexive, perhaps even unconscious, for many people when watching a history movie”. Therefore, “history movies often generate resonance between the past and the present”. Indeed, “filmmakers often use a historic event as a metaphor for current concerns, attitudes and values that are easier to sell to contemporary audiences” (71). So, even though history movies are representations of the past, they remain current in the culture as contemporary products. Metzger sums up that historical films make significant contributions to the development of historical understanding, as long as teachers cultivate students’ skills and knowledge to “analyse, interpret and evaluate historically themed films” (72).

Chapter II

Comedy: a film genre

Being a young art form, “film has developed techniques, structural patterns, and a thematic range that have taken other media - literature, music, dance, the pictorial arts - hundreds of years to work out” (Lothe, 2000: 86). A large number of films have taken a literary prose text – a short story, a novel - as their starting point. Needless to say, narrative fiction has made, and is still making significant contributions to the development of the film industry. One of the major definitions of comedy consists in a form which is said to date back to the structural model of narrative comedy formulated in the 4th century. Contributions from Renaissance theorists resulted in a linear narrative structure: an introduction/exposition, a conflict/complication, a further element of complication, a climax and a conclusion/resolution (Neale, 1990: 26-28). Nevertheless, Krutnik (1995: 17,30) argues that comedian-centered films are not organised simply in accordance with the narrative aesthetics of classical cinema, as the comedian comedy encompasses a range of possibilities for combining narrative and performative entertainment spectacle. Such is the case with *Forrest Gump* (1994), which spans whole decades. Besides being shown wars, assassinations, scandals, etc, the viewer learns about Forrest’s childhood, his college days, his career as soldier, shrimper, runner, millionaire... And beyond this life story we are presented with a sprawling tapestry of recent American history. The comedy film *Forrest Gump* has been described as essentially a picaresque novel for the screen, alluding to the eighteenth century lengthy episodic prose works following the rambling adventures of some heroic (or unheroic) character. Kagan (2003:154) points out the extraordinary screenwriting of *Forrest Gump* as a “modern Hollywood production for seeming to break most modern screenplay storytelling conventions”. In fact, there seems to be no real film plot, Kagan adds, “just the main character’s intimates dying off – best friend, mother and lifelong love”.

King (2002:1) remarks that for as long as film has existed as an entertainment medium, so has film comedy, bearing in mind that the Lumière Brothers’ *L’Arroseur arrosé* - avowed to be the first work of fiction on screen - was a comedy, one of the most popular formats in the early years of cinema. According to Neale (1999:51), comedy takes its place amongst the major film genres. Nevertheless, he argues that many Hollywood

films, as well as many genres, are “hybrid and multi-generic (...) In consequence, genres often overlap, and individual films are sometimes be considered under a number of different generic headings” (51). Karnick and Jenkins (1995:69) wonder whether film comedy is a genre and what its distinctive features are. They believe comedy to be “a category transcending epochs and cultures, and it thus adds little to a consideration of historical genres” (71).

The fact is that the recent publication of a large number of books on comedy is a clear signal of a noteworthy renewed interest of film critics and theorists, such as Neale (1990), Horton (1991, 2000), Karnick and Jenkins (1995) and King (2002). Comedy has always been both a significant product in Hollywood output and has offered a form of critical debate on feminism, gender, politics, psychoanalysis, race and ethnicity, history and so on. One can conclude that the diversity of topics addressed in comedies and the approaches adopted by theorists reflect the diverse and multifaceted nature of comedy itself. Indeed, since comedy encompasses a range of forms, sites and genres, it can combine with or parody virtually every other genre or form. Seidman (1981:144) stresses the enduring popularity of film comedians, assuming this to be “an indicator of the comedian’s relevance to American culture” from the early 20th century onward and to point to comedy as a culturally rich form.

Keeping in mind that one of the main purposes of this research is to look at the way(s) in which American identity and history shapes and is shaped by contemporary comedy, it is important to focus on the repetitive aspects of comedy as a genre. Seidman affirms that “there are certain recurring formal elements that contribute to the genre’s basic pattern” (79). According to Seidman, amongst these elements is to be found the comic figure’s childish character and his penchant for play and imagination (100-141). In many comedy films, the condition of childishness is evidenced by verbal references or by the way the comic figure manifests certain childlike qualities (examples one might cite could be Harry Langdon or Harpo Marx). Their childish nature is basically indicated by the manner in which comic figures are presented in the films: their gestures and activities, manner of dress, and so on. For instance, childlike language and self expression, unawareness, clumsiness, lack of coordination, etc. The problem of being a child in an adult’s body raises the question of growth and cultural assimilation being retarded by regressive tendencies which accentuate the problems of individual evolution and social initiation. Nevertheless, the comic figure manages to create enjoyable forms of fantasy that

enable him to inhabit a desired, idealized world free from the strains of growing up in a culture commanded by adults.

Seidman adds that the condition of childishness is furthered by the occasional depiction of the comic figure as both child and adult in the same film, such as with Tom Hanks in *Big* (1988) and Robin Williams in *Jack* (1996). “There is an emphasis on the comic figure’s difference (...) audiences enjoy both the counter-cultural value of the comic figure, as well as the reaffirmation of cultural values which stress community and harmony” (144). Comedies are said to resolve contradictions, and to “offer culture a sense of security, a site where aspects of the community needs and problems are projected in a pleasing fashion” (157). Therefore, Seidman argues that comedies can be regarded as “a form that has reaffirmed certain cultural values through its fictional and extra-fictional features, and even the cultural value of popular cinema itself” (157). Directed by Francis Ford Copolla, the comedy film *Jack* (1996) is about a boy with an unusual aging disorder that has aged him four times faster than a normal human being, so that by the time Jack reaches his tenth birthday, he looks like a 40-year-old man. Robin Williams performance is heartbreaking as a ten-year-old overcoming a unique physical disability in this bittersweet story of childhood innocence and friendship. According to Horton (2000:21) Robin Williams is an example of the complexity of a comedian work, because he is a comic actor who can play a fabulous comic role in *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) and “break through into pure pathos and drama” in *The Dead Poets Society* (1989).

Comedy and narrative

The structural model of narrative comedy presented in Neale (1990: 29) is argued to be so schematic and general that it can be applied to other genres besides comedy. On the other hand, comedy is often an exception to the rules of motivation governing most other Hollywood genres, which is particularly apparent in the way happy endings are handled in comedy. Bordwell (quoted by Neale: 30) reckons that “the classical Hollywood cinema demands a narrative unity derived from cause and effect” – that is causal motivation. Nevertheless, he points out the frequent use of forms of non-motivation in comedies. Therefore, a difference is to be found between happy endings motivated by cause and effect in genres such as the thriller and the western, and genres where the arbitrary and the coincidental play a much greater role (the horror film, the musical, the

comedy). All in all, comedy does not seem to require a powerful regime of motivation to bind together its events and structure. Coincidence is said to play an important role not only in the ending of a comedy, but throughout the plot as a whole. The point is that, whatever the form of motivation, it is always functional to the design of a narrative.

Moreover, comic suspense and surprise are two types of narrative strategy that are fundamental to all kinds of comedy. Rooted in the Renaissance and neoclassical *peripetia* or reversal of fortune, and in the *anagnorisis*, suspense and surprise are the products of different ways of distributing narrative knowledge among characters and between the characters and the audience. Comic suspense and surprise result from the way events unfold, whether predictably or unpredictably. Neale remarks that so as to produce suspense or surprise, narrative knowledge has to be distributed in certain patterns which form the basis of several stereotypical plot structures in narrative comedy (33). For instance, repetition is considered to be a basic element in all narrative film. Lothe places an emphasis on narrative time and narrative repetition in film. Even though film obviously presupposes space, he argues that a temporal vector is imposed upon the spatial dimension of the image. "Narrative repetition, which is closely related to narrative time, is an important constituent aspect of prose fiction" (63), and Lothe remarks that "the form and the functions repetition has in films are in part radically different from those we find in prose fiction (67). It is a fact that the process of film production itself consists in a series of repetitions - a mechanically repetitive process. Furthermore, "repetition in film is closely related to filmic presentation of time, and especially to sequence" (67), thus contributing to the narrative dimension. For example, in the final scene of *Forrest Gump*, when Forrest Jr. gets on the school-bus, he announces to the same driver "I'm Forrest. Forrest Gump", in the same words his father used on his own first day of school. So, history finishes in repetition, and the driver's smiling recognition of the boy reassures the viewer that the old order is re-established. Furthermore, the kind of rejection young Forrest faced when he first got on the bus to school and was refused a seat by everyone but Jenny is shown again in scene 5 when grow-up Forrest gets into the Army bus and was offered a seat by Bubba. The parallel way the two scenes are presented give a hint to the audience that Bubba would become Forrest's best friend, just as Jenny has been throughout his childhood.

The director Robert Zemeckis remarks on the absence of typical plot devices in the script. Therefore, Forrest Gump's optimism combined with bland stupidity are said to be the backbone of the movie. Kagan remarks that the film's plot events, "which involve

recent history about which most people have powerful if ambivalent feelings, act as Rorschach pictures, reaffirming each viewer's own complex, contradictory emotions" (155). Indeed, the broad outline of the film made it very unconventional by Hollywood standards. Sharman (1994:43) praises Zemeckis's skill at crafting "a strong sense of narrative coherence out of repetitive framings and neatly handled temporal shifts". Forrest's life is told in flashbacks as he is sitting at the bus stop waiting for the bus to drive him to Jenny's. A few passersby come and go and listen to pieces of the narrative told by Forrest. The listeners change regularly throughout his narration, each showing a different attitude ranging from disbelief and indifference to fascination. The viewer has a privileged position that allows him/her to combine the pieces into a narrative unity, thus getting an integrated version of Forrest's life. According to Dix (2008:110), analepsis or flashback has a clarifying effect, filling in narrative blanks and it is by now a familiar temporal disruption for the spectator. But the structurally opposite device of prolepsis is used less often and is said to have connotations of peculiar mental processes like prophecy and premonition.

Therefore, the temporal medium is very important in this film, given that montage and editing are carefully controlled so as to give it an episodic structure. According to Lothe, the characters' performance constitutes a series of events which are closely linked to narrative time, involving a change or a transition from one situation to another (72). Wiegman (1999:125) reminds us that *Forrest Gump* is set at a bus stop, and that "one of its main technological innovations is its clever insertion of the protagonist into nationally recognizable television scenes". As Forrest meets historical figures, such as Elvis Presley, John Lennon, JFK, many famous faces are glimpsed in the movie. Lothe remarks that the characters in the text usually "set the action in motion (are action-initiating) on the basis of specific aims, wishes, desires, or experiences" (75). The director breaks the rule of telling the story from Forrest's point of view when he picks up Jenny's story by inserting quick shots of her leaving with a group of long-haired hippies while Forrest is in Vietnam. Even though this is Forrest's tale, the audience does not lose track of Jenny, as several shots show where she is and what she is doing. At the same time, this device provides the film production with a benchmark in history of what was happening and what was changing. Again, in chapter 10, there is a series of shots that take the audience through Jenny's journey when Forrest was away in the Army. So, the camera leaves Forrest and his point of view in order to fill in her story for the audience. Once more, in scene 12, while Forrest is

engaged in the shrimp business, we get glimpses of Jenny in the cocaine parties of the 1970s. Once Forrest's narration of past events is complete, the director made the decision to tell the end of the story in real time, because the original script written by Eric Roth was all narrated after the whole set of events had been completed.

Depending on how it is presented in the discourse, an event can fulfill different functions, be given one or more specific purposes in relation to the content of the text. According to Lothe, an event is considered important on grounds of "what consequences it has for the characters and for the development of the plot" (75). The presentation of an event often indicates how important it is through the narrator's comments, by means of repetition, and so on. For instance, the film features a visual montage of Bubba's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother serving shrimp to a series of white Louisiana mistresses. After Gump shares his fortune with Bubba's family, the flashback is transformed into a unique shot of a white maid serving shrimp to Bubba's mother.

The interplay of narrative and thematic dimensions in narrative fiction is said to depend on the way problems are posed and what critical approach is used. For instance, the metaphor of the feather floating in the wind at the beginning and at the end of the film provides a circular perspective from which to interpret the movie's "lesson", which is condensed in the film's central cloying metaphor "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get." It is a fact that both at the box office and at the Academy Awards, Forrest Gump's simple, seemingly visionary statement became extraordinarily persuasive and it is included in Winston Groom's collection of quotes and sayings – *Gumpisms, the Wit and Wisdom of Forrest Gump* (1994).

Comic features in *Forrest Gump*

Forrest Gump is a humorous, warm-hearted movie with plenty of comedy. Kagan remarks that "much of the film's humor comes out of the stupidly futile and self-destructive goals the other brighter idealists dedicate their lives to" (155). For instance, Bubba is a shrimp enthusiast, just because his family has been working on that for centuries, and Dan strongly wishes to die in combat like all his ancestors. The humor of the film comes from a wide range of verbal, physical and character devices and derives greatly from Forrest's innocent cluelessness and openness. Furthermore, juxtaposing famous figures and historic events with the fictional character of Forrest Gump results in several

hilarious comical incidents. For instance, in scene 14 Forrest may not realize the meaning of the Apple logo on the letter from the “fruit company” he invested in, but the viewer does. And while staying in the Watergate Hotel in 1971, Forrest innocently calls security and reveals the scandal leading to Nixon’s resignation: “Yeah, sir, you might want to send a maintenance man over to that office across the way. The lights are off, and they must be looking for the fuse box or something, because them flashlights are keeping me awake.”(scene 12). And Forrest moons President Johnson who had said that he would “kinda want to see that” on hearing that Gump was shot in the buttock (scene 8).

Paatero (2005) points out that the film finds comedy even in tragedy, e.g. the Vietnam War is described in a carefree way and American war culture in general is similarly derided in scene 5. Initially, Forrest Gump’s voice-over declares Lt. Dan to have descended from a family with long, great military tradition of fighting in every single American war. Having raised the viewer’s expectations, we are then shown three mental pictures - taking place in 1778 during the revolutionary war, in 1863/ Gettysburg during the Civil War and on the beach at Normandy/World War Two in 1944. Three ancestors of Lt. Dan, wearing their respective uniforms and bearing an exact resemblance to him, are shown falling down dead in a repetitive pattern. Thus, the montage of the scene is directed in an ironic manner with witty sound effects, so as to turn the tragic potential of the events into a comic moment. Perhaps one of the most subtle ironies in the story is the fact that the flashbacks occur when Forrest is waiting for a bus that he has no need to take, because Jenny’s place is within walking distance. The comedy film *Forrest Gump* parodies other key films focusing on American history. For instance, the sound of Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Doors over a looming helicopter has become a staple convention in several Vietnam War films, and the film *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) is specifically called forth when Forrest wheels Lieutenant Taylor swearing through the New York night traffic.

According to Kagan, a concern of Zemeckis in his films has been the broader forms of comedy, seeking new frontiers in broad humor. From this point of view, “*Forrest Gump* can be seen as a comedy, a holy fool’s progress through the end of the century, luck and purity comically defying prejudice, war, and capitalist competition in a mildly humorous mode” (222). The director is to be acknowledged for dealing with the most sensitive scenes in a humorous way, for instance in scene 9, having the college girl witness Forrest and Jenny in her dorm takes the pressure off the tenseness of the moment. Indeed, the sources

of meaning for nearly everything in this movie have been tampered with and manipulated in a humorous way.

The comic character

Needless to say, the comedian-centred comedy has proved highly popular in film comedy around the world. Such appeal and success in so many different cultural contexts, and such a large range of international markets might be explained by the fact that it is “a product clearly marketable and pre-sold on the basis of a star or central character presence that lends itself strongly to the economies of on-going series production” (King, 2002:38). Therefore, I think it is important to include the comic character / persona theme in this dissertation, so as to provide a more accurate perspective on the comedy film. Horton (2000:3) remarks that the history of comedy has been shaped just as much by the comedians themselves, as by playwrights, authors and screenwriters. Besides, King argues that “the star comic persona can function effectively as *part of* the narrative infrastructure”, since the characteristics associated with the performer strongly shape our anticipation of what is or is not likely to happen (39). Such is especially the case with established stars in comedian-centred comedies, whose distinctive comic personae are so deep-rooted that sets of associations and expectations arise in the viewer. King adds that such expectations and associations “can also come into play at another narrative level: in the articulation of the thematic issues and oppositions around which many film comedies are organised” (40).

Much of American film and television comedy centers on a well-known comic, so writers must be familiar with the comedian’s abilities and limitations. It is therefore important to focus a little on the characteristics of the actor performing Forrest Gump’s role. Williams & Hammond (2006:376) remark that Tom Hanks has made a virtue of giving the appearance of playing himself in each film. Hollywood directors Ron Howard and Penny Marshall were drawn to Hanks by his comic abilities, which enhanced the films *Splash* (1984) and *Big* (1988). The former, directed by Howard, was Hanks’ first hit and *Big*, directed by Marshall, is about a twelve-year-old boy who wishes to be big at a magic wish-machine and wakes up the next morning to find himself in an adult body literally overnight. In both films Hanks’ assumed childish nature and comic style were central to the genre. According to Williams & Hammond, Hanks’ star persona blurs the line between character, actor and person in a way that rivals that of the stars of the classic period (377).

Indeed, Hanks seems to walk effortlessly through his roles, delivering the audience a character with a common vulnerability and sense of decency that they may recognize in themselves. Born in 1956, Hanks clearly belongs to the generation of baby boomers. Nonetheless, he is said not to be representative of that generation's inclination to the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s. This connection is quite evident in his portrayal of the admitted idiot in *Forrest Gump*, which recreates the post-war traumas of the 1960s and 1970s.

Tom Hanks proved to be perfect for the role of Forrest Gump and for the first few weeks of shooting with the young Forrest, Tom Hanks had the chance to get immersed into the character so that when they got to the shots at the bus stop in Savannah he was already perfectly comfortable in the character. Corliss (2001) adds that the key ingredient in this film is Tom Hanks, whom he says the audience trusts to be an exemplar of quality. In his words, Hanks was classically trained and sitcom-bred, so he knows that the starkest drama can always use a leavening of wit. It is a fact that both Tom Hanks (*Bosom Buddies*, 1980) and Jim Carrey (*In Living Color*, Fox 1990-1994) got their starts in television comedy. It is also worth referring *Punchline* (1988) where Hanks plays a wannabe funnyman and *Castaway* (2000), *Terminal* (2004), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Road to Perdition* (2002) where he essayed greater dramatic depth. There is current discussion on whether Hanks has the range and persona reminiscent of James Stewart and there is even an online poll to choose who the new Jimmy Stewart is: Tom Hanks, George Clooney, Dennis Quaid or Johnny Depp? (<http://blogs.amctv.com/future-of-classic/2009/05/poll-classic-cool-actors.php>)

Horton (2000:22) warns that even though comedy is largely based on name recognition, raising a range of expectations regarding name comedians, it is important to consider not only the actor's comic career but also his possibilities for growth. For instance, Jim Carrey moves from a hilarious role in *The Masque* (1994) to a different comic performance in *The Truman Show* (1998).

Other film comedies recreating recent American history:

Back to the Future and Blast from the Past

The *Back to the Future* trilogy followed the trend of genre mixing: comedy, adventure and special effects. My aim is to demonstrate that there is also a historical approach to the 1950s and 1960s in the trilogy, although I intend to focus most on the first 1985 film, which became popular with audiences and critics on a number of levels. *Back to the Future I* is widely believed to have managed to bring in most of the high-profile cultural anxieties associated with the 1980s, ranging from the breakdown of the nuclear family to the threat of nuclear attacks by Middle Eastern-based terrorists. The story revolves around the friendship of teenager Marty McFly and Doc Emmet Brown, the eccentric inventor of a time machine which provides an unexpected opportunity for Marty to rearrange the past of his dysfunctional family. Williams & Hammond point out that this is a sentiment associated with the family comedy series of the 1950s, such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-60) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63). The film's comedy centres on the main characters' disbelief at the shape of both the past of the 1950s and the present of the 1980s, and more particularly, on the explicit reference to the potentially incestuous relationship between Marty and the 1955 version of his mother. Accidentally transported to 1955, Marty interacts with his future parents so as to rearrange history and the viewer is presented with a depiction of an American town in the 1950s and all the pop culture references of that decade. The film finishes in a race against time, which ultimately results in Marty resolving his parents' relationship difficulties but having rearranged the course of family events in such a way so as to return to a successful rather than coping family. Remaking his life, Marty sculpts his own parents as he would wish them to be so that he can enjoy a more pleasant adolescence. Thus, Barker associates time-travel in this film with some sort of genetic engineering (180).

Despite acknowledging the innovative characteristics of the trilogy, Kagan remarks that the *Back to the Future* films are not so distant from previous Hollywood treatments of time travel in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1939) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). The trilogy's constant comic tone and pop culture context are said to account for its popularity. Kagan adds that the sequels only introduced additional complications and variations to the original story (220). According to Williams & Hammond, a feature of this film is its play with history. They believe the vision of America in the 1880s depicted

in the film to be a dystopic one (274). The critical response to *Back to the Future I* was actually quite mixed. While it was enthusiastically praised for its psychoanalytic references and for being a therapeutic family comedy (Maslin, 1985; Gordon, 1987), a number of other critics have admitted their dissatisfaction. For instance, Kael (1985) criticises the film for representing the fifties' appeal to the youth market. In the eighties teenage tastes dominate mainstream movie making and this movie is believed to reinforce mediocrity. In a way, the film endorses American values like self-promotion and manipulation of others to one's own advantage, as the main character Marty aims at changing the past and the course of events in order to improve his family's situation and ensuring his own well-being. But critics were still harder on *Back to the Future, Part II* and *Part III* describing them as a bleak kind of storytelling, where actions have no real consequences and the logic and continuity of any given future world is erased. The trilogy is said to be a project that had started honourably and ended as self-parody. Kagan remarks that Zemeckis's fascination with pure technology and technique were pushed almost to extremes in the *Back to the Future* trilogy (86).

Kagan notices that the three plots are the same as that of Hollywood fantasy films such as *The Wizard of Oz*: faced with basic unsolvable personal problems, the protagonist travels into a fantasy world that contains counterparts of their real world friends and foes. Humour is broadly used throughout all three films, but with less precision and purpose as they go on. The humour in Part I was often designed to clarify and emphasize or play with the time travel concepts, while in the second and third part humour tends to be genre mocking (89). For instance, theatres are showing holographic movies, but they include the 17th sequel of *Jaws*, a pepsi costs \$50 and new televisions allow teenagers to watch six shows at once.

Kagan remarks that the particular themes, concepts and attitudes explored in the films directed by Robert Zemeckis have evolved and developed over the course of his career (217). The frontiers of technique and technology, for instance, have been a constant in Zemeckis's films, but Kagan points out that "*Back to the Future* is Zemeckis's first major experiment in technology and technique" (218). He plays with the science fiction idea of time travel as a strategy to remake the past. Later, having exhausted the time travel concept, Zemeckis moved into a universe where animated characters "live", provided by new forms of technological and technical possibilities. In Kagan's opinion, in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* film characters are pure technology, emotional robots submitting to the

dehumanizing powers of technology (219). In *Forrest Gump*, the director pushes the limits of technology from another angle, having the movie characters interact with real historical personalities. But *Back to the Future* is considered to be Zemeckis's most successful humorous project, containing several situations derived from knowledge of past and future events. For instance, in the past the idea of then movie star Ronald Reagan being president elicits a call for tightwad Jack Benny as Secretary of Treasury.

From a wide range of comedies produced in the nineties, I have selected *Blast from the Past* (1999) as a similar take upon American history and social progress. This comedy is set in the stereotypical happy early American sixties, starring Christopher Walken as the brilliant but eccentric scientist Calvin Webber, whose extreme fear of a nuclear holocaust leads him to build a huge fallout shelter in the backyard of his home in Los Angeles. The night the Cuban Missile Crisis begins, the Webbers accidentally find themselves locked in the shelter believing they are survivors of a nuclear war, and they remain there for thirty-five years. In the meantime, Mrs Webber, a picture-perfect suburban wife, gives birth to a baby boy who is raised and taught by his parents. While the life of the Webbers remains frozen in 1962, the world changes drastically, and by the time the locks are released and their son Adam goes outside, the surroundings of suburban *San Francisco* [= San Fernando]Valley have turned into a ghetto. When the time comes for him to leave the safety of the underground bunker and explore the crushing world of the nineties, he runs into Eve, who prevents Adam from being ripped off. Besides being ingenuous, Adam is unfamiliar with the present lifestyle, amazed by the simple things of modernity, and uneasy about flirting, which results in a series of gags and comic situations. This romantic comedy places at its centre these two children of the Nuclear Age: an innocent, ingenuous young man cocooned in a bomb shelter for over three decades and a sarcastic modern city woman. Brendan Fraser is Adam, a man out of time, while Alicia Silverstone is Eve, a woman of her time.

There is clearly a biblical reference to Adam and Eve in these two characters' names and personality traits. Adam's unusual upbringing contrasts deeply with Eve's growing up in the ever changing and cynical city of Los Angeles. She turned into a smart and suspicious woman, as her life has dwindled to a series of dead-end jobs, shallow relationships and frustrated hopes, while Adam is an unforeseen product of the "duck-and-cover" era, whose education turned him into an inexperienced and outdated young man. On the one hand, his wandering around in the world that his neighbourhood had turned into

demanded skills that his parents' upbringing had failed to teach him. Indeed, much of the humor of the film is derived from his being uneasy about the lifestyle of the nineties, amazed about ordinary things and unfamiliar with the slang language. On the other hand, Adam is well equipped for the world because he is the product of good and careful parenting. Eve gets a whole new perspective on life; at first she finds it hard to believe Adam is for real, as he acts and speaks like no one else she has met before. But the more she watches Adam approach the world in amazement, comic miscomprehension and delightful innocence, the more she finds herself attracted to him. In the end, after years of mistaken confinement, the family moves into a home at the surface built at the image of their previous home. Meanwhile Calvin Webber, in his belief that the "commies" have faked the collapse of the Soviet Union, plans to build a new fallout shelter.

Barker argues that "multicultural diversity in this film looks like fragmentation, inauthenticity and loss", presenting a loving, dedicated son who builds his parents a dream house at the image of their previous home, thus perpetuating their eccentric, anachronistic lifestyle instead of trying to update it (183). Moreover, the new Adam of the 1950s is endowed outstanding dancing skills and physical abilities so as to fit the Kennedy-era. Anyway, cultural anachronism seemed to be very fashionable in the nineties, and is still present in recent films, such as *A Knight's Tale* and *Black Knight*, both released in 2001.

Comedy films depicting cultural paranoia through time-freezing and repetition:

Groundhog Day* and *The Truman Show

Believing paranoia to be a cultural symptom historically anchored back in cold war culture and still thriving in the U.S. cultural imaginary, O'Donnell (2000) regards various US novels and films written and produced from the 1970s to the 1990s, as indicative manifestations of cultural paranoia. Keeping in mind that contemporary manifestations of paranoia occur within cultural pressures and forces that include identity, nationalism and global capitalism, O'Donnell studies the films *Groundhog Day* (1993) directed by Harold Ramis and *The Truman Show* (1998) by Peter Weir. In the former, a narcissistic television weatherman is doomed to wake up every morning to relive Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania until he learns to rise above his vanity and re-examine his life and priorities. Indeed, only by transcending his self-centred and insensitive nature will Phil be able to re-enter historical time. Thus, *Groundhog Day* is a tale of self-improvement; to

look inside oneself and realize that the only satisfaction in life comes from turning outward rather than concentrating solely on one's own wants and desires.

As the film employs a handful of scenarios revisited with each passing of the same day, the viewer is presented with a display of an endlessly repeatable February 2nd. This is to say, temporality is framed within the repetition of an annual event that serves to predict the beginning of spring. Trapped in time, the egotistic main character played by Bill Murray, is transformed into a small-town guy living the day according to the ritualistic and stern confines of Punxsutawney. In O'Donnell's words, "*Groundhog Day* is, at bottom, a paranoiac fantasy in which the protagonist becomes the center of a web of diurnal, partial narratives that are always repeated in the same manner, yet always viewed from a different perspective as Phil Connors changes positions in relation to the infinitely rehearsed activities of an average *Groundhog Day* in Punxsutawney" (1). Within the renewed twenty-four-hour frame, the main character becomes a genius jazz pianist, a skilful ice sculptor, a fine lover, an altruistic citizen catching a falling child and helping a choking man as, day after day, he is exactly in the right place at the right time. Thus, in *Groundhog Day* there is no past and no future beyond the diurnal present, only a succession of days enabling the character to improve his skills day after day and resulting in a comic effect. For instance, Phil Connors re-starts music lessons each day, and the piano teacher becomes ever more bewildered at the apparently natural skills of her student as the days and lessons proceed. In effect, even though it may be the hundredth repetition of *Groundhog Day* for Phil Connors, for her it is always the first version of February 2nd. He wakes up to the fact that every new day is the same day, but one in which reality deepens, experience builds up and ultimately his control of the situations increases. Therefore, in O'Donnell's opinion, the formula of the film is: "simultaneity plus repetition equals mastery" as in *Groundhog Day* historical time is abbreviated and erased, finally enabling identification with the social order and the main character's happiness (3).

This kind of temporal-framed paranoia seems to be a common element in any number of films produced after the 1970s, such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy with its overlaying of decades and *Contact* (1997), also directed by Robert Zemeckis. O'Donnell holds both *Groundhog Day* and *The Truman Show* to be demonstrations of simulation and repetition of reality, but there are deep ideological contrasts between them: in the case of *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors himself is entirely responsible for being in an endless time loop, while in the latter everyone except Truman is initially in on the plot and Christof, a

techno artist is held responsible for the him being a real person in a virtual construct. A domed island was built for Truman and filled with thousands of cast members, and he was turned into a real-time television star of a show broadcast continuously for over thirty years. Truman becomes aware that he is the subject of the plot to record and ravage his life. Once Truman confirms the plot that contains him, he initiates the escape from the symbolic order of the film into reality beyond the film. O'Donnell considers *The Truman Show* to be Peter Weir's response to such films as *Groundhog Day*, participating in the same temporal logic (4).

Truman's greeting "Good morning, and if I don't see you again, good afternoon, good evening, and good night" is repeated to his neighbours every morning and it sums up the ideal temporality of his digitalized world: on Truman's island historicity is condensed into "the endlessly rehearsed and repeated present" (5). Viewers find Truman's screened life fascinating because it removes them from their own ordinary lives and projects them into the eternal present, gathering around the TV screen to follow the simulated history of his life. As a result of hearing a falling light, some radio interference and an overhead unscripted comment, Truman becomes aware that everyone is watching his moves and actions. According to O'Donnell, Truman actually becomes gradually aware of the inauthenticity of everyone around him and his escape from the island where he was imprisoned for the first three decades of his life is comparable to "breaking through its shell - along with the demystification of the father / God / Christof", who will not be able to watch him anymore (5).

According to Barker, *The Truman Show* belongs to "the group of 1990s neo-paranoia movies predicated on information technologies (*The Net* 1995, *Conspiracy Theory* 1997, *Enemy of State* 1999) which openly assert that reality can be usurped and individual identities reshaped and erased" (182). But the premise of cultural paranoia is often overlooked by the fact that *The Truman Show* plays like a comedy.

Chapter III

Adaptation to the screen: contemporary dilemmas

According to Potter (1990:39), “films act as an unseen witness, creating the illusion of showing us what we would be seeing if we were a fly on the wall, whilst at the same time inviting us to perceive the exterior world both from the subjective point of view of characters who we see inhabiting it and through the film maker’s thoughts and feelings about the characters and the world they inhabit”. Indeed, the narrative potential of film is so strong that it has developed its strongest ties with the novel. Both films and novels tell long stories with a profusion of detail and they do it from the perspective of a narrator. It is widely accepted that popular novels have been a vast reservoir of material for commercial films over the years, but Monaco (1981:27) argues that commercial film still can’t reproduce the range of the novel and that almost invariably details of incident are lost in the transition from book to film.

Nevertheless, film has pictorial possibilities which the novel does not have. In Elliot’s (2003: 77) opinion, it should come as no surprise that film inherited those characteristics from painting, even though film language is widely believed to bear a closer resemblance to verbal language than to painting. The driving tension of film is between the materials of the story and the objective nature of the image. The end result is that the observer is free to participate in the experience much more actively. Film is, in this way, a much richer experience, but it is also impoverished since the persona of the narrator is so much lame. Nonetheless, one of the novel’s greatest assets is its ability to manipulate words. Surely, films have words too, but not usually in such profusion and never with the concrete insistence of the printed page. That might explain the preconception that the novelist produces a work of quality, of “high” art which then becomes popular culture when it is adapted to the screen for mass viewing audiences.

Metz (1974) points out that the merging of the cinema and of narrativity was a great fact, which was not strictly casual. It is said to have been a historical and social fact, which in turn conditioned the later evolution of the film. He draws a line between non-narrative genres (the documentary, the technical film, etc) and the feature-length film of novelistic fiction, which is simply called a film, underlying the superiority of the later.

The issue of adaptation has long been a salient one among film critics for quite practical reasons. As Dudley (1984:98) has observed, the making of a film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself. He recalls that over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals, though by no means all of these originals have been exalted or respected. According to him, the most frequent question of film adaptation concerns fidelity and transformation. It is assumed that the task of adaptation is the reproduction in cinema of something essential about an original text. Therefore, fidelity to the spirit of the text, to the tone, values, imagery, structure and rhythm is said to be difficult to achieve. In Elliot's opinion, there is a 20th century psychic concept of adaptation that understands what passes from book to film as the spirit of the text (136). Other critics believe that the adapter looks for the balance between preserving the spirit of the original and creating a new form. Cartmell and Whelehan add that the success of a film is often measured in terms of its capacity to realize what are held to be the centre meanings and values of the original text (3). Moreover, certain features of a narrative – such as historical veracity, authenticity of location and costume- must be kept so as to ensure the reproduction of the core meaning of the novel, thus the success of the adaptation (7). When approaching the field of adaptations, our attitude is still likely to be influenced by cultural assumptions about the relative worth of the literary versus the film medium. Furthermore, there is also an assumption that film viewers look for the authenticity of the original, expressing the belief that the visual interpretation cannot do justice to the complexity and substance of the novel.

Even though a varied range of literary genres has brought into existence film adaptations, the novel has been by far the most popular written source throughout the history of the cinema. Cartmell and Whelehan point out that “a popular film adaptation of a novel can transform the text's value, from esoteric object to object of mass consumption” (7). Indeed, a film is produced and packaged under a company logo, therefore it is expected to guarantee box-office success to make so as to pay for its high production expenses (7). Despite the strong appeal of popular culture forms, the idea that the film form could reduce the number of literature readers has proved to be unfounded. As a matter of fact, a successful film or TV adaptation of a literary text is very likely to increase the sales of a novel substantially. Cartmell and Whelehan argue that “our actual reading practices in a postmodern cultural context place the reading of literary texts into the same critical sphere as the consumption of more explicitly commercial products” (19). It is

suggested that studying adaptations will bring more flexibility to analyses of literary texts, thus contributing to a more self-conscious audience about their role as critics.

According to Cartmell and Whelehan, the process of presenting a literary text on film is one in which the formal devices of narrative, such as point of view, tense, voice, must be accomplished by other means, which puts the adapter's skills to the test. Indeed, as MacFarlane (1996:14) notes, there are narrative features that can be readily transferred from one medium to another and there are those that require adaptation. For instance, there is a major distinction between the novel and the film: the former is said to have three tenses – past, present and future – while there is no past tense in the film. In view of the important role novels have played in service to filmmaking, then, it is not surprising that, when critics evaluate a film based on a novel, they often focus on the effectiveness of the adaptation. Indeed, it is common to find contradictory evaluations of the same film, with one critic reckoning the adaptation to be successful while another considers it a failure. Kline (1996) argues that these differences in judgment about the effectiveness of specific film adaptations spring from the critics' adoption of different paradigms for evaluating the film adaptation. Nevertheless, there are important cinematic elements that can not be disregarded, since they are orchestrated to amplify the thoughts and emotions that actors convey to the audience. So, when "reading" a film, these are some cinematic elements to consider: camera movement / panning, photography, lighting, sound, editing...

Mise-en-scène

Translated from the French as "staging" or "putting into the scene", *mise-en-scène* seems to have its origin in theatre rather than in cinema. Indeed, filmic *mise-en-scène* has widely been defined exclusively by what it has in common with theatrical staging. However, Dix (2008:10) insists upon the fundamental importance of matters of visual style for film studies and prefers a more comprehensive approach to *mise-en-scène* which considers not only the elements that film shares with theatrical staging, but also distinctive visual characteristics of cinematography. When reflecting on film studies, Dix refers to pro-filmic elements as the contents of the visual field that are believed to be previous and autonomous from the camera's activity: setting, props, costume, lighting and acting (12). What is more, critics have also reckoned montage and sound to be elements of *mise-en-scène* (Dick. 2002: 19).

Cinematic settings are said to be worth careful attention. To begin with, settings range along a wide spectrum and they are charged with deep significance. In fact, locations not only reinforce the credibility of particular film story, but are also associated to certain film genres. For instance, gloomy precipices and gothic castles function as a clue to horror films because peculiar spaces have been associated with certain film genres. Besides revealing the characters' geographical location, socio-economic status and occupation, setting performs another basic function: revealing their psychological traits and state of mind. For instance, *Forrest Gump* opens with the main character sitting alone at a bus stop, in a reflexive posture, unaware of the buzz around him but aware enough to spot the floating feather falling on his lap. This reveals his peaceful and easy nature of character.

Dix describes props as objects of different size, *things* that appear on screen and reveal traits of character (14). Besides, certain props also signal film genre, being associated to some genres more than with others. For instance, hanging a long sharp knife is a picture likely to be readily associated to a thriller movie. Thus, objects are freed from their material detail and endowed with non-realist meanings, largely thanks to the camera's capacity for close-up. Depending on the context, the same object on the screen may be interpreted differently according to its particularities, narrative suggestiveness and symbolism. For example, a TV set may be no more than a piece of furniture in most films, but in *Pleasantville* (1999) it fulfils a central role in the plot as a means of transporting the two main characters to a televised world. And in *The Truman Show* (1998) a television set becomes an indicator of a society of surveillance and manipulation. Therefore, Dix believes that "cinema shares with photography a vocation to reveal with heightened vividness the material world that we inhabit" (14). Lastly, props are also said to perform an informational role regarding character (15). Such is the case of the *Curious George* book which Forrest is carrying in his hand luggage when he is at the bus stop waiting for the bus to take him to Jenny's. And close to the end of the film, when father and son are waiting for the bus to drive Forrest Junior to school, Forrest notices the same book in his son's schoolbag, and remarks that it was his favourite book. Curious George is the protagonist of a series of popular children's books written by H.A. Rey and Margret Rey, featuring a monkey named George who is brought from his home in Africa by "the Man with the Yellow Hat" to live with him in the big city. The presence of this prop is aimed at stressing Forrest's childishness and the purity of his feelings.



Figure 1. Young Forrest (Michael Humphreys) and Jenny (Hanna Hall) read “The Curious George” storybook

There is also a wide range of possible meanings and connotations associated to costume, which also includes make-up and hairstyle. The fact is that certain items and even combinations of clothing give clues as to national identity, class, gender, emotional and psychological status. For instance, in the 1992 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff’s dark, loose and worn out fittings, combined with his long dark hair, are indicative of his relentless and bitter temperament. And in *Forrest Gump*, Lt. Dan’s long hair, beard and scruffy clothing closely resembles the anti-war protestors in the sixties. What is more, costume may also induce assumptions about a film’s genre. Such is the case of nineteenth century outfits worn by characters in the film adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). All in all, every piece of clothing is regarded as a signifier from which particular meanings may be drawn out, and costume combines with other filmic elements to reinforce certain meanings.

Dix considers film lighting to be “a key contributor to the fashioning of cinematic illusions” (18). The ideal lighting is one that absorbs the spectator to the point of responding to it almost as natural. Nonetheless, there are numerous well-established lighting combinations that are used to achieve different qualities of light and shadow in films. Moreover, there is a pivotal articulation between lighting and acting / performance. For instance, abundant and soft lighting is perfectly adequate for romantic movies. **Acting** is a filmic component including on-screen facial expression, gesture, positioning, movement and speech. Dix advises not to judge film acting by criteria used in the

assessment of theatrical performance, because “film acting has conventions which may overlap only partially with those of theatrical performance” (20).

Dix describes cinematography as the myriad of “decisions taken during the recording and processing of film image” and focuses on some major properties and tactics of the film camera itself: distance; height, angle and level; masking; movement; focus (23). He gives particular attention to the extreme close up possibilities to communicate feelings. For example, a shot showing the eyes or the mouth may convey fear, sadness, happiness, etc. According to him, height, angle and level of the camera are also important aspects to consider as variable effects can be produced by the specific choice of camera height and he calls attention to the need to contextualize the reading of a film sequence, and not to attribute a fixed significance to the camera angles (25). The apparatus involved in recording images is itself frequently mobile, which brings us to the importance of movement, either shifts in the camera’s entire body or those where there is only modification of some outer part of equipment. Another common way of achieving mobility without repositioning the camera itself is the *zoom*, in which the sense of progressively moving towards or back from a subject is produced using a lens of variable focal length. The camera movements described above are likely to have an effect upon the quality of focus, which largely depends on the selection of lenses used.

Dix also gives careful thought to colour and its meanings, even though the implications of colour have not always been given a central place in film studies, dividing opinions between “those welcoming it just as they had sound as an enhancement of cinema’s capacity to document the world fully”, and those who disapproved of it (32). Even nowadays, Dix regrets that colour is a topic occupying a marginal status. According to him, some film critics “place colour within the pro-filmic elements of *mise-en-scène* as a subclass of setting”, and “colour is also to be found elsewhere in the pro-filmic range, especially as a key element in costume” (32). Moreover, colour is prone to be enlarged, altered and even invented at the cinematographic level. It may be chemically modified even after filming through manipulations of the developing process, not to mention the possibilities opened up by digital technology. The fact is that colour performs several functions in film: an evidence of historical and geographical authentication, a marker of genre classification and even as a means of narrative organisation. Indeed, there is strong symbolic and thematic potentials attached to colour, and the spectator needs to be sensitive to the different contexts of colour, as it also has powerful cultural determinants (34).

Chapter IV

Forrest Gump's approach to the recent past

Forrest Gump has a highly episodic, non-linear narrative: its scenes do not drive forward, they merely follow one another with the logic of simple chronology, not the logic of traditional film structure. Most of the film is narrated in the first person by Forrest to various passersby at the bus stop opposite the park. However, in the last fifth of the film (more precisely, in scene 17), upon learning directions to Jenny's, Forrest leaves and the viewer follows him as he reunites with Jenny and meets their son. This final segment suddenly has no narrator unlike the rest of the film, and is told through Forrest and Jenny's dialogues. Moreover, the film's episodic narrative structure manages to balance drama with light comedy, presenting situations and historical events in an original and easy-going way and appealing to the viewers' sympathy for the main character.

Both Hinson (1994) and Yacowar (2004) take quite a critical view of this film's approach to history. The former argues that, even though *Forrest Gump* "operates on the stage of important events, it seems not to have any real historical point of view"(3), and the latter feels that the film establishes American history as an absurd and mock-heroic succession of accidents bereft of any coherence and design" (675). Hinson ironically adds that "in the world according to Gump, history is as weightless as Gump himself", since the main character takes part in real-life events, reducing them to gags (3). Such is the case of scene 4, at the University of Alabama, when he comes upon a crowd gathered to watch as Governor George Wallace attempts to keep several black students from attending classes. Gump is inserted into actual footage of the event and, despite the tense mood, he is unaware of the importance of the moment and slips around behind George Wallace.



Figure 2. As governor Wallace makes his televised anti-integration speech, Forrest (Tom Hanks) edges into the frame with an uncomprehending look on his face.

Byers (1996: 426) acknowledges these meeting with famous people and events of his time to be “some of the film’s most striking sequences”, explicitly referring to history and rewriting such moments by inserting Forrest in the picture as a witness or even a participant. Yet, Byers believes that such writings neutralize history, on the grounds that “the images are altered to include Forrest himself and narratively re-inscribed as parts of the private story of one rather marginal individual, so that the comedy of their eccentric connections to Forrest’s life supplants and covers over their larger import (427). Maslin (1994) also has a critical opinion on Forrest’s immersion in visual postwar history, on the grounds that by the end of the film viewers would have lost all ability to distinguish real images from digitally altered ones.

Wang (2000:96) argues that “such a rearrangement of representative images and sound” obscures reality and reverses the course of events. For example, the film features a telling of the on-air composition of John Lennon’s anti-war song *Imagine*, which carries a revolutionary message pleading for peace and condemning materialism, nationalism and religion. However, as composed by Forrest Gump in a televised interview, the song is transformed into a celebration of conformity to dominant values of consumerism, and Christianity. A reconstruction could hardly be more transforming and mendacious. Yacowar argues that *Forrest Gump* seems “a caricature of America’s mythology of success arising naturally from simple values, innocence and morality” (677). Nevertheless, Yacowar admits that Forrest is self-aware of his slowness when he asks Jenny if their son has mental limitations. Moreover, the main character manages to outdo his cultural and personal limitations by establishing a true brotherhood with Bubba and generously committing to the promise made to his dead friend. Besides, Yacowar notices “a prophetic irony in the nature of Forrest’s exchanges with the various American presidents”. Completely ignorant of the issues involved, he exposes “the presidents’ private natures: Kennedy’s phallicism, Johnson’s scatology and Nixon’s self-destructiveness” (679).

Byers remarks that in the film’s reference to the many assassinations and assassination attempts in the period, it is significant that “all the targets except John Lennon, are either presidents or presidential candidates – actual or aspiring heirs to the position of Father of the nation”, as wounded patriarchs (427). Thus, the assassinations become a motif unifying the plot, and the film records all of the famous American ones, except for Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. While some arguments about extreme radicalism are advanced to justify not including Malcom X, Byers considers the omission

of Luther King's murder bewildering and he can only make sense of the erasure of such important event on the grounds of "the wish to attach victim status to white men" (427).

The fact is that the politics of the most influential nation of the world cannot be separated from "the most far-reaching entertainment medium in the world", argue Davies and Wells (5). In this sense, Coyne (2008:7) adds that "Hollywood has, in effect, functioned as a two-way mirror, through which the world views America". He recalls a 2005 poll on the greatest American of all time, which revealed Ronald Reagan – president and movie star – to be the twentieth century embodiment of the American Dream, as he was a humble boy who grew up to be president. Indeed, Reagan strongly appealed to the aspirations of American voters, not so much via his latter political career, but for his prominent role in the cinema. The American film industry is believed to have deeply shaped Americans' aspirations and contributed to defining the meanings of American democracy, its dreams and destiny, side by side with American global economic and military supremacy. Coyne stresses that in American movies, ideology is *everywhere* (8). While stressing the underlying political messages in American movies, he realizes that many classic American films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *Casablanca* (1942), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *the Godfather* (1972) and *Forrest Gump* (1994) are clearly political in content without being primarily set in the realm of US politics, as each has an underlying political message even though none chiefly addresses American politics.

It goes without saying that *Forrest Gump* addresses the American viewers' emotions and patriotism, and a skilful use of visual imagery and songs makes it seem truly all-American. Yacowar also feels that Forrest's character makes him "an emblem for America" (682), and wonders about the questions posed to the viewer when the feather blows in the wind at the film's end: "Must humankind resign itself to a tragic destiny, or can it choose a more honorable one?" (682). The best elements of Groom's eccentric novel were turned it into a memorable new cultural icon for the 1990s. Barker also remarks that "no other film has performed a defter sleight-of-hand with time and history than *Forrest Gump*", the most ambitious comedy of the 1990s", which references all the relevant historical **televised** moments since the fifties (184).

According to Wang "*Forrest Gump* revises popular memories of the 1960s through its representations of gender and race and its visualization of post-war history"(92). She adds that several scholars have tried to explain the stunning popularity of the film, and the

cultural and ideological impact of its visualization of post-war history. Such is the case of Byers (1996), who analyses the relevance of patriarchy in the film's narrative and stresses *Forrest Gump's* political influence as a conservative film, thus reinforcing the general view of the power of film to influence national politics and rewrite recent history. Moreover, Wang aims at documenting "the cross-articulations among the political climate of the 1990s America, the film, and the ideological agenda of the Republican right" (93). In Morrow's (1992:50) opinion, "in the politically and culturally turbulent final decades of the twentieth century, America has sought to restock its repertoire of folklore and self-images and archetypes". In this sense, a narrative about American history in popular culture, such as the 1994 film *Forrest Gump*, was helpful in constructing popular political sense out of a journey through the last four decades of American history. Forrest Gump is considered to be an important pop culture figure, having often appeared on worldwide screens, being a subject of countless articles attempting to explain the *Gump* phenomenon, and inspiring a wide variety of merchandise. Moreover, Wang remarks that the *Gump* phenomenon is not simply a fad; there has been an ongoing "cultural struggle over the meanings ascribed to Forrest Gump and his story" (93).

Forrest Gump was invoked during the 1994 congressional elections to highlight the conservatives' ideological agenda. The conservatives found the roots for gender and racial crisis in the sixties, the era in which both African Americans and women made their most significant political and cultural advances, thus implicitly relating the political and cultural movements of the 1960s with the crisis of meaning in 1990s America. When *Forrest Gump* opened in theatres in July 1994, it is said to have answered the questions of when and where America as a nation had gone wrong, resulting in the crisis of values deeply felt in the 1990s. *Forrest Gump* is said to aim at answering these questions through an episodic narrative composed of familiar media images of post-war history. Besides manipulating historical memories, archival footage was digitally altered so as to insert the character of Forrest Gump into documentary footage of actual events. Thus, Wang sums up: "the images are recombined and repackaged to create a new, recycled visual history" (95). Historical memories are re-contextualized and reframed, becoming part of Gump's tale in this new arrangement of visual memory, turning the film into a site at which a new, shared experience of modern history is rewritten. For instance, the visuals illustrating what Forrest describes as the happiest time of his life – losing his virginity and conceiving the

son who would carry on his name – emphasize the celebration of the U.S. bicentennial in 1976 and Forrest's and Jenny's domestic enjoyment of that event.

Corliss (2001) describes Forrest as the greatest sentimental figure from a film industry that softens virtually any controversial social issue. Embodying the superiority of the handicapped, his plain optimism and his success as a businessman and a reviver of American confidence could turn him into a powerful emblem of the 1980s conservatism. Indeed, the film's presentation of the sixties was coded as conservative. That is to say, *Forrest Gump* was regarded as a handy ground for the articulation of conservative politics. The conservative agenda for the 1994 midterm congressional elections was based on the so-called traditional American values of the white masculine society. Thus, conservatives mobilized the historical myths supplied in *Forrest Gump* in an attempt to define their political ground. Having grown in popularity with the conservative media for pushing traditional values to the forefront, the success of the film was believed to mirror the more conservative mood of the country. Besides, *Forrest Gump*'s negative account of the sixties counterculture reinforced the discourse against the liberals and Clinton. Owing to the film's conservative visual recreation of the sixties, the Clinton administration was associated with the rebirth of the heinous counterculture. Despite the strong attack on 1960s liberals, the Republican message had a redemptive tone (on which presidential candidate Bob Dole's campaign was based): no matter how great the adversity, the American Dream is within everybody's reach (Wang: 107).

It is a given fact that “the figure of Forrest Gump influenced the 1994 campaign agenda. Wang argues that the figure of Forrest Gump proved to be more than a one-dimensional cinematic image”, since it was associated with the conservatives' effort to reclaim popular culture and the presidency (107). Indeed, the political impact of the symbols and ideas carried out through popular culture is strong, real and not to be dismissed. It had such a real influence that a poll conducted by a short-lived television show *TV Nation* showed that nearly 30% of the people surveyed believed this fictional version of the sixties to be a documentary. In Wang's opinion, liberals undervalued the cultural resonance of the film, dismissing the discursive power of *Forrest Gump* as a sentimental “pop culture trend” (108). In this way they ensured that the cultural echoes from the *Gump* phenomenon would benefit the conservatives.

Likewise, when *Pleasantville*, written and directed by a Democratic Party activist and speech writer for Clinton, was released in 1998, liberals ignored the political potential

of the film. *Pleasantville* offers a bolder alternative version of the counterculture, contesting conventions and tradition, thus offering liberals a chance to combat conservatives' depiction of the counterculture and America's moral decay. According to Wang, director Gary Ross employed a digitally enhanced narrative of two 1990s teenagers lost in a 1950s sitcom world so as to deconstruct family values discourse and criticize those holding the return to the 1950s to be a solution to contemporary problems. Nevertheless, Wang reaffirms her conviction that liberals failed to take advantage of the political possibilities of both *Forrest Gump* and *Pleasantville*, since it would have been possible, for example, "to connect the Republican-led charge to impeach Clinton to the puritanical and mob-like fury unleashed against the forces of social change in *Pleasantville*" (108).

Gender and race

Wang focuses on the topics of gender and race in *Forrest Gump*, arguing that the film presents a nostalgic view of America in the 1950s, while presenting the 1960s and 1970s as an era of confusion and conflict (97). This contrast is clear through Forrest, a representative of the 1950s and Jenny, his childhood love, who is said to represent the 1960s and 1970s. Forrest Gump is made to represent all the American virtues –honesty, tolerance, decency, goodness and loyalty, while Jenny was attributed most of the excesses Americans acted out in the sixties and seventies. The account of her sexual experimentation is intertwined with her involvement in 1960s political and cultural movements. Therefore, the feminine is featured as the setting of cultural chaos since the film associates Jenny's sexuality with the tumultuous movements, sexual chaos and historical tumult of the 1960s and 1970s. Moving from strip shows, to the pages of *Playboy*, to college, to antiwar activism, it becomes very clear to the viewer that as Jenny physically moves away from her past in Alabama and from the values of the 1950s, she engages in an escalating path of self-destruction. Byers remarks that consigning to her all these roles – a folksinging bohemian, a promiscuous Playboy model, a flower-child, an anti-war activist and lover of a radical leader, a cocaine addict, an HIV-positive single mother- is intended to be more symbolic of the counterculture than realistic/credible (432).

Forrest Gump is believed to participate in the rewriting of gender history during the sixties, even though Jenny has a leading narrative role during the film's presentation of this

era. Nevertheless, Byers argues that the film erases all direct signs of feminism from its selection of images and memories of the era, so as not to threaten the masculine myth of *Forrest Gump*. The most striking detail regarding Jenny's journey through the counterculture is the fact that "she is neither shown as a feminist, nor is feminism as a political movement ever really represented" (433). Even though the women's movement and the Civil Rights movement do not feature in the novel, one might expect the screenwriter to include them in his rewriting of history. But the novel's legend of Forrest Gump was reworked in order to fit the screenwriter's framework, and therefore particular historical events were selected and included in the film. In this light, the women's movement and its attempt to rewrite patriarchy were eliminated so that masculinity emerged as superior at the end of the film. Wang agrees that the decision not to include the women's movement in the account of post-war history negates its historical contributions and hinders the fact that progressive politics emerged from feminism (97). Byers adds: "the character and relationships of Forrest Gump are a cultural pastiche, in which everything that is useful to the constitution of the boomer man as a good guy and father is appropriated, and everything that is in opposition to him or threatens his prerogatives - whether it is his own generation's rebellious past or independent women or Black men as a political force - is dismissed" (436). This is described as the "othering" strategy promoted by *Forrest Gump*, so as to distance its audience from the memories of the sixties and perhaps their participation in these events.

Byers argues that *Forrest Gump* works hard to deny white racism, even though several scenes have racism as their historical referent (428). Despite acknowledging racism and the anti-racist movements, the script turns it into something so incomprehensible as to empty it of historical meaning. Moreover, those scenes portray the white pro-racist leaders negatively. For instance, Gump's voiceover identifies Nathan Bedford Forrest as his ancestor, a great Civil War hero and founder of the Ku Klux Klan, suppressing any mention of race and describing the Klan as silly, since Gump is unable to comprehend their real motives. Wang also believes that while *Forrest Gump* "provides narrative space to address the role of gender in the 1960s, the film largely falls silent on race", wondering whether the absence of racial matters was due to the main character's being unable to figure out racial difference (98). Wang remarks that the civil rights movement, the most critical political movement of the sixties influencing the development of both the women's movement and the gay rights movement, is portrayed only through images of the 1963

desegregation of the University of Alabama and the activities of the Black Panther Party. In this way, the film ignores other historic events depicting the tenacity of white racism and the courage of the black resistance, such as the Freedom Summers, the Birmingham bus boycotts, the March on Washington, the Watts riot, and the assassination of Malcom X and Martin Luther King (99).

Wiegman (1999:124) believes that “the film participates in the contemporary struggle to reform whiteness by moving its protagonist through a range of anti-racist positions”. Indeed, the film contains two explicit references to the history of racial conflict in America: George Wallace’s “standing in the schoolhouse door” scene at the University of Alabama, and the Black Panther Party scene. According to Wang, “the difference between these two visual memories highlights the racial politics of the film” (98). In the later, Gump steps in to save Jenny who is being physically abused by her boyfriend and organisation leader at the party’s Washington headquarters, thus evoking the threat of bodily harm to those women who participated in political movements. Being an African-American organisation established to promote black power and self-defense through acts of social agitation, the Party’s black nationalist reputation attracted an ideologically diverse membership. Even though this scene, widely believed to be central to the film’s reconstruction of the 60s racial politics, does not appear in the novel, it is designed to visualize the danger of black autonomy to a white woman and to give voice to the racial and sexual threats of Black Nationalism, thus emphasizing the need to keep it under white control. All in all, Wang believes that in the context of the 1990s America, *Forrest Gump*’s emphasis on the threat of black violence and the birth of such politics in the sixties reinforces the film’s conservative racial politics (98).

In the George Wallace scene, the camera focuses on Forrest’s inability to comprehend what the controversy is about, instead of focusing on Wallace’s speech defying the court’s integration order, even though his figure is visually apparent in the archival footage. This allows the director to have the racial hatred of white supremacy silenced by our hero’s inability to understand racism and the politics of desegregation. Wiegman remarks that Gump symbolically joins the students when he innocently fetches one of their dropped books, and with this gesture he becomes a role player, and is strategically detached from the racist whiteness that Wallace stands for, even though the innocence of his action seems to depoliticize the whole scene (126). Byers remarks that “this sequence offers the film’s only depiction of the Civil Rights movement and the

racism against which it struggles” (429). In his opinion, the fact that Forrest is unable to understand the concept of racism has the effect of downplaying its historical importance. Furthermore, after that scene, representations of racism disappear from the film sequences, in favour of the notion that black Bubba and southern white GI Gump were naturally best friends. According to Byers, “after the George Wallace sequence, the film refers to race primarily by its construction of two Black men: Forrest’s best friend and figurative brother, “Bubba”, who dies in his arms in Vietnam, and a Black Panther leader whom Forrest encounters in connection with an antiwar demonstration soon thereafter” (430) . Just like Forrest, Bubba is innocently silent on issues of race, focusing on his dream to become a shrimp boat captain. On the other hand, the Black Panther shouting slogans at Forrest in the Party’s headquarter is said to represent the oppositional discourse, stressing his refusal to fight for a racist country. But his speech is simply aggressive and devoid of sense to Forrest.

Wang contrasts the way in which race issues are addressed in the film during the 1960s with the virtual disappearance of racial questions in the film’s portrayal of the 1970s and 1980s. African Americans appear only on the margins of the cinematic screen, as shrimpers who lose their boats during Hurricane Carmen, gospel singers, or as maids serving Forrest’s mother. Wang adds that “post-’60s representations of race generally feature them in personal, not political roles”, implying an “integrated view of American society” where race relations have progressed, even though African Americans have visually moved off the screen to drift towards the margins of society. She adds that “by suppressing the history of racial conflict and the depth of racial division, *Forrest Gump* ultimately misrepresents the struggles and successes of the movement” (99). For instance, when Forrest shares the fortune he has earned in the shrimping business with the impoverished family of his deceased African American best friend Bubba, this single private gesture visually overthrows the destiny of three generations of women in Bubba’s family, who served shrimp to white mistresses.

Thus, Forrest’s generosity enabled her to reverse her destiny working for the privileged. From a visual point of view, this echoes other successful black women who have managed to stand out in the American multicultural society despite their impoverished background, such as Winfrey Oprah. Wang adds that it is implied that Bubba overcame his racial legacy because he dared to dream about owning his own business and shared his ideas with Forrest Gump, echoing the mythic American Dream (100). It is

implied that it was not racial oppression that prevented Bubba's family from breaking the cycle of poverty and racial subordination. The viewer then is led to conclude that Bubba rose above his racial legacy because of his enterprise as he dared to dream about owning his own shrimping boat and shared it with Forrest. The ideology behind this narrative is that individual initiative can overcome the impact of slavery, thus eliminating the need for race-based political remedies.

The film is believed to go even further, so as to suggest that since the cultural and political upheaval of the 1960s, white men have been consistently victimized, while women and blacks have acquired rights and voices in the political arena. Indeed, *Forrest Gump* presents a list of white men who experienced the chaos of the era, such as Elvis Presley, George Wallace, and the scenes of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and John Lennon, the resignation of Richard Nixon, etc. These are presented to the viewer through archival clips and series of visual and oral media reports that serve as historical signposts. Wang remarks that Forrest manages to remain true to the ideals and values he has been taught and blind to issues of the exercise of power, wealth, politics and cultural change. He is said to represent the victory of traditional American values that he sustains - loyalty, obedience and innocence. On the other hand, "the self-destructive paths of social change, sexual freedom and experimentation explored by those surrounding Forrest, particularly Jenny, lead only to ruination" (101).

Patriarchy

Byers believes that the movie's central character and its unifying romance plot are conceived so as to criticize traditional masculinity. So, "the abuse and neglect of women and children, for instance, are initially associated to an older generation of men." (434). The fathers of the two main characters, Forrest and Jenny, were in one case physically absent, and in the other, sexually abusive. Forrest's father is permanently "on vacation", as his mother says, having abandoned his family and his responsibility towards them, while Jenny's father is portrayed as the child sexual abuser, and it is implied that his behaviour towards Jenny accounts for her later instability. But the excesses of masculinity do not belong entirely to the generation of Forrest and Jenny's parents. It also accounts for Jenny's boyfriend Wesley's abusive and misogynist behaviour towards her.

Wang also supports this view on the father figure, adding that the film renegotiates the role of the white patriarch as the source of political and cultural renewal, thus realising that the film is embedded in the discursive claims of the conservatives (101). Byers believes that the father figures described in the film not only suggest that bad masculinity is mainly in the past, but also provide arguments in the boomer generation's dispute with their own fathers (434). By the end of the film, the return of patriarchal control is celebrated, as Forrest becomes a father and, after Jenny's illness and death, takes on the responsibility of raising their young son, Forrest. When Forrest Junior gets on his schoolbus and introduces himself as Forrest Gump, the father status of the protagonist is finally and publicly affirmed: he has passed on his name. Furthermore, in the final scenes of the narrative, the audience finds out that "Little Forrest" was conceived on the Fourth of July, thereby reinforcing the relation between paternity and the future of the nation. Furthermore, the beginning of Forrest's fatherhood coincides with the start of Ronald Reagan's first term in the White House. Through the film, traditional family values and conservatism are given a central role in the American background. In Wang's words, "the assassination of John K. Kennedy, *Forrest Gump* brings its audience to "The Recovery", the restoration of calm family life in "the Age of Reagan" (102).

Forrest is said to represent the boomer as the "new man", egalitarian, sympathetic to the marginalized. He becomes a football star, a Medal-of-Honor-winning war hero, a successful entrepreneur, a spiritual leader and a wise father, therefore also living up to the fantasies of a traditional masculinity. Having fulfilled the traditional masculine roles and achievements, Forrest is said to be representative of the ideals of an All-American culture in his period. The last scenes of the film complete the masculinisation of the culture and exaltation of the father: Forrest's trip to Savannah, meeting his son, learning about Jenny's condition and accepting her marriage proposal. Moreover, at their wedding they are joined by Lieutenant Dan, who had gone through a period of alcoholism, bitter cynicism and loss of faith, but was saved by Forrest's innate goodness. Byers points out that the film focuses on the historical trauma that Vietnam caused for American masculinity in the legless Lieutenant Dan. When he appears at Forrest's wedding, he is back on his feet again, with the help of prostheses, he is re-equipped, ready to re-ascend to the paternal position. Byers considers that this way "the film redeems the technological know-how, commonly coded both American and masculine, that failed when the military relied on it to win the war" (436).

Ideology in *Forrest Gump*

Yacowar (2004:669) believes that the film presents generous simplicity as a preferable alternative to the fervid ideologies that in the sixties tore America apart. Thus, the film seems to appeal to the populist faith in the common man, even though, in his ignorance, “Forrest is not so much an ideal as a denial of the common sense of the populist model” (673). Nevertheless, Yacowar feels that the film is a satire on the powers of the “common man”, as there is a very strong sense of irony both in the main character’s nature and in the course of his destiny. “Yet, he not only survives against all odds and adversities, he manages to place his stamp upon history” (671). Chumo (1995:2) argues that *Forrest Gump* offers its audience the chance to redeem their past political sins through the healing presence of Gump, just as Jenny wanders off but is always welcomed back by him. The film carries the audience back to traditional gender and racial roles, encouraging the taking up of common American values that have sustained the nation through historical crises. Gump is said to represent a form of Ideal American, free from both prejudice and belligerence, a virtuous innocent law-abiding Huckleberry Finn – character. Wang adds that the film provides a new historical narrative to the current search for meaning, acknowledging the significant power of the film to reorient recent political history (102).

In fact, Forrest touches upon nearly every major cultural event of recent times, and influences the course of events, but his actions are just the products of Forrest acting on thoughtless impulse. For instance when his beloved Jenny leaves, he gets the urge to spend two years running across the United States, which is transformed into a meaningful cult. Yacowar sums up: “Like the feather, running represents both his assertion of his own will and the larger destiny that seems to have been established for him” (679). Recalling the opening scene from the film, in which a feather floats gently from the sky to land on Gump’s muddy Nike running shoes, Wiegman (1999) remarks that the running shoes are an evidence of Forrest’s physical mobility and they relate Gump to a commodity that had been associated to Nike’s exploitative working conditions in Southeast Asia in the 1990s. So, the presence of the Nike corporation commodity in the film is most likely intended to recover the trademark’s prestige and to fulfil Nike’s own corporate fantasy of an innocent historicity, summed up in the slogan - *Just do it*. Wiegman concludes that “as Gump is marked quite literally first and foremost by the trademark, it becomes the film’s earliest mechanism for ascribing to Gump a particularizing identity” (133). In fact, even the

advertisements for the film, both in theatres and on video, feature Gump in his running shoes.



Figure 3 The film opens as a white feather gently wafts across the screen and the town, finally landing at Forrest's muddy Nike sneaker.

Wiegman affirms that early in the film, Gump is considered “discursively black” through the analogy between his mental and physical disability and black social disadvantage (124). The fact that the narrative sets a black woman to serve as the bus stop audience for the childhood portion of Gump's tale is evidence of the film's concern with the re-signification of segregation (126). Her words “My feet hurt” trigger a set of childhood memories of his mobility restrictions: the physical restriction of wearing leg braces to and the social disadvantage of enduring ridicule and exclusion because of his disabilities.

In order to stress this analogy between racial segregation and Forrest's restricted mobility, ostracism and social exclusion, the narrative presents the scene of him being refused a seat on a school bus, which would happen again years later when he was refused a seat on a bus by all his fellow army mates, but Bubba. From Wiegman's point of view, these scenes not only rewrite segregation as a discourse of injury no longer specific to blacks, but also attribute such injury to the prejudice and moral void of selected individuals (127). The following scenes show Forrest suddenly gaining mobility as he magically breaks free of his leg braces as a kid being chased by his classmates and as a teenager being harassed by other boys. On the other hand, his flight across a college football field grants him a scholarship and an athletic career, and in Vietnam his ability to run saves his life. Finally, in the segment that Wiegman considers to be “the film's oddest and longest

devoted to mobility, Gump spends three years running from shore to shore and redrawing the boundaries of the nation's geographic identity" (127).

Mobility proves to be a central theme in the film, since even the redemption of the white Vietnam veteran Lieutenant Dan is thematized through mobility, as Lieutenant Dan, initially disabled by the loss of his legs in the war, comes to walk again with artificial limbs in his last appearance in the film. At the same time, the reconstruction of his traumatized white male body is accompanied by his own sexual completion, as he announces his impending marriage to Susan, an Asian American woman. Forrest's ability to save Lieutenant Dan is regarded by Wiegman as a retrieval of masculinity, but Susan's appearance is also intended to make reference to the narrative of war in Southeast Asia. Forrest Gump and Lieutenant Dan's investment in Apple Computers, an industry whose production and distribution is linked to post-war capitalist expansion in Southeast Asia (132). In Yacowar's opinion, Forrest is successful because "he is too simple to have an idea or an ideology of his own" (680). For instance, he fits so well in the army because he sticks to doing only whatever he is told to, and on the college gridiron he needs signs and cheers to tell him to stop as well as to run. It is also his simple virtue that saves the worldly Lieutenant Taylor, who makes his peace with God and also with man, under Forrest's influence. Even though at first a wheelchair-bound Lt. Dan Taylor hates Forrest for cheating him out of his destiny, Forest leads him to choose a different destiny from the one he had assumed and in the process Taylor abandons the militarist and racist ideologies he had earlier been prone to. In a similar way, Forrest makes it possible for Bubba's mother to reverse her destiny as a servant for the privileged class, freeing her from the ideology of racist and economic subservience.

Yacowar concludes that Forrest embodies an alternative America when he demonstrates the wisdom of humility and integrity, instead of fervent ideologies (682). Therefore, it is ironical that conservatives mobilized the historical myths animated in *Forrest Gump* in an attempt to define their political ground in the 1994 midterm elections. According to Wang, "the goal of political and cultural conservatives, particularly around the 1994 midterm elections, was to define the 1960s as the moment when our nation lost its traditional values and to blame the counterculture and its values for the current crisis of meaning"(103). So, the film was incorporated in conservative political discourse so as to provide evidence of and against counterculture. Wang stresses that "*Forrest Gump's* role in the 1994 Republican congressional victory exemplifies the process of discursive

appropriation and the importance of media figures in embodying cultural politics” (109). Using the mediated figure of Forrest Gump enabled the conservatives to articulate a legislative agenda that effectively marginalized issues of gender and race.

According to Kagan, “few of the critics anticipated *Forrest Gump*’s huge success. Other critics praised the film as actually encouraging major cultural dreams, national ideas and philosophical visions”(150). Wiegman claims the film to have a pedagogical mission: to demonstrate that intellectual difference is not an impediment to the American way of life and to success (127). Sharman (1994:43) feels that in the early nineties, the director Robert Zemeckis was in the process of redefining his image and attempting to up his quality-credibility. *Forrest Gump* is said to demonstrate his finer strengths as a director with a sure touch for light comedy.

Chapter V

The nature of the *Forrest Gump* adaptation

a) Character development in *Forrest Gump*

The screenwriter privileged characters that undergo some sort of character change, proving the premise of the movie: a love story about human emotions. Therefore, the cast of the film was carefully selected, particularly the actors performing the childhood part of Forrest's life. In the first twenty minutes of the film, depicting Forrest's childhood, his mother's resilience, love and wisdom dominate the set, until grown up Forrest, performed by Tom Hanks comes into the picture. Sally Field was the perfect actress to play the role of Forrest's mother, just as the unique character of young Forrest was played by Michael Humphreys and young Jenny by Hana Hall. Director Robert Zemeckis* points out that Hana Hall "seemed to have the same unique sort of damaged interior in the way she played the character as Robin Wright did".

The film is said to add dramatic weight to the Jenny character, whose abusive past at the hands of her father may explain her self-destructive behaviour and weakness for abusive relationships. An abused child who grew up searching, mostly in the wrong places, for some sort of purpose and happiness, throwing herself into every new social craze only to come away disappointed and settling down only a short time before her tragic death. Having come home to Forrest in scene 15, she flees again only to return to him with their child and the knowledge that she is dying, and AIDS is strongly implied to be the cause of her demise. Paatero (2005) describes her as a symbol of feminine weakness and vulnerability, while Corliss (2001) believes that in adding relevance to Jenny's role, screenwriter Eric Roth transferred to her all of Forrest's flaws and most of the excesses of the 60s and 70s. On the one hand, Jenny represents the counter culture – she is a long-haired hippie involved in antiwar rallies, and fast-living drug addiction. On the other, Forrest is said to promote traditional, conservative family values. Yacowar stresses the contrast between Forrest's supportive mother and Jenny's abusive father, who would forever affect their children's self image and establish their children's different destinies (679). This explains Forrest's consistent simplicity in contrast with Jenny's hunger for

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of *Forrest Gump*. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

experience and understanding. She is said to live out her own microcosm of the modern American experience, trying one ideology after another.

According to Byers, she embodies just about everything the New Right means by the counterculture: a folk-singing bohemian, a promiscuous woman, a flower child in the summer of love, an antiwar activist and lover of a radical leader, a cocaine addict and an HIV-positive single mother (432). “Her misguided attempts at self-expression and independence” not only hurt Forrest, keeping the two of them from fulfilling their roles as soulmates and parents, but also endanger Jenny herself, allowing her to become prey to abusive men such as her antiwar boyfriend (433). Besides being the narrative voice and mediator, Forrest is the emotional subject of Jenny’s experience. Forrest’s marriage to Jenny marks the confirmation that all along he was right and she was wrong, and that she owed him the apology she offered before she proposed. In the end, her death completes her metaphorical punishment, since it is implied to be a consequence of her loose behaviour.

Yacowar believes that Forrest and Jenny’s “divergent lives are augured in their childhood tree-play”: while he dangles and swings by his braces, she climbs and reads (679). It is a fact that his supportive mother strongly contrasts to her abusive father, but both affected their children’s self-images and influenced their destinies and choices. While Jenny understandably hates her childhood home and throws rocks at it when she returns as an adult, Forrest is always eager to return to his home and even brings his son and wife back there. As a child, hiding in the cornfields from her father, she prays to be turned into a bird so that she could fly away. Yacowar associates her with escaping birds, adding that “the birds that flock away, first from the cornfield and then from her graveyard, seem to be both an emblem of her desire and a taunting reminder of the freedom” that she seeks in sex, drug abuse and radical politics (680). The only time Forrest shows anger in the film is when he addresses Jenny’s misogynist boyfriend whom he had beaten up at the Black Panther Party for physically assaulting her.

Nevertheless, asides from his mother’s aphorisms, Forrest’s existence is almost completely ruled by chance, not confined to the endless complexities of the modern world. Kagan points out Gump’s passivity and even helplessness. Even though Lt. Dan and other characters are actually far more energetic and active, their paths all lead towards oblivion, while Gump’s viewpoint makes him a champion athlete, military hero, millionaire businessman and family man. Indeed, as Kagan remarks, “*Forrest Gump* has a hero who succeeds by accident and by drifting along with things as they are. Individuals who try to

accomplish anything are ridiculed or destroyed, in particular all leaders are assassinated” (224). Yacowar points out that much of Forrest’s memories conclude with the doom of the greats he has met: Elvis dies, John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and John Lennon are killed, while Wallace and president Ford and president Reagan survive assassination attempts. Meanwhile, Forrest thrives in blissful simplicity, oblivious to politics (680). Kagan remarks that “the audience is drawn into identifying with the passive, accepting, divine fool character’s point of view as the only reasonable course, since everyone else seems mad or doomed, usually both” (221). Zemeckis* says Forrest Gump “embodies innocence and truth”, and that is what makes his character work, since he is like a baby. Producer Steve Starkey* stresses sharp contrast between the two characters, as Forrest represents the ideal American, always taking the right choices, while Jenny represents a generation not able to find fulfillment in anything other than drugs, sex and rock n’roll. Despite these opposing features, they are romantically attracted, and their love story is the backbone of the film.

Zemeckis* admits the difficulty in casting the actor to perform the role of Lt. Dan, because it was a character who would undergo deep changes throughout the film: harsh with the main character and later on developing a strong compassion and friendship towards Forrest. Gary Sinise proved to be able to embody all the facets of this character. Gary Sinise is praised for having immersed in the Lt Dan character so well that he is compared to “a metaphor for the crippled part of America”. His character has to confront the fact that America was involved in that illegal war of aggression. Lt Dan is said to speak for America when he says “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” His character makes an absolute spiritual journey and transformation where he has to accept his fate, then go through a period of anger, later through a period of acceptance and finally he has to grieve it. At the end of the film, when he arrives at Forrest and Jenny’s wedding wearing titanium “new” legs he is in the position that Forrest was in relationship to his legs at this setting early in his childhood.

While Forrest is a constant character who acts according to what he believes is right, Jenny and Lieutenant Dan go through a process of changing which turns them into the real pivotal characters in the movie. They represent emotional growth, since they have to go through stages of different pain in order to heal themselves. These two characters

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of Forrest Gump. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

come together as similar in that they believed they had a destiny that they needed to fulfill. Lieutenant Dan was more aware of what his destiny should be – fighting and dying in an American war – while Jenny was still searching for hers. According to the director*, Jenny’s role required the production finding an actress who could show “the emotion of a damaged and truly deeply hurt individual”. Casting Robin Wright proved to be the perfect casting option because she was able to depict that throughout the entire film. Beneath the surface of Jenny’s beauty surfaced a hurt inner self, and Robin Wright brought so much authenticity into the character that the audience could almost feel the distance she has travelled when she finally goes home to Forrest in scene 15.

b) Faithfulness in *Forrest Gump*

Director Robert Zemeckis* stresses that the feather image was always present in the screenplay drafts by Eric Roth and he believes the feather to be “a metaphor for the randomness of life and destiny”, as the feather lands at Forrest’s foot when it could have landed anywhere else. The setting that takes up two-thirds of the film is the bus stop bench in Savannah, whose location seemed perfect to the production which then engaged in making the bus stop, just as they found the place to build the Gump house. The tree is an important representative part of the setting. It was across the street from the Gump house and right across the farm where Jenny grew up. According to the producer Steve Starky*, “it was a breakthrough to have found Oak Alley”, the place where Forrest’s house was set, as well as the beautiful oak tree and Jenny’s farm, because it made it possible to shoot the sections involving the surroundings of the house, and most Vietnam section could also be shot in the nearby surroundings. Moreover, at nearby Beaufort, a shrimping area itself, other Vietnam scenes and the shrimping could be staged.

Therefore, the large unwieldy production of *Forrest Gump* was able to shoot in one place while taking the viewer all over the South. Indeed, being set in South Carolina, much of the film revolved around history of the South, presenting a journey through our times with a southern perspective. Nevertheless, the Vietnam setting in *Forrest Gump* is considered to be one of the most realistic and best accomplished. The option not to show the enemy comes as a remarkable idea, and contributes to keeping the intimacy of the point

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of Forrest Gump. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

of view of the scenes, as the viewer stays with the characters and perceives the reality through their eyes. For instance, the viewer witnesses the gun battle taking place in scene eight, from Forrest's point of view.

In the director's words*, he wanted the characters and the setting to seem almost like they were "out of a Norman Rockwell illustration". The 20th century painter and illustrator Norman Rockwell enjoyed a broad popular appeal in the United States for creating cover illustrations of everyday life scenarios for the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine and illustrating the *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* adventure books. *Forrest Gump* includes a shot in a school that re-creates Rockwell's "Girl with Black Eye" with young Forrest in place of the girl. In fact, much of the film drew heavy visual inspiration from Rockwell's art.

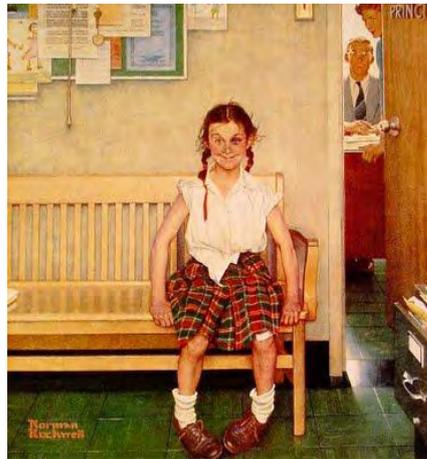


Figure 4. Norman Rockwell's "Girl with Black Eye" 1953. *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 23, 1953 (cover) Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. Connecticut.

This scene is said to have the Rockwell point of view, outside the principal's office, but there is a peculiar element in the scene which is the chart of the National Average IQ Scores. This prop was the director's way of showing what Forrest's IQ was. The point is that, if Forrest did not have an IQ that the chart proved to be below normal, his story would not be told. The director was able to isolate this character as a simpleton but one that has an innocence that allows him to carry through life without having a point of view. The only way he could have an effect on the world was because of his innocence and his simplicity.

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of *Forrest Gump*. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

The running sequence in scene 16 is considered to be one of the most demanding in terms of visual accuracy because production had to conjugate Forrest's cross-crossing the country with his hair transformation, make-up, wardrobe and to the characters that he found along the way who followed him. That is said to have required dozens of settings, because the film waves through many different periods of time and different settings that range from mountains to desert.

c) Exclusions in the film *Forrest Gump*

It must be taken into account that Eric Roth does not entirely turn Groom's novel into a slimmed-down screenplay. One can notice that many of the sub-plots and characters in the book have been left out of the film, while others have been added. For instance, several major developments in the film plot have been added, such as Forrest having polio as a child (scene 4) and then miraculously running faster and faster until his leg-braces fall off. Furthermore, in the book Gump is also awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for courageously rescuing several marines from the jungle in Vietnam, but Lieutenant Dan is not amongst them. In fact, Forrest meets him in hospital while recovering from being shot. Moreover, while in the book, Gump's shrimp-farming is done in ponds, which would be terribly uncinematic, the movie makes it a sea-based enterprise and a dramatic storm is added to the script. Some startling scenes were added to the screenplay of the film, such as Forrest meeting John Lennon in the Dick Cavet show and being the inspiration for the song "Imagine". Likewise, there is no mention in the book of Forrest's running across America (scene 16) after Jenny leaves him, and gathering a cult-like following, which is a skilful connection to the miraculous running earlier in the movie, triggered by Jenny's shout "Run, Forrest, run!" (scene 2 and 4). Adding scene 16 to the script offers a great opportunity for computer generated visual effects.

On the other hand, Eric Roth's screenplay leaves out large pieces of the novel plot, such as Forrest's career as a wrestler- the Dunce, his part in the NASA space program, his brief career as a chess professional player and his short acting career as The Creature from the Black Lagoon. In addition, the film leaves out the fact that, despite his low IQ, Gump is a mathematical genius which explains not only his part in the NASA program, but also his outstanding abilities as an advanced chess player and even his musical ability to play harmonica. The film omits some aspects of Gump that might offend more conservative

moviegoers, such as Forrest smoking marijuana while living with Jenny and playing harmonica in a folk-rock group. Other events, such as the four years living with the cannibals, his companionship with a male ape called Sue and the wrestling career, are suppressed from the screenplay. Robert Zemeckis and Eric Roth also altered the tone of Forrest's physical relationship with Jenny, as they seem to have tried to erase all traces of sexual eroticism from their hero's personality. Therefore, Forrest's sexual exploits with a lady boarder living at the Gump house early in chapter 2 of the book is omitted and Forrest's relationship with Jenny in the book is far much more physical than the overtly romantic movie scenario. For instance, the period when Forrest and Jenny lived together an intimate sexual relationship has been cut from the movie plot. Moreover, Corliss (1994) argues that the film alters the politics of Winston Groom's novel quite explicitly; although Jenny is sexually promiscuous, her sexual exploits are neither consistently nor explicitly linked to her involvement in political or social movements.

The film adds dramatic weight to the Jenny character: being the victim of an abusive father, which made her wish to be a bird so that she could fly away from her everyday reality, and returning to Forrest with their child and the knowledge she is dying. Adding Jenny's abusive past to the screenplay is said to explain her later self-destructive behaviour and weakness for abusive relationships. At the end of the film, having returned to her hometown, she stares at her childhood shack and furiously throws stones at it until she collapses on the ground. The film also implies that AIDS is the cause of Jenny's death, has Forrest looking after her until she passes away and has her buried under their childhood play-tree. Unlike the book, the film reaches a cathartic moment when the Forrest re-unites with Jenny, meets their son and marries her. Moreover, the circular structure of the plot is fully accomplished in the film, showing young Forrest Junior's first trip to school

d) Pictorial possibilities and digital technology

According to Schiach (2005:10) the history of the cinema reflects the changing economic, industrial and sociological structures of a whole century. Indeed, the advances in cinematic technology have been so rapid in the last decades that it is hard to predict future developments as "cinema technology is harnessing the advances in computer graphics to startling effects" (28, 30). Davies and Wells say that Hollywood cinema in the nineties developed and enhanced its modes of spectacle, fully grasping the advantages of digital post-production technologies, and the extraordinary impact of computer-generated

images (6). Zemeckis* points out that *Forrest Gump* represents “a technological breakthrough” for two reasons: not only does the film production take historical footage and recreate it to tell a story, but it also manipulates archival footage and puts new words into the mouths of the historic characters. This opened up new perspectives in story-telling.

The use of actual events such as the assassination of the Kennedys, to mark the passage of time gives the director Robert Zemeckis and the producer Wendy Finerman the chance to exploit the devices of using digital technology to have Tom Hanks interact with historic characters such as JFK, Lyndon Johnson, George Wallace and Richard Nixon. So as to achieve that, historical archival footage was carefully re-worked and the main character was inserted into the actual archival footage. This way, memory of crucial figures and events is evoked, either through cinematic restaging or through the use of actual news footage.

Indeed, *Forrest Gump* was one of the pioneer films to use computer generated imaging techniques, such as chroma key, warping, morphing and rotoscoping. For instance, the wafting feather appearing at the beginning of the film and in the final sequence is a remarkable visual effects shot. There is a similar visual effect in the 1997 comedy *Men in Black*: the camera follows a bug flying around till it ends up smashed on the windshield of a car. In the title / opening sequence of *Forrest Gump*, the white feather floats down through the city, pauses on the shoulder of a man in a grey flannel suit and then veers off to land at Gump’s sneaker, who picks it up and then carefully places it inside the *Curious George* storybook in his suitcase.



Figure 5 Forrest (Tom Hanks) picks up the wafting feather, takes a careful look at it and places it inside the *Curious George* storybook.

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of *Forrest Gump*. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

Close to the end of the film, after walking his son to the bus for his first day at school, Forrest finds the feather in the book and releases it back in the sky. It is very clear to the viewer that the feather's last movement is directed at him, so as to confront the audience with the question of its meaning.

Yacowar believes that the feather may either represent Gump's drifting, insubstantial character, or it could stand for an angelic spirit or a divine guardian that seems to watch over Forrest, turning his every affliction into a blessing. In fact, Forrest never understands his series of successes, but he accepts them on faith. Thus, the feather landing at Forrest's foot becomes a symbol of his having been chosen for a special destiny, strongly contrasting with the mundane birds with which Jenny Curran is identified (671). Moreover, the feather that blows in the wind is said to embody the chance elements in our life, and Forrest wonders, whether we have a destiny or float accidentally through life like a feather in a breeze, concluding that it is both, at the same time. Besides the skillfully computer-generated feather image, the running sequence in scene 16 offers the opportunity for a succession of amazing views of American landscape, thus enhancing the visual medium itself with colours, shapes, and movement.



Figure 6 Forrest's (Tom Hanks) cult-gathering running across the United States suddenly reaches an end.

Another visually important change comes from turning Forrest into a shrimp boat captain and riding through a dramatic hurricane which wrecks all the other shrimp boats but his, leaving Forrest with a fortuitous business monopoly and allowing for some very impressive footage. According to Byers, "perhaps the most distinctive part of the entertainment value of *Forrest Gump*, and specifically of its comedy, is its use of state-of-the-art special effects techniques characteristic of late capitalist means of production to

alter the historical record by inseting Forrest visually into it” (439). The film places Tom Hank’s character in actual footage from landmark media moments in U.S. history. Kagan also realizes the major role that advanced technology played in Zemeckis’s film, considering the special visual effects in the Washington D.C. peace protest, the legless Lt. Dan sequences and the meetings with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon to be completely new and remarkable technical challenges (141).

The sequences showing legless Lt. Dan are of particular visual relevance, as production engaged in hard work to add realism to the scenes. The visual effects team had him pass through physical spaces of tables and other props with the stumps of his legs, so that the audience would not think the actor Gary Sinise had his legs tucked over. For instance, lifting legless Lt. Dan out of the hospital bed, falling off the wheelchair, and jumping over the shrimp boat were shots requiring computer generated imaging. In the first example the team had a bed with holes in it, which later on were erased digitally, as well as the shadows of his real legs and wrinkles were painted around the stumps of his legs. One of the best digitally altered shots is when Lt. Dan falls out of the wheelchair in the desperate scene at his flat. The shot was first filmed without the table, which was put back into the scene afterwards and Gary Sinise was digitally inserted. And there is an important scene on the shrimp boat where Lt. Dan is thanking Forrest for saving his life, sitting with his legs on the side of the boat and then swinging around and jumping into the water. That required cutting a section out of the side of the boat, so it looked like he was swinging right through the solid space of a boat where in fact there was a hole. Later on, the side of the boat was put back in and blended into the scene. In conclusion, in each one of these leg shots, computer generated imaging was used to blend the scene together so it would cover up Gary Sinise’s real legs and make the audience believe it was a stump.



Figure 7 Lieutenant Dan (Gary Sinise) in one of the best achieved special effects sequence.

Visual effects were used to enhance reality, such as in the Washington D.C. peace protest scene around the reflecting pool. Production had the main shot done with Tom Hanks standing in front of a crowd in the immediate foreground. Then the crowd was moved to the different quadrants around the reflecting pool until the crowd filled up the huge space around the pool. Finally, the computer replicated the crowds along the sides of the reflecting pool by issuing multiple shots of the same crowd.



Figure 8. Forrest (Tom Hanks) stands in front of a crowd gathering around the reflecting pool.

This is one of the many crowd replication shots through the movie; the football stadium images were also altered so that it looked like it was a different location altogether. For example an additional upper level was digitally added to the stadium, just as the crowd in the Chinese ping-pong set was painted in. Again, in the cornfield shot when the camera starts craning up, the birds flying out of the cornfield were digitally inserted. Given that the initial idea to release doves did not work out because they would fly the opposite direction or not fly at all, the team decided to create computer-generated birds that would fly off at the perfect timing and in the perfect direction. Moreover, there is also a lot of sky replacement in the film to help create the atmosphere, such as the scene set at the reflecting pool and in the cornfield scene. However, in the last film scene, when Forrest is reminiscing to Jenny, there is a set of real images, such as the sun going down at Beaufort and the perfect image of the mountain reflecting in the lake so as to match Forrest's words "It looked like there were two skies, one on top of the other". Oak Alley is widely considered to be the perfect setting for Forrest's childhood and teenage years, and it

is closely related to his growing-up. For instance, Forrest and Jenny are first shown as teenage grown-ups in a scene that mirrors the early scene of him running and miraculously getting rid of his leg braces: Forrest is again running away from a group of bullies and Jenny is urging him to run faster. And Oak Alley is the set for a family walk Forrest, Jenny and Forrest Jr close to the end of the film. But, as producer Wendy Finerman* remarks, the director was “truly skillful in managing to tell the story of her abuse without getting graphic” in the cornfield scene where she and Forrest are being chased by her father.

Sound design is also acknowledged as very important in this film. Skillfully combined with imaging, sound effects enhance reality in a suggestive way and transmit a subjective point of view emotionally and dramatically. For instance, in scene 4 when Forrest is running from a group of neighborhood bullies on their bicycles, the image goes into slow motion in order to enhance certain sounds, such as the bikes’ chains, the wheels and also Forrest’s leg braces falling apart. In this scene, there is focus on specific bicycle sounds in a way that makes perfect sense combined with the slowing down of the images of the bicycles running. Close-up recordings of the chain on the bicycles were made, so as to transmit the audience a microscopic version of the sound of the bicycles chasing Forrest and the same thing was done with the sound of Forrest’s braces as he is running and especially as the braces begin to fall apart.

e) Forrest Gump’s soundtrack

According to Dix, soundtrack comprises four basis elements - speech (including voiceover besides dialogue), music, sound effects and silence – disposed in various combinations and rhythms. He adds that the highest place has conventionally been attributed to dialogue, and curiously silence as a strategic choice of the filmmaker began with the sound era (81). As an aspect of film form, sound has proved to be more elusive than image, since there is no exact equivalent of the image’s minimal unit - the shot. As a matter of fact, some critics argue, music provides continuity across a series of disparate shots and thereby distracts from the artifice of the editing process. From this point of view, film music reinforces the cinematic illusion.

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of Forrest Gump. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

Besides the importance of the visual dimension in *Forrest Gump*, which was honored with an Oscar for Best Visual Effects, it is also important to reflect on the aural potential of music, voices and sound effects. Sound effects are given careful attention in this film as there is a range of well-designed audio effects in the film, aimed at contributing to its veracity. For instance, the bike, the crowds, Vietnam, playing ping pong. The ping pong shooting also required a lot of computer generated imaging; production went through the motions of hitting the ball, and put the ball in later.

Moreover, so as to represent American history as accurately as possible, soundtrack is given careful consideration in *Forrest Gump*. Indeed, cinema is an audiovisual medium that relies heavily on hearing's fundamental role in the making of meaning. The film soundtrack went on to sell 12 million copies, and is one of the top selling albums in the United States. It brings together the original motion picture score by Alan Silvestri and an impressive collection of great hits from the 50s, 60s, 70s and early 80s performed by well-known American artists: Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, The Mamas and the Papas, Beach Boys, The Doors, Simon & Garfunkel, The Byrds, the Supremes, Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band, Fleetwood Mac, Jackson Browne, amongst others.

Music is considered particularly important to the story, giving a true representation of nearly four decades of American life. Each song is a landmark in this picturesque film, and even the scenes taking place abroad, e.g. in Vietnam, narrate events closely tied to American history. Producer Steve Starkey* says the songs were used as “signposts to history” because in that period all teenagers listened to the same music and owned the same records. Production added the songs to action shoots, such as the Vietnam scenes and the motion picture score was inserted in sentimental scenes. So, in Starkey's words, “the records play the landscape as if it was part of the set design, and Alan Silvestri played the emotional underpinning of the characters”.

Silence is also given prior importance in some shoots, for instance in scene 16 after Forrest and Jenny's night together, she leaves him and in the next shoots of him wandering around the house staring, silence adds to the sadness he feels. Once he has found a way to deal with the pain of losing Jenny and started running out of the Gump property and down Oak Alley, the motion score is back on the screen.

* Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump. (supplementary material on DVD release of Forrest Gump. DVD. Paramount Pictures. 1994

Final considerations

“The world will never be the same once you’ve seen it through the eyes of Forrest Gump”.

This was the tagline advertising *Forrest Gump* back in 1994. Perceiving the world from Forrest Gump’s point of view proved to be a successful cinematic experience, and a humorous look at the restless decades from the fifties through the sixties and the seventies. The film is remarkable for its historical revisionism, but also for the singularity of Gump’s tale, which unfolds through a series of chronological flashbacks narrated by him. Forrest’s voice-over places him at the centre of events during three decades of US history. All scenes involving an historical context are said to have required a tremendous amount of documentary research, as the production went to great lengths to re-enact them perfectly. That required finding cast members looking exactly like the people in the real-life footage and recreating portions of the events so that the audience would either be watching the real set of events or a re-creation, and not be able to tell the difference. In some sequences Forrest would be inserted in the real event, in others the same event would be re-enacted and Forrest would be put in. The director aims to present some watersheds in modern American history, for instance the assassination of presidents and politicians. Besides being a breakthrough in digital effects, such computer generated images subtly present recent US history as rewritable and malleable.

The politics of *Forrest Gump* have divided critics, but it is a fact that it was used by right-wing American politicians, for whom *Forrest Gump* encapsulated the American Dream and criticized the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the filmmakers claiming the film to be apolitical, the point is that Forrest Gump does present a conservative re-visioning of recent American history. Moreover, it deals with the reconstruction of white masculinity together with the reinforcement of the current victim status of white men. The discussion of destiny running throughout the film provides a means of negating Forrest’s responsibility. It has been suggested that the wafting feather is a symbol for Forrest’s innocent, drifting character, who accepts destiny randomly and therefore can not be held accountable for the course of events. Another film tagline sums up this negation of individual responsibility: “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get”. But Forrest’s address to Jenny at her graveside juxtaposes that perspective of the randomness of human existence (“floating about accidental like on a

breeze”) to Lieutenant Dan’s view of a predetermined destiny. Forrest’s learning impairment justifies his lack of responsibility and his failure to engage with the major political debates of the period.

The Jenny character, more than any other, stands out for her representative role; she is associated with a variety of counter-cultural movements throughout the film. In Boyle’s words “Forrest’s often comic narrative of success against the odds is contrasted with Jenny’s self-destructive journey through the counter-culture”. While he attends college, joins the Army, is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, becomes a national celebrity, a millionaire and a guru to a hoard of followers, she is thrown out of college, takes drugs, participates in the summer of love, joins the antiwar movement and is beaten up by her boyfriend. Finally, when Jenny settles down to raise young Forrest, she is punished for years of promiscuity, drug taking and repeated abandonment of Forrest. It is implied that hers is an AIDS-related death, thus turning her into a representative victim of the sins of the counterculture. In no moment of Jenny’s journey through the counterculture is she presented as a feminist, and there is no reference to the women’s liberation movement. The repression of a feminist point of view, trusting to Forrest the role of narrative voice and mediator, is essential to *Forrest Gump*’s redemption of white masculinity.

Further research on this subject might be focused on metaphorical violence in *Forrest Gump*, a concern that arises from the cultural context in which the film was released. In 1994 *Forrest Gump* faced off competition from *Natural Born Killers* directed by Oliver Stone, and *Pulp Fiction* directed by Quentin Tarantino, with their controversial portrayals of violence. Researching the role that violence plays in *Forrest Gump*’s revisionist history is a good field of future research, either interpersonal violence (bullying, incest, domestic violence, assassinations) or violent struggles such as the Vietnam war and antiwar protests. Boyle (2001) expresses her concern with how *Forrest Gump* depends upon actual and metaphorical violence, considering this aspect of the film to be largely neglected by critics. Therefore, she suggests exploring how the film presents white men as victims of history whilst forgetting the significance of white male violence. Even though Forrest’s story include real violent events, Forrest’s naïve and intensely personal narration empties events of their socio-political significance and consequences, thus providing a new gloss on brutalism. Indeed, according to Boyle, interpersonal male violence against women

is displaced onto the counterculture and the racist violence of recent US history is dismissed.

The film's treatment of disability is also an interesting field of research, even though there is no community of disabled veterans, and no political analysis of disability in *Forrest Gump*. It should be noted that Forrest unquestioningly accepts his physical and mental disabilities, but his impairments are far from the reality of impairment experienced by his real-life American counterparts. In contrast, Lt Dan's disability works as a reminder of the personal costs of American involvement in Vietnam. Lt. Dan is the stereotype image of the disabled person who has to come to terms with his disability so as to overcome his vulnerability and dependency, and even to reconceptualise his manhood. All in all, the film presents disability as a state of mind, a problem of psychological self-acceptance and of emotional adjustment. Forrest succeeds because he never really feels disabled by his disabilities, and once Lt. Dan readjusts to his new condition, he is rewarded with wealth, love and a new pair of titanium legs. This is therefore an answer to the political activism of Oliver Stone's *Born on the 4th of July* (1989). Having reworked the negative image of the Ron Kovic character, Lt Dan is a much more positive one. While *Forrest Gump* presents the redeemed version of the Vietnam War, *Born on the 4th of July* offers a dramatic, tougher view, as director Oliver Stone plays the counterculture voice in American cinema. Regardless of their differences, both films were a commercial success. According to Davies and Wells, Stone's technique, however overdetermined and archetypical it may be, combines the entertainment factor with the polemical, thus ensuring "the box-office returns that continue to legitimize his practice" (5).

Forrest Gump also opens new opportunities to research historical representations of the Vietnam War on literature and film. Taylor (2003:2) argues that the challenge for American writing and film-making about the Vietnam War has been to communicate truth about a conflict which was confusingly different from any other 20th century conflicts in which Americans were involved. The interdisciplinary study of history, literature and film is believed to contribute to a sharper understanding of American motivations and expectations about the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, Taylor argues that "film makers have often shown a determination to manipulate their audience in accord with a set of established ideas", so he strongly believes that "the study of film and literature which focuses upon the individual's experience of war offers a more direct benefit" (149). Such telling of stories – either fictional or non-fictional – presents opportunities for

understanding the complexity of the conflict in Vietnam. Having studied several representations of the Vietnam War, Taylor remarks that good cinematic history can also pursue historical accuracy as an objective, resisting the temptation to manipulate the facts for dramatic effect and ideally offer an interpretation firmly based upon the available facts (66). In this sense, *Forrest Gump* offers a graphic and singular account of the fighting in which Americans took part in Vietnam, and is likely to be read from the main character's own subjective point of view.

Finally, it is important to consider how comic form is able to make complex historical material look pleasurable. Unlike tragedy, comedy palliates the suffering, as it is regenerative and celebratory. Comedy celebrates recovery and regeneration; it affirms the life spirit. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that despite their differing routes, both comedy and tragedy involve insight into the human limitations and human abilities. The healing effects of laughter are widely known and comedy films have proved to be a meaningful cultural statement. The fact that the ideological re-working of recent American history is done by a film comedy such as *Forrest Gump*, is significant of the importance of the comedy genre. This is hardly a Vietnam movie, as it focuses on Forrest experiencing of the events he narrates and getting past problems. Indeed, Forrest gets through thanks to the comic spirit of the film; the simple nature of *Forrest Gump* is a wishful antidote to the Vietnam conflict.

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Figure 2. At college Forrest (Tom Hanks) edges into the frame as Governor Wallace makes his televised speech. This is one of the historical footages in *Forrest Gump*. The Paramount film was directed by Robert Zemeckis and produced by Wendy Finerman, Steve Tisch and Steve Starkey.

Figure 3. The film opening sequence ends as a white feather finally lands at Forrest's feet. (Phil Caruso; copyright © 1994 by Paramount Pictures)

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Figure 8. Having returned from the Vietnam, Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks) is asked to produce a speech to a crowd gathering around the reflecting pool. (Phil Caruso; copyright © 1994 by Paramount Pictures)