

# Identity and Otherness in *Forrest Gump*: a Close-up into Twentieth-century America

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## Identity and Otherness in *Forrest Gump*: a Close-up into Twentieth-century America

Shortly before dying, Mrs. Gump, Forrest's mother, tells him: "Well, I happen to believe you make your own destiny. You have to do the best with what God gave you," whereupon Forrest asks her, "What is my destiny?" She replies that he would have to figure it out for himself. In the 'making-of', Sally Field, who played the role of Mrs. Gump, also mentions fate as the core issue in the film, wondering whether our life is planned or, on the contrary, just flows by chance.<sup>1</sup> Posed this way, the question seems to depart slightly from her character's belief in free-will, that is, in human capacity to mould one's life path; however, it still confirms the relationship between one's choices and uncontrollable circumstances as central both to the plot and to the protagonist's development. The idea is already suggested in the opening credits sequence, through the image of the floating feather, whose unpredictable movement might imply the arbitrariness of life. Starring actor Tom Hanks wisely clarifies these apparently opposing views, by stating that "our destiny is only defined by how we deal with the chance elements in our life", thereby converging with Mrs. Gump's advice.<sup>2</sup>

*Forrest Gump* (FG), (1994) is one of Robert Zemeckis's most acknowledged films, awarded six Oscars, including for best film and for best director. Based on Winston Groom's 1986 novel of the same name, it is the lighthearted first-person narrative of how a simple-minded Southern young man dealt with those chance elements he encountered in life. In this

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<sup>1</sup> *Behind The Magic of Forrest Gump. Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump*: documentary (1984).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

essay, we consider how this approach helps discuss the issues of identity and alterity as related to the socio-cultural and historical context framing the plot.

Early in the film, Forrest's mother tells him that he was "no different". The need for such a statement reflects her determination to make her son fit in, but paradoxically hints at how different Forrest was: apart from his back and leg deficiency, he was born with an IQ under 75. His difference is clearly presented in the opening scene, not only through characterization.<sup>3</sup> His way of speaking, his style of dress, even the way he sits, all evoke a child's common posture but also through diegesis itself: sitting at a bus stop, Forrest maintains a conversation with the person next to him, the listeners changing, but his story continuing in a detailed, chronological way that already reveals an idiosyncratic childlike, innocent approach to events and to people's behavior. Thus, the opening scene sets the tone of the film, the weight and the peculiarity of the main character, and the film structure: a flash-back narrative supported by Hank's voice-over and consistently resorting to archival footage, which illustrates visually what Forrest narrates.

In fact, the whole film develops in terms of a story-telling process. As Celestino Deleyto notes, narrative texts entail different ways of presenting a story, going far beyond the issue of literary genre or subgenre and resorting to various media of expression, such as cinema, television and video. In this context, cinema (by expanding the field) contributes hugely to making the study of narrative theory "consistent and complete" (217-18). Notwithstanding the relevance of narrative, a number of other elements in films, including technical devices, help convey significance and attain aesthetic effects (Reis 29). James Monaco distinguishes this "connotative" meaning from the "denotative", provided by image and sound, because cinematic recordings allow a closer and more accurate approximation to reality than the written word (178-9-180).

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of characterization refers to the distinguishing traits of the human elements in a story. Gump's is a clear example of indirect characterization, based on the character's speech, actions, reactions, gestures, which allow the construction of significant psychological, ideological, cultural, or social characteristics (Reis and Lopes 51-2).

In *FG*, however, the combination of all these elements appears unified by the narrative itself, especially due to focalization.<sup>4</sup> The story is told from Forrest's perspective; according to the leading actor, it is his very spirit and tone that form the backbone of the movie. In fact, in *FG*, focalization cannot be analyzed separately from character. For Zemeckis, Forrest is "a very decent man,"<sup>5</sup> and for Wendy Finerman, one of the producers, a remarkable figure with a unique personality (Passafiume par. 2). Forrest's particular characteristics thus provide the framework to discuss identity and otherness in a given cross-section of American time and history, thereby raising two interrelated questions which also hint at the value of narrative in the film: What is told? and How is it told?

The condition of otherness can be defined as the perception of not belonging, of being different in some way, because the other does not fit in the norm that rules the group and lacks its essential, common features, thus being seen as an inferior being. In fact and even though gifted people or geniuses can also be seen as "the other" because of their being different, the concept often applies to people with disabilities, a view that can be traced back to Greek culture. Hence, the issue of otherness can only be discussed in terms of a specific identity, from which it substantially differs (Melani <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu>). The word identity derives from the Latin *idem*, meaning "the same", which implies the idea of being identical, of coinciding in some aspect (Vesey and Foulkes 147). It is the common, accepted, unifying pattern of a group that sets up its identity, be it cultural, social, or political, to cite a few, and it is against such a set of traits that the idea of otherness is defined; in like manner, one's identity, whether at the individual or the collective level, is also measured by its difference from others.

As mentioned earlier, the film resorts to first-person narrative, through the protagonist's voice-over, to tell Forrest's life, as an autobiography;

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<sup>4</sup> Deleyto considers focalization, precisely, "an essential code in film narratives" (231). In terms of narrative theory, focalization refers to the particular perspective or point of view from which a story is told, thereby determining both the quantity of information provided, for example about events, characters, places (Reis and Lopes 164-5).

<sup>5</sup> *Behind The Magic of Forrest Gump. Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump*: documentary (1984).

therefore, he is present in all scenes and it is through his own perspective that the viewer perceives them. However, events as narrated by Forrest seem to lack the degree of subjectivity implied in this type of narrative point of view. His language tends to be objective and simple, in most situations devoid of any abstract, non-literal meaning.<sup>6</sup> Such a use of language, both in understanding and in expression, reflects his astounding simplicity, especially in the way he sees things. For example, when his commanding officer in Vietnam, Lieutenant Dan Taylor, asks him and Bubba (his black friend), “Are you twins?”, he fails to grasp the underlying irony replying simply, “No, we are not relations”. Faced with discrimination from a very early age — in the school bus, for example, other children would refuse to give him a seat because of his braced legs — Forrest doesn’t make any judgments,<sup>7</sup> whether because of his uncorrupted state of innocence, or because of his limited comprehension. Probably both play a part, shaping his worldview and partly determining his choices — “making his own destiny”, in his mother’s words. Even if Forrest does not plan his options, they result from his inner nature and embedded values. Forrest’s state of innocence constitutes the key factor for his differentness for, unlike ordinary people, he remains untouched by evil. Brockmann contends that, because of the pity he arouses and of the empathy he shows towards other people, he resembles Wagner’s Parsifal, who also achieved salvation because of such traits (353).

Throughout his life, Forrest is guided by his mother’s judgment and by his love for Jenny. His mother’s comments on things would always enable them to “make sense”, an expression he consistently uses to show his understanding of life’s complexities. As for Jenny, she played a catalyzing character from very early on, because it was her concern for him that prompted him to run, for the first time, when threatened by other kids.

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<sup>6</sup> Even if no further details about his mental deficiency are given, in this sense it reminds the spectator of Asperger syndrome, where language is restricted to literal interpretation and its figurative sense unattainable.

<sup>7</sup> In this respect, he resembles Alexei in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), as he, too, stands morally above both his brothers and the other characters for his noble, generous capacity of not judging other people’s actions, even if, like Forrest, he does not acknowledge that verbally.

Getting free from his leg braces allowed him to overcome his visible handicap — a hyperbolic illustration of Zemeckis's idea that “no matter how many obstacles that are thrown in our path, there are ways to accept them and to live through them.”<sup>8</sup> This idea could suggest that *FG* would belong in a feel-good film category. Indeed, the feel-good factor can be identified in the film, especially because, resembling Frank Capra's style,<sup>9</sup> it displays a disturbing theme in a lighthearted, comic way. The notions that disabled people are above suffering or that they possess super-human capacities converge with such a view and entail stereotypical beliefs that would account for their otherness, too. Moreover, some criticism of the film reads Forrest's extraordinary capacities as part of a magical world, as if it were a fairy-tale, in which things happen in sharp contrast to reality. And, in terms of society's perception of the disabled, Judith Sanders, for example, considered that the film perpetuated negative stereotypes of the disabled (36-7), while other reviews pointed out the positive message it conveyed, that no one should be excluded, humiliated or victimized (Klinger 47). From the perspective of this essay, both views probably coexist, but, considering the protagonist's path, the latter seems to prevail. What is more, Forrest's disability and the way he copes with it are firmly anchored in the real world and, above all, constitute the key narrative device that allows a fresh close-up into American experience.

Seemingly against all odds, Forrest's extraordinary physical capacities put him in circumstances illustrative of American culture, history and society, from the fifties onwards; as Zemeckis puts it, Forrest “interacts with the tapestry of American history by accident, getting directly involved in historic events and meeting historic people.”<sup>10</sup>

In fact, people and events keep mounting up at a rhythm that some critics of the film viewed it as overdone. A. J. Hoberman, for example,

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<sup>8</sup> This idea appears as one of Zemeckis's personal quotes in his IMDb biography. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000709/bio>.

<sup>9</sup> In the late nineteen thirties, Frank Capra's films addressed dark subjects in American society, conveying information and reflection on the American experience, namely issues related with the Depression, through comedy.

<sup>10</sup> *Behind The Magic of Forrest Gump. Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump*: documentary (1984).

comments that the film covers too many issues (41). Indeed, a synoptic narrative of events unravels like a historical catalogue or a documentary, Forrest interacting with them in such a natural way that, as Stephen Brockmann suggests, his story equals the history of USA after WWII (353). Events comprise, for example, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, peace demonstrations, the sexual revolution of the sixties, to cite a few. Such a plot device, however unlikely, conveys an all the more comprehensive and representative portrayal of America in the second half of the twentieth-century, in which Forrest represents the unifying element. His peculiar way of interacting with people and events remains unaltered throughout a variety of circumstances, in a way highlighting how his personal success is consistently attained by means of his being different, in opposition to the path of characters that conform to accepted identity patterns.

A version of history is portrayed in the film with the valuable aid of special effects, intertwined with the archival footage mentioned earlier — a specific cinematic technique that allows facts and fiction to merge and which reinforces Forrest's narration in voice-over. In several scenes, the protagonist's intervention is inserted into historical footage, a technical feat<sup>11</sup> for example, when Forrest's and President Kennedy's hands meet in an apparently real greeting, or Gump participates in a historic ping-pong match.<sup>12</sup>

Of all the events Forrest goes through, the Vietnam War assumes particular relevance. Driven by good nature only, he becomes a hero when he manages to rescue some of his war mates and his commanding officer, Dan Taylor (played by Gary Sinise). The concept of heroism is critically addressed here, for while Forrest is awarded the Medal of Honor by President

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<sup>11</sup> In the early eighties, Woody Allen had used such an innovative blending of cinema and historical, actual people or events, creating a sort of more believable fictional documentary (Ethan de Seife, "The Treachery of Images". <http://www.spinaltapfan.com/articles/seife/seife1.html>). He used a variety of techniques prior to the digital technology of Forrest Gump.

<sup>12</sup> This scene refers to the U.S. national table tennis team's historic visit to China in 1971, as part of what became known as "Ping-Pong diplomacy". To show Gump's prowess and speed in the game, actors were required to mime the ping-pong match while the ball was put in graphically (*Behind the Magic of Forrest Gump*, 1994).



Lyndon Johnson and only slightly wounded, Dan becomes severely injured and loses both legs. Dan's handicap overtly opposes Forrest's childhood condition, clearly portraying a reversal of fortune, and the developing storyline acquires tones of the conventions of Greek tragedy. Becoming crippled most completely denies Dan's dream of war heroism; because he would prefer to have died, he resents Forrest for having saved him. His personal tragedy is considered by the actor, Gary Sinise, as the embodiment of "the crippled part of America", following the trauma of Vietnam War. The opposition of Forrest to Dan becomes striking, not only because of Forrest's bravery, but in particular due to his personality, as his restricted mental perception is in keeping with his pure values and principles. His motivation is always intrinsic, rationalized as "making sense", according to his mother's criteria, while that of others is extrinsic and shallow. It is his otherness, thus, that ironically brings him to the core of American mainstream beliefs, in this case, American patriotism and heroism.

Because of such a process, most critical reception of the film focused on political aspects and considered it conservative: a "testament to Republican values and virtues", in the words of conservative politician Patrick Buchanan (Tibbetts and Welsh 131), a "deeply reactionary periphrasis" of American history in the last decades of the twentieth century (Bergan 392), "aggressively conservative" and "reactionary" (Byers 421). The latter argues that by erasing relevant aspects of history, the film manages to rewrite it from a conservative perspective (424-6). Barbara Wang also analyses how *FG* was used by political conservatives to assert their views on American history. Like Byers, she also points to the erasure of relevant events, such as the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, which might imply that racism is no longer an issue in contemporary America (99).

The political aspects of *FG*, however important, do not constitute the focus of the present analysis, but deserve being mentioned as my reading may, to a certain extent, question such strictly political perspectives. For example, Forrest's friendship with Bubba, his black mate in the army, seems to deny any racial prejudice. Nonetheless, that Forrest does not call for racial equity is only because he does not acknowledge racial difference, an attitude that belongs in his peculiar way of regarding people and society, whose verisimilitude is supported by his own mental retardation. His generous help to Bubba's family after his death surpasses racial concerns,

too, even though Wang suggests that his gesture simply “overturns years of slavery”, shifting the focus to the entrepreneurial spirit that shapes the American dream (100). The scene of desegregation in Alabama University further illustrates Forrest’s unawareness of such issues: when faced with a racist comment on black students being allowed to attend university, he reacts with surprise, “Oh, they do? With us?”, but when Vivian Malone and James A. Hood<sup>13</sup> enter the building, he courteously grabs the girl’s notebook from the floor and hands it to her. The incident suggests that his politeness and good nature take over. Brockmann, who interprets Forrest’s behavior in light of his ignorance and innocence,<sup>14</sup> draws on the opening scene too, highlighting the fact that Forrest’s first listener at the bus stop is a black woman (353).

Forrest’s oddity serves to disclose a certain degree of ironic commentary on most situations. Whether he does not criticize or reject them becomes irrelevant, for his frequent objective descriptions or narrations pave the way for critical judgment. As Zemeckis said, what we see, we see through Forrest’s eyes;<sup>15</sup> for example, he sees the Ku Klux Klan plainly as wearing bed sheets and acting like a bunch of ghosts or spooks, a visual conceptualization that exposes its ridiculous side, to a certain extent underlined by Mrs. Gump’s commentary, suggesting subtle criticism: “Sometimes we all do things that, well, just don’t make no sense”. Again, when Jenny’s hippie mate, a peace activist, beats her, revealing the contradiction between words and actions, it triggers Forrest’s reaction, once more driven by friendship and chivalry rather than by ideological beliefs. Likewise, when his running marathon makes him an icon and he is repeatedly asked “Are you running for world peace?” it is the stereotypical aspect that is depicted

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<sup>13</sup> Vivian Malone and James A. Hood were the first two African Americans to enrol at the University of Alabama in 1963, until then an all-white university. The scene represents an important landmark in the process of desegregation in American history, despite Governor George Wallace attempts to boycott it, a fact that the film seems to oversee.

<sup>14</sup> Brockmann elaborates on the equation between ignorance and innocence by opposing it to the one of knowledge and guilt, founded on the biblical myth of the original sin by Eve in the Garden of Eden (357-8).

<sup>15</sup> *Behind The Magic of Forrest Gump. Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump*: documentary (1984).

and criticized. The fact that so many people followed him in his run pinpoints some ideological void, with its consequent quest for a leader and a cause to follow. In this respect, *FG* resembles a satire. Although Forrest's action is original and purposeless, it is mobilizing and successful, running counter to common, somehow stereotyped forms of intervention. This also provides a fine example of how otherness and identity may oppose one another and, simultaneously, be questioned.

Ironically enough, throughout his life Forrest deals with people who might symbolize different forms of alterity in American society: Bubba, a black person, Dan, a disabled one, Jenny,<sup>16</sup> a hippie and a druggie who later on gets Aids, a sign of the times of the early eighties associated with homosexuality and with the use of intravenous drugs. Nonetheless, while Forrest stands as the prototype of the different, when relating to each of those, he plays the role of spokesman for conventional, accepted behaviors; moreover, he has a core function in trying to help marginal people into the mainstream — whether by marrying Jenny, financing Bubba's family, or keeping friends with Dan Taylor and later on becoming his partner in the shrimp boat business. Incidentally, this is also one of the arguments for a conservative reading of the film that sees Forrest as the good American who manages to survive those who embody difference and because of that, are somehow doomed, as Thomas Byers states: "...attributes of otherness (blackness, femininity) are assimilated to Forrest himself, while the subjects in the real position of such otherness (Bubba, Jenny) must die" (422). This moral punishment appears reinforced inasmuch as Forrest's success and rewards belong in the realm of his virtues, faithful to common American values (Wang 101-2): "Forrest's survival lends an air of inevitability to the traditional American values that he 'naturally' upholds. Only 'socially productive' values — loyalty, innocence, obedience and innocence — will last" (101). In addition to this, as Kevin Stoda contends, Forrest's actions illustrate Zemeckis's enduring conviction of individual power over the collective, an idea he had conveyed before, for example in *Back to the*

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<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, through Jenny we get a thorough, extensive overview of the cultural landscape, namely in terms of pop culture, for example: she wants to become a folk singer, whereby Joan Baez's songs are evoked, and becomes a member of the hippie movement and of peace movements.

*Future* (1985) (<http://eslkevin.wordpress.com>, par.15). In the context of the present discussion, this individual strength is reinforced by the extraordinary characteristics borne out of oddity. Forrest's wedding is illustrative of his triumphant path, opposing Dan's, whose iron legs are the counterpart of Forrest's braces as a child. Thus, Dan seems to have borrowed metaphorically both Forrest's handicap and his status of difference, thereby moving to the realm of *the Other* himself.

Despite all the stances that have classified the film as conservative, Forrest's process of integration into the mainstream, which the concept of identity falls into, to a great extent results from the fact that he enters the world free of pre-references or prejudice. Every contact he makes is virginal and empirical, and therefore depoliticized.<sup>17</sup> Brockmann contends that Forrest's innocence not only opposes the evil, tragic events of American history, but also represents the innocent part of America itself, resisting all its flaws (356). In addition to this, and probably as importantly, it is our view that Forrest's lack of criticism and ignorance do not overshadow cruelty or injustice in what he shows us — a selection not based on politics, but merely on humanism — which also provides the possibility for every viewer to have this same kind of clean look, keeping merely to what is narrated in order to make their own judgment. Wang incidentally notes that, in the end, *FG* “was open to appropriation by both liberals and conservatives” (109), which to some degree undermines the insistence on the conservative bias of the film. One of the producers, Steve Tisch, reiterates that it “isn't about politics or conservative values. It's about humanity, it's about respect, tolerance and unconditional love” (Wang 109).

The originality of *Forrest Gump* partly lies in the fact that human values can overlay the political or ideological ones, whether some of them coincide or not. Forrest's unconditional upholding of such principles defines the essence of his otherness, while the socio-cultural and historical context framing his life allows for far much than a political reading of the film.

To conclude, Gump's path through life highlights the frailty of the conceptual opposition between identity (in the sense of being “identical”

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<sup>17</sup> Byers mentions that being depoliticized is precisely one of Forrest's traits, more often than not achieved through comic details (143).

and belonging to a larger, accepted group) and otherness, be it in political or in human terms, as his being different proved a special means to place him at the core of American identity, whose founding principles he helped reinforce and enrich. Nineteen years after being released, it is human potential in *FG* that prevails, namely by revising the concepts of identity and otherness. These may easily merge or be interchanged, either because, as Forrest wonders in the coda, “we each have a destiny”, or because “we’re all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze...”, or because of “both”. Whatever the reason, it is the human growth and the personal learning born from such a path that emerge as the ideological, ethical rationale for *Forrest Gump*.

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### ABSTRACT

Forrest Gump's life experience spans a few decades of the second half of the twentieth century. Major events in American history, encompassed by the social and cultural setting of the times, are displayed through the main character's particular angle, a first-person narrative where fact and fiction, History and stories are inextricably interwoven.

While Forrest's unique view of the world is shaped by his mental and physical limitations, he embodies oddity and otherness as seen from other people's eyes. However, whether because of his choices or merely out of chance, his difference seems to consistently bring him to the core of mainstream American values and dreams.

This article aims to reflect on this peculiar relationship between man and contemporaneity, focusing primarily on the dichotomy identity/alterity, both in terms of individual development and within the realm of American experience. The interrelation of both concepts in the film further enables the discussion on how criticism of American culture and history, on the one hand, and allegiance to it, on the other, may correlate, thereby contributing to enlarge the reflection on the meaning of *Forrest Gump*.

### KEYWORDS

Identity; otherness; American culture; *Forrest Gump*; twentieth-century History

### RESUMO

A vida de Forrest Gump abrange algumas décadas da segunda metade do século XX, ao longo das quais acontecimentos marcantes da história americana, bem como o respetivo contexto sociocultural, são apresentados através do ponto de vista do protagonista, numa narração em primeira pessoa que alia, de forma por vezes inextricável, factos e ficção, a História e as "histórias".

A perspetiva particular de Forrest acerca do mundo é, em larga medida, definida pelas suas limitações de carácter físico e mental, o que o torna, aos olhos dos outros,



uma figura de alteridade. No entanto, seja pelas suas opções ou tão-somente por uma questão de sorte, o facto de ser diferente parece colocá-lo, de modo sistemático, no centro dos valores e sonhos tradicionais da sociedade americana.

Este artigo pretende refletir sobre esta relação específica entre o homem e o tempo coetâneo, focando, sobretudo, a dicotomia identidade/alteridade, quer em termos de desenvolvimento pessoal, quer no contexto da experiência americana. A inter-relação dos dois conceitos no filme permite equacionar a forma como a crítica à sociedade americana e a fidelidade aos seus princípios de algum modo se articulam, contribuindo, assim, para o aprofundamento da leitura dos sentidos em *Forrest Gump*.

#### PALAVRAS CHAVE

Identidade; alteridade; cultura americana; *Forrest Gump*; história do século XX

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