

Forrest gump: marxist and feminist analysis



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In the 1990s, Paramount Studio produced some box-office hits and one of which, Forrest Gump, is a huge triumph that won the Oscar for Best Picture for 1994 and gained over \$677 million dollars of box office throughout the world. The film is based upon the novel by Winston Groom and directed by Robert Zemeckis; it portrays the leading role Forrest Gump (played by Tom Hanks), who is a normal American guy, with an IQ of 75 so called as idiot, but successfully getting through his bittersweet childhood, brilliant football career at college, and brave performance in the army as well as a fortune in his shrimping business. Forrest's story truly inspires the entire American with his significant achievements and positive attitudes towards life; in addition, the film reveals a history of America over the past decades in which take numerous historic events, representing the eventual American dream in a land of opportunity.

Forrest Gump is wholly masculine film and Forrest Gump is no doubt the protagonist, two important females, his mother - Mrs. Gump and his best girl friend ever - Jenny, however do present their thoughtful images in the film, making a great impact on Forrest's interior world and life. Accordingly, this article would like to concentrate on the above-mentioned women and explore how they influence Forrest with their unique characters and values. Furthermore, a deeper level of examination linked to patriarchal myths and values in social context will be also proposed to demonstrate the status of the 1990s American society.

With the intention of arguing these points, some film theories should be certainly applied to the narrative in Forrest Gump. It has been predominant since the 1970s that film critics and scholars have turned from semiotics to

psychoanalytical notions that been broadly utilized into the film analysis. Consequently, it is crucial indeed to employ these methods into this article, theoretically addressing feminist debates in terms of the texts in Forrest Gump. Furthermore, it can see through how the hegemony is constructed in a patriarchal society in relation to feminism by the analysis within Marxism discourse.

Representations of Women in Forrest Gump

The two females are depicted in the film: one is Forrest's mother - Mrs. Gump (by Sally Field), who makes great contribution to Forrest's life; the other one is Jenny Curran (by Robin Wright), as Forrest says about her: " she was my most special friend, my only friend". In general, these two females can be identified as stereotypical representations of women with their social, cultural and sexual definition, extremely influencing Forrest into another representation of men in a patriarchal society as Hollows, Hutchings and Jancovich (2000, P230.) states that " It is a historical fact that women have formed an important part - of the audience for commercial entertainment films".

Mrs. Gump appears to be a single mother of Forrest. According to how Forrest values his mum, " she is a very smart lady", responsible, brave, and independent. She is good at managing her property inherited from her family, renting all the empty rooms to make a living. Regardless Forrest's low IQ, Mrs. Gump still insists on her son's attending public school rather than a special school as she says that " my boy Forrest is going to get the same opportunities as everyone else"; She tells Forrest that " stupid is as stupid does", encouraging Forrest growing up to a normal and confident person. On

the other hand, she really understands that life is full of ups and downs, giving Forrest lessons such as " life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get". To Forrest, Momma is always an excellent model he learns from. Even though she is dying, Mrs. Gump calmly says to her son " it's just my time ... Don't be afraid, death is just a part of life. It's something we're all destined to do. I didn't know it, but I was destined to be your momma. I did best I could". Generally, the character of Mrs. Gump is a strong and independent female presence. However, her existence is more than for herself; viewing all the way through Forrest's story, Mrs. Gump becomes a signifier of independence which can be seen as answering to male desires and anxieties. Claire Johnston (2000), one of the first film critics to recognize the film text as a semiotic sign system, develops Barthesian semiotic point of view into her feminist inventions that the woman exists as a structure in the text of classical Hollywood films:

Iconography as a specific kind of sign or cluster of signs based on certain conventions within the Hollywood genres has been partly responsible for the stereotyping of women within the commercial cinema in general, but the fact that there is a far greater differentiation of men's roles than of women's roles in the history of the cinema relates to sexist ideology itself, and the basic opposition which places man inside history, and woman as ahistoric and eternal. (2000: 23)

In this respect, Mrs. Gump is a sign being considered as a structure or a convention. Whatever Forrest recalls his mother, for example, he always starts with words like " Momma always said" this or " Momma always said" that, which emphasis his mother's huge influence on him. The mother's

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amazing characteristics of perseverance, independence and kindness are taken by Forrest who can overcome any difficulties through his life. It proves a system of exchange in classical films that the representation of women as the ideological meaning is for men rather than women. Hence, as Cook and Johnston (1990) argues:

The male protagonist's castration fears, his search for self-knowledge all converge on woman: it is in her that he is finally faced with the recognition of 'lack'. Woman is therefore the locus of emptiness: she is a sign which is defined negatively: something that is missing which must be located so that the narcissistic aim of the male protagonist can be achieved.

Besides, Jenny presents her distinct aspect of the representation of women in Forrest Gump, who is depicted as an extremely confused character. She spends most of her life finding herself, always expecting that " Dear God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far away from here". Young Jenny is abused by her drunken daddy and stays with Forrest just because she is scared of loneliness. After high school, they go to different colleges. In Forrest's eyes, Jenny and he are just like peas and carrots since she friendly offers a seat on his first bus to school. However, the film mostly presents the dark, lonely and weak side of Jenny whom is totally unlike strong and independent Mrs. Gump; Jenny makes wrong decisions of being naked model for magazine, singing at a strip club and taking drugs when Forrest sets off his successful life; particularly, a couple of times she wants to suicide. No matter when and where, Forrest always attempts to rescue Jenny out of trouble through her journeys but ends up Jenny's running away every time. Jenny is Forrest's only love and he really does care about her, trying his best to protect her. Finally,

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they go together as what Forrest hopes when Jenny decides to settle down and marry Forrest.

Mrs. Gump and Jenny play important roles with respect to Forrest but in completely different ways. The semiotic investigation into the myth of women in the film text clarifies the women as a structure and how they works as a signifier of ideology.

Psychoanalysis Concepts and Spectatorship Issues

Apart from theoretically examining the representation of women in Forrest Gump with the help of semiotics discourses, psychoanalytic theory is necessarily to be taken as a critical tool in order to clearly exemplify women's differences from men in terms of lack and castration as well as discuss spectatorship according to Hollywood classical cinema. According to Janet McCabe (2004), " Psychoanalytic theory shifted from a semiotic concern with the text, to consider instead the unconscious processes involved in how the spectator is positioned in and through the film text" (p. 24). In this instance, Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic approaches significantly contribute to feminist film analysis in terms of studying sexuality concerns within spectating practices.

Drawing on Freudian theory regarding scopophilia, voyeurism and fetishism as well as Lacanian mirror phase, in her article Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Mulvey (1975) establishes her point of male gaze and demonstrates that film is structured according to male fantasies of voyeurism and fetishism.

In *Forrest Gump*, the act of gaze employs a complex relationship between the characters, the audience and spectator. For example, during his childhood just before mum tries to enroll him to the public school, Forrest sits on a swing outside the house at night, hearing the principal's grunts from inside the house. Forrest then grunts, imitating when the principal steps out, making him feel embarrassed. It is obvious that Mrs. Gump becomes an object for both the principal and her son to view, however, what reflect from them are varied: for the principal, she is an erotic impact and pleasurable looking; for her son, it seems his first time to recognize his mother does not own her penis but he previously assumes that she should have, so he thinks mother's one must have been castrated. The scene demonstrates Mulvey's (1989) debate from a feminist perspective: "it clearly conveys how male castration anxiety comes to be projected onto the female form, which is then appropriated as a fetish... how woman is represented adorned with phallic shapes" (p 8).

In addition, Forrest's looking at Jenny throughout her journey displays Mulvey's (2000) view of male gaze: woman plays a 'traditional exhibitionistic role' - her body is held up as a passive erotic object for the gaze of male spectators, so that they can project their fantasies on to her. For instance, Forrest's sitting in the rain at night and staring at her kissing with a boy in the car make him in the position of passive voyeur; his another looking over Jenny's breasts while she removes her bra in the dorm room presents Jenny herself as erotic spectacle for Forrest, then his active gaze renders her image into an object of sexual fantasy; before being sent to the War, Forrest comes to the night club, sitting in his seat in the same way as the spectator,

watching Jenny and sharing with audience in the cinema his anxious gaze when she is topless, sitting on a stool and playing a guitar on the stage. All these Forrest's looking over Jenny at his different occasions seemingly oscillates between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination.

Marxist Criticism and Cultural Studies

Along with psychoanalytical, feminist and cultural criticism, Marxist criticism is an especial approach to expose a collection of hidden meanings in films rather than discussing representations of women or sexuality from a sociological perspective.

According to Marxist theory, the film represents the Repressive State Apparatus as Forrest is going through his life: the assassination attempt on George Wallace, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy; the struggles over civil rights and the war in Vietnam. At this point, Lieutenant Dan (Gary Sinise) initially appears as a strong portrayal in the army with " a long, great military tradition", but ends up losing his both legs in the war then being encouraged consistently by Forrest's plain ideology, viewers thus see he eventually finds the real meaning of the life with his new mental legs, which convey a positive message towards the ideological issue that all the Americans wonder like Forrest Gump: " what's my destiny?"

Regardless its nature of unspoken yet invisible, ideology generally defines the shared beliefs and values held by a culture, it therefore hugely influences upon the culture with its invisible power. To some extent, ideology forms the manners of people think and things look, which is so called hegemony. In the film, either Mrs. Gump positively disciplines Forrest that " life is a box of

chocolates" or Jenny leaves him a negative advice that " if you're ever in trouble, don't try to be brave ... Just run away", Forrest simply takes them at the unconscious level; nevertheless, running becomes his starting point to success and even leads a large group following behind him. Consequently, whatever the representation of women meaning to this male protagonist in the classical narrative cinema, or how he gains the fantasies of voyeurism and fetishism in light of psychoanalysis, it finally appears to viewers that Forrest's story asserts possibility and hope even though difficulties, loneliness, and death, as he says that " to put the past behind you and move on". Accordingly, behind the images on screen, Forrest Gump reflects positive values that Americans should hold; the main characters more or less, present these ideological state apparatuses in terms of Marxism criticism. The film not only entertains audience with erotic spectacle and pleasure, also offers its suggestion to audience with regard to the society and culture they are positioned.

Marxism and feminism examine film studies individually; these discourses in fact have same desire to challenge the power structures in a patriarchal society. Meanwhile, both of them link to each other on the basis of psychoanalytic notions. Studying the main females of the film with feminism theory is certainly useful to explore the ways in which ideology has though been structured in the cultural context.

Conclusion

To sum up, Mrs. Gump and Jenny, the two females who relate to the protagonist Forrest Gump, have been mostly examined with the mechanism of feminist discourse in the article. By going through the feminism analysis

with their representation and sexuality in the film text and ideological implication in terms of Marxism theory, we can conclude the film, as Comolli and Narboni (2000) state: " on the one hand it is a particular product, ... on the other hand, as a result of being a material product of the system, it is also an ideological product of the system".

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