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**Film Review**

*Forrest Gump* and the Myth of American Innocence\*

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With six Academy Awards *Forrest Gump* is the most celebrated movie of the recent season. Not only has the film garnered thirteen nominations from the Academy of Motion Pictures, but the Screen Actors Guild, the Foreign Press Association, the Writers Guild of America, and People's Choice, not to mention Harvard University's Hasty Pudding Society, have already honored the movie. For the preceding two months a drumbeat of publicity whetted public anticipation for how many golden Oscars the movie would capture at the star-studded festivities of March 27.

The producers pulled the movie out of domestic distribution in the weeks before the sixty-seventh annual Hollywood pageant in order to prepare the way for an intensive advertising campaign that beckoned the public once again into theaters. With its triumphant return, *Forrest Gump* has amassed tens of millions of dollars in additional box office receipts and video sales. It is now the third most lucrative movie of all time (after *E.T.* and *Jurassic Park*), having grossed more than \$660 million worldwide at this writing (*New York Times* 28 May 1995: E2). With the Midas touch, collateral profits spring from sales of the original novel, a pocket book of "Gumpisms," caps, t-shirts, and inevitable soundtrack.

Although the eponymous hero of the movie is a sentimental simpleton, his makers are shrewd sophisticates who have created a popular icon with international appeal. The director Robert Zemeckis commented, "The film was so American in every respect, but as it turned out history is very much shared. ... and international audiences accepted it as a human story that happened to be set in recent American history" (*Turkish Daily News* 13 March 1995: A3). In the autumn of 1994, I saw *Forrest Gump* in a packed Ankara theater where a matinee audience of largely young people watched with rapt attention.

Few anticipated that when this movie opened in the summer of 1994 that it had such universal attraction. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* panned it. Robert Altman, whose cerebral films rarely have broad appeal, chastised critics of his recent satire *Pret-a-Porter*, "You should go see *Forrest Gump*. [It] is all about one thing. You'll be able to follow it" (*Turkish Daily News*, 10 March 1995: B6). And regarding the Oscar awards the *Irish Times* protested, "Rarely has Hollywood celebrated such a triumph of mediocrity" (*Turkish Daily News*, 31 March 1995: B6).

The simplicity with which *Forrest Gump* casts contemporary history is seductive for those willing to suspend disbelief. The myth of New World innocence and the American Adam is resurrected: the golden age is the 1950s, the values are those of the small town, and the guileless protagonist succeeds through an intuitive moral goodness. The consensus and conformity that dominated the United States after World War II centered on the containment of Communism abroad and on the contentment of the white middle class with its domestic situation. Peace and prosperity were welcomed after depression and war; American institutions, including capitalism, seemed to have reached a zenith of perfection, about which only malcontents seriously complained.

Inexplicably, as *Forrest Gump* would have it, sin entered into this Garden of Eden during the social tumult of the 1960s and early 1970s. The Vietnam War, Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society, discontented women, single parent families and drug abuse mysteriously appeared. Through travail and temptation, Forrest Gump, the holy fool who is blessed with wealth and hails from the heartland of the country, remains true. His steadfastness serves to save us in an age of alienation and *angst*. As Zemecki explained the evangelic allure of the nostalgic, "I imagined Norman Rockwell painting the baby boomers," the demographic cohort at the center of the movie (*Time*: 42). America remains the city on a hill, the light of the world, the redeemer nation. All is well.

By avoiding controversy and embracing cliché, the movie renders modern history into mass entertainment. Pivotal political and ethical issues are trivialized and transformed into a popular product, an inoffensive commodity of the least common denominator for the greatest number. Co-producer Wendy Finerman noted of the audience research, "What amazed us was that all four quadrants--older men and women, younger men and women--wanted to see it" (*Time*: 47). The commercial techniques of Madison Avenue that so effectively market MacDonalds and Marlboro, Levis and Coca-Cola worldwide are no strangers to Hollywood financiers. An enticing soundtrack of thirty-two rock 'n roll classics enhances the entertainment and lulls the audience into uncritical docility.

Eric Roth adapted the screenplay from a 1986 book by Winston Grooms that is replete with well worn literary devices. Although engagingly acted by Tom Hanks, Gump is a unidimensional character for whom complex development is not

possible. He is the timeless standard of goodness. His foil, Jinny, is the feckless female who in patriarchal tradition must die for her sins, from an AIDS-like disease that is tactfully not identified, after having repented in proper melodramatic fashion. Jinny plays Eve to Gump's Adam. In Pavlovian fashion, the viewer is primed to respond on cue to stereotypical gender roles.

Zemecki, whose previous credits include *Back to the Future* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, is a competent technician. (And now a rich one, for, like Hanks, he has made 32 million dollars from *Forrest Gump*.) His creative capabilities do not compare, however, to the artistry of contemporaries such as Robert Altman, Spike Lee or John Sayles. Nor does he have the craft or populist faith of a Frank Capra, whose classic films of the Depression era also affirm an American dream. The bedroom humor (Gump's mother sleeps with the principal in order to get her mentally deficient son into school) and bathroom joke (Gump bloated with Dr. Pepper amuses President Kennedy) are banal and derivative from the stale situation comedies of commercial television. The much vaunted digitalized display of historical figures whom Gump encounters go little further than being a marvel of technical legerdemain.

Of course, it is fun to pretend that Gump, the boy who cast off leg braces, taught Elvis Presley to gyrate. Indeed, affliction--paralysis and amputation--overcome by personal resolve is a metaphor that the nation is "back on its feet again." Gump runs, Dan walks. The Vietnam era is a nightmare from which we awake. Gump's son is normal; America is healed. The menacing Black Panthers and the malicious radical who abused Jinny, just as her alcoholic father had, are stock villains from whom the brave hero must rescue the fair damsel. Such is Zemecki's conception of dramatic tension. For balance, there are "good Negroes," such as Bubba, and benign protesters in colorful hippie attire, although they too are caricatures.

Gump's unheard speech to a massive anti-war demonstration in Washington, D.C. offends none and pleases all. In Tom Hanks's naive words, "The film is non-political and thus non-judgmental" (*Time*: 42). Yet, the Vietnam War is a conflict without Vietnamese and their more than three million dead. The homicidal havoc that the United States government unleashed in Southeast Asia is portrayed only in the hardships of American soldiers. Napalm, free fire zones, Agent Orange and village massacres are conveniently missing. The American arrogance of power and erroneous Cold War assumptions of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations about Southeast Asia are mirrored in the ethnocentrism of *Forrest Gump*.

The civil rights struggle--the most important social movement in twentieth-century America--is only tangentially depicted. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the long, hot summers of ghetto riots are missing. Did the audience in Ankara understand that most large American cities are reservations of impoverished people of color surrounded by largely affluent white suburbs? The plight of the urban underclass, for whom Martin and Malcolm called for racial justice and economic

redress decades ago, is as blissfully invisible in this movie as it is for most mainstream politicians today whose repressive corrective is more police, more prisons and welfare restrictions.

*Forrest Gump* is a superficial and self-indulgent cultural fantasy. Through the Academy Awards, Hollywood honors itself as the arbiter of collective memory. Themes of grief and uplift, sin and absolution, healing and harmony provide a vicarious catharsis from the serious problems of the day. Anti-intellectual and apolitical, *Forrest Gump* promotes a "feel good" narcissism devoid of civic commitment to social issues of power, justice and equity. History merely happens, just as the floating feather fatefully begins and ends the film. Personal preoccupation, not social engagement, is its norm, part of a national malaise that the movie encourages.

This modern fable with its myth of an earlier golden age mirrors the conservative political appeal of Ronald Reagan during the 1980s and the continued attraction for his successors during the 1990s. Burdened with personal debt, frustrated with a decline in real earnings, frightened of job layoffs, fearful of crime in the streets, alarmed at black rage, confused about cultural change, cynical about politics, and confounded about the Vietnam War, many white voters have turned rightward. President Reagan recalled "the good old days," a blend of fact and fiction, in which all was right with America, images not unlike those from the movies in which he acted. In their evocation of national innocence and individual salvation, *Forrest Gump* and Ronald Reagan share a common mentality, one of escape and delusion. The theme of "back to the future," as Zemecki would have it, makes for mediocre movies, poor politics, and bad history.

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### Works Cited

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