

Forrest Gump Study Guide

Forrest Gump

Introduction

"...Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get..."

(Forrest Gump)

In the first 18 days after its release, 'Forrest Gump' took \$100 million at the American box office. No other movie in the history of Paramount Pictures had ever grossed so much so fast. And within a fortnight, the movie's take had doubled to over \$200 million.

Did the studio expect 'Forrest Gump' to achieve so much? Not according to the film's scriptwriter, Eric Roth. He's been quoted as saying that "no one had any idea it was going to do so well".

So what was the key to the film's success? That is the question this guide will attempt to answer.

SECTION 1: 'FORREST GUMP' AND FILM STRUCTURE

'. . . I don't know if we have a destiny or if we're just floating around accidentally on a breeze.

Maybe it's both at the same time'

(Forrest Gump)

Consider the plots of three popular films from that time:

In 'Die Hard', a group of terrorists hold to ransom a high-rise tower block. But unknown to them a tough cop (Bruce Willis) is hiding in the building. Will he 'take out' the terrorists and rescue all the hostages before they blow up the building...?

In 'Dead Calm', a couple go yachting in the Caribbean. They come across an apparently sinking ship, and take aboard a man who claims to be a sole survivor. But whilst the husband (Sam Neill) makes a tour of the 'ghost' ship, the survivor – a psychopath – takes over the yacht and kidnaps the young wife (Nicole Kidman). Can she regain control of the yacht and get back to her husband before he drowns...?

In 'Jurassic Park', a 'mad scientist' (Richard Attenborough) invites a small group of experts to his private island, where he has accomplished a scientific miracle: he has brought long-extinct dinosaurs back to life. But the security system on the island collapses, and the dinosaurs run rampage. Can our heroes outwit the dinosaurs and escape unscathed...?

In terms of structure and narrative, these three are typical of the great majority of films produced in Hollywood each year. What drives them onward in their sheer simplicity? First we are introduced to the situation and to the characters who must play that situation through. Then we simply sit and watch, and the story, two hours later, reaches its reasonably inevitable conclusion.

These films aren't predictable. Far from it; they are full of twists and turns. But the twists and turns take place within a formula that's been clearly spelled out in advance by the filmmakers, and which is clearly understood by the audience. If 'Die Hard' took a bizarre turning half way through, and Bruce Willis gave up on the terrorists and went Christmas shopping instead, we, (the audience) would feel cheated. If Nicole Kidman, in 'Dead Calm', fell in love with the psychopath and set sail for Jamaica, we'd feel cheated. If the cast of 'Jurassic Park' had ignored the rampaging dinosaurs and sat down for a game of charades, we'd feel cheated. But to 'feel cheated' implies there are rules by which we expect the filmmakers to play...

So let's consider 'Forrest Gump'. Does 'Forrest Gump' stick to the rules...?

One common feature of 'Die Hard', 'Dead Calm' and 'Jurassic Park' is that – in terms of breadth of narrative – all three make a lot out of comparatively little; they stay in one place, they feature only a few characters, they cover a short period of time...

'Forrest Gump' is more ambitious. It covers the world, has a cast of thousands, and spans whole decades. It is epic in its breadth. During its two-and-a-half hours duration we're shown wars, assassinations, scandals... We're shown Forrest's childhood, his college days, his career as soldier, shrimper, runner, millionaire... And beyond this life story we're presented with a sprawling tapestry of recent American history. It's a film that truly bulges at the seams.

The film's director, Robert Zemeckis, has described the film as 'essentially a picaresque novel for the screen'. The term 'picaresque' refers to a type of novel common in the 18th century. Usually these were lengthy prose works of many hundred pages, following the rambling adventures of some heroic (or unheroic) character. These works were always episodic; they didn't build towards a grand conclusion, they simply tacked one self-contained scene after another. The novels ended not because the story was over; had the author wished, the story could have sprawled onwards forever.

How accurate does 'picaresque' seem as a description of the structure of 'Forrest Gump'?

TASK:

- Working in groups, pick an action adventure film you've seen that seems to have a fairly simple structure like. Now try to plot the film structurally by listing:
- 1. the main characters Who's the good guy? Who's the bad guy?
- 2. the situation What's the bad guy trying to do?
- 3. the spark What gets the action moving?
- 4. the resolution Does the good guy win? If so, how?

- Now try to list all the key elements of the film you've picked that you haven't included in this
 elementary plot structure (e.g. love interest, humour). How many things were there in the
 film that add to your enjoyment, but yet are marginal to the main driving force of the plot?
- Now try this exercise again, picking a different genre of film say a love story. This time
 the plot may not feature a battle between 'good guy' and 'bad guy', but structurally things
 won't have changed. For instance, to take a very classic example:
- 5. characters Romeo and Juliet
- 6. situation Two feuding families
- 7. spark Romeo and Juliet
- 8. resolution Romeo and Juliet die tragically
- Now try the same exercise for 'Forrest Gump'.
 How easy is it to pinpoint the film's narrative structure?

'Forrest Gump', as this exercise would reveal, is a highly episodic, non-linear film. Its scenes do not drive forwards, they merely follow one another. When the childhood scenes come to an end, the college scenes follow with the logic of simple chronology, not the logic of traditional film structure. And when the college scenes end, we go to Vietnam. And then we have a ping-pong section. And then we follow Forrest's exploits as a shrimp fisherman. And then Forrest goes for a run. And then Forrest makes lots of money. And then Jenny returns and Forrest becomes a model father. This structure is truly 'picaresque'. In traditional Hollywood terms it is unusual and extremely risky.

Perhaps this is why the scriptwriter, Eric Roth, had doubts that the film would do well.

And yet, despite the odds, the episodic structure of 'Forrest Gump' remains curiously 'watchable'. But why? If it's not the narrative drive that keeps the audience engaged, what else has the film to offer?

SECTION 2: THE INNOCENT AT LARGE

"Stupid is as stupid does . . . "
(Mama Gump)

"Just make your bed real neat and stand up straight . . . "

(Forrest on army life)

At the centre of the film 'Forrest Gump' is the character of Forrest himself, the simple-minded, good hearted, straight-talking Alabama boy played by Academy Award winner Tom Hanks.

Hollywood movies have always divided people into 'types'. Often actors are known for the 'types' they play. If they find themselves unable to break from this mould, they are said to be 'typecast'. Examples of Hollywood types include the hero (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the tough woman (Sigourney Weaver), the bad guy (Christopher Walken), the love interest (Meg Ryan) and the wimp (Rick Moranis).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 9. What other 'types' can you think of? You may find these 'types' fall into sexual stereotypes, or into national and ethnic stereotypes. Or they may be 'types' dictated by people's professions or simply personality.
- Think of movies you have seen recently, and try to recall the characters in them. How easily can they be bracketed into 'types'? How many of the characters defy categorisation? Does being hard to categorise make a character more interesting?

One common 'type' that has recurred again and again since the early days of the Hollywood movie is the innocent-at-large. He crops up in many guises, but his appeal is always the same. The innocent at large is the uncomplicated soul who, armed with a little home-spun wit and with enormous generosity of spirit, manages to show up the world around him as unpleasant, morally corrupt, and lacking direction.

Films featuring a variant on the 'innocent at large' might include:

'Mr Smith goes to Washington' (1939), in which a young Senator – the archetypal 'little man' – exposes corruption in high places. As James Stuart, playing Mr smith, puts it: "I wouldn't give you two cents for all your fancy rules if, behind them, they didn't have a little bit of plain, ordinary kindness – and a little looking out for the other fella, too".

'Being There' (1979), in which Peter Sellers plays an illiterate gardener, whose home-spun mutterings are mistaken for philosophical profundities. By the climax of the film he's risen to TV super-stardom.

'Rain Man' (1988), in which Dustin Hoffman plays an 'idiot savant' whose simple ways soften the cynical attitudes of his salesman brother (played by Tom Cruise).

'Dave' (1993), in which Kevin Kline plays a small town businessman and entertainer who, by accident, becomes President of the Unites States. His common sense, of course, guarantees him making a far better job of it than his more qualified predecessor.

'Forrest Gump' is a classic example of the 'innocent at large', a perfect illustration of the genre. With his buzz-cut hair and his slow, simple wisdom, he surveys the hectic world around him and sums it up with an awesome good heartedness that takes one's breath away.

TASK:

- Working in groups, brainstorm words and phrases that describe Forrest's character.
 When you run dry, work through the plot of the film, and remember the way he reacts to each particular event. Specific occurrences may reveal aspects of his character that are vital to the whole.
- Now look through the list of words and phrases you have produced. Think about each
 word or phrase in turn, and, imagining you'd used the phrase to describe someone you
 know, ask yourself the question: 'Is this a compliment?'
- With a plus point for every positive word or phrase, and a minus point for every negative one, how well does Forrest score?

As this exercise might reveal, there is much about Forrest that we would traditionally consider unappealing. Sometimes, for instance, his naivety borders on the unpleasant, as when he describes Jenny's father – a child abuser – as "a very loving man, always kissing and touching Jenny". Equally, in any other character, his starched and humourless patriotism might be cause for dislike.

And yet we cheer Forrest on. Whatever his faults, he wins the audience over. Why?

Consider the following paragraphs from newspaper articles and reviews of 'Forrest Gump':

- "... Not since Charles Bronson's 'Death Wish', when his character avenges the violation of his family by gunning down muggers across New York, have audiences jumped out of their seats and cheered for all they were worth. I had tears streaming down my face and yelled 'Go, Forrest, Go', with about 1000 other people" says Chicago bartender Chris Jackson. "It is amazing. It is about the triumph of the common man ..." (Alan Hall, Screen Mirror)
- "... 'Forrest Gump', the latest cinematic impersonation of American innocence, has become an icon dear to the hearts of the baby-boom generation whose common experience he mirrors. Gump's life, it seems, is how millions of middle-aged Americans feel theirs should have been ... "
 (Charles Laurence, Daily Telegraph)
- "... It takes baby-boomers back to the futures that were lost to darker American episodes over the past 30 years. The film suggests only a simpleton could miss the erosion in the national character..."
 (Rita Kempley, Washington Post)
- " . . . It is, of course, sentimental, but much more than that, it is melancholy, and nostalgic. America is in a nostalic mood right now. 1994, after all, is the 25th anniversary of everything – the first moon walk, Watergate, Charles Manson, Woodstock, the gay rebellion of Stonewall. You name it, it happened 25 years ago . . . " (Clive Barnes, London Evening Standard)

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- According to these articles, what type of audience is the film 'Forrest Gump' appealing to?
 How old is this audience now?
- What does the Daily Telegraph journalist mean when he says this audience shares a 'common experience' with the character of Forrest Gump?
- Do you feel that without this 'common experience' one's enjoyment of the film 'Forrest Gump' might be lessened?

The success of the film 'Forest Gump' rests on an understanding of the cares and heartaches of American society over the past 30 years. Whether the film succeeds as well in Britain will depend on the ability of British audiences to tap into this wholly American experience . . .

SECTION 3: FORREST GUMP AND AMERICAN HISTORY

"... My Granpa's Granpa's Granpa came over here about a thousand years ago. Something like that ... "

(Forrest Gump)

"... America. Our kind of place ... " (bumper sticker on Dan's wheelchair)

'Forrest Gump' unfolds like a pageant of modern American History. Whatever the key historical event, year by year, Forrest seems to have been there. He was lurking in the background as black students crossed the threshold onto privileged white southern colleges; he met President after President, the icons of American life; he fought in Vietnam, the most significant war Americans have fought since the Second World War, and returned to join (unwittingly) the peace movement, a struggle which played a significant part in carving out the identity of contemporary liberal America. He witnessed the thawing of American hostility towards China. He benefited from the rise of corporate America. And his girlfriend succumbs to AIDS, an issue of the 1990's.

Only a fictional character could have seen so much. Real people may be in the right place at the right time once or twice in a lifetime, but that's usually all. By showing Forrest in so many 'historic' situations, the filmmakers aren't attempting to stretch our credulity; rather, they're taking us to enjoy a narrative 'game' where suspending disbelief becomes part of the pleasure. This suspension of disbelief reaches its climax in the very funny moment where Forrest is shown phoning security on spotting burglars in a suite at the Watergate Hotel. This is pure farce. The burglary was the incident that sparked off the Watergate affair, a scandal that revealed corruption in the government of President Richard Nixon and resulted in his resignation. For Forrest to supposedly have set the whole thing in motion – playing an active

part in history rather than simply observing it – is pure self-indulgence on the part of the filmmakers; it's as if they are saying to us, the audience, "Of course Forrest isn't real, he's simply a narrative vehicle – but so what? Sit back and enjoy it . . . "

TASK:

- Prepare a list of the key historical events featured in the film.
 - How much did you know of these events before you saw the film? How much did the film enable you to understand more about them? Were they self explanatory, or rather confusing?
- Look back at the quote by Rita Kempley of the Washington Post. What does she mean by the 'darker American episodes' presented by the film? Can you think of any episodes presented by the film that aren't dark, but are uplifting and optimistic?
- How does Forrest react to these 'dark episodes'? What is his reaction, for instance, to the assassination of John F. Kennedy? To the Vietnam War? To the Watergate affair?
- Why are the film-makers so keen to show that Forrest is oblivious to the events that go on around him? Why are we encouraged to find it funny that he so blithely misses the point? Think again of Rita Kempley's phrase "only a simpleton could miss the erosion in the national character". She's hinting at a message in the film, if such a message exists. So what is the message?

One way to get at the answer might be to look in greater detail at the section in 'Forrest Gump' when Forrest heads off to Vietnam as a GI. Vietnam has long been considered a turning-point in American history, and the critical event that some commentators have blamed for America's supposed 'erosion in national character'. So perhaps studying the film's attitude to Vietnam will enable us to pinpoint the 'message' of 'Forrest Gump'. . . .

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- What do you know of the war in Vietnam? Who was fighting whom, and why?
- Discuss in groups the picture of the Vietnam War presented in contemporary Hollywood movies. Vietnam has become so important to the American film industry that it constitutes as much a 'genre' of film as, say, western or the sci-fi picture. Think, for instance of the Rambo movies; 'The Deer Hunter'; 'Apocalypse Now'; 'Full Metal Jacket', Platoon'; 'Born on the Fourth of July'; 'Hamburger Hill'; Casualties of War'; the list goes on. How do these movies present war? Do they glorify it? Or do they show the pity of war? Do they show wars as patriotic, national crusades? Or do they focus on more individual stories?

In general, Hollywood has played Vietnam two ways. It has either adopted a gung-ho patriotic shoot-em-up approach (for instance in 'Rambo II'), or it has taken the view that Vietnam was a tragedy, a war fought for politicians, and a terrible waste of thousands of American and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese lives.

For American Society, the war was equally divisive. Many in the establishment believed the war to be 'right', a 'moral crusade' (against the North Vietnamese Communists), and they condemned all those who opposed the war as unpatriotic. The peace movement resented this; they felt that opposing the war was the truly 'patriotic' position, because there was nothing to be proud of in losing lives for a 'misguided' cause.

After the war ended the situation grew even more complicated. It became apparent that the vast majority of soldiers who had fought and died in Vietnam were poor, and that many of them were black. Draft dodgers – those liberals who refused to fight or avoided fighting – were now perceived as the middle class 'lucky ones'. They were expected, increasingly, to feel guilty about their lack of participation in the war.

To complicate matters further, as the veterans returned home they blamed the peace protesters for eroding American resolve to win the war. Some veterans believed that, had they had better support, they might have won. And anyway, considering the war 'morally wrong' denigrated their achievement and their sufferings.

So to present the Vietnam War in a 'politically correct' way, Hollywood today has a difficult job on its hands. To say that the war was right offends liberal sensibilities. To say that it was wrong belittles the veterans who fought so hard and sacrificed so much.

So what about 'Forrest Gump'? What 'line' does the film take?

Consider the following quotes from the film:

Forrest to Lieutenant Dan: "... Someone from his family had fought and died in every American war. I guess you could say that he had a lot to live up to ... "

Dan on surviving the war: " . . . Keep your socks dry . . . "

Dan to Forrest: "... I was supposed to die in the field with honour. That was my destiny. And you cheated me out of it..."

Bubba (dying): "... Why did this happen?" Forrest: "You got shot ... "

TASK:

- Using these quotes to kick off the discussion, analyse in groups how Dan and Bubba relate to the war. Which character represents the 'establishment' view of Vietnam as a glorious national and personal crusade? What character represents the victim of the war, the 'lamb to the slaughter'?
- How do Dan's attitudes change during the course of the film?
- What does Jenny's character represent during this section of the film?

In the characters of Bubba and Jenny, it is clear that the filmmakers have deliberately presented us with a broad cross section of opinion towards the war. But to know where the filmmakers themselves stand, we have to understand Forrest's own point of view. Here, then, is Forrest's summing up of Vietnam:

Forrest: ". . . I got to see a lot of countryside. We took these long walks. And we were always looking for a guy named Charlie . . . "

As ever, Forrest simply misses the point. He enjoys army life, he performs heroic deeds, he gets decorated for valour, but he won't condemn Jenny for her role as a peace-protester. He's forever non-judgemental. When Dan revisits him, Forrest fails to understand Dan's cynical and bitter tone. It simply washes over him.

So what are the filmmakers saying? That we should admire Forrest's lack of political convictions? Or rather that we should admire his refusal to take sides? As Forrest Gump himself would say: "Nobody ever got into trouble by keepin' his mouth shut".

'Forrest Gump' presents us with a world where, to succeed, you should act the simpleton, Forrest's wisdom is in fact a non-wisdom; he advocates not that we pen our eyes, but that we put on blinkers. Those characters in the film that have glorious dreams (Dan's dream of the noble death, Bubba's dream of a shrimp boat, Jenny dream of a flight) all find their dreams unachievable. But Forrest, who has so few expectations, succeeds in spite of himself.

This is a kind of triumph, though it's not the sort of triumph usually recognised in Hollywood films. And this quirky, downbeat message has obviously struck home. American audiences have found the film, and it's conclusion, amusing, sympathetic, and highly relevant.