

Forrest Gump

Review by Judith Sandys

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Why, one might wonder, does a film like *Forrest Gump* hold such appeal for so many people? This is a somewhat silly fantasy in which the hero is a man of limited intellectual capacity to whom unbelievable things keep happening. Football star, war hero, ping pong champion, millionaire, guru: despite his limitations, fame and fortune follow Forrest no matter where he goes or what he does. And in the end, he wins the heart of the woman he loves.

Perhaps in these recessionary times, we find it comforting to think that good things can just "happen." Or perhaps the ever-increasing cynicism with the world around us makes us applaud this man who does not possess a single mean or calculating bone in his body. Whatever its appeal, it is important to note that at the same time as it may entertain or comfort, this film reflects and reinforces many negative stereotypes about people with cognitive disabilities.

While not entirely original (the characterization of Forrest Gump is reminiscent of Chance the gardener in the old Peter Sellers movie *Being There*, and stylistically, the movie takes up the main "sight gag" of Woody Allen's *Zelig*, wherein the hero finds himself at the centre of various moments in history), the film is technically clever—the historical scenes are extremely well done and, almost invariably, very funny. Certainly, this film purports to be a sympathetic portrait of a man with cognitive limitations. After all, Forrest Gump is a likeable character. He is friendly; he is kind and generous; he is a caring and loyal friend; he is able to love deeply; and in the end he triumphs—financially and in love.

What, then, are the problems with this film?

First of all, the characterization of a person with a somewhat less than average IQ (75) relies heavily on inaccurate and misleading stereotypes. While many people, myself included, are sceptical about the value of IQ scores in terms of defining and

measuring something as complex as "intelligence" (see for example, Gould, 1981), it is important to note that these tests are constructed so that the average test score will be around 100 and scores are distributed on a bell curve. What this implies is that there are many, many people with IQs around 75 or 80. While people with such scores may not be able to be brain surgeons or rocket scientists, in day to day interaction, they are likely to be indistinguishable from those who may achieve higher test scores on standardized "intelligence" tests.

Nevertheless, because *Forrest Gump's* limited intellectual capacity is central to the story line of this film, the director must ensure that he is recognizably different. There are a number of conventions which are used in film to convey a message of limited intelligence: pants that are too short, clothes that are just a bit too tight, feet that turn in, a funny hair cut, missing teeth, a blank look—all these may be used to signal to the audience that this is someone who has not quite figured things out. Several of these conventions are present in this film, albeit quite subtly. As soon as we see Forrest, we know that something about him is not quite right. The way he sits, the expression on his face, his haircut—all these combine to tell us that he is not very bright. While Forrest's IQ of 75 is above the level which defines intellectual disability, to all intents and purposes, Forrest is presented as having such a disability.

If one looks at how people with intellectual and other disabilities have been perceived throughout history, certain negative roles appear with great regularity (Wolfensberger, 1992). These negative roles effect how we—as individuals and societies—perceive and respond to people with disabilities. And as long as people with disabilities are perceived in these ways, society can justify the policies and practices which logically emerge from them. Chief among the roles typically assigned to people with cognitive disabilities are that of child, object of ridicule, and non-human. All three are reflected in this film.

Forrest Gump is presented as having a child-like innocence. He speaks in a child-like manner, in tone, in the forms of expression he uses ("like Mama always said..."), and in his enunciation of specific words ("chock'lit"). The book he treasures is

Curious George, a story popular with the preschool set.

In the Middle Ages, people with cognitive disabilities were sometimes thought to be "changelings," non-humans in human form (Wolfensberger, 1972). The portrayal of Forrest Gump in this film has some of these overtones. What he lacks in cognitive capacity, he more than makes up for with physical skills—physical skills that are well beyond human capacity. It is these non-human qualities that are the source of much of his fame and fortune.

People with intellectual limitations have long been seen as objects of ridicule. Indeed, that is the central premise of this film. Forrest Gump is one long "stupid joke." While we recognize the taunting of the children as cruel, in fact Forrest continues to be subject to ridicule even in adulthood. I lost count of how many times he was referred to as an idiot or moron or called dumb.

It is true that in this film many good things happen to Forrest. Nevertheless, for the most part, these just happen. Forrest is not portrayed as a causal agent, able to shape his own destiny in any conscious way, nor are the actions of others perceived as having any negative impact on what happens to him. He just "is" and whatever happens, happens. In a world where things just happen, no one is responsible. In such a world, people with disabilities are very vulnerable.

There are aspects of the portrayal of Forrest Gump that are very positive. It is encouraging to see a man who is defined as having cognitive limitations being portrayed as able to love and be loved, to care for others, and to take on the responsibilities of parenthood. It is noteworthy that the important relationships in Forrest Gump's life do not centre around other people with cognitive limitations—an all too frequent assumption in our society. However, while the positive aspects of the film must be recognized and applauded, the fact that they occur in the context of a film that perpetuates negative stereotypes of people with intellectual limitations as childlike, not quite human and objects of ridicule.

In our society, people with disabilities are most often poor. Denied opportunities to acquire many skills, excluded from employment, or at best limited to the most menial and poorly paying jobs, disability in our society is most often associated with poverty. This film portrays a man who, through a series of events over which he has no control, becomes very wealthy.

Since, in our society, wealth is highly valued, people who do acquire wealth are accorded significant status regardless of whether they have earned that wealth. It is interesting to note that when Forrest is wealthy he is perceived as more competent—it is only in the context of this great wealth that he is portrayed as able to have a sexual relationship and to parent a child. Somehow, his wealth makes him more competent in these areas. There is perhaps some lingering ambivalence, however; we are never sure that his true love would have returned to him if she were not dying. Perhaps the film-maker could not imagine a woman wanting to spend a whole lifetime with Forrest Gump.

What we have, then, is a fairy tale with a hero who has cognitive limitations but super-human physical skills. Despite the taunts of others, our hero remains untouched and ever cheerful. Because this is a magical world, good things just keep happening to our hero, who, as a result, is able to acquire great wealth. With his great wealth, he is able to win the love of a dying woman (although, alas, his magical abilities cannot save her life) and to father her child. He and his child live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, life for people with intellectual and other disabilities is not a fairy tale. The things that happen are all too often bad things. These bad things do not just "happen." They happen because of the way society perceives and responds to people with disabilities. And it is these very perceptions which this film perpetuates.

References

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