"No Box of Chocolates": The Adaptation of Forrest Gump

This essay appeared in Literature/Film Quarterly 25.1 (1997).

Like Chance the Gardener in Being There, Forrest is the creation of his audience, a Nowhere Man positioned at the center of an historical tableau, the gooey nougat at the heart of a video sampler. Ironically, the fictional scenario which that 1979 film so skillfully satirized, in which a mentally incompetent man rises to popular acclaim, became the political reality of 1994, the Year of Gump. That this picaresque tale of an idiot has been taken straight (picaros have traditionally been satirical figures) tells us all we need to know about the death of irony in our culture. From jiving participant, to mesmerized spectator, to reconfigured pixels: is that what's meant by "Gump Happens"?

Allison Graham, "Contracting America: The Gumpification of History"

[T]he movies at their best have reminded us, forcefully, that things should be otherwise--which is why advertising urges us to laugh them off, to "see right through them." Those movies have to be suppressed, revised, their power forgotten, because they don't just bedazzle us with a blurred, promissory vision of utopia but actually enable us to see, through them, the real workings of the very system that produced them, and that is now degrading them and us.

Mark Crispin Miller, "Hollywood the Ad"

Everyone who has gone to see a film based on a favorite book (and film producers count on the public's desire to do precisely that, since adaptation of a bestseller virtually guarantees a sizeable seed audience) has played the game of comparison and contrast. Walking to the car, sitting in the restaurant or the bar, pillow talking, we note how the characters have changed (sometimes in personality, often in appearance), how the plot has changed (sometimes resulting in a happy ending), how the setting, or the theme, or the tone has been altered, for good or for ill. We are disappointed when our favorite minor scene is nowhere to be found in, say, Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's Color Purple (1985). Brian DePalma's Bonfire of the Vanities (1990) transforms all the characters of Tom Wolfe's novel into rank caricatures, for reasons that are beyond our ken. We are confused, too, by Sidney Pollack's intentions in altering John Grisham's ending to The Firm (1993). We find Clint Eastwood's Robert Kincaid not quite as we had
imagined Robert James Waller's *National Geographic* photographer while page-turning our way through *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). We observe how Demi Moore's *Scarlet Letter* (1995) differs slightly from Hawthorne's. (When asked what people would think of the very un-Hawthornish happy ending of Roland Jaffe's film, she makes light of the unfaithfulness because, she says, no one has read the book anyway.) We await with some trepidation Jaffe's in-progress version of *Moby-Dick*.

Sometimes, however, we note even stranger transformations of book into film--changes which take us into the realm of narrative ontology. Because we have read the copiously footnoted neurological casebook which served as its inspiration, we are startled to read in the credits of Penny Marshall's *Awakenings* (1990) that the book is based "on the novel by Oliver Sacks." We are surprised when the credits of Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989) again inform us that it is an adaptation of a "novel," this time Christy Brown's autobiography *My Left Foot*, and even more shocked when, as that very book's non-fiction "strange text" comes alive in mindscreen, read onscreen by Brown's nurse, it contains scenes which not only are not included in the book but which totally alter some of its central themes.

The metamorphosis of *Forrest Gump* the novel into *Forrest Gump* the film (1994) does not quite belong with the latter group: it requires no metaphysics to understand. But it does not quite fit with the first group either. For the questions raised by this film in which commentators as different as Presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan (who saw it as a testament to Republican values and virtues) and Michael J. Lerner (who believes it speaks to the real need for a "politics of meaning") have found genuine cultural import, are certainly not the usual, colloquial leaving-the-movie-theatre ones. They are nevertheless central to not only an understanding of the film's tremendous popularity but to any assessment of the current state-of-the-art and go right to the heart of our postmodern era.

In an interview broadcast on CNN, novelist Winston Groom has insisted that he was not troubled by the changes screenwriter Eric Roth made in adapting the book of *Forrest Gump* for the screen. He would not hesitate, he insisted, to have another of his books adapted by Hollywood. Certainly some of the changes are understandable and logical.

Obviously it was not possible, with Tom Hanks cast in the central role, to make Forrest Gump 6 ft, 6 inches tall and weighing 245 pounds. And the logic of making Forrest a shrimp boat captain rather than a very-uncinematic shrimp farmer is easy to accept. Time constraints also shaped the screenplay. In its present form, *Forrest Gump* is, at 142 minutes, already a very long film. As is almost always the case in the adaptation of any complex novel to the screen, a great deal of cutting was needed. And so in the movie we do not get to experience Forrest Gump become a professional wrestler, spend time in a mental hospital, save Mao Tse-tung from drowning, journey into outer space, live with a cannibal, become a masterful chess player, play the monster in a remake of *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (with co-star Raquel Welch), or run for the United States Senate.
Forrest Gump's adaptation nevertheless raises persistent and troubling questions:

- Why is Forrest made smarter in the movie?
- Why make young Forrest crippled as a child?
- Why make Forrest squeaky clean, morally upright, and virginal in the movie?
- Why make Forrest a devoted and loving son?
- Why make Bubba an African American?
- Why make Forrest into a college graduate?
- Why have Forrest enlist in the Army instead of being drafted?
- Why have Forrest save Lieutenant Dan's life?
- Why equivocate on Forrest's opposition to the Vietnam War?
- Why make Forrest and Dan close, influential, life-long friends?
- Why have Lieutenant Dan loses his legs but not become badly scarred?
- Why have Lieutenant Dan become reborn?
- Why make Jenny the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her father?
- Why have Forrest and Jenny marry?
- Why have Forrest raise his child by Jenny?
- Why have Jenny die?
- Why change "Being an idiot is no box of chocolates" to "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you'll get"?

Allow me to focus on a few of these.

WHY MAKE FORREST SQUEAKY CLEAN, MORALLY UPRIGHT, AND VIRGINAL IN THE MOVIE? In the novel, Forrest Gump repeatedly uses profanity, is mildly racist, and is sexually active; indeed, he loses his virginity to a boarder at the Gump house who seduces him. In the movie, Forrest is morally upright and squeaky clean; he has sex for the first time with Jenny only very late in the day, and it is this one experience which leads to the birth of Forrest, Jr.

WHY MAKE FORREST A DEVOTED AND LOVING SON? In the novel, Forrest Gump ignores his mother for years on end. While he is in Vietnam, the family house burns to the ground, and his mother eventually ends up in the poorhouse, which causes Forrest no great distress. In the film, Forrest Gump is resolutely faithful to his mother; he literally comes running when he learns she is ill; and he is at her bedside when she dies and grieves long and hard over her passing. Her sacrifices on his behalf give him a chance in life (enable him, for example, to be mainstreamed at school), and her wisdom ("Stupid is as stupid does," "Life is like a box of chocolates") provides the guidance by which Forrest steers his life.

WHY MAKE BUBBA AN AFRICAN AMERICAN? In Groom's novel, Forrest's buddy Bubba is white, and they meet at the University of Alabama, where he and Forrest are members of the football team. The filmic Forrest meets Bubba, an African American man with a distended lower lip, on the bus on the way to basic training for the army. In both novel and film, Bubba makes possible Forrest's ventures in the shrimp business. In the
film, however, Biyou la Batre, Louisiana's shrimp business is a largely African American enterprise, and Forrest's triumphant success (after a hurricane wipes out his competition) is at the expense of the other Black shrimpers. (Later, of course, he gives a sizeable percentage of his money to Bubba's family.)

WHY MAKE FORREST AND LIEUTENANT DAN CLOSE, INFLUENTIAL, LIFE-LONG FRIENDS? In Forrest Gump the movie, Lieutenant Dan is Forrest Gump's commanding officer and is saved (against his will) by Forrest Gump's heroism when he carries him away from a Vietnamese fire fight. In the novel, however, Dan is not Forrest's commanding officer, nor does Forrest save him in battle (he meets him later in the hospital). In the movie, Dan loses his legs in combat, but in the book he has not only lost his legs but is horribly scarred by burns received in combat. In the novel, Dan becomes a grotesque character in an American tradition stretching back to Poe's "The Man Who Was Used Up" and plays a distant and ironic role in Forrest's life. The last time we meet him, he has become a bitter communist. In the film, Gary Sinise's Dan serves first as Forrest's mentor, then, after struggling with his own despair and depression and plunging into a life of drunkenness and debauchery, learns the will to live from the indomitable Forrest. His service on Forrest's shrimp boat turns his life around and gets him "back on his feet," so to speak. At film's end, he has acquired a new pair of prosthetic legs and (happily) married an Asian woman.

WHY MAKE JENNY THE VICTIM OF SEXUAL ABUSE AT THE HANDS OF HER FATHER? A hippie romantic in Roth's screen version, who dies of an AIDS-era variation on Ali McGraw's Disease, the filmic Jenny represents a substantial departure from the generally darker and less innocent character in Groom's novel. (Film critic David Kehr describes the novel's Jenny as "a busty cheerleader out of a softcore sex fantasy." ) The filmic Jenny does have a dark side, of course—one not in the book at all. She is a sexually abused child, the victim of a horrid father (in the novel her father is not even mentioned), whom she hates long into adulthood. Indeed, the movie suggests that Jenny's Protean instability (as a college student, cum-stripper folk singer, cum-anti-war activist, cum-plaything to the rich, cum-nurse, cum-loving mother and wife, she would make a good test-case for Robert Jay Lifton's theory of the dissociation of personality in the nuclear era) is the result of the lingering aftereffects of her abuse. In the book, Jenny and Forrest Gump do not marry. She marries another man and they raise Forrest Gump's child because "the little boy be better off with Jenny and her husband to give him a good home an raise him right so he won't have no peabrain for a daddy." In the movie, Jenny gives birth to Forrest Gump's child; years later, they marry, and Forrest Gump raises his own child as a single dad. The film's final, moving scene shows Forrest putting him on the school bus. Jenny's death, to be found only in the film, is not explained.

WHY CHANGE "BEING AN IDIOT IS NO BOX OF CHOCOLATES" TO "LIFE IS LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES. YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'LL GET"? On the day Forrest Gump was released on home video, I found myself in the local Kroger store in pursuit of a fresh gallon of 1%. Entering the store, I encountered a Gump clone, dressed in a white suit sitting on a park bench by the grocery carts. He offered me (complete with a Gump accent) a chocolate from a Whitman's Sampler in his lap and a flier for the
$16.95 video. Long before my meeting Gump's "box of chocolates" had, not surprisingly, already become its signature line. It had, of course, been intended as such. The decision to alter Groom's Twain-like sarcasm into the film's maudlin folk wisdom was not a literary or a cinematic one. It was a marketing decision. The Kroger Gump would not have been offering me one of his Whitman's if the theme of Forrest Gump had been "being an idiot is no box of chocolates." Nor, indeed, would he have been there in the first place. For it is hard to imagine that a movie with such a dark, ironic theme would have ever been even a moderate box office success in the first place.

It would be tempting to suggest that all the changes from novel into film listed here were in fact the result of marketing decisions. After all, we live in an age in which movies are tried out on test groups in order to ascertain, prior to release, what exactly audiences want. (The most famous example is, of course, Fatal Attraction [1987], whose Madame Butterfly ending was altered when it did not appeal to focus groups.) I do not mean to suggest, however, that Forrest Gump's distortions were the result of such pandering.

We live, too, in a time in which Jesse Helms-style bashing of NEA funded art (as in the case of Mapplethorpe) may, as many fear, result in even more restrictive self-censorship--in preemptive toning down/dumbing down of artistic production. When the neo-Marxist media sociologist Todd Gitlin went behind the scenes at ABC in the early 1980s, in preparation for writing Inside Prime Time, he assumed he would discover a conspiracy at work in the creation of prime programs and schedules, a collusion that would account for the repression of the radical and the original, explaining, for example, the network proclivity for "co-optation," the tendency to absorb all criticism of the medium into grist for its mill, its unique ability to (in Gitlin's own words) "convert the desire for change into the desire for novel goods" (Inside 77). What he found instead was a conspiracy without conspirators. No one needed to plot in secrecy to make the stupefying, status-quo-maintaining decisions necessary to keep network television a safe medium for capitalism. As in Orwell's 1984, ABC's good citizens did not need to be censured in order to prevent "thought crime," for they lived in a world in which thought crime was itself unthinkable.

Forrest Gump's $149 million dollar US box office and $480.9 million box office world wide were supposedly a complete surprise. They should not have been. Virtually every decision made in altering Winston's Groom's novel for the screen--from Forrest's heroic (and very cinematic) overcoming of his childhood handicap, to his very un-90s moral uprightness, to his Hallmark Greeting Card good son persona, to his politically correct and southern-stereotype-defying friendship with an African American, to his disease-of-the-week-genre inspirational influence on the courageously handicapped (but not deformed) Lieutenant Dan, to the Love Story death of the sympathetically child-abused Jenny, to Forrest's "new male" single-fathering--can be seen in retrospect as a kind of self-censorship-for-profit reconceptualizing of a Candide-like novel, appropriate to the era of the death of irony.

Works Cited

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