

FORREST GUMP - REDEEMER LITE:
THEOLOGICAL TEXT IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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“The present age with its sudden enthusiasms followed by
apathy and indolence is very near the comic;
but those who understand the comic see quite clearly that
the comic is not where the present age imagines.
Now satire, if it is to do a little good and not cause immeasurable harm,
must be firmly based upon a consistent ethical view of life,
a natural distinction which renounces the success of the moment;
otherwise the cure will be infinitely worse than the disease.”

- Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*

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INTRODUCTION

I enjoy watching movies. I also enjoy interpreting. As a Christian minister I have been trained in interpretation of the biblical text. This current interpretive exercise goes beyond the biblical text, however, to include contemporary artistic expression. The modern North American cultural setting is often characterized as becoming increasingly secularized, but when one considers the creative expressions of the time it is clear that North Americans are still grappling with the large questions of religious meaning. Movies are the unique artistic contribution of the modern era and along with TV are the primary theatre for contemporary story telling, self-understanding and quests for meaning. I was the pastor of a church until 2002, and had begun, since 2000, to use contemporary commercial movie scenes as part of my sermon presentation. This has become increasingly popular. There is now available, among many new resources for the religious interpretation of film, a movie lectionary guide, one book for each year of the three year cycle with one movie put alongside each week's readings.¹ Numerous on-line resources are also dedicated to interpreting movies from a religious perspective.²

The modern setting is being challenged by a postmodernism that is particularly sensitive to the hermeneutical nature of all human speech and understanding. In a

¹ Peter Malone and Rose Pacette, *Lights, Camera...Faith!: A Movie Lectionary. Cycle A*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2001. (Cycle B and C are also now available).

² See, for example, Gordon Matties, "Religion and Film Bibliography," <http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/gmatties/Religion%20and%20Film%20Bibliography.htm>

postmodern context an original, uniquely authoritative text is not required. All texts and their interpreters are seen as moving objects and subjects on shifting sand. This challenges an authoritarian religious hermeneutic that would claim an absolute authority for a canon of scripture or a foundation of a church. What it does allow is the use of a contemporary cultural creation—a movie—as a source of discussion about theology. For many, postmodernity is perceived as a centre-less intellectual game for the elite and well to do. However, many postmodern analyses are profoundly ethical. Being aware of the subjective aspect of knowledge postmodernism is particularly critical of the ethical damage caused by belief in the absolute objectivity of one's own perspective. The choosing of an ethic and a perspective that encourages the transformation of the world into a better place is very much part of the agenda of postmodernity. Postmodernity is especially attuned to injustices done to those othered or not included in modern approaches to understanding. Postmodern understandings of the interpretation of reality are also sensitive to subliminal ideological constructs that are operating behind the scenes. There always is an agenda, and, if an agenda is not chosen deliberately, the forces of a wider agenda will prevail.

This understanding of postmodernity is not in conflict with many Christian theologies. Christian theology has been concerned about the transformation of society and culture, especially in finding a more equitable treatment of those who are disadvantaged. Some Christian theology has also been sensitive to the underlying messages and interpretations of a medium as well as a message. Christian theology and

postmodern analysis are good conversation partners for doing theology in the twenty-first century North American context. A theological interpretation of a contemporary movie as text within a postmodern context, to which this thesis aspires, will draw from many theological and postmodern sources and considers how well a movie expresses Christian theology and encourages cultural transformation.

The movie *Forrest Gump* has been chosen because it is a movie that, in a postmodern fashion, plays with reality and draws from Christian theological and Western mythological themes. Gump is a Christ-like figure who re-interprets the events of the last few decades of the twentieth century in the United States of America. His memory and influence of events are blatant subjective interpretations, even to the point of being grafted into actual newsreel recordings. The movie does not claim to be a Christian movie, but it clearly draws from the Christian religious tradition of the majority of its U.S. audience. Many Christian interpretations of the movie have been very positive, finding in Gump a good example for living or an effective healer of America's wounds. But, by combining the theological considerations of Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, the feminist theologies of Lisa Isherwood, Mary Daly, Rita Brock, Valarie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, among others, along with the keen postmodern insights from Steven Scott and Thomas Byers, this thesis will show that Gump falls short of an effective redeemer figure of his culture's hurts. In fact, he ultimately serves to reinforce a damaging status quo that leaves othered voices un-empowered rather than liberated.

Forrest Gump begins and ends with shots of a feather floating to Gump as a child in the beginning and away from Gump when he sees his son off to school at the end. This light feather motif is central to the movie. This thesis is set out in such a way as to begin and end at a similar, but different, point. It will be similar to the poetic chiasmic pattern of the ancient Israelites, A. B. C. C. B. A., or:

A. Transformative Theology (H. Richard Niebuhr and Film Theologies)

B. Paul Tillich's Art Theology

C. Theological and Mythological Interpretations of *Forrest Gump*

C. Postmodern Ideological Interpretations of *Forrest Gump*

B. Paul Tillich's Theology of Style and a Crucified Redeemer

A. Liberative Theology (Feminist Theologies and Karl Barth)

The first A. and B. make up chapter 1. The first C. is the content of chapter 2 and the second C. is the content of chapter 3. The second B. and A. make up chapter 4. The A. component of chapters one and four consist of the potentially transformative theologies of traditionalists Niebuhr and Barth considered alongside more recent film and feminist theologies. The B. component of both chapter one and four is an examination of Tillich's unique contribution to a theology of art. Both C. sections are specific interpretations of *Forrest Gump*, the first one being traditional and the second postmodern. The flight of this thesis will begin and end with the consideration of how *Forrest Gump* suggests human life should be lived. Gump says that life is a like a box of chocolates, you never

know what you are going to get. For Gump, the results are surprisingly sweet, but for others, the box of chocolates, all too predictably, contains bitter morsels.

CHAPTER 1

Interpreting Culture, Art, and Movies Theologically

The consideration of a particular movie as a theological text is set within the context of more general theological discussions. To use a movie as a theological text the wider discussion of the relationship between theology and film and the purpose of each must be considered. This chapter will draw from some important twentieth century considerations in these regards. It will begin from the broadest context of culture in general, move to a more specific discussion of art as an important expression of culture and then to movies as a unique twentieth century artistic cultural form. Conversation partners from the discipline of theology include H. Richard Niebuhr and his analysis of Christ and culture, and Paul Tillich and his theological understanding of art; from the discipline of film theology, John May's Niebuhrian categorizing of movies and Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt's theological, mythical and ideological analyses will be considered along with Margaret Miles' comparison of today's movies with ancient Greece's theatre.

In contemporary North American culture an invitation to consider theological issues would rarely draw a big audience. Theology is often perceived as the practice of academics as they focus upon ancient texts, yesterday's history or massive systems of spiritual philosophy. Most people are not seeking theological discussions in the churches either. Perhaps academic obscurity and ecclesiastical dogmatism has stifled God-talk in our age. If the possibilities for theology are limited to pencil and pew that could be the case, but theology is active in our culture and taking place in today's expression of the ancient Greek theatre, the silver screen. Millions of people flock to new releases every weekend, millions more rent video releases and an increasing number are downloading yet to be released movies onto their home computer screens. Privileged, first world North Americans are a movie watching culture. The Winnipeg Free Press ran a recent article with the bold headline, "We're going to the movies in record numbers."³ North American box offices are setting records for the biggest audiences seen in 40 years. One and a half billion tickets were sold in 2002 at a value of more than nine billion US dollars. Film viewing is a primary place for experiencing contemporary story telling, and in these stories, God-talk is flourishing.

Forrest Gump is one of the most popular movies of the last decade of the twentieth century.⁴ Nominated for thirteen Academy Awards in 1994, it won Oscars for best

³ Melissa Leong, "We're going to the movies in record numbers", Winnipeg Free Press, Jan 10, 2003, D1.

⁴ *Forrest Gump*, writer Eric Roth director Robert Zemeckis, performers Tom Hanks, Sally Field, Robin Wright, Paramount, 1994.

picture, best actor, best director, best visual effects, best editing and best writing (screenplay). It is a Hollywood movie focused upon American popular culture during the last half of the 20th century. It is a popular movie about popular culture. It is also a movie that gives insight into many contemporary theological and cultural concerns. *Forrest Gump*, contrary to what some people may think, shows that theology is very much alive in contemporary North American secular society. It contains major theological themes that relate to understandings regarding the providence of God, free will and destiny, the nature and role of a redemptive figure, humility, faith pilgrimages, and societal transformation. Some of these themes are evident explicitly, for example the religious pilgrimage of Lt. Dan, while others, such as the reinforcement of society's traditional gender roles, are more implicit. Because these themes are intertwined within this popular movie, many viewers may not be aware that they are considering theological doctrines and practices as they would be if they were enrolled in an academic theology course or attending a place of worship. This has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, because of the entertainment setting of watching a movie, there is less resistance to topics of theology that might otherwise be considered boring, irrelevant or divisive. In this way, today's movies function like Ancient Greece's plays in that they are not only entertainment, but are a place for people to consider the question of how human beings should live.⁵ The negative aspect is the other side of the same coin – that is, because people are in a relaxed entertainment setting, they are more susceptible to

⁵ Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 7.

receiving uncritically the implicit values presented in a movie. Viewers, consequently, are not seriously challenged, and the status quo remains unchallenged. There is an attempt in *Forrest Gump* to challenge some aspects of its culture and ask how people should live, but because of its entrenchment within the dominant popular culture it ultimately fails to speak theologically in a transformative and liberative fashion for those needing it the most.

Movies are contemporary cultural visual art forms that tell stories. As such, they participate in wider discussions found in Christian theology, especially in conversations related to identifying relationships between theology and culture. H. Richard Niebuhr in his mid twentieth century work, *Christ and Culture*, categorized the relationship between Christian expressions and the wider culture into five different types.⁶ The Christ side of the relationship was understood by Niebuhr as the view of reality as expressed by a Christian who is a follower of Jesus Christ and who “counts himself as belonging to the community of men for whom Jesus Christ – his life, words, deeds, and destiny – is of supreme importance as the key to understanding of themselves and their world...God and man, good and evil.”⁷ The Culture side of the relationship is the collective values and impositions of human society that make up human civilization. Culture is the “artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural...A river is nature, a canal culture; a raw piece of quartz is nature, an arrowhead culture; a moan is natural, a

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 12.

⁷ Niebuhr, 11.

word cultural. Culture is the work of men's minds and hands."⁸ Culture includes things such as myth and art. Niebuhr believed that the Christ reality led people away from human achievement and aspiration because of its single-minded focus on God. Culture, on the other hand, dealt with the realm of temporality and pluralism, the world of humanity. The Christ reality moved away from human achievement towards God's grace, while culture moved away from God's work towards human accomplishment. This tension created numerous possibilities for disagreement and dialogue. Niebuhr proposed five types of dialogues, with two poles of opposition and agreement (Christ against culture and Christ of culture) and three mediating positions (Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and finally –Niebuhr's favourite – Christ transforming culture).

In the Christ against culture type Christianity is perceived and taught as being in opposition to human culture. It calls its followers to abandon the world, to be separated from it. This type of Christianity challenges people with an either-or decision – something is either for Christ or for culture, it cannot be both. Monastic movements exemplify the idea that people must leave or abandon the world in order to be followers of Christ. The Christ of culture type finds in Jesus the culmination of the aspirations of culture. Rather than standing against culture, Christ draws culture to himself from within it as the natural end of culture's own goals. Political and social movements such as Western civilization, democracy, Eastern culture and Marxism have been understood at various times as being essentially an embodiment of Christ.

⁸ Niebuhr, 13.

In the Christ above culture type a synthesis is evident, but Christ remains superior. What Christ brings from above gives a unique value-centre to the less than sufficient, but basically correctly aimed, human aspiration. Thomist theology is a representation of this type. The Christ and culture in paradox type negotiates the tension between the two in a continuing and unresolved dialogue. The two authorities of Christ and culture are retained in their unique capacities and allegiance to both is required even though they are discontinuous and opposed to each other. While allegiance to both is required in existence, hope is reserved for “a justification which lies beyond history.”⁹ Martin Luther’s understanding of two kingdoms is a primary example of this type. Niebuhr’s fifth type is a conversionist solution of Christ transforming culture. This view is neither as pessimistic as the against and paradox types, nor as optimistic as the of or above types. Niebuhr advocated this position:

Those who offer it understand with members of the first and fourth groups [against & paradox] that human nature is fallen or perverted, and that this perversion not only appears in culture but is transmitted by it. Hence the opposition between Christ and all human institutions and customs is to be recognized. Yet the antithesis does not lead either to Christian separation from the world as with the first group, or to mere endurance in the expectation of a transhistorical salvation, as with the fourth. Christ is seen as the converter of man in his culture and society, not apart from these.¹⁰

Niebuhr argued that Christ can and should convert culture. Augustine and Calvin are two major theologians found in this type. Liberation theologies seem to be a further post-

⁹ Niebuhr, 43.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, 43.

Niebuhrian extension of this type. In this examination *Forrest Gump* will be considered in its effectiveness in fostering cultural transformation.

Niebuhr's typology provides a useful approach in a theological evaluation of a specific cultural expression such as a popular movie. Should a theology of popular film place Christ up against the movie or find places of convergence? Should Christ and a movie be evaluated from the perspective of a transhistorical salvation or the liberative conversion of humanity within history? Different theologies will be sensitive to different aspects of a movie depending on what is expected from the relationship between Christ and culture.

Many discussions are taking place concerning the relationship between theology and film. John R. May's article entitled "Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film" is one such valuable resource, especially in light of Niebuhr's typology.¹¹ May credited two developments in the history of movie-making that were significant in movie's religious interpretation in North America. First was the acknowledgement of movies as a legitimate art form during the 1950s and 1960s that was encouraged by the growing worldwide popularity of European and Asian filmmakers of the time. The second was the new found artistic freedom of American film directors following the 1966 abolition of the restrictive production code enforced by the Motion

¹¹ John R. May, *New Image of Religious Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 17-37. This volume brings together a number of Catholic interpretations of film presented at an international symposium held south of Rome in 1993.

Picture Association of America. This allowed moviemakers to portray moral, ethical, and religious issues in a more profound light. Looking at movies as texts and surveying religious (not just Roman Catholic or Christian) interpretations of classical Hollywood feature films, May discerned five theoretical approaches: religious discrimination, religious visibility, religious dialogue, religious humanism and religious aesthetics. May suggested that these approaches developed somewhat chronologically between the 1950s to the 1990s.

The first of May's approaches, religious discrimination, is a heteronomous approach.¹² The primary approach of religious critics of movies in the 1950s was from a discriminating moralistic perspective. Religious moralists reviewed movies and evaluated them, usually negatively, on their moral portrayals and influence. This approach has been a persistent voice throughout the history of religious film criticism. It is the topic of Michael Medved's recent book, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*.¹³ May described Medved as a practicing Jew who "displays all the

¹² May related these categories to three more general approaches he had previously written about concerning the relationship between religion and literature that he had called, heteronomy, autonomy and theonomy. He wrote: "Heteronomy considers literature as the handmaid of faith...autonomy insists that literature can be judged only according to its own norms...[and] theonomy, following Paul Tillich, sees both literature and religion grounded in ultimate reality, that is to say, God." 20.

¹³ Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

strong ethical instincts characteristic of the prophetic tradition.”¹⁴ As Medved’s title suggests, he contended that Hollywood culture attacked the religious and family values of mainstream America. He believed that not only are Hollywood values (or lack thereof) out of sync with mainstream America, but that they encourage destructive behaviour. His book is a plea for responsibility from Hollywood. This category resonates with Niebuhr’s Christ against culture type.

May’s second category is religious visibility. This is a theoretical approach that only considers films that have clearly “identifiable religious elements.”¹⁵ Explicit religious elements of such movies could be biblical content, priests, nuns, the church, miracles, visionaries, etc. Also included in this category are discussions surrounding unique Roman Catholic contributions from unorthodox Catholic filmmakers including Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, and Frances Ford Coppola. May noted how religion is made visible by Hitchcock and Scorsese in their portrayals of guilt and salvation and by Coppola in his dealing with transubstantiation and hierarchy.¹⁶ This connects with Niebuhr’s Christ above culture type because it separates religious issues from general human life. More often than not, it considers a religious life as superior to a secular one.

¹⁴ May, 21.

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□ May, 22.

¹⁶ Robert K. Johnston observed that Roman Catholic filmmakers were much more likely to make use of strong visual images while Protestant filmmakers tend towards more verbal narrative. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 77.

A more equitable relationship between film and theology was highlighted in May's third category, religious dialogue. This autonomous approach seeks to allow each discipline to maintain its own unique integrity, that is, to be evaluated in light of its own intentions and visions. This approach also recognizes that because theology and film give answers to the same human experiences, a genuine give and take dialogue is possible between them. Helpful correctives are given to both interpretations of humanity: To the secular filmmaker there is encouragement to recognize the continuing religious nature of many human experiences, and to the theological reviewer there is discouragement to monologically baptize every film with a religious intent not always present. James Wall, editor *The Christian Century*, described the changing times in this discussion evident in the early 1970s as a "theological climate in which the reality of God came to be sought within secular structures as well as within conventional religious structures."¹⁷ Wall insisted that theological critics of movies should recognize the "filmmaker is an artist who presents a vision of reality in his work, a vision that can enrich our own, whether or not we share it."¹⁸ Another dialogical approach has been to compare movies with Jesus' parables. This category seems to correlate most closely with Niebuhr's Christ and culture in paradox.

May's fourth theological film criticism category identified a strong blending of film and religion into what he called religious humanism. May saw in this category a

¹⁷ Quoted by May, 24.

¹⁸ Quoted by May, 24.

Tillichian theonomy, and while not precisely the same it seems to resonate with Niebuhr's Christ of culture. This view assumes that there is a sense of religious transcendence in all of humanity's activities, not just religious activities. The primary proponent of this perspective is Neil Hurley. His 1970 book, *Theology Through Film*, argued for a "religious principle" at work in movies that assumes all "people will identify negatively with forms of evil and villainy and positively with sacrifice, suffering and selfless forms of love."¹⁹ All human art forms, including film, are an expression of human experience and meaning. According to Hurley, the search for meaning is a religious pursuit, so any human creation is implicitly religious, even if it may be explicitly non-or anti-religious.

May's fifth and final category was religious aesthetics. This was the most recent of May's categories. He suggested that this category did not develop until the 1980s. There are similarities with the fourth category of religious humanism but this category focuses on the artistic form of movies rather than the content of movies. May cited Thomas M. Martin who, in a 1981 book, suggested that movies "move beyond morality, explicit religious elements or humanistic themes to define religious significance in terms of the cinema's specific art."²⁰ Martin pointed out that the "persistent experience of electronically transmitted stories has a profound impact on the basic notion of oneself as

¹⁹ Quoted by May, 25. Neil Hurley, *Theology Through Film* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

²⁰ Quoted by May, 28. *Images and Imageless: A Study of Religious Consciousness and Film* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981).

it relates to one's religious sense of reality."²¹ Movies do this by the integration of (apparently) moving images into a comprehensive whole. This stimulates the imaginations of humans into creating constructs that make sense of life, usually in the form of story. Stories are the emotional and intellectual forms we create and recognize as we interact with the world in order to find our place and meaning in it.²² Movies have the greatest ability of all art forms to create a total environment because they can incorporate so many senses and perspectives. Through the use of a variety of techniques that manipulate time and space – slowing it down and speeding it up, focusing on minutia and displaying broad panoramas – movies can awaken a heightened sense of wonder in our lives. Martin wrote, "it is precisely this ability to awaken a sense of awe and wonder in the beholder that is necessary in laying the foundation for religious consciousness in a culture which tends to reduce experience to 'one damn thing after another.'"²³ Stories are dependent on some kind of construct, wonderful or banal. Movies, as they all participate in these constructs of meaning, have become the primary setting for the development of

²¹ Quoted by May, 28.

²² Cf. Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as Way of Knowing* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), where he wrote that stories are "a way by which and through which we come to know and understand ourselves, others, the world around us, and even God." viii. And cf., Robert K. Johnston's chapter in *Reel Spirituality* called "In Film, Story Reigns Supreme," 99-124. And Walter Brueggemann in *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) provides a helpful biblical hermeneutic that takes into account the importance of story and imagination in a postmodern context.

²³ Quoted by May, 28.

integration of meaning in our contemporary fractured society. Like ancient Greece's theatre and western Christianity's cathedrals, movies now are the culture's primary source of storified meaning.²⁴

May's last category does not strongly correspond with any of Richard Niebuhr's types, because it is focused on the art form of movies in particular. Niebuhr's last and prescriptive type of relationship between Christ and culture was Christ transforming culture. This type could find some resonance with all of May's categories. His categories of religious discrimination, visibility, dialogue, humanism and aesthetics could all be considered in the light of their transformative and liberative impact.

May concluded his analysis of fifty years of dialogue between religion and film with a similar broad observation. For him an irony lies in the delineation of religious film criticism moving from moral discrimination to film aesthetics. Analyzed morally from the perspective of the discriminating category, any film was a ground for religious discussion. With the advent of the discussion surrounding the religious nature of general film aesthetics, any film again becomes a ground for religious discussion. And so, not only the three middle, explicitly religious discussions – visibility, dialogue and humanism – are approaches allowing religious discussion of movies. May concluded rather, “that any film, even those without explicit religious elements, can still be considered as potentially religious.”²⁵ Therefore whether one uses Niebuhr's prescription for Christ and

²⁴ Cf. Margaret Miles, “Film Talk: An Approach to Moviegoing,” *Christian Century* 113 (1996): 544.

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culture or May's categories of film and religion in dialogue, all movies can be texts for theology and can be evaluated on what they put forward as to how people should live.

In light of what John May has pointed out in his final category of religious aesthetics, the evaluation of *Forrest Gump* as a text for theology must involve consideration of the art form of movies. The relationship between art and theology has been attested to by Paul Tillich, one of the important thinkers in this regard. While Niebuhr's types may not help directly in the consideration of May's religious aesthetics category, Tillich's observations do relate directly.

Tillich, in his consideration of visual art, thought that style was more significant than substance. He believed that the expressionist style of painting, no matter what the subject, was more religious than most non-expressionist, religious images. The expressionist style betrayed more the fragmented religious situation humanity experiences. Tillich considered most religious art kitsch. The closest he came to approval of representations of religious content were those of the crucifixion. May recognized this Tillichean perspective when he quoted Michael Bird from his essay, "Film as Hierophany": "What is acquired in a cinematic theology is a consideration of how the style of film can enable an exploration of the sacred."²⁶

Art plays an important role in experiencing what is ultimate for Tillich. He wrote that art is one of only two non-religious ways, the other being philosophy, "in which man is

□ Quoted by May, 34.

²⁶ Quoted by May, 30.

able to experience and express ultimate reality."²⁷ And in his evaluation of the religious situation of the Western world in 1930 he wrote: "Art indicates what the character of a spiritual situation is; it does this more immediately and directly than do science and philosophy for it is less burdened by objective considerations."²⁸ *Forrest Gump*, therefore, as an art work of 1994 would, for Tillich, indicate in a profound way the spiritual character of late twentieth century North America. Therefore his thoughts are worth further elucidation in this discussion of a movie as text for theology.

Paul Tillich was a theologian who discovered significant theological expressions in art. He was primarily attracted to visual art. He understood that theology itself was a philosophical expression of religious and biblical concepts and that artistic expression was also a philosophical practice. He believed that human nature elicits acts of creation and whether they are religious, philosophical or artistic, they are all symbolic expressions of humanity's condition. Tillich understood humanity to be the most creative of all creatures because of humanity's estranged condition. Humans are finite creatures, aware of and estranged from the infinite. As such, humans are anxious, being aware of realities that they are excluded from. Not only do humans find themselves aware but excluded from the infinite, in their finite awareness they tend to self-centeredness that further excludes them from other humans. This selfishness leads even to violent acts toward one

²⁷ Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," in *Art, Creativity, And The Sacred: An Anthology In Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 207.

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Meridian Books, 1932), 85.

another. This makes human loneliness and sense of estrangement even more acute. Human beings' desire is to be part of the infinite to which they belong and to overcome their separation from other beings. In existence, therefore, humanity is filled with anxiety and longing. This anxiety and longing is not only the ground of religion, but also philosophy, art, and all of human culture: "No realm of human culture, no human creation whatsoever is understandable without an insight into the structure of man's finitude and anxiety, of his potential infinity and courage to be."²⁹ In their estranged state, humanity has divided their knowledge into different compartments (e.g. biology, philosophy, religion, art), but one avenue of overcoming their estrangement is to recognize that these are unified as human expressions. Tillich wrote, "all his [sic] functions are rooted in the one human nature and the aim of all of them is he himself."³⁰ And so, because "no creative philosophy is completely lacking in artistic spirit and no creative art is completely lacking in philosophical spirit," a multi-disciplinary discussion about religion, philosophy, and visual art should take place because they all consider humanity's ultimate meaning and relation to the world. By logical extrapolation, this would include (apparently) moving visual art, namely, movies.

Beauty as found in visual art in the midst of evil was the ground of revelation for Tillich. He discovered the revelation of being in the fragmented and violent existence of

²⁹ Paul Tillich, "Art and Society," in *On Art and Architecture*, eds. John and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 15.

³⁰ Tillich, 13.

war. He served for five years as a chaplain in the German army during World War 1. In the “mud, blood and death of the Western Front” he frequently viewed prints of great paintings in magazines.³¹ This gave him a hunger to see the original paintings, which he hurried to see after the war. Sandro Botticelli’s *Madonna with Singing Angels* was a profound source of revelation for him. He recalled that, like light shining through stained-glass windows, “something of divine source of all things came through to me.” This life changing experience gave to Tillich the “keys for the interpretation of human existence.”³²

Tillich would see much more in works of art as he followed this initial vision. As his artistic tastes developed he became more attracted to expressionism. He thought that it better portrayed humanity’s anxiety in their separated predicament. In finitude humans are afraid of death and meaninglessness. They live in the human boundary-situation between infinity and finitude, essence and existence. Humans are also separated from one another, even to the degree of violence. Expressionistic art deliberately distorted reality so that the artist’s inner emotion and struggles emerged. Strong colors, vigorous brush strokes and deliberate distortions of form are characteristics of this style of art. For this reason, human anxiety expressed in expressionist painting became most compelling for Tillich. He found in expressive style “a rediscovery of the symbols in which the

³¹ Paul Tillich, “One Moment of Beauty,” *Art and Architecture*, 232.

³² Paul Tillich, 235.

negativity of man's predicament is expressed."³³ Some of the examples he refers to are Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, Emil Nolde's *Prophet*, and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. The manifestation of ultimate reality in this style comes through the artist's distorted, subjective, expressions. Tillich called it "an ecstatic-chaotic expression of religious subjectivity."³⁴ None of these paintings were religious in content, but profoundly religious in style.

Expressionist painting need not be about a religious theme in order to express a religious reality. Tillich believed that no reality is ever missing the dimension that "concerns us unconditionally."³⁵ The French cubist painter Braque was asked to paint the Christian symbol of a fish but refused because he stood outside Christianity. The priest who asked him to paint it convinced him to paint it nevertheless. "He was of the opinion that there was more religiously expressive power in a profane fish painted by Braque than in a painting that had dishonestly been adapted to religious symbolism." Tillich thought that religious creations were better as expressive profanity than "the kitsch of religious painting that has proceeded from the unholy marriage of idealistic and realistic elements of style."³⁶

³³ Tillich, "Protestantism and Artistic Style," *Art and Architecture*, 124.

³⁴ Tillich, 150.

³⁵ Tillich, "On the Theology of Fine Art and Architecture," *Art and Architecture*, 210.

³⁶ Tillich, 211.

Representations of Jesus as the Christ on the cross was one religious subject Tillich thought was particularly capable of expressing the human predicament. He believed that pictures of Christ on the cross rang much truer to the human predicament because they often showed the human physicality of Christ and his suffering. Mathias Grunewald's fifteenth century *Crucifixion* was considered by Tillich to be the greatest anticipation of modern expressionist art. It is a rare combination of a religious subject and religious expressionism. He often called this the "greatest German picture ever painted."³⁷ The horror expressed in this painting drew Tillich to it. It is a painting that courageously portrays what he thought was the human predicament – brokenness and living in the boundary-situation – without seeking to cover that experience.

Tillich, as apologist to the intellectual despisers of religion, was primarily interested in a sophisticated appreciation of classic art. Nevertheless, his understanding of the religious style of art is an important consideration for a theological interpretation of a popular Hollywood movie. *Forrest Gump* has moments of expressionist angst but overall displays religious and cultural kitsch. This will be considered further in chapter four.

Chapters two and three will consider a variety of interpretations of *Forrest Gump*. The first of these chapters considers traditional theological and mythological interpretations of the content of the movie. The second looks at some of the underlying ideologies. Postmodern critical issues will be central to the second of these chapters both in pointing out some of the postmodern elements of the movie along with providing

³⁷ Tillich, "Existential Aspects of Modern Art," *Art and Architecture*, 99.

important critical insight into the damage done by the movie. This division of theological, mythical and ideological criticism of popular movies is central to Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt's edited volume, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*.³⁸

Martin and Ostwalt pull together a series of critical articles that “teach us to recognize the explicit and implicit presence of religion in one the most important media of our contemporary culture.”³⁹ They seek to demonstrate that religion pervades North American film in its persistent use of religious issues, archetypes and ideologies. The authors suggest that movies therefore are more than just entertainment – they are important and effective playful spaces that work with serious issues of meaning. When Martin began to study the scholarly work on the relationship between religion and film he discovered two disciplines that rarely intersected. Film criticism was interdisciplinary, with representation from most other fields of study except religious studies. Likewise, few scholarly religious studies had been published about movies, especially popular Hollywood films. While film criticism had explored extensively the structural and ideological concerns elucidated by Freudian and Marxian analyses, Martin noted that ironically this same film criticism ignored Freudian and Marxian recognition of the

³⁸ Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview, 1995).

Cf. another important book on the relationship between theology and movies from Great Britain; Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds. *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

³⁹ Martin and Ostwalt, vii.

power of religion. Martin encouraged that more serious attention be given to religion because “varieties of fundamentalism is increasing in importance throughout the world and will likely do so at an accelerated rate as the dawn of new millennium approaches and passes.”⁴⁰ This prophetic encouragement needs to be received with greater vigor today because of the tragic events of the first few years of the new millennium.

Martin acknowledged an emerging film criticism, seen in particular in the work of path-breakers such as James Wall, John R. May and Thomas M. Martin. At the same time he pointed to a 1993 quote from James Wall suggesting that the “serious study of religion in narrative film has been extremely limited.”⁴¹ A suspicion of the predominance of realism and mass marketing in American popular film contribute to little serious religious study of the medium. This is a blind spot according to Martin. His volume therefore deliberately focused on Hollywood blockbusters such as *Rocky* and *Platoon*. By considering religion in these types of films, Martin and Oswalt hoped “to convince students of film that they should take religion seriously and, on the other hand, convince students of religion that they need to take popular films seriously.”⁴² *Forrest Gump* is another Hollywood blockbuster worth serious study.

To explore the relationship between religion and film Martin and Oswalt proposed three basic approaches to religious understanding – the theological, the mythical and the

⁴⁰ Martin, 2.

⁴¹ Quoted by Martin, 3.

⁴² Martin and Oswalt, 4.

ideological. Theological thinkers are concerned with the talk about God found within traditional sacred texts and their analyses throughout history. In western culture this God-talk is found mostly within Christianity and Judaism. Because Hollywood films are an art form of the West and the West has been highly influenced by these theological traditions this insight is important and valuable. The heart of the mythological approach is made up of scholars who do not equate religion with monotheistic religions or any particular tradition, but focus on the apparently universal religious behaviour of humanity. Myths, rituals, systems of purity, and gods pervade all human communities as they grapple with life, reality, and values. Myths in the form of stories provide dramatic and powerful prototypes of foundational realities and values. The third approach, ideological, looks beyond theology and mythology to the historical, social and political ideologies that underlie religion. “The social structure, the unconscious, gender and power relations,” are examples of the concerns of ideological critics.⁴³ They perceive religion not in religious terms, but in terms of the dominant culture’s ideas and behaviour. Martin and Ostwalt believed that this threefold approach to religious film criticism provided a concrete and colourful avenue of discussion for religion and film, as well as for religious discussions in general. They anticipated a fourth approach which would blend the three approaches with each approach benefiting from the other, but not weakened by the limitations of each.

⁴³ Martin and Ostwalt, 7.

Such a blended approach is aspired to in this thesis. It will blend not only Martin and Ostwalt's three approaches but will also include a discussion of style. In agreement with the many voices reviewed above that a theological evaluation of movies is legitimate, this thesis will consider *Forrest Gump* as a text for engaging in contemporary God-talk. The movie's content, ideology and style will be considered. As an artistic cultural expression of the Christian west it will be evaluated on how effective it is in encouraging its North American viewers to ask themselves the transformative question, "How should we live?"

CHAPTER 2

Theological and Mythological Interpretations of *Forrest Gump*

The theological and mythological themes found in the content of *Forrest Gump* will be the focus of this chapter. These themes are evident in the surface activities of the movie's characters as well as their parabolic significance. The following characters and their theological and mythological personae will be considered: Gump, Lieutenant Dan and Jenny as Pilgrims; Gump as Redeemer; and Gump as Holy Fool. Gump's character as Redeemer and Holy Fool will be interpreted as falling short of the fullness of these symbols.

My initial response to *Forrest Gump* was that he was an illustration of a simple guy getting through life successfully. He has an innocent goodness about him that overcomes the odds of a tough life. Everything seems to work out well for him, even if it does take a long time, as in the case of his marriage to his life-long love, Jenny. He does not manipulate events in order to succeed, he reacts with a simple goodness and good things happen for him. For example, the leg braces he was incorrectly prescribed as a young

boy, and were the catalyst for many abusive chases from schoolmates, become the source of amazing running skills that literally run him right on to the field of championship college football under Bear Bryant's Crimson Tide. And, while hospitalized for a war wound in his "butt-ox" he took up ping-pong to entertain the troops and miraculously became a world champion. This was followed by great wealth through an endorsement (a little white lie) with which he bought a shrimping boat that also became very lucrative. The prevailing message seems to be that simple, nice guys finish first.

Merold Westphal, in his review "Tis a Task to Be Simple", discerns in the movie's popularity, and in his own attraction to it, a call to become like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. The birds and lilies are simply "trusting, joyful, obedient...like Forrest Gump, they lack the capacity to be anything else."⁴⁴ Westphal hears in his own and America's sighing as they watch *Forrest Gump* a desire to be more simple, an envying for "his innocence, his spontaneous goodness, his freedom from the rat races to which we are so often and so deeply addicted."⁴⁵ But this task to be simple is not as simple as it looks. Gump's moral superiority seems to be at the expense of his intellectual superiority. According to Westphal, American culture in general does not have a worldview that can

⁴⁴ Merold Westphal, "Tis a Task To Be Simple: Reflections on Forrest Gump," *Perspectives* 10 (1995): 9. He also finds witness in the movie to the Good, the Beautiful and the True along with finding himself caring deeply about the three characters, Forrest, Jenny and Lt. Dan. These are the qualities of good art for Westphal.

⁴⁵ Westphal, 9.

intelligently embrace Gump's simple morality, but the church of Jesus Christ does, which presumably combines simplicity with morality and intelligence.

A further celebration of Gump's good attitude is discussed on the website "Cinema in Focus", which is self-described as "a social and spiritual commentary" on movies.⁴⁶ This commentary lifts up Gump's good attitude, which he learned from his mother. Life is not going to be fair, especially to a physically and mentally handicapped boy. The unpredictability of life, as illustrated by a box of chocolates ("you never know what you are going to get"), can be overcome, however, by a good attitude. Gump's adventurous, courageous, and faithful approach to life did not let the adversity he experienced defeat him. He dealt with whatever chocolate life handed him, but not with "fear, anger and bitterness."⁴⁷ Instead he responded with the biblical virtues of faith, hope, and love. "Cinema in Focus" contrasts Gump's good and successful approach to Jenny's "failure to overcome diversity."⁴⁸ She too had been given adversity from her chocolate box of life, but did not handle it with same attitude as Gump's. "Jenny avoids facing her pain and is neither pure, faithful or wise."⁴⁹ Because of this she fails to experience God's power of forgiveness and purity in her life – that is until she receives Gump's love and marries

⁴⁶ Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman, review of *Forrest Gump Four Stars - Uplifting* [on-line]; accessed 23 Oct. 2002; available from [http://www.cinemainfocus.com/Forrest%20Gump%20\(4%20Stars%201995\).htm](http://www.cinemainfocus.com/Forrest%20Gump%20(4%20Stars%201995).htm)

⁴⁷ Cinema in Focus.

⁴⁸ Cinema in Focus

⁴⁹ Cinema in Focus

him. And so, a good attitude of love, or connecting with someone with a good attitude (for a Jenny, being domesticated by having a child, becoming a waitress, and marrying Gump), can overcome not only one's sin, but also the sin of the bad hand one may be dealt.

An interpretation of the characters of *Forrest Gump* as pilgrims on various journeys serving as good or bad examples is a popular approach to the movie. In the Reformed Christian journal, *Perspectives*, Roy M. Anker finds the interpretive key to Gump as an individual seeker. Anker is aware of the criticism of *Forrest Gump* around issues of privatism. The movie is blatantly about, even told by, the individual character of Gump. It is his struggle and experience that remains central even in the most tumultuous social events of American life. These events are not addressed. Anker nevertheless sees value in the presentation of Gump as an individual who is a "pilgrim, journeying wherever to find what will content his soul's deepest longing."⁵⁰ He is pleasantly surprised by Hollywood's serious consideration of God, not only through Gump's life but also through Lt. Dan's struggles. Buoyed by the frame device of the feather, along with the personal pilgrimages of Lt. Dan and Forrest, Anker discerns hope for all potential pilgrims that they just may be able to "exult in the reality of a wild grace that infuses all things."⁵¹ Peace ultimately is a personal experience found through relationships and life's unfolding, not in the support of larger causes.

⁵⁰ Roy M. Anker, "The Progress of Pilgrim Gump," *Perspectives* 9 (1994): 13.

⁵¹ Anker, 16.

Anker is aware of the “romantic cliché about the blessed lives of village idiots and mad seers,”⁵² but still sees believability in Gump’s earnestness as a loving pilgrim without guile. This is because Gump’s life is not spared real life difficulties. Beyond his own physical and mental difficulties, his father left his mother “for a long vacation” when he was a child; his mother paid a high price for his education by sleeping with the principal and then ultimately succumbing to death by cancer; his childhood girlfriend Jenny suffers sexual abuse at the hand of her alcoholic father, she too ultimately succumbs to death, this time by AIDS, but only after a very tough life in the rebellious counter-culture; his Vietnam war-buddy Bubba is shot dead; and his Lieutenant and Shrimpboat partner, Lt. Dan, has both legs amputated after the war. Anker suggests that this illustrates how life has a way of making even the wisest of us “full-fledged idiots” and that in the face of life’s tragedies “we are all Forrest.”⁵³ Gump does grapple with the ambiguous answer life gives to the theodicy question at the end of the movie when he addresses Jenny at her graveside under the tree they played in as children. He mourns, wondering if life is just a cruel series of random events or if there is a kinder purpose. Anker believes that the overall story of Gump gives hope that individual seekers, foolish or wise, despite many hardships along the way, can experience grace. Anker underlines this truth further in his reference to Lt. Dan’s discovery of God.

⁵² Anker, 14.

⁵³ Anker, 15.

Lt. Dan believes that in order to fulfill his destiny he must die heroically in battle like his forefathers had in every previous American war. During their involvement in Vietnam Gump rescues him from an attack, thereby preventing his predestined death. To make matters worse both of his legs are amputated. He becomes extremely angry. His rage is aimed not only at Gump but also at God. This “Ahab-like”⁵⁴ anger comes to a head atop Gump’s shrimp boat mast during a storm. Strapped to the top of the cross-like mast, Lt. Dan raises his fist and yells at God asking if the violent storm is all he’s got, and to Gump, “where the hell’s this God of yours?” The storm ironically becomes the catalyst for the unprecedented success of their shrimping business as the answer to the faithful Gump’s prayer for shrimp (at the destructive expense of all the other shrimpers), as well as Lt. Dan’s spiritual conversion. After the storm Lt. Dan actually thanks Gump for saving his life and then drops over the side of the boat baptism-like into the calm sea and peacefully backstrokes toward the setting sun. Gump’s voice over reflects that he thinks that Lt. Dan “made his peace with God.”

Another element in the movie that relates to both Gump’s and Lt. Dan’s spiritual pilgrimages concerns their legs. Legs, feet, running, running shoes and so forth have a strong presence in the movie. Gump recalls that Momma said you could always tell a lot about a person by what kind of shoes they wore. Many movie commentators point to the leitmotif of the light feather as the ‘lightness of being’ represented by Gump, but none recognize the connection of the legs to this motif. The feather at the beginning of the

⁵⁴ Anker, 15.

movie lands on Gump's new *Nike* runners. Gump begins life with braces on his legs; these initially are a hindrance and basis of cruel abuse (although they do inspire Elvis' famous dance moves). But then his weakness becomes the source of his strength. After miraculously breaking free of his braces (while fleeing persecution) his legs become the strength of his life allowing him to become a football star, rescue his comrades in Vietnam, and become a national cult hero running back and forth across America. In his childlike acceptance of his 'lightness' he has great strength. His weak legs become his strength.

In contrast to Gump's weakness is Lt. Dan's strong determination to fulfill his destiny. His destiny is also connected to the motif of his legs. He too understands the importance of feet, as illustrated by his instruction in Vietnam to his troops about the importance of keeping their socks and boots dry at all times. He tells Gump and Bubba, "There are only two rules here: Take good care of your feet, and don't do anything stupid." But Lt. Dan's strong legs become weak. In his determination to personally fulfill his destiny he loses his legs. He now is weak. It is not until he accepts his weakness, which is that his destiny is not in his own hands (feet/feat?), that he finds strength. Not long after his losing/winning battle with God in the storm he appears at Gump's long awaited wedding to Jenny with new legs, strong titanium legs, "the same stuff they use in the space shuttle."

One's destiny or purpose in life is powerfully illustrated through the motif of legs. Gump's child-like acceptance of his lot allows him to run fast through out his life; Lt.

Dan's attempt to force his destiny tragically brings him to a wheelchair. It is only after he accepts a different fate than the one he anticipated, one brought to him by the care of Gump, that he finds the strong legs of his real destiny. The traditional theological themes evident in this interpretation are the need for human humility before God's purposes, the Pauline exaltation in his weakness and the activity of God using the foolish things of the world to deconstruct the wise. Mythological themes of fate, hubris, and tragedy are also evident.

Jenny is also a pilgrim seeker but seems to fare worse than Gump or Lt. Dan. Her prayer to God is primarily one for escape. Running into the cornfields from her sexually abusive alcoholic father she prays that God would make her into a bird so she could fly away from her pain. Despite her prayer she goes through life suffering other abusive relationships and connecting herself with a counter-culture characterized negatively throughout the movie. She only briefly finds redemption by having a baby, by working as a waitress, and by marrying Gump, which finally domesticates her. Immediately after their marriage she dies of AIDS. The theological message that comes through from Jenny is that redemption for her is found in submitting to the love of the right man. While her father and various other men did not truly love her, Gump does, and her destiny is wrapped up in returning his love. Gump and Lt. Dan submit directly to God and his will for them, but Jenny submits to a man's love (and domestication) to find her destiny. This is despite the fact that as a child she independently chose to befriend the much-maligned Gump.

The movie's characters, Gump, Lt. Dan and Jenny, have been interpreted theologically as examples of pilgrims on various spiritual journeys. The successful path through life is associated with humility; Gump is essentially humble and is consistently rewarded, Lt. Dan must submit to something other than an heroic military destiny, and Jenny must quit fighting against her culture and give in to her real salvation through domestication. Life lived as a humble pilgrim is this interpretation's prescription for getting through the tough times of late twentieth century America.

Another theological interpretation of *Forrest Gump* is that of Gump the Redeemer. Peter N. Chumo II interprets *Forrest Gump* as fantasy rather than realism and suggests that it is a parable of the reconciling of America's wounds. "Gump is a kind of Christian redeemer" who offers the possibility of America putting the past behind them and moving on.⁵⁵ To view the movie literally and take Gump as an example of how life is to be lived is in danger of viewing the movie as an apologetic for stupidity. For Chumo, *Forrest Gump* is a fantasy about a transcendent, innocent figure who has a cleansing effect on many of America's historical tensions and conflicts. This messianic interpretation is typical of Christian theology.

The first of these divisions healed by Gump is the deep racial conflict between blacks and whites. Gump was named after the Civil War hero and founder of the Ku Klux Klan, General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Chumo suggests that by carrying the name of

⁵⁵ Peter N. Chumo II, "'You've Got To Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On': Forrest Gump and National Reconciliation," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, no. 1 (1995): 2-8.

America's racist history and clearly not being racist, Gump transcends and redeems the ugly past by moving on – as can America, if it forgets the past and behaves decently. This reconciliation is most evident in the movie's portrayal of Gump's relationship to his army buddy, Benjamin Buford Blue. He is nicknamed Bubba, "just like one of them old redneck boys." A redeemer typically restores broken relationships and reconciles opposites by identifying with both sides of the conflict. In naming the white non-racist Gump as a racist and the black non-racist Bubba with a racist name, and then portraying them as best friends, the movie is portraying Gump (and those with Gumpish attitudes, like Bubba) as a solution to America's racist heritage.

Gump and Bubba are portrayed as so close there is a suggestion they are even related. Chumo points this out through the humorous scene when they are first introduced to Lt. Dan in Vietnam:

"DAN: Where are you boys from in the world?

GUMP and BUBBA (in unison): Alabama, sir.

DAN: You twins? [They look at each other.]

GUMP: No, we are not relations, sir."⁵⁶

As comrades in arms they form a partnership in Vietnam that keep both of their heads out of the mud. Although Bubba is killed, Gump returns to America to fulfill the departed Bubba's dream of a shrimping business. The name of the business, Bubba Gump Shrimp

⁵⁶ Chumo, 2.

Company (Bubba's name is even first), "becomes a lasting legacy to Bubba and a testament to the spirit of integration itself."⁵⁷

The second major divide in American national consciousness that Gump transcends and therefore heals is the Vietnam War. Gump is a war hero but also stumbles into an anti-war rally where he gives a speech (unheard) that Abbie Hoffman says was "so right on, man." The rally was held at the Washington Monument. After he finished his speech, Jenny, now a folk singing war protester, called out to him. They both jump into the water to meet, embrace, and kiss in the Reflecting Pool, much to the delight of all the anti-war protesters, all done in the shadow of the Jefferson monument. Chumo writes: "Visually, the scene represents the union of the flower child in flowing white gown...and the military man in uniform and medal – two seemingly opposed American figures."⁵⁸ Chumo sees in this meeting the suggestion of a "national baptism", a new spiritual beginning that will culminate in their wedding scene.

The third and final historical division that Gump reconciles is the very power of history itself. There is a lot of focus in *Forrest Gump* on the idea of destiny. Destiny has a fatalistic element to it that suggests a predestinary power of history. Chumo points out that Gump breaks the negative power of this destiny that is illustrated in both Lt. Dan's and Bubba's stories. Lt. Dan's perceived destiny is that he must die in battle like all of his ancestors, but Gump breaks this cycle by rescuing him, thereby giving him a destiny of

⁵⁷ Chumo, 2.

⁵⁸ Chumo, 3.

life rather than death. Gump also changes the course of Bubba's mother's destiny. She and all her recent ancestors had been servants to white women, but after the success of Bubba Gump Shrimp she becomes wealthy and hires a white servant. Both Lt. Dan's and Bubba's mother's destinies are illustrated in the movie by a similar historical montage. But Gump, also named after a negative character in history and illustrated in the movie by showing old footage of *Birth of a Nation*, breaks the negative power of historical destiny and gives life and wealth to Lt. Dan and Bubba's mother.

Chumo points out that it was the words of wisdom from his mother that Gump was heeding. "Momma always said you make your own destiny. You have to do the best with what God gave you." And yet, he too struggled with the issue. At Jenny's graveside he said, "I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floatin' around accidental-like on a breeze. But I, I think maybe its both. Maybe both is happening at the same time." And so Gump, even though helping overcome destiny, feels the mystery of its reality, but almost seems to reconcile free will and predestination. Chumo concludes his discussion on Gump's role as redeemer by suggesting that, "Gump not only reconciles oppositions within history but also reconciles oppositions about history."⁵⁹ The redemption Gump brings is one realized within history but only when deep divisions are forgotten. A negative response to this is to note that in order to move on, those hurt by the past, like women and other races, must either adjust to the status quo and/or die (like

⁵⁹ Chumo, 3.

Jenny and Bubba), and those in positions of privilege must have poor memories (like Gump).

Chumo identifies even wider implications of Gump's redemptive role than those specifically dealing with America's historical wounds. He suggests that Gump merges further oppositions such as Christianity and paganism in his run across America; here is a Jesus Christ figure who, like a hippie-back-to-nature type, appreciates the land. During this run he reconciles pessimism and optimism in his stumbling catalytic work for two pop-culture axioms. He accidentally helps invent the bumper sticker "Shit happens", and the yellow smiley-face T-shirt, "Have a nice day." Harsh reality and sunny disposition are reconciled in Gump. He also reconciles the opposites of home and away. Both Gump and Jenny, despite being away from their homes, end up back home. Chumo points out that Gump is successful both away and at home: "Whereas many American heroes must choose between the two – Tom Sawyer stays home and has adventures in town, whereas Huckleberry Finn must flee the hypocrisies of civilization for the open territories – Gump is able to reconcile the home and the world beyond it."⁶⁰ This extends even to the heavenly world. When he is describing his long run to the dying Jenny, Gump recalls the beauty of the earth and says, "It was like you could not tell where earth ended and heaven started." This reference to "a kind of marriage of heaven and earth", for Chumo, confirms Gump's "role as a Christlike redeemer."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Chumo, 4.

⁶¹ Chumo, 4.

Marriage scenes are an important concluding element in stories of redemption. Chumo finds great significance in the wedding scene that brings together Gump and Jenny as well as Lt. Dan and his new bride. The wedding scene near the end of *Forrest Gump* reminds Chumo of another post-war, male melodrama, William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). It too ends with a dramatic multiple wedding scene where "readjustment to American society is ensured, and the social order is perpetuated."⁶² In *Forrest Gump* Jenny, the "archetypal flower child" is married to Gump the "all-American hero."⁶³ They are both able to maintain their identities but also put their differences enough behind them to be together. This is true as well of Lt. Dan and his future bride. She is Asian. This "suggests a reconciliation with Vietnam, a union of East and West."⁶⁴ Lt. Dan's new legs, made out of "custom-made, titanium alloy... what they use on the space shuttle" point not only to his restored manhood but to America's bright technological future that can now be embraced because of Gump's healing of the past.

Chumo's interpretation of *Forrest Gump* as fantasy shows him that the primary message of the movie is not that pleasant simple-mindedness is how to get along, but that, as Gump quotes his Momma, "You've got to put the past behind you before you can move on." This is the overall message of the movie for Chumo. "For a nation often

⁶² Chumo, 4.

⁶³ Chumo, 4.

⁶⁴

□ Chumo, 5.

bitterly divided and fragmented, even unsure of its role in the world, Forrest Gump is a reassuring fantasy of a man who, in an almost mythic way, can transcend our divisions and heal the scars of the past.”⁶⁵ The redemptive hope the movie presents to a society still filled with much anxiety and wanting to forget the past and move on helps explain its tremendous success at the box-office. Theological interpretations of *Forrest Gump* have yielded possibilities of Gump being seen as an example of a pilgrim and a redeemer.

Another aspect of the redeemer theme worthy of exploration is the mythological character of a holy fool. Gump is a type of holy fool. This archetypal figure brings together Anker’s pilgrim Gump and Chumo’s redeemer Gump. The holy fool is a character in many religious and cultural traditions. In his book on Saint Symeon of the sixth century C.E., Derek Krueger writes: “The holy fool tradition can be traced from Symeon to the patron of St. Basil’s Cathedral in Red Square in Moscow and in literary form to the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*. In the West an interest in the holy fool can be seen to thrive among the French Jesuits of the seventeenth century.”⁶⁶ Holy fools are found in the Sufi tradition of Islam, Zen Buddhism, and Hasidic Judaism.⁶⁷ Also, among North American First Nation people there is a sacred myth of the Trickster-

⁶⁵ Chumo, 5.

⁶⁶ Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool. Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City* [book on-line]; accessed 20 Feb. 2003; available from <http://mercury.uwinnipeg.ca/search/tSymeon+the+Holy+Fool/tsymeon+the+holy+fool/1,1,1,B/1856&FF=tsymeon+the+holy+fool&1,0,1,0>

⁶⁷ John R. Boettiger, “Psyche and Spirit, The Holy Fool,” *Reckonings* [on-line]; accessed 23 Oct. 2002; available from http://www.reckonings.net/holy_fool.htm.

transformer named Wisakadjak (“anglicized by early-Europeans to ‘whiskey-jack’”).⁶⁸ In the western cultural manifestation holy fools are best recognized in Shakespeare’s plays as the fool in the court of the king.

Fools are amusing and confusing and often ridiculed.⁶⁹ But in their lightness they accomplish significant things. Like the fools in Shakespeare’s plays they have access to the seat of power and can criticize their masters, often quite harshly, without punishment. Their foolish humour has a way of provoking reflection in an unguarded response. Their humility “may loosen the defensive, ego-inflated character of those who make too much of themselves and thus lose touch with deeper reality.”⁷⁰ Holy fools, in their embracing of madness, point to a wonder and mystery that lies beyond the normalcies of life.⁷¹ They have a unique way of disturbing the status quo. Through their madness they reveal the mad, mad world. Perhaps it is not they who are mad, but everyone – and everything – else.

⁶⁸ George van der Goes Ladd, *Shall We Gather At The River?* (Toronto: Canec, 1986), 40.

⁶⁹ Boettiger, 1.

⁷⁰ Boettiger, 1.

⁷¹ Thomas More in his *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), writes: “The path of the soul is also the path of the fool, the one without pretense of self-knowledge or individuation or certainly perfection. If on this path we have achieved anything, it is the absolute unknowing...or is it the ‘negative capability of John Keats – ‘being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’” Quoted by Boettiger, 1.

Gump is definitely a humorous, humble, holy fool; he even joked before kings (actually, Presidents). His foolishness not only deflated strong egos like Lt. Dan's, but also the strength of American know-how. He is portrayed as the unwitting catalyst for many of America's cultural events: Elvis's dance moves, John Lennon's lyrics, bumper sticker and T-shirt sayings, college football championships, and Watergate busts. He does cause the rational western self-made man, and self-made culture, to question their real strength. Gump's simple heart-motivated love and faith seem not only to get him through life but through life quite "successfully." One reviewer wrote of Gump as a good example, "Hopefully, *Forrest Gump* will encourage many of us to express aspects of the holy fool inside of ourselves."⁷²

Not all interpreters of the movie see either the redemptive forgiveness or the simple foolishness represented in Gump as positive. Many dislike the celebration of ignorance found in Gump. In one of their movie reviews, *Time Magazine* sought to understand the movie's huge popularity and its ability to make people feel good. The redemptive forgiveness offered by the movie is characterized by *Time* as "absolution with a love pat".⁷³ "Whaddya know?", writes the reviewer, "We waged a stupid war that destroyed both another country and the best part of ourselves; we tore up our streets and our psyches in a kind of Cultural Revolution; we practically killed ourselves with drugs – and

⁷² http://www.spiritualityhealth.com/newsh/items/moviereview/item_3133.html

⁷³ "The World According To Gump," *Time Magazine*, 1 Aug. 1994, 58.

it turns out we're not guilty."⁷⁴ It is not a movie that makes a person think, but one that makes a person feel. This reviewer interpreted *Forrest Gump* in the context of a film industry that typically softens difficult social issues and where most stories become fables with happy endings. Gump is the "ultimate sentimental figure", a prime example of Hollywood's portrayal of the "spiritual superiority of the handicapped."⁷⁵ The genius of the movie is that Gump can be seen as representative of many people. Some have compared him to President Bill Clinton, but this review sees him as a throwback to the naïve optimism of the conservative 1980s when Ronald Reagan was President. The review interprets Forrest Gump as "E.T. with a little Gandhi thrown in."⁷⁶ With his amazing influence throughout recent American culture, Gump "seems almost omnipotent," as well as "all-innocent and all-powerful".⁷⁷ He really is "the ideal guru for the nervous '90's: Forrest God."⁷⁸

David Van Biema in "Forrest Gump Is Dumb", another *Time Magazine* evaluation of the movie, also sees the upbeat and lucky Ronald Reagan as "the real proto-Gump."⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *Time*, 58.

⁷⁵ *Time*, 58. Cf. also Hollywood's latest offering of *Radar* and Adam Sandler's numerous characters, e.g. in his remake of *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*.

⁷⁶ *Time*, 58.

⁷⁷ *Time*, 58

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□ *Time*, 58.

⁷⁹ David Van Biema, "Forrest Gump Is Dumb," *Time Magazine*, 29 Aug. 1994, 82

Rather than discerning constructive themes of Gump as Redeemer or Holy Fool, both Time reviewers see his lucky survival through many tough situations as the “miracle of idiot grace,”⁸⁰ and the portrayal of an “idiot hero.”⁸¹ Both point out the dangers of knowing Gump. Biema writes, noticing how many ‘hits’ miss Gump, but not those around him, “although Forrest is a good man, he is not a good man to know.”⁸² Biema has a queasy feeling about the movie’s celebration of innocent ignorance as a way to get through life’s tough realities. He perceives addictive temptation in the appeal of the ‘Gumpism’ that is the movie’s primary message, “act decent, stay positive (brains optional), and everything will be fine.”⁸³

This ‘Gumpism’ is something Canadian pop-culture philosopher, Mark Kingwell in his book, *Dreams of Millennium: Report From A Culture On The Brink*, also criticizes. He perceives the “identification of virtue with mental impairment” celebrated in the movie’s man of the century (Gump), as an example of North America’s hostility to intellectuals: “We North Americans find ourselves, on the brink of the third millennium, living in a high-tech society in which, paradoxically, stupidity is our brightest badge of

⁸⁰ *Time*, 56.

⁸¹ Biema, 82.

⁸² Biema, 82.

⁸³ Biema, 82.

goodness.”⁸⁴ Gump’s intellectual childlikeness is not seen as a positive virtue because he cannot really grapple with tough issues. Using this ‘Gumpism’ as a model will not lead to effective activity in alleviating real suffering. In a scathing critique of the disconnect between the popularity of the movie and real life, David Van Biema writes:

Moviegoers recently exiting the showing of Gump near my Manhattan building probably walked smack into a local legless beggar. Poverty, homelessness and physical disability are not what one likes to grapple with on a nice day out with the kids. But one thing you can bet on: his legs cannot be restored by Industrial Light and Magic.⁸⁵

Similar issues are raised in Matthew Giunti’s article “Forrest Gump: Ignorance is Bliss.” Gump’s empty moral centre also disturbs Giunti; he sees in him “a Zen-like exemplar of go-with-the-flow spiritual acceptance.”⁸⁶ Giunti describes Gump as “an empty conduit through which God’s grace flows.”⁸⁷ While Gump goes with the flow with his mind turned off, all those around him suffer, often for his sake. This further “moral evasion” evident in the film brings Giunti to the description of Gump’s life as “the story of Job run backwards.”⁸⁸ In other words, unlike Job who suffers and is comforted by his

⁸⁴ Mark Kingwell, *Dreams of Millennium: Report From a Culture on the Brink* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1996), 44.

⁸⁵ Biema, 82. Industrial Light and Magic is the cinematic special effects company used in the movie to create such amazing special effects as the disappearance of Lt. Dan’s legs.

⁸⁶ Matthew Giunti, “Forrest Gump: Ignorance is Bliss,” *Christian Century* 113, no. 17 (1996): 550.

⁸⁷ Giunti, 550.

⁸⁸ Giunti, 550.

healthy friends, Gump makes easy decisions in hard situations and his friends around him are the ones who suffer. Giunti suggests that the movie's popularity was due to its simple message of making tough things look easy. Gump not only gets through a very difficult time in U.S. history, "but emerges as a kind of New Age superhero, rich, retired, plenty of quality time with the kid, revered as a moral touchstone."⁸⁹ The best way to do well in America is to "simply turn-off your mind and go with the flow."⁹⁰

The theological and mythological interpretations of *Forrest Gump* perceive Gump's simplicity as either an appealing example for dealing with life's complexities (especially in an increasingly complicated technological age), or a mindless non-solution for grappling with life's tough problems. Redemptive interpretations see him either as reconciling not only the great divides of America and the whole world, or as a lightweight redeemer too innocent, sentimental, and forgiving, and therefore unable to truly reconcile. The theological and ethical discussions evident in these interpretations of the movie are rich. This is to say that profound theological issues are suggested in *Forrest Gump*. These include the nature of the world we live in, and if, for example, there is any cause and effect between behaviour and the unfolding of life. And, if so, is it through their hearts or their heads that humans should primarily interact with the world? *Forrest Gump* makes a strong case for the primacy of the heart-centred interaction. The movie also raises the question of benevolent providence evident in life. Despite Gump's unsure

⁸⁹ Giunti, 550.

⁹⁰ Giunti, 550.

answer to this at Jenny's graveside, the movie's overall message indicates an unfolding of the universe in a way that favours humble-hearted folks. Another theological question raised by the movie is whether or not America (or humanity in general) needs redemption from an 'other'. And, if so, what kind of Redeemer? The movie indicates that it is only through the simple-minded man, a type of holy fool, Forrest Gump, that the past can be forgiven, the present healed, and the future successfully fulfilled.

The most satisfying of these interpretive approaches are the ones focused on *Forrest Gump's* symbolic redemptive message. As a literal example Gump is not someone to whom most people would aspire. While he serves as an encouragement for faithful love – his devotion to Jenny, his Mama, Bubba, and Lt. Dan – his simple-mindedness is not an appealing option. Even Gump is concerned that his son is “normal”, and marvels at his above average intelligence, unlike his own. Also, many of the things Gump does in the movie are unrealistic and clearly symbolic; for example, his presence in news pictures, his influence on Elvis Presley and John Lennon, and his over three-year run across America. Interpreting him symbolically, therefore, as a redeemer in the genre of the holy fool is the best way to interpret the movie using theological and mythological categories. The redemptive elements, particularly those concerning America's divisions, as pointed out by Peter Chumo, are insightful. However, Chumo fails to recognize the redemptive aspects found in the mythological tradition of the holy fool.

In the tradition of the fool two main characters have been suggested, the wise sage and the holy fool.⁹¹ The wise sage plays the fool usually by asking questions and pretending he does not know the answers. But the wise fool does know the answers, and is being foolish as a deliberate strategy to enlighten the foolish. The other kind of fool is the inherently foolish person who is possessed, with less pretense and strategy, by an alternative vision of reality, someone who marches to the beat of a different drummer. This vision, however, serves as a critique on the status quo and, as such, can potentially illumine the madness of the so-called, real world. Socrates and Shakespeare's fools are examples of the wise sage. Dostoevsky's *Idiot* and Gump are examples of the holy fool.

Gump's foolishness is tempered, however. Many conservatives in American culture have found in Gump a hero for their point of view.⁹² Holy fools usually offend the conservative element in their culture. There are some quick and subtle elements to Gump's foolish critique of the status quo, but they are hard to spot. His foolishness exposes the foolishness of the three Presidents he meets, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. Gump's foolishness also criticizes the South's racist culture. In his deadpan and frequent observations of the number of American leader's fates determined by assassination or

⁹¹ Cf. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, Mass: Faber and Faber, 1935). And, William Willeford, *The Fool and His Sceptre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969).

⁹² Cf. Patrick J. Buchanan, "Hollywood Surprise. 'Hello, I'm Forrest Gump and I'm a Conservative.'" *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 Aug. 1994, B3. and Thomas M. Leitch, "Know-Nothing Entertainment: What To Say To Your Friends On the Right, and Why It Won't Do Any Good." *Literature Film Quarterly* 2 (1997): 7-17.

assassination attempts, Gump criticizes America's violent culture. His foolishness also criticizes the American know-how attitude by being an unwitting contributor in so many of America's accomplishments.

These foolish critiques on the mad, mad world of America are tempered, however, in Gump's activity as a soldier. He is the perfect private. He follows orders to the tee, respects his leaders, and is really fast with a gun. His drill sergeant yells at him approvingly after an incident of good military behaviour, "Gump, outside you may be stupid, but in the army you've got an I.Q. of 160!" The scenes in Vietnam are all focused on the hardship suffered by Gump and his fellow soldiers (all named after American cities and states). They are the victims of both the harsh weather and the invisible enemy named 'Charlie.' The American presence in Vietnam is not questioned, they are just good ole' American boys in a tough spot. There may be some foolish irony in Gump finishing his military service as a ping-pong player and opening up China with his table tennis skills, but he remained a good soldier to the end. When he does speak (unwittingly) at the big peace rally in Washington his speech is cut off by a military saboteur. Abbie Hoffman seems to like his speech – but film viewers are left guessing as to what Gump actually said about the war.

Interpreting Gump theologically and mythologically as a redeemer and holy fool yields a number of interesting insights. The tradition of the holy fool as a genuinely mad person listening to alternative tunes seems to be continued in *Forrest Gump*. He is a tempered fool, however. Gump still hears enough of the march tunes from the status quo to not run

too far out of step. The next chapter will focus on insights from critics who give postmodern ideological analyses of *Forrest Gump*. They will point out that the ideologies evident in the movie merely reflect the dominant status quo rather than criticize it.

CHAPTER 3

Postmodern Ideological Interpretations of *Forrest Gump*

A postmodern interpretation of a particular movie could proceed in an almost limitless number of directions with as many understandings as there are viewers. This chapter will briefly summarize postmodern ideological criticism and consider two postmodern interpretations of *Forrest Gump*. Postmodern ideological criticism provides interpretive insights that are not seen through other interpretations, but, like all things, has its own limitations. These limitations are most evident when postmodernity finds no

centre from which to criticize. It then becomes a text of the powerful status quo, something of which *Forrest Gump* is an example.

Postmodernity aims to reveal the textual aspect of all human analysis. Perhaps foremost, postmodernity is a criticism of the damage caused by the Enlightenment perception of reality. The Enlightenment's commitment to the primacy of *a priori* categories of thought and moral imperatives, buoyed by Christianity's love of doctrine and Plato's passion for the Ideal, formed the modern predilection toward an eternal, external, mind-centred reality. An authoritative text in this context, at best, expresses the thoughts of a person (more specifically, a western, European, wealthy, heterosexual man) trying to tap into the eternal reservoir of reality that exists 'out there' somewhere. Reality, in order of significance and truth, begins ontologically, is discerned rationally, and only then is written down in a text. Within modernity, therefore, to read a text properly is to evaluate how objectively it reflects true being. This male logocentric approach to reading human life is what the postmodern gadfly loves to challenge. This annoying bug keeps buzzing around saying that not only is a text text, but that all of it is text. That is, ontology, rationality, objectivity, writing, even the gadfly's own buzzing, is all human text dependent on relative and subjective context. Any human creation is a text to be negotiated with and to be evaluated in the text's context. The reader's own context as an interpreter must also be acknowledged. The context of the text and the context of the interpreter is more than what is evident on the surface. All perspectives are influenced by other perspectives and all perspectives are influenced both consciously and

subconsciously. Perspectives are a result of interplay between individuals and their cultural contexts.

A good example of this self aware textual interplay is a chapter written by Jacques Derrida called, “Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know).”⁹³ Derrida plays with Soren Kierkegaard’s text, *Fear and Trembling*, which is itself a negotiation with the biblical text of *Genesis*, in which Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Also included is Herman Melville’s newspaper story, “Bartleby the Scrivener.” In his interaction with these texts, Derrida trembles with awareness of the sacrificial dimension in all that we write or think or do in everyday common life. Every interpretation sacrifices something. By saying one thing, it leaves out all other things. Anything said or written by any one person can never say all things. Objectivity is not available to humanity. All texts do damage, so people must suspend the ethical, do what they do ultimately alone as the lone knight of faith (alone with God), and make the sacrifice anyway. If persons say anything they unavoidably do damage, so it should be done in fear and trembling.

A contemporary popular movie is a multi-faceted text for reflection in a postmodern context. Movies are technological plays. A movie is a playful negotiation with life. But, this technological negotiation is also a crowning product of modernity. Postmodernity rejects the modern either/or option and prefers a both/and approach. This is apparent even in its relationship with modernity. Postmodernity is both a rejection of modernity and a

⁹³ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Reprinted in David Jobling, Tina Pippin & Ronald Schleifer’s *The Postmodern Bible Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 333-352.

celebration of modernity. While postmodernity is critical of modernity's nightmare intellectual scenarios that have 'othered' so many through its either/or categorical binaries (like right or wrong, true or false, male or female, rich or poor, white or black, civilized or uncivilized, saved or unsaved) which always favour the definer of the categories, it delights in modernity's ability to manipulate human existence through technology. Moving pictures are both a great accomplishment of modern technology as well as fertile ground for postmodern play. Ambiguity and irony abound. And where ambiguity and irony abound postmodernity abounds even more.

On the one hand, movies claim an ability to portray reality 'as it really is.' They are not merely written signs on a page, or audible voices heard through a speaker, they are moving pictures and synchronized sounds of the way things really are, all in living colour. But, on the other hand, they can create reality more powerfully than any other medium. Everything is a stage; all are actors, timelines and storylines. Perspectives are the director's entire making – nothing is real, all is special effect. Despite early rumors of crowds running out of the theatre the first time they saw and heard a train heading toward them on the screen, most viewers interact with movies in a playful fashion. Most viewers do not interact with the reality portrayed in movies as what really happened, but understand it as a representation. This does not prevent movies from being perceived as part of our real world. The fact that movies are playful representations does not undermine their influence. Two anecdotes illustrate this point: An American college football player who played in a Bowl game in January 2003 described his moves as being

“just like those in *The Karate Kid*”; the same week on a PBS late night talk show, Dr. Ben Carson, a leading brain surgeon from Johns Hopkins University, described his moves in a virtual medical technique as being “just like those in *Fantastic Voyage*.” As modern texts giving a powerful technological interpretation of reality, movies are important modern expressions to be interpreted with postmodern negotiation.

A playful intertextual portrayal of reality is evident in *Forrest Gump*. The movie depicts aspects of American history during the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s. The imaginary character Gump interacts with real events and personalities of the late twentieth century. These real events are referenced, re-enacted and some are even shown by actual news clips. The movie is a deliberate play with reality. The telling of the story of this reality is complex and multi-faceted. This play is further evident in the complexity of the movie’s narrative portrayal. The primary narrative provided by the movie is a memory told to various people waiting for a bus with the older Gump. Gump is played by Tom Hanks. Robert Zemeckis is the movie’s director, who is interpreting the screenplay of Eric Roth, who re-wrote Winston Groom’s novel by the same name. Paramount Pictures is the huge corporation that funded the multi-million dollar cost to make the movie, with the hope of a good return. Viewers of this movie are therefore experiencing the textual interplay of, at minimum, a narrator or actor, a director, a screenplay writer, a novelist, the original TV newsreel producers, a skilled splicer and editor and a movie producer. All of these go into creating that little bit of reality viewers watch in their own personal, complex context of a theatre or TV screen. Postmodern viewers know that the

exercise of what really happened is an impossible human task. Besides, this movie is not really concerned about what really happened, it is a deliberate and multi-faceted play with people and events.

The director, Robert Zemeckis, likes technical play in movies. Many of his other movies deliberately distort reality through technology: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* brings together Toon town and the so-called, real world, *Back to the Future* plays with present, past, and future, and *Contact* depicts contact between extra terrestrial intelligence and humanity. In *Contact*, Zemeckis also includes the news clippings from CNN and of President Clinton. Responding to criticism of the technical play of *Forrest Gump* Zemeckis wrote,

I remember when [New York Time film critic] Janet Maslin was bitching and moaning about Forrest Gump. She said in her review, "This is terrible. How are we going to tell the real images from the nonreal images?" And I said to myself, Real image? What is a real image? I mean, it's all bent by optics. It's all laid down on chemical, Isn't a 100mm lens a special effect?⁹⁴

Zemeckis expresses well the medium of movies as well as postmodern hermeneutics. Movies generally, and *Forrest Gump* in particular, are good texts to negotiate with in a postmodern context because of their self-conscious multi-textual play with reality.

The North American, movie saturated culture and the postmodern shift to viewer response causes viewers less to ask what is real, but what do they feel or see. It is a move from the objective to the subjective. It is not always simply an empty subjectivity, however. Even Zemeckis sees more than merely optic play in his movie. He

⁹⁴ Zemeckis, Robert, "Hooray For Image Banks!" *Forbes*, Dec. 1, 1997, 121.

enigmatically wrote further that *Forrest Gump* was not a movie just about special effects, but “it’s a movie about grieving. That’s the truth of the film.”⁹⁵

The complex nature of a text does not leave postmodernity in a thoroughly nihilistic subjectivist tailspin. It opens up interpretive negotiation on two major fronts. One is reader-response, or in this case, viewer-response. That is, for the viewer to ask themselves as a viewer how they respond to this movie and why. The other, and related, direction of interpretation is to consider the rhetorical nature of the text. Everybody and every text have points of view, and so all viewers are brought into negotiation with the text’s rhetoric through their response. Points of view and responses are complex, some are deliberate and some are subliminal. Neo-Marxist and Freudian analyses seem to be particularly helpful to some postmodern critics, because they are hermeneutics of suspicion that ask questions about the sub-cultural and subconscious influences of economics and sexuality. These analyses not only ask questions in a postmodern fashion, but also point out the harm of a vacuous type of postmodernism that suggests everything is only a textual plaything. Some postmodern sensibilities are highly tuned to these complexities. *Forrest Gump* is a movie text that invites the viewer into playful and serious negotiation with its own playful and serious negotiation. It invites a viewer to consider, “What is my response to its rhetoric?”

Steven D. Scott’s response in an article in the *Literature/Film Quarterly* suggests that *Forrest Gump* is a great example of postmodernism at its “seductive and subversive

⁹⁵ Zemeckis, 121.

best.”⁹⁶ Reflecting on Gump’s icon-like status in America, Scott considers the ‘gazillionaire’ status not only of the character Gump in the movie, but also of the movie itself and its spin-offs. The original novel, the movie, the movie’s video release (along with an actual box of chocolates), Winston Groom’s other works (including a book on Gumpisms, sequels to the novel and the movie) all add up to huge capital success. This reflects Gump’s experiences in the movie. As Scott writes, “Forrest Gump the character...is valorized through money making enterprises.”⁹⁷ Through his ping-pong paddle endorsement and successful shrimping business, Gump becomes a gazillionaire. His Midas touch helps propel the successes of Elvis Presley and John Lennon, as well as the unknown inventors of the ‘have a nice day’ happy face T-shirt and the ‘shit-happens’ bumper sticker. Scott observes that “Forrest Gump the novel-turned-movie-turned industry is, in fact, the embodiment of the postmodernism that Fredric Jameson has described as symptomatic of ‘late capitalism’, it is a perfect example of ‘consumption’ as an ideal, ‘of sheer commodification as a process’.”⁹⁸ In both form and content *Forrest Gump* exemplifies this celebration of marketing and consumerism evident in some aspects of postmodernism. This revealing of the multi-faceted consumerism evident in and around the movie is a postmodern observation of one of the dangerous aspects of postmodernism.

⁹⁶ Scott, Steven D., “‘Like a Box of Chocolates’: Forrest Gump and Postmodernism,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 29, 24.

⁹⁷ Scott, 24.

⁹⁸ Scott, 24.

Scott also acknowledges the technical prowess of the movie: “This movie is a piece of work that announces itself from [the] opening sequence [of a long unbroken pan shot of a feather] onward as a deliberate and self-conscious technological marvel.”⁹⁹ This technical tour de force not only plays skillfully with technology but also with history. Scott points out that the malleable treatment of history is one of the emphases of postmodernity. Citing Fredric Jameson further, Scott wrote, “ours is an ‘age that has forgotten how to think historically’; postmodernism ‘knows only too well that the contents [of historical, and other narratives] are just more images.’”¹⁰⁰ Linda Hutcheson, another observer of postmodernism’s literary treatment of history notices that literary postmodernism is essentially an “ironic re-thinking of history.” “Always, for Hutcheson,” writes Scott, “literary postmodernism is analytical and critical: ‘its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as humans constructs...is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.’”¹⁰¹ *Forrest Gump* is a prime example of this reworking.

Postmodern play with perceived and portrayed reality is often characterized by satire and allegory. These are not unique elements of postmodernism, but they are characteristic of typical expression found during paradigm shifts. A prevailing paradigm and its hold on

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□ Scott, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Scott, 25.

¹⁰¹ Scott, 25.

reality is often made aware of its inner contradictions through irony. The paradigm is often mocked through satire and loosened up by allegory. The humorous and pretend nature of satire and allegory allow things to be said indirectly and sometimes more effectively. In this way postmodern play challenges modern paradigms, playing very much the role of holy fool. *Forrest Gump*'s expensive technological reworking of history does all of these things, but to what degree it is successful at challenging prevailing paradigms is questioned by some postmodern analysts of the movie. David Kerr, in his consideration of the movie in the context of director Robert Zemeckis's other movies, suggests that a consistent characteristic of his movies is that they are dark social satires of American life.¹⁰² Others, including Steven Scott, find too much sentimentality in *Forrest Gump* to be darkly satirical. Scott suggests, however, that *Forrest Gump* "read ironically and as postmodernism...is a pointed commentary on the mindless vacuousness of at least certain aspects of contemporary American life."¹⁰³ This ironic reading is not just found in the movie's story alone, but as a movie it is "a technically brilliant avant-garde allegory that deconstructs the 'American Dream' while at the same time living it by 'making a lot of money.'"¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Kerr, Dave, "Who Framed Forrest Gump" *Film Comment*, New York: 31 March 1995 45-51

¹⁰³ Scott, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Scott, 30.

The first irony Scott points out in the text of the movie is one that is often missed. Gump's entire successful financial rise is based on a lie. In a commercial he endorsed a ping-pong paddle he did not actually use. Scott observes that "accounts of this film that laud Gump for his enduring all-American honesty and forthrightness tend to gloss over this fact."¹⁰⁵ This subtle ironic undercutting of the American Dream is missed by many popular readings of *Forrest Gump*. This popular reading tends to see Gump as an allegory for the American Everyman. Many were surprised at the degree of this movie's success; perhaps this un-ironic interpretation provides some insight. Hank's and Zemeckis's Oscar acceptance speeches both suggested that the movie's popularity was due to the Gump's Everyman representation. Scott suggests that a postmodern ironic reading of *Forrest Gump* adds a more sophisticated recognition of a deconstruction of the American myth. Gump both elevates and undercuts America and its arch-typical citizen: Yes, he is successful, but it is based on a lie.

Scott points to two other ironic elements that question the myth of the rugged and upright American individual. One, that Gump is stupid, and two, that his only strategy in life is to run – mostly to run away. If this is read without irony, with Gump as example of how everybody can become rich in America, then this is a prescription for dumb, well-meaning, bumbling conservatism that ignores sophisticated criticism and real education. (Gump's education was a result of his mother's sexual payment and his uncanny ability to run). But, read ironically through a postmodern playfulness, "the film self-consciously

¹⁰⁵ Scott, 23.

pokes fun at one of the icons of American popular myth and culture, the rugged individual and his living out of the American dream.”¹⁰⁶ Yes, Gump does ooze simple-minded good heartedness (like cream from a warm chocolate), but, Scott concludes, “he is opportunistic, exploitative and capitalistic above all.”¹⁰⁷

This movie is like a box of chocolates, viewers never know what they are going to get. Or do they? Perhaps they get what they want to get. Two broad interpretive trajectories were discussed in the previous chapter on the theological and mythological interpretations of *Forrest Gump*. The two main chocolate varieties to choose from were Gump as an example of a genuine pilgrim who sought and found American styled salvation and Gump as redeemer or holy fool who criticized and healed America’s wounds. In Steven Scott’s literary film analysis similar chocolate choices are available. Scott’s postmodern sensitivities discern two broad interpretive trajectories as well. On the one hand, an un-ironic, literal reading of *Forrest Gump* would find in Gump an example and “a tract that argues for the realistic possibility that the so called American dream can come true for anyone.”¹⁰⁸ This corresponds to the theological interpretation of Gump as pilgrim. On the other hand, Scott’s ironic and allegorical reading that questions the apparent goodness of the American dream finds similarity to theological and mythological interpretations of Gump as redeemer or holy fool.

¹⁰⁶ Scott, 29.

¹⁰⁷ Scott, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Scott, 29.

So what kind of chocolate is it? Postmodernity unapologetically and aggressively declares that we determine what kind of chocolate we eat. Reality is not an *a priori* box of chocolates making available its categorical imperatives unknown to the consumer until eaten. Rather, a person negotiates with a vast box of contextual chocolates and chooses, accepts, feels, resigns to the flavours they like. The chocolate chosen says more about the eater than the box. This reader (viewer)-response analysis is the favourite chocolate flavour of postmodernity. From postmodernity's perspective the reading given by a viewer primarily deconstructs the viewer, not the thing being viewed. You are the chocolate you eat. Gump can be read as an example of the success guaranteed to the dim-witted, but basically good-natured, all-American guy, or as an ironic critique of that myth. He can be held up as an example of how to go on a spiritual quest within his culture or as a redeemer and critic of his culture's sins. Scott concludes his article with an ironical postmodern observation of a postmodern interpretation of the movie. He first suggests that a postmodern viewer-response analysis brings into question a viewer's interpretation of the movie. That is, that the satire of the movie is directed as much to the viewers of the film as it is found in the characters in the film. This dynamic, Scott further suggests, is characteristic of the "dilemma of postmodernity more generally, with artifact and audience alike implicated in creation and critique."¹⁰⁹ Scott seems to be suggesting that the ultimate conundrum for postmodernity is that if all interpretations are implicated nothing can truly be implicated. There remains no distinct place of judgment from where

¹⁰⁹ Scott, 30.

the status quo may be legitimately challenged and called to transformation. The powers and direction of a society would be free to continue unchallenged.

Judging by the huge popularity of the film in the United States its consequent embrace by conservatives such as Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan,¹¹⁰ it seems that Americans primarily see themselves as a good-natured Gump and see no need to change. They are essentially bumbling, innocent, obedient good-natured boys who always listen to their Momma, eventually get their girl and excel in sports and warfare. Along the way they make big bucks for themselves and a few others, even if the wealth is based on a shady endorsement, that is, a “little white lie,” his Momma told him to give. It was, after all, only advertising.¹¹¹

The irony of his agreement with Newt Gingrich’s conservative analysis of *Forrest Gump* is not lost to Thomas B. Byers in his own critique entitled, “History Re-Membered: Forrest Gump, Postfeminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the

¹¹⁰ Cf. Byers, Thomas B. “History Re-Membered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counterculture.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.2 1996, 420. And, Buchanan, Patrick J. “Hollywood Surprise. ‘Hello, I’m Forrest Gump and I’m a Conservative.’” *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 Aug. 1994, B3

¹¹¹ Personal anecdote: I too, like Gump, like “runningga”. One afternoon while jogging I was thinking about the lack of challenge in *Forrest Gump* to the commercial capitalist economy of the United States. The scene in the movie that I was thinking about was when Gump was running and wiped his dirty face on the T-shirt of a stranger. This blessing from Gump was then transformed by this man into the profitable happy-face yellow T-shirt. Just as I was thinking this I was attracted to a yellow sticker on the ground. It was a yellow happy-face sticker that I further recognized as being currently used by Wal-Mart as their logo. It later dawned on me about an uncanny and disturbing parallel to the event in the movie and the Eastern Orthodox Church’s tradition of the first icon. Their tradition is that the first icon was the bloodstained cloth used to wipe Jesus’ face by a woman as he suffered along the Via Dolorosa.

Counterculture.” Byers too refers to two interpretive trajectories of the movie; one which is the Newt-onian celebration of the victory of conservatism over the destructive counterculture, and the other is an apolitical reading focused on individual attitudes. The second interpretation was set forth by one of the movie’s producers when he accepted the 1995 Best Picture Oscar when he said, “it’s about humanity, it’s about respect, tolerance and unconditional love...[it] isn’t about politics or conservative values.”¹¹² Byers finds the producer’s comments too universal to be genuine, but the conservative embrace of the movie an accurate reflection of its aggressive and conservative re-write of history. For Gingrich and company this conservative re-write positively recovers a truth buried by the radical counterculture of the 1960s and beyond. Byers sees in the movie an example of what Michel Foucault considered a basic function of popular movies, that is, “to obstruct the flow of the popular memory’ of struggle against structures of oppression.”¹¹³ This means that psychologically popular films such as *Forrest Gump* are “an act of repression” and, as Foucault quipped, “when you see these films, you find out what you have to remember.”¹¹⁴ As is evident from his article title, Byers finds that *Forrest Gump* represses the historical remembrance of feminism and the counterculture of the late

¹¹² Byers, 420.

¹¹³ Byers, 421.

¹¹⁴ Quoted by Byers, 421, 419.

twentieth century. The movie's memory re-members good old-fashioned American white masculinity. Byers's interpretive grid for his analysis is Freud's Oedipus complex.¹¹⁵

The theoretical and cultural context of Byers' reading of *Forrest Gump* is found in Susan Jeffords' observations of the remasculinization of American culture found in her essay entitled, "Narrative as Violence, Violence as Patriarchy, Patriarchy as Story-Telling."¹¹⁶ The primary function of the patriarchal narrative, according to Jeffords, is to re-member the emasculated male and restore him to the position of the paternal signifier, the Father. The female body in this process is re-membered through dismemberment. Byers quotes Jeffords: "The undisputed image of man can only be created at the expense of woman."¹¹⁷ The narrative structure re-instating the male identity is most active when traditional cultural modes are being threatened. Byers thinks that "perhaps *the* major function and driving force of patriarchal narrative is the attempt to re-member a masculine body whose member has been 'dissed'".¹¹⁸ Byers summarizes the traumatic decades of the late twentieth century in America as a predominantly threatening time for white males:

¹¹⁵ His article is, in fact, a part of a book he was working on at the time that was following the progress of the return of the Father in Hollywood movies.

¹¹⁶ □ Byers, 422. Jeffords, Susan. "Narrative as Violence, Violence as Patriarchy, Patriarchy as Storytelling." *Gender: Literary and Cinematic Representation: Selected Papers from the Eleventh Annual Florida State University Conference of Literature and Film*. Ed. Jeanne Ruppert. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994. 82-95.

¹¹⁷ Byers, 419, from Jeffords' "Narrative as Violence."

¹¹⁸ Byers, 421.

The Vietnam War, the exposure of racist oppression and challenges to white hegemony, and the general cultural disruption known as the “sixties”; the rise of late capitalism’s global economy and the concomitant demise of American economic dominance and security and of men’s capacities to be sole breadwinners; the reconfiguration of the family, certain aspects of the sexual revolution, and the emergence of second-wave feminism and gay liberation as concerted political and cultural threats to that masculinity’s traditional prerogatives.¹¹⁹

The current postmodern era that challenges the dominant cultural fictions adds further to the pervasive threat toward the male subject’s sense of adequacy and potency.

This threat requires counter-action and Hollywood has come to the rescue with its new male heroes such as Rambo and Rocky, as well as men with babies and the positive retelling of American history with particular reference to Vietnam and race. Byers considers Hollywood’s *Forrest Gump* to be “perhaps the most overt, and most comprehensive...revision of history”¹²⁰ (or, a retelling of his-story). Three common motifs found in such revisions are evident in *Forrest Gump* to Byers. First, closure is invoked upon the traumatic time by periodizing its history. Second, the most harmful aspects of the traditional male are villainized or ‘othered’ and then replaced by an enlightened new man. And, third, which is crucial for Byers, is a “rehierarchizing in which the woman is put down and the new man is raised up in a way that conspicuously marks the restoration of his identity with the paternal principle.”¹²¹ Through this

¹¹⁹ Byers, 423.

¹²⁰ Byers, 424.

¹²¹ Byers, 424.

periodizing, othering and rehierarchying the old bad man and the emerging independent woman are subordinated and replaced by the new good man. This new man is the remembered and restored male, the independent woman is dis-membered and killed.

The dominant subject in America as portrayed in movies like *Forrest Gump* is not only the heterosexual male but also the white, middle-class father – otherwise known as a baby-boomer. Given that, Byers interprets the portrayal of Gump the baby-boomer in classic Oedipal complexity. In the 1990s baby-boomers reached the age their fathers were in the 1960s, and rather than continuing their counterculture struggle, they have “become what they rebelled against.”¹²² Having become their fathers they now identify with the dutiful sons of the 1960s (*e.g.*, Gump as good soldier and respected veteran) and consider the radical sons they, in fact, were, in a negative light (*e.g.*, Gump’s antagonist, Jenny’s angry, abusive, anti-war boyfriend). As a soldier Gump is never shown hurting anyone. In fact, all he really does is rescue his fellow soldiers and receive a humorous bullet wound in his “butt-ox” from the faceless enemy. The only hint of his possible counter cultural anti-war attitude is conveniently silenced by a crazed military man during a large anti-war rally, a rally that Gump participated in naively.

Byers’ point about the sons of the counterculture embracing the culture and becoming the patriarch, is further illustrated by the movie’s re-write of the novel by Winston Groom. The intertextuality of stories is a favourite playground of postmodern

¹²² Byers, 425.

observation.¹²³ While Byers considers the intertextuality of the movie *Forrest Gump* and Freud's archetypal Oedipal complex (which is itself a play with the ancient Greek play by Sophocles), an intertextual analysis compares the movie with the novel would be useful. This is not in order to make a modernist evaluation of whether or not the movie properly reflects the original novel, but in order to further consider the rhetoric of the movie. Byers's analysis is given further credibility when Eric Roth's and Robert Zemeckis' re-write of Winston Groom's novel is considered.

The Gump of the novel consistently describes the Vietnam War as a 'bunch of shit'. There is no ambiguity in the book about Gump's anti-war feelings.¹²⁴ In another contrast with the movie, Gump's father was not a cheating husband who went on a "long vacation," as he is depicted in the movie. In the novel he was a hard working longshoreman who was crushed to death under a dropped crate of bananas. Byers's overlay of the motifs he finds in *Forrest Gump* make even more sense when contrasting the movie's story line with the novel's story line. In the movie the old male is clearly villainized and othered while the new baby boomer male is exalted. Not only is Gump's father not a bad man in the novel, Gump himself is far less attractive. In Groom's novel Gump is not an innocent slighted lover of the impure Jenny, but actually has an intimate

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□ Cf. Julia Kristeva, in "Reading the Bible," from *New Maladies of the Soul*. Translated by Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) reprinted in *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, 92-101. Kristeva developed her concept of intertextuality from Mikhail Bakhtin. Cf. also Derrida's intertextual play with Melville, Kierkegaard and *Genesis*.

¹²⁴ Groom, Winston, *Forrest Gump*. Garden City, N.Y.:Doubleday, 1986.

relationship with her. He, however, is the one who wanders both sexually and geographically. Further, her father (another old male) is not the sexually abusive character he is portrayed as in the movie. Eric Roth's and Robert Zemeckis' re-write of Gump in the movie is very much a redeemed and re-membered baby-boomer father, much more so than in the book.¹²⁵

This re-memberment of his-story discerned by Byers in *Forrest Gump* may also help explain the surprising popularity of the movie, especially in comparison to the book. The novel was not very popular before the movie was made. After the movie's release, it did become widely read. But as the movie's popularity waned so did the book's; it is now in 2003 out of print. Nonetheless, Byers's consideration of the movie's exoneration of the 1990s baby boomer male helps explain its unexpected huge popularity.

The consideration of Gump as a role model for contemporary American male baby boomers does raise the question about Gump's mental capacities, or lack thereof. Why would baby boomers identify with a man with an IQ just below 75? Byers suggests that Gump's inability to really grasp the significance of many events makes him a favourable model for those who have a stake in not grasping their significance. This finds resonance with Mark Kingwell's (and other's) concerns of the 'Gumping' or 'dumbing down' of

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□ It is also interesting to note that Groom tried twice to write the screenplay for his book, but was rejected both times.

North America and the North American male in particular.¹²⁶ The complexities and contradictions rampant in the baby boomer's adolescent era proved too difficult to handle. Rather than continuing to grapple with the difficult and perhaps even self-condemning paths of that era, it is simpler and less intimidating to play dumb. Such baby boomers might say, "We're just a bunch of good ole boys, we don't mean no harm. You'll forgive us if we do something stupid won't you? 'Cause stupid is what stupid does. If we mean well, things will work out well, you don't really expect us to figure these things out do you?" And so Gump's less than stellar IQ can serve as a popular refuge for some male baby boomers not wanting to grapple with the increasing complexity of problems faced in the late second millennium in North America.

Byers, like Steven Scott, raises the larger question of the irony and satire found in the movie. Some view the movie as an ironic satire that pokes fun at the values portrayed by Gump. Byers acknowledges that there are some clever and ironic elements in this movie and that it could hold up that interpretation. Byers believes this reflects an "increasing tendency of Hollywood films to provide cues for multiple and contradictory interpretations."¹²⁷ This facilitation of a variety of viewer-responses makes it a good movie for postmodern analysis. Not only does Zemeckis bring together the two worlds of Gump's imaginary experience and recent history, but he also juxtaposes at least two

¹²⁶ Mark Kingwell, *Dreams of Millenium: Report From a Culture on the Brink* (Toronto: Penquin Books, 1996).

¹²⁷ Byers, 440, fn 4.

possible interpretations – a re-membered celebration of conservative values and an ironic satire of them. This too may further explain the wide appeal of the movie. It appealed to viewers with establishment and anti-establishment predilections. As one twenty-something viewer of the movie reflected in a conversation with me, “Ah, so maybe that’s why both I and my parents liked the movie.”¹²⁸ This both/and rather than either/or aspect of the movie is postmodernity at work.

Thomas Byers does, however, make an either/or choice in his reading of the movie. He thinks that an “ironic reading runs against the grain of the this film.”¹²⁹ This is found particularly in the movie’s invitation to identify with Gump. Despite the fact that he is portrayed as stupid, Gump “tends to be gently humorous rather than politically satirical in tone.”¹³⁰ Gump is gentle and nice enough that most audiences like him and the cultural leaders are decent enough that audiences do not criticize them. Byers notes the distinction between *Forrest Gump* and the overtly satirical movie *Being There*. The gardener in *Being There* is clearly innocent and childlike and the mature people around him are revealed as who they truly are.¹³¹ The gardener is other enough for the audience to not identify with him (he is incapable of taking care of himself and walks on water to

¹²⁸ Don Betts in conversation with the author.

¹²⁹ Byers, 440, fn. 4.

¹³⁰ Byers, 440, fn. 4.

¹³¹ The gardener is named Chauncey Gardener in *Being There* because when he introduces himself he does not know his last name, only that he has taken care of a garden. Gump, on the other hand, is proudly aware of his name, “My name is Gump, Forrest Gump, people call me Forrest.”

conclude the movie). This allows him to serve as a strong satirical foil to those around him – not only characters in the movie, but the movie’s viewers. Byers agrees with other readers of *Forrest Gump* that it is too overridden with a typical Hollywood text to be genuinely satirical. The movie’s ultimate Hollywood goal is to gain as many paying viewers as possible – to be a box-office hit, not to attack the box-office audience. It is to make people feel good about themselves, not bad. The satire is there not to genuinely criticize, but to reach the widest audience possible, an audience that includes both conservatives and their critics.

The movie’s overt attempt to gain sympathy for Gump by the widest audience is again illustrated by comparing the screenplay with the novel. In Groom’s novel Gump is an unattractive, big, rude idiot-savant. He is a Rabellesque figure whose antics are consistently pissing people off and bringing all kinds of trouble on himself. His most used maxim is not the folksy wisdom he learned from his Momma, but a childish “I need to pee.” And the movie’s ‘life is a box of chocolates’ quote is actually his own (not his Momma’s) observation that “Bein’ a idiot is no box of chocolates.” Gump does have amazing strength and speed as well as amazing natural talents, such as playing the harmonica and chess. The novel’s satire is accomplished through the establishment seeking to take advantage of Gump’s abilities but then being extremely frustrated by his inevitable screw-ups. He also wins Jenny’s love by his ability to play the harmonica, but then ruins that relationship through his sexual exploits with groupies. His closest companion eventually is not his Momma or Jenny, but an orangutan. The movie version

of Gump has been made much more attractive. This strengthens the possibilities of identification with Gump making him less effective as a source of ironic satire. His character seems much more likely to be an example of the new good baby-boomer male in contrast with the old bad male. Feminists and other counterculture folks need not worry; the new male has evolved, he is not as smart, but is more caring.

Another motif Byers points out as part of the remasculinization of American culture evident in *Forrest Gump* is the periodizing of the time of tribulation, which tames it and makes it easier to dismiss or to interpret as being solved. Two key elements of the film illustrate this aspect. The first is the historical sequences that recall the assassinations and assassination attempts of John and Robert Kennedy, George Wallace, John Lennon, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. Through Gump's eyes, the major differences between these men are, in Byers' words, "flattened out."¹³² The era of conflict is periodized – Kennedy, Wallace, Reagan and Lennon – are all portrayed as victims of the crazy time the United States has now overcome. Their extreme differences "disappear in the face of their status as targets – and as wounded patriarchs."¹³³ Byers points out further that these men were all either presidents or presidential candidates, which is "the position of Father of the nation."¹³⁴ Of course, John Lennon was not a presidential candidate, but in Gump's narrated memory, the assassinated Lennon was "a nice young man from England...on his

¹³² Byers, 427.

¹³³ Byers, 427.

¹³⁴ Byers, 427.

way home to see his little boy.” Through Gump’s memory, Lennon’s counter cultural significance is leveled out in the periodizing of the movie and he is remembered as another good father who was victimized. The portrayal of these patriarchs as victims draws sympathy towards them. It ignores the possibility that they may be representative of an oppressive patriarchal system. The negative aspect of society is limited to the bad males who were the faceless unknown violent men who shot these good men for no apparent reason.

Another interpretive element that is characteristic of postmodernity is to read against a text to consider which characters are not mentioned, and why. This negotiation of reality understood as text not only evaluates how characters have been written in, but why some have been written out. Consideration of who is not in the picture may be even more telling than who is in the picture. In *Forrest Gump*’s particular historical memory (or forgetting) of victimized patriarchs Byers finds the “film’s most striking erasure of a single historical event” to be the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Why include Wallace’s failed assassination and leave out King’s actual assassination and that of Malcolm X? Byers is disturbed by the possibility that even beyond basic persistent contemporary racist conditions, a man like Wallace is now perceived as more mainstream than King and therefore more easily included as a victim. This adds further evidence that by its periodizing historical remembrance and forgetfulness, *Forrest Gump* offers a description of the turbulent age as a time of victimization of the white patriarch. The patriarch’s bad actions were mere foibles (*e.g.*, John Kennedy’s dalliance with Marilyn

Monroe) and they were basically all the same (even Kennedy and Wallace, Reagan and Lennon!). This tames the period of its serious counter cultural challenges. Feminist challenges are especially tamed, because the movie shows that the white patriarchs were not so bad after all and that they in fact were the real victims. The counterculture itself is essentially othered.

The othering of the feminist counterculture is developed in the movie's portrayal of Jenny, especially in comparison to Gump. This is the second element of the movie that periodizes, undermines, and tames the turbulent times. Byers observes that while Gump is "a representative of the ideals of All-American's 'straight' culture in his period," Jenny represents "just about everything the New Right means by the counterculture."¹³⁵ The movie combines in Jenny a number of different women similar to the historical portrayal of the white victimized patriarchs. The chances of the same woman both posing for *Playboy* and being a protest folk-singer, or being an anti-war activist and a disco-dancing cocaine addict, are slim. Jenny is a negative symbolic representation of the counterculture's sexually liberated woman. "Once again," Byers observes, "all historical distinctions are blurred – in this case for the purpose of constituting all deviations from traditional 'family values' and codes of behaviour as a single, destructive, and implicitly 'liberal' other."¹³⁶ Byers' hermeneutic of suspicion seems to be further justified when the movie script is compared to the novel. In the book, Jenny does not go through the

¹³⁵ Byers, 432.

¹³⁶ Byers, 433.

numerous counterculture activities that she does in the movie. In particular, she is not as sexually promiscuous. Gump is opposite as well. He is not a sexual innocent in the book. Jenny is the one waiting for Gump to come home in the novel, which is turned around in the movie. Also, Jenny does not die in the book. Jenny's marriage to Gump and her eventual death in the movie are completion of her "metaphysical punishment," according to Byers. Once she has apologized to Gump she can die. Susan Jeffords sees this as the completion of the "dismemberment of the female body," which is then re-membered by the triumphant male Gump over her grave.¹³⁷ The changes made from the novel to the screenplay (Groom actually had Gump apologizing and Jenny remaining alive) give further credibility to postmodern feminist readings of the movie.

Byers sums up the characters and relationships found in *Forrest Gump* as "cultural pastiche."¹³⁸ Everything affirming of the baby-boomer good guy and father is appropriated, while everything that threatened it, like the counterculture and liberal women, is othered. The mythical re-writing of history portrayed in the movie does not ignore the rebellions of the past, it tames them and redraws them through the more culturally compatible new male. Using Freudian analysis in a postmodern fashion, Byers shows how the film remasculinizes culture by re-membering and re-consecrating the Father. The movie tries to make the new father different, but his re-membering is still

¹³⁷ Byers, 437.

¹³⁸ Byers, 434.

accomplished at the expense of those othered, such as women, black men, and the unpatriotic.

This postmodern film has a vicious edge to it. Combining postmodern “electronic techniques that are characteristic of late capitalist means of production,” along with the comical stupidity of Gump’s meta-narrative allows for a non-ideological defense of the movie.¹³⁹ To be critical of the film’s politics is to be anachronistically irrelevant in the “postindustrial, post-Civil Rights, postfeminist” America of today.¹⁴⁰ The effect of *Forrest Gump*’s photographic simulacrum is to empty out history. This does not leave it or Gump neutral and innocent. Power and contest still remain. Any re-narrative of history has a bias no matter how technically clever or playfully humorous. Byers warns of the danger of a kind of postmodern theory that suggests history is only a matter of re-narrative by the strong. *Forrest Gump* is a dangerous example of the powerful Hollywood culture’s use of play to “disremember recent popular struggles in order to re-member a particular historical subject.”¹⁴¹ Byers does not want to surrender an aspiration towards what Fredric Jameson calls ‘genuine historicity.’ And so, with Freudian postmodern awareness, Byers reviews *Forrest Gump* and warns of its dangerous use of postmodernity to re-establish the status quo. It is a clever and vicious example of the remasculinization

¹³⁹ Byers, 438.

¹⁴⁰ Byers, 438.

¹⁴¹ Byers, 438.

of American culture, and, to quote Michel Foucault again, “when you see these films, you find out what you have to remember.”¹⁴²

Forrest Gump is a postmodern movie using the best of modernity’s technical abilities. It is a deliberate play with reality and provides multiple opportunities for response. Steven D. Scott and Thomas B. Byers use postmodern sensibilities to interact with the subliminal and overt messages of the movie as well as its reflection and reshaping of its culture. They are particularly concerned with the movie’s expression of wealth and patriarchy. In its production and impact they recognize skillful influence. Both of them warn of its power in a postmodern context to merely celebrate wealth, technology and the re-emergence of traditional male centred values. Using postmodern reader response techniques they analyze the movie’s textual rhetoric and find in it a subversive return to some of the destructive elements of modernism.

These postmodern ideological analyses of *Forrest Gump* have added further critical insight to the theological and mythological interpretations of the second chapter. The postmodern critics concerned with the empowerment of a system that glorifies the accumulation of wealth and undermines potentially liberative movements raised clear ethical issues. Ironically, they also warned of an a-ethical type of postmodernism that allows such dynamics to go forward unchallenged. While theological and mythological interpretations dealt with the messages found in the obvious content of the movie, postmodern interpretations sought to go below the surface, trying to hear other

¹⁴² Byers, 419, from Foucault’s “Film and Popular Memory.”

ideological and suppressed voices. The fourth chapter will be a unique blend of a number of considerations. It will take into account also an interpretation of the aesthetics, or style of the movie and the theological and ethical issues that it raises.

CHAPTER 4

Contemporary Theological Discussions Initiated by *Forrest Gump*

The theological, mythological, and ideological interpretations in chapters two and three dealt primarily with the content of *Forrest Gump*, not its style. These interpretations looked at the surface, symbolic and subconscious elements of the messages found in the movie. A postmodern interpretation of a film must look further to its style. A major theological thinker of the twentieth century which postmodern thinkers could find as an insightful conversation partner is Paul Tillich. Like postmodern critics, he was impressed with the unique communicative power of art. He was also aware of other elements of

communication other than the content of a work of art. The style, or aesthetics, of a work of art was important to consider for Tillich when he interpreted it. Further theological discussion, in a postmodern context, of *Forrest Gump* can be initiated using his analysis of religious style.

Tillich believed that the best religious art painting of the twentieth century was Picasso's *Guernica*. He understood the religious strength of the painting to lie in both its content and style. It is to be understood in the context of his concept of the Protestant Principle. This principle set forth the reality of humanity graciously being accepted, but fully appreciated only in the recognition of their complete unacceptance, that is, an acceptance-in-spite-of. He believed that *Guernica* was a profane and courageous expression of the “Yes” of this grace discerned in the midst of the clarion “No” of the disintegration of body, soul and community. It was Picasso's interpretation of a small Spanish town following the world's first saturation bombing. Humanity's finitude, subjection to death, estrangement from true being and bondage to demonic forces were revealed in the fullness of their horror in the picture's cacophonous mixing of body parts, human, animal, and earthly. Nothing was covered up; human angst and destructiveness were clearly revealed under the all seeing eye of the light. After finding refuge in the United States following his exile from Nazi Germany, Tillich said that the painting showed “ what is now in the souls of many Americans as disruptiveness, existential doubt, emptiness and meaningless.”¹⁴³ Because it did not hide the real human situation, it

¹⁴³ Tillich, “Protestantism and Artistic Style,” *Art and Architecture*, 150.

was for Tillich the most religious of paintings, even though it contained no explicit religious content.

How would *Forrest Gump* fare under Tillich's analysis? Director Robert Zemeckis said that the movie is about grieving. Picasso's *Guernica* screams with grief, grief not only of the military bombing, but also of human fragmentation and destructiveness. Does *Forrest Gump*? Does *Forrest Gump* portray an acceptance-in-spite-of?

In terms of content there are painful grief-filled elements in the movie. Gump's physical and mental handicaps caused him to be teased, abused, and ostracized. Gump's mother was a victim of abandonment by her husband and felt powerless enough at one point to submit to sexual payment for her son's advancement. Jenny's life began as a sex abuse victim; she consequently made bad choices leading to further frustration, pain, and grief; eventually she died from AIDS. Lt. Dan's legs were both amputated and he went through a torturous inner battle before coming to grips with his destiny. And, Bubba, Gump's comrade in arms, was tragically killed in Vietnam before he realized his life long dream of owning a shrimping business. The historical events referred to in the movie caused much pain and grief in the United States: Vietnam, racism, assassinations, and political corruption. Yet *Forrest Gump* does not come across like a *Guernica*. Further reference to Tillich's categories of religious content and style suggest reasons as to why this is the case.

First, as to content, a courageous expression of "No" to humanity's estranged condition is not sounded loudly enough, especially as found in the subject of the movie,

Gump himself. Gump essentially escapes everything unscathed. Like the shots of the light feather inserted at the beginning and conclusion of the movie, Gump floats along; he is above the grief around him. This is because supernatural victories abound in his life. He is not only miraculously healed of his leg ailments, but is given great strength that allows him amazing success as an athlete, war hero, and national icon. While his mental slowness stays with him all of his life, it does not get in the way of his great success in advertising, business, and the ensuing accumulation of great wealth. He eventually marries his childhood sweetheart and fathers an intelligent son with her. Everything Gump touches turns to gold and the persistent *deus ex machina* refrain found in the primary subject of the film relieves and tempers its grief prematurely. Gump's providential successes render ineffective a courageous "No" to the human predicament.

Second, and more significantly, in light of Tillich's analysis of style, *Forrest Gump* does not effectively portray the pain and fragmentation of the human situation. There are some expressionist strokes in the movie, expressionism being the painting style which Tillich believed best expressed the human condition. The movie's re-imagining of history through the insertion of Gump as well as a series of montages do approach the angst and subjectivity of human experience. The litany of assassinations and assassination attempts are broad brush strokes portraying the violence of American culture. But overall, it is a feel-good movie. The combination of music and Gump's innocent and humorous voice-over tame the angst of the painful events the movie portrays. An illustration of this is when Gump and Bubba arrive in Vietnam. It is a bright sunny day by the ocean and there

is a ballet movement of sound and vision as U.S. military helicopters land. Creedance Clearwater Revival's song, *Senator's Son*, is being played and despite the anti-draft nature of the song the viewer is drawn into feeling good about the situation. Gump and Bubba have a private interview with their Lieutenant who is tough, but quirky and caring. The scene calls for comparison with a similar scene in *Apocalypse Now*. In this bizarre scene, helicopters land on a beach in Vietnam carrying a boat, a surfboard, and speakers that are blaring out a Wagnerian opera. Their primary task is to transport a boat, but the megalomaniac commander wants to see one of his California soldier boys surf. After the local villagers are needlessly and brutally terrorized, the commander forces the soldier to surf in the ocean amidst constant missile fire. The horror and absurdity of war is clearly evident in both content and style in this scene. In *Forrest Gump* the artistic style does not represent the horror of the situation. The movie is trying to be mildly critical when harsher criticism, similar to *Apocalypse Now*, is required. The fact that these two simple minded American southerners, one white and one black, were shipped-off half way around the world to fight in a painful undeclared war helping to destroy a foreign country is lost in the style of the presentation.

There are two characters in the movie that are presented in a way that would come closer to Tillich's analysis of religious style and content, Jenny and Bubba. In contrast to Gump, neither of them experience miraculous escapes from their tough situations. The reach of the *deus ex machina* does not extend to them. Jenny prayed often for deliverance; she prayed that God would turn her into a bird so she could fly away and

escape the painful abuse she suffers, but it never happens. The closest she came to flying (other than with drug induced trips) was when she climbed up on a hotel balcony railing in the midst of suicidal despair. The music being played was Bob Seger's *Freebird*. The irony, the angst, the expressionistic style in this scene is much closer to Tillich's understanding of a courageous presentation of the human situation. While Jenny does not die at this point, she dies soon from the new leprosy of AIDS. Bubba is a black man from the south caught up in the war in Vietnam who is simple and obsessed with shrimps. Like Jenny, he too dies prematurely, not from AIDS but from a bullet shot by an invisible Vietcong soldier. The movie's constant return to Bubba always talking about shrimp is an effective stylistic presentation of simple minded obsessiveness. Likewise, the fragmentary presentation of Jenny's life going from one counter-culture crisis to the next is a powerful expressionist portrayal of the fragmentation and lostness of humanity. One of the most interesting scenes is Bubba's death scene. He died in the arms of Gump on the bank of a swamp in Vietnam. The scene is strangely Pieta-like, bringing to mind the crucifixion of Christ.

This introduces another key element in Tillich's understanding of religious content in art. He believed that almost all specifically religious content was unable to accurately present the human predicament. Tillich's favourite description of attempts at it was kitsch, that is shallow, popularist presentations of a poor quality. He believed religious content was too often a sentimentalized presentation of the human predicament, too quickly and too easily resolved. The one religious subject that he thought was capable of

expressing the human predicament was representations of Jesus as the Christ on the cross. Tillich believed that pictures of Christ on the cross rang much truer to the human situation because they set forth clearly the suffering of Christ in his human physicality. Mathias Grunewald's *Crucifixion* (fifteenth century) was considered by Tillich to be the greatest anticipation of modern expressionist art. It is a rare combination of a religious subject and religious expressionism. Tillich often referred to this as the “greatest German picture ever painted.”¹⁴⁴ Tillich was drawn to the horror expressed in this painting. It is a painting that courageously and truthfully portrays human brokenness.

In both style and content, therefore, the presentation of Jenny and Bubba are both better representations of Tillich's religious category than Gump. They are also better representations of the typical Holy Fool/Redeemer motif. Bubba is more overtly a fool than Gump. Bubba's vision (of shrimpin') and premature death actually bring about the redemption of success for Gump. And Jenny took on all of culture's maladies and gave up her life in the process, but not before providing Gump with redemptive fulfillment and paternity. Picasso's *Guernica* and Grunewald's *Crucifixion* are better portrayed in Jenny and Bubba than in the subject of the movie, Gump. Gump's character aspires to a Redeemer/Holy Fool, but because fragmentation, pain and death never really reside with him he offers a salvation of kitsch. The suggestion that Gump's life is the story of “Job ran backwards” rings true.¹⁴⁵ Job suffered the agony of fragmentation and his friends

¹⁴⁴ Paul Tillich, “Existential Aspects of Modern Art,” *Art and Architecture*, 99.

¹⁴⁵ See above, page 45.

drew near to bring comfort, Gump grows more comfortable while friends suffer fragmentation and death.

The kitsch and sentimentality of Hollywood, driven by box office dollars, has overridden the desire of the director to give a central place to the grief and pain of the human predicament as evident in the tumultuous decades of twentieth century America. He flirts with it, but with Gump as his subject, it remains muted. Tillich thought that only when the fullness of the negative human situation was expressed courageously could it be transcended. "He who can bear and express guilt shows that he already knows about 'acceptance-in-spite-of'. He who can bear and express meaninglessness shows that he experiences meaning within his desert of meaninglessness."¹⁴⁶ The solid ground of the "Yes" of grace and hope was most clearly sounded in the abyss of the "No" of uncovered meaninglessness and grief. The grief of pain and suffering is evident in *Forrest Gump*, but only as discovered by postmodern sensitivity to the other (e.g., the woman and the black man) and Tillich's theology of religious style. Because the subject is not ultimately the full victim and representative of the human predicament, the predominant status quo remains unchallenged. Furthermore, those victimized remain victimized and, as such, remain powerless to transform their culture.

The suggestion that both Jenny and Bubba are stylistically more Christlike than the subject of the movie raises further theological questions. From one perspective it may seem that to interpret Jenny and Bubba as truer representations of the Holy

¹⁴⁶ Paul Tillich, "Protestantism and Art Style," *Art and Architecture*, 124.

Fool/Redeemer and Suffering Christ motifs is to elevate them in a positive way. After all, the Christ figure is often perceived to be a white male and therefore unable to represent or help in any fashion women or black males. A reading of *Forrest Gump* that suggests the truer images of the suffering Christ are found in Jenny and Bubba might be seen as a step forward in overcoming the patriarchal foundations and racist interpretations of Christianity. Feminist theologians in particular, using this reading, might interpret Jenny positively as a Christ figure.

Feminist theologian Mary Daly is one of the most adamant in her critique of Christianity as being “irredeemably patriarchal.”¹⁴⁷ It is impossible for Daly to conceive how women can be redeemed through and within Christianity, and Western culture. Their inherent patriarchy makes clear “if God is male, then male is God.”¹⁴⁸ She believes that women as women are doomed to failure within Christianity. Christ as male has “legitimated sexual hierarchy throughout Christian history.”¹⁴⁹ This “Christolatry” is so pervasive that nothing short of its castration is required. No attempt at rereading the male person of Jesus as the Christ will work. Unless the male figure is “removed from the picture, his very existence will inevitably lead to a backward move to patriarchy.”¹⁵⁰ Daly

¹⁴⁷ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: Women's Press, 1986), as found in Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 23.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Isherwood, 23.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Isherwood, 24.

¹⁵⁰ Isherwood, 24.

seeks to separate herself from all patriarchal language and looks forward to a second coming, not of the male Christ, but of a female presence. This female presence will not only “liberate the memory of Jesus,” but will bring freedom to all, male and female. The female liberation will not raise specific female experience to damaging metaphysical levels as Christianity's male metaphysics have, but will embrace all. A reading of Jenny as a female Christ figure would therefore not be acceptable to Daly.

Beyond the specific maleness of Christ, Daly also points out the damaging affects of the myths of sin and salvation. Atonement theologies that glorify sacrifice have long proved difficult for womanist theologians. Lisa Isherwood wrote: “Women have found that their lives do not speak of suffering and sacrifice as salvific but rather as crushing of the very humanity they strive to rejoice in.”¹⁵¹ This presents a problem in interpreting someone like Jenny in a Christlike fashion. On the one hand, it presents possibilities of a female Christ figure, but on the other hand, the notion of what it means to be the Christ is only fulfilled in her suffering and death. The exaltation of suffering does not bring salvation to those who are seeking liberation from their suffering.

Some womanist theologians do find liberation in the combination of the maleness of the Christ and his suffering. Women in cultures that are categorized as oppressed by Western feminists ironically find liberation in the scandal of the male particularity of Jesus. Precisely because it was a male that was the suffering and serving figure in Jesus

¹⁵¹ Isherwood, 25.

Christ some Filipino women theologians, for example, find a legitimate place for criticism of their patriarchal cultures. “Indeed, as he was born a male he was in the best position to challenge the male definition of humanity and male privilege.”¹⁵² In Jesus Christ it is a male who suffers unjustly and suffers for the sake of others. The patriarchal power is brought down low so that the powerless can find elevation. This points again to the problem with Gump. He, the white, rich, male ultimately avoids suffering while the weak woman and the black man suffer and die. Perhaps, then, suffering can be redemptive, depending on who it is that is suffering.

Other Asian theologians such as Virginia Fabella found an important place for women in Jesus' treatment of women as presented in the gospels.¹⁵³ Others, such as Delores Williams, find in the suffering male Christ profound identity with their own suffering as well as a legitimization of sacrifice on behalf of others.¹⁵⁴ Making exploitation sacred is dangerous, however. Isherwood concluded:

¹⁵² Isherwood, 19.

¹⁵³ Virginia Fabella, “Christology from an Asian Woman's Perspective,” in Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (eds.), *We Dare to Dream* (Hong Kong: AWCCT, 1989). Both Isherwood and Rosemary Ruether are not convinced of this approach. Isherwood, because of further historical evidence that suggests Jesus' treatment of women was not unique (20); and Ruether believes that the dissolution of the particularity of Jesus has not been helpful and therefore suggests an even stronger particularity. Rosemary Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).

¹⁵⁴ Delores Williams, *Sisters of the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), Isherwood, 25.

The whole notion of the sacrifice and death of Jesus has been a tricky one for womanists, many of whom acknowledge that their foremothers found great comfort in the idea that Jesus could save them from their suffering through his own. There is a tightrope to be walked here and the debate is far from over.¹⁵⁵

Isherwood and other feminist theologians are concerned about a cycle of abuse and disempowerment that has occurred by Christian salvific theology that has made a sacred ritual out of the suffering and death of Jesus. With reference to popular movie culture, Isherwood wrote that, “death and resurrection motif may be glorious for Jesus and Rambo but it is crippling for women.”¹⁵⁶ She believed that for women and other historically abused peoples to flourish Christian theology must move beyond such understandings. In light of this feminist challenge, any traditional theological discussion of a movie like *Forrest Gump* must consider the damage caused by typical atonement ideas, even if it does try to put the woman in the place of Christ.

Many feminist theologies seek a different starting point than traditional male atonement theologies, and in this they are strongly related to post-modernity. Typical atonement theologies begin with the doctrinaire rationalization of a historical event while feminist redemptive theologies begin with the subjective experience of oppressed women seeking liberation. Patriarchal Christian theology has focused on rational doctrines, religious spirituality, and individual soul salvation. This has tended to associate the *agape* love of the New Testament with a very heady, intellectual activity. Rita Brock would

¹⁵⁵ Isherwood, 25-26.

¹⁵⁶ Isherwood, 27.

rather associate the power of Jesus with the life force *eros* rather than *agape*.

Intellectualized *agape* has encouraged sterile objectivity while an experienced *eros* encourages a wild uncontrolled power that does not descend from on high but is intrinsic to human nature. This erotic power is defined as much more than sexuality, it is “our innate desire to relate for justice and growth.”¹⁵⁷ It is an embodied knowing that is willing for the whole self to be in full subjective relationship, an experience found more so in female dynamics than male. This divine erotic power is “love in all its fullness, an embodied love beating in the heart of a broken-hearted healer.”¹⁵⁸ Brock wished to understand the Christ as larger than the individual hero Jesus who bravely gave his life for the individual and community. Her Christ is the erotic power that brings healing as Jesus did, but is accessible to all. This approach is more concerned about healing sickness than merely explaining it. At the core of this type of Christianity is political, community activity bringing empowerment and healing. Christianity then becomes “a religion dedicated to life in abundance.”¹⁵⁹

Mary Grey's feminist redemption theology also begins at the point of what she perceives as the female psychological makeup. Her relational theology begins with a psychological model that posits women's development of the self as basically “a sense of

¹⁵⁷ Rita Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, as cited by Isherwood, 55.

¹⁵⁸ Isherwood, 57.

¹⁵⁹ Isherwood, 56.

self in relation.”¹⁶⁰ This is in contrast to the psychological development of boys, who perceive the self “in isolation, and through competition and separation.”¹⁶¹ This helps Grey understand male theology's concern with separation and transcendence. Isherwood is concerned about Grey's gender stereotyping, but finds value in exploring redemptive imaginations that emphasize relationality and mutuality. Grey's feminine approach to the universe is finding an ally in current scientific models of the universe that highlight its interrelational nature rather than a Darwinian combative one. She contended that if the “raw stuff of the universe is interrelationality...why should we as a species act differently?”¹⁶² Grey's natural feminist approach leads her to strongly link creation and redemption. This offers new possibilities for a redemptive theology that embraces all of creation. Traditional Christian dualistic notions of reality and a call for stewardship have allowed relations with the natural world that are too weak and have led to our current ecological crisis. Grey's redemptive agenda as “deeply embedded in the earth and the bodies of those on it,” envisions a new way out of the crisis.¹⁶³ Like Rita Brock, Mary Grey still sees the life of Christ as central to the process because self-affirmation along with just and mutual interrelations were the essence of his life. These were the important

¹⁶⁰ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989), and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), as cited by Isherwood, 29.

¹⁶¹ Isherwood, 29.

¹⁶² Quoted in Isherwood, 29.

¹⁶³ Quoted in Isherwood, 30.

ontological aspects of Jesus, not his maleness. As he strove for justice and right relations as a male, females must do the same. Grey offered a powerful blend of female experience, natural science, and Christology to imagine and motivate a broad cosmological redemption brought about by a global community of justice seekers, male and female.

By unapologetically taking human experience and women's experience in particular as the starting point for redemptive theology, many feminist theologians have raised a new consciousness in Christian theology. It is not that feminists are subjective theologians and traditional male theologians are objective ones. The subjective agendas of masculinity such as intellectualism, individual separation, and heroic overcoming have affected traditional Christian doctrine. Feminist theologians more openly accept the subjective nature of their knowledge and suggest further that the point of any kind of knowing is liberation not explanation. This aligns them strongly with the current postmodern context that is challenging the objective rationalism of the Enlightenment. A movie such as *Forrest Gump*, even though it is not overtly Christian, still carries with it (consciously or unconsciously) traditional Christianity's patriarchal baggage. The male as a heroic individual brings redemption while the oppressed victimized woman continues to suffer. Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly would point out that this movie illustrates that patriarchy and male atonement theories are irredeemable, nothing short of a complete feminization of knowing and doing is required. Other feminists such as Mary

Grey would agree with the superiority of the feminist relational model for reality, but still finds evidence of that in some readings of Jesus Christ.

There can be found in some readings of Jesus Christ strong empowerment of self-affirmation that is a key element in the liberation of oppressed people, such as women. In this regard an interesting and perhaps surprising ally for feminist theology has been suggested by Daniel Migliore, namely, Karl Barth.¹⁶⁴ Migliore placed side by side a number of feminist's revisionist views on sin with Barth's and discovered that for both, "sin takes the form not only of pride and self-aggrandizement but of self-loss and banality."¹⁶⁵ As the late Shirley Guthrie put it, the one to whom Migliore's article was written to honor, sometimes sin is a way of thinking "not too much but too little of ourselves and what God created and empowers us to be and do."¹⁶⁶ Migliore observed that this insight is a long way from being a significant part of the church's theology, preaching and practice, and needs greater emphasis.

Migliore begins his comparison of feminist notions of sin and Karl Barth's with reference to three feminist theologians, Valarie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Elisabeth

¹⁶⁴ Daniel L. Migliore, "Sin and Self-loss: Karl Barth and the Feminist Critique of Traditional Doctrines of Sin" *Many Voices One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Walter Brueggemann & George W. Stroup (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 139-154.

¹⁶⁵ Daniel Migliore, 139.

¹⁶⁶ Migliore, 139. (From Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 219.

Moltmann-Wendell.¹⁶⁷ The three main descriptions of sin attributed to these theologians is, respectively, sin as self-negation, sin as flight from freedom, and sin as clinging to the past.

Saiving was looking for a redefinition of sin that would take into account all of human experience, both male and female. Sin and its counter-move, love, having been defined by male experience, were described as self assertive will to power and self giving care for others. This formula ignored much of woman's experience. Saiving drew heavily from biological psychology in her understanding of male and female dynamics. Male identity is formed by separation from their mothers. Men do this by performing aggressively to prove themselves. Because of this struggle to perform, passivity is perceived as demeaning and therefore to be avoided. Salvation from this sin of pride is consequently a willing passivity performed through sacrificial love. Saiving suggested that for women passivity was natural. This is demonstrated by women's natural physical experiences of menstruation and menopause. She also pointed out that female experiences, such as "impregnation, pregnancy, childbirth [and] lactation, have a certain passivity about them: they are things which *happen* to a woman more than things she

¹⁶⁷ Primary works cited are: Valarie Saiving, "The Human Situation," *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 25-42. Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1980). Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey: Perspectives on Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), and, *The Women around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

does.”¹⁶⁸ In light of these natural aspects, descriptions of sinful pride and sacrificial love are off target for women. Will to power is not a major sin for women and so a call to limitless sacrificial love is not redemptive. The exhortation that women as well as men are “always expected to lose themselves by limitless surrender of their own concerns to serve the needs of others” is unnecessary for those not predisposed to self centred acts of power.¹⁶⁹

According to Saiving, the predominant sin for women therefore comes from a lack of organizing centre and focus. This is characterized by triviality, distractibility and diffuseness. In short, it is an undeveloped or negated self. Migliore wrote, “for Saiving the more likely temptations for women are servility and self loss rather than pride and self assertion.”¹⁷⁰ Saiving observed the implications for this understanding in a changing environment:

If it is true that our society is moving from a masculine to a feminine orientation, then theology ought to reconsider its estimate of the human condition and redefine its categories of sin and redemption. For a feminine society will have its own special potentialities for good and evil, to which theology based solely on masculine experience may well be irrelevant.¹⁷¹

Those words were written in 1960 before the beginnings of the feminist theology movement. They were rediscovered in the 1970s and re-printed in 1979 in Carol Christ’s

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Migliore, 140.

¹⁶⁹ Migliore, 140.

¹⁷⁰ Migliore, 141.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Migliore, 141.

and Judith Plaskow's edited collection *Womanspirit Rising*. It is interesting to consider them in conversation with *Forrest Gump* which covers the same time in history. The popular 1994 movie and its gender portrayals indicate a reversal of the feminine orientation Saiving anticipated. Of the two main characters, Gump and Jenny, Jenny is the most assertive. Gump is blown along by the winds of fortune around him while Jenny aggressively sought counter visions for her culture. It is the male Gump, however, who is rewarded for his humility and the female Jenny who is punished for her aggressiveness, reasserting the typical male orientation of sin and salvation. Many theological interpretations of the movie were positively attracted to the movie because of its playing out of the typical male orientation of the redemptive success of humility, as portrayed in Gump. Only through further analysis with the help of postmodern feminists and feminist theologians can it be exposed as a harmful movie that persists in empowering the powerful and continuing to humiliate the humble, despite its attempts to do the opposite.

Judith Plaskow both agreed and disagreed with Saiving's analysis of feminist theology. She disagreed with Saiving's biological grounds for understanding gender differences. Plaskow would find much more significance in women's cultural and social experiences in their development than in their supposed biological essence. She agreed with Saiving, however, that traditional theological themes such as sin and grace do have something important to say to women. They have been impoverished, though, because they have not taken into account the different experiences between men and women. With typical postmodern sensitivity Plaskow is self-aware that she is only speaking as a

“modern, white, western, middle-class woman,” and not for all women.¹⁷² With this in mind she responds to two influential modern, white, Western, middle class male theologians and their explanation of sin and grace, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.

Niebuhr's theology was typically traditional in that the primary form of sin for him was pride and the fruit of grace was sacrificial love. According to Niebuhr, humankind finds itself in an anxious tension between finitude and transcendence. In its freedom humankind moves in one direction or the other. Either it abdicates its responsibilities and lives in finite sensuality, or, and more significantly, it arrogantly pursues infinite heights beyond its real position – that is, like Eve, humankind wishes to be like God. So humankind is lost either through absorption or pride. Niebuhr identifies pride as the biggest temptation and so he most often understands salvation in the direction of lowering humankind's transcendent aspirations. Paul Tillich explained sin as estrangement from essential unity with God, or the Ground of Being. Sin, for him, is expressed in three different ways: unbelief – which is the turning away from the ontological God; hubris – which is the elevation of the alienated human to the centre; and concupiscence – which is the drive to reunite the self with the whole, or the absorption of the whole into the self.

Plaskow acknowledged that Tillich was aware of the ambiguities of all human actions and that even self-sacrifice can have destructive and demonic elements.¹⁷³ But

¹⁷² □ Migliore, 142.

Saiving's problem with Tillich remained, especially in consideration of his famous sermon, "You Are Accepted."¹⁷⁴ Tillich suggested that the human response to grace was to not seek for anything, do anything or intend anything but simply accept the fact that "you are accepted." Plaskow responded to this sermon by suggesting that Tillich's "language actually seems to reinforce sins of weakness in that it implies that the failure to act, the failure to take responsibility is not only acceptable but praiseworthy."¹⁷⁵ Both Tillich's and Niebuhr's prescription of humble acceptance in response to prideful hubris fails to take into account women's experience. The affliction most women must deal with, according to Plaskow, is a flight from freedom – the sin of weakness, not of hubris. Understandings of sin and grace must emphasize the elevation of women in particular. Human freedom, agency, self-affirmation, and creativity must be given a significant place. As Migliore asked, "must humanity be abased that God might be exalted?"¹⁷⁶ Niebuhr's view on sensuality also differs from those of Saiving and Brock. Both of these women discovered in the sensual aspect of female experience elements that are life-giving and worthy of being embraced; Niebuhr characterized a focus on sensuality as an

¹⁷³ □ Niebuhr also was realistically aware of the sinful taint on all of human activity, even the most righteous. Cf. *The Nature and Destiny of Man Volume 1: Human Nature* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1941), 200.

¹⁷⁴ □ Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 153-63.

¹⁷⁵ □ Quoted in Migliore, 143.

¹⁷⁶ □ Migliore, 143.

abdication from humanity's true self where the true intellectual self would be absorbed by the sensual.

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell also had difficulty with the way defining sin as pride can lead to passivity, dependence, and loss of self. She asked, "wanting to be like God: what does that mean for those who scarcely dare to be themselves?"¹⁷⁷ For the consideration of a life of faith Moltmann-Wendell also wanted to begin with women's experience, but not women in general, rather women's experience of the gospel. She focused on women who find in the gospel a call to visibility, not humility. The positive significance of the traditional doctrine of justification is that it embraces both men and women. This unconditional grace is an empowerment to become truly human: "Anyone who lives by the power of the God who loves unconditionally is accepted in all his or her existence, from top to toe, inside and out, negative and positive. Anyone who lives in this sphere to God's life must today be able to say: 'I am good. I am whole. I am beautiful.'"¹⁷⁸ Moltmann-Wendell found the women around Jesus powerfully liberated. The grace of God in their lives created new persons in community, affirmed the goodness of the body, and gave "to women as well as men an active part in the liberating and renewing work of God."¹⁷⁹ In her interpretation of the resurrection narratives the women were not tempted by pride leading to betrayal and abandonment of the humbled Christ as were the men,

¹⁷⁷ □ Quoted in Migliore, 144.

¹⁷⁸ □ Quoted in Migliore, 144.

¹⁷⁹ □ Quoted in Migliore, 144.

rather, their temptation was their reluctance to move on to a different relationship with Jesus. Since grace brought liberation for women their sin was to hang on to the past, seeking the comfort of permanence. “Where you seek permanence,” she wrote, “there is only death. Where you are changed, there is life.”¹⁸⁰ And so, “the 'sin' of women is not pride, but persistence.”¹⁸¹ The pain of parting cannot be avoided, women must move beyond their desire for permanence and embrace with a child like faith the adventure of God's ever-new agenda of living in a new community of friendship and partnership.¹⁸²

Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell suggested that understandings of sin must take into account sin as self loss, not just self elevation. If they don't, they are not relevant to women. Furthermore, redemption must be considered with an end to empowerment, not debasement. Daniel Migliore has suggested that in this regard feminist theologians could find a good place for conversation with the theology of Karl Barth.

¹⁸⁰ □ Quoted in Migliore, 144/45.

¹⁸¹ □ Quoted in Migliore, 145.

¹⁸² □ Moltmann-Wendell's dynamic call to women is illustrated well in the recent Woody Allen movie, *Anything Else* (2003). Jerry Falk is an aspiring young male writer in New York who is befriended by a quirky, philosophical older writer played by Woody Allen named Dobel. Jerry's primary problem is that he cannot move on from relationships and situations no matter how damaging they are for him. With the insistent help of his older mentor he is finally able to break free of relationships with a hurtful girlfriend, an incompetent manager and a useless psycho-therapist. Without anything else left, even the promised companionship of Dobel, Jerry is able to move on to Hollywood with a promising writing job and new hope.

Migliore recognized that at initial glance the two approaches to theology seem incompatible. In his interpretation of the Adam and Eve story, for example, Barth presented their relationship as archetypal for free human relationships, but he also placed women as a 'B' to men's 'A'. And, even more fundamentally, Barth, as is typical of his entire theological approach, demanded that sin must be understood as it is revealed through Jesus Christ rather than trying to understand it by looking at personal experience. Barth's contention that humans only know sin "as it is exposed, attacked, and overcome by God's gracious and costly activity in Jesus Christ" means that only by looking to Jesus Christ rather than human experience can humanity truly understand human sin.¹⁸³ Migliore found a bridge to feminist theology in this regard, however. By insisting on the particular and concrete ground of the historical Jesus Christ being a mirror in which humanity see itself, Barth avoided generalities and abstract speculation which correlates to feminist theologians' insistence that the distinctive and particular experience of women be taken seriously.

A stronger relationship is to be found in Barth's broader definition of sin. From Barth's christocentric foundation he believed that the essence of sin can only be grasped when it seen as counter-movement against the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Barth understood grace not as God's move to overcome humanity's sin but sin as humanity's move to avoid God's grace. Barth believed in original grace, not original sin. So then, sin is not to be equated with rebellion against bourgeois morality or violation of

¹⁸³

□ Quoted in Migliore, 146.

divine law, but rather, sin is refusal to live in right relationship to God and others as made known in the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

All of Barth's understandings of sin were set forth as counter-movements to God's three-fold work of reconciliation; namely, the self-humbling of God in Jesus Christ, God's exaltation of humanity to partnership with Him, and the true and radiant witness of Jesus Christ. The sinful counter-moves of humanity to each of these activities of God are pride, sloth, and falsehood. The first and last of these have similarities to the traditional male redemption theologies, but the middle one, sloth, is where Migliore found resonance with feminist theologians. Sloth for Barth is disobedient inaction. It is a failure to live in the freedom to which humanity has been created and for which Christ freed it. In Jesus Christ humanity has been exalted, therefore human passivity is not only a failure to act but an escape from freedom. This is the opposite to the sin of pride that is the Promethean titanic form of sin. This is the unheroic form of sin, the opposite of aggressiveness and will to power. It is "triviality, apathy, voluntary indifference and immobility – not merely heroic perversion...it is ordinary, trivial and mediocre."¹⁸⁴

Migliore recognized that this approach could result in blaming victims for their victimization and so should be carefully nuanced and concretized. Nevertheless this understanding is close to the point made by many feminist theologians. He wrote, "the sinner is not only one who seeks to become God, but also one who remains passive and

¹⁸⁴ □ Migliore, 148.

fails to participate in the freedom of partnership with God given in Jesus Christ.”¹⁸⁵

Migliore believed that this was a remarkably inclusive description of sin that included not only self-assertion but also self-negation and falsehood, which compensated for the one-sidedness of many standard Protestant doctrines of sin. Even though many feminist theologians would reject Barth's christocentric method, Migliore believed that even Barth's critics would concede that his treatment of sin was more systematically balanced than Niebuhr's or Tillich's. Grace is understood as not only the impetus for justification but also for sanctification and vocation. Barth's method was weak in taking into account contextual factors such as gender, race, and class, but it did broaden the description of sin to include “loss of real agency, selfhood in relationships, and decline into banality that he calls sloth.”¹⁸⁶ This is a similar challenge feminist theologians have made towards traditional views of sin. Barth still offered a challenge to feminist theologians as well, that freedom not be ultimately grounded in ourselves but in the liberating freedom of God.

Human experience as the starting point for theology was the life long theological nemesis of Karl Barth. It was his contention that the liberal project of nineteenth century Germany had led to the aggressive and destructive nationalist agenda of the twentieth century Germany. In reaction to this Barth built his theology on the totally other God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This starting point might seem to contrast profoundly with

¹⁸⁵ □ Migliore, 149.

¹⁸⁶ □ Migliore, 152.

feminist and womanist theologies and postmodernism that embrace unapologetically human experience. There are points of contact, however. By separating God and humanity so profoundly Barth allowed a unique freedom for God to be fully God and an equally unique freedom for humanity to be fully human. This freedom, properly embraced, allows humanity to use its vitality to live fully in the world, being open to all that is available in human experience, male and female. By insisting on the unique revelation of God being found in Jesus Christ and therefore the centrality of a trinitarian and communitarian understanding of the nature of God, Barth insisted on relationality being exposed as the core of reality. Along with his delighting in human vitality and freedom, this relational understanding of what is true resonates profoundly with feminist and womanist theologians.

Paul Tillich's understanding of religious style provides another interpretive approach to *Forrest Gump*. He believed that the fragmentation and grief of the human situation should be courageously expressed in both the content and style of an art form. *Forrest Gump* deals with a time of grieving in United States history, but its style and content miss the mark of an uncovered expression of it. The male subject, Gump, who represents the status quo baby boomer male, remains unscathed by the human situation. Those needing liberation from the consequences of their society's fragmentation, namely women and Afro-Americans, are ironically presented in both content and style fully exposing the human situation. This observation led to the general discussion about the liberative effectiveness of the Christian theology of a suffering male redeemer. Feminist

theologians prefer to begin with women's experience as the ground of their liberation. In this they resonate with postmodernity's embrace of subjectivity. Feminist theologians seek an encouraging and empowering understanding of redemption rather than typical male models of redemption that emphasize submission, humility, and suffering. This dynamic is not foreign to some Christ centred understandings of redemption as ironically illustrated by Karl Barth's understanding of sin as sloth. *Forrest Gump*, itself, however, rewards the humility of Gump and punishes the aggression of Jenny. This illustrates the concerns feminist theologians have that point out some of the oppressive aspects of a Christ centred redemption. The movie does not stray from the traditional understanding of this dynamic and supports a re-emerging male status quo in the late twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

The feather in this thesis has floated back to a new beginning. This interpretation of *Forrest Gump* has combined traditional Christian theological and mythological understandings with postmodern ideological criticism and feminist theologies. The feather began with Niebuhr's call for those Christian to transform culture. It then floated through Tillich's unique mix of Christian theology and art criticism. The feather then floated through specific interpretations of *Forrest Gump*, theological, mythological and postmodern ideological. Returning back through Tillich's understanding of aesthetics, the feather was further buoyed along by the liberative winds of feminist theologies. The feather then landed at the feet of another traditional Christian theologian, Karl Barth, and his offer of a broader definition of sin and redemption that includes an empowerment of those oppressed.

Along the flight of this feather *Forrest Gump* was evaluated as to its effectiveness in portraying the human situation and its asking of the liberative question of how humans should live. The movie likes to use aspects of a redeeming Christ and Holy Fool, but always falls short. Gump is too light, a featherweight, he is a redeemer-lite, or, to use Tillich's word, kitsch. Gump himself is the one redeemed, not those around him who are in greater need of it. The only truly liberated person around him was an army Lieutenant. In Gump the status quo is re-established and the oppressed remain othered, all done through the clever guise of the new offering of a redemptive fool.

Further flights of consideration in an interpretation of this movie include a suggested re-write that would accomplish a fuller exposure of the human situation and bring

liberation to the othered of North American culture. As a starting point a re-write would not bring salvation so quickly to the subject of the movie. It would also not kill off the woman and black man. If any one must die it should be Gump. Rather, I would like to see something along the line of Gump and Bubba saying a farewell to arms in Vietnam because of the horrors they saw and were forced to participate in. While fleeing, unarmed, wounded and AWOL in Vietnam they would stumble upon a small village by the sea. There they would be imprisoned and nurtured by local Vietnamese villagers. Eventually a relationship would develop and they would learn to fish for shrimp and provide for the village and themselves. Jenny, meanwhile, would find out that they had gone AWOL and that they were still alive. She would go on a trip to find them and wonder along the way about what she would find when she found them (cf. Captain Willard's trip to Cambodia in *Apocalypse Now*). I can't decide whether to leave them there living a tough but satisfying life communally, inter-racially and simply on the coast of Vietnam or have them return to the United States to live as a vanguard of a new way of living. Or, perhaps, come back and be so ostracized that they either give in to the status quo or end up living on the streets.

Another interpretive aspect to pursue is a theology of the handicapped. How would handicapped people respond to Gump? Would they find him liberating or not? A comparison of this movie and one like *Rain Man*, from a liberative perspective for the handicapped, would be worth consideration. Also a consideration of the experience of watching a movie in the dark with a large audience could be deconstructed. Despite its

apparent social setting a viewer is really alone watching a movie in a theatre. This has an impact on the social application of what one is watching. Is a further experience of actually discussing a movie in a small group necessary to broaden a movie to a genuine social experience? How does it compare to watching a play or reading a book, or poetry, or listening to music? The experiential setting of various art forms in contrast and comparison with movie viewing would be a significant consideration worth pursuing.

Using a popular Hollywood film as a text for theology in a postmodern context has proven to be very fruitful. Without citing chapter and verse from an *a priori* authoritative sacred text this postmodern interpretation of a single movie has opened up many important considerations for Christian theology and praxis in twenty-first century North America. This reading has suggested that *Forrest Gump* is a postmodern movie that is ultimately shaped by the capitalistic, racial and patriarchal strongholds of its day. The movie plays at deconstructing the status quo by using the traditional Christian and mythological character of a Redeemer/Holy Fool, but ultimately falls short. This postmodern, feminist, theological deconstruction of the movie has exposed its impotence either to criticize the status quo effectively, or to empower those othered by it. Watching movies is an important formational experience of storified meaning in the contemporary world; postmodern God talk that engages these movies is therefore an important exercise in the consideration of their transformational possibilities. As the appreciation of the role of story rather than reason continues to rise in significance in our culture's search for

meaning, the need for a theological dialogue will also arise between Christian stories, which tell of the liberation of all things, and all other stories.

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