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The portrayal of mental retardation in cinema. Forrest Gump: Rule or Exception?

Taxiarchis Vouglanis *

Department of Tourism Management, University of West Attica Greece.

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Abstract

This article approaches mental retardation, social representations and Hollywood cinema, in the movie Forrest Gump. The main goal is the analysis of individual elements that reveal either a new, more human-centered management of the subject or remnants of conventions and prejudices that remain in relation to mental retardation in works of artistic texture that have the potential to dialogue with almost the entire Western world. In the movie there is a clear tendency to escape from the medical view of mental retardation and a greater interest in its social ramifications. The protagonist is a real 'hero' of the society in which he lives and, despite any adversity, always emerges victorious.

Keywords: Mental Retardation; Movie; Stereotypes; Social Representation

1. Introduction

The movie Forrest Gump was a huge box-office success, managing to be nominated for an Oscar in many categories and subsequently winning six of them and indeed in 'dominant' categories, such as Best Movie, Best Director and Best Actor. The movie, which was released in cinemas in 1994, was an adaptation of the book of the same name by Winston Groom. The movie tells the personal story of an ordinary man and his epic journey through life, during which he met important figures in history, influenced pop culture and experienced first-hand remarkable historical events, the significance of which he never understood as he was a person of low mental capacity.

2. Plot of the movie

The opening scene of the movie finds the hero sitting on a bench at a bus stop, where he strikes up a conversation with each of those waiting on the bench with him. Buses pass with the result that the interlocutors change each time. Forrest, the hero of the movie, begins his story since he was a small boy, mentioning the philosophical saying he heard from his mother's mouth: 'Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get', thus introducing the element of surprise that also dominated his own life. Despite the simplified expression of what he wanted to say, we cannot overlook the fact that his narrative begins with a 'slogan', something that we usually see imposed by pop culture and advertising [1].

Forrest, during his childhood, faced a problem with his spine as a result of which irons were placed on his legs and he became the object of ridicule by the rest of his peers. 'If God wanted us all the same then we would all be wearing irons on our feet', his mother typically says in order to encourage him and continues by saying 'Never allow anyone to say they are better'. This theological interpretation of the mother in terms of diversity, although extremely simplistic, nevertheless expresses the hallmarks of Hollywood production. Forrest himself admits that his mother was a very intelligent woman indeed, paving the way for those who would like to be considered 'intelligent people' in relation to this particular issue. Another expression of encouragement from his mother 'You are the same as everyone else - you

* Corresponding author: Taxiarchis Vouglanis

are no different' is rejected outright by the headmaster of the school where his mother is enrolling him, who says 'Your son is different'. The principal refers to the fact that Forrest's IQ ranks him at 75, when according to state law he had to rank at 80 or above in order to be accepted into a public school. 'Then we're all different' replies Forrest's mother, who in no way wanted her son to be sent to a special school. 'He may be on the slower side but he will have the same opportunities as everyone else' adds the mother, who is then forced to have sex with the school principal in order to satisfy her request. When, in fact, after the end of the contact, the director finds Forrest in the yard and says to him 'Your mommy loves you very much, little one', we realize that the creator of the movie directs our attention to the sacrifices that those who surround a child have to make with mental retardation in order to ensure him the same opportunities as the rest. We see, of course, on the one hand the one-dimensional side of a state educational regulation and the corruption of those who carry it out, but on the other hand we come face to face with the difficulties of life that a mother encounters when her son's mental retardation can make her an object of exploitation.

After Forrest is admitted to the district school, following the unorthodox arrangement, his mother, in order to meet the expenses, operates their house as a guest house. One of the customers also happens to be an aspiring and unknown, then, young singer, who spends time with Forrest who in turn, with the strange way he moves his feet, inspires the singer who would later become a legend and would go by the name Elvis Presley. Remembering Forrest the moment he saw him on TV in dance figures and personal scandals he monologues 'It must be very hard to be king'. It is curious that until that moment he does not dare to articulate a corresponding opinion about himself. The irons he carried in his childhood on his legs, the invalidation and rejection by his peers and the social condemnation of a certain model of life were not enough to lead him to a corresponding conclusion about his own life. But the life of a 'king' brings its own compassion.

On the first day of school, when he gets on the school bus, we encounter a classic image of exclusion. Looking to find a friendly person to sit next to, the phrase he keeps hearing is 'This seat is taken'. When, suddenly, the liberating phrase 'You can sit here if you want' is heard from a blonde girl on the bus, Forrest completes his narration by saying that he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life and that Jenny looked like an angel. From that day they went everywhere together and became, as the hero typically says, 'carrots and peas'. The beautiful and wonderful Jenny had a very bad and difficult life in her family. Her mother had died and it is implied in the play that her father abused her and her sisters. On the contrary, Forrest, whose condition creates complications in the smooth flow of life at home, had a wonderful mother and a very beautiful life within his home. One day, as the two children return home, they are bullied by some older children at school. Jenny shouts to Forrest the phrase that became a slogan in the movie but also outside of it - 'Run, Forrest, run!'. The scene shows the hero's weak legs breaking free from the irons from the strain of overexertion, in slow motion and in epic style. Forrest surpasses himself and justifies his character in the movie. He runs away from his classmates on bicycles in his childhood and escapes from his classmates with the pickup truck in his teenage years.

'I managed to go to university as well' continues Forrest. When the coach saw how fast he ran he put him on the baseball team. In the match, they call him insulting names but, at the same time, they have pinned all their hopes on him. 'He may be stupid but he's quick' says the coach celebrating yet another win at the hands of Forest. His huge success, of course, is accompanied by scenes of confusion, when he does not know exactly where to stop running and always reaches the locker room until they raise a huge poster to realize the end of his route. Our hero is propitiated in the center of an entire stadium and cheered because of the special ability he possesses, which at that given moment serves the interests of the social group he belongs to. Otherwise, perhaps his stay at the university would have had a completely different character.

On the day that the first colored students have appeared at the university and a lot of people and the channels have gathered, Forrest randomly asks a fellow student what the others mean when they talk about 'sluts'. 'The niggers, you idiot, want to come to the university with us'. 'With us?', wonders Forrest, surprised and, at first glance, fully compliant with the social codes of the university community. Once again in this incident, the hero manages, unknowingly, to steal the show when he runs to deliver to a black student the notebook he had dropped a while ago. He is, then, on the news of all channels with an American society that anoints him as a symbol of anti-racism simply because of his upbringing he was kind.

During his college years, Forrest continues to see Jenny infrequently as her own love life evolves. One night when Jenny has a fight with her boyfriend, while Forrest is outside her place to see her, she rushes to hit him. Jenny's boyfriend leaves her. 'That's what he knows, that's what he does' Jenny shouts after him about Forrest and even though the latter actually worked against her she treats him. As with his mother, Forrest has unknowingly put the girl he loves in a difficult position and created a problem for her. After they go up to Jenny's room, she opens up to him about personal dreams.

The hero manages to join the American national baseball team without, of course, realizing what exactly this means. Through the group he meets President Kennedy himself but he comments on the good free food provided at the reception. The president, in fact, addresses all the players individually, who, in turn, address him with words of honor while Forrest, to the president's question 'How do you feel?', responds by saying 'I have to pee'. He himself, therefore, fails to realize the honor that is being done to him despite the generous opportunities that have been given to him. History passes him by and slips out of his hands. "It must be hard to have brothers," he adds in his account of the assassination of the president he had met.

When it came time for him to graduate, he says 'I only played football for five years and got a degree'. Here, we rightly wonder if this is an allusion to the education system in America, or if it is an allusion to the great extent to which it has been facilitated. On the day of graduation, a soldier approaches him, gives him a pamphlet and asks him 'Have you thought about your future at all?' 'Should I think?' Forrest wonders again and leaves himself in the hands of a system that has guaranteed him every next step.

Boarding the army bus, the scene that unfolded on the school bus is almost repeated. Finally, a young man of color, also a target of racism and prejudice, gives him a seat at his side. "They call me Baba, as if I'm rude," he introduces himself. Baba is uneducated, has strange speech and does not have particularly high expectations for his life. He is, however, aware of his marginalization, something that Forrest has not stood for so far. In general, Forrest always finds a seat on the bus next to people who are also, for some reason, marginalized. After the introductions to the person who will be his army mate, the days of training follow in which Forrest once again knows great glory. His honest - almost naive in normal social situations - answers make him ideal for the military environment. We know, of course, that traditionally the military environment requires people who blindly and disciplinedly follow orders without investing in their actions personal will, critical thinking and initiative. Forrest, therefore, is a military phenomenon. 'You must' have an IQ of at least 160' shouts the sergeant in surprise and of course he is ridiculed both for his criterion and for the irony that, in fact, the opinion carries when we know Forrest's condition. Of course, the sergeant is of color and so, perhaps, the script line reserves for him a joint treatment with Bubba.

Before Forrest leaves with the army for Vietnam, he goes to greet Jenny, whom he finds singing in a decadent center naked with a guitar in her hands and men below the stage shouting various comments. Once again, Forrest rushes to her rescue. 'You can't always save me' she says and when Forrest confesses that he loves her she replies by saying 'You don't know what love is'. They end their conversation with her advising him 'Don't try to be brave. Just run away'.

When his platoon is ambushed and a wild manhunt and shelling ensues, the unscathed Forrest runs through the thick vegetation to find the wounded and carry them to the beach. Platoon leader Dan orders him to let him die wounded right where he found him and at least be a hero. Forrest disobeys him, ignores the order perhaps because he obeys the instinct of survival and fails, according to the creator of the movie at least, to understand the human laws of morality, values and pride. And while the shelling becomes more and more intense, defying the warnings of his wounded comrades, emotionally driven, he runs back into the shelling field to find his comrade Baba. In the end, Forrest earns a medal and Dan is discharged. During his stay in the hospital, of course, Forrest acquires a new obsession, table tennis. 'Gab, how can you watch this stupid thing?' Dan had addressed him and then Forrest becomes the champion of the game. For the umpteenth time in the movie he does something really big.

Then, completely by accident, he attends a large peace rally in a huge park. The organizers put him on stage to speak. For technical reasons, what he says cannot be heard but the crowd adores him. He is called from afar by Jenny, who has infiltrated the hippie circles of the time, and we watch one of those scenes that unfold in Hollywood's great romances. They both cross a lake, embrace and the crowd applauds. His fame escalates, then even more, and after he joins the American national team playing table tennis, he gives interviews on central channels, and happens to sit next to John Lennon, who addresses him with the phrase that he is now 'more famous than Bugs Bunny'. So we see the war hero and the famous pacifist being interviewed at the same time. Then, he continues his narrative bored recounting his visit 'again', as he characteristically says, to the White House, this time meeting Nixon while, at the same time immersed in the tragic irony, he calls at one point to hand over some people who are 'using from across the street' apartment lens and they don't let him sleep', while in essence he is talking about the 'Watergate' scandal which led for reasons inexplicable to Forrest to the resignation of the president he had known. His stay in the army has now come to an end and he leaves full of honors. Ping-pong advertisers are eager to get him to appear in their commercials, and with the money he earns, he plans to fulfill the dream he and Baba had agreed upon, to get a fishing boat and trade in shrimp. He collaborates with ex-lieutenant Dan, who makes it clear to him from the first moment 'I'm a man who keeps his word but don't think I'll call you sir'. 'No sir' replies Forrest and immediately Dan starts giving orders like when they were at war. The power-to-power relationship between the two men, although the data has been completely mutated, remains much the same with Forrest subservient to Dan. Despite the initial failures in the venture, after a typhoon finds the two

heroes at sea, they catch tons of shrimp. Forrest makes a fortune on behalf of the Bubba-Gum company and manages to buy 12 ships and a factory. It even makes the cover of Fortune magazine. The people next to him on the bench, of course, look at him with great disbelief and believe his story only when they see the magazine Forrest has with him. Of course, the latter does not take the magazine out of his bag to convince them but to show them Dan's picture.

After his mother's death, since he had been so important in his country, they secured him a permanent job, mowing the lawn. Since, however, he did not need money, he did it without pay. Suddenly, one day Jenny reappears in his life. 'I was very happy' he says as the two of them moved in together at home 'maybe because he had nowhere else to go' as he characteristically says causing surprise for the sign of emotional maturity he showed, which he later rejects. And just like that, a period of their life together began with Forrest proposing to her on the 4th of July after the fireworks celebration. She refuses. "I may not be smart, but I know what love is," he says characteristically. The next morning, Jenny leaves the house while Forrest is still sleeping. When he wakes up, while alone, he starts running for no particular reason. He started running from one end of the country to the other. He even inspired people to follow him. Journalists were waiting for him everywhere, asking him why he was doing all this. "They couldn't believe that I did it for no particular reason," he says, and comes into direct conflict with the idea that his loyal fans and followers had. After three years, as suddenly as he started running in the same way he stopped and returned to his home.

It is precisely at this point that Forrest's narration stops, as well as his flashbacks to the past. After a letter from Jenny he is on his way to find her. He visits her at her home where she lives with her son. She asks him to forgive her and confides in him that her son is also his. Forrest is moved and the first thing he asks is 'Is he smart?' Jenny has a terminal illness and Forrest suggests they all move into his parent's house together. "Will you marry me, Forrest?" Jenny asks. 'Ok' replies Forrest without making any hint of what had gone before. They all move in together and get married in front of all their friends. After some time Jenny dies. On the grave that Forrest has set up under their tree, he addresses her in a scene of sudden empathy 'I don't know if we all have a destiny or if we are floating randomly in the wind. Perhaps both are true - they may be happening at the same time'. After Forrest's characteristic abstinence from such thoughts and concerns, after dialogues in which he presents himself with an extraordinary lack of understanding of subtext or metaphorical meaning, he suddenly speaks in a philosophical mood about the flow of life. The movie closes with Forrest waiting with his son for the school bus. As he bids him farewell, he goes to advise him of what his mother had told him when he himself had first entered that particular bus. He hesitates and simply tells his son that he loves him and that he will wait for him there, perhaps because he realizes that this time a new Forrest Gump would board the bus that started with completely different facts from the one whose course he followed in the movie.

3. Medical model vs social model of mental retardation

In the movie Forrest Gump some overt references are made to the medical view of mental retardation. The school principal who cannot admit Forrest to school because of his IQ, the army instructor who speculates on Forrest's high intelligence are some of these examples. The context of the movie, in fact, promotes the concept of high achiever as opposed to the exclusion from such privileges tearing down the stereotypes of the society depicted in terms of success. Forrest's mental retardation is presented at the beginning of the movie, at least, as capable enough to disqualify him from various structures, drive him bankrupt, or even burden his offspring. Of course, always within the context of the specific creation, all these limitations proposed from the beginning with the medical model are abolished as a result through the course of Forrest's life. In fact, at the opposite end of all these restrictions stands the figure of the hero's mother, who openly promotes the social dimension of her son's 'problem' more than any other hero in the movie. 'A stupid person is the one who does stupid things' ends up repeating the hero, who, of course, appears to be aware of his slight mental retardation but acts in accordance with his mother's teachings, claiming even without his knowledge many times all perspectives- even the most ambitious ones - that social life has to offer him [2].

The movie several times contrasts medicine with the social view of mental retardation with the aim of giving precedence to the latter. This is achieved through the sequence of events [3]. Whenever an element of the medical model emerges, the plot development subverts its power. At the same time, the constitution and structure of society is such that it allows for the aforementioned subversion. Beyond the picturesqueness one might attribute to this particular representation, Forrest's achievements could illustrate the societal approach to mental retardation.

4. Social representations

With regard to the representation of the hero in the context of his environment, it is of particular interest to examine whether his uncontrollably triumphant profile that comes to level the negativism, which perhaps the stigma of mental retardation entails, is consistent at every level [4]. Forrest is literally the 'star' of the movie, however, at the same time

this happens without his knowledge, without any personal effort, without realizing the magnitude of his success. This, of course, makes him very 'lucky', 'favored', almost 'blessed' by the circumstances, which, watching the movie, we realize exceeds the limits of realistic depiction of the life conditions of a person with mental retardation. Furthermore, Forrest is the focus of his mother's life, who is forced to steel herself morally and emotionally in order to be an effective mother to her son. Forrest's condition determines her entire direction in life and outlook. It is rejected by the system and accepted by the people. Of course, the first people who accept him in any situation are those who, for various reasons, are also stigmatized. None of them make it, in the end, except Forrest of course. Also, Forrest represents the one who, while he has no perception of the most abstract social values, manages to establish himself on this level as well and to be duly honored. As we see in the movie, following either instinct or caprice, he achieves much more than his typical fellows who yearn and consciously strive for similar success because some higher 'hand' rewards him with more than one could hope for [5]. Forrest, despite his stigma, is nevertheless the grateful son who makes his mother proud, the loyal friend-companion, the efficient athlete, the war hero, the ping-pong champion, the millionaire, and finally the loving father. In any case, he expressed no reaction except to what had to do with survival instinct. One could say that it was precisely this lack of reaction and this unceasing continuous effort - or rather obedience to the command-prompt for effort - that was scripturally rewarded. The hero exceeds all expectations and becomes a conduit with which an important part of American history is inextricably linked. Although it would not be audacious to say that in the context of the movie, America has found its next symbol, which consists of the man who, despite the facts with which he starts, traces a golden path both for himself and for his country.

The hero, in turn, acrobats between perception and non-perception of the stigma he carries in a process of questioning and justifying the system of which he is a member [6]. He is used as both a protector of the weak and an object of admiration for the stronger-capable. Let's not forget, of course, how he is accepted by the other heroes as such when, now, they have no other choice. This 'cloudy' representation, which creates mismatched messages of expectation on a realistic level, is inherent to the convention that governs the 'representational system' from which it originates. Forrest's mental retardation did not in general deprive him of anything. It is a point of hope, self-transcendence and universal acceptance and appreciation [7].

5. Dramatic vindication-purification of the hero

Forrest's life, as depicted, contains difficulties and dark spots, which in turn, however, are overcome. In any case, Forrest triumphs and the problematic data turns in his favor. This is something that happens throughout the movie - a lot of climaxes-justifications accumulate, at regular intervals, to the point where one wonders about the creation of this new symbol that does not want to leave things hanging as to its stigma and the reversal of this. Of course, the hero himself, as already mentioned, has no idea of the social recognition that his name enjoys. In particular, there are very few moments that he refers to moments that he himself considers happy and these, of course, always have to do with Jenny. This, in fact, constitutes another point of targeting of Forrest, as a character. His final ending with Jenny completes his personal dream, although he loses it very quickly with her death. He is left behind with his honors but mostly he is left behind with his son who has the same name as him. The movie ends with the clear almost 'statement' that the new Forrest Gump is brilliant. In terms of the movie, this is probably a katharsis.

The elements presented in the film explain why Forrest became an iconic character worldwide. Beyond those who watched the film, the development of technology contributed to the global visibility of the film and the acceptance of the hero [8-37]. To this day, thirty years after its first screening, there are references to the hero both on the internet and on social media, thus contributing to the acceptance of the hero in different generations. The film has also been widely used in education not only for issues such as diversity and equality but also in subjects such as history due to the relevant references it includes [38].

6. The role of ICTs in Retardation and other mental disorders training

In this section, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education and in Retardation training, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [39-40], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [41-54], and AI, STEM, Games and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [55-58]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [59-70], accelerates and improves more than educational practices and results, especially in children with general mental disorders, treating domain.

7. Conclusions

This particular cinematic representation of the mentally retarded hero conforms to all the conventions of Hollywood production. Despite the exaggeration which at first level one could guess works in favor of the hero, in reality it appeals to the emotion and to the romantic excesses that is expected from similar type of movies. Since it is also a landmark movie for this genre, it is understandable that the message of exaggeration that constitutes the hero able to rise to the screen and support his leading role, is inseparable from the creation of an entire ideology on the issue.

It is not of course a realistic portrayal but a melodramatic exaggeration. The hero is crowned a superhero. While, at the beginning of the movie, the medical view of mental retardation could have excluded him, the social model comes to vindicate him. His justification, of course, this happens in such an arbitrary way that it fails to give us the depth to which the stigma can reach and the alienation it brings about. Any well-intentioned viewer will smile at the turning of almost all situations in favor of the movie's character. Indeed, such a great favor of fate can be considered comical. Let's not forget that everything happened without the conscious participation of the hero. The logic that 'anything can happen to anyone, even to people like Forrest' is one of the main messages supported by this specific movie and a permanent tactic of Hollywood that tries to soften the ugly things of people's lives that for some reasons deviate from the 'usual', the 'common'. In this respect, it is a completely predictable representation.

On the other hand, the same movie that pays tribute to its protagonist, also includes other characters who aspired to transcend themselves and achieve something important for themselves - characters who, in fact, possess, for the conventional and formal data, far more and stronger qualifications than Forrest's. They, therefore, are leveled alongside and parallel to the hero. Sometimes, in fact, although by chance because no kind of purpose is attributed to the hero in general, he succeeds through their own failure. The 'good guys', for example, as Forrest himself mentions in a scene of the play were exterminated when he survived to know a glorious sequel. We cannot be sure that the hero will enjoy even this glory which is apparently his own. If it weren't for the label of mental retardation, Forrest in the same actions could be labeled as an adventurer. We would then talk about a character who, while he does not show any desire, constitutes the 'grabber' of the desires of his oriented fellow human beings. However, with the application of the stigma of mental retardation, the judgment about a hero is made 'under conditions' and here we are dealing with a very strong 'condition'. The condition, here, clothes him with the 'virtue' for the present facts of ignorance and does not allow the hero to become unlikeable. However, it would be particularly interesting if the conditions that could justify the hero's triumphant development could be identified, at the same time, within the movie. The central character of the movie under study turns into a laurel-crowned symbol of an important piece of American history but without the corresponding depth one would expect. What possesses the hero and is the root of his representation is a kind of childlike virtue combined with an untouchable acceptance of events, a passivity.

Compliance with ethical standards

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