



A Semiotic Analysis of Social Criticism in Robert Zemeckis's "Forrest Gump" Movie (1994)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the semiotic analysis of social criticism in Robert Zemeckis's Forrest Gump Movie (1994) using Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic theory. According to Saussure's theory, the sign consists of two interconnected elements: the signifier and the signified. Thus, the purpose of this study is to highlight the social criticism signs present in the Forrest Gump story and to highlight how crucial it is for literary works to reflect a real society through social criticism. The Forrest Gump film was chosen as the object of research because researchers are interested in exploring social criticism messages that are represented in the movie. In this context, the researchers believed that Forrest Gump movie which tell story about a man (Forrest) who has intelligence problems and becomes the object of ridicule in the social sphere and his life provided meaningful messages through the screenplay of the movie.

INTRODUCTION

When we watch a movie, we will notice that there are many implicit and explicit messages (Van Lommel, 2006). One of the things we see in films is, of course, social criticism. Every film must serve a specific purpose. Visualizing social conditions in a film, with the director's ability to incorporate social messages (Wartenberg, 2019). When social criticism is presented or conveyed through film media, we can directly see the environment, characters, culture, and objects that exist in the representation of social criticism made (Delabastita, 1989; Bourdieu, 2018). *Forrest Gump* movie by Robert Zemeckis, the film was adopted from the novel, it really manages to bring a lot of social value in it (Lolita, 2003). This film manages to convey all the messages in a humorous style but still touches the hearts of those who watch. Further, it depicts a man who was born with limitations both physically, mentally and intelligently (Chan, 2020). This film packs the main character as a person who still wants to socialize and do many things, even though he is in an abnormal condition. In his life he got a lot of insults and belittled by some people, but thanks to his perseverance, Forrest managed to live his life very well. Forrest won many awards which made him more appreciated by those around him.

In most films, if the main character is portrayed as a weak and abnormal figure, then the film will be packed full of sadness and misery experienced by the main character. Then the film will try to carry the message that misery and sadness will be experienced by someone who is not normal, and in the end there is help from someone with compassion for them or they are still trapped in the space of sadness and adversity. Meanwhile, in *Forrest Gump* movie, the main character, Forrest, is not shown at all sad and sorry for his situation. Forrest still looks confident and persistent in doing whatever he can do, this film depicts the figure

of Forrest who can overcome the problems of his physical and mental condition well. Forrest managed to achieve great things on his own. This makes the film interesting and unique, and on that basis it is also worth discussing. For some people who have the same fate as Forrest, this film will be much more relatable and can motivate them to remain confident in moving on in life. The message that this film conveys means a lot to many people. Social value becomes a very big point in this film.

The idea of social criticism is often presented in a literary work (Bertens, 2012). This criticism is an assessment or expectation of a recurring phenomenon. Further, it is expressed by the author through a series of words that comprise a piece of writing. The author writes criticism as an expression of feelings that are opposed to the social life that takes place in their environment. The spread of these ideas demonstrates that as humans, we must be sensitive to deviation. The sensitivity that gives rise to literary criticism is expected to be a means of improving people's lives (Hoggart, 2017). In this vein, all personal affairs of characters in literary works can be used as vehicles for moral messages. Individual problems include self-esteem, ability and self-confidence, death, longing, loneliness, revenge, doubts in making decisions, and others. Human relations with other humans have also become a source of inspiration, such as friendship, betrayal, kinship, labor-employer relations, superior-subordinate relationships, and other human interactions. Furthermore, the human relationship with God is more vertical and inner. This relationship is based on the trust that every human being has. This belief will elicit feelings of love, longing, and love, as well as fear of the sin that will be obtained.

Literature and society cannot be separated any longer. People's lives, with various polemics that occur today, do not rule out the possibility of being poured into literary works in order for them to reflect society itself. Further, the process of the authors' imagination in carrying out his creative process cannot be separated from the creation of literary works (Hock & Joseph, 2019). That literary works emerge from society as a result of the author's imagination and reflection on social phenomena. Literary works, on the other hand, do not exist in a cultural vacuum.

Literary work has an object that stands on its own, bound by the world in words created by the author based on the authors' social reality and experience. Literary works are directly or indirectly influenced by the authors' surroundings. Writers, as members of society, will not be separated from the social and cultural order. All of these have an impact on the creation of literary works. Furthermore, a literary work emerges from the background and fundamental human desire to express one's existence (Bennet & Ryle, 2016). A literary work is regarded as an expression of life's reality. People who want to advance will accept literary works as a form of constructive criticism of limiting social values and as a stepping stone to a better order of life values (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017).

Literature and film serve the same purpose; films do more than just entertain their audiences. It also provides information to society and educated people persuasively. As a result, like literary works, without being forced to know otherwise spoiling. All literary works have the same goal: to provide moral value so that the message is properly communicated to the audience. The film or literary work has its own way of relating to us, one of which is through the use of social criticism things. The researcher discussed social criticism because it is very important for controlling a societal system, and researching social criticism can make us more sensitive to what is going on in society. Based on Wellek and Warren's theory, the researcher chose *Forrest Gump* as the object of study because the film contains many social criticism messages that merit further investigation and discussion.

The *Forrest Gump* film was chosen as the object of research because researchers are interested in exploring social criticism messages that are currently happening in real life. For instance, a man who has intelligence problems and becomes the object of ridicule in the social sphere and in his life. And there are



numerous critical messages worth investigating in the *Forrest Gump* film. *Forrest Gump* is a film with social criticism value. This film tells an interesting story and depicts many social aspects of life. *Forrest Gump* may be an overly sentimental film with a somewhat problematic message, but its sweetness and charm are usually sufficient to approach true depth and grace. A 1994 American comedy-drama film directed by Robert Zemeckis from a screenplay by Eric Roth based on Winston Groom's 1986 novel of the same name.

The film follows the life of *Forrest Gump*, played by Tom Hanks, who has a low IQ. His mother raised him with great love. Forrest had been bullied by his peers since childhood, who treated him as a fool. This film is worth seeing because it is full of moral values derived from the characters' social and psychological aspects. Each viewer's imagination is triggered by the figure of *Forrest Gump*. There are numerous life lessons to be learned from watching this film. *Forrest Gump* teaches his audience that, behind a person's flaws, there must be strengths that distinguish him from others. Furthermore, *Forrest Gump* teaches that everyone has their own destiny. Even after more than two decades, this film is still interesting and relatable to watch again. This is an interesting topic to discuss, so the researcher eventually decided to discuss social criticism. The researcher should go above and beyond to support this research. This type of step involves reviewing the social criticism contained in a film other than the *Forrest Gump* film, as well as previous research relevant to the problem and object of the current research (Light, 2018).

In order to develop research concepts, researchers explored some studies on the analysis of social criticism in film have helped to enrich the process in this study. For instance, in Lestari's (2017) research, she attempted to analyze the social criticism contained in the film and correlates it with the real conflicts faced by the community regarding education in this study. Further, Dhiyaurrahman (2022) analyzed and described the social criticism contained in the film *Avatar*. Ridwan tries to analyze the meaning of several conversations that touched on social conflict and pictures of how humans destroy something that should be protected and then eventually trigger social conflict in the *Avatar* movie. These previous studies significantly helped the researchers in analyzing this semiotic study. In contrast, based on Wellek and Warren's (1956) seminal theory, the researcher will discuss and examine social criticism and the description of social criticism in the *Forrest Gump* film. The researcher's primary concern will be the social criticism in the film *Forrest Gump*. *Forrest Gump* contains a variety of social criticism. The researcher will develop two research questions based on the research background, namely how is the overview of social criticism in the *Forrest Gump* movie? And what types of social criticism are contained in the *Forrest Gump* movie?

METHODS

This study is an interpretive qualitative study. Qualitative data (Stenius et al., 2017) which is in the form of words rather than numbers, has always been the main source of information for certain social sciences, particularly Anthropology, History, and Political Science. Qualitative data is a strong data source with a broad understanding that includes an explanation of how a process works (Atkinson, 2021). The semiotic method which analyzes signs, was used in this study. This study will employ the semiotics of Saussure's thinking as its semiotic method. Saussure situates the sign in the context of human communication by distinguishing between a signifier and a signified.

The existence of Saussure's semiotics is the convention-based relationship between signifier and signified, known as signification (Velmezova & Fadda, 2022). Signification semiotics is a sign system that studies the relationships between sign elements in a system using specific rules or conventions. To interpret the sign, social agreement is required. Semiotics is a science or analytical method for studying signs that is based on learning how to interpret things, with the meaning that objects not only carry information, but also

form a structured system of signs. To fulfill the objective element in scientific research, the researcher will minimize the nature of the researcher's subjectivity by interpreting the song lyrics in accordance with what has been agreed (conventionally) in general, in this case the researcher and the environment around the researcher. Researchers are interested in social criticism presented in a literary work. Every literary work must have its own value and purpose. Literary work is a community institution that uses language as a medium, whereas language is the creation of society. As a result, the majority of elements in literary works are social, namely norms that can develop in society. Social criticism is an innovation, meaning that social criticism becomes a means of communicating new ideas in addition to assessing old ideas for social change. Social criticism as a form of communication in society that aims or functions as a control over the course of a social system or social process. Based on that definition, social criticism can be defined as a criticism, input, refutation, satire, response, or even an assessment of something that is deemed deviant or violates the values that exist in people's lives.

In this study, the data will be analyzed by dividing the entire social criticism into several issues and then analyzing the verses using Saussure's semiotic theory. Saussure's theory is more concerned with how signs (in this case, words) relate to the object of study. Saussure's theoretical model places more emphasis on the sign itself. When researching the social criticism in *Forrest Gump*, the researcher creates an interpretation by dividing the entire social criticism into several verses, and then the verses are analyzed using Saussure's semiotic theory, which includes elements such as the signifier and the signified. These elements will be separated, allowing researchers to better interpret the sign in the film *Forrest Gump*. The sign and signifier between the stanzas will aid researchers in interpreting the lyrics of the song "Jealous," which are associated with social reality at the time the song was written.

According to Jackson & Mazzei (2022) and Rahman (2022), qualitative research is defined as a research that focuses on exploring the problem that was conducted in human or society that naturally happened without conducting any experiment, to make the interpretation and solve the problem." This method employs analysis, data collection, observation, and interviews to determine the meaning. The collection, analysis, and interpretation of data from interviews, participant observation, and document data in order to understand and describe meanings, relationships, and patterns are referred to as qualitative methods. Based on the explanation above, the researcher chose the qualitative description method to solve the problem because it focuses on analyzing and interpreting a document.

The writers employed a qualitative data analysis method in this study. The reason for conducting qualitative research is that the subject of the study is a literary work in the form of a film or dialogue. The writer could see each aspect of the text, such as intrinsic and extrinsic elements related to the human and societal problem, using this method. The referred problem is one that does not require any experiment to be conducted, but rather is determined by the dialogue. And the researcher will thoroughly analyze this dialogue or film clip so that the results obtained are easy to understand. The goal of qualitative research is not to find generalizations, but to comprehend the meaning of the problem through data collection and analysis (Stenius et al., 2017). This method is used to analyze a text or a phenomenon that occurred in society. This method is appropriate for the writer to conduct research on social criticism in the *Forrest Gump* movie. In order to identify the social criticism, the researcher in this study analyzed the meaning of oral data material presented as conversations (movies) and written data presented as movie scripts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, purposeful sampling is used, which is a sampling approach that is carried out intentionally or not randomly by setting certain criteria for the sample data needed in this study. As a result, based on the specified criteria, the researcher selects the data sample to be collected. As a result, only samples of data relevant to the research problem were used in this study, namely quotes from words or sentences and visual descriptions of social situations in *Forrest Gump*.



Figure 1. Mother's talking to Forrest

The screenplay above shows how Forrest's mother talking to Forrest. In the screenplay it is written that we are all the same, no one has any differences in this world. The phrase was addressed to Forrest by his mother after returning from treatment for the foot that Forrest had suffered, so that he could not walk normally. The expression was not uttered without reason, Forrest's mother who had to see her child was born abnormally and had problems with his legs, wanted to try to instill in Forrest's head the understanding that his condition was not a bad thing. Forrest is still a normal boy who can get along and get the same rights as everyone else. Children who are not mentally or physically normal tend to close themselves off from association, because they feel that they are not accepted by society. In addition, they also feel ashamed of their shortcomings. Forrest's mother in this case tries to motivate Forrest to remain confident in living his life. This is a social conflict that has moral value in it (Erlidawati, E., & Rahmah, 2022). This is an illustration of the social conditions experienced by every child who is born abnormally. They have to bear a heavier burden because they accept themselves as different from others. Other people also have bad habits and opinions towards those who have physical or mental limitations. This case is one of the most common social conflicts in society.

Further, the situation below (figure 2) was where Forrest had trouble getting into school. The principal was surprised by Forrest's IQ ability. From the results of the tests carried out, Forrest's brain ability is below the average child in general. Then the principal suggested to Forrest's mother to put him in a special school. This was done because the school has a standard number in the IQ ability of students who will attend school there. This is very often found in social life, when a child who has below average intelligence, or is in an abnormal condition mentally and physically, will be recommended to enter a special school. This is because schools are worried that children will not be able to adjust and cannot follow lessons well. In addition, the school is worried that the child will be ridiculed and made fun of by other students. However, not a few parents feel offended and want their children to continue to attend normal schools. Parents see and think that special

schools will affect the quality of their children's educational development. The environment in special schools will make children feel unworthy and unable to enter normal schools. So it is not uncommon for many parents to do various ways so that their children still get the best education.

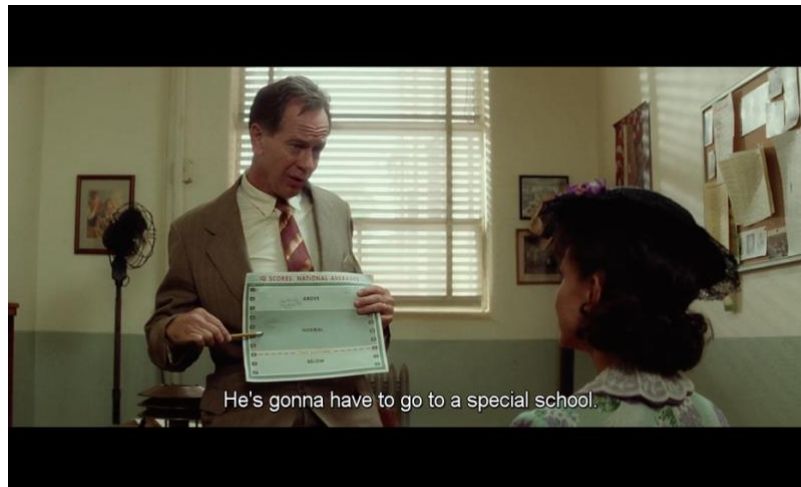


Figure 2. At the school's principal office

In the situation described above, Forrest's mother even sacrificed her pride for her child. He was willing to do whatever the principal said so that Forrest could enter the school. Of course this is an irony of social life that occurs. Many people in this world try hard to get what they want but sometimes use bad ways.



Figure 3. Mother's giving advice to Forrest

This was the last piece of advice Forrest's mother gave before she left. The advice that has become very meaningful to Forrest after what he has been through all this time, all the difficulties and challenges in living life, he is now at a better point and will soon have to accept the loss of the person he loves the most. The expression reflects the affection and love of parents for their children, after successfully caring for and raising them. Especially by sacrificing more things because of his child's abnormal condition.

If we look at the sentence with a broader meaning, then Forrest's mother's advice is very meaningful. A man should do everything he can in his life. Do not complain a lot and continue to use what God has given

you. In actual social life we must often find conditions where someone is desperate, and feels useless to be born in this world. With this advice we will become more aware of the opportunities we can create. This advice becomes more powerful because the story presented is a child who has many limitations mentally and physically, but he can still survive and even achieve big things in his life. For those who experience the same fate regarding mental and physical limitations, of course it will be very motivating to follow and do the same as a Forrest. And for those who have luck with physical and mental perfection, of course, will be motivated not to be lazy and start chasing their dreams and doing good things.



Figure 4. Forrest's confessing his love

This is the situation when Forrest confesses his love to the woman he loves. Forrest expressed his feelings as well as asked the woman to marry. But Forrest did not get a clear answer, he felt he had been rejected by the woman. Then Forrest questioned the reason that he revealed if it was because I was not a smart person. Of course, that expression was made with many factors, one of which was social factors and the stigma of society towards those who have intelligence problems. In society, a normal woman would be considered strange if she married an abnormal man. They are considered unsuitable. This perspective arises because the perception of others about those who have intelligence problems is bad. The alienation makes them also think that the pairing between normal women and abnormal men is an unnatural thing.

It will greatly affect people like Forrest. He felt there was something wrong with him, especially in terms of intelligence. He becomes insecure and feels unworthy of any woman. Conditions that usually occur in social life. When a person has limitations in certain things, then they will feel unworthy to get big things like other people. In this case it is about love. A person who is normal or has a disability still has the same rights and opportunities in any case, including in terms of love. There is no longer any difference in rights between them. People with disabilities are still humans who want to live comfortably and happily. Forrest's situation is one of the most common cases of social conflict found in people's lives.

CONCLUSION

This semiotic study aims to gain insight into the perspective of social criticism in the movie which allowed for the incorporation of rich details about the cultural backgrounds, norms, and practices. The researchers began the coding process by locating relevant sources including scholarly articles, books, and

theses. Then, the researchers emphasized crucial quotes from Forrest Gump movie's screenplay that related to the issue. The researchers then chose specific events and dialogues, then sorted the resulting data into categories depending on the many types of social conflict that were revealed.

Through the social critique lenses from Forrest Gump movie, we pick out the most interesting points to explore. The Forrest Gump movie sends multiple messages regarding how one should act in social situations with those who have mental impairment. If we apply Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, which holds that literature is connected to particular social situations like a society's political structure or specific economic and social difficulties, we can have a deeper understanding of this. By following the aforementioned processes, the researchers were able to draw meaningful inferences from the collected information from the movie. The goal of this is to draw attention to the social criticism included in Forrest Gump and to stress the need for literature or literary study to accurately reflect society.

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