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PROVERB IS AS PROVERB DOES: *FORREST GUMP*, THE  
CATCHPHRASE, AND THE PROVERB

**Abstract:** This article examines the phenomenon of the movie catchphrase, arguing that many of these memorable, repeatable items draw both their form and their meaning from the proverb tradition. It particularly examines the movie *Forrest Gump* (1994), which coined such proverbial catchphrases as “stupid is as stupid does” and “life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get,” and proposed fictive origins for modern proverbs such as “shit happens.” Examining both the origin and functions of these proverbial utterances, the article argues that people’s prior experiences of proverbs became a crucial aspect of their understanding of the film. It thus suggests that modern movies contribute to, and are shaped by, the intertextual process we know as the proverb tradition.

**Keywords:** Film, Literature, Popular Culture, Catchphrase, Cliché, Fable, Intertextuality, *Forrest Gump*.

Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.  
(*Gone With the Wind*, 1939)

The problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill  
of beans in this crazy world.  
(*Casablanca*, 1942)

Go ahead, make my day.  
(*Sudden Impact*, 1983)

Hasta la vista, baby.  
(*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991)

Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what  
you gonna get.  
(*Forrest Gump*, 1994)

Stupid is as stupid does.  
(*Forrest Gump*, 1994)

Some quotations from popular Hollywood films transcend their identities as snatches of movie dialogue to become part of people's vernacular speech traditions; the popular press refers to them by the term "catchphrases." But a closer examination of many of them reveals that they are themselves recycled, put together out of pre-existing vernacular utterances. Just as movies absorb and recycle popular speech patterns—including proverb use—so does American folk speech absorb and recycle certain movies. Clearly, the chain or web of intertextual reference that characterizes and defines proverbs is as active in movies as it is in other areas of American popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

Consider, for example, Humphrey Bogart's famous claim from *Casablanca*, namely that "the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." According to Whiting (1989:307), the proverbial comparison upon which this is directly based, that something does not "amount to a hill of beans," goes back at least to 1929, when K.C. Strahan included it in the novel *Footprints*. The idea of a "crazy world" is far older (though the expression "mad world" has been more popular). Comparing something's value to the value of beans goes back at least to Middle English, for Chaucer was fond of the expression "not worth a bean." Thus, the new movie line is really a combination of several proverbial phrases, drawn from our vernacular traditions of speech and writing, and made to fit the movie's plot.

Similarly, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," Rhett Butler's famous statement in *Gone with the Wind*, takes previously entextualized elements and builds them into a new utterance. The phrase "I don't give a damn" certainly predated the movie, as did the traditional term of endearment "my dear." Another great line from *Gone With the Wind*, "tomorrow is another day," was itself a proverb before the film took hold of it. Indeed, even the movie's title seems likely borrowed: "gone like the wind" appears in the book of psalms and in many other places besides.

In the last several decades, movies have been generating proverbial speech intentionally, as a marketing tool. The success of such stars as Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger in affecting the popular imagination through highly repeatable

catchphrases has dawned on marketing executives, and the efficacy of the soundbite in the news media and the slogan in advertising has also undoubtedly had an influence. Like the lines that caught on from older films, many of the recent catchphrases that passed into common use were put together from elements that already made up part of our tradition of vernacular speech.

As examples of this, consider Jim Carrey's "all righty, then," (*Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*) Arnold Schwarzenegger's "I'll be back" (*The Terminator*) and "Hasta la vista, baby," (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*) and Clint Eastwood's "Go ahead, make my day," (*Sudden Impact*) all popular movie catchphrases during the 1980s and 1990s. All of these were traditional in some form prior to being used in the movies. "All righty, then" has been used as a simple affirmative for years, "I'll be back" and "Hasta la vista" were common leave-taking formulas before Schwarzenegger uttered them onscreen, and Eastwood's phrase was composed of two traditional metaphors: "to go ahead"<sup>2</sup> (*i.e.* to proceed with whatever task is at hand,) and "to make someone's day" (*i.e.* to make someone happy).<sup>3</sup>

Even what seem like original phrases may be proverbial in origin. One of the most famous catchphrases of the 1990s was "show me the money," uttered by Cuba Gooding Jr. in the film *Jerry Maguire*. Most people have assumed that this phrase was invented for the film, but reporter Amy Wilson (1997 E01) tells a different story. In Wilson's account, Phoenix Cardinals safety Tim McDonald was walked through the March 1993 NFL meetings by his agent, Leigh Steinberg, and a film director, Cameron Crowe. According to Wilson, Crowe later asked McDonald the reason for his appearance at the meetings. McDonald replied that he was trawling for a better deal, looking for someone to, as he put it, "show me the money."

The rest is both athletic and cinematic history. McDonald got a new position on the 49ers, and Crowe borrowed what Wilson calls "some emphatic athlete lingo," creating the catchphrase out of McDonald's answer. Wilson continues:

On the Sugar Bowl scoreboard, on CNN, on Oprah, wholesale adoption of the phrase occurs as more than a few folks intone with glee: "Show. Me. The Money."

So this is where a lot of catch phrases come from. Real life heard by writers who hand it to an accomplished actor who delivers it—and its double meaning—to a captivated populace that repeats it, applies it in various venues until it becomes shorthand...and we get to a point where we don't associate the phrase with the movie anymore. It is ours (Wilson 1997 E01).

Wilson is quite right about this, of course. But if, as she suggests, this was not an idiosyncratic statement but rather “athlete lingo,” if it was a traditional way to express the desire for a higher salary and greater recognition, wasn't it already “ours?” In this case, the movie apparently absorbed a proverbial phrase canonical among a certain occupational group, resulting in the popularization, or mainstreaming, of occupational folk speech. Movies, in other words, can take the colorful, vernacular proverbs of different folk groups and make them as widespread as our best-known saws.

In the rest of this paper, I will examine proverbial catchphrases in film, using *Forrest Gump* as my central example. In addition to general questions about the nature of such movie proverbs, I will examine the relationship of the catchphrase to the cliché, the use of proverbial intertextuality to create catchphrases, and the consequences of this intertextual process for the meaning of the phrases. I will explore how the existence of such proverbial catchphrases affects people's interpretations of the film as a whole, bringing my analysis of proverbs to bear on important questions of meaning and interpretation that are central to popular culture scholarship.

### ***Catchphrase, Proverbial Phrase and Cliché: Some General Considerations***

What exactly is a “catchphrase,” and how does it differ from a proverbial phrase? Most existing definitions make the catchphrase either a generally traditional saying, or a phrase that is repeated over and over like a leitmotif during a popular song or play. The first meaning seems to be what folklorists Iona and Peter Opie refer to when they write about “the way lines of current dance songs become catch phrases ... ‘See you later, alliga-

tor’-‘In a while, crocodile’, repeated ad nauseam in 1956.” (Opie and Opie 1959:17) The second meaning is exemplified in the following definition of the term “wheeze” from the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

2. orig. Theatr. slang, A joke or comic gag introduced into the performance of a piece by a clown or comedian, esp. a comic phrase or saying introduced repeatedly; hence, (gen. slang or colloq.) a catch phrase constantly repeated; more widely, a trick or dodge frequently used; also, a piece of special information, a ‘tip’.

Both of these definitions are used in both academic and popular writings, and both share the important characteristic of repetition; in the first definition, the phrase comes to be repeated by people outside of its original context, while in the second it is repeated over and over during the course of an artistic performance. A catch phrase, then, is an item of discourse subject to replication and recontextualization, two features that also characterize the proverb.

The first definition of the two is the more commonly accepted; for example, Eric Partridge (1977:vii) writes in his *Dictionary of Catch Phrases*:

Consult the standard dictionaries, the best and the greatest: you will notice that they tacitly admit the impossibility of precise definition. Perhaps cravenly, I hope that the following brief ‘wafflings’ will be reinforced by the willingness of readers to allow that ‘example is better than precept’ and thus enable me to ‘get away with it’. A pen-friend...tells me that the best definition he has seen is this: ‘A catch phrase is a phrase that has caught on, and pleases the populace.’ I’ll go along with that, provided these substitutions be accepted: ‘saying’ for ‘phrase’; and ‘public’ for the tendentious ‘populace.’

The definition we are left with, by Partridge’s account, is “a saying that has caught on and pleases the public.”

In reading this passage, a proverb scholar is inevitably reminded of Archer Taylor’s opening to *The Proverb*, in which he first speaks of definitions being too difficult, engaging in a little

of what Partridge calls “waffling” before settling for “a proverb is a saying current among the folk.” The two descriptions, in fact, are nearly identical. In both cases, the exact type of saying is not specified, and the only necessary attribute appears to be currency among some unspecified population, referred to as “the folk” by Taylor and “the public” by Partridge.

Partridge’s further stipulation, that a catchphrase “pleases” the public, actually confuses the issue; how could we hope to tell whether the people using a certain catchphrase find it pleasing or annoying? And how can an entity as amorphous as “the public” be pleased at all? In fact, an anonymous writer in the *Arizona Republic* (1996:A8) once explained that a sentence “is a catch phrase for sure if, each time you hear it, you want to falsely imprison the person responsible for it.”

Here we have entered into what Partridge calls a “vexed question”: where the catchphrase ends and the cliché begins. For by Partridge’s own account, clichés are also phrases that catch on. Some of them are idioms, some of them are proverbs, and some of them are quotations from literature.<sup>4</sup> The difference between catchphrase and cliché is that a cliché is “an outworn commonplace; a phrase, or short sentence, that has become so hackneyed that careful speakers and scrupulous writers shrink from it” (Partridge 1950:2). In other words, catchphrases and clichés are identical in their production (someone uses them either because they appear clever or because they save time), but different in their reception (“the public” enjoys catchphrases but “careful speakers and scrupulous writers” find clichés hackneyed). When Partridge compiled his *Dictionary of Catch Phrases* (1977) and his *Dictionary of Clichés* (1950), he apparently used his own enjoyment of the phrases as a criterion to decide which dictionary each would go into.

Partridge is quite aware of the arbitrary nature of his work. He writes that “the categories of Catch Phrase, Proverbial Saying, Famous Quotation, Cliché, may co-exist: they are not snobbishly exclusive, anyone of any other. All depends on the context, the nuance, the tone” (Partridge 1977:vii). Partridge here admits that the overlapping of our native genre terms is quite marked, and also that the catchphrase, the cliché and the proverbial phrase are indistinguishable by any formal means; all are

entextualized vernacular phrases subject to recontextualization in the ordinary flow of discourse.<sup>5</sup>

A mere glance over some of Partridge's entries will confirm that the phrases some consider to be "catchphrases" or " clichés" operate in a manner just as easily considered proverbial.<sup>6</sup> True proverbs like "monkey see, monkey do" and "as ye sow, so shall ye reap," proverbial phrases like "to spell it out for someone" and "to dot one's i's and cross one's t's," and even Wellerisms like "'nay, nay!' quoth Stringer, when his neck was in the halter," are all listed in one or the other of Partridge's dictionaries.<sup>7</sup> Although some of these have not been noted by proverb collectors, all clearly fit almost any definition of the proverb or proverbial phrase. This point is made not to challenge Partridge, but to point out that whether a saying is proverbial, a "catchphrase" or a " cliché" is often based on a personal reaction to the saying, not on any objectively measurable criterion. When I speak of "catchphrases" below, I could as easily be using the term "proverbial phrases" or " clichés."

The film industry believes that catchphrases are useful in marketing. As MGM executive Susan Pile has said, "if [a catchphrase] makes it into the streets, it definitely doesn't hurt the movie's grosses" (Shaw 1996:13).<sup>8</sup> However, the above analysis suggests that writers and directors who purposely mine the proverb tradition to fashion catchphrases walk a delicate line. On the one hand their catchphrases might please people and help the film, while on the other hand they might bore people as tiresome clichés. As we will see below, viewers have had both reactions to the catchphrases of *Forrest Gump*.

#### ***Gumpism as Catchphrase, Cliché and Proverb***

More than any film before it, *Forrest Gump* created phrases that seemed traditional even though they were new. As historian Judith Zinsser (1996:91) puts it, Gump's new aphorisms "actually sound familiar," even to people who have never heard them before. Gump's proverbs in fact, "seem to be culture" in Greg Urban's (1996:21) sense: they are entextualized nuggets of discourse that appear to predate their actual creation. This textuality, this seeming, helped Gump's catchphrases to appear proverbial in the eyes and ears of the audience. Some viewers took that proverbiality seriously, and concluded that the phrases were wise

and witty; others reacted against the traditional authority of proverbial speech, deemed it hackneyed and vacuous, and rejected the gumpisms out of hand.

To frame the above dichotomy in another way, some writers, like Partridge's generic "people," were pleased by Gump's phrases as catchy nuggets of wisdom. Others, taking the position of Partridge's "careful speakers and scrupulous writers," shrank from them as worthless clichés. But the reactions of both camps suggest that Gump's sayings were experienced as proverbs.

Among the many positive reactions to Gump's proverbs are writers who find them to be "words of wisdom" (Anitai 1994: E11), "dead on the money" (May 1994: 4), and "endearing, down-home philosophy" (Bruning 1994:9). One writer goes so far as to say that it was in lines like Gump's "that some of us found the wisdom and the humor to cope with [life's] darker moments" (Boyar, 1994:E1). But the naysayers are more numerous, dubbing Gump's lines "faux wisdom" (Van Bierna, 1994: 82), "bland, empty platitudes" (Parks, 1994:10), and "meaningless fortune cookie-isms" (Verniere 1994:48). Many highlight the phrases' status as moldy clichés, including one who writes: "if I hear that 'life is like a box of chocolates' line one more time, I'll scream" (Creamer, 1994:SC1). Writers in both camps frequently acknowledge the gnomic quality of the gumpisms, employing such words as "proverb," "saying," "aphorism," and "homily."

One of the most positive reactions comes from Tatsuya Komatsu (1995:9), who considers the Gumpisms to be "natural, authentic English expressions." For Komatsu, Gump's phrases have all the features necessary to proverbs: they are pleasing and catchy and ring with authentic traditional wisdom. In his category of "expressions," Komatsu includes practically all of Gump's proverbs and proverbial phrases, including "life is like a box of chocolates," "stupid is as stupid does," and "like peas and carrots," along with verifiably preexisting proverbial speech like "a promise is a promise," "miracles happen every day," and "never take your eye off the ball," showing that he interprets them all as belonging in the same category of saying.

Like Komatsu, singer and songwriter Bruce Springsteen clearly puts traditional proverbs and Gump's new ones in the



same category, but for him they all constitute clichés. In his 1995 song “My Best Was Never Good Enough,” Springsteen includes two of the most famous Gumpisms in what is otherwise a long litany of traditional proverbs, slightly altered to fit the song’s rhyme and meter. These proverbs, including “every cloud has a silver lining,” “every dog has his day,” “when the going gets tough the tough get going,” “a quitter never wins and a winner never quits,” “when God gives you lemons, make lemonade,” “the early bird catches the worm,” “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” “a hit is as good as a run” and “the sun don’t shine on a sleeping dog’s ass,”<sup>9</sup> are apparently interpreted as hackneyed bits of pseudo-wisdom. At the end of the song, Springsteen changes from canonical proverbs to Gumpisms:

Now life’s like a box of chocolates  
 You never know what you’re going to get  
 Stupid is as stupid does  
 And all the rest of that shit  
 Come on pretty baby call my bluff  
 ‘Cause for you my best was never good enough

Here, Springsteen’s use of “all the rest of that shit” (which appeared once before in the song as well, this time as “all the rest of that stuff,” and referring to traditional proverbs) signals his mistrust of the supposedly wise sayings.

Putting Springsteen’s proverb song in the context of his career and his album makes one thing clear: he is not rejecting the proverbs out of doubt that they carry traditional authority. He is rejecting them *because* of their traditional authority. The album, entitled *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, is one of Springsteen’s most antiestablishment efforts, championing the poor, the rootless, the migrant worker and the homeless drifter against the action of hegemonic authority. His rejection of proverbs and Gumpisms signals that the catchphrases, like the older proverbs he quotes, represent the structures of power he is fighting.

The most important point of the above analyses is that different reactions can be evoked by both proverbs and catchphrases, reactions that classify them as catchy on the one hand or as corny on the other. Both reactions begin with the fact that proverbs encapsulate traditional wisdom, and, as Samper (1997) has pointed out, hegemonic authority. Most reactions to the

Gumpisms, both positive and negative, are based on their successful use of the proverbial frame to convey a feeling of age and authority, despite their actual novelty.

***The Proverbs of Forrest Gump: Simple Constructions***

The above analyses suggest that the new sayings of *Forrest Gump* were experienced as proverbs almost immediately after their creation. Like the catchphrases with which this chapter began, the gumpisms achieved this instant proverbiality by making direct and explicit intertextual reference to previous proverbial speech in addressing a recurrent and recognizable social situation. In the previous chapter, I outlined several theoretical ways of accomplishing this. Using *Forrest Gump*, a film that contains many such innovative proverbs, I will further explore these strategies of proverbialization, not as hypothetical examples, but as real-life case studies of proverbial innovation in popular culture.

The simplest method of creating a proverbial utterance is what Urban (1996) calls “replication,” the quoting of a previously-heard utterance in a new context; this is the type of proverb that fits best within a paradigm in which the proverb tradition consists of a canon of repeated phrases, and it is the type most often considered proverbial by scholars. Like practically any movie, play or book, *Forrest Gump* utilizes this strategy of proverbialization several times. As a single example involving a common proverb, when Forrest is learning to play ping-pong, another soldier offers him this unsolicited advice: “never take your eye off the ball.” Clearly, this is a variant of “keep your eye on the ball,” a venerable piece of sports wisdom which is listed in several dictionaries of proverbial speech. In this case, then, a recognized, canonical proverb of many years’ standing was introduced to the film to highlight the typical nature of a social situation: the complete novice being given his first lesson in a sport.

Unlike the above example, many of the canonical proverbs used in the film have not yet been placed in most proverb dictionaries. A quick reference to the Lexis/Nexis database is required to confirm their age and currency. For example, “death is (a) part of life,” a statement made by Mamma Gump, has been used more than 600 times, first appearing in the database in

1979.<sup>10</sup> Its variant, also quoted in the movie, is “dying is part of living.” This sentence also goes back to 1979 in the database. Most English-language proverb dictionaries fail to list either of these statements as a proverb.<sup>11</sup>

“Miracles happen every day,” “you make your own destiny” and “do the best with what God gave you” are more examples of Mamma Gump’s folk wisdom, also from outside the usually accepted proverbial canon; each of them predates the film by many years.<sup>12</sup> All of these proverbs express immediately recognizable social situations: the death of a loved one, faith in God and in oneself, the need to find meaning in daily life.

Similarly, when Gump says “I guess Lieutenant Dan figured there’s some things in life you just can’t change,” he is using an uncollected canonical proverb. It appears in a few variants in the Lexis/Nexis database, including Gump’s exact wording, “some things in life you just can’t change,” but more frequently merely as “[there are] some things you [we, I] can’t change.” Other variants include “you can’t change some things,” “certain things you can’t change,” “certain things in life you can’t change,” and “you can’t change certain things.”<sup>13</sup> Again, this proverb is used to signal a recognizable and recurrent social position: resignation to an unchangeable situation. In this case, Dan and Forrest need to preserve their dignity despite their physical and mental handicaps.

Besides this straightforward replication of previously heard proverbs, the simplest way to create a proverbial utterance is to use a “proverbial pattern.” This strategy was also employed by the film’s writers. After his friend Bubba dies, Forrest decides to travel to Bayou Le Batre and start a shrimping business because he made a promise to Bubba and “a promise is a promise.” This is, of course, a canonical proverb, but it is simultaneously an invocation of the “X is X” pattern, which can be used to generate other proverbs, such as “business is business,” “a man’s a man,” and “people are people.”<sup>14</sup> Other proverbial patterns are also used, but in more complex ways; I will show below that “like peas and carrots” and “life is like a box of chocolates” are, at least in part, created with reference to proverbial patterns.

One of the most common gumpisms, “stupid is as stupid does,” was created by following a proverbial pattern as well. It is unclear, however, whether the pattern was taken from tradition,

where it is rare, or abstracted from the single common proverb that uses it. This gumpism can therefore be said to fall between two strategies: the straightforward application of a pattern, and the use of a single proverb to create a new pattern.

The canonical proverb in question, of course, is “handsome is as handsome does,” a traditional way of saying that looks aren’t everything, that true beauty is to be found beneath the surface. This is only the most common of several versions, all of which are semantically and structurally very close: “pretty is as pretty does,” “lovely is as lovely does,” and “beauty is as beauty does” have all been noted as well. In more general terms, then, we may place positive judgements about someone’s looks into the pattern “x is as x does.”

Still, this is only part of the story; the pattern apparently did not originally refer to looks at all. According to Stevenson (1948:539), the pattern’s first recorded occurrence is in 1580, where it is rendered as “goodly is he that goodly dooth.” In 1600, it appeared as “he is proper that proper doth.” In 1670, it appeared with “proper” once again; it also first appeared in the preferred form, with “handsome” as the adjective. But soon thereafter, it appeared as “well is he that well does.” Clearly, with “goodly,” “proper,” “well,” and “handsome” among its first five occurrences, and with “proper” twice at that, this proverb was used to speak of things other than appearance.<sup>15</sup> In fact, in its earliest origins, “x is as x does” seems to have been a formula along the lines of “x is x,” into which any adjective that expressed approval could be placed. In this form, it foregrounded a person’s actions as the principal means by which to judge his or her character or worth. Its central idea—that the only truly good, or handsome, or proper, or well person is one whose deeds are good, proper, handsome or well—is rendered all the more forceful by its generality. It is deeds that make a person’s character what it is—no matter what it happens to be.

Given this general meaning, we might expect a proverbial formula such as this one to yield other proverbs. Indeed it has. In the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* we find “foolish is as foolish does,” quite possibly the direct source for Gump’s adage. “Ugly is as ugly does” appears fourteen times in American newspapers, some of them predating the movie. Since the film,

even more proverbs have surfaced that use this pattern. In talking about Tom Hanks, the *Houston Chronicle* has said that “talent is as talent does” (Westbrook 1995:5). More recently, Tamala M. Edwards (1998:66) of *Time Magazine* commented on the un-abomber case by saying that “crazy is as crazy does.” These proverbs demonstrate that “x is as x does” is a viable pattern that can spontaneously generate new proverbs. It may well be that the public reaction to *Forrest Gump* re-established or at least re-energized this pattern as a generative force in our proverb traditions.

***The Proverbs of “Forrest Gump”: Complex Constructions***

The above examples of Gump’s proverbs are the ones with the simplest and most transparent histories. The more interesting proverbs, on the other hand, are combinations of several previously existing proverbial images and patterns, much like *Sudden Impact*’s combination of “go ahead” and “make my day.” Some take their images from one or more proverbs and their structure from common proverbial patterns. These phrases are intertextually linked to the raw materials of the proverb tradition; they are classic examples of innovative proverb use. They include the proverbial comparison “like peas and carrots,” as well as the proverbs “life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get” and “you’ve got to put the past behind you before you can move on.”

This last proverb, which is spoken by Forrest as he muses on his period as a long-haired runner, is a case in point. Like Gump’s other proverbs, it “sounds familiar” despite being new. Once again, this is due to deep connections with the tradition of metaphorical folk speech that produces proverbs. Specifically, the new phrase is made by juxtaposing two very common traditional metaphors: “to put the past behind you” and “to move on.”<sup>16</sup>

Like “to go ahead,” mentioned above, “to move on” might not strike every reader as metaphorical at all. Consider, however, that the phrase usually does not refer to physically moving at all. Like “to go ahead” it is a phrase that taps into our deepest traditional metaphors, which Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have deemed “metaphors we live by.” “To move on” can be used as an example of any of our major complex metaphors involving

journeys. For example, employing the metaphor that an academic argument is a journey, a scholar might write “let me *backtrack* a bit and return to my last point,” “without wishing to *get stuck* on a single idea, let me rephrase...” or, conversely, “let us *move on* to our next point.” In the case of *Forrest Gump*, the phrase seems to be used as an instance of a general “life is a journey” metaphor. In order to “move on” with, or continue, his life, Forrest needs to “put the past behind him.”

Like the metaphor of “moving on,” the concept of “putting the past behind” a person is but one aspect of larger metaphorical traditions. Most important among these is the orientational metaphor that the past is behind us and the future in front of us. We look back to the past, but look ahead to the future. “I *was* an axe murderer,” the released convict might say, “but that’s all *behind* me now.” We might accuse someone of wanting to “*go back* to the way things used to be.” The very idea of progressing to the future and regressing to the past is based upon the metaphorical idea that the past is, and belongs, physically behind our backs.

There is also another metaphor operating when we “put the past behind us.” Again, this is the metaphor of life as a journey. We are not merely stating that the past *is* behind us, but rather actively putting it behind us, in order to progress into the future—to “move on.” The image is one in which we constantly move forward, our future approaching up ahead and our past receding behind us. It is a common metaphor that English speakers use every day. “I’m *looking forward* to my trip next week,” we say, or “I can see we have a *long way to go* before this deal is settled.” Indeed, it is precisely because the two proverbial phrases “to put the past behind us” and to “move on” form part of the same larger metaphor (life is a journey), that the two are eminently suited to being combined, as Mama Gump combines them.

Even the combination of these two metaphors is not original to *Forrest Gump*. Between June 1989 and April 1997, the phrases appeared in close proximity (within three words) of one another fifty times in the newspapers catalogued by Lexis/Nexis. Over forty of these instances are quite simply versions of “to put the past behind one and move on,” though there are a few other very similar constructions. Only three of the fifty articles put the

two phrases in reverse order (“to move on” followed by “to put the past behind one”). As Mama Gump so rightly observes, “you’ve got to put the past behind you before you can move on,” at least in common usage.

The general structure of this phrase, “you’ve got to x before you can y,” was borrowed from vernacular speech traditions as well. “You must creep before you can crawl,” “you’ve got to crawl before you can walk” and “you’ve got to learn to walk before you can run,” all listed in the *Dictionary of American Proverbs*, use this pattern.<sup>17</sup> In addition to structure, these proverbs share two obvious traits with Gump’s: reference to the same recurrent situation (time-consuming but necessary preparation being necessary for progress in life), and the comparison of life events to journeying, whether by creeping, crawling, walking, running or simply “moving on.”

In the phrase “you’ve got to put the past behind you before you can move on,” we see a clear example of a “true proverb” that is proverbial but not canonical. It is not just a version of “to put the past behind one and move on,” because unlike that phrase it encapsulates wisdom; the phrase merely describes a recurrent social situation, but the proverb evaluates it as well. At the same time, it has origins in several specific proverbial phrases and a deep connection to our common stock of metaphorical language. Therefore, although this phrase did not become an item of repeated canonical folklore, it is nonetheless an item in the proverb tradition, which I would simply call a proverb.

This more complex way of building proverbs, out of bits and pieces of previously existing proverbial discourse, can introduce fascinating levels of ambiguity to the proverb’s meaning. The meaning of any utterance is intertextually determined, that is, determined in relation to other utterances as well as to speakers and listeners. Building a proverb out of pieces of older proverbs therefore involves what Babcock and Abrahams call “carryover of meaning” and Urban calls “transduction” from the older proverbs to the new one. When more than one proverb is used, more than one traditional meaning contributes to the final meaning of the utterance. We can see this in Gump’s utterances quite clearly: both the proverbial comparison “like peas and carrots” and the proverb “life is like a box of chocolate: you never know what you’re gonna get” have relationships to more than one pre-

existing proverb or pattern, and both have been interpreted by different people as having quite different meanings. All of these meanings seem to have been taken at least in part from the older proverbial speech on which the new proverbs were modeled.

As an example of such multiple meaning, consider “life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get.” In reading the very large number of citations this proverb received in the newspapers,<sup>18</sup> a careful reader will notice a pattern. In the cases where it is used proverbially, to comment on a recurrent social situation, it occurs with two distinct meanings. Some writers use it with the meaning it obtains in the film: that you never know what you are going to get, that life is uncertain. But quite often, it seemed simply to mean “life is good.”

Perhaps the strongest proponent of the idea that a life “like a box of chocolates” is always good is the critic Michael Medved, who glosses Gump’s phrase by saying, “sure, you could get a nougat, you could get a covered almond, you could get a cherry cordial, but the most important thing about a box of chocolates is that everything it contains is sweet.”<sup>19</sup> Other examples of this use of the proverb include “just as life is not like a box of chocolates, the history of Western philosophy could not be reduced to easily digestible morsels” (Jeffries 1996 T19), “Life was like a box of chocolates for the Rio Mesa High boys’ basketball team, except the Spartans knew exactly what they were going to get” (Bresnahan 1997 C8), and “sometimes life is like a box of chocolates—sweet and free” (Santella 1996:11A). The first of these suggests that “like a box of chocolates” means “easily digestible”; the second chronicles the Spartans’ victory over another team, directly contradicting Forrest and his mother’s meaning and implying that the happy occasion of their victory was what made life “like a box of chocolates” for the Spartans; the third simply substitutes “sweet and free” for “you never know what you’re gonna get.” In all of these cases, the writers seem to say the opposite of what Gump means, which is that life is sometimes good and sometimes not, or that “you have to take the rough with the smooth,” to use another proverb.

Considering the hardships in Forrest’s life, why would a life “like a box of chocolates” always mean a gift from God? Could there never be a bad chocolate, one which you’d rather not eat?



Several satirical writers who used the “life is like a box of chocolates” proverb based essays around this very point: there are, in most boxes of chocolates, some disgusting selections. One points out that most chocolates are “that awful pink or orange nougat” (PR Newswire 1996) and another complains similarly of “ooky sorta-orange goo” (Lane 1995: 11B), while Frank Ronan (1994:46) reminds readers that “Life may be like a box of chocolates, but you can avoid those sick-making strawberry creams by reading the inside of the lid.” Considering that some people recognize the existence of bad chocolates, and that others, including Medved, recognize Forrest’s life as one with its own difficulties, why do so many writers take “life is like a box of chocolates” to mean “life is always good?”

Clues to this question can be found in the phrase’s history, and particularly in its intertextual connections to the proverb tradition. One obvious place to start is in the phrase’s direct origin: screenwriter Eric Roth and actor Tom Hanks based it on the opening line of the novel *Forrest Gump*: “Let me say this: bein a idiot is no box of chocolates.” A Lexis/Nexis search reveals that the phrase “no box of chocolates” was by then at least two decades old; it was thus a canonical proverbial phrase that was directly related to the catchphrase. Its first occurrence in the Lexis/Nexis database is in a 1978 Newsweek article (Saal 1978), in which the great pianist (and native Russian speaker) Vladimir Horowitz is quoted as saying “my dear, a revolution is no box of chocolates.” It also occurs several more times before the appearance of *Forrest Gump* (the novel) in 1986. Although it hasn’t been noted in most dictionaries of proverbial speech, then, the phrase “to be no box of chocolates” is clearly traditional in the classic sense, equivalent to the more common phrase “to be no bed of roses.”

Since “to be no box of chocolates,” in almost all of its usages, appears to mean “to be unpleasant” or “to be difficult,” its opposite “to be a box of chocolates” should, by intertextual extrapolation, mean “to be pleasant” or “to be easy.” The most commonly understood meaning for “life is (or is like) a box of chocolates”<sup>20</sup> is exactly that. There is, in fact, no other obvious source for this interpretation. This meaning for the catchphrase therefore makes more sense in the context of the proverb tradition than it does in the context of the film, where it clearly

means, “you never know what you’re going to get,” in other words, “it is sometimes pleasant and sometimes not.”

“To be no box of chocolates” is not the only nugget of proverbial speech that has intertextual resonances affecting the meaning of “life is like a box of chocolates.” There are many viewers who perceived the phrase’s obvious similarity to the proverb “life is just a bowl of cherries.” Clearly, the “box of chocolates” phrase was not intended to mean the same thing as “life is just a bowl of cherries”; one writer recognizes this, pointing out that “life may be like a box of chocolates, but this year has been more like a bowl of cherries for actor Tom Hanks, who has been named *Entertainment Weekly* magazine’s entertainer of the year” (Baltimore *Sun* 1996:2A). This anonymous wire-service scribe shows us simultaneously that the phrases’ meanings are perceived as intertextually related and that they are not perceived to be exactly the same.

However, most writers who have used the phrase lack this insight, and make the meaning of “life is like a box of chocolates” virtually identical to that of “life is just a bowl of cherries.” Many writers have clearly connected the two in their minds. The comedy troupe Forbidden Hollywood performed a parody song, “Life is like a box of chocolates,” to the tune of the 1934 Rudy Vallee song “Life is just a bowl of cherries.” Gary Dunford asks the question, “which two of these thoughts are close enough to provoke a literary lawsuit?” (Dunford 1995:6) The two he seems to mean are “Life is just a bowl of cherries” and Gump’s box of chocolates proverb. Judith Zinsser (1995:91) misquotes the proverb as “Life is *just* a box of chocolates (emphasis mine),” and leaves out the second half, “you never know what you’re gonna get.” From her argument, she clearly thinks that Gump’s statement has the same meaning as the “bowl of cherries” proverb. Finally, Diane Stoneback is one of several writers who have consciously combined the two phrases. Her version reads, “ever since Branca’s Philadelphia-based Falcon Candy Co. won the license to manufacture the candy bearing the Forrest Gump logo, his life has been like a bowl of plump, chocolate-covered cherries” (Stoneback 1995:D1). Clearly, the meanings that the phrase “life is like a box of chocolates” obtains in discourse situations have been affected by “life is just a bowl of

cherries”; again, an intertextual process of meaning-making connects the catchphrase to our proverb tradition.

Like “life is just a bowl of cherries,” another canonical phrase seems to have affected the meanings of Gump’s proverbs through the similarity of their images. This is, of course, “life is sweet,” noted by Whiting as a common saying in *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings*. Many who interpreted Gump’s proverb to mean “life is good” include the word “sweet” in their explanations. Above we saw examples from Medved and Santella; in addition, there is Weber’s (1995:5) gloss as “sweet and palliative” and Sandy Quadros Bowles’s (1997:4) observation that “chocolates are all sweet and creamy—How can you go wrong, whichever one you choose?”

In a letter to the editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, Tom Louderback (1996:10A) summed up this perspective nicely: “In times like these we need to remember the wisdom of Forrest Gump: ‘It’s just like my mama always said, life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re going to get.’ Forrest Gump knew that each choice would be different, yet every choice would be sweet.” Finally, the most direct and obvious example came from CNN anchor Jim Moret: “Life is sweet ... like a box of chocolates” (*Showbiz Today*, 1995). As with “life is just a bowl of cherries,” the Gumpism’s main image has called to mind another proverb and assimilated that saying’s meaning into its own; once again, the proverb tradition has exerted its intertextual influence.

While we have concentrated so far on the first part of the gumpism “Life is like a box of chocolates,” the second part, “you never know what you’re gonna get” is also intertextually linked to the proverb tradition. By the reckoning of previous scholars, “you never know” is itself a free-standing proverb, a proverbial phrase, and a fragment of other proverbs such as “you never know your luck” and “you never know until you try.” When “you never know” is functioning as a proverbial phrase, its common meaning is that things are never certain, that one can never be sure. This is exactly the element of meaning that it contributes to the gumpism. Indeed, the proverb could probably be reduced to “in life, you never know,” and it would still retain Mama Gump’s original sense.

This provides the solution to the question of why the gumpism is used with two disparate meanings by people who presumably share an interpretive proverbial tradition within which to read it. Some have taken its relationships with “life is sweet,” “life is just a bowl of cherries” and “to be no box of chocolates” as the ones that define its meaning, while others have read the uncertainty traditional to “you never know” as the central element. There is one constant, however: both of the meanings commonly ascribed to this saying are being created with reference to the proverb tradition.

In addition to its images and its phrasing, this gumpism has a structure that intuitively suggests a proverbial interpretation. In fact, “life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get,” fits a traditional proverbial pattern, namely, “life is (like) x : y,” where x is a noun phrase and y is an explanatory sentence or description. According to one standard source on proverbs (Stevenson 1948:1400-1401), defining life in this formulaic and analogic way is quite an old tradition. In 160 B.C., Terence wrote in his *Adelphoe* that “human life is like a game of dice: if you don’t get the throw you want, you must make the best of the throw you get.” Some five hundred years later, St. Jerome wrote that “this life is a race: we run it on earth that we may win a crown elsewhere.” Some examples of the formula at work among traditional, entextualized proverbs include the famous German example, “Life is like a chicken coop ladder: short and full of shit,” its variants such as “life is like a chicken coop ladder: a person can’t get ahead because of all the shit,” and its corollary, “life is like a child’s undershirt: short and full of shit.” In his extensive work on these German proverbs, Dundes (1984) avoids calling them “proverbs” and uses the vaguer word “expressions” most of the time, also referring to them as “folk definition[s] of life.” They nonetheless fit most definitions of the proverb, including Dundes’s own (Dundes 1981/1975).

In English, there are not many canonical proverbs that employ this formula, but the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* lists a few, including “life is a gamble: you win or lose” and its variant, “life is a lottery: most folks draw blanks.” Furthermore, the formula itself is widely known and employed. In a *Newsday* article about the internet, Fred Bruning quotes his nephew, Mi-

chael, who says that “life is like a gyroscope: The more you try to catch up, the faster it goes” (Bruning 1997:B04). Baseball player Howard Johnson, reflecting on his retirement, stated that “life is like a book: you go on to the next chapter” (Conway 1997:C1). And media tycoon Ted Turner has been quoted as saying that “life’s like a grade B movie: You don’t want to get up and walk out, but you also don’t want to sit through it again” (Hudis and Sacharow 1996). These are but a few of the many examples of this pattern at work in modern English.

Within the same overall formula of “Life is like x: y,” there have been many adaptations of Gump’s proverb; obviously, people are aware of the traditional structure and play with the proverb within its boundaries. Some of these variants do not preserve the root metaphor of the box of chocolates. An example is “Life is like a buffet, you never know what you’re gonna get; but you will get a lot,” (Rathgeb 1997:D14) noted in a smorgasbord advertisement in a supermarket tabloid. Others preserve the metaphor but not the conclusion, as for example, “life is like a box of chocolates. It costs too much, it’s bad for you, and you don’t know where the nuts are until it’s too late” (Ostler 1995:E1), “I heard someone comment the other day that their life was like a box of chocolates...it was full of nuts” (Algood 1995: 3F), and “Life is like a box of chocolates—sometimes sweet, usually hard, but mostly just plain nuts” (Advocate 1995:6B).<sup>21</sup> The least cheerful adaptation of all was a soliloquy by the villainous “Cigarette-Smoking Man” (played by William B. Davis) on the November 17th, 1996 episode of the TV series *The X-Files*:

Life is like a box of chocolates: a cheap, thoughtless, perfunctory gift that nobody ever asks for. Unreturnable, because all you get back is another box of chocolates. So you’re stuck with this undefinable whipped mint crap that you mindlessly wolf down.... Sure, once in a while there’s a peanut butter cup. English toffee. But they’re gone too fast and the taste is fleeting. They end up in nothing but broken bits filled with hardened jelly and teethshattering nuts. When you’re desperate enough to eat those, all you’ve got left is an empty box....

Clearly, this is not as tightly constrained a formula as “x is x.” There is a great deal more leeway in what specific images will be

picked, and in the precise wording of the resulting phrase. For this reason, we might think of members of this set as weaker on the scale of proverbiality, less firmly bound by rules of intertextual reference, less fully entextualized than a proverb like “a deal’s a deal.” Nevertheless, they participate in the process of proverbial communication. By their traditional formulaic structure, they announce themselves as separate entities, as “sayings embedded in what is said.”

There are some adaptations of the gumpism that compare something other than life to a box of chocolates. These include “birthdays are like a box of chocolates: after you have too many, you feel like crap,” “men are like a box of chocolates: you have to go through a bunch before you find one you really like,”<sup>22</sup> and “politics is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get. Sometimes you get nuts and soft centers” (Johnson 1994:D1). This stems from an even looser pattern in English, namely “x is like y: z,” in which x and y are noun phrases stated to be analogous and z is a clever description of the analogy’s key. This pattern has an even greater range of options, and can therefore be considered even more weakly bound by intertextual constraint, but nonetheless is a traditional resource of the language.

In analyzing this new proverb, then, we find in it a multitude of proverbial voices, affecting both its production and its reception. It has borrowed the box of chocolates from “to be no box of chocolates.” It has borrowed the outward shape, and with it an element of meaning, from “life is just a bowl of cherries.” It has borrowed some of the semantic force of “life is sweet,” and the entire text and meaning of “you never know.” It has then set these elements inside the traditional frame of “life is like x: y.” There is almost no part of this new proverb that was not already an element of the proverb tradition.

As we have seen, the extensive borrowing of varied proverbial elements, and the subsequent “transduction” or “carryover of meaning,” led to interesting ambiguities in the meaning of “life is like a box of chocolates.” These ambiguities arose through different social actors negotiating the saying’s precise position in an intertextual web of proverbial meanings. Similarly, the proverbial comparison “like peas and carrots” drew more

than one meaning from the proverb tradition. This phrase, used by Forrest to describe his inseparable friendship with Jenny Curran, also entered common vernacular tradition, appearing over fifty times in newspapers during the two years and seven months after the film's release.<sup>23</sup> As with the Gumpisms that follow the patterns of true proverbs, the quick acceptance of the comparison "like peas and carrots" into mainstream speech and writing is due at least in part to clearly discernable intertextual relationships between it and various pre-existing, traditional phrases.

Screenwriter Eric Roth was aware that "like peas and carrots" was based on a canonical saying, but he was unable to recall which one; he told reporter Stephen Schaeffer (1994:042) that "Forrest would confuse aphorisms, like 'Jenny and me, — we're like peas and carrots.' Whatever the real saying was, he fouled it up." But Tom Hanks, the actor who portrayed Gump, and who helped Roth coin all of Gump's new proverbs, did remember. Hanks told reporter Irv Letofsky (1994:E1) that Gump "doesn't say, 'I ran like the wind,' he says, 'I ran the way the wind blows.' He doesn't say, 'We're like two peas in a pod,' he says, 'We're like peas and carrots.'"

The metaphor "like two peas in a pod" is in fact part of a complex of traditional images in English that refer to peas; "as thick as peas," "as alike as two peas," and "as close as peas in a pod" have all been recognized as proverbial by Whiting (1989:476-477). All of them frequently include the stipulation that the peas be from the same pod. But they do not all have the same meaning. The first, "as thick as peas," essentially deals with closeness; it refers to people who "stick together," who are inseparable, or who are physically close to one another, as when they share a small living-space. The second, clearly, refers to resemblance. The third may refer to either; Whiting gives only two examples, one of which refers to inseparability and the other of which refers to resemblance. What we have, then, is a traditional root simile (people being like peas [in a pod]) which carries two different meanings: sometimes it means that the people are alike, sometimes it means that they are close or fond of one another.

In one telling invocation of Forrest Gump's phrase, a journalist notes that men and women are "like the peas and carrots that Forrest Gump talked about. We go together, but we're just

not out of the same pod” (Austin *American-Statesman* 1995:A8). This writer points out one of the most important facts about “like peas and carrots”: despite the fact that it was based on “like peas in a pod,” it is not usually interpreted to carry the same range of possible meanings. It does mean “close,” but it does not mean “identical.”

In this sense, “like peas and carrots” is a much better metaphor for Forrest and Jenny. He is a straight-laced, all-American boy whose main accomplishments are in football, the Army and big business, while she is a war protester, naked folk singer and flower child who becomes a disco queen and a drug addict. Still, they love each other and complement each other’s lives. In the common peas and carrots mixture, peas are green and carrots orange, peas are spheres while carrots are cut into cubes. In both cases, then, the items are totally different, but still seem to go together naturally.

Some writers nevertheless do understand “identical” to be the meaning of “like peas and carrots.” The clearest example of this is in a news story by Ed Bark (1994:7), who uses the expression to refer to Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner, citing the similarities in their lives and work, rather than any indication that they are friends. Indeed, since the dislike Turner and Murdoch feel for each other is legendary (Turner has publicly called Murdoch a Nazi), Bark could hardly have meant that they seem to go together as natural friends. Instead, he seems to mean that they are nearly identical, have similar lives and similar approaches their positions as media moguls. Since “like peas and carrots” is never used in the movie to carry the meaning of “similar,” there is no obvious source for this interpretation besides the proverbial tradition. The Gumpism’s place in an intertextual web of proverbial speech therefore seems to have led to a shadow of a secondary meaning, at least for some viewers.

“Like peas and carrots” is worth mentioning for another reason as well: it is an example of how preexisting proverbial speech can affect not only the meaning but also the form of new proverbs. For the proverb tradition has not only adopted “like peas and carrots,” it has also adapted it according to established proverbial rules. Elihu Harris, mayor of Oakland, California, has been quoted as saying that “The terms Oakland and Raiders ...go



together like peas and carrots,” (Hallissy 1995:A19). A professional sportswriter wrote that “Memorial and West went together like peas and carrots in the preseason outlooks provided by other coaches in the Big Eight Conference” (Hernandez 1995:30). And Pam Festge (1995:15A), the wife of defeated Wisconsin state assembly candidate Jim Festge, wrote in a letter to the editor that she and her husband “go together like peas and carrots.” In all, more than half of the instances of “like peas and carrots” that I collected in the time after the film was released said that two people or things “go together like peas and carrots.” The construction “go together like” appears nowhere in the film, and seems to be an innovation added by those who quote the phrase.

The key to this alteration appears to be another “proverbial pattern.” A good clue to this is that at least one verifiable instance of the phrase “to go together like peas and carrots” predates the film: Harsila and Hansen’s (1992:26) claim that “fresh and fish seem to go together like peas and carrots, meat and potatoes or peaches and cream.” This quotation makes it clear that peas and carrots are not the only things that can be said to “go together” in English. Indeed, searching the database proves that other possible pairs include not only meat and potatoes and peaches and cream, but a host of others including love and marriage, a horse and carriage, bacon and eggs, salt and pepper, cheese and crackers, bagels and lox, cookies and milk, apple pie and ice cream, peanut butter and jelly, fish and chips, Batman and Robin, toast and jam, gin and tonic, and scotch and soda. The appearance of so many variations of this phrase in the Lexis/Nexis database suggests that “to go together like x and y” is a proverbial pattern in English, into which one can plug many pairs of items to make a new comparison.

Like the “x is x” pattern, “go together like x and y” is an entextualized piece of discourse that must absorb other discourse into itself in order to be used. The difference is that, in the case of “go together like x and y,” the discourse that it absorbs tends itself to be in the form of an entextualized chunk. For many uses of the formula “go together like x and y,” it seems, not only do x and y really seem to go together, but “x and y” is a commonly-stated phrase, what students of idiomatic speech call an “irreversible binomial idiom.” “Gin and tonic,” “peaches and cream,” and “peanut butter and jelly” are examples; we often say these

pairs just as I have written them, outside the context of a comparison.

There is no example of anyone writing that any two things go together like “tonic and gin,” “cream and peaches” or “jelly and peanut butter” in the Lexis/Nexis database. It is always the same fixed, entextualized phrases, or irreversible binomial idioms, that we use to discuss the foods themselves.

A further search, this time on the phrase particle “go together like” shows that the particle can have almost any two things after it (“a telephone and a fax machine,” for example, or “Pat Buchanan and Courtney Love,” or even “blood and crumpled metal”) but that the instances in which an independently entextualized phrase is inserted are more common. Furthermore, they are more than five times as likely to occur more than once.<sup>24</sup> Those entextualized “x and y” phrases that pair up food items (bread and butter, bagels and lox or scotch and soda) are extremely likely to occur more than once.<sup>25</sup> Apparently, there are potent and traditional conventions of the language causing certain comparisons, embedded in a formulaic frame, to recur in vernacular usage.

It is not surprising that Gump’s phrase should be changed to conform to this rule. The pair “peas and carrots” fits all the criteria for easily fitting into the “go together like” frame: it is a pair of food items, commonly consumed together, and commonly referred to in a fixed phrase. The mixture “peas and carrots” is found in frozen and canned forms, always referred to as “peas and carrots” and never as “carrots and peas.” Thus, when this pair of terms occurred in the context of a comparison, within an extremely popular and well publicized movie, and with the clearly implied meaning of “going together,” it was only natural that the comparison should enter mainstream discourse. It was also natural that it should be changed by the powerful forces of entextualizing tradition into “go together like peas and carrots.”

One of the beautiful aspects of vernacular language traditions is that they allow for this sort of phrase, simultaneously traditional and newly created. Clearly, this phrase had all the hallmarks of our proverbial tradition the very first time it was used; it is created out of traditional elements in a fixed, traditional relationship, inserted into a traditional frame. Furthermore, it

would be largely meaningless without a proverbial tradition within which to read it. Most importantly, it draws on the traditional content and meanings of more than one previously existing proverbial phrase in order to achieve its own meaning, and then draws on a widespread proverbial pattern to achieve its final form. It is, in all these ways, a product of the proverb tradition.

***Forrest Gump's Proverbs: Fictive History, Real World History, and the "Natural History" of Proverbial Discourse***

In their 1996 book *Natural Histories of Discourse*, Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban define these "histories" as "indications of more originary interactional text(s) of inscription" lurking within present texts, or "the residue of past social interaction carried along with the sign-vehicle encoding the semantic, or denotational, meaning in denotational text" (Silverstein and Urban 1996:5). In essence, they read each text as a multilayered palimpsest, containing not only its denotational meaning, but a potentially infinite layering of metadiscursive clues to past contextualizations and past meanings. Sometimes these clues are genuine results of an utterance's being replicated, or recontextualized from past contexts, but sometimes they are encoded into a new text in order to make it seem to be shared culture. It is these metadiscursive clues that constitute entextualization, and they are a powerful part of the function of proverbs and other vernacular speech forms.

Despite their brevity, each of Forrest Gump's proverbs contains clues to different layerings of meaning within two orders of history, which I will call real-world history and fictive history. As I have shown above, each of Forrest Gump's proverbs has a real-world history. A proverb's coinage by Roth and Hanks, what previous proverbial and traditional resources it has drawn upon, and its emergence from the film into American discourse, all form part of this history. When the bounded proverb texts alone were not detailed enough to provide much evidence about their real-world histories, these histories were recoverable from metadiscursive commentaries in the larger texts in which they were embedded.

In addition to its real-world history, each proverb has an important element of fictive history. By fictive history, I mean its history in Forrest Gump's fictive world, as opposed to its history

in our own world. How did such a text come into being? Who said it before Forrest and on what occasions? Are there “residues of past (fictive) social interactions” to be discovered within Gump’s proverbs? There are such residues, albeit faint ones. Like the intertextual connections to real proverbs, these entextualizing residues help Gump’s new proverbs to seem as though they’ve been around for years.

The single most important mechanism of each proverb’s fictive history is its ascription. In many cases, Forrest ascribes the proverb to his Mama: “My mama always said,” he tells us, and follows with one of his proverbs. This suggests, even the first time that Forrest uses an utterance, that it enjoys a long history. He does not say that mama “once told me,” or even that “mama said,” which would imply that the phrase was heard only once before. Instead, we are told that she “always said” them, or that she “says” them, suggesting that her usage of them continues, or that it continued for some time. He implies, in other words, that the phrases are traditional, repeated proverbs heard on multiple occasions.

Within the fictive world, then, Gump frames his utterances as statements he heard from his mother on many occasions. This ascription of proverbs to Gump’s mother fits our expectations of proverbial speech; in Briggs and Bauman’s (1992) terms, it minimizes the intertextual gap between these utterances and our idealized mental image of proverb production, allowing them to seem even more clearly proverbial. We all know people with their own pet sayings, and this film makes Gump’s mother into just such a person. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that this folksy proverb-speaker should be a maternal figure in Gump’s life; it is a common perception that proverbs are the domain of older people, and even that proverbial wisdom is associated with older women.<sup>26</sup>

Another strategy used to suggest a history for Gump’s proverbs is repetition. Gump does not say that “stupid is as stupid does” just once, but three times. Likewise “peas and carrots.” “Life is like a box of chocolates” is said not only several times, but by several characters. These utterances, therefore, are clearly both externally separable from individual contexts and internally cohesive, “thing-y,” to use Silverstein and Urban’s (1996:1)

term, within Forrest's world. In the real (non-fictional) world, proverbial phrases and other entextualized utterances obtain their cohesion and separability partly from their formal characteristics, but partly also from the process of having been repeated. Here again the screenplay mimics the real-world history of proverbs, meeting our expectations of proverbial speech.

Sometimes, Gump's proverbial utterances are not only repeated but varied in the process. A good example of this, and of the construction of a fictive history for a gumpism, is the "box of chocolates" proverb. Gump routinely quotes his mama as saying that "life is like a box of chocolates." Near the end of the film, when Mama Gump is dying, we finally get to hear her utter the proverb. This has the effect first of all of confirming Forrest's claim that the proverb is traditional within his world—his mama really does say it after all. Interestingly, however, Mama Gump's version of the proverb differs from Forrest's. She does not tell him that "life is like a box of chocolates." Instead, she says that "life *is* a box of chocolates."

The minor variation in "life is (like) a box of chocolates" adds a further sense of "natural history" to the proverb. Everyone knows that utterances of this sort do vary in natural speech, and this variation thus makes the sentence resemble a traditional proverb even more by suggesting that it has been changed by the forces of oral tradition. Furthermore, the specific variation, the inclusion or exclusion of the word "like," is significant. As I mentioned above, the common "proverbial pattern" of "life is (like) x:y," can occur either with or without the word "like." The gumpism thus varies in the same way as the traditional pattern, once again suggesting its own traditionality within Forrest's fictive world.

*Forrest Gump*, then, displays a particularly clever technique of historical manipulations to create believable proverbs. Not only do Gump's proverbs have a real-world history, a connection to the real-world proverb tradition as outlined extensively above, each is also explicitly placed within a fictive proverb tradition which shares significant identifying features with the real-world proverb tradition. By minimizing the intertextual gap between these new proverbs and older ones, both orders of history achieved potent results, allowing the film to coin sayings that seemed traditional immediately. One outcome was that they

emerged rather easily from their localized contexts to enter oral tradition, but there were other important consequences as well.

***Forrest Gump and the Fable Tradition: "Fabular Reading"***

The ability of *Forrest Gump*'s proverbs to mix real-world history with believable fictive history was crucial to the film's reception by the public because it allowed Gump's statements to be recognized by the audience as proverbs, even on the first hearing. This in turn made a certain kind of interpretation of the movie common, a style of interpretation that stressed morality and that frequently used one of Gump's proverbs as a starting point.

Most critics and moviegoers loved *Forrest Gump* when it was released, but a small group of critics from academia, politics, and the media began to interpret the film's political views. Soon, the screenwriter, the producer, the lead actors and even the author of the original novel were issuing disclaimers, avowing that the film was "non-political," attempting to distance themselves from the increasingly political interpretations that were being offered to the public. A surprisingly large number of these interpretations centered themselves on one or another of Gump's proverbs.

I call this tendency toward proverbial interpretations "fabular reading," because it follows the traditional pattern for reading fables. It is a commonplace of film criticism to refer to a movie as a "fable" if it has any didactic quality at all, and *Forrest Gump* is no exception; many reviews and interpretations in the popular press use the word "fable" to describe the film.<sup>27</sup> But *Gump* is exceptional in that the idea of its fabular nature seems to have been particularly powerful, and to have affected the way the film, and its proverbs, are interpreted.

The traditional relationship of proverb to fable has been extensively commented on from ancient times. Modern analysis of the relationship between these genres goes back to B. E. Perry's work in 1925, and, more recently, the two genres have been the focus of intertextual analysis (Dolby-Stahl 1988, Carnes 1988, 1991). Historically, proverbs and fables are related to one another in a number of complex ways. In some cases, proverbs were apparently created to "sum up" previously existing fables; in

others, fables appear to have originated as expansions upon a proverbial theme. Proverbs are frequently embedded in fables in the same way that they appear embedded in other narrative forms. Furthermore, there are some texts in existence that can meaningfully be said to belong to both genres.

What is most important for our purposes is that, when a proverb occurs within a fable, it is almost always taken to be a moral, or a summation of the fable's message, particularly when it comes at the beginning or the end of the fable. Moreover, as Pack Carnes has argued, in modern times the association in people's minds between the genre of fable and the summative moral in the form of a proverb has grown stronger, until "the epimythium has come to be an essential feature of the fable, and more often than not, that epimythium is to be expressed as a proverb or proverbial phrase" (Carnes 1991:62). In other words, when people today think of a fable, they almost always think of a story with an overtly stated moral, and they also imagine that moral to be a proverb.

Given this tradition, it is not surprising that so many critics have sought to interpret *Forrest Gump* by means of its proverbs. This is precisely the process that might be involved in reading an unfamiliar fable: look first at the moral. However, unlike a traditional fable, *Forrest Gump* contains many different proverbs. An examination of the interpretations of *Gump* shows that the debate is often over which proverb is to be selected as the moral.

Probably the largest number of critics selected "Life is like a box of chocolates" as the film's moral. This is also not surprising, since it is the proverb that occurs closest to both the beginning and the ending of the film. As I mentioned above, this proverb suggested to many interpreters that life would always be pleasant. The career of Gump himself, who goes from crippled child to football star, war hero, ping-pong champion, shrimp-boat captain and millionaire, seem to confirm and expand on that message, in much the same way that a traditional fable does with a traditional proverb. Some interpreters, like Medved, saw this proverb in its paradoxical fullness and produced similarly paradoxical interpretations; Medved's own, remember, was that "Forrest Gump" was a film about faith and optimism in the face of both success and adversity.

The conservative political commentator Pat Buchanan used another of Gump's proverbs as his "moral." For Buchanan, the film is really about the contrast of Forrest, who stands for conservative values and ends up fulfilled, happy and rich, and Jenny, who is involved in every counterculture movement from the folk boom to free love to SDS to the Black Panthers and beyond to the cocaine-filled discos of the 1980s, and who thus stands in Buchanan's mind for liberal values, which he calls "amoral and sluttish." Buchanan sums the film up thus:

"Stupid is as stupid does," is Forrest's retort to all who call him an idiot. That is the movie's message. Beautiful and intelligent, Jenny follows the trends of the 60s and 70s, lives in sadness and sorrow, and dies young. The stupid way. Forrest, crippled, with an IQ of 75, does what is right, and wins fame, wealth, honor, love. "Forrest Gump" celebrates the values of conservatism.... In "Forrest Gump," the white trash are in Berkeley and the peace movement; the best of black and white are to be found ...in the Army of the United States. (Buchanan 1994:C5)

The difference between the points of view of Buchanan and New York City public Advocate Mark Green, each of whom read the movie through one of its proverbs, provided a fascinating moment on CNN's *Crossfire* program on September 5, 1994.

MARK GREEN: the dominating metaphor of the film...is a feather buffeted by the breeze, and the dominating epigram of the movie is ... 'Life is a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get.' Randomness is not a conservative value.

PATRICK BUCHANAN: The theme of the film is, 'Stupid is as stupid does. Forrest Gump goes to Vietnam. He follows his Mama's advice. He goes into business. He is always honorable and decent and chaste and full of fidelity, and he triumphs ... doesn't it suggest that the trendy causes of the 60s...were false?



Here, Green interprets “life is a box of chocolates” differently from Medved, concentrating on the second half of the proverb, and concludes that it is a proverb about randomness. From this, he draws the further conclusion that the movie glorifies a life of random wandering over one of intelligently chosen direction; like Medved and Buchanan, he is using one of Gump’s proverbs as a key to the film’s interpretation.

In the academic sphere, scholars have also engaged in this form of “fabular reading.” Although he calls the film a parable rather than a fable, Peter N. Chumo II clearly believes the film has a message, and that that message is expressed in a proverb:

Gump cannot adequately explain his run across America but claims that it is probably about putting his past behind him: “My mama always said, ‘You’ve got to put the past behind you before you can move on.’” This could be the message of the film as a whole. For a nation often 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 (Chumo 1995:7).

Like Buchanan and Green, Chumo grounds his interpretation in one of the film’s proverbs, making it seem relatively solid and unassailable.

Interestingly, Thomas Byers finds his own interpretation on the same proverbial moment in the film, but has a far more incisive and critical approach. For Byers, *Forrest Gump* is a movie that is precisely about “putting the past behind us,” but not in the benign and happy sense Chumo means. Byers locates the film’s central contrast as the one between Gump’s claim that “I just felt like running,” with the slightly more honest one that “My momma always said you got to put the past the past behind you before you can move on.” He points out that, when Gump makes both of these claims, he is actually running in response to his grief at having been abandoned by his sweetheart Jenny. The first claim, that he just felt like running, is clearly an evasion. It is belied by his second claim, that he is running to put his past behind him. But he still never reveals just what aspect of his past

he is referring to, fooling himself (if not the critical interpreter of the film) about his real motivations.

For Byers, this is the central moment of *Forrest Gump*, because for him the film is about obfuscating the past and ensuring that it will be forgotten, so that a whitewash project can take place. It is a movie about fooling ourselves, telling ourselves lies about the past to make it more palatable in the present. In Byers's estimation, *Forrest Gump*'s "erasure of history...clears the space for a programmatic, highly politicized revision of the period that the film recounts" (Byers 1996:421). In other words, it puts the (real) past behind us, so that we can move on with a project of imagining a more pleasant past, present and future.

Another academic who has done work on *Forrest Gump*, Judith Zinsser (1995:91), admits that the film confused her. Her confusion, she says, is centered on a question about two of the film's proverbs, which she refers to as "mantras" (the quotation marks around the word are hers): "just how does 'you make your own destiny, Forrest,' reconcile with the serendipitous nature of 'Life is just a box of chocolates?'" As I noted above, Zinsser misquotes the box of chocolates proverb, assimilating it toward "life is just a bowl of cherries." She assumes that it means that everything in life is good, even if it does come as a surprise sometimes. On the other hand, "you make your own destiny" suggests a hands-on, active attitude towards life, where nothing is taken for granted. Zinsser cannot reconcile these two proverbs, but in the end, she decides, "perhaps I have understood. There simply are irreconcilable contradictions in the film..." (Zinsser 1995:97).

In misquoting "life is like a box of chocolates," Zinsser has missed a rich opportunity to show those contradictions coexisting within a single proverb. Still, her overall point, that the film contains a multitude of different, incompatible ideas, many of which are encapsulated in proverbial form, is quite true. Indeed, this is what some people who have engaged in fabular readings of the film have missed: that there is no single proverb that really sums up the movie's many ideas.

This is, of course, because *Forrest Gump* is not really a fable, in the stricter sense of the term. Like the so-called "fables" of the *Panchatantra*, on which B. E. Perry comments in his in-

fluent work on fables, the storyline of *Forrest Gump* is too long, too involved and too complex to be subordinated to a single principle. In its narrative style, it much more closely resembles the classic picaresque novel, with a central protagonist wandering through a set of episodic adventures, tempered with some of the *bildungsroman's* emphasis on a character's growth and development. Like the classic works of these genres, it stops to moralize along the way but cannot claim to have a single moral.

If "fabular readings" imply that the fables under scrutiny have a single, transparent meaning, so also do they ascribe that kind of meaning to the proverbs that serve as morals. Like traditional proverbs, however, Gump's new proverbs in fact speak with many voices and are subject to many interpretations. Mark Green's interpretation of the film, for example, takes for granted that "life is like a box of chocolates" is a proverb about randomness, even though that interpretation does not seem to have been a common one. Moreover, there are two different commonly understood meanings for "life is like a box of chocolates." Obviously, a single moral cannot so easily be extracted from a proverb, much less a fable.

Despite these shortcomings of fabular readings, particularly applied to a text like *Forrest Gump*, it remains true that many have read the film in this way, extracting a single sentence from the film, interpreting it, and taking that interpretation to be the movie's central point or theme. The frequency with which this key sentence is one of Gump's proverbs is another indication of the power of the kind of entextualization enjoyed by these catchphrases. Proverbs, as one of our smallest genres of folk poetry, have always functioned as condensed nuggets of discourse that can be deployed within other discourse to clarify and enhance meaning; this is how they become morals of the story. By their deep intertextual connections to the proverb tradition, Gump's catchphrases accomplished the same feat. This suggests that catchphrases are not only catchy marketing tools on the one hand, or annoying clichés on the other, but also (at least potentially) powerful contributors to the way a film is interpreted by its audience.

***Proverb History and World History in "Forrest Gump"***

In this final section, I will engage in the ongoing and public process of critical reading, or interpretation, of the film *Forrest Gump*. Like "fabular interpretations" of the film, my own reading will focus on its proverbial moments. However, unlike them, my interpretations will not attempt to extract a single, monologic meaning for each proverb, and use that as the more or less transparent meaning of the movie. Instead, my reading involves the process of using proverbs and relates that process to other ongoing processes in the film. Most prominently, it engages the process of representing history. My goal is emphatically not to provide a single and monologic reading of *Forrest Gump* as either conservative or liberal, but rather to problematize the readings that have been offered by showing that this film, like proverbs themselves, speaks with many voices.

The interpretation and representation of history was a crucial issue in most critical readings of *Forrest Gump*. The political fabular interpretations of *Forrest Gump* cited above from both academic and popular sources revealed that many people saw politics as central to the film's message. Indeed, readings of Gump from both the left and the right of the political spectrum have seen it as a politicized rewriting of the history of the sixties and seventies, only one of popular culture's many projects in this area (cf. Glover and Kaplan 1992).

Once again, examining *Forrest Gump*'s proverbs can help us gain insight into an important area of criticism; *Forrest Gump*'s treatment of American history is similar in many ways to its treatment of the histories of individual proverbs. For example, while the characters of Gump and his mama are purely fictional, we are told almost immediately after the film starts that Gump is a direct descendant of Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the confederacy's Civil War heroes and a founder of the Ku Klux Klan. Forrest's family history, then, is a combination of real history that is common knowledge among educated Americans, and pure fiction, in the same way that each of Gump's proverbs mixes real world history (e.g. the "box of chocolates" metaphor) and fictive history (e.g. Mama always said...).

The film goes farther than merely to claim that Gump was descended from Nathan Bedford Forrest. In the first of the movie's celebrated special effects sequences, Tom Hanks (as Nathan Bedford Forrest) is digitally inserted into footage from the early feature film *The Birth of a Nation*, portraying a group of mounted Klansmen charging down a country road. This is a fascinating piece of revisionist cinema history; rather than merely showing the undoctored clip while Gump recounts his ancestry (in that context, it would have been obvious enough that one of the men on the screen was supposed to be Nathan Forrest), the director has taken the pains to insert Hanks into the scene, and to style the actor's hair and beard to resemble the general's. This makes the scene into a kind of cinematic collage, in which several layers of fictionalized cinema history are simultaneously visible.

It is oddly appropriate that the makers of *Forrest Gump* should choose *The Birth of a Nation* as the one feature film from which to quote. It is considered the first American feature film, so *Gump* is at once aligning itself within that tradition. But *The Birth of a Nation* is also the first American film to engender serious controversy surrounding a film's portrayal of history, much as *Gump* would later do.<sup>28</sup>

Further special effects sequences take the process of collage a step further. Instead of combining footage of Hanks with footage from other fictive-historical films, they insert Hanks into real footage of real people and events. Hanks is seen wandering around when the University of Alabama is desegregated, he is made to converse with several U. S. presidents, and he appears on *The Dick Cavett Show* with John Lennon. All of these scenes are textual collages similar to that of the *Birth of a Nation* footage in that real world history involving famous people is combined with fictive history involving Gump. In this case, however, the footage in question contains images of the real historical figures, not images of actors portraying them.

Historians who criticize historical film usually use some form of the argument that, in the words of film historian Robert Brent Toplin (1996:1), "Hollywood's interpretations of American history can make a significant impact on the public's thinking about the past." Therefore, historians like Pierre Sorlin (1980) Daniel Leah (1990), and Michael Parenti (1992) have criticized Hollywood films for their lack of historical accuracy

and their tendency to reduce complex situations into simple interpersonal conflicts. All of these tendencies, they argue, obscure rather than illuminate history for the majority of filmgoers.

A more severe critique of historical films is advanced by Michel Foucault, who argues that one of the *raisons d'être* of the historical movie is the suppression of the truth about the past. Foucault's position is that historical films, like chapbooks and popular books about history, are at root an attempt to "obstruct the flow of...popular memory" (Foucault 1979:91). Foucault seems to see this "popular memory" as the collective memory of the working class, previously kept alive through oral history, folksongs and popular written accounts, but now atrophied due to the stream of false history foisted upon them from above. In this view, films about history are a deliberate assault upon the knowledge of ordinary people, a politically motivated attempt to deceive.

Foucault's ideas about the historical film are flawed in a few respects; for one, he maintains a romantic orientation towards the past, believing that the "popular memory" embodied in folksongs was objectively accurate, untainted by bias, and exclusively a product of the lower classes, which of course it never was. Nevertheless, his criticisms of historical movies are cogent and well-founded, and they have been influential. For example, Byers's interpretation of *Forrest Gump* follows Foucault's somewhat alarmist lead; for Byers, the film's manipulations of history are one-sided, serious and unforgivable. *Forrest Gump*, he argues, completely erases the past in favor of a new vision of history that serves only the most powerful of interests.

To a certain extent, all of these critical comments on historical films in general, and on *Gump* in particular, are valid. On a practical level, the frequent use of many of Gump's proverbs by the public indicates that the mixture of fictive history and real history is a potent force that allows the proverbs to be accepted as old by at least some people. This supports the most basic arguments of historians who critique historical films; clearly, if the combination of a proverb's real and fictive histories helps it seem genuine, the combination of real and fictive facts and events may likewise appear genuine in the public's imagination.

However, the more severe criticisms of *Forrest Gump* are harder to support. The textual collages scattered throughout *For-*

*rest* Gump, for example, argue against Byers' account of the film as a supremely successful whitewash project, in which real history is completely whited out and replaced by fiction. While this does occur at some points of the film, it is more common for the film to engage in the sort of blending of history and fiction discussed above. This is what gives the film's proverbs some of their memorability and verisimilitude, but it is also what undercuts the believability of the film's history.

As a single proverbial example, let us examine one of the film's most amusing scenes of proverb use. During his coast-to-coast jog, Forrest steps in what critic Jay Boyar (1994:EI) has politely called "malodorous droppings." Immediately, one of his followers tells him what has just happened. Gump, unmoved, merely shrugs and says "it happens." "What happens," the other man asks, "shit?" The next scene shows a bumper sticker reading "shit happens," with a voice-over by Hanks explaining how the man made good money by selling the expression. This scene is juxtaposed with another one in which Gump similarly originates the leave-taking formula "have a nice day" and its association with the ubiquitous yellow smiley-face.

These scenes are clearly unbelievable, farcical. Partly this is because the origins of our proverbial phrases and other entextualized items of culture seem ahistorical. But more than this, the fact that these two events are piled up on one another in this way contributes to their lack of reality. Previously in the movie, Gump has been seen to originate Elvis's hip-swinging dance, to be present at the integration of the University of Alabama, to be the man who turned in the Watergate burglars. In short, Forrest has been pivotal to history and culture in ways that affect everyone's life, and these two moments are merely more examples.

Our common sense tells us that no single person could have done all of these things. The effect of the film's claims therefore is to produce humor and laughter at the suggestion of what is impossible, rather than indignation at the suppression of history. While the film doesn't tell us how "shit happens" was really coined, it does, by the use of humor, tell us it was not the way the film depicts it. While there is no real clue in the movie as to the origin of Elvis's body language, we are sure that Forrest wasn't it. The piling up of all of these unlikely moments into the life of one person makes them even more farfetched.

Byers has pointed out that the humor inherent in the scenes of Forrest's insertion into history puts serious critics of the film's problematic historicity at a disadvantage:

By being overtly comic, they allow for a kind of "end of ideology" defense of the film, in which critics of the film's politics can be seen as humorless ideologues, tied to dogmas of "political correctness" that are seen as anachronistic and irrelevant in our postindustrial, post-Civil Rights, postfeminist, allegedly egalitarian contemporary America (Byers 1996:439).

Here Byers recognizes that the unreality of these scenes is not meant to be mistaken for reality, that the scenes are overtly playing with what did not happen and could not have happened. However, he ignores some of the deeper potential significances of laughter in art. Bakhtin was convinced, for example, that the festive laughter provoked by Rabelais' grotesque novels was of the highest political significance; he wrote that "festive folk laughter ...means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (Bakhtin 1968: 92), and furthermore that ordinary people use "festive comic images to express their criticism, their deep distrust of official truth..." (Bakhtin 1968: 269).

The scenes involving Gump coining well-known phrases, as well as some of the most memorable moments of collage, hint slyly at such Rabelaisian subversion. When Forrest slips in shit and inadvertently coins "shit happens," for example, we are shown a literalized or reversed metaphor involving what Bakhtin would call "the material bodily lower stratum."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when "have a nice day" is coined, Gump is wiping mud from his face. Both of these involve figurative reversals, such as Gump's head being covered in dirt. Both show words of wisdom generated from filth. Both feature a man getting rich from Gump's getting soiled.

In both scenes, then, the American economy, popular wisdom (and the commodification thereof), and the ethical implications of catchphrase formation itself—in which one person gets rich by imitating what another person has said as part of natural speech—are shown to be laughable and farcical, as they are symbolically pushed down into mud and feces. Both scenes pro-



voke the kind of festive laughter of renewal that Bakhtin found so pervasive in Rabelais, an all-encompassing laughter at the economy and Hollywood as well as at Gump; the film is laughing not only at us, the consumers of Hollywood cinema, but at itself as well.

Gump's encounters with various American presidents, similar to the proverbs in their combination of real and fictive history, are part of this picture as well. When he meets John F. Kennedy, Gump has consumed about thirty bottles of Dr. Pepper, and can only answer the President's question ("How do you feel?") with the revelation: "I got to go pee." In another scene, he bares his buttocks for Lyndon Johnson, showing off his war wound. In both of these scenes, *Forrest Gump* debases the presidency by associating it with the body's lower regions and functions; the head of state becomes the butt of our laughter. In both of these scenes, a sense of festive laughter is introduced, of laughter aimed at the highest political office in the United States. This laughter is not merely frivolous, but an important part of experiencing *Forrest Gump*. It is far from conservative, and even smacks a bit of the radical.

Byers has his own ideas about the seriousness of these sequences, ideas that ignore their humor and attend instead to other effects:

By manipulating history, these techniques flatten it, turning it into a spectacle.... But these emptying out effects, we must note once again, are not ends in themselves; they clear the way for a renarration of the history of struggle that serves the most powerful of entrenched interests and carries a vicious edge under its carefully contrived demeanor of historical innocence (Byers 1996: 439).

These comments are perceptive, and he backs them up with strong arguments concerning the plot of the film. He demonstrates, for example, that *Forrest Gump* consistently portrays the counter-culture as violent, repressive and unenlightened; Jenny's boyfriend the war-protester is abusive, the Black Panthers are sinister posturing demagogues, and so on. Furthermore, he points out that involvement in the counterculture is shown as an aspect of Jenny's dysfunctional personality, which also leads her to co-

caine abuse, AIDS and death. All of these, he argues, serve the film's essentially reactionary agenda.

However, often in *Forrest Gump* a counter-narrative emerges that confounds even rich and complex analyses like Byers's. Byers points out, for example, that Forrest's experiences in the Viet Nam war and in the Peace movement argue unambiguously that the counterculture was "bad" and that serving in Viet Nam was "good." He shows that, for example, the hippies are shown as rude, untidy, and hypocritically militaristic, while the soldiers are, in Forrest's words, "some of America's finest young men." He points out that Wesley, Jenny's counter-culture boyfriend, abuses her in much the same way that her father did, while Forrest by contrast protects her, suggesting that "those who went to Viet Nam were the mamas' boys (as are both Forrest and Bubba) who rejected the violence of their fathers, while those who rebelled against the establishment and the war were the spiritual heirs of these fathers" (Byers 1996:435).

But this ignores several key features of Forrest's experience. With his I.Q. of 75, Forrest is considered "a goddamn genius" in the army, partly because he does not know and does not care what the war is about or even that it is violent; he believes that he and his friends are searching for an elusive fellow named Charlie. Thus his "rejection" of violence is really only stupidity. Forrest's opinion of his fellow-soldiers is equally suspect; he does not know that they are killing anyone until much later.

Byers also fails to mention (at least, at this point in his argument) that there is another pivotal soldier in the film who obsessively follows in the bootprints of his violent forefathers, and who shares characteristics with both Jenny and her father. This is Lieutenant Dan, who is in the war precisely because he is following his fathers' tradition; we are even shown a gruesomely funny series of quick scenes in which his ancestors are gunned down, one by one, in America's many wars. Unable to function after the war, he becomes an alcoholic and a promiscuous womanizer, at one point coming close to physical violence against a woman. In all of these particulars he is reminiscent of Jenny's drunk and abusive father, of the abusive boyfriend Wesley, and of the addicted, self-abusing Jenny. If the film imagines the counterculture as a haven for sullen and violent misogynists, it portrays

the army and the war as experiences that can produce just such characters.

Thus, the film's political views of the war and the anti-war movement are not as clear-cut as Byers (or Pat Buchanan, for that matter) would have them. Indeed, there were some viewers of the film who saw it as a liberal whitewash, stealthily disguised as a conservative film.

The fact that a film or a single scene can be subject to many simultaneous interpretations, or even that it can "mean" simultaneously in opposite directions, should not come as a surprise. The idea that meaning does not reside entirely in the text, but rather is negotiated in the interface between text, performer and audience, is by now commonplace in Folklore, Film Studies, and Cultural Studies. Nonetheless, interpretations like Byers's still read cinematic texts as monologic narratives.

The relevance of *Forrest Gump*'s proverbs to its treatment of history, then, is manifold. To begin with, there is an isomorphism between the film's use of proverbs—entextualized nuggets of discourse that have a "history"—and its use of people, places, events and cinematic images which are similarly historical. Moreover, the success of Gump's proverbs at "emerging" from out of the context of the film and into mainstream discourse suggests that the concern of historians over the distortion of history in *Forrest Gump* and other movies is not misplaced; there is a real danger that cinematic and other popular culture renderings of history can similarly affect the consciousness of many filmgoers.

At the same time, the humorously nonsensical ways in which history is rewritten—exemplified by the moment when the proverb "shit happens" is coined—can be read as affirming that there is a real history, and that the film is not it, in much the same way that readers recognized "peas and carrots" as a statement similar to, derived from, but not identical to "two peas in a pod." Furthermore, the laughter provoked by scenes of proverb formation is laughter at some of our core economic values, and some of the values that the film and the Hollywood establishment itself stand for.

In short, it is difficult to say with certainty whose aims are being served by the film's distortion (or creative re-imagining) of the past. Like Zinsser, who finds Gump's proverbs, and thus

the film, inherently multivocal and even self-contradictory, many viewers may leave *Forrest Gump* feeling that the movie sends mixed messages about history, politics and power. What is certain, however, is that *Forrest Gump*'s use of proverbs is closely tied to its use of history, and therefore enlightening for the study of the film as a whole.

### ***Conclusion***

If anything has become clear from our analyses of the catchphrases in *Forrest Gump*, it is that individual catchphrases are drawn directly out of traditions of proverbial speech, borrowing elements of different proverbs and encasing them in traditional proverbial structures. This results in what can only be called new proverbs—and it's heartening to note that the editors of the recent *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012) have listed some of Forrest Gump's sayings. Similarly, the great lesson learned from proverbial interpretations of the film is that, for the public, for professional critics, and for other figures attempting to interpret the film, catchphrases act like proverbs; Gump's proverbial catchphrases became the cornerstones of many interpretations, including to some extent my own. In this important regard, then, the movie catchphrase and the canonical proverb share functional traits as well as proverbial roots.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, interpreting proverbs can be seen in certain important ways as a guide to interpreting larger texts such as *Forrest Gump*. The proverb was subjected for too long to the monologic interpretations of lexicographical glosses, scholars seeking "national character," and others. So, too, have films been subjected to this type of interpretation. Instead, we can take our cue from the last several decades of nuanced proverb scholarship, and attempt to see the many contradictory potentialities of meaning embedded in films, waiting to be variously activated by audiences. This more revealing, but also less cut-and-dried, less concrete process is the kind of interpretation that can best predict, explain and explore how different social actors come to use texts, whether proverbs, catchphrases, movies, or great works of literature, as equipment for living their lives.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> To date, very few articles have treated the use of proverbs in movies in any detail. In most cases where the movies are mentioned (e.g. Bryant 1951), it is only a passing reference, and only relates to proverbial movie titles such as *Finders Keepers*, *Fit For a King* and *Fool and His Money*. An important exception to this is Donald P. Haase's 1990 article on *The Company of Wolves*, which examines how this surrealistic film uses traditional proverbs in both old and new ways. Haase follows the lead of the wealth of scholarship that has dealt with proverbs in various literary works. He catalogues the proverbs and shows how some applications of proverbs are examples of traditional wisdom, and how others present challenges to that wisdom. The approach taken in this paper is based on an intertextual theory of proverbs, as described in several previous publications of mine (Winick 1998, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "to go ahead" has not been considered proverbial or even metaphorical by most previous scholars, so no records exist as to its origins or its earliest uses. However, it is clearly metaphorical, and in fact entails some of the core metaphors of our culture that are so basic as to appear almost literal, detailed by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*. In specific, the phrase involves the metaphors that life is a journey, and the future is ahead of us. Thus, to proceed in life, to "take the next step," as it were, becomes to "go ahead." See my discussion of "You've got to put the past behind you before you can move on," below.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article, I cite the Lexis/Nexis database as a source on the age and frequency of proverbs in newspapers. The database I used was All-News, which has since been discontinued by Lexis/Nexis in favor of other news databases. Therefore, it will be difficult for future scholars to replicate my results exactly. However, I am confident that the ages I claim for various proverbs will continue to be supported, if not exceeded, by searches on the successor databases. The phrase "to make my day," for example, first appears in my searches of the Lexis/Nexis database in 1975. It is undoubtedly older, and future searches will probably turn up even earlier examples of it.

<sup>4</sup> Almost certainly, Partridge would have included quotations from other media as well, had he thought of it.

<sup>5</sup> Nigel Rees, who compiled the more recent *Dictionary of Catchphrases* (1995), follows Partridge in most theoretical matters. He is even more explicit on the overlap in genres, stating that "it is possible for a phrase to be several things at once: catchphrase, slogan, idiom or whatever." As with Partridge's earlier dictionary, Rees's contains true proverbs, Wellerisms, proverbial phrases and comparisons; it is more apt than Partridge's to include movie lines. The observation that there is no dividing line between proverb and cliché is similarly supported by most dictionaries of clichés since Partridge's pioneering effort. James Rogers (1985:vii) makes a unique distinction, claiming that "if a proverb still gets heavy duty in the language, it [also] ranks as a cliché," while Betty Kirkpatrick, in her excellent introduction to *Cliches*, writes that "many clichés start life as proverbs" (Kirkpatrick 1997:xi), but does not explain exactly how they pass over the threshold into being clichés. She does, however, create a whole category which she calls "proverb clichés." G.L. Permiakov (1979)

famously included the proverb as a kind of cliché, but he expanded the meaning of cliché quite a bit from what many of these other authors mean.

<sup>6</sup> There have been other works of scholarship that mention catchphrases. Alexander (1984) attempts to distinguish between catchphrases and proverbial phrases, but does so poorly; his catchphrases all appear to be greetings (e.g. “what’s up, doc?”), even though he lists greetings as a separate category. Simon (1980) thinks that proverbs and catchphrases should be better distinguished, and criticizes Partridge on this account, but offers no suggestions for how to make this thorny distinction.

<sup>7</sup> The difficulty any outsider would have in guessing which dictionary each of these phrases came from only underscores how subjective a process the selection must have been.

<sup>8</sup> Negative reactions to catchphrases can affect critical responses to the film, but they probably don’t damage a film’s box-office sales. This calls to mind an occupational proverb I have heard from the publicity community: “the only bad publicity is an obituary.”

<sup>9</sup> This proverb is not, to my knowledge, included in any proverb dictionaries. I have heard versions of it several times, including Springsteen’s version and one from the movie *White Men Can’t Jump*, where it becomes “some days, the sun even shines on a sleeping dog’s ass. II

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that the database is most complete for recent years, and gets less and less complete the further back in time one looks. Most phrases, even our most common ones, cannot be tracked much earlier than the late 1970s in the database.

<sup>11</sup> This may be because the statements “dying is part of living” and “death is a part of life” are not as concretely metaphorical as many proverb scholars prefer. However, many English-language proverb dictionaries do include the phrase “dying is as natural as living,” which is also quite literal. Clearly, the two proverbs are different, but related.

<sup>12</sup> Once again, the non-metaphorical nature of these phrases may have kept them out of most proverb dictionaries; nevertheless, I believe them to be short sentences of wisdom with as much claim to proverbiality as “honesty is the best policy,” “first impressions are the most lasting,” and other items accepted into our proverb dictionaries.

<sup>13</sup> This is also similar to the uncollected proverb noted by Doyle (1996:80): “Some things never change.” 101

<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, I have shown that “x is x” has a specific meaning that prevents it from being tautological: “one example of x should be (or can be) treated as any other example of x.” Hence, “a promise is a promise, so don’t try to get out of this one,” “a man’s a man, so don’t discriminate against poor people,” “business is business, so don’t expect a special deal based on a personal relationship.” It also means that any item, plugged into the pattern, can access the proverbial meaning. If a scientist is asked which paramecium he wants prepared on a microscope slide,” and he answers “a paramecium is a paramecium,” the message is conveyed that they are all the same and it doesn’t matter

which one, even though that specific phrase may never have been uttered before.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is likely that, in the early examples of this proverb that use “handsome,” the word is referring not to looks but to abilities; “handsome does,” in other words, refers to “doing handsomely,” in other words, doing things skillfully.

<sup>16</sup> The phrase “To put the past behind” someone occurs more than 3,000 times in the Lexis/Nexis database. As for “move on,” because there is no way for the database to distinguish literal moving on from the folk metaphor, an accurate count is impossible.

<sup>17</sup> I have also seen the pattern elsewhere, as for example, “I should walk before I dance.” (Levin 1992:114) referring to writing short stories before progressing to novels.

<sup>18</sup> In order to tease out both the origins of this proverb and the consequences of those origins for the proverb’s meanings, I turned to various recontextualizations in the Lexis/Nexis database, originally taken from a wide variety of news sources.

<sup>19</sup> Medved is making a subtler point than the one that “life is always good.” Indeed, he bristles at the suggestion that *Forrest Gump* is a “sappy, feel good movie.” In a speech given in 1995, subsequently published in the Hillsdale College publication *Imprimis*, Medved explained his views to students in a leadership course:

[Forrest] goes through a series of almost unimaginable tragedies. He is born with limited intelligence..., is forced to wear braces on his legs, [and] is incessantly tormented by his peers. He goes to war and watches his best friend die, while his courageous commanding officer loses both legs.... His adored mother also dies before his eyes, and the woman he has loved since childhood... dies within a few months of their marriage.

But instead of whining, Forrest Gump held fast to his unshakable optimism and felt grateful for what favors he received. [sic] That’s the deeper meaning of the movie’s signature line, when Mama Gump tells Forrest: ‘Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re gonna get.’ That is the most important lesson we can teach our children: to accept life, even at its most tragic, as a gift from God. (Medved 1995)

Medved’s interpretation of the catchphrase is thus based on a paradox: even tragedy is sweet. The more common interpretation, that “life is always good,” shares aspects of Medved’s but avoids its open paradox.

<sup>20</sup> In *Forrest Gump*, Mamma Gump’s original statement is that life *is* a box of chocolates. Forrest misquotes her slightly when he states that life *is like* a box of chocolates.

<sup>21</sup> This adaptation is particularly interesting to me in that it is clearly based intertextually on three different proverbs: “life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get,” “life is sweet,” and “life is hard. II By

“stacking” the three in this particular way, psychotherapist Marion Wikholm suggests that the three are comparable or related statements.

<sup>22</sup> The previous two variants were found on greeting cards.

<sup>23</sup> Although my search revealed only its use in news sources (*i.e.* magazines, newspapers, professional newsletters and radio and television transcripts), they make clear that it is not only professional journalists who have picked up on the phrase. It also appears in letters to the editor and other write-in features, as well as in direct quotations from both public figures and private citizens.

<sup>24</sup> Once again, we must take care to examine the stories and make sure we account for reprintings of the same article or quotation. When British Prime Minister John Major said that taxes and the Labour party went together like strawberries and cream, for example, he was widely quoted. The fact that this sentence, out of all the things he had said during that week, was picked out for such frequent quotation is certainly due to the phrase’s being part of the “proverb process,” but we could not conclude from all of these quotations alone that the phrase was widely used by others.

<sup>25</sup> The exceptions to this rule are “love and marriage” and “a horse and carriage,” whose popularity was ensured by the Sammy Cahn song.

<sup>26</sup> The other film that has been analyzed in depth for its use of proverbs, *The Company of Wolves* (cf. Haase 1990), also features an older woman, Rosa-leen’s grandmother, as the main source of proverbs.

<sup>27</sup> I uncovered 19 different reviews and stories that use the term “fable”; these were found in my own files of articles that quoted “life is like a box of chocolates,” “stupid is as stupid does” or “like peas and carrots” in the four years after the movie was released. There are undoubtedly more articles that called *Forrest Gump* a fable without directly quoting these catchphrases.

<sup>28</sup> *Forrest Gump* is, in fact, a complex patchwork of intertextual reference to other films; *The Birth of A Nation* is the most obvious, but others spring to mind as well. *Sergeant York*, for example, features a war hero who during the war has plans with his best friend to ride on the New York Subway. Since his friend is killed, York takes the subway ride alone. Gump, similarly, has plans with Bubba to start a shrimping business. After Bubba is killed in the war, he starts the shrimping business alone. When York returns from the war, he is offered many lucrative endorsements, which he refuses because “Uncle Sam’s uniform ain’t for sale.” When *Forrest Gump* returns, he is also offered lucrative endorsement opportunities, which he at first wants to reject for similarly ideological reasons. His Mama convinces him to accept, however, with the obviously uneasy justification that “it’s only a little white lie.” These plot similarities and differences are hardly likely to be mere coincidences. In similar ways, *Forrest Gump* refers to or resonates with many important films in Hollywood’s history.

<sup>29</sup> I do not, of course, believe that *Forrest Gump* is the real coiner of this phrase; indeed, if the phrase really had originated in the movie, this scene would not have been funny. The humor depends, in this case, upon the phrase already being familiar to the audience. However, the film depicts Forrest, with-



in its fictive history, as the phrase's coiner; this is what I mean when I write that he "inadvertently coins the phrase."

<sup>30</sup> All of these phrases depend on the proverb tradition for both their production and their reception, and all can therefore be considered proverbial using a communicative or intertextual theory of proverbiality.

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