

A Rhetorical Analysis of *Forrest Gump* from the Perspective of Triangle Theory

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Human activities could never escape from the domain of communication theories. Rhetorical theory has been considered as the basic art of persuasion, which covers various discourses in different fields including films in the media. The film of *Forrest Gump* has been defined as a rhetorical piece from the perspective of communication theories. This essay attempts to cultivate the depth of the film theme by using the rhetorical theory with evidence, identifying three critical element: pathos, ethos, and logos. In the film *Forrest Gump*, pathos refers to the unconditional love and simplicity of the characters; Ethos confirms the credibility by examples such as historical connections; and logo is supported by the evidence in accordance to the law of causality. The analysis is a positive inspection with truth messages and considerable thoughts, which have to some extent cultivated the theme of love and simplicity, suggesting *Forrest Gump* is indeed a good movie worth watching.

Keywords: rhetorical theory, *Forrest Gump*, pathos, ethos, logos

Introduction

Human life can never escape from communication activities. Communication theory plays an important part of modifying all the communicational activities. Different theories have different functions in different particular areas. Rhetorical theory is considered to be the basic art of persuasion. Films could be included in the rhetorical discourse.

The novel of *Forrest Gump* written by Winston Groom Forrest in 1886 (Winston, 2002), was put to screen by Robert Zemeckis (Passafiume, 2015). The film *Forrest Gump* has a natural to spread express its charm since its birthday in 1994. For over 30 years, one man has captured the hearts of audience everywhere, he is Forrest Gump; the movie that could not be removed from the must-watching list is *Forrest Gump*. *Forrest Gump* has just celebrated its 20th anniversary with a 7-day IMAX release, proudly being the winner of its six-time-award (Nicholson, 2014). The Vietnam War would not always be remembered by the recent generations but *Forrest Gump* would be. The image of the not-so-smart South American boy has always been connected to the universally popular verbal tag "Life is like a box of chocolate; you never know what you gonna get". *Forrest Gump* has not only been defined as a historically patriotic film but also a loving-theme philosophical document that is full of softness in emotion and rich in life philosophy. The particular themes that the author wanted to

claim were the unconditional love and simplicity in human nature. From the perspective of persuasion arts in communication, this film can be defined as a rhetorical piece.

This essay attempts to analyze the movie *Forrest Gump* (AU, 1994) by using the rhetorical theory with a purpose of cultivating the depth of the theme. It is also expected to maximize the widest range of application and extend the future possibilities of such a rhetorical triangle theory. First, it is necessary to talk about the concept of rhetorical theory and the device it uses. Secondly, the plots and contexts of the movie will be analyzed with the rhetorical theory, of which the issue would be built in the following body paragraphs: the pathos, the ethos and the logos, hence the analysis with a rhetorical theory is regarded as a good way to convince the audience with the acceptance of the movie.

The Concept of the Rhetorical Theory

The origin of Rhetorical theory, namely the rhetorical triangle, could be dated back to 5th century BC Greece (Stephen, 2008). Philosopher Aristotle first contributed the most influential starting point for the definition of rhetorical theory, in which he claimed that rhetoric theory was the art of discovering all the available means of persuasion (Foss, 2012), he definitely pointed out that the rhetoric was the ability to seek the possible means of persuasion in a given case (Wikibooks, 2015). In other words, rhetoric was originally connected to the art of persuasion. Rhetoric has the synonym of communication since it has been broadly used in communication activities among many human activities. Correspondently, rhetorical theory is also considered as a pragmatic and practical doctrine, which influenced greatly in the Western education with progressivism and pragmatism (John, 2011). The Aristotelian doctrine has been frequently applied not only by the influential teachers in Roman such as Cicero, but also the peripatetic writers (Christof, 2010). In modern time, the rhetoric field covers various forms in discourses: literature art forms such as poems, songs, sermons, songs; public speeches such as ceremonial speech, political speech; media discourse such as films, radios and televisions. The central of the rhetorical tradition are constituted by five canons—invention, arrangement, style, delivery, memory and delivery (Brett, 2011).

However, Aristotle identified the three critical elements: pathos, ethos, logos. Pathos appeals to the emotion of audience, which are always evoked by the innocent characters or touching contexts (Mountainman, 2015). Ethos, rooted from the Greek word “ethikos”, with the meanings like morality, the state of being, and the soul which convince the credibility or authority of the speaker or author (Foss, 2012). In other words, Ethos is the reasons that people should believe what are you saying. Logo is also one of the important appeals that describing facts and figures to support the logical rationality of the analysed materials (Mountainman, 2015).

An Rhetorical Analysis of *Forrest Gump*

Pathos

The pathos, or emotion of the movie was portrayed by the natural presentation of basic plots, the artistically release of the explicated emotional labels, and the metaphorical awakening arousals, the stylistic context setting and unique narrations, and the expression of characteristic traits.

First, the film starts with a stylistic context setting that white leather floating around the town and eventually land on Forrest Gump's feet. The floating feather in the air opens up the sensation of the film, was a perfect metaphorical awakening arousal to absorb people into the world of imagination. The good use of sound effect

softly moves the audience forward with warmth. An emotional question has been aroused that “What’s the destiny?” Is it as unsettled as a light feather or as mysterious as a box of chocolate? Is it controlled by ourselves or by God?

Thoughts would be lasting with the unique narrations about Forrest’ sitting on the park-bench at the bus station, narrating his memory of the past. A flashback with peaceful tone have the audiences drawn to the world of wondering. Born with a sub-standard IQ of only 75 and handicap on legs, Forrest Gump witnessed life miracles through his innocence and pure love. Instead of being cynical, he accepted whatever happened in his life without any complaint.

Second, his deepest connection with mum’s love was expressed by the technique of repetition. His oral phrase tag was “Mum says”, which was the strategy that the successfully win the audience’ admiration by setting each character repeating familiar quotes: “my mum says ‘life is like a box of chocolate, you never know what you are gonna get’”; “my mum says ‘that was the magic shoes’; ‘Forrest, don’t let anybody tells you that they are better than you, if god wants everybody to be the same, he’d given us all braces on our legs...’”, “as a part of life that everybody is destined to”; which transforms the spirit of the Christian philosophy. It should not be neglected that the philosophy teaching and heartfelt arousal were also conveyed colloquially.

Moreover, appropriate context settings explicitly shaped the characteristics of the man. “I am a stupid man, but I know what love is.” He did not speak much, but what he said was truth from the bottom of his heart. Technically, the settings of runs were one of important strategies to express the theme of the Forrest’s simplicity as well as the power of love. All these scenes of Runnings display nothing except his innocence and simplicity, and it is such simplicity that help this film to earn the audience’s love and admiration as well as the main character Forrest Gump. With lots of unconditional love in his heart, he was kind to everyone in and beyond his life circle, including his mother, Jenny, son, and the comrades like Bubba in the battle Field, or even stranger at the bus stop.

Last but not least, his simplicity can be well found in his obedience in the natural flow of life track. Actually, he does whatever is told without any complaint, which has been best revealed in the plots of the army (Youtube, 2012). When asked what his sole purpose in the army is, Gump responded without hesitation that “to do whatever what I am asked to”. It is so much appreciable that the author has successfully expressed his loving theme through a great many vivid portraits of such a pure character.

Ethos

The ethos or credibility of this film has gained great credibility from the audience by connecting the historical events and producing touching sound & visual effects. In a word, the real-life context leaves little doubt for the audience.

Claim 1: This film deserves to be the Academy Award winner for Best Achievements in the visual and audial effect (Tim, 2015). A perfect combination of sound and visual effect creates the life-like context of the film. Talking back of the opening scene, the lighting looks natural as an overcast day, then it gradually turns brighter as the music continues. As the lighting became brighter, the editor tries to inform the audience that something would happen in the town. The setting appears to be ordinary, indicating something ordinary happens in somewhere in this town. Other examples may refer to the scene that music escalates stronger while Forrest was awarded for his triumphant run; and impressively, in the last minute of the ending, soft music reverberates in wind, leaving

endless thoughts to the audience. Music has always been the powerful tool to elevate the effect of the screen play, with no exception here.

According to George Murphy, the director who managed the visual effect, it took combinative effort and technology to achieve the level of movie realism (Dirks, 2015). It is reported that there were 120 visual effects achieved by a wide range of techniques: such as live-action motion control, computer graphics and animation, optical composites and rotogravure mattes, blue-screen photography and matte painting. The reality of movie has to be largely attributed to visual effect (Dirks, 2015).

Claim 2: The editor enhanced the credibility of this film by placing it with historical elements. The historical events provide an insight look of the American society from the 1960s to 1990s: the Elvis' Dancing, presented by the tenant in Gump's house, which was a national phenomenon (Elvis, 1956) during Gump's childhood; the Vietnam War indicates the tension background of that period. Besides, the black and white television clips exactly revealed the facts of a not-so-technological era. The scene turned up so real in the news that Gump was meeting with three Presidents: Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon (Dirks, 2015).

Claim3: It is applause that the film became more reliable by using the rhetorical device of symbolization. In other words, simple objects were used to imply deep meanings. The floating feather has well symbolized the unsettled destiny whereas the box of chocolate was compared to the unknown future; the comfortable shoes were borrowed to express a positive attitude towards life vision. It should not be neglected that this movie has selected appropriate actors for each character. For instance, Tom Hanks is the perfect actor to play the hero Forrest Gump, since his own personality was so coherent with the personality of the main character Forrest Gump. Furthermore, the other main characters involved highly in this movie are typical figures in the very society, which have effectively reflected Gump's personality.

Logos

The logos, refers to the logic or rationality of this film. The director managed to perfect the logos of the movie with senses by accomplishing coherence to the law of causality and the language characteristic.

Claim1: The main character Forrest Gump's destiny was definitely coherent with the law of causality: from a mentally inadequate birth to war hero, his persistent attitude and pure character are the main causes for his unexpected successful life. Another good reason to his successful life is that the involvement with the people in his life. The logics were presented in the unconditional love for mother to the child, which is the natural human relationship; on his unconditional love to Jenny and to the war soldier in the army, all that reveal no contradiction to his pure nature. So the love is logically express in the movie.

Claim2: The language characteristic is perfectly fit to the special personal feature. The use of simple daily expressions, idioms and slangs create a close intimacy to the audience, at the same time it is the perfectly matched to the pure personality of Gump. In order to reveal his mental inadequacy, special languages were designed for his character. Gump often uses simple words, and sometimes made mistakes in grammar and context. "Bubba was my best good friend" "we was always together" (staff, 2014) are the representatives of oral mistakes that he has always made.

Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis is a positive inspection with truth messages and considerable thoughts, which has to some extent cultivated theme of love and simplicity, suggesting *Forrest Gump* is indeed a good movie worth repeatedly watching. With more concern on the emotional reveal, the pathos like love issues have been more wildly discussed than any other matters in the movie. The use of each element in the rhetorical theory has briefly shaped the emotion, the authority and the logic of the movie; it is revealed that *Forrest Gump* is indeed a movie of love, life philosophy, and splendid screen work. However, the question about what the human's destiny is remains ambiguous and controversial. Either for its high literature value or artistic merit, or an achievement of motion movie, the film is worth watching for times. More plots are expected to be cultivated for a deeper understanding at theme. It can be both entertaining and educational.

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