

The Garden and the Gardener: Towards a Cinematic Twist for America's Prelapsarian Fantasy

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Introduction: Three Men in Heaven

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, two days after Christmas 1988, director Hal Ashby's long-term plan for drug-induced self-destruction was at last fulfilled. Three days later, on Sunset Boulevard his friends gathered for a memorial. One of the sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll-generation's most consistently successful Hollywood directors, one of America's best editors, was dead. He has been barely remembered since. The memorial concluded with Ashby's most enigmatic scene: a well-dressed man in a vast snow-touched garden walks away from the camera. In this sense of course, it is Ashby, not drug-fucked on this occasion but elegantly shuffling off his mortal coil. The figure moves down towards a lake's edge. Approaching the water he does not feign to stop but continues on. When he is half-way out, stepping gently on the surface of the pond he begins to wonder at what he is doing. He stops bemused, dips his umbrella down into the water. It goes all the way. Only after he tests the depth does he realise he is walking on nothing but the delicate surface of the water. The revelation barely phases him. He continues on towards a partly submerged tree and begins to tend to it - as any good gardener would.

The gardener in this scene from the film *Being There*, Chauncey Gardiner, or Chance/the/gardener, depending on your hearing is, of course, Peter Sellers. In this final, miraculous, scene it does not do to say that Sellers is **playing** Chance. Through a decade of obsession Sellers became Chance. Fittingly it is one of his (do I mean Chance's or Sellers'?) last appearances on film. The actor's obsession with the novella *Being There* (1971) was so

Through a Glass Darkly

strong that he became the driving force behind the motion picture (1979). Its story was his. For Sellers the final scene became, as it did for Ashby, a path towards a heaven of his own making. The last line of the film is emblazoned on his memorial plaque in Golders Green cemetery: 'Life is a State of Mind.' The line is as empty of meaning as Sellers seemed empty of self.¹

The third man who brought the film of *Being There* to fruition was the author of the story Jerzy Nikodem Kosinski. He would outlive the other two until he took his own life in a bath in 1991 after seeing Peter Greenaway's *Drowning by Numbers*. Kosinski also believed he had touched some kind of heaven in the writing of *Chance*, 'I longed to create a character like this in order to give me a sort of high point of suspension. This is my heaven to reach that kind of spiritual buoyancy.'² Yet more than this, Kosinski himself was also *Chance*, although in a very different incarnation as *Nikodem Dyzma*. This simple-minded yokel rises to supreme political power in a novel from pre-war Poland. As Kosinski's biographer notes of the novel, '...[Dyzma] was more on the order of a blueprint, a plan of action for life.'³ *Chance* was therefore Kosinski's even more refined blueprint.

It is this blueprint that lets us into the heart of both Kosinski and the film and in this paper, I would like to concentrate on the origins of a character who would go on to star in one of the most remarkable films of its age.

It is easy to speak of Kosinski as a troubled man: harder to sketch him as a religious one.⁴ The author, born in Lodz, Poland

¹ As demonstrated in his famous television interview with Michael Parkinson where Sellers refused to appear as himself, so came on instead as a German. See,

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s1153923.htm>

² Michael Shumacher, 'Jerzy Kosinski' in *Writer's Yearbook 1990*, volume 60, 83.

³ James Park Sloane, *Jerzy Kosinski: A Biography*, New York, 1996, 66.

⁴ His credo can be found in two general areas. It is circumscribed in the article

in 1933, once said he worshipped being alive. When pressed to explain if such a state came from God, he replied that he was more interested in the gift than the giver.⁵ Thus, his motivations for writing a religious, or at least mythical, aura into his novella and then into the screenplay cannot be said to be part of his own 'spiritual' journey. Of his life journey much is yet to be settled for Kosinski left a great deal of obfuscation in his wake. There is no doubt that he was a mythomaniac and any critic must remain reticent to make any definite conclusions concerning the link between his art and his life although recent scholarship on the author is beginning to catch up. The debate on his worth as a writer now concentrates on how his fanciful self-refashioning informs on, or devalues his fiction. The author's numerous statements that the *Painted Bird*, was mostly autobiographical seem far-fetched in the least.⁶ He additionally claimed to have perfected English in the three months after he landed in the United States in December 1957. It seems now clear that he regularly hired translators and editors to help him finish his books.⁷ In 1958 he was awarded a Ford Foundation fellowship to continue his doctoral studies but eventually gave up formal study to concentrate on his writing. A few years later he married Mary Weir, the widow of a U.S. steel magnate and entered the upper echelons of U.S. society. This fact gives *Being There* an autobiographical aura. After a series of well-received accounts of

'God &...' where the author writes, 'I'm a missionary to only **one** particular life: the life that is within me; and I proselytise only one faith: my faith in the sanctity of life. I refuse to pass judgements on the religious beliefs of others.' J Kosinski, *Passing By*, New York, 1992, 160.

⁵ Laurence S Cunningham: 'The Moral Universe of Jerzy Kosinski' *America*, 11 November 1978, 329.

⁶ Kosinski's aligning of his own youth with the boy of the *Painted Bird* has since been questioned by Joanna Siedlecka and James Park Sloan, see the latter's article 'Kosinski's War' in *The New Yorker*, 10 October, 1995, 46-53.

⁷ See Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith, 'Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words' in *Village Voice*, 22 June 1982, 68-70. These aspects of Kosinski's mythomania do not in any way lessen the quality of his work and should encourage critics to be sharper when it comes to linking Kosinski's life with his art.

communism under the pen name Joseph Novak, *The Painted Bird* and other novels followed under his own name. Kosinski developed as a major American story-teller while remaining a significant work of fiction in his own right.

Being There: The Novella

When reading *Being There* we imagine the plot to be simple and its religious dimensions mostly a reflection of the opening tales of the Hebrew Bible. Chance is a simple gardener whose life begins and, it seems, is destined to end in a garden. He is himself a reflection of this *hortus conclusus*, shut off from the world except by a series of television sets that are both his, and our, gates into this character's infantile interior life. Indeed, he resembles an Adam-like figure, '...a prehistorical, pre-self-conscious being.'⁸ Just as importantly, the world remains ignorant of Chance. When 'the Old Man', the only one to ever delight in the garden, dies lawyers come to close the house and dispose of the estate. They are surprised to find Chance. They ask him for papers that prove his identity. He has none but, ironically, adds '...you have me. I am here.'⁹ They persist in asking him to justify his existence in the house or state his claim regarding the estate. It is here we learn that Chance is an un-being, a human, born and bred in America, yet without papers, medical or dental records, social security card or birth certificate. In essence he embodies the double-nature of being both home-grown and a perfect stranger. The lawyer Franklin asks Chance to sign a waiver against any claim he might make against the estate. Not for the first time we are let into the machinations of Chance's mind through the narration,

[Chance] tried to calculate the time needed to read a page. On TV the time it took people to read legal documents varied.

⁸ Herbert B Rosthchild Junior, 'Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*: Coriolanus in Postmodern Dress' in *Contemporary Literature*, 1988, XXIX, 1, 54.

⁹ Jerzy Kosinski, *Being There*, London, 1970, 23.

Chance knew that he should not reveal that he could not read or write. On TV programmes people who did not know how to read or write were often mocked and ridiculed. He assumed a look of concentration, wrinkling his brow, scowling, now holding his chin between the thumb and forefinger of his hand. 'I can't sign it,' he said...¹⁰

As the talent of reading and writing do not 'get in the way,' as it were, of Chance actually reading the document, he is then able to produce an ideal, perfected performance of how one should read a document. Interestingly, Chance cannot keep this up. When asked to sign he confesses that he (literally) cannot sign the document. This is taken by the lawyers not as a sign of illiteracy but as an indication that Chance is preparing a claim. They ask him to leave.

Packing some clothes of the Old Man, and so impeccably dressed, Chance wanders out onto the streets for the very first time. Expelled from the garden he encounters the fallen world, his Adamic aura holds true. Yet it is only once he is expelled that he runs into his Eve, or more precisely she runs into him. He is hit by a limousine and the full import of his name becomes apparent.

Distressed by the accident, the woman in the car, Elizabeth Eve Rand or EE, takes Chance home to where her elderly, wealthy and dying husband, Benjamin Rand, has fitted out their home as a hospital. If EE's husband Rand, like the dead Old Man, somehow represents (or mirrors) a God slowly wasting away, then we already have a complication of Œdipal proportions, one that few commentators have noted.¹¹ Rand, unable to meet the

¹⁰ Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 25.

¹¹ It seems that only Lewis is insightful enough to see a connection between Chance and EE (Eve in the film) and the young Harold and the octogenarian Maud of Ashby's 1971 motion picture that drew Sellers to him, and Sellers' own bizarre relationship with his mother Peg. See Roger Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, New York, 1997, 604ff.

duties of husband, infers to his wife that the stranger might be an appropriate replacement.¹² With alacrity, Chance the gardener, renamed Chauncey Gardiner through a mishearing, becomes part of the household.

A visit by the President of the United States to Rand leads Chauncey to an introduction with the head of state. When faced with complex questions concerning his own history, his personal life and finally, (with the president) on questions of the economy, Chauncey responds with infantile answers that are constantly misinterpreted, to his credit. A simple statement about gardening is taken by Rand and the President as a profound metaphorical comment on national affairs. Then, once he is quoted by the President, Chauncey becomes an overnight national media star. Towards the end of the book he has become a permanent fixture in the Rand household. The penultimate scene of the book has a group of men discussing possible candidates for election to a particular position (which position is not made clear), they rule out all possible candidates as being corrupted by their past. Finally they agree that Chauncey Gardiner, the man without a past, is their '...one chance.'¹³

In identifying the religious nature of the novella, a critic might say that the Jewish and Christian parallels are never far from this tale of gardens, old-man God-figures, an infantile Adam and a sexually desirous Eve. Linking this with an idea of an American Civil Religion outlined by Bellah, one sees that *Being There* supports the idea of America as a religious entity as precious as the Holy Land itself.¹⁴

Additionally, Lupack avers that the positioning of Eden on American soil is central to a US literary experience.¹⁵ More than

¹² Kosinski: *Being There*, op cit, 72.

¹³ Ibid, 135.

¹⁴ See, Robert N Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, Chicago, 1992.

¹⁵ Griffiths, op cit, 139.

just a link to the religious, Lavers suggests that the 'obvious biblical parallels of the first few pages of the novel push the reader towards interpreting the action allegorically.'¹⁶ And it is in this mode that we continue reading. Such a reading posits the United States as both containing Eden and representing a new postlapsarian realm. Such a reading is problematised however, for Chance's '...consciousness differs from ours in that he is not fallen, not an alienated being.'¹⁷ It is indeed his innocence that separates him from us...

Chance... is not an intellectual defective or a mental retard but an innocent. Chance's thought processes are, as the text shows, complex and subtle, they simply do not relate to the cultural expectations around him...¹⁸

It is this innocence that will cause not Chance, but those around him to profoundly reassess their lives. In this way we can argue then that Chance transmogrifies from an Adam figure to a Christ figure but not because of any identifiable action, rather because of Chance's reactive presence transforming so many other characters as he passes by. The lawyer, the President, Rand, Eve and numerous others are all affected by Chance.

So, to get at the heart of the character, from where is it that we can say Chance originates? Initially, we can point to twentieth century developments in Polish literature and single out the successful 1932 novel of Tadeusz Dolega-Mostowicz, *The Career of Nikodem Dyzma*. In this novel a denizen of society's fringe becomes, thanks to a series of fortunate happenings, misunderstandings and a great deal of guile, a political success

¹⁵ Lupack makes a comparison between Chance and Lewis' archetypal man in his new world garden. Barbara Tapa Lupack, *Plays of Passion, Games of Chance*, Bristol Indiana, 1988, 63. See, R W B Lewis, *The American Adam*, Chicago, 1955.

¹⁶ Norman Lavers, *Jerzy Kosinski*, Boston, 1982, 77.

¹⁷ Herbert B Rothschild Junior, op cit, 55.

¹⁸ Gareth Griffiths, 'Being there, being There: Postmodernism and Post-Colonialism: Kosinski and Malouf' in *Ariel*, 20, 4, 1989, 142.

story. It is a novel that is directed to the limitations of nascent Polish democracy, and in it we can identify the basic plot of *Being There*. In fact, according to a friend from his youth, Nikodem Dyzma seemed to change Kosinski's life.

To Kosinski, however, the book was far more than a work of literature. It was more on the order of a blueprint, a plan of action for life. He assured Stash Pomorski of his intention to follow in the footsteps of Nikodem Dyzma, who bore, after all, his own uncommon middle name.¹⁹ Yet this immediate literary heritage does not explain the infantile dimensions of Chance's nature.

A better answer for Chance's origins can be found after a quick glance at Kosinski's oeuvre. This shows us that Chance is in fact a typical Kosinski character inverted. For Chance provides yet another answer to a question that plagued the often paranoid Kosinski: how does the individual negotiate a place for himself in a brutal world? Whether or not *The Painted Bird* is biographical, the source of inspiration for Chance as he is comes, not from Polish literature, but from Kosinski's experience of recent European history and the need, as his father put it, "to live your life unnoticed."²⁰ He demonstrated this motto to the young Jerzy by changing the family name at the start of the Nazi invasion from the very Jewish Lewinkopf to the absolutely common Polish Kosinski and then decamping with his family to the no-man's land of the Polish South-east – acts that, together with a lot of non-Jewish help, enabled this Jewish family to survive their occupied homeland. With such a background it is not surprising that Kosinski's characters can be easily spoken of as existing within the paradigm of victim/victimiser.²¹ A standard example of

¹⁹ Sloane, op cit, 66.

²⁰ Ibid, 8.

²¹ Scott C Holstead, writes in 'The Dialectics of Getting There: Kosinski's *Being There* and the Existentialist Anti-Hero' archived at www.well.com/user/sch/kosinski.html accessed 12 February 2004, 'An initial response to *Being There* often might be to focus upon the text as a type of creation anecdote, or as a social satire, or perhaps as a political critique against

a character who avoids being a victim to better victimise others would be Tarden the main character of *Cockpit* (1975).²² Sherwin writes of this character,

...Tarden... adopts a variety of disguises.... Disguise thereby enables the individual to be free to create his own image of himself, rather than have that image imposed upon him. In addition disguise provides a tactic for self-protection.²³

As part of his survival plan Tarden is both interested in creating selves and ready to run away from them. Paradoxically, by denial of self, self-protection is his ultimate goal.²⁴ Chance is Tarden's negative. He has no self-generated disguise, he is *not* free to create an image of himself except that he becomes whatever he has just seen on television and yet even this allows him a similar fantasy of total control: 'By changing the channel he could change himself.... Thus he came to believe that it was he, Chance, and no one else, who made himself be.'²⁵ The various disguises Chance takes on in other people's eyes (let us call them his various 'social faces') only develop because people impose their understanding of Chauncey upon Chance. This occurs most clearly when Chance tells a gay man at a party that 'he likes to watch.'²⁶ For the reader Chance is obviously talking about television, but the man thinks he is talking about voyeurism and an act of masturbation then takes place in an upstairs bedroom. This act leaves the man satisfied and Chance

mass media and the television generation. While all of these readings are legitimate, it seems that the starting point should center on Kosinski's protagonist, Chance, in order to understand the universal significance of the portrayal of Chance, and implicitly the reader, as victim.'

²² Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit*, New York, 1994, 34ff.

²³ Byron L Sherwin, *Jerzy Kosinski: Literary Alarm Clock*, Chicago, 1981, 25.

²⁴ And similarly Kosinski's own sense of paranoia can be found hinted at in his general motto '*larvatus prodeo*' (I go forth disguised) a favourite line of Descartes borrowed by him from Ovid.

²⁵ Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 9.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 108ff.

bemused. Similarly, in the very next section of the novella EE, the wife of Rand takes Chance's catchphrase 'I like to watch' in much the same way and a similarly satisfactory act of sex is completed for her. She adds, enrapt, yet also the victim of her own delusion,

You uncoil my wants, desire flows within me, and when you watch me my passion dissolves it. You make me free, I reveal myself to myself and I am drenched and purged.²⁷

Ultimately, Chance's lack of identity appeals to everyone in their own way. His surface, like the surface in the pond of the film, bears him along. To victimise Chance would be to down - to end up a victim to his emptiness. Thus, it is Chance's unique circumstances that give him the same self-protection as a Tarden, it is also, of course, Kosinski's way of satirising quite viciously the quality of life in a televised America where a man empty of serious quality is perceived to be replete with qualities through the distortion of an all-pervasive medium.²⁸

As I have shown elsewhere²⁹ that commentators such as Lavers,³⁰ Holstead,³¹ Griffiths³² and Lupack³³ rush to link *Being*

²⁷ Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 117.

²⁸ 'Gog and Magog triumph in the country where for over seven hours a day an anxiety-driven populace habitually channels its own rapidly shrinking attention span into spectacle-fed TV; where literacy evaporates from education as fast as life's meaning from a shopping mall and humanness from a medical ward; where infant mortality and crime set national records even in the nation's capital...' Kosinski, *Passing By*, op cit, 135.

²⁹ Christopher Hartney, 'Between Sacred and Secular: The Pop Cult Saviour Approacheth!' in (Cusack et al, eds) *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Sydney, 2005, 282-290.

³⁰ Who mentions both the work of Kosinski's friend Jacques Monod [*Chance and Necessity*] and the passage in *Being There* where the chance life of plants adds an existential assumption to the plot. Lavers, op cit, 79.

³¹ '*Being There* is a major existentialist work following in the tradition of Sartre and Camus in which Chance... mirrors Camus's Mersault in *A Happy Death* and in which Kosinski demonstrates the logical progression of the existentialist

There to an existentialist heritage. In fact Chance seems on one level so divorced from the reality about him that he seems to have a particularly 'Camusian touch' as the main Russian in the book Skrapinov might say. For example as Lavers states '...the world of Chance is an existential world where man makes his own meaning, or else lives pointlessly and dies'.³⁴ The novel, however, undercuts such readings on a number of levels. Primarily Kosinski's characters survive, '...while the nameless protagonist of his second novel, *Steps*, might admire the arrogant individuality of [Camus'] Meursault.... He would really think Meursault naïve for not understanding his situation before it became deadly.'³⁵ Whereas with *Chance* it seems as though an unseen (probably random) mechanism of the universe, allied with the surface of television, is keeping him safe. In this way, if we take as a basic principal of existentialism the idea of commitment to a possibility of existence, then *Chance* is already beyond such a commitment, nor is he trapped in a cloud of *ennui* because he has failed to make such a commitment. Complicating this approach by identifying influences of Heidegger in *Being There* barely satisfies as an explanation either. Certainly, Kosinski gave the working title of the novella as *Dasein*, yet *Chance* is too strange and sophisticated a figure to be effected by the *angst* of his impending death nor is he living a life *Sein-zum-Tode* or being-to-death. *Chance* remains innocent of death's pull on himself, rather, he only realises its reactive effect on life as it is idealised in television dramas, 'On TV, after people died, all kinds of changes took place-changes brought about by relatives, bank officials, lawyers and businessmen.'³⁶ His being-

anti-hero.' Scot C. Holstead, 'The Dialectics of Getting There: Kosinski's *Being There* and the Existentialist Anti-Hero,' archived at www.scottholstead.com/papers/kosinski.html accessed 7 February 2006.

³² Griffiths, op cit, 139.

³³ Lupack, op cit, 141.

³⁴ Norman Lavers, op cit, 78.

³⁵ William Kennedy: 'Jerzy Kosinski, On Still Being There' in *Critical Essays on Jerzy Kosinski*, London, 1998, 66.

³⁶ Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 14.

in-the-world is so highly conditional that it increasingly makes no sense to speak of him as being in a Heideggerian manner. In fact the plot of both novella and film reveal a lack in Existentialism and to a lesser extent the works of Heidegger – how do these systems accommodate children, the infantile and those who are mentally incapable of understanding such precepts? Of course as Holstead has shown there are parallels in style between *Being There* and other existential novels, but it does not do to say that *Being There* is a doctrinal manifestation of Existentialist ideals. Other influences are more strongly at work.

Despite Laver's belief regarding men making their own meaning or living pointlessly, whatever commitment is made by other characters in the novella their being is nevertheless undercut by the presence of Chance (and so, chance). It is not surprising that the biological accidentalism proposed by Kosinski's friend Jacques Monod is often looked to as the real philosophical point behind the novella³⁷ and I believe this is a more certain approach to Kosinski's work after 1970. For in *Being There* even self-generated meaning is shown to be pointless. Existentialist readings would be more fitting if the novella itself did not play such a joke on the perfect happenstance that leads to Chance's never-ending rise. In fact, the reader could very easily dismiss the idea that any life could be such a collection of fortuitous events and co-incidences that plague *Being There* and other novels such as *Blind Date*. That the reader continues to read has more to do with our willingness to enjoy the story rather than to be challenged by a clear existentialist world view. The best understanding thus comes, not from a philosophical appraisal,

³⁷ Kosinski maintained a close relationship with Jacques Monod whose *Le hazard et le necessite*, Paris, 1970 (translated the following year as 'Chance and Necessity') seems to undergird Kosinski's attitudes to a fate that is so prevalent in life it victimises any sort of meaning. 'The scientific discoveries of Monod and of other biologists led him to postulate a fundamental theory that there is no plan in nature... to guard against [our] powerful feeling of destiny should be the source of our new destiny' Byron L Sherwin, *Jerzy Kosinski: Literary Alarmclock*, Chicago, 1981, 45-6.

but an appraisal guided by the genre of the piece for *Being There* is at heart a fable.³⁸

The text clearly signals to the reader its fabulous nature. When Chance, as Chauncey, is introduced near the end of the book to the Russian ambassador, Skrapinov, he asks Chance ‘...do you by any chance like Krylov’s fables? I ask you because you have that certain Krylovian touch.’³⁹ The ambassador is then moved to recite some Krylov in Russian and when Chance smiles at the completely unusual sounds, the ambassador concludes that Chance knows Krylov in the original. The overt reference to Krylov highlights the theme of *Being There* and how ‘...language can establish a duplicitous relationship between speaker and hearer, writer and reader.’⁴⁰ Kosinski simply deepens the relationship. Where a fable should (seemingly) say one thing and mean many things, Kosinski provides us with the tale of a character who says one thing and is understood by all in their own way as completely satisfactory. The argument by Lily that ‘...*Being There* is a fable about perfect language, one that captivates the listener while revealing nothing of the identity of the speaker’⁴¹ is quite just, particularly when consider below how Chance fits into Kosinski’s wider stable of characters. Additionally, in order to deliver the anti-television propaganda of the novel in the same scene we find the French ambassador assuring Chauncey that one must occasionally ‘accept fables as reality’⁴² although the full import of this statement will resound most fully in the ending to the film. What seems most to drive the

³⁸ Welch D Everyman, *Jerzy Kosinski: Literature of Violation*, San Bernadino, 1991, 57. ‘[*Being There*] is, in fact, something of a fable, a contemporary fairy tale in which, by a strange series of circumstances and coincidences, a humble gardener finds a place for himself among the powerful and wealthy.’ This is backed up by references in the novella and film by the Russian ambassador to the fables of Krylov.

³⁹ Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 88.

⁴⁰ Paul R Lily Junior, *Words in Search of Victims: The Achievement of Jerzy Kosinski*, Kent, 1988, 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 60.

⁴² Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 92.

novella as a fable is the profound connections between Chance and his televisions. With his simple statements beautifully misconstrued each time he talks, Chance becomes a new kind of Everyman because of his stunning ability to *channel* the essences and ideals of modern humanity almost exactly as they have been distilled onto television; a medium whose *raison d'être* is its mass appeal.

Television

In the novel the television operates initially as an obsession of Chance's and more profoundly, as a reference point for human behaviour. Kosinski introduces the reader to Chance's television as almost a portal into another dimension, a wardrobe to Narnia,

Chance went inside and turned on the TV. The set created its own light, its own colour, its own time, it did not follow the law of gravity that forever bent all plants downward. Everything on TV was tangled and mixed and yet smoothed out: night and day, big and small, tough and brittle, soft and rough, hot and cold, far and near...

That is television, with its other worldly, gravity-defying laws, balances out the dramatic syzygies of life leaving one neither over- or underwhelmed, justwhelmed. Totally passive in fact.

In addition to arguing for an Existentialist heritage to *Being There*, Lupack also argues for a comparison to high myth. She suggests that in Chance we have the retelling the Narcissus story which is moot. If we take all Chance sees on television as a mirror of himself, and Kosinski suggests we should,⁴³ we can come to understand the enormity of this tale for the concept of *being* in a televisual world. 'Though Chance could not read or write, he resembled the man on the television more than he

⁴³ Kosinski, *Being There*, op cit, 9, 'By changing the channel he could change himself.... In some cases he could spread out into the screen without stopping.'

differed from him...'⁴⁴ and in a world where television increasingly serves as the model for correct behaviour, Chance can also be seen as, the analogy is fitting, a perfect social and psychological car accident. And just like him, we 'want to watch,' compelled to constantly see what will become of us and so reduced to a vegetative state just like Chance and the plants he tends. Gordon adds,

Being There is more than a political or cultural fable; it is also a psychological fable about the ways television may mediate our sense of self. The characteristic contemporary disorder of narcissism originates in the oral stage, when the infant cannot differentiate the breast or the world from itself. The assumption, rightly or wrongly, behind the metaphors applied to television is that it somehow induces a regression to oral passivity.⁴⁵

Thus this link between the narcissistic and the televisually-psychological forms the inner core of the novella that then becomes the foundations upon which the sacrality of the motion picture is able to develop.

I look forward to providing a detailed reading of the film in a future paper, but what we have analysed in this brief is the philosophic, literary and mythic sources of the general fascination generated by a seemingly dull and vacuous character. Chance in his nascent form as Dyzma thrilled Kosinski and who, thus inspired, was able create a literary figure that came to be obsessed over by Sellers and as a figure to remember and celebrate Ashby.

It is hard then not to consider, as I often do, that the ghosts of these three men exist in a loop-play of the final scene of *Being There*. For the last scene of this film has become a kind of heaven that each of them reached in their own way. It is a scene,

⁴⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁵ Andrew Gordon, 'Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* and the Oral Triad' *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, Vol 19, No 2, 1989, 3.

Through a Glass Darkly

however, that ends a film which for so many others is either a stunning work of genius or a one-joke flick too thinly stretched. *Being There* is a *rara avis*; an American satire, it seems only geared to make us laugh, but it also provokes us in a gentle but increasingly profound way. If we watch this motion picture closely enough, we find our laughter driven by something dark within us. It can be disturbing. The film is something that asks us to question our own ideal of selfhood. How then such a film could also represent a kind of heaven for those associated with it is seriously worth investigating. *Being There* comments upon something startling within the culture that created it. And the key to this lies within the almost impenetrable and infantile nature of Chance; a creature we all have the opportunity, possibly, and perhaps the desire to become. Could it be that if we do, we too can approach heavens of our own design starting off across lakes deep enough to drown us.