

Between Sacred and Secular: The Pop Cult Saviour Approacheth!

Christopher Hartney

In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson has demonstrated that the popular culture of the twentieth century shows an increasing tendency to be fascinated by automatons and puppets in human form.¹ She also shows how the puppet gives rise to the concept of puppet-master (human or divine) and stories of automatons with increasing frequency take on a Gnostic cosmology using this basic relationship of human-automaton/human-god to set the mood. This is the case from *Blade-Runner*² to *The Matrix*³ and, through a slightly more oblique path, onto Philip Pullman whose *His Dark Materials* trilogy finds itself a place within the pattern.⁴ We remain fascinated with how the puppet operates in this predominantly Gnostic schema because the automaton or alien presents us with a gauge against which we parry our own measure of human experience. These 'other' beings, however, by allowing us to reflect on ourselves, bring us so close to our understanding of self that inclusion of a sacred aura or reference is unavoidable. One example of a hero, I feel, takes this relationship to another level not because he is a well-known pop hero, but in the way he is depicted as such. Although this character appears in a 1979 film, I will argue that his example allows us a vision of a future where pop, secular and sacred become incorporated in a new sense of self in Western culture.

Stephen Hopkins' 2004 *biopic* based on Roger Lewis' biography of Peter Sellers⁵ (with Australian actor Geoffrey Rush cast in over 30 roles⁶) touches again on an unforgettable period in the cultural life of

¹ Victoria Nelson: *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2001.

² Paris Mawby: 'The Kingdom is Within' in *The End of Religions*, Carole M Cusack and Peter Oldmeadow, editors, Sydney, 2001, 139-154.

³ Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner: 'Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in the Matrix' in *Journal of Religion and Film*, Volume 5, No 2, October, 2001, 1.

⁴ Nelson demonstrates that Heinrich von Kleist's *Über der Marionettentheater*, is a vitally important text for developing the puppet-gnostic nexus and quite separate from Nelson's thesis Pullman in the acknowledgements attached to *The Amber Spyglass* considers this work as influential to his trilogy as Milton or Blake.

⁵ Roger Lewis: *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, London, 1997.

⁶ As I write, Rush has been awarded an Emmy Award for his portrayal of Sellers. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 2005, Arts and Entertainment supplement, 4.

the West and in particular, the United States. There is no doubt that Sellers was a comic force powered from the torturous depths of his own self-hatred.⁷ After the success of the *Pink Panther* series, he was in a position to convince enough people that his obsession to see the novella, *Being There*, realised as a film. During the 1970s Sellers had been hard at work badgering this book's reticent author, Jerzy Kosinski, to sell the rights. A deal was made whereby Kosinski himself finished the screenplay, his only work for film.⁸ Once completed, the film encapsulated one of Sellers' greatest performances. It was the apex for the career of its director, Hal Ashby and it introduced the general public to the wider *œuvre* of Kosinski.

When reading *Being There*, we imagine the plot to be simple and its religious dimensions Biblical. 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 stunted interior life. More 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 to justify his existence in the house or assert his claim regarding the estate. It is here that we learn 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. With no proof that he **exists**, the lawyers ask him to leave. Packing some of the Old Man's clothes and so, quite impeccably dressed, Chance wanders out onto the streets for the very first time. Expelled from the garden, he encounters the fallen world. A limousine hits him and the full import of his name becomes apparent.

⁷ The most touching biography on Sellers' neuroses was penned by the actor's son, Michael Sellers: *P S / Love You*, London, 1982.

⁸ 'I have no affinity for films...I waited nine years for *Being There*, so obviously I was not rushing. I like to think that as a novelist I have far greater creative freedom. Why should I surrender the result of this freedom, the novel, to a collective medium which is going to dismember it and illustrate it with living actors? Even with *Being There*, over which I had almost complete control, a great number of people were probably disappointed – they had seen their own Chauncey Gardiner and now it is Peter Sellers. So in a way fiction depends on being open ended' writes Kosinski in *Passing By: Selected Essays 1962-1991*, New York, 1992, 53. The screenplay itself is available on numerous websites, for example, www.geocities.com/Hollywood/8200/being.txt

Distressed by the accident, the woman in the car, Elizabeth Eve Rand or E E, takes Chance home to where her elderly and dying husband, Benjamin Rand, has fitted out his home as a hospital. Quite quickly Chance the gardener, now renamed Chauncey Gardiner through a misinterpretation, becomes part of the household. A visit by the President of the United States to the king-maker, Rand, leads to Chauncey speaking 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 metaphorical yet profound statement on national affairs and Chauncey becomes an overnight national media star. Through no effort of his own he becomes a pop-culture phenomenon. Towards the end of the book he has become a permanent fixture in the household of Rand and in the heart of his wife.

Kosinski seems to have structured his hero/non-hero to be a development of an Adamic character. A critic might say then that the Jewish and Christian parallels are never far from this tale of, if not an original man in the primordial sense, then at least a man who is ultimately unique. No doubt, the 'obvious biblical parallels of the first few pages of the novel push the reader towards interpreting the action allegorically.'⁹ The United States is the new post-lapsarian realm, E E becomes Eve and Rand the God, who, after Nietzsche, is barely hanging onto life, about ready to ready to leave Adam in charge.¹⁰ This is problematised, for Chance's '...consciousness differs from ours in that he is not "fallen," not an alienated being.'¹¹ We might argue that Chance then transmogrifies from an Adam figure to a Christ figure because of his reactive presence in the lives of so many others. It is, however, a slim argument. There may be some kind of crucifixion hidden deep within the plot but an overt link to Jesus is simply not there. By the end of the book we understand that Chance will not come to a bad end because he reflects the times so perfectly. Moreover, Kosinski is giving us satire, not tragedy. There will be no overt sacrifice. Chance is, at the end, a figure; an

⁹ Norman Lavers: *Jerzy Kosinski*, Boston, 1982, 77.

¹⁰ This 'god is dead' (or at least terminally ill) scenario can be traced through current pop culture from *Blade Runner* with the death of Tyrrel, *Magnolia*, with the death of 'Big Earl,' James Morrow's *Towing Jehova*, New York, 1995 and, of course, Pullman's trilogy.

¹¹ Herbert B Rothschild Jnr: 'Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There: Coriolanus* in Postmodern Dress,' in *Contemporary Literature*, XXIX, 1, 49, 55.

ideal representing an age. By the end of the book he is less a Christ than a tutelary deity of a people but with obvious salvific qualities.

Commentators such as Lavers, Holstead and Lupack are eager to link *Being There* to some sort of existentialist heritage.¹² For example, '...the world of Chance is an existentialist world where man makes his own meaning, or else lives pointlessly and dies.'¹³ This argument stands if Chance's progress through the plot is pure chance. The reader could very easily dismiss the idea that his life is such a collection of fortuitous events. Numerous others place it in realm of fable.¹⁴ Lupack, who argues both lines, additionally suggests that in *Chance* we have the retelling of the myth of Narcissus with the television replacing the pond. If we then take all *Chance* sees on television as an extension of himself, we can come to understand the enormity of this tale for the concept of *being* in a post-television world. 'Though *Chance* could not read or write, he resembled the man on the television more than he differed from him...'¹⁵ and in a world where television increasingly serves as the model for correct behaviour, *Chance* can be seen, pardon the analogy, as a social and psychological car accident. Like him, we 'want to watch;' compelled to see what will become of us. And the equanimity we find in the image Sellers projects as he plays out *Chance's* series of remarkable events, becomes event more compelling than the book. 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.¹⁶

¹² Barbara Tapa Lupack: *Plays of Passion, Games of Chance*, Bristol Indiana, 1988, 141.

¹³ Norman Lavers: *Jerzy Kosinski*, Boston, 1982, 78.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Jerzy N Kosinski: *Being There*, London, 1970, 6.

¹⁶ Andrew Gordon: 'Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* and the Oral Triad' *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, vVolume 19, No 2, 1989, 3.

This link between the existentialist, the narcissistic and the televisually-psychological forms the inner core of the novella that then becomes the foundations upon which the religiousness of the film develops. In order to examine this core more closely, there are two major points we must also consider.

Ultimately, Chance's lack of identity appeals to everyone in his or her own way; his surface is triumphant and so are his unique circumstances. Chance is also, of course, Kosinski's way of quite viciously satirising the quality of life in a televised America: the modern Western world lets say, where a man empty of serious quality is perceived to be replete with qualities through the distortion of an all-pervasive medium.¹⁷ This leads us to what is, given the theme of the satire, a bizarre development; the anti-television novella becomes a film.

At this point it is worth mentioning the director, Hal Ashby. Ashby became a significant Hollywood director during the 1970s, coming not from film school, but from years as editor within various studios. He started the decade with *The Landlord* (1970) and captured in spirit much of Nixon-led America. *Harold and Maude* (1971), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Shampoo* (1975), *Bound for Glory* (1976) and *Coming Home* (1978) give us a clear insight into his work, which included innumerable references to war in general and the Vietnam War in particular. Ashby continued making films into the 1980s, but these are generally regarded as sub-standard. *Being There* was his pinnacle. From these films we can see that for Ashby '...the extreme longshot serves the same function that the close-up does for many film makers – heightening emotion at emotion at critical moments in the narrative – but it does so without forcing a shift to a particular character's subjective perspective.'¹⁸ And this has great import in the last shot of *Being There*.

¹⁷ '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.

¹⁸ Darren Hughes: 'Senses of Cinema: Hal Ashby' archived at www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/ashby.html accessed 12 January 2005.

As noted above, Sellers plays the lead in a very subdued and unwavering manner and, in some of the most famous shots in the film, Ashby has him moving away from us. Again, I stress he is at a distance and yet, through the televisions we know the inner workings of his mind: he is thus closer to us than our own jugular – a crystal bucket man in fact. Leaving the house for the first time, the soundtrack underlines the importance of this action and introduces us to the overtly epic nature of the film by playing a *funkified* version of Strauss's *Also Sprache Zarathustra*. This song turns several minutes of the film into an extended video clip where the newness of Chance's experience in the outside world reminds us of his status as both an 'Adamic prototype'¹⁹ and a man walking into a new realm. It is clear Washington and the capitol will become the place where he dominates as any epic hero would. The 'Adam-in-a-new-world' theme can also go to the heart of the American experience.²⁰ Moreover, in the last scene and the scene with Congress in the background (both used in various promotional material for the film) Chance walks away from the audience. He remains at an amazingly Ashby-esque distance. The major poster, in fact, places Chance in the sky, as a star in the firmament. He therefore borders on something completely divine. These references to the epic nature of Chance's journey, will, I shall argue, make it necessary for the director to alter the final scene to bring the ending into alignment with the body of the film and as we will see, it is at this point the film's religious nature becomes blatantly obvious.

If there is a saviour-like dimension to Chance it lays in his status as a reactive hero. The transference of the story to film without Kosinski/Ashby taking the option of adding a narrative of Chance's internal thoughts, solidifies the lead character's main attribute; constancy. Although Chance is on a journey out of the garden, he is not, in the parlance of modern scriptwriting schools 'on a journey' as a character. His character does not develop, and the humour of the movie relies upon how others adjust their lives to take account of his constancy, and how they react to a being rendered by Sellers' perfect mask-like acting, and the character's perfect language. I say that his language is perfect because it captivates us with its simplicity; a simplicity that must be allegorical in the way that it is misunderstood

¹⁹ Lupack, op cit, 144.

²⁰ 'The eternal Adam in his New World Garden has in fact been the central myth in the American novel for more than 150 years. Ibid, 145.

by other characters and, finally, in the way it tells us nothing of the character's nature.²¹ The televisions complete our picture.

The funeral of Rand, a scene not covered in the book, comprises the last images of the film and it is here that the most religious symbols are displayed: the most obvious being the pyramid within which Rand's body is to be entombed which is decorated with a great eye. The irony is that the same image appears on the one-dollar bill, so, in a way, Rand is being joined eternally to money and at a highly spiritual level. The symbol is, of course, also completely Masonic.²² As Rand's coffin is carried towards the tomb, the six pallbearers discuss who might lead the country. They speak as a corporate unit **as if** they are Masons and have the country in thrall. As they walk, they first admit that the current president is unre-electable. They then run through a number of names. Finally someone suggests **Chauncey**, another adds, 'I do believe gentlemen, that if we want to hold onto the presidency then our one and only chance is Chauncey Gardiner.' The statement suggests that the Masonic influence has spread a lot further than the style of the Rand monument.

The final scene is the most controversial. It does not appear in the printed script and is added by the director for it is clearly an Ashby-esque touch. Again it is a long shot where Chance is walking away from us. We notice that it is the middle of winter. Yet Chance firstly lifts an old branch off a new sprout. This emphasises both his protective nature metaphorically, the simple fact that he is a gardener and the promise of spring. Chance therefore, somehow represents hope. He then sees a tree fallen and dying in the middle of a pond. He walks towards it and halfway there discovers that he is walking on water. He dips his umbrella into water nearby, this shows him and the audience how deep the water really is but, without knowing why, Chance continues to walk across the surface of the water towards the dying tree. The film ends.

The *Chicago Times* critic, Roger Ebert, writes:

It shows us Chance doing something that is primarily associated with only one other figure in human history. What are we to assume?

²¹ Paul R Lilly: 'Vision and Violence in the Fiction of Jerzy Kosinski' in *The Literary Review*, 25, 3 1982, 389-400.

²² See entry, 'Œil' in *Dictionnaire de la Franc-Maçonnerie*, sous la direction de Daniel Ligou, Paris, 1987, 856.

Between Sacred and Secular: The Pop Cult Saviour Approacheth!

That Chance is a Christ figure? That the wisdom of great leaders only has the appearance of meaning? That we find in politics and religion whatever we seek? That like the Road Runner (who also defies gravity) he will not sink until he understands his dilemma?²³

A reader of the book might wonder why this last scene in the film is so extraordinary when, in the novella, Kosinski is keen to play things much more subtly? The answer lies in Kosinski's style as a writer who left much of the experience of his works to the reader. He was never an author who overwrote. The fable and allegory of the work remains present in the beginning of the work whilst the end of the book fragments into glimpses of Chance's life out of the garden. It is the reader's enjoyment, then, to apply Chance as a model to various aspects of life outside the book but within the reader's own world. This open-endedness in the book calls for closure in the film.

I have demonstrated above that the film sets itself up as a comedy of epic proportions. Ashby's film style, as hinted at in his other works, leaves an aura that something great is happening not only in the lives of those who Chance touches, but in the realm of human consciousness itself. But of course, we also know that, for Chance at least, nothing at all has happened. Ebert hits on the enormity of the film's import:

The movie's implications are alarming. Is it possible that we are all clever versions of Chance the gardener? That we are trained from an early age to respond automatically to given words and concepts? That we never really think out much of anything for ourselves, but are content to repeat what works for others in the same situation?²⁴

In the film Chance mutates from an Adam to a modern, television-addicted Jesus. He represents in his lake-walking both the beginning and the end of time. All the world joins him in his *hortus conclusus*: the garden becomes the world. In a way, the audience cries out for an ending like this for it shows in a way that we are not fallen; that popular culture has saved us.²⁵ Chance has become too closely

²³ Roger Ebert, *Being There*, 1979, composed 25 May 1997, archived at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/199705>

²⁴ Ebert, op cit, 1

²⁵ Given these themes it is no wonder that books are beginning to celebrate the justified triumph of popular culture, see, Steven Johnson: *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, New York, Riverhead, 2005.

Buddha of Suburbia

related to both the hero-as-everyman and a hero for the film not to elevate him to the highest possible status in Western society. His promise is that just by being vacuous and passively watching, we shall inherit the world. The passivity of the television-watcher thus triumphs. In this though, we can argue that Chance is actually the devil amongst us, taking on the form, or veneer of a god in order to delude us into a world where we believe we triumph. Watching becomes the ultimate act of the hero, the human and audience member. I suggest that it takes a great deal of thinking to climb out of the shared affinity one has with Chance at the film's end. In this way Kosinski's script, elevated by Ashby's directing, and Sellers' perfect mark, still powerfully provokes us as the novella does, but in order to achieve this, it must use the religious in the overt way it does. The way that it does ultimately provides us with a well-dressed automaton; a *tabula rasa* character that conjoins the sacred and the everyday in a unique and, I suggest, increasingly relevant way.