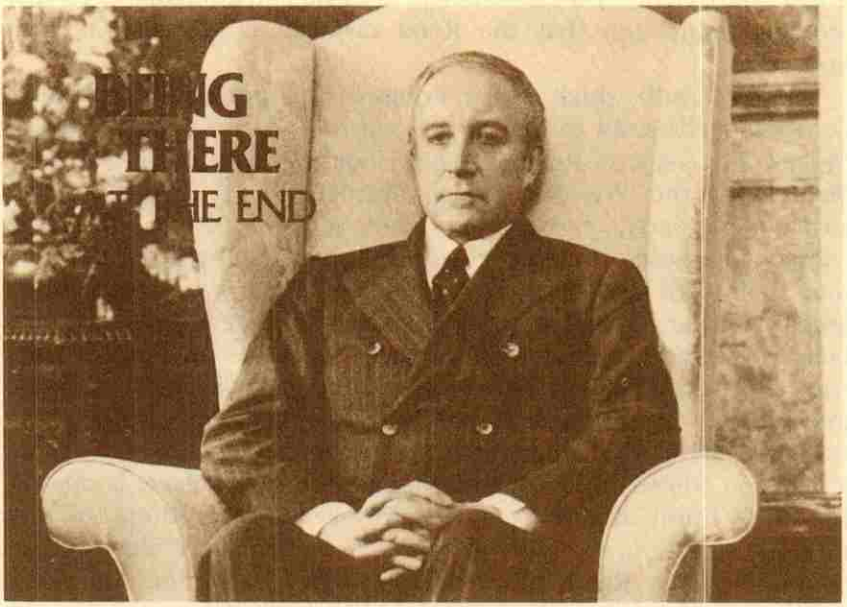

Being There (United Artists/Lorimar, 1979). Produced by Andrew Braunsberg. Directed by Hal Ashby. Screenplay by Jerzy Kosinski, from his novel. Cinematography by Caleb Deschanel. Edited by Don Zimmerman. Music by John Mandel. CAST: Peter Sellers (Chance), Shirley MacLaine (Eve Rand), Melvyn Douglas (Benjamin Rand), Jack Warden (President), Richard Dysart (Dr. Allenby), Richard Basehart (Skrapinov).

Being There, based on Jerzy Kosinski's novel directed by Hal Ashby, and starring Peter Sellers as Chance the gardener, scores a near-triumph of film satire. The muted, slow-paced plot recounts Chance the gardener's story of spectacular rise to fame and fortune with subtle brilliance. What strikes one in fact is the consistency of tone—at least up to the ending—in a tale that invites considerable slapstick and mugging. Consider for example the out-take that Ashby projects behind the rolling credits. This scene would have been included in a sequence that takes place in Rand's private hospital room. Sellers is relaying, in carefully controlled monotone, the message given to him by a black teenager in an earlier scene: "Tell Raphael to get his honky ass. . . ." Sellers breaks up in the middle of his delivery and tries bravely to start over. Each time, however, he loses control and bursts into uproarious laughter. Ashby probably cut this scene from the final print because Sellers could not complete it. It may also be true, however, that he decided against using it because it would have disrupted the otherwise plausible mood of sterile lunacy in the scene. Chance would certainly have been regarded as unstable by the doctors and nurses, thereby endangering his "cover" as a

down-on-his-luck businessman. The final version contributes to the growing impression that the Rand mansion is in reality a mad house.

The skill with which Ashby brings off his portrait of the idiot hero relates directly to his care in controlling each scene in which Chance appears with Rand (Melvyn Douglas), his wife Eve (Shirley MacLaine), the President (Jack Warden), and Rand's doctor (Richard Dysart), even butlers and servants. None of these characters regards the true person in Chance; all see reflected in him their own expectations or vanities. Rand is probably most ardent in pursuing this delusion. Like a modern-day Lear, he believes Chance suffers from the same plight as all businessmen who are overburdened by taxes, exploited by politicians, and misunderstood by the general public. That the dying Rand is so exercised about this dilemma, at the same time he moves about in a mansion whose appointments remind one of a palace, is one of the film's finest ironies. Chance simply echoes everything the old man says, and in the process he is regarded as a sage, caring counselor. That Rand, the President, and 95% of the American public should swallow Chance's child-like fable about gardening as an allegory for social and economic planning trenchantly satirizes the belief that only wise men inhabit the drawing rooms of the rich and famous. Chance makes the supposedly secure feel insecure, the potent impotent. As President Warden watches Chance on TV he is utterly unable to respond to the advances of an oversexed First Lady. On the other hand, Eve finds Chance so suave and sexy that she cannot keep her hands off him—if only to masturbate her way to climax. Her achievement of orgasm comments in powerful fashion on the truth that sexual fulfillment usually qualifies as narcissistic ago massage. All we really need to "succeed" is our own hand and a willing audience. Chance provides that audience. His unqualified love for television, for wanting to watch, is a metaphor for our essentially voyeuristic culture. Most devastating of all the film's ironic truths is that despite the apparent differences in economic, social, and intellectual standing between Chance and Rand, they are twins locked up in a world of illusion and dependent on machines for their survival.

These telling revelations hit home with incremental weight until we suddenly realize that no one—even those who know the truth about Chance's background—seriously plans to burst the bubble of Chance's revered wisdom and potency. Even the family doctor, who spends much of the movie tracking down leads, decides not to tell all after Rand's death lest he destroy Eve's newly-won happiness. His decision is crucial. As Rand's casket is being carried to his tomb, with the President eulogizing the scoundrel without

restraint, the corporate pallbearers can be heard discussing future political decisions. They are seriously considering Chance's chances of becoming the next President of the United States. The film thus reaches the pinnacle of satiric madness in a scene that goes far beyond even the novel's ending, where Kosinski only allows us to overhear Chance's name being placed in nomination for Vice-president. The scene in the film seems to be saying that, from the perspective of big business, the ideal leader is one with no known past and overwhelming popular support.

Being There should have ended here. But Ashby goes one step too far. Instead of dollying back to a long shot of the funeral, with the pallbearers' voices trailing off, he has Chance wander away from the graveside ceremony to a pond that rests at the foot of a hill on top of which sits the Rand mansion. After tenderly arighting a small pine tree plant, Chance looks up at the mansion and begins to stroll slowly into the pond. When I first saw this scene, I thought Chance was intent on committing suicide, an act that made sense only if he were capable of feeling the deep emotion of grief. But the film took care to demonstrate that his only concern was whether or not he would be taken care of by his new master. Just as this fact was struggling to consciousness it became equally clear that Chance was not walking *into* the water but *on* it. About ten steps into his stroll, moreover, Chance struck his umbrella into the water as if testing the temperature, thereby demonstrating that there was no ice hidden just below the surface. The walk and this gesture are faintly reminiscent of Chaplin, a visual image that creates further dismay about the exact role of Ashby's character. The uneasy feeling of pretentiousness creeps in during this closing segment, not only because of what Chance is doing but because of the way it is shot. Rather than using close-ups to exhibit Chance's surprise at his new-found talent, Ashby depicts the whole scene in a long shot, which adds a quality of grandeur that is clearly not warranted by the preceding action.

This ending leaves the impression that Chance qualifies not as village idiot become king but as a Christ figure up to his old tricks. The scene further requires that serious viewers reinterpret Chance's actions throughout the plot, reassigning to them like qualities. (Should he have not raised Rand from the dead? or converted Eve into a devout, spiritual woman?) Ashby forces us to take Chance seriously as someone capable of saving us instead of showing us our vanities and pomposities. This turn is unacceptable. The vehicle of satire, which clearly directs the events throughout, cannot carry the weight of the final Christ comparison. Innocents like Gulliver or Candide, whom Kosinski may have had in mind when he used the many garden references, are never allowed by their creators to act as anything other than

mirrors for the vices of the societies in which they exist. Their personalities are shaped as *naifs* precisely because the satirist uses them as his cutting tools, not as his heroes. Satire, after all, allows for no heroes; and until its ending, *Being There* has none either.

Ashby confuses us further by using this surrealistic stroll to end the movie, because if any Biblical character is suggested in the book and movie it is certainly not Christ but the first gardener, Adam. Why is MacLaine named Eve? Why is Chance's first master referred to as "the Old Man," hinting that he is Chance's "creater?" Why is the scene in which Chance leaves his dead master's house to enter the slum-ridden world of urban Washington so obviously intended to parallel Adam's departure from Eden after the Fall? These parallels are pretentious enough, but they fit more believably the tone and texture of Kosinski's story than the trumped-up close Ashby gives us. To represent fallen Adam (Chance) stumbling on a new Eden (Rand's mansion) and new Eve (MacLaine) points the ironic moral of the story: we live in a world of self-delusion and narcissism that leads us to embrace as savior not Christ but a fool. Ashby's ending, unfortunately, violates our sensibilities and the form in which the bulk of the film is narrated. Given the final impression of unlooked for surrealism, it might have been better to simply let Chance sink to the bottom of the pond.

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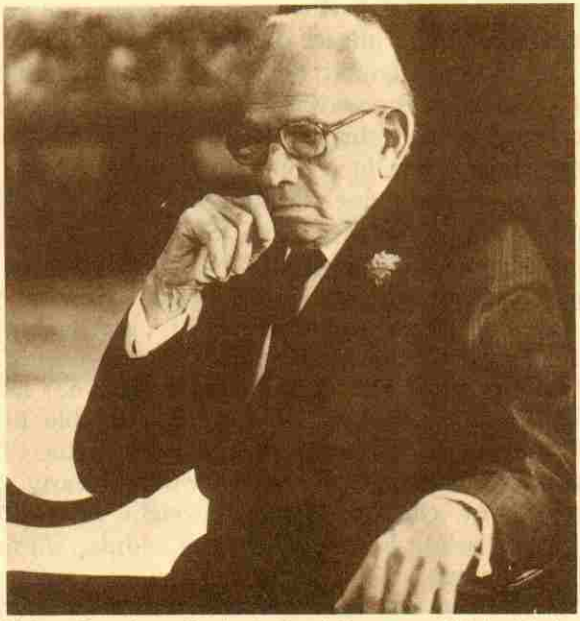

Melvyn Douglas as Benjamin Rand. Courtesy of United Artists.