



Being There

1979, USA, Colour, Comedy / Drama, Running time: 130 mins.
Rated 12.

Directed by Hal Ashby from a novel by Jerzy Kosinski. (1970)

Cast: Chance (Chauncy Gardener): Peter Sellers, Benjamin

Rand: Melvyn Douglas, Eve Rand: Shirley MacLaine

Jack Warden: President

This is the second of our films representing the future from the past. The last film we showed was 'Network' which, like 'Being There', was intended as a satire. Whether the makers of 'Being There' would have had any sense that the future would contain someone such as Donald Trump is speculative, much less that they were foretelling his arrival.

Here I am presenting a thesis, maybe that should read 'a conceit', that knowingly or not, this film prefigures the era of Trump. The film critic Roger Ebert describes the figure of Chance as 'a man unaware of his limitations'. In the light of Trump's recent statement that he is a 'very stable genius' would it be unfair to suggest that he is patently unaware of limitations evident to most of us?

Another arguable link is Chance's statement 'I like to watch' by which he means television; Trump is said to watch TV for much of the day, and which is apparently his chief source of information, (or in his case perhaps we should say 'disinformation').

Second film in our 'Future from the Past' Season

Tuesday 6th Feb
2018 at 7.15
pm

Film essay by
Dominic
Thierry
(InFiFa) and
notes compiled
by Mark
MacLennan
(InFiFa).

Chance is prone to making gnomic statements which are interpreted as containing pearls of true wisdom. Trump's statements could hardly be described as gnomic but arguably the brevity that has become the essential requirement if pronouncements are to gain traction with the public is another shared aspect. We see this with the coming of the term 'sound bite' and the age of Trump's favoured form of communication, the 'tweet'.

The essential vagueness that Chance's statements rely upon to maintain their perceived credibility are not spoken with any specific intent, but again arguably the desire of Trump not to be pinned down to specific claims or promises could be said to have been foreshadowed in the manner of statements made by Chance.

My premise is furthered at the end of the film by Chance being seriously proposed as a presidential candidate. Returning to Roger Ebert he states 'The movie argues that if you look right, sound right, speak in platitudes and have powerful friends, you can go far in our society'.



Another connection between 'Network' and 'Being There' was the desperation of the lead actor to gain the part. Ebert reported that Sellers had described himself 'When I am not playing a role, I am nobody' which he argued made him perfect for the role of Chance. A striking aspect of his performance is that he maintains the same 'note' all the way through the film.



The plot of the film revolves around this acceptance of the highest in the land by a man whose actual experience has been boundaryed by a garden. That he is accepted as a man of wisdom tells us that we are much affected by the appearance of things. Chance is white, middle-aged, well-dressed, well spoken. If his appearance was other would the film have been in anyway plausible?

In relation to plausibility I ask you to consider whether Rand's wife would not have 'caught on' about Chance as does the doctor?

In case you are unaware of the nature of the last scene I shall not give it away, but suffice to say that it draws an analogy with only one other person. Does it demonstrate a zen state of mind? That we are all looking for a messiah? Or does it add merely a false grandiosity to what has gone before?

Is there significance to the name Eve and of Chance being expelled from 'the garden'?

What does the final line, 'Life is a state of mind' tell us?

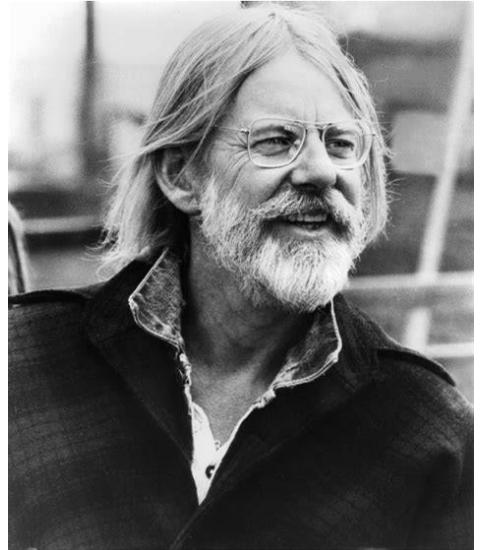
Many viewers have commented that this film is one that has long stayed with them. Will it stay with you, and if so why might that be?



The film was nominated for 2 Oscars, for Best Film and for the aged Melvyn Douglas who had never won an Oscar despite a long and lauded film career. Although Sellers was nominated the Oscar for Best Actor that year went to Dustin Hoffman for Kramer versus Kramer. Sellers himself blamed the outtake used as the credits rolled for destroying his chance at the Oscar. Interestingly Ashby wanted Burt Lancaster for the part; apparently Laurence Olivier turned down the part due to the masturbation scene.



The film is striking for its costumes. The score is limited but relies on interpretations of 2 classical piano pieces and an excerpt from Richard Strauss' 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'. The cinematography has also been praised.



Director Hal Ashby (pictured above) made other notably quirky films in the 1970s during that period of renaissance for American film, notably 'Harold and Maude', (a personal favourite of this writer), 'The Last Detail' with Jack Nicolson and 'Shampoo' with Warren Beatty. Returning to my original thesis the parallels with Trump have also been noted by two contributors to 'The Daily Beast', Sam Harris and Malcolm Jones. They suggest that Chance and Trump are 'Two men who are almost purely the creatures of television'.
Writer: Dominic Thierry

Our next screening.....V for Vendetta

The third and last film in our.....Future from the Past Season



Eden
Court
Cinema

20th
February
2018 at
7.15 pm

Based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore, V for Vendetta takes place in an alternate vision of Britain in which a corrupt totalitarian government has risen to complete power. During a run in with the secret police, an unassuming young woman named Evey (Natalie Portman) is rescued by a caped and masked vigilante named V (Hugo Weaving) who embodies the principles of rebellion against the state..



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www.invernessfilmfans.org