

Being There by Jerry Dean Roberts

Sometimes the best films are the ones that strive to be more than just one thing. We see the story that is presented to us but then, at the best of times, the hidden truth begins to reveal itself. Hal Ashby's *Being There* a lot of deep meanings wrapped around a man who does not. He is a simpleton, a man seemingly born without the capacity for cynicism, or even the capacity to learn. And yet, his connection to the outside world has a transformative effect that he doesn't realize. The revelation in his simpleton is that his limited capacity is interpreted as genius. Is he limited, or are we?

He is Chance – played by Peter Sellers in his penultimate performance – whose past is a mystery. He was apparently born behind the walls of a large mansion and apparently has remained there all his life. Suddenly, the old man who owned the house dies and Chance is forced to leave. Mentally, he lives within a very confined space, a confinement that has offered him only two knowledgeable recourses: gardening and an over-abundant appetite for television. He apparently knows nothing more.

Stepping out into the larger world, Chance encounters a large number of strangers who make assumptions about him. He wears his only suit which makes him look like a wealthy upperclassman. When he speaks, he speaks about his garden and repeats "I like to watch TV." The joke, of course, is that strangers misinterpret his simplicity for insights. When Chance is questioned by a television reporter about what newspaper he reads, he says "I don't read I watch TV." Of course, not knowing that he cannot read or write the reporter takes that to mean that he prefers television news over newspapers.

The bulk of the film deals with his association with a kindly old political kingmaker (Melvyn Douglas) who is dying of a blood disease and finds comfort in Chance's company as he reads between the lines of what he thinks Chance means. When Chance meets The President of the United States (Jack Warden), his vocabulary of gardening is interpreted as political insight. The film ends with a discussion about whether or not he should run for President.

The importance of *Being There* is that it calls into question how much like Chance we really are in this rampant media age. We think ourselves clever and individualistic but how much of what we say is really a rehash of something we have heard elsewhere, or something we learned at another point in our lives? How much of what we say and repeat is interpreted by others as insightful genius? Are we really sentient beings with the capacity to form brilliant notions or are our brains just stacking information that locks together into a logistical whole? Are we really expanding our minds are we just reinterpreting and rehashing things that we already know? Or do we, like Chance, really just like to watch TV?

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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