

## A Life Without Mind

For me **Being There (Hal Ashby, 1979)** started out as a light comedy and ended up being a serious reflection on our life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I think that the very last sentence of the movie - "Life is a state of mind" - was a kind of summary of its ars poetica. My reading of it was that our life is what we make of it. The movie showed us this truth mostly through the display of a mindless life.

Chance - the simple-minded (or mindless) gardener who is forced to leave the house, where he spent his entire life, after his employer dies - was acting like a mirror. Everyone he meet with, with the exception of the doctor, took his simple answers (mostly consisting of "Thank You" and "I understand") at their literal value, as if Chance would understand them. They all got what they wanted from this yes-man:

- The dying business man believed him a successful financial advisor
- The sexually unsatisfied wife got satisfaction even though Chance didn't do a thing
- The president of the United States took his advice on politics
- The funny butler thinks he was joking all the time
- The elderly black lady who brought Chance up shared her view of life upon seeing him on television: "All you've gotta be is white in America, to get whatever you want"
- The gay man hitting on Chance at a party found him as a partner.

Thus we learned about the desires and expectations of all these characters. Our attention was pointed to our capacity of self-delusion: all we need is someone who agrees with us or reflects what we believe in and then we can fill him with our content just like an empty vessel.

Chance learned everything he knew about life from TV and his garden. In one of the first scene after he left the house for the first time he tried to use his remote control to change reality when that didn't suit him. This was a very metaphorical joke on our culture where the average person spends 2-3 or more hours in front of the TV.

When Chance had to communicate something he either talked about the cycles and details of gardens or said, "I like to watch", referring to the television. By the tenth time we heard it we became aware that we, the movie watchers, were the voyeurs, we were the ones who are watching. This was quite a disturbing feeling.

Whatever Chance was watching on TV - and he likes to watch it all the time - becomes a background - asynchronous - sound for the movie itself. I didn't discover a consistent logic behind the editing of the movie, whether there is a connection for every occasion between what's going on the screen and on the TV. I think most of the time it was just there as a disorienting factor. However there were a few examples, when it was clearly not. E.g. when the old man died in his bedroom, Chance turned on the TV and we saw a mattress commercial that guarantees comfortable sleep. Also at the first bedroom scene, where Chance was not responding to the wife's onslaught, we were hearing a song: "You are my friend, you are special." A few seconds later he switched channel: "Long time ago people didn't have TV."

At Chance's first encounter with "real life" the soundtrack was an easy listening version of Richard Strauss' "Also sprach Zarathustra". This was an homage to the "2002: A Space Odyssey" (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). There the theme is heavily associated with discovery and evolution, and since then this association has transpired to popular culture.

Being There could also be considered an homage to Rene Magritte's paintings. A returning element in his work is the businessman with umbrella and Bower-hat at obscure locations. At the very end of the movie Chance walks on water, while on Magritte's painting a figure like Chance often falls from the sky like rain drops. The water-walking scene is also contrasted with the burial scenes, with which it is crosscut. Ben is buried into a pyramid, which has the symbol of the freemason on top of it, while the walking on water may refer to Jesus.

I enjoyed the movie on several levels. One of them was the slapstick comedy consisting of mostly text and audio jokes and some visual ones. At the other level this was an opportunity for self-reflection. How often do I hear what I want to hear as opposed to what was really said? I cannot even guess. On the "metaphysical" level this goes to the very heart of meaning in life. What are we as individuals without others?