

# The Filmmaker Becomes His Film: Hal Ashby's *Being There* (1979)

**Christian Poorten**

## **Introduction**

The opening shots of a film are the Genesis of a new world, one that did not exist prior. The director, its creator, leaves a first impression, introducing the audience to everything they need to know about what will follow. In Hal Ashby's *Being There*,<sup>1</sup> the opening is a visual prologue, establishing the situation and protagonist. Chance the Gardener opens his eyes, waking up to the sound of his television and tending to the house and garden. But our assumption that these are the marks of a normal life is slowly challenged as hints are left, one by one, throughout the scene. The introduction not only makes us aware of "what is being revealed," but likewise "what remains concealed."<sup>2</sup> Something is off about Chance; his eyes are hollow. The body of this article will extend this analysis of film to different aspects of the cinematic process, showing how the filmmakers act as magicians, manipulating audience perception. It is always challenging to analyse the aesthetics of film, because it can rarely be ascertained with certainty whether a director chooses to shoot a scene as he/she does in order to enhance the story, or simply because it looks appealing. Ideally, both are true. This filmmaking process is held sacred by many who call it their profession, as Martin Scorsese once noted, "Sometimes when it all comes together... you become the film you're making."<sup>3</sup> As the simple mind of Chance is thrust into the world beyond his home, the filmmakers must find the simple way to shoot the story. This also serves a satirical function. The plain beauty of the

---

Christian Poorten is a scholar at the University of Miami.

<sup>1</sup> *Being There*, dir. Hal Ashby (United States: Warner Bros Pictures, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Annette Insdorf, *Cinematic Overtures: How to Read the Opening Scene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 122-124.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in T.J. English in a 1990 interview. T.J. English, 'OBSESSION: Martin Scorsese Eats, Sleeps, Breathes and Dreams Movies, Shot by Shot', *LA Times*, (23 September 1990) <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-23-tm-1868-story.html>. Accessed 1 November 2018.

cinematography acts in juxtaposition with Chance's preposterous hero's journey. Ashby, through his artistic choices in lens types and directorial style, acts as a "cinemagician,"<sup>4</sup> and becomes his 1979 film, *Being There*.

### **Creativity Through the Lens**

The lens has always been used as a type of magic, giving the user special powers, whether for the ability to correct abnormal vision, or to gaze at the heavens. Long before the inventions of still photography, one of the first recorded mentions of a lens in Aristophanes's play, *The Clouds*, from 419 BCE. Strepsiades asks, "At the drug seller's shop have you seen that beautiful stone you can see right through, the one they use to start a fire?" to which Socrates replies, "You mean glass?"<sup>5</sup> Humorously, the characters are plotting to use a lens to melt a clerk's wax paper so as to avoid paying interest, attesting to the aura of sorcery surrounding the ancient technology. In more recent history, lenses were fashioned to "restore the light of the spirits." Buddhist writings call the spectacle lens a "magical jewel that grants all wishes," namely the clarity of vision usually found in youthful people.<sup>6</sup> This technology was a blessing for those aging monks who wished to read and write religious scriptures. In a different context in the West, lenses were being developed for the purposes of enhancing the natural human eye, rather than simply restoring what once existed. Galileo refined the first refracting telescope in 1609, originally invented by Hans Lippershey in the year prior, bestowing humanity with the vision of the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> Zacharias Janssen invented a rough compound microscope in 1590, refined again by Galileo in 1610,<sup>8</sup> which allowed us to glimpse the infinitesimal. These scientific truths

---

<sup>4</sup> Colin Williamson, *Hidden in Plain Sight: An Archaeology of Magic and the Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications, 2008), p. 56. This English translation by Johnston defines Socrates's reply as a "glass," whereas other translations use "crystal lens". The original Latin word for lens is *lentil*, named so because of the similarity in shape between a glass lens and the legume.

<sup>6</sup> S.E. Kile and Kristina Kleutghen, 'Seeing through Pictures and Poetry: A History of Lenses (1681)', *Late Imperial China*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2017), p. 60.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Charles King, 'Notes on the Progress Made in the Development of the Refracting Telescope from Galileo to Dollond', *Optometry and Vision Science*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1945), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Russel L. Haden, 'Galileo and the Compound Microscope', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1942), p. 242.

## *The Filmmaker Becomes His Film*

danced in darkness around us, waiting for a light to be shone on them. It was not until very recent history, within the past two centuries, that metaphorical truths were uncovered and portrayed through film photography. Stories had been waiting to be told.

Thousands of years of history fall into the lap of each director as they embark on the journey of filmmaking. Ashby benefited from the honed, timeless technology of the lens in his creation of *Being There*. It is the sacred magic of the lens that has carried through millennia, for various uses, to eventually inject its rare powers into the camera. D.W. Griffith said of film, “The whole world is its stage, and time without end its limitations.”<sup>9</sup> Not even he could have foreseen the stunning visual achievements that would arise less than a century later. The film director, now more than ever, has access to portray anything within imagination. But it is much more complicated than to be simply attributed to the whim of a director. Rachel O. Moore describes the cinema as a medium of modern magic in itself. She argues that cinematic images cater to a “fetish,” explaining that, “This fetish power is animated by the mechanical nature of the camera, on the one side, whose image, on the other side, stands before an audience in a state of fatigue, distraction, or exhaustion. These two aspects of the cinema... create a phantasmagoria of lively objects and muted subjects.”<sup>10</sup> The cinema, then, is a saviour of the audience, in some respect. It allows the viewer to peer into the raw meaning of humanity, which has arguably become lost in modern society. It serves our innermost desires to visualise a hero’s triumph. The lens seems to be a physical metaphor for *focus*. That is to say, for example, the focus of sunlight onto a point to ignite fire, light from an object onto the retina to clarify vision, or onto film to produce an image of the world. Ashby focuses his directorial vision onto the screen. The audience focuses its attention.

### **The Lens: In Service of Character**

The focal length of a modern lens is one of the most important aspects in determining the nature of the final captured image. This measurement, typically conveyed in millimeters (mm), put in simple terms, is the distance

---

<sup>9</sup> Harry M. Geduld, *Focus on D. W. Griffith* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 4.

from the camera lens to the film, which receives focused light.<sup>11</sup> Shorter focal lengths are able to capture a much wider field of view, at the cost (or artistic benefit) of warping the edges of the frame. These ‘wide’ lenses typically create a strong sense of depth within the frame, separating the background from the foreground. Contrarily, longer focal lengths narrow the field of view. The most recognisable trait of a long lens is a ‘compressed’ image, with little distinction between the background and the foreground.<sup>12</sup> The subject appears to lie flat on a canvas with the rest of the frame. Over the course of analysing the sacred and creative in *Being There*, the focal length of the lenses used and the depth of the image will be the main points of concern.

Just as a religious or philosophical lens is a set of ideas and principles with which we view the issues of our existence—past, present, and future<sup>13</sup>—the photographic lens is the method through which a story is presented. Ashby’s cinematographer, Caleb Deschanel, said of his artistic choices, “We actually only used a 40mm lens and a 75mm lens for the whole movie... It was kept simple, almost like we had the simpleton brain of [Chance] guiding the way we were shooting the film.”<sup>14</sup> Chance the Gardener is not really human, as we would typically recognise. Surely he is a biological life form, but there is no semblance of personality, character, or substance behind the veil. In accordance, the opening fifteen minutes of the film are cinematographically monotonous at best. This serves to introduce Chance as a character. Each shot is more or less at an eye-level perspective and at medium range. It is not until Chance is forced out of the “Old Man’s” house that he begins to walk away from the camera, from foreground to background, turning his back on what he has always known. This scene

---

<sup>11</sup> The measurement of focal length becomes less straightforward when we take modern cinema lenses into consideration, which often have up to 25 separate lenses within one housing, but the principle remains the same.

<sup>12</sup> Blain Brown, *Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Imitation for Cinematographers & Directors*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Burlington, MA and Abingdon, UK: Focal Press, 2016), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Tina M. Harris, Bethany Keeley, Samantha Barrientos, Marita Gronnvoll, Jamie Landau, Christopher R. Groscurth, Lijiang Shen, Youyou Cheng, and J. David Cisneros, ‘A Religious Framework as a Lens for Understanding the Intersection of Genetics, Health, and Disease’, *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part C: Seminars in Medical Genetics*, vol. 151C, no. 1 (2009), pp. 22-30. Take this integrative look at genetics and disease through a religious lens as an example.

<sup>14</sup> Caleb Deschanel in criterioncollection, ‘Making Being There’, YouTube (22 March 2017) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IATDcleKcWw>. Accessed 11 September 2018.

## *The Filmmaker Becomes His Film*

culminates in an iconic shot of Chance walking down a skinny street median strip, directly toward the United States Capitol Building. It recalls the famous opening frames of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as planets de-eclipse each other to reveal the sun. Both of these films are, above all, about acquiring consciousness. However, Ashby portrays it satirically, through the emptiness of Chance, who is in fact incapable of consciousness. In *Being There*, as ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra’ rings out in homage to *2001*, the Capitol dome is de-eclipsed by the top of the frame. It must look otherworldly to Chance, who has been confined to a single house his entire life. The audience can chuckle in understanding that, ironically, at this pinnacle of opportunity for discovery and realisation, Chance has absolutely no idea where he is going. It is as if a man were released from imprisonment in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, only to wander aimlessly around in his newfound freedom in search of another cave. In this case, Chance searches for another garden. As in the opening of *2001*, the entirety of the film is cryptically foreshadowed in these parallel scenes. Chance will make his way to power no matter what, even if it is simply a product of wandering.

The scene in question is shot with the relatively long 75mm lens, and being the first outdoor shot with a rich, distant background, the Capitol and Chance are compressed into the same plane, portraying an extraordinary image. There is an analysis of an essentially equivalent shot in the film *Rain Man*, which might as well summarise this shot in *Being There*, which reads, “Very long lens perspective makes this shot ... abstract. It is reduced to the simple idea of beginning a journey ... the road seems to rise up into their unknown future.”<sup>15</sup> Filmmaking is essentially the process of reducing our complex, noisy reality into a simple, meaningful message. The lens choice here, in only a few seconds, tells the story of Chance beginning his odyssey. The street before Chance is pulled up tightly in the frame rather than forward in depth, so Chance appears to move up toward the Capitol rather than forward and away from the camera. It also portrays other magical effects in motion perception, as well. In compressing space from foreground to background, long lenses incidentally cause movement through depth to appear abnormally slow, as the size of the object changes very slowly.<sup>16</sup> We

---

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Cinematography: Theory and Practice*, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Cade and DSLRguide, ‘Lenses - Storytelling with Cinematography’, YouTube, 16 May (2015) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlnwLGtgb1o&t=56s>. Accessed 1 November 2018.

witness this effect as the cars on the busy Washington, D.C. street seem to travel in slow motion, lending more attention to Chance, the subject. Ultimately, it is only possible to tell the particular story that this shot does with a 75mm lens or longer. The message of the shot reads as follows: Chance begins his fool's journey to the top of the United States political hierarchy.

The 40mm lens, on the other hand, which is used for most of the close or medium shots in cutting between characters in dialogue, represents a more realistic approach to film. It is wider than the 75mm, but does not yet verge into uncannily warped territory. Directors of quirky, outlandish films often opt to default toward extreme wide-angle lenses, such as Terry Gilliam's "hallucinatory" worlds of *Brazil*, or *The Brothers Grimm*.<sup>17</sup> On these sets, the 28mm lens is used most often, and he even drops to a visually alienating 14mm in some scenes.<sup>18</sup> Ashby, contrarily, attempts to ground Chance in the real world. If he depicted it visually as the absurd story that it is on paper, the hilarity of the situations would overtake their ironic function. Satire and irony are only possible when there is a sense of universally accepted 'normalcy' for comparison. The film's comedy is derived from the filmmakers conspiring to pretend that this story is a normal hero's journey. The mind of Chance is not rich with depth and detail. It is one of flat, bland experience. Yet, the sincerest aspect of the film comes from the story's aversion to mocking him. It remains true and sympathetic to his character as if he is a realistic, sentient human being. We pity him because his character elicits this from the audience, not because the film requires it of us.

The 40mm lens also offers a more inviting, aesthetically pleasing portrayal of the environment than a shorter one would. Editor Don Zimmerman recalls that Ashby and Deschanel preferred long lenses for the interior scenes because, "the environment ... was so beautiful that to shrink it would be almost horrible."<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the long-lens image of the human face is more flattering. This approach is necessary because of the intimacy and intricacies of the characters portrayed on screen. A study published in 2016 shows evidence that focal length can affect the social

---

<sup>17</sup> Roger Ebert, 'The Brothers Grimm Movie Review (2005)', *roger.ebert.com*, at <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-brothers-grimm-2005>. Accessed 23 October 2018.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Focal Lengths and Lenses Used by Great Directors', at <https://wolfcrow.com/blog/the-focal-lengths-and-lenses-used-by-great-directors/>. Accessed 23 October 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Don Zimmerman in *criterioncollection*, 'Making Being There'.

perception of facial images, with longer focal lengths producing a softer image and fewer distorted features.<sup>20</sup> Ashby is clearly aiming for an aesthetically sound portrayal of the story, which will not distract from the relationships developing on screen. Ultimately, the film is about the meandering fashion in which a mindless man can affect those around him. Chance simultaneously provides the dying Ben with a person he can trust with his assets after he passes, the lonely Eve with a romantic companion, and his wheelchair attendant with jokes about an elevator, none of which he is remotely qualified for, yet they see in him what they project onto his lifeless being. Ashby is less concerned with the wide-lens technique of portraying depth between characters and objects than he is with the longer-lens technique of painting them on a flat canvas in close relation to one another. No shots in the film display this sentiment more than the beautiful images he composes within the mansion.

### **Directorial Style: Magic in Composition and Compilation**

When Ashby introduces a scene in the Rand Mansion, he often begins with a vignette, or the “tableau” shot, to use Deschanel’s terminology. He recalls inspiration from Gordon Willis, the principal cinematographer on *The Godfather*.<sup>21</sup> In the same way it is useful to photograph Italian mobsters brooding around a desk, as products of their environment, so too is it effective to portray Chance immersed in his situation, as if he belongs in the Mansion. It juxtaposes with the audience’s knowledge that this mentally handicapped gardener in fact belongs in an institution. Once camera movement became practical for film production (with the invention of the camera dolly, and later the Steadicam)<sup>22</sup> it became a staple of modern cinema, forever separating the medium from stage production. Incidentally, the still frame shot has become a more stylistic choice. The *tableaux vivant*, French for “living picture,” encourages the viewer to explore the canvas.<sup>23</sup> In film, it is much the same.

---

<sup>20</sup> Vít Třebický, Jitka Fialová, Karel Kleisner, and Jan Havlíček, ‘Focal Length Affects Depicted Shape and Perception of Facial Images’, ed Pablo Brañas-Garza, *PLOS ONE*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2016), pp. 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Deschanel in criterioncollection, ‘Making Being There’.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Pierre Geuens, ‘Visuality and Power: The Work of the Steadicam’, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1993), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Shannon Murphy, ‘Tableaux Vivant: History and Practice: Art Museum Teaching’, *Art Museum Teaching* (6 December 2012) at

Ashby can compose the shots in immense detail, placing objects and the actors in precise locations. We can assume that this is the direct translation of the image in the mind of the director. This principle recalls our definition of the film director as a magician, manipulating the viewer to see what the story tells, nothing more, nothing less.<sup>24</sup> Take, for example, the ‘tableau’ of Chance and Ben sitting in their respective wheelchairs, smoking cigars, while the Doctor plays pool in the background. Nothing is in the frame by mistake. The picture frames on the back wall are placed in virtual symmetry. The large duck statue, highlighting the absurd affluence of the mansion, leads the eye toward the subjects. The circular wheels contradict the otherwise rectangular image. Chance becomes an almost perfect reflection of Ben in this instance, moulded by his environment. He even attempts to light a cigar in vain. The image beautifully whittles down to the simple story of Chance becoming immersed in his new world. Each ‘tableau’ is a precursor to a more intimate shot of dialogue between characters. Ashby eventually reverts back to the standard, over-the-shoulder, shot-reverse-shot techniques of photographing conversation. In these situations, we as the audience are at the mercy of the cut, and the editor’s decisions can truly play tricks on us.

The magic of cinema is apparent in single shots, with the lens’s ability to convey images at the director’s whim, but perhaps the most fantastical element in the process of filmmaking is a product of the editing room. Wielding the ability to compare two shots back to back, an editor can compare an image to those before and/or after it, whether they are closely related in space and time, or cut across hundreds of thousands of years and miles up into the heavens.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the editor truly becomes a magician more reminiscent of the classic sense of the term. Colin Williamson relates the cinematographer to the “sleight-of-hand” artist, whose hands move more quickly than the eye can see. He cites a study that tracked the eye movement of film spectators where the representations of the viewers’ point of focus on the screen grew in accordance with the length of time the shot was visible.<sup>26</sup>

---

<https://artmuseumteaching.com/2012/12/06/tableaux-vivant-history-and-practice/>. Accessed 26 October 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Stanley Kubrick (dir), *2001: A Space Odyssey*, (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011). Kubrick famously cuts from the dawn of man, millennia ago, forward to 2001, matching an ape-thrown bone to a man-made spaceship orbiting the Earth. It details the raw power that film editing holds.

<sup>26</sup> Williamson, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, pp. 61-63.



## *The Filmmaker Becomes His Film*

The longer a shot holds, the more the audience is able to explore it apart from the subject. That is, the filmmakers can show as much or as little as they want to give up, fabricating the story based on what they choose to indulge. This is apparent in *Being There*, as Zimmerman recalls, “When [Ben] and [Chance] were walking down the hallway, I did it in a reverse, because I just loved the hands on their backs. To me that was more telling than anything.”<sup>27</sup> In turn, this is the precise story that the audience is told. The editor is also able to cause the audience to infer meanings from expressions on the actors’ faces based on the context in which they are presented, which Alfred Hitchcock calls “pure cinematics,”<sup>28</sup> classically known as the ‘Kuleshov Effect’.<sup>29</sup> Of course, since Chance is a vacuum of a man, this principle is paramount for the audience to understand how he interacts with other characters. In fact, the supporting characters in this way mirror the audience, as Chance is a pure *tabula rasa*, only filled with meaning by the context in which he is presented.

The aforementioned dinner scene is a clear example of the contextual misunderstandings of Chance by Ben and Eve. When Chance says that his house was shut down, Ben hesitates, then replies, “You mean your business was shut down?” and when he expresses his desire to work in their garden, they are confused, but Eve realises, “I know exactly what he means. Isn’t it wonderful, to be with the trees and the flowers like that? It’s such a pleasant way to forget one’s troubles.” The only context that Ben and Eve have of Chance is his professional attire and demeanor. His utterly vapid expressions are taken as sorrow for the loss of his business. Marta Calbi et al. attempted to reproduce the results of the original Kuleshov experiment, concluding that “the context triggers the arousal and the emotional reaction in the observer who then attributes an emotional value to a neutral face.”<sup>30</sup> We as the

---

<sup>27</sup> Zimmerman in criterion collection, ‘Making Being There’; Ashby, *Being There*.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Hitchcock in ‘(1) Hitchcock’s Pure Cinema- “The Kuleshov Effect” - YouTube’, YouTube (19 October 2009), at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNVf1N34-io>. Accessed 23 October 2018. In this excerpt of an interview, Hitchcock simply but brilliantly demonstrates the ‘Kuleshov Effect’, substituting the middle of three pieces of film to change the perception of a character’s reaction.

<sup>29</sup> The Soviet filmmaker, Lev Kuleshov, was the first to clearly demonstrate his editing theory, thus the name of the effect.

<sup>30</sup> Marta Calbi, Katrin Heimann, Daniel Barratt, Francesca Siri, Maria A. Umiltà, and Vittorio Gallese, ‘How Context Influences Our Perception of Emotional Faces: A Behavioral Study on the Kuleshov Effect’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8 (4 October 2017), p. 7.

audience, on the other hand, have been introduced to Chance's true story. We are aware that Ben, Eve, and the rest of the elite characters of the film are mistaken because they are lacking a vital piece of film before his reaction, to use Hitchcock's cited demonstration as an example. The audience knows the truth, because it was able to witness Chance's true origin. This is the running joke of the film.

## **Conclusion**

Carl Jung's analyses of the nature of a Trickster Figure sometimes seem to double as an oblique analysis of the theme in *Being There*. Chance acts as a sort of involuntary, obligate Trickster, simply by virtue of his circumstances. His deception and trickery are not calculated, but they exist nonetheless. Therefore, I am more readily inclined to ascribe him the title of 'fool'. With this in mind, Jung wrote:

Anyone who belongs to a sphere of culture that seeks the perfect state somewhere in the past must feel very queerly indeed when confronted by the figure of the trickster. He is a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness.<sup>31</sup>

Jung argues that this state of unconsciousness, or foolishness in Chance's case, is the precursor to the state of being typified by the saviour. But Ashby's film is presented as a satire. Chance is the fool and the saviour simultaneously. As Roger Ebert puts it, "[Chance] survives a series of challenges he doesn't understand, using words that are both universal and meaningless."<sup>32</sup> Again, the filmmakers do not make comic light of the situation, yet the humour comes from the preposterously lucky path that Chance took to arrive at the final scene. He walks on water with the camera gazing at him from afar. Ashby asks no peering questions and certainly posits no answers. For the entire film, we, the audience, feel enlightened in comparison to the characters, because we know the truth about Chance. Here, Ashby shows us that we do not understand as well as we think, in this one

---

<sup>31</sup> C. G Jung, Gerhard Adler, and R.F.C. Hull, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure', *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 48, Collected Works of C.G. Jung (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 192.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Being There Movie Review & Film Summary (1979)', *Roger.ebert.com* (25 May 1997), at <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-being-there-1979>. Accessed 6 September 2018.

## *The Filmmaker Becomes His Film*

last trick. It is simply presented as an inevitability, not luck, that Chance would continue on to perform the mythological act that we associate with only one man.

Is Chance a ‘Christ figure’, then? This question has been debated exhaustively,<sup>33</sup> but this being an analysis of the technical magic of filmmaking, I will address it in terms of the literal way in which it is presented on film. Richard C. Stern et al. describe a type of Christian film which stands as an alternative to films explicitly about Jesus, writing, “there is another category of film that we might label as secular or, at least not self-consciously religious, but which does employ a Christlike figure as its key character or hero.”<sup>34</sup> His final act before performing this ‘miracle’ is to save a small plant from the dead branches holding it down. The last frame is depicted in another ‘tableau’, as the camera grinds to a halt to witness what is about to take place. Based on the rest of the film, this means an important story is being told. Ashby finds himself using the 75mm lens. Again, the plain, flat, yet beautiful portrait contrasts with the absurd event. Chance walks away from the camera, as he did only once before, when leaving his first home. He stands small in the frame, with an immense landscape before him. We can only imagine where this next journey will take him. Yet, the final shot stands on its own as a piece of art in itself. This is a twist on the “Hollywood ending,” which tends to “promulgate idealism in the face of life’s true hardships.”<sup>35</sup> There is not much evidence for Chance being the True Christ, although the discussion certainly has its merits. Ashby conjures an image that recalls Christ, but which ultimately stands on its own; Ashby created Chance for this world alone.

To many, the Bible, or other religious canon, is a sacred source of inspiration through which infinite meaning can be derived. To Ashby, film is sacred and religious in this way. He preaches, “Make your film so goddamned good that you see something in it all the time ... The film will

---

<sup>33</sup> Jeff Saporito, ‘What Are the Interpretations of Chance Walking on Water at the End of Being There’, *ScreenPrism* (10 December 2015), at <http://screenprism.com/insights/article/what-are-the-interpretations-of-chance-walking-on-water-at-the-end-of-being>. Accessed 31 October 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Gueric DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> James MacDowell, *Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 98.

tell you what to do.”<sup>36</sup> Chance becomes his portrayal of the ultimate saviour, an instance of himself on the screen. Is the only way to truly be holy to be utterly innocent, Ashby seems to ask? Maybe he saw Chance as the only possible saviour for the uninspiring American culture of the elite, someone who dismantles the system with the mere power of novelty and incompetence. Ashby created Chance the Gardener as a saviour, as a Christ of the Cinema, thereby becoming the God of his own film. In its Genesis, the opening shot, and its End, the fade to black, he transforms the film into a microcosmic universe in itself.

---

<sup>36</sup> Hal Ashby and Sean Fennessey, ‘The Realistic Magic of Hal Ashby, the Greatest Director of the 1970s’, *The Ringer* (6 September 2018), at <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2018/9/6/17826818/hal-ashby-documentary-harold-maude-last-detail-hollywood-shampoo-being-there-coming-home>. Accessed 27 October 2018.