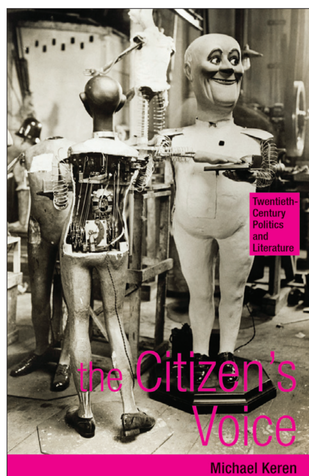
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY PRESS

University of Calgary Press

www.uofcpress.com



THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

by Michael Keren

ISBN 978-1-55238-669-9

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY PRESS

Making a difference.
Making you think.

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org/content/view/17/33/

Being There

In 1970, one decade before Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States, two decades before Tony Blair was elected prime minister of Great Britain, and three decades before the practice of electing good-looking candidates for high office was no longer questioned anywhere in the world, Jerzy Kosinski composed the short novel *Being There* about an illiterate gardener who becomes a candidate for American vice president on the basis of his television skills. Kosinski was not endowed with prophetic vision. As an observer of social reality he identified the great power of television in modern politics and foresaw the rise to power of figures capable of utilizing that power, or who are manipulated by others who are. This novel joins a series of philosophical and literary critiques of modern democratic politics stressing the role of the mass media in its corruption.[1]

One needs to exercise some caution in the face of those often exaggerated critiques which relate to the mass media as an independent force that fundamentally changes all traditional democratic forms and processes. It

is wrong to attribute omnipotent power to the mass media; democracy has often proven its viability against all odds.[2] On the other hand, large parts of the political game are nowadays conducted in the media. Political leaders are elected for high office while the voters have insufficient information about their character, skill, or political position.

Democracy has always been marked by the choice it provides between candidates. For instance, if *A* was a capitalist and *B* was a socialist, the two would spell out their competing ideologies to the electorate in order to get a mandate to rule in line with their respective preferences. But today this is no longer the case. In an election campaign taking place mainly before television cameras, the difference between *A* and *B* disappears. Both capitalists and socialists use slogans that appeal to large audiences. Ideological differences fade once the campaign is conducted by media experts, advertising firms, spokespersons, and copywriters who are naturally trying to reach the broadest common denominator. A political party aiming to win would discourage the ideologue and prefer the good-looking guy with the skill to appear healthy and wealthy – not necessarily wise – before the cameras.[3]

Kosinski deals with this phenomenon by taking it to an extreme. It is the story of an orphan living in the house of an old man, who may be his illegitimate father. He has been totally isolated from the outside world, his life limited to his quarters and to the garden. Besides a maid bringing him his food, he would meet nobody, just watch television. The author pictures him as fully integrated in the natural and virtual reality he is part of without an independent standing versus the garden or the television set. When he wonders in the garden, he never knows whether he is going forward or backward, whether he is ahead of or behind his previous steps. In other words, he moves in the rhythm of nature, and of television. He has no independent stature vis-à-vis the set but moves or does not move in its path; nothing changes for him besides the change of channels. As his only contact with the world is through images appearing and disappearing on the screen, his own being is described as self-created, like a TV image that floated into the world. Thus, his "real" being consists of being watched by others:

> When one was addressed and viewed by others, one was safe. Whatever one did would then be interpreted by the others in the

> same way that one interpreted what they did. They could never know more about one than one knew about them.[4]

This means that people's existence depends on those watching them. The communication world created by Kosinski is one entirely dependent on floating images:

> As long as one didn't look at people, they did not exist. They began to exist, as on TV, when one turned one's eyes on them. Only then could they stay in one's mind before being erased by new images.[5]

In addition to this model of existing by nature of serving as an image for others, the author proposes a model of existence dependent on bureaucratic records. When the old man dies, and lawyers handling the estate investigate the gardener to discover who he is, they come to the conclusion that he does not exist because there is no record of him. Although he has a sense of being, of growing side by side with the trees in the garden, and of the change from the days of radio to that of color television with a remote control, the lawyers can find no trace of him as he possesses no checkbook, driver's license, medical insurance card, or birth certificate.

As in the story of Adam and Eve, the gardener is driven out of the house to never return. The doors and gate to the garden are locked and, walking for the first time in the sun, he is struck by a passing limousine. A woman in the limousine, EE, introduces herself, and although he has no name besides Chance, for he was born by chance, he recalls that in similar situations men on TV introduce themselves by two names and thus introduces himself as "Chance the gardener." EE understands "Chauncey Gardiner" and from that point onwards, the road to high office is paved, for the protagonist already possesses the right name, one that is easily absorbable by television audiences.

All of Chauncey Gardiner's responses, derived from TV, contribute to his political success. He has no life beyond the images he got from the screen and thus, in a world in which everybody is affected by television, Chauncey Gardiner turns into an admired figure. He has no language besides the language used on television, and that language is devoid of any unique ethnic or communal accent. His communication is perfect. When EE takes him

to her house and they conduct a conversation, he repeats parts of her own sentences, as is done on TV, which cheers her up and makes her confident. When the president visits her ailing husband and Chance meets with him, he remembers that during televised press conferences, the president always looks straight at the viewers, and he therefore stares directly into his eyes. His hair glistening, his skin ruddy in his freshly pressed suit, Chance impresses men and women as only movie stars, or the politicians resembling them, do:

> Manly; well-groomed; beautiful voice; sort of a cross between Ted Kennedy and Cary Grant.[6]

Television provides Chance with an appearance of self-confidence and decency. He is never afraid of an uncertain future because on TV, the actors will always be there, everything has its sequel, and one just has to wait patiently for the next program. The decency stems from sexual morality on American TV. When EE makes love to Chance, he impresses her by his delicate approach learnt from a TV culture in which love-making involves a man and a women coming very close to each other, sometimes even partly undressed, but then the scene is obscured; a brand new image appears on the screen and the embrace of the man and woman is utterly forgotten.

Chauncey Gardiner's political success stems from three additional factors:

First, he has no past. As is well known, a person's past may often be a barrier, especially for politicians who are supposed to look pure and sinless:

> Gardiner has no background! And so he's not and cannot be objectionable to anyone! He's personable, well-spoken, and he comes across well on TV! And, as far as his thinking goes, he appears to be one of us.[7]

The gardener does not think at all, but he appears to be "one of us" because, since he lacks any existence beyond that projected by his audience, it is easy to project anything into him:

> The people who watched him on their sets did not know who actually faced them; how could they, if they had never met him? ... Chance became only an image for millions of real people. They would never know how real he was, since his thinking could not be televised. And to him, the viewers existed only as projections of his own thought, as images. He would never know how real they were, since he had never met them and did not know what they thought.[8]

Second, his lack of awareness of the complexity of the world makes him voice a limited number of truisms, based on his experience in the garden, which are easily accepted by elites and masses alike. Statements like "There are spring and summer, but there are also fall and winter. And then spring and summer again"[9] are welcomed in a society preoccupied with complex problems which seem to have no solution. The solutions proposed in the public sphere seem complicated and are hard to implement. Thus, simple statements, based on gardening experience, raise hopes. When the president says they are the most refreshing and optimistic statements he has heard in a long time, he is probably right. In a world in which the complexity of the discourse on public problems does not assure their solution, simple statements are refreshing.

Third, Chauncey Gardiner is politically successful because the entire political system is perfectly adapted to the world of television. Politicians, diplomats, ambassadors, newspaper editors, reporters, producers, businessmen, secret service agents, and secretaries are attracted to Chauncey Gardiner because they themselves are engaged in virtual rather than real activities. When the only thing that matters is appearance, then the illiterate gardener with the perfect appearance is cherished. Had the system dealt with real issues – human welfare, avoidance of war, preservation of the environment, and the like – all the above actors would have had to be preoccupied with complex problem-solving. But when the essence of the game is preservation of one's power and status, mainly through frequent media appearances, then the illiterate gardener has an advantage. His illiteracy helps him flourish in the cocktail parties, talk shows, background discussions, small talk, and other symptoms of virtual politics.

In the modern political world, it has become customary to broadcast endless interviews with politicians while everybody – the interviewers, the

interviewees, and the audience – is aware that nothing will be said. Under these circumstances, the gardener who has no comment on an article in the *New York Times* or declares he does not read newspapers at all because he is illiterate becomes very effective.

This book, then, may be seen as a satirical work on modern politics, mainly in the United States, where a person who is unknown may be elected, on the basis of television skills, to a position on which the fate of millions may depend. As in totalitarian states, where a cult of personality is built, the democratic system allows, according to this book, mass control by images. The book is often referred to when candidates appear on the political scene just because of the image they convey on television. For instance, on the eve of the 1996 presidential elections in the United States, former chief of staff Colin Powell, who considered joining the race, was compared to Chauncey Gardiner for his refusal to commit himself to any clear ideology. *Being There* is also referred to when grey, unknown candidates are proposed for high office, such as a supreme court justice, just because more capable candidates were rejected due to past scandals.

But the book is not only a political satire; it also makes a point – albeit not sufficiently developed – about the era of the 1960s during which it was written.

This was an era in which educated social groups in the capitalistic West reconsidered some of the foundations of the world they lived in, asking "who are we?" and "where are we going?" The students' rebellions in France, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere indicated that many young people in the modern industrial state were experiencing a feeling of suffocation. They felt they were losing their humanity in a setting dominated by omnipotent multinational corporations, bureaucratic organizations, and technological advances. And as was often the case when educated social groups lamented social and industrial progress, the solution was found in a return to nature. In the fashion of Rousseau and other romantics, revolutionary thinkers of the 1960s called for a return of civilization to the lost paradise of simplicity and purity, a return, in the language of this book, to the garden behind the wall surrounding the old man's house.

Kosinski hints at this romantic tendency in the emphasis given in the book to Krylov's fables. Chance cannot read and write but he impresses others because of his "Krylovian touch"[10] Krylov's fables are mostly concerned

with human purity corrupted by complexity and modernity. Consider, for instance, the fable dealing with a simple, healthy, industrious gardener whose intellectual neighbor boasted he could grow better vegetables because of his use of scientific methods. In the end, no vegetables grew in the intellectual's garden while the simple man's garden flourished. Students of the 1960s, particularly in the United States, called for a return to Krylovian simplicity, to the formation of an America free of CIA, LBJ, imperialistic interests, gigantic corporations, and power brokers, a country nurturing true democracy, protecting the environment and getting out of Vietnam.

Although these claims were considered revolutionary at the time, they actually matched a profound American creed, namely, the belief that American capitalism grew as part of Americana and was deeply rooted in values related to land and nature. This is why an illiterate gardener could impress the American business community. Here is what EE's husband, the heavy capitalist, has to say when Chance, asked what business he is in, mentions the garden:

> A gardener! Isn't that the perfect description of what a real businessman is? A person who makes a flinty soil productive with the labor of his own hands, who waters it with the sweat of his own brow, and who creates a place of value for his family and for the community. Yes, Chauncey, what an excellent metaphor! A productive businessman is indeed a laborer in his own vineyard![11]

At the time the above claims were made, Kosinski was an American cultural hero who appeared frequently on television talk shows in a false identity.[12] Kosinski was born in 1933 to a Jewish family in Lodz, Poland, and spent the years of the Nazi occupation with his parents moving between shelters. After the war he studied in a Lodz high school as well as at the University of Warsaw and in 1957 was able to obtain a study visa in the United States. He studied at Columbia University, and a few months after his arrival received a generous grant from the CIA to write a book about the USSR, where he spent a year before his departure to America.

From here on, he began to invent a life story that turned him into a cultural hero. He made people believe that his bestseller *The Painted Bird*, about a child wandering alone in Nazi-occupied Poland during the war, was

autobiographical; that his father, textile merchant, Mojzesz Lewinkopf, was a linguist and his mother – a pianist; that he had arrived in the United States with only $2.80 in his pocket (while in reality a $500 deposit was needed to obtain a study permit); that he escaped Poland by forging reference letters from fictitious figures (which was apparently not true), etc.

In 1982, when these facts were exposed in the *Village Voice*, and Kosinski was accused of plagiarizing *Being There*, America refused to believe it. Many, including the *New York Times*, defended him forcefully. But life under a partly invented identity finally took its toll. If Kosinski ever wrote an autobiography, it was *Being There*. Like Chauncey Gardiner, the author, who wandered with his parents during his adolescent years from shelter to shelter, did not have the opportunity to shape a "real" personality. Like his character, he found himself in the spotlight with his only identity being that projected by the cameras. *Being There*, it could be argued, is not the story of the manipulation of the masses by a sophisticated scoundrel but the tragic story of a man whose only identity is one that exists in the eyes of the watching public. The only time Chauncey Gardiner feels secure is when he watches television or is being watched on the screen. Whenever he finds himself in an uncertain situation, he turns on the TV and watches its "reassuring images."[13] As we can see when he engages in sexual relations, he is totally alienated from a world of human interactions.

Kosinski's point of view is thus one of alienation from the reality he observed in the 1960s, and this seemingly enabled him to expose the "deluxe alienation" of educated strata in the western world at the time. His philosophical argument is not stated clearly enough, but it may be reconstructed thus: Let us draw a model of the political world which the rebels of the 1960s, and American culture in general, long for. Let's draw the historical narrative differently, as if the warm, tribal, natural *Gemeinschaft* has not been replaced by the modern *Gesellschaft* existing in America. Let's picture a hypothetical, literary narrative in which the Garden of Eden was not abandoned for the sake of an industrial state with bureaucratic institutions, laws and regulations, social and occupational differentiation, diverse political interests, etc., but in which Rousseau's ideal has been implemented.

Rousseau expressed his loathing for complex civilization and his wish for a simple form of existence, and Chauncey Gardiner fulfills that wish. He has no documents, no address, no checkbook, he owns no driver's license and

possesses no medial insurance card. He has never paid taxes, never gone to the dentist or the doctor, and never served in Vietnam. He is not a citizen of the state in the Aristotelian sense – he lacks any social affiliations or political interests and loyalties. He lives outside the time and space of the modern world. As we have seen, while in the garden he moved in consonance with the growing plants, and when he left the garden, he could continue to do so due to television in which there is no change of time and space, just the shifting of channels.

But the return of a complex society to nature, to a pre- or post-civilization existence, is dangerous. This can be seen as the main political message of the book. Kosinski, living in Poland during the Communist takeover, hated the Communist regime, which promised the masses a restoration of a paradise lost and subjected them instead to hunger, poverty, and political persecutions. America never did resemble, of course, this kind of totalitarianism, but Kosinski is concerned about the totalitarianism implied by a regime ruled by Chauncey Gardiner. A polity in which leadership is determined by televised images is undemocratic. It lacks political participation, the articulation and aggregation of diverse interests, and any form of political struggle. There are no failures and mishaps in that system, no wheeling and dealing, no negotiations, coalition building or recruitment of support, and there exist no moral dilemmas.

Chauncey Gardiner seems like a rather decent guy – he does not resemble any of the totalitarian leaders of the twentieth century. There is also a certain stability about him – he does not stagger back and forth between emotions. But there is no way to know how decent he is. In a moment of truth, when decision-makers decide the fate of other people's lives, a measure of human decency could make all the difference in the world. We have no way to tell how Chauncey Gardiner would behave at such a moment.

For one, he is not committed to truth, as the system described in the book has replaced truth by its appearance. Chauncey Gardiner lacks any mechanism of self-reflection and contemplation. He has no doubts or reservations, as there exist no objective standards against which one's acts may be evaluated. This, Kosinski tells us, is the mark of the age. In an age dominated by television, everything is invented anew every minute – there exist no stable norms that can be relied on. The television world consists of closed circles of images in which every occurrence is self-produced and all acts

originate and end in virtual reality. The cyclical nature of the virtual world is illustrated when Chance discovers in a television studio that the cameras actually were not reflecting an external world but each other:

> Chance was astonished that television could portray itself; cameras watched themselves and, as they watched, they televised a program. This self-portrait was telecast on TV screens facing the stage and watched by the studio audience. Of all the manifold things that were in all the world – trees, grass, flowers, telephones, radios, elevators – only TV constantly held up a mirror to its own neither solid not fluid face.[14]

Such a cyclical system, avoiding contact with an external system of norms and possibly denying its existence, has grave political consequences.[15] When politics are played within a cycle of images, the distinction between good and bad is lost. In order to talk about a political act as good or bad, it must be set against a standard that not only exceeds the act itself but is rooted in a whole system of political restrictions, legal precedents, etc. In virtual politics, however, good acts are those that look good and bad acts are those that look bad.

Moreover, even when a bad act is exposed as such, its evil nature would soon be blurred in a flood of images, whether or not manipulated by the leadership. The phenomenon of political leaders caught in acts of corruption and similar felonies who, before hiring a lawyer, surround themselves with public relations experts is already a familiar one. These leaders will soon engage in endless television appearances intended to hide the felony under a pile of images that divert the attention of politicians, the legal system and the public to other matters. However confident Chauncey Gardiner seems to his viewers, the state Kosinski describes cannot be secure, as it has no historical past and no moral foundation. It lacks political commitment towards itself and towards others.

The undeniable power of television is brought to an extreme in this novel. Television has, of course, not only provided us with virtual images but has also brought previously ignored political facts, such as the facts of war, famine in remote regions, or political restlessness among previously ignored social groups, into our living rooms. Studies have shown that humans are

exposed to the images portrayed by television in a more limited way than prophets of doom like Herbert Marcuse, Marshall McLuhan, or Neil Postman have predicted. The Aristotelian citizen belonging to a network of social groups engaged in communal political activity has not disappeared from the scene in the age of mass society. The increase in the power of the mass media and their owners has given rise to media-watch organizations and individual mechanisms providing protection from their overwhelming effect.

And yet, Kosinski's warning is in place. He warns us of the dangers involved in a direct jump from the old man's garden to the television studio, from nature to virtual reality, from one paradise to another. He warns us not to give up the intermediary stage of political civilization so despised by the rebels of the 1960s and by many today.

All over the world, a resentment of "politics as usual" is found in public opinion polls.[16] People resent the political process with its particularistic interests, endless conflicts, and ugly wheeling and dealing. They express fatigue with the long and tiring processes in which politicians engage in forming coalitions, negotiating compromises, and reaching consensus for policies. People are often willing to give up what seems like, and often is, a corrupt political process for a pure and clean virtual reality in which good-looking candidates provide, in straight talk, hope for "the future."

But what this means is giving up life in time and space, replacing reality by a cyclical, self-contained system of images whose main characteristic is a lack of commitment by any humans towards any other humans. *Being There* is a book about the abandonment of human interaction for the sake of a fascinating yet very dangerous adventure in which there is no failure but also no change and development. Chauncey Gardiner moves from success to success. He does not fail because his audience projects onto him its unrealistic hopes and desires. There is nothing he says that is not accepted because his laconic words do not endanger the continued existence of the virtual order.

Once in power, he could survive in office forever because he is not evaluated by any criteria but those that brought him to office in the first place. He is cherished by a society tired of complexity and disenchanted about its capacity to solve problems. His rise to power is aided by a lazy press unwilling to dig too hard into his background and by a phony elite, represented by EE, whose main interest lies in a smooth political process that would assure its own longevity. As EE says to the gardener she houses: "You're

an angel, my dear. Thank God there are still men like you around to give aid and comfort."[17]

Jerzy Kosinski did not share EE's preferences. Although he himself became a TV star inventing a life story based on his audience's expectations, he probably realized the need of the individual for a life that is lived in separation from the cameras, to engage in human interactions, to develop and change, not just "being there." For on May 2, 1991, after coming home from a party where he performed, as usual, the celebrity role, he got into the bathtub and took his own life.

Being There, as well as the story of Kosinski's life – and death – may thus be seen above all as a story about the right of the individual to fail. Failure has never been desired in Western civilization. Educational systems, beginning in the home, socialize us to "succeed." The signals we detect throughout our life from parents, teachers, colleagues, and the mass media encourage us to "make it" in school, in sports, in our career, in our social life, in politics. "Nothing succeeds like success," the cliché goes, and very few dare object to it when planning their lives. Success is defined differently across cultures and periods, but it always includes a measure of appreciation by others. It is therefore intensely sought in politics. Political leadership is an indication of success and, at the same time, depends on the image of success.

As we follow Chauncey Gardiner making it to the top, we are filled with fear stemming not only from the gardener's illiteracy but from the nature of success. Kosinski brought the norm of success to the realm of the absurd, where it belongs. He demonstrated the shallowness involved in achieving social glamor and political power for its own sake. He made his protagonist climb the ladder only to reveal to the bystanders there is no human substance behind the role. He made us think more deeply about that substance than we usually do when we elect leaders and made us realize the place failure has, and ought to have, in our civilization. For it is in failure, not in success, that our human qualities are revealed, especially our compassion towards other humans. The successful leader has a good chance to fall into arrogance and vanity; the twentieth century has seen enormous destruction brought about by leaders pictured as larger than life who, convinced by the picture drawn of them, were willing to lead millions to their death.

Is there an alternative to choosing leaders by their proven and potential success? In his study of biblical leadership, theologian Martin Buber admitted

that it is the moment of success that determines the selection of events that seem important to history. World history is the history of successes; in the heart of history only the conquerors have value. But the Bible, he wrote, knows nothing of this intrinsic value of success. On the contrary, when it announces a successful deed, it is duty-bound to announce in complete detail the failure involved in the success. Buber brings many examples – Moses who led the people out of Egypt but was defeated in every negotiation with them, King David who was not allowed to enjoy his triumphs, or the prophets whose existence was in failure throughout. Buber writes:

> This existence in the shadow, in the quiver, is the final word of the leaders in the biblical world; this enclosure in failure, in obscurity, even when one stands in the blaze of public life, in the presence of the whole national life. The truth is hidden in obscurity and yet does its work; though indeed in a way far different from that which is known and lauded as effective by world history.[18]

Chauncey Gardiner represents the exact opposite – there is neither truth nor real work hidden behind the appearance of success. Buber considered the biblical leaders as endowed not only with moral perfection but with a greater quality that stands at the center of his theology – the capacity to engage in genuine dialogue with God, nature, and other human beings. Chauncey Gardiner, on the other extreme, holds no dialogue – not even with himself. Thus, in a strange and complex way, this literary character joins in the great theologian's call to maintain the dialogical capacity, tamed by success but enhanced by failure, in public life.

This page intentionally left blank