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Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, Editors

Being Nothing

George W. Bush as Presidential Simulacrum

[Carol V. Hamilton](#)

Nobody likes to see dead people on their television screens.

-- George W. Bush, April 13, 2004

I. Flat Personality for the Age of Simulation

In Jerzy Kozinsky's 1970 novel *Being There*, a character named Chance the Gardener, whose entire existence has been restricted to watching television shows and tending a walled garden, is suddenly thrust into the outside world. Here he acquires admirers who rename him Chauncey Gardiner, mistake his ignorance for profundity, and take his horticultural allusions for zenlike koans. His intellectual limitations and personal inadequacies become social and political virtues. At the end of the novel, the President's advisors gather to consider a candidate to replace the current vice-president. One of them suggests Chance. "Gardiner has no background," he declares. "And so he's not and cannot be objectionable to everyone! He's personable, well-spoken, and he comes across well on TV" [\[1\]](#). Although *Being There* is over 30 years old, it is eerily pertinent to the current political scene. Only in one respect was Kozinski's prophecy too cautious. Writing during the reign of the uncharismatic, unphotogenic, yet canny and intelligent President Nixon, Koskinski was apparently unable to imagine Chance as a sitting president.

As a result of his immersion in television programs and limited experience with the outside world, Chance is unable to distinguish videotaped fictions from social reality. *Being There* recognized the capacity of images -- the spectacle -- to displace or colonize the real, even in relation to the Vietnam War.

"What about the war?" the young woman sitting on Chance's left said, leaning close to him.

"The war? Which war?" said Chance. "I've seen many wars on TV."

"Alas," the woman said, "in this country, when we dream of reality, television wakes us. To millions, I suppose, the war is just another TV program. But out there, at the front,

real men are giving their lives." [2]

The war is just another TV program. Not so, of course, to the soldiers themselves or to the civilians maimed and killed by American missiles, but to the television audience. And although the vivid television coverage of Vietnam stirred up anti-war opposition, the coverage of the first Gulf War, with its greenish flickering images and explosions of phosphorescence, famously resembled a video game rather than a battlefield. In 1991, Jean Baudrillard published three articles in the Parisian newspaper, *Libération*, questioning the reality of the first Gulf War. "We prefer the exile of the virtual," he wrote in the first of these essays, "of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real." [3] Baudrillard's argument was widely misunderstood and angrily condemned.

This article appropriates ideas from *Being There* and Baudrillard's Gulf War pieces in order to propose that George W. Bush is a simulation, a virtual figure upgraded from a prototype like that of Chance the Gardener. I am not interested in George W. Bush's corporeal being but rather in his *flatness* and in the way that his obvious deficiencies are "spun" by supposedly disinterested media pundits. Bush's estrangement from the real -- evident in his unfamiliarity with geography, history, ordinary English syntax and semantics, and a fund of common knowledge -- stems from his own lack of reality. George W. Bush does not exist.

Under the sign of postmodernism, the hermeneutics of depth have been replaced by the play of surfaces, and the flat celebrity has superseded the complicated historical figure. In his magisterial *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson commented on the shift between the deep subjectivity represented in the modernist novel and the postmodern "death of the subject." "This new order," Jameson writes, "no longer needs prophets or seers of the high modernist and charismatic type, whether among its cultural producers, or its politicians. Such figures no longer hold any charm or magic for the subjects of a corporate, collectivized, post-individualistic age." [4] Accordingly, the cosmopolitan, dignified F.D.R. gives way to the bland, folksy, often incoherent persona of GWB, with his faux-Texas accent and gunfighter strut.

Like Bush, Kosinski's Chance possesses a very limited range of references and a markedly restricted ability to articulate ideas. When his new fame lands Chance on a talk show, he manages, after some helpful prompting from the host, to utter a series of banalities about the vicissitudes of growth in a garden. Afterwards, one of Chance's admirers comments that the gardener "has the uncanny ability of reducing complex matters to the simplest of human terms." [5] Chance is also complimented on his appearance by Lord Beauclerk, chairman of the board of the BBC:

"I enormously enjoyed the bluntness of your statement on television. Very cunning of you, very cunning indeed! One doesn't want to work things out too finely, does one? I mean -- not for the videots." [6]

Lord Beauclerk both mistakes Chance's banality for a strategic ploy and assumes that television viewers are morons whose simple minds require simple explanations.

When Bush stammers publicly about freedom, democracy, and the axis of evil, American media commentators gloss his remarks positively. Reporters and pundits chronically overestimate Bush in much the way Chance's admirers do, discoursing about him as if he actually possessed a political philosophy and an understanding of government policies. They overlook, understate, or make

excuses for his slipshod syntax, reliance on clichés, and inability to answer either theoretical or factual questions. They inevitably refer to him as if he were a "real" person with a complex sensibility, rather than a simulacrum entirely composed of sound bites and photo opportunities.

After the press conference of April 13, 2004, for example, one television reporter acknowledged that Bush had spoken "clumsily" at times, but speculated that the president's plain speech is part of his appeal, that he uses the idioms of ordinary Americans. Other commentators approved his evident "conviction" about the war in Iraq -- referring to moments when Bush uttered the clichés about freedom with apparent vehemence. On the April 13th, 2004, edition of *Hardball*, Chris Matthews expressed his admiration for Bush's refusal to acknowledge any responsibility or any mistakes -- a bizarre encomium, considering the long and embarrassing moments when Bush slouched down the side of the podium, grinning and stammering, unable to think of any response, as if a computer virus had infected his personal software.

On the following day, the *New York Times* lead editorial characterized the president's performance as follows: "Mr. Bush was grave and impressive while reading his opening remarks, but his responses to questions were distressingly rambling and unfocused."^[7] The use of "impressive" seems precisely calibrated to ward off the blow of "distressingly." None of the commentators mentioned the ingratiating smile that constantly played about the President's lips, a nervous and inappropriate aspect of his demeanor, particularly considering the serious content of the reporters' questions. No one referred to the software glitch, and it was not shown again, let alone played repeatedly -- unlike other moments televised in 2004, such as Howard Dean's "scream" and Janet Jackson's bared breast. After observing how media pundits shed the best possible light on Bush, one has to wonder: are journalists and pundit colluding in his legitimization, or are they, like Chance's many admirers, actually taken in?

In *Being There*, Chance's ignorance of the "real" world causes him to remain silent when he doesn't understand questions, remarks, and behavior directed toward him. His strange passivity prompts other characters to interpret him as they see fit. When EE, wife of the elderly Mr. Rand, makes sexual overtures to Chance, for example, she regards his lack of response as indifference to her particular physical charms. When ambassadors at the United Nations meet Chance at a dinner party, they quickly leap to wildly inflated assumptions about his linguistic and cultural fluency. No one realizes that in every situation, Chance is completely out of his depth.

Insider accounts suggest that Bush has adopted a similar strategy of passive inscrutability. In Ron Suskind's *The Price of Loyalty*, Paul O'Neill, Secretary of the Treasury from 2000-2002, becomes acquainted with the inner workings of the Bush White House. O'Neill soon observes, with increasing dismay, the President's uncommunicative demeanor. After he presents his ideas and positions on the economy, he pauses for a question or response: "Bush didn't ask anything. He looked at O'Neill, not changing his expression, not letting on that he had any reactions -- either positive or negative."^[8] Like Chance, Bush is open to interpretation: "The President seemed to nod in affirmation. O'Neill couldn't be sure."^[9] A White House veteran, O'Neill was accustomed to the active participation of previous presidents -- to their questions, analyses, thinking processes. In subsequent meetings with Bush O'Neill notes the typical "flat, inexpressive stare"^[10] with which the president would listen to his briefings. He concludes that no one on the staff knows what Bush is thinking -- that "experienced, ambitious men and women atop vast federal agencies [were] acting, in many cases, on little more than hunches about what the President might think -- what he might have suggested with a nod or a wink during some presentation of options."^[11] The climax of

O'Neill's disillusionment with Bush is described as follows:

O'Neill was watching Bush closely. He threw out a few general phrases, a few nods, but there was virtually no engagement. These cabinet secretaries had worked for over a month on detailed reports. O'Neill had been made to understand by various colleagues in the White House that the President should not be expected to read reports. In his personal experience, the President didn't even appear to have read the short memos that he sent over.

That made it especially troubling that Bush did not ask any questions. There are so many worth asking about each of these areas, O'Neill thought as he sat quietly, dozens of queries running through his head.

"This meeting was like many of the meetings I would go to over the course of two years," he recalled. "The only way I can describe it is that, well, the President is like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people. There is no discernible connection."[\[12\]](#)

While in public, Bush appears to interact amiably with the media, in the center of government -- away from public observation -- he is disconnected, like an unplugged machine. At a January 30, 2001, meeting with the National Security Council, O'Neill remembers, "the president said little. He just nodded, with that same flat, unquestioning demeanor that O'Neill was familiar with."[\[13\]](#) Behind closed doors, Bush no longer connects or exists. His principal function has been lost. In this respect he is like an expensive, hand-waxed automobile, gleaming in the darkness of a garage. The car is intended for rapid motion and for public display. When its owner-driver is at the dinner table, he has no need of the car. "The celebrity displays personality," explains Michael Rogin. "He pleases others; intimate before the mass audience, he plays at privacy in public. Neither a repressed interior nor an intractable reality exercise claims over the celebrity for he exists in the eye of the beholder."[\[14\]](#) If Bush "plays at privacy" in public, he cannot act "for real" in private, because he is now in a realm where substance and depth, rather than sheer surface, are called upon.

II. Precursors of the Presidential Simulacrum

President Reagan was soaring above the real.

-- Michael Rogin

As simulacrum-in-chief, George W. has political forebears as well as literary and cinematic cousins. The political slippage from the real to the hyperreal begins with Ronald Reagan. Unlike George W. Bush, Reagan was real, but for Reagan, a postmodernist *sans la lettre*, memory, history, and brute facticity were always already constructs.

The ongoing joke about Reagan -- made eventually by Reagan himself -- was that he relied upon cue cards to speak in public. Everyone acknowledges that, unlike the current occupant of the White House, Reagan read his cue cards and speeches fluently -- without fractured syntax, stammering, or incoherence. In *Ronald Reagan, The Movie* (1987), Michael Rogin demonstrated not only how

Reagan frequently confounded events from films with historical events but also what that confusion signified: "Reagan's easy slippage between movies and reality is synecdochic for a political culture increasingly impervious to distinctions between fiction and history." [15] Observing that the content of Reagan's March 16, 1986 speech about the threat posed by Nicaragua, seemed questionable even to some of his supporters, Rogin comments:

But even if the empirical truth value of Reagan's speech was larger than zero, it was somehow beside the point, for the speech inhabited a wholly different realm from the one in which reporters tried to hold it to account. The *fractured reality principle* could coexist alongside the speech, for the two operated on different planes ... President Reagan was soaring above the real. His maps, pictures, and visionary worldview exhibited on the television screen, replaced the world they claimed to represent... As Reagan's words and pictures brought his Nicaragua into American living rooms, *the real Latin American country disappeared*; it was in danger of symbolic and physical obliteration (italics added). [16]

Rogin's observations about Nicaragua are all too applicable to the two wars on Iraq. Iraqi casualties were not reported, and certainly not shown, so they seemed "unreal" to the American public. Spokespeople for the army and their right-wing supporters even objected to any specific information about dead American soldiers -- formal photographs of their faces, even shots of flag-draped coffins -- as if the connection between war and death, if represented to any degree, would demoralize American citizens and turn them against the enterprise. It was crucial to administrative policy that the war be linked only to a series of abstractions -- freedom, democracy, counter-terrorism.

The actual death of Ronald Reagan was the occasion for another kind of spectacle. During the grand state funeral, media commentators lauded him in glowing terms, rarely so much as hinting at any downside to his policies -- "trickle-down economics," expelling the mentally ill onto the streets, the Iran-Contra affair, and an inflated national deficit. Furthermore, Reagan was given credit for superhuman, transhistorical feats, like single-handedly ending the Cold War. Death both inflated and proliferated Reagan's image, which for a week was inescapable in the American media. The funeral, like one of Andy Warhol's deliberately tedious movies, went on interminably. As FAIR complained in an email to its list of supporters:

Journalists seemed determined to show that any criticisms of Reagan could be turned upside down. As Dan Rather explained on CBS's *60 Minutes* (6/6/04), "The literal-minded were forever troubled by his tendency to sometimes confuse life with the movies. But he understood, like very few leaders before or since, the power of myth and storytelling. In his films and his political life, Ronald Reagan stood at the intersection where dreams and reality meet, and with a wink and a one-liner, always held out hope for a happy ending." [17]

Michael Rogin, who had first exposed Reagan's chronic confusion between film and reality on CBS's *60 Minutes* -- and at the *invitation* of that network, when a reporter heard Rogin give a talk on this subject at a scholarly conference -- thus becomes one of "the literal-minded." Dan Rather proceeds to replace misinformation with "dreams"; Reagan no longer *blurs* the boundary between truth and fantasy but "stands at the intersection" of the two.

Even one of Reagan's most ardent admirers, Edmund Morris, has acknowledged some of the late president's faults, such as his failure to display affection to his children, absence of close friendships, and inability to recognize people he had met repeatedly. Like George W. Bush, Reagan periodically manifested an astonishing ignorance of basic cultural information. Crucially, Reagan seemed to lack what Morris calls "private empathy" with other people's troubles. Despite this, Morris writes:

He could be movingly sincere when he was required to emote in public. To question his identity with "the boys of Pointe du Hoc" or the nameless dead of Bergen-Belsen would be to misunderstand his essentially thespian nature. Actors are not like you or me: their *real world*, where they *really feel*, is onstage (italics added). [18]

Here, and elsewhere, Morris seems to suggest a kind of solipsism in Ronald Reagan, an inability to comprehend the "reality" of other minds and other sentient beings. To possess an "essentially thespian nature" apparently means to express feelings *only* in public and *only* for those who no longer exist or who have never existed.

In 1982, during Reagan's first term, Warner Brothers released Ridley Scott's famous film *Bladerunner*, a film in which human actors played "replicants," artificially created lifeforms who are almost indistinguishable from human beings -- the important difference being their incapacity for emotional empathy. *Bladerunner* is based upon Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and both take as their main character a bounty hunter whose job is to "retire" the replicants, or "androids" as they are called in the novel. However, the Nixon-era novel is quite different from -- darker, more pessimistic than -- the Reagan-era film. While actors like Rutger Hauer make the film's replicants appealing and even touching in death, the androids of the novel are gratuitously and unimaginatively cruel, even to the few vestiges of organic life that survive on Earth. One cuts the legs off a spider to see what will happen. Another vengefully pushes a goat from a roof. The androids of the novel lack the instantaneous empathic reaction that normal human beings innately possess, and thus they fail the Voigt-Kampff Empathy test, with its references to "boiled dog" and "babyhide"(real humans react with revulsion). The androids are simulacra. As one of them, Rachel Rosen, admits: "We are machines, stamped out like bottle caps. It's an illusion that I -- I personally -- really exist; I'm just representative of a type." [19] A human character senses of the androids that "a peculiar and malign *abstractness* pervaded their mental processes." [20] The bounty hunter Rick Deckard always identifies androids by their coldness. "Her tone held cold reserve -- and that other cold, which he had encountered in so many androids." [21]

If coldness, lack of empathy, and a bias in favor of abstraction are characteristic of the android, then George W. Bush is clearly one of them. His political speeches are composed entirely of undefined abstractions like "freedom." While governor of Texas he inevitably approved state executions, never exercising executive clemency. Appeals for mercy were particularly ardent in the case of Karla Faye Tucker, the convicted murderer who had undergone a conversion to Christianity while incarcerated. Bush, who had claimed in a national debate that Jesus was his favorite philosopher (no one asked him to name his second favorite), refused even to meet with Tucker's many advocates. Not only that, but according to no less a stalwart conservative source than bowtied Tucker Carlson, Bush mocked her imagined appeal to him: "'Please,' Bush whimpers, his lips pursed in mock desperation, 'don't kill me'." [22] Like Reagan, Bush seems solipsistic, unable to believe in the existence of other people. He has shown this coldness even to members of his own family. According to *The Perfect Wife*, Gerhart's biography of the First Lady, Bush was "snarly"

upon learning that his daughter Jenna would undergo an emergency appendectomy, "like he was pissed at her." [23]

The notion of an American president as an android or simulacrum appears in an earlier, less well-known Philip K. Dick novel, *The Simulacra*. In this version of the future, Germany has become the 53rd member of the United States, time travel is possible for the governing elite, and a venerable presidential figure known as *Der Alte* (The Old One) periodically addresses the public on television. There have been several presidential figures, each with a name and an identity -- the current one is named Rudi Kalbfleish -- and all fabricated by the Karp Cartel. At the end of one presidential address, the Assistant Secretary of State takes charge:

Curtly, in his usual brisk tone, Garth McRae said, "Shut it off."

The Kalbfleish simulacrum stopped. Its arms stuck out, rigid in their final gesture, the withered face vacuous. The simulacrum said nothing, and automatically the TV cameras also shut off, one by one. [24]

In the world of Dick's 1964 novel, only a minority of citizens know that *der Alte* is a simulacrum. By the end of the novel, the secret has been revealed. The presidential simulacrum, the beloved First Lady Nicole, and television, "that planet-wide instrument of persuasion," are all intimately related. [25]

Now, 40 years later, as the July, 2004, cover of *Wired* proclaims, "Human Being 2.0: The Race to Make Androids That Walk, Talk, and Feel Just Like the Rest of Us," can we be sure that Dick's prediction has not already come to pass?

III. A Blank Page: The Culture of Celebrity

Illiteracy is a kind of blindness.

-- Ruth Rendell

What is the origin of simulacra like the current President of the United States? When I argue that Bush is not "real," I do not mean that he was manufactured in a secret factory, owned by a corporation like the Karp Cartel and controlled by a powerful conspiracy. But I will speculate that in a post-literate, hyperreal world, those accretions of historical time and psychological reflection that produce subjectivity tend to disperse before they constitute a deep, coherent self. The result can be a personality like that of Bush -- intellectually narrow, emotionally shallow, working with an abridged vocabulary, like a novice in a foreign language class. He is a commodity produced by contemporary American culture, with its bizarre admixture of consumerism, television, worship of celebrities, and glib Christian fundamentalism. Other cultures in other periods have produced personalities limited in different ways -- the provincial peasant, for example, who has never been more than a mile from his birthplace. Unlike the peasant, the contemporary flat personality knows that other countries, other cultures, other religions exist -- but in his solipsism they remain "unreal" to him, mere delusions to which other people, themselves mere figments, display an irrational attachment.

The star or politician on screen is the opposite of the introverted reader in the book-lined study. With the exception of the occasional compelling sports event or drama, watching television is a porous, rather than engrossing experience -- hence the urge to channel-surf, get up for a snack, make a phone call during a commercial. A good book, by contrast, is sufficiently absorbing as to make interruptions annoying. In the May 2004 issue of *Harper's*, Lewis Lapham pondered the shift from reader to viewer: "As the habits of mind beholden to the rule of images come to replace the systems of thought derived from the meanings of words, the constant viewer learns to eliminate the association of cause with effect." [26] Magical thinking and incantations replace rational argument, thoughtful analysis, and careful research. This may sound reactionary, but it is difficult -- as Noam Chomsky has complained -- to develop a complicated political discourse on a show like *Nightline*, interrupted not only by commercials but also by the briefly encapsulated views of other speakers. On television, acting and role-playing take the place of the subjectivity both developed by and observed in the *Bildungsroman* and the high modernist novel. Thus, "in deciding how to behave, Chance chose the TV program of the young businessman who often dined with the boss and the boss's daughter." [27]

Kosinski's Chance is unable to read or write. "I do not read any newspapers," said Chance. "I watch TV." [28] In an October 17, 2003, interview on Fox, George W. Bush volunteered that he did not read newspapers. The emptiness of both George W. Bush and Chance the Gardener is on display yet remains invisible to their admirers. This emptiness in turn is a product of their illiteracy. Those who are proposing Chance for the vice-presidency significantly praise him as a "blank page," a man with no personal history. [29]

The relationship between reading, privacy, and subjectivity is the subject of Sven Birkert's "The Time of Reading," first given as a lecture on May 1, 1996, in the New York Public Library. Reading has become archaic, he speculates, rather like walking in the age of the automobile. We no longer seem to have time to read, not the kind of time reading requires -- solitary, private, indefinite. Birkert's postulates the emergence of a new kind of self, "no longer tightly gathered around a core identity, no longer pledged to simple membership in an organic human community, but rather fluid, capable of metamorphosis -- of donning masks, assuming roles ... The self of the future may indeed be a decentered entity." [30]

Such a self is already here, of course -- was here in Ronald Reagan and is even more (or less) so in George W. Bush. One cannot imagine either of them as an adolescent curled up with a book by Thoreau or Jack Kerouac. For both of them the desirable persona to adopt was that of the suntanned cowboy on his ranch, not the pale, bespectacled nerd -- the Western outdoorsman, not the Eastern intellectual. Both also, despite a lack of actual military experience, played at Commander-in-Chief, tossing off salutes and, in Bush's case, dressing up like an airman and landing on the deck of an aircraft carrier -- "donning masks, assuming roles."

"For every reader who dies today," Jonathan Franzen observes in an essay entitled "The Reader in Exile," "a viewer is born." [31] In order to devote himself to reading and writing, Franzen gives away his television set. He confesses to possessing an old-fashioned literary sensibility. "I understand my life in the context of Raskolnikov and Quentin Compson," he writes, "not David Letterman or Jerry Seinfeld." [32] With some skepticism, Franzen considers the pessimistic arguments of cultural critics. Barry Sanders speculates that, in Franzen's words, "without a literacy rooted in orality there can be neither a self, as we understand it, nor self-consciousness." [33] (Such an observation is

applicable to Bush, who seems constitutionally incapable of self-doubt or self-criticism.) Franzen also writes about Sven Birkert's collected essays, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, which he finds "alarmist" and unduly pessimistic, despite his sympathy with many of Birkert's sentiments. "Novelists want their work to be enjoyed," he points out, "not taken as medicine." [34]

An even more pessimistic look at illiteracy, both its particular and cumulative ill effects, appears in Ruth Rendell's 1977 novel *A Judgment in Stone*, which opens with the sentence, "Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write." [35] Parchman is a malevolent counterpart to Chance the Gardener; she lacks his good looks, his benign disposition, and his artlessness. Unlike Chance, she has grown up among many people, all of whom can read, so her illiteracy induces profound shame and becomes "the root cause of her misanthropy." [36] Rendell explains: "Isolating herself was natural now, and she was not aware that it had begun by isolating herself from print and books and handwriting. Illiteracy had dried up her sympathy and atrophied her imagination." [37] In compensation, Parchman possesses a keen memory, especially for visual images. Like Chance she is fascinated by television and spends most of her free time watching it. Both *Being There* and *A Judgment in Stone* represent the personality of the illiterate as lacking in depth and complexity, a flat screen or blank page. Kosinski exploits the irony of the situation, while Rendell explores its capacity for tragedy. One could protest that both novelists overstate the deficiencies they attribute to illiteracy, but it is important to recognize that they situate their illiterate characters in the context of almost universal *functional* literacy (both novels were written before the advent of personal computers) and perpetual TV.

We live in a culture in which the ultimate validation or personal achievement is to appear on television. Just as movies confer potential immortality on actors, television seems to confer "reality" on ordinary citizens. Chance looks forward to his first appearance on a TV talk show. He "wanted to become an image, to dwell inside the set." [38] Kosinski elaborates:

Television reflected only people's images; it also kept peeling their images from their bodies until they were sucked into the caverns of their viewers' eyes, forever beyond retrieval, to disappear. Facing the cameras with their unsensing triple lenses pointed at him like snouts, 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 (italics added). [39]

In this passage the circulation of images, the televised spectacle, enhances the power of images to the detriment of the real and of real human interaction. In a Freudian pun, thinking becomes mere projection. In this triumph of solipsism, one can believe in one's own reality but not in the reality of others. Nonetheless, Chance's appearance on the talk show does not expose his ignorance; it only enhances his reputation.

In the screenplay version of *Being There*, Chance's former caretaker Louise, happens to witness his performance. Of all the millions of viewers, she alone knows of Chance's intellectual limitations. She is the only counterpart to the child in the fable who declares that the emperor is naked. She exclaims to herself :

Gobbledegook! All the time he talked gobbledegook! An' it's for sure a White man's

world in America. Hell, I raised that boy since he was the size of a puissant an' I'll say right now he never learned to read an' write -- no sir! Had no brains at all, was stuffed with rice puddin' between the ears! Short-changed by the Lord and dumb as a jackass an' look at him now! Yes, sir -- all you gotta be is white in America an' you get whatever you want! Just listen to that boy -- gobbledegook! [\[40\]](#)

One might speculate that a flat personality like that of Chance, or of George W. Bush, is inherently more in accord with the flatness of the television or computer screen and thus transmits smoothly and consistently. By contrast, perhaps, a complex, three-dimensional personality, full of contradictions, corners, and real history is difficult to reduce to a flat surface. Not all politicians, however, are inherently flat. John Kerry, for example, has posed a problem for the sound-bite insights of television pundits. How could anyone be both a decorated war hero and a longhaired protestor? A novel could delicately delineate such a transformation (think of *Lord Jim* or *Crime and Punishment*) but television must flatten it into "flip-flopping." The obviously literate Kerry, who speaks in complex sentences and uses "big words," has been compensating for these deficiencies by emphasizing his athleticism and military experience. He advertises himself as "the real deal."

But in the hyperreal United States, where "reality TV" has usurped reality itself, the problematic status of "the real" is precisely the issue.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Kosinski, Jerzy. *Being There*. New York: Grove Press, 1999, p. 139.

[\[2\]](#) Kosinski, p. 107.

[\[3\]](#) Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995, p. 28.

[\[4\]](#) Jameson, Fredrik. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1991, p. 306.

[\[5\]](#) Kosinski, p. 106.

[\[6\]](#) Kosinski, p. 95.

[\[7\]](#) *The New York Times* 14 April 2004

[\[8\]](#) Suskind, Ron. *The Price of Loyalty*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 2004, p. 58.

[\[9\]](#) Suskind, p.59.

[\[10\]](#) Suskind, p. 117.

[\[11\]](#) Suskind, p. 98.

[\[12\]](#) Suskind, pp. 148-49.

[13] Suskind, p. 73.

[14] Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan, The Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p. 9

[15] Rogin, p. 9.

[16] Rogin, p. xvi.

[17] www.fair.org/press-releases/reagan-myth-reality.html

[18] Morris, Edmund. "The Unknowable: Ronald Reagan's Amazing, Mysterious Life." *The New Yorker*, 28 June 2004, p. 48

[19] Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982, p. 165.

[20] Dick, p. 137.

[21] Dick, p. 88.

[22] Wolcott, James. "The Bush Bunch." *Vanity Fair*, July 2004, p. 82.

[23] Wolcott, 83.

[24] Dick, Philip K. *The Simulacra*. New York: Vintage, 2002, p. 32. I have to add that I only came across this novel after writing an almost final version of this article.

[25] Dick, *The Simulacra*, 88.

[26] Lapham, Lewis. "Buffalo Dances." *Harper's Magazine*, May 2004.

[27] Kosinski, p. 39.

[28] Kosinski, p. 96.

[29] Kosinski, p. 127.

[30] Birkerts, Sven. "The Time of Reading." [http:// www.bostonreview.net/BR21.3/Birkerts.html](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR21.3/Birkerts.html).

[31] Franzen, Jonathan. *How to be Alone*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002, p. 165

[32] Franzen, p. 165.

[33] Franzen, p. 166.

[34] Franzen, p. 176.

[35] Rendell, Ruth. *A Judgment in Stone*. New York: Vintage, 2000, p. 1

[36] Rendell, p. 38.

[37] Rendell, p. 42.

[38] Kosinski, p. 61.

[39] Kosinski, p. 65.

[40] Kosinski, Jerzy. *Being There* [screenplay]. www.geocities.com/Hollywood/8200/being.txt

Carol Vanderveer Hamilton lives in Pittsburgh. Her article, "The Evil of Banality: Moby-Dick versus the Extreme Machine" appears in the Summer, 2004 issue of *The Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*. Her book of poems, *Blindsight*, is forthcoming from Carnegie Mellon University Press.