

Book Review

The Art of the Possible over the Art of Actuality

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12 Monkeys.

Susanne Kord.

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Susanne Kord's book, *12 Monkeys* (2019) analyzes the director Terry Gilliam's film, *12 Monkeys* (1995) that illustrates a deadly virus released in 1996 as its triggering force, which was in return inspired by the director, Chris Marker's film, *La Jetée* (1962). Kord's book may be of special interest to academics, scholars, and researchers in such disciplines as media studies, film studies, literature, sociology, history, and philosophy with its rich theoretical and analytical content. Although the book offers a critical analysis of the film with specific references to other films such as Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and *Birds* (1963), and *Die Hard* (1988); philosophical, scientific, and theoretical sources of such figures as Einstein, Schopenhauer, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault; intertextual references like "Omar Khayyam and *The Rubaiyat*, the *Book of Revelations*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Hesiod, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*;"

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and to mythological and folk literature sources such as Prometheus and Cassandra complex, it can also be accessible to a wider audience with its easy-to-understand language and pellucidity (Kord 2019, 13).

The book is divided into nine chapters and the bibliography. The first chapter, “A Spectacular Mess’: Synopsis” presents a detailed plot summary of the film giving brief information about its budget comparing it with the other two films, *Congo* (1995) and *Outbreak* (1995); its critical reception by critics; and intertextual references. The second chapter, “Pushing the (Reset) Button: Why You Can’t Start Over” demonstrates how *12 Monkeys*, which “remains Gilliam’s least understood film,” is different from other similar films by playing with various genres such as “apocalypse and post-apocalypse movies; sci-fi; nuclear noir, and what is becoming known as ‘geek dystopia’” and themes such as “time travel; free will v. determinism; mental illness; conspiracy theories; the impossibility of human closeness, and the nature of reality” (Kord 2019, 13).

Insight into the endings of other apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic or time travel films is juxtaposed with the use of time travel, apocalypse, survival, and the possibility of changing the past in *12 Monkeys*, which the author explains as follows: “You can’t start over. You can’t change a reality that already occurred. *You* may be able to go back in time, but you can’t turn *it* back” (Kord 2019, 15). The writer’s explication of the significance of playing with a number of genres and themes proves instrumental, as it affects the expectations of the viewers substantially, refuting the probable expectations of a hopeful future in the end: “*12 Monkeys* holds out no such hope that post-apocalyptic humanity will be able simply to push the reset-button” (Kord 2019, 14).

The next chapter, “Thank you, Einstein’: Why You Can’t Turn Back Time” reflects the discussion of the linearity of time with specific references to Einstein, Minkowski, spacetime, and the notion of causality. This part highlights the pivotal role of perception and individual point of view in constructing the reality. It is concluded that time is not linear in that “the beginning is also the end” (Kord 2019, 22). Kord portrays an efficient explication of causality under the influence of Einstein’s perspective, with the conclusion that “causality is the only objective reality . . . time, in other words, is not responsible for causality, but the other way around” (2019, 19). The author delves into the potential similarities and differences between the present and the future, implying that “all time exists on an equal footing” (Kord 2019, 20). In the rest of the chapter,

I find Kord's emphasis on the purpose of time travel in the film highly significant, which is not to change the past like in other similar films, but to gather information as an observer in order to better understand the roots/source of certain catastrophes: "Won't help you. Won't help anyone. Won't change anything. The future already exists and cannot be changed" (Kord 2019, 22).

Accordingly, Kord illustrates the stark differences between Cole's and Dr. Raily's perspectives efficiently, drawing close attention to the vitality of the perspective in shaping our version of the reality. Kord's outlook on the similarities between different time spans is especially functional:

In fact, the pre-apocalyptic present/past and the post-apocalyptic future are remarkably similar. Dystopian dreariness permeates all timelines, and visual parallels abound---between the city landscapes of the past and the apocalyptic landscape of the future, between the mental hospitals of the 1990s and the subterranean cages of the 2030s, between the CAT-scan machine used to trace the source of mental illness and the time machine used to trace the virus. (2019, 26)

This quotation manifests how the belief in social progress is only a matter of perspective and how it is not time that is responsible for the ill-deeds in society, considering the remarkable similarities between two disparate time periods.

In chapter four, "On Mis/Perceptions of Reality," Kord deals with how reality is perceived or misperceived, affecting our understanding of sanity and insanity and normality and abnormality. Through the interaction between Cole and Raily, Kord draws close attention to "erasing the dividing line between sanity and insanity" by citing the line from the film: "We decide what's right and wrong, we decide who's crazy or not" (2019, 32). This shows how the point of view molds the reality, leading to "flawed interpretations of reality" (Kord 2019, 34). The author's following remark indicates her critical skill to express the implicated correlation between the fictional world and the actual world: "Such prophets, she declares, have regularly popped up during the most catastrophic events in human history, from natural disasters like the bubonic plague to man-made horrors like the mustard gas attacks of World War I" (Kord 2019, 36). Furthermore, I find Kord's touching on Gilliam's use of the angles important, as it has a huge impact on such binaries as sanity and insanity, and normalcy and abnormality: "Camera angles tells us what is 'normal' and what is 'crazy' before we even have a chance to listen to the dialogue" (Kord 2019, 41). Although the author explains certain cinematographic

techniques and the use of camera, which “offer the audience a choice of perspective,” she does not make use of too complicated a professional jargon, which makes the book accessible to a wider audience (Kord 2019, 43).

Chapter Five, “The Human Condom and Other Signs of Loneliness” discusses the impossibility of closeness; isolation of people; and identity in the light of a system that “enforces total separation and a complete lack of privacy” (Kord 2019, 46-47). In the subsection, “The Cinematography of Loneliness: Spaces,” Kord analyzes the use of spaces such as cages and its role in illustrating the loneliness of the characters: “The film translates these ideas into basic emotions---confusion, mourning, hopelessness and existential loneliness—and expresses these emotions spatially” (2019, 53). In this respect, the camera angle pinpointing to the loneliness of characters becomes influential.

Chapter six, “Free Will, Determinism and Doing What You’re Told” explores the theme of liberty and the juxtaposition between free will and determinism in order to discuss whether or not people have free will over their lives or whether the universe is deterministic. Kord here presents a functional discussion of the relationship between free will and determinism through specific references to Spinoza and seems to implicate that free will does not exist: “[F]ree will is an illusion, born of our belief in linear time and a strong desire for freedom and control” (2019, 65). Kord also offers a brief insight into different types of determinism such as biological determinism, theological determinism, cultural determinism, logical determinism, and causal determinism (2019, 66). In the light of Gilliam’s stance towards the reality and the significance of point of view in constructing the reality, Kord seems to support the argument that “both linear time and free will are highly *intuitive*” (2019, 66).

In the subsection, “Causality and Determinism,” Kord offers a deep perspective into referential sources from mythology, religion, and folk literature: “James Cole and Jesus Christ share the same initials. Both play the double role of prophet and dutiful son” (2019, 68). Her close reading of the characters and the specific scenes is reinforced with the critical sources. Although it may sound repetitive at times, Kord seems to stress the impossibility of changing the past: “[T]he only thing that changes is our observation of it. You cannot will reality, freely or otherwise; and you cannot change it. All you can do is observe it” (2019, 72). Her close reading of the use of colors and the cinematographic language is especially remarkable: “Colourlessness is the cinemato-

graphic language of determinism because individuals blend in, fade into the background, disappear into their world” (Kord 2019, 75).

The next chapter, “Strangers on a Plane: On Not Answering the Big Question” offers quotations from certain crucial interviews by Gilliam and focuses on the Big Question, which becomes “whether saving the future is actually a vision of hope” (Kord 2019, 79). This chapter eschews offering a concrete response to the Big Question and leaves it to the imagination of the viewers: “[W]e can condone or condemn, accept or reject. We may not be able to save the future, but at least we can decide how many shreds of human dignity we would like to preserve as we face it” (Kord 2019, 81). These very last sentences exemplify the implicit and explicit messages the film and Susanne Kord seem to implicate.

In chapter eight, “More Monkeys: The TV Series,” Kord engages herself with the similarities and differences between the film, *12 Monkeys* and the TV series, *12 Monkeys* (2015-18) in addition to offering what Gilliam thinks of the TV series. Kord highlights an efficient comparison and contrast touching on the change of characters, setting, places, and time; the personification of time; and the shift of the ending, which has a tremendous impact on the thematic structure of the original story. Kord’s analysis of Hollywood’s influence on the TV series is significant: “TV *12 Monkeys* is also fatally addicted to another Hollywood cliché: the One Man Syndrome” (2019, 85). She analyses the similarities and differences in an efficient way through examples: “Part of the attraction of Gilliam’s film resides in the unavoidable sympathy aroused by the figure of Cole . . . TV *12 Monkeys* not only replaces him with a bog-standard action hero but also deletes the inevitability of death” (Kord 2019, 86). Overall, the writer offers a detailed analysis of each season and many episodes from the TV show with numerous specific examples.

The last chapter, “Coda: Gilliam’s art of the Possible” can be considered as the conclusion of the book. It concentrates on Gilliam’s quest for originality with a remarkable quotation by Gilliam. This concluding chapter summaries the underlying implicit and explicit engagement of the film with the notions of liberty, free will, control over life, determinism, and the juxtaposition between possibility and actuality. The critical sources in the Bibliography/Filmography are extremely relevant and functional in contributing to Susanne Kord’s argumentation and critical analysis.

In conclusion, Kord's book has a strong potential to contribute to the current scholarship in such areas and disciplines as speculative literature, utopian literature, dystopian literature, pandemic fiction, film studies, literature, sociology, history, and philosophy with its rich and profound scholarly analysis, especially to relevant future research to be conducted. At the very end of the book, Kord brings the importance of perseverance and tenacity to our attention through the final insight into the film: "Because this is, in the end, the great advantage of Gilliam's *Art of the Possible* over the *Art of Actuality*: it may not kick Time's ass, but it does stand up to it" (2019, 96).