

# NON-FICTION REVIEWS



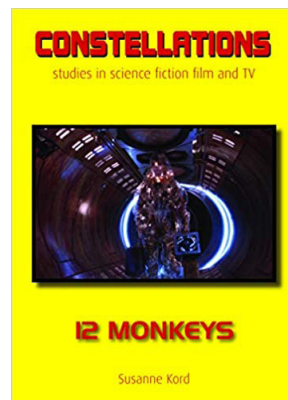
### *12 Monkeys*, by Susanne Kord

Dominick Grace



Susanne Kord. *12 Monkeys*. Auteur, 2019. Constellations. Paperback. 102 pg. \$24.99. ISBN 9781999334000.

Auteur's Constellations series of short monographs on key SF films and TV shows is uneven. Susanne Kord's *12 Monkeys*, which focuses primarily on Terry Gilliam's film but also devotes a short chapter to the TV show, is a strong addition to the growing series. Kord, a Professor at University College London and author of several books and articles on popular culture, especially film, demonstrates intimate knowledge not only of the film but also of the critical tradition surrounding it. While one might quarrel with the back cover copy's claim that *12 Monkeys* is Gilliam's best film (a claim not made within the book itself), Kord argues persuasively that it is Gilliam's "least understood film" (13) because audiences and scholars alike have failed to see past the ways the film "deliberately confounds viewer expectations" (13). Kord cites numerous reviews and studies that express bafflement about the film, noting that commentators can't agree "even on plot fundamentals" to a "startling" degree (8). Kord sets out to untangle the film's knots, and she does so by exploring carefully and thoroughly how it deals with the implications of time travel.



Key to Kord's reading is an explication of how the film denies the idea that time is linear, choosing instead to follow Einstein's ideas (Einstein is even referenced in the film) of spacetime. Though the film repeatedly has characters point out that time cannot be changed, Kord argues that the implications of this fact have been insufficiently recognized in studies of the film, which often want to read some sort of hope or optimism into it—to see *12 Monkeys* as the kind of time travel story in which one can change the past (or the future)—despite the fact that the film itself forecloses on that possibility. Kord's chapter on the TV series notes that this is a key aspect of the film discarded by the television show, which is predicated on the notion that the past can indeed be changed, if only one finds the right antecedent event to undo. Following the first chapter, which offers Kord's synopsis of the film, Kord provides two chapters, "Pushing the (Reset) Button: Why You Can't Start Over" and "'Thank You, Einstein': Why You Can't Turn Back Time," in which she offers a detailed reading of the film's time travel theory and some of the implications of that theory for concepts such as free will and determinism, a subject to which she returns in chapter 6, "Free Will, Determinism and Doing What You're Told." These aspects of Kord's study constitute her most significant contribution to *12 Monkeys* scholarship and should be illuminating to anyone interested in the film, whether as a fan or as a scholar.

Kord is interested in other questions raised by the film, notably about the implications of point of view and perception. The film itself provides a meta commentary on this topic when Cole, while in a movie theatre watching Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), comments on how the movie itself can't change but that one sees something different every time one watches it. Kord reads this not only as a commentary on the nature of the relationship between films and audiences (a relationship endorsed by Gilliam himself, who Kord quotes in the book's coda as believing that there are multiple equally valid interpretations of his films, regardless of his intent) but also as a commentary on the nature of time in the film: time itself is fixed and immutable, but how one perceives it varies. This is of course very much in keeping with Einstein's relativity. Kord makes much of the fact that a key problem in the film is that what is true is very much a matter of perspective; what seems like Cole's insane babbling from the perspective of Raily in 1996 is, from Cole's perspective, literally the truth.

Kord also looks carefully at Gilliam's filmic technique. She devotes considerable attention to the ways Gilliam fills the screen with significant information. This ranges from visual elements such as set dressings and objects shown on screen through camera point of view (e.g. the frequency with which characters are shown contained or enclosed, or even viewed through obstacles such as fences), the color palettes (e.g. how Cole frequently blends into the drab surroundings in which he is placed, or how the absence of color differentiation creates confusion even about which time frame we are in), camera angles, etc. Gilliam is a master of cinematic form, so it is unsurprising that so much of the film's meaning is communicated not by dialogue and acting but by the visuals, but Kord expertly demonstrates how this is the case in clear prose that makes Gilliam's technique evident even to those who are not film scholars.

Indeed, one of the most admirable aspects of this book is Kord's clear, engaging writing. This book is not only insightful but also a pleasure simply to read for the vividness and elegance of its prose. Kord is adept at communicating complex scholarly ideas in understandable language. That she can say so much of value in a mere hundred pages is impressive. This book makes an important contribution to Gilliam scholarship and should be read by anyone interested in the study of his films, but it is also eminently readable by a general audience. Given its relatively low cost, it would make a useful resource for students covering the film in a course, but it would be a worthwhile addition to any library's Film and/or SF studies holdings.

**Dominick Grace** is Professor of English at Brescia University College in London, Ontario. His main area of research interest is popular culture, especially comics and Science Fiction.