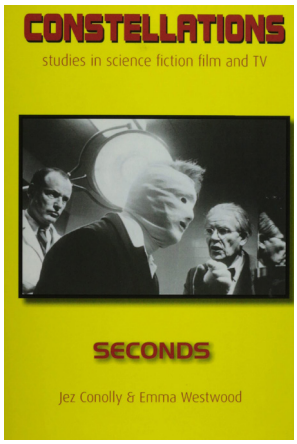
Seconds, edited by Jez Conolly and Emma Westwood

Steven Shaviro

Jez Conolly and Emma Westwood. Seconds. Auteur, Liverpool University Press, 2021. Constellations. Paperback. 120 pg. $29.95. ISBN 9781800859296. Ebook ISBN 9781800858497.



John Frankenheimer's 1966 film *Seconds*, starring Rock Hudson, was not marketed as a science fiction film, but its premise is sufficiently science fictional that it merits inclusion in the *Constellations* series of brief "studies in science fiction film and TV." Although the book is outrageously overpriced for a text of about 35,000 words, Jez Conolly and Emma Westwood do a brilliant job of summarizing the film, exploring its implications, and finally giving it its proper place in the canon of science fiction cinema.

I cannot avoid a few spoilers here; the book assumes that the reader has already seen Frankenheimer's movie. *Seconds* is about a mysterious corporation, known only as "the Company," that offers affluent but dissatisfied men a supposed second chance to live their lives all over again. If you take them up on their services, and pay them well enough, the Company will fake your death, surgically reconstruct your body, and give you a new identity. The movie's protagonist, initially played by John Randolph (one of four blacklisted actors for whom *Seconds* offered their first Hollywood roles after fifteen years without work), is a middle-aged New York banker, wealthy and powerful but living an empty life; he is trapped in a loveless marriage, and commutes daily into the city from his expensive home in the suburbs. He is both cajoled and blackmailed into signing up for the Company's services. After a series of grueling operations, the protagonist emerges as a younger-looking and healthier man, now played by Rock Hudson. Thus rejuvenated, the protagonist moves to California and embarks upon a new life, filled with art, excitement, and even a bit of 1960s countercultural pizzazz. But this new life ultimately proves as sterile and unsatisfying as the old one. At the end of the movie, the protagonist returns to the Company; only this time, instead of surgically altering him yet again, they kill him and use his body as fodder for further operations with new subjects. It is implied that this is the ultimate fate of all the Company's clients.

Conolly and Westwood begin the volume by reflecting upon their own different reasons for valuing the movie. They then proceed to a brief plot summary. After this, instead of proceeding sequentially, they give a series of overviews of the film from different perspectives and in accord with different interests. They analyze everything from the overall shape of Frankenheimer's career

as a director to small but telling details about the fonts used in the opening titles (designed by Saul and Elaine Bass, who had previously worked with Hitchcock). They spend a lot of time on set design, and on James Wong Howe's innovative black and white cinematography. They are especially good in discussing how the disruptive and alienating style of the film—with its departure from Hollywood norms, and its nods to the French New Wave—works to express the negativity of the narrative, which refuses to accord us the happy ending that audiences of the time still craved. They also focus on the significance of the movie for Rock Hudson himself, a gay man who lived a closeted existence as a heterosexual-romantic screen idol. And they situate the film in the larger currents of American popular culture, which in 1966 was in the midst of its transition from a concern with suburban lifestyles and the gray, monotonous lives of middle-management businessmen (as reflected in movies like *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* [1956]) to mainstream adoption of the more free-wheeling 1960s counterculture (as reflected in the New Hollywood of the early 1970s).

In this way, Conolly and Westwood provide a close analysis of the movie, while at the same time showing its relevance for larger concerns about cultural transformations in the mid-twentieth-century. The authors are especially astute in the way that they relate emblematic details of the film to more pervasive issues. I am thinking here especially of the chapter in which they analyze one of the more memorably weird sequences in the film: that in which Hudson's rejuvenated protagonist is induced to participate in a Dionysian grape-stomping ceremony. The participants are not quite hippies, but rather people more or less in Hudson's own age-group (he was 41 when the film was shot). The protagonist hesitates to join in, but he is finally induced to, and he ultimately gives way to an almost orgasmic ecstasy. Nonetheless, we still see in Hudson's performance vestiges of the uptightness that were most evident in Randolph's previous incarnation of the character. In Conolly and Westwood's analysis, the movie is skeptical both of our fictions of personal identity, and of our fantasies of being able to simply erase those fictions and substitute them with others. This double questioning of identity and of escape from identity is one of the important science fictional themes that the authors pull out from the movie, even though they do not write explicitly about science fiction as a genre or mode of discourse.

There are a few minor points in the book where I wished for a slightly different treatment. The authors spend more pages than necessary worrying about the believability, for the audience, of Randolph's transformation into Hudson. This doesn't seem to me to be much of a problem, since few subjective fantasies are more alluring than the prospect of being transformed into a gorgeous and sexy movie star. I was also disappointed that the authors didn't give more attention to Will Geer's role in the movie. Geer in real life was a radical political activist; he is one of the four formerly blacklisted actors who were given roles in Seconds. Here he plays the head of the Company, whose sinister aims are disguised behind a veneer of empathetic folksiness; it is almost as if Geer were giving us, in advance, a parody and deconstruction of the role for which he became famous in the following decade, as Grandpa in *The Waltons*.

Despite these reservations, I consider *Seconds* to be a deeply insightful and accomplished book, which does justice to an important movie that has long been overlooked. Although the book doesn't explicitly address the issues most overtly articulated in science fiction scholarship and criticism (e. g. cognitive estrangement and the duality of utopianism and dystopianism), its actual concerns are deeply congruent with those issues. The goal behind the *Constellations* book series—that of giving succinct yet comprehensive readings of particular science fiction films and television series—is an important one, and this volume fulfills that goal admirably.

Steven Shaviro is the DeRoy Professor of English at Wayne State University, where he teaches film studies. His books about science fiction include *Connected, Or What It Means To Live in the Network Society* (2003), *Discognition* (2016), and *Extreme Fabulations; Science Fictions of Life* (2021).