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“The Old Vines Are Buried Deep”
Classical Motifs in John Frankenheimer’s *Seconds*

SEAN EASTON

John Frankenheimer’s *Seconds* (1966) is the story of a middle-aged banker who abandons family and career, purchasing from the secretive Company a new identity, vocation and surgically altered youthful appearance. The rejuvenated banker hopes to find fulfillment in his life, but learns to his cost that the Company has little success in adjusting clients to their new identities. The film’s points of contact with the classical world, when taken together, frame the main character as a candidate for sacred knowledge who instead becomes a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, for the Company.

Seconds (1966) is the third film in what has been called John Frankenheimer’s paranoia trilogy, the first two installments of which are *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *Seven Days in May* (1964).¹ *Seconds* differs from the other two in that it moves away from a narrative of Cold War conflict.² Its protagonist is a depressed banker named Arthur Hamilton (John Randolph), who has lost interest in his work, has minimal contact with his adult daughter, and feels isolated in his marriage. The malevolent conspiracy haunting this film derives from the Company, a thoroughly capitalist organization with a product to sell: new identities for the well-to-do that have grown dissatisfied in their lives.³

While *Seconds* has been interpreted in light of similarities to Marlowe’s *Faust*,

1. Pratt (2001) 105. Screenwriter Lewis John Carlino adapted the screenplay for *Seconds* from David Ely’s pop conspiracy novel (1963) of the same name. Ely in turn, for theme and character, borrows heavily from *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis’ 1922 satirical novel that indicts the culture of middle class boosterism, or the practice of self-aggrandizement as an avenue to success. See William Shafer, “David Ely Biography,” <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4299/Ely-David.html> (accessed September 24, 2012).

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2. Pratley (1969) 133–34.

3. On how each film in the trilogy cultivates paranoia, see Sterrit (2011) and Cornea (2011) 231. Cornea notes that *Seconds* anticipates the science fiction and horror films of the 1970s–80s, such as the *Alien* and *Terminator* series that dwell on corporate malfeasance.

the function of its classical motifs has so far gone unremarked.⁴ The film offers three points of contact with the Greco-Roman world, which help to tell the story of how the Company ensnares Hamilton: a Latin inscription on a memento revealed at a key plot moment; the name Antiochus which becomes the legal name of the main character's purchased identity; and an extended scene of ecstatic, explicitly Dionysian ritual, the theme of which is rebirth. The function of each is to encourage Hamilton through its symbolic authority to flee the restrictions of his former life and embrace the conditions of the new.

Seconds, as recent scholarship emphasizes, underscores the citizen's vulnerability to a culture industry that cultivates discontent in order to accelerate the pace of consumerism.⁵ Indeed, the message of *Seconds*, as Frankenheimer characterizes it, is that experience is the substance of the self; to deny experience is therefore self-destructive; and consumerism encourages such denial.⁶ Rebuffing, in an early scene, his wife's overtures, first at sex, then at simple affection, Hamilton is impotent in body and spirit when the Company makes its sales pitch: now that he has done his duty to everyone, he owes it to himself to escape his current existence and pursue the abandoned dreams of his youth.

To follow one resonance of the title, Hamilton is offered "seconds"—an extra portion of (relative) youth after he has consumed the first. His new identity is designed to help him appreciate each fleeting moment of his life—all the seconds that are left to him. He acquiesces to the offer, but soon finds his purchased life unsatisfying. He feels that the Company, which crafted a new life for him based on a series of tests it administered, has repeated the very theft of autonomy that undermined his life the first time. Thus, although it forgoes the Cold War narrative of its predecessors, the paranoia trilogy's theme of imperiled freedom remains very much in the fore.⁷

The Inscription

The first Greco-Roman motif in *Seconds* is a Latin inscription, not found in the novel, which illuminates the error at the core of the Company's rejuvenation program. As the film begins, the audience learns that Hamilton has been

4. Armstrong (2008) 225n2. For other occurrences of the Faust myth in Frankenheimer's oeuvre, see Krohn (2011) 272–73.

5. See especially Cornea (2011) 231–34.

6. Frankenheimer defines his goal in *Seconds* as making a "... horrifying portrait of big business that will do anything for anybody providing you are willing to pay for it" and its message as "... experience is what makes you the person that you are." See Pratley (1969) 141–42. See also Frankenheimer (1998) DVD Commentary: 1:24:14–1:25:25. Sterritt (2011) 22 contends that the conventionality of these ideas makes them ultimately less interesting than the film they animate.

7. Bowie (2006): "*Seconds* extends the assumption of homicidal political conspiracies in *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Seven Days in May* to the private sector."

receiving disturbing late night phone calls that have set him thinking. The caller is a Company recruiter, Charlie Evans (Murray Hamilton), a friend he thought dead. Charlie insists, however, that he feels more alive than ever—now that he has left behind those ills that still beset Hamilton. To verify his identity and remind Hamilton of a time when they both felt young and vital together, Charlie directs him over the phone to a trophy sitting on his shelf. Next to the trophy is a photograph of the two of them on the day that they won it in a doubles tennis match.

Charlie instructs him to look at an inscription etched on its base (00:10:20–00:10:39):

- (Charlie Evans) "*Fidelis eternis* (sic). You scratched it there, down in the locker room after we won the finals. Remember? With your belt buckle?"
 (Arthur Hamilton) "I had forgotten."
 (Charlie Evans) "I didn't."

Though the reason for a specifically Latin inscription is left unexplained, likeliest is its status as a classicizing idiom—to Latinize is to lend timelessness and elevation. The inscription's Latin is mistaken, yet the error is such that it adds depth to the moment. The word *eternis* does not exist and, if it did, would not modify another adjective such as *fidelis*.⁸ Partly owing to its erroneousness, it resembles English closely enough to communicate its meaning to a Latinless audience. The visual and auditory texture of the inscription also resonates with Latin's role in the U.S. as the language of pithy mottos in military and governmental iconography. The inscription transfers this aspect of Latin's cultural capital from the public to the private sphere.

If we situate the mistake in the context of the story, it suggests that Hamilton has studied Latin at some stage, but that his admiration for its symbolic powers easily eclipses his actual knowledge of it. The young Hamilton deploys the symbolic capital of Latin to impose a seal of timelessness on the bond that the trophy memorializes. Implicit in his forgetting of the inscription is his abandonment of the bond with its goals of achievement and gratification outside of the domestic sphere to which marriage has transferred him.⁹ On the other hand, Charlie's recollection of the inscription combines word with image (the photograph) in order to invest the trophy with a talismanic power.

8. There are near variants such as *aeternalis* and *aeternabilis*. The Marine Corps has the grammatically correct version: *semper fidelis*.

9. Rebecca Bell-Metereau (2011) argues that this scene initiates a narrative subtext addressing Hamilton/Wilson's unacknowledged same-sex orientation, which in turn parallels Hudson's own biography.

It beckons Hamilton toward the new life where he may hope to recapture the spirit that the image and inscription describe and, in so doing, advertises recovered youth as a necessary precondition for creating meaning in one's life. Just as the photograph preserves the image of a relationship, but not its substance or complexities, so the Company's emphasis on the image of youth obscures the life circumstances that constitute its reality. Similarly, the inscription preserves the appearance of Latin in order to acquire its association with higher purpose and a sense of permanence, while actually disregarding the rules of the language. In this sense, the error in the inscription anticipates the flaw in the whole process.

The Name

The man who was Arthur Hamilton is henceforth to be known as Antiochus Wilson (Rock Hudson), a respected painter.¹⁰ The Company's choice of given name for the new identity is the one classical reference that the film takes from the book. As such, the name seems to set the pattern for the additional references found in the film. Although neither the film nor the novel explains the reason for it, author David Ely draws attention to the name's grandiose character in a conversation between Hamilton/Wilson and a Company education specialist: "You'll get accustomed to [the name], sir. To my mind, it has a noble ring—Antiochus. Antiochus Wilson . . . a jewel of a name, if I may venture to say so. And besides, you are at liberty to use the diminutive 'Tony' if you like, in daily affairs."¹¹

As the Latin inscription elevates the sentiment inscribed on the trophy, so does the name Antiochus promise to do for Hamilton/Wilson's new identity. The sense of disjunction between the grand name and its diminutive remains in the film no less than the novel. The audience quickly comes to know Rock Hudson as the troubled Tony Wilson, while Antiochus Wilson remains an alien identity that he cannot accept. For example, while drunk at a party he begins to hint recklessly to a guest (Nedrick Young) at his true identity (1:15:35–1:15:52):

(Guest) "You and I must play golf sometime."

(Hamilton/Wilson) "Golf? Golf. Antiochus Wilson playing golf! (scoffs)
Now . . . Arthur Hamilton. . ."

He cannot play golf with the guest because Antiochus Wilson the decadent painter does not indulge in the stodgy hobbies of his secret former self.

Although the novel's Company representative characterizes it simply as el-

10. From here on, I refer to him as Hamilton/Wilson, except when referencing incidents prior to his transformation.

11. Ely (1963) 57–58.

evated, the name Antiochus also carries grim associations. For a mid-twentieth century, Bible-reading U.S. public, the most prominent Antiochus in the ancient world would likely be Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the villain of *The Book of Maccabees*.¹² The text casts this Hellenistic monarch as a pagan threat to Jewish identity, connecting him in particular to the introduction of the gymnasium and the suppression of circumcision.¹³ *Maccabees* further indicts some Jewish males for disguising their circumcisions to gain advantage in Hellenic circles—likely through participation in the culture of the gymnasium, where nudity would be inescapable.

According to this view, Hellenic culture under Antiochus IV threatened Jewish culture not only through directly repressive measures, but also indirectly by inciting males to alter the appearance of their bodies.¹⁴ This portrait of Antiochus IV's indirect threat to Jewish culture is suggestive. It resonates with Hamilton/Wilson's own feeling that the name Antiochus signifies an alien entity to which he has surrendered himself. On this reading, the appeal of a Hellenic identity to a non-Greek in the Seleucid empire of the second century B.C.E. may be imagined as similar in one respect to that of youth to an aging banker in 1960s America: each identity promises, in exchange for certain erasures of the self, access to a new life of privilege and opportunity.

Reluctance to accept and build upon this exchange of former self for future privilege is the fundamental problem Hamilton/Wilson poses for the Company. Its model for customer satisfaction is premised on the idea that the reborn's identity will provide the client with the means to enjoy the pursuits that a youth spent in fulfilling responsibilities to others has denied him. While the Company does succeed eventually in winning him over to its product, it is as a means to a different end: to purchase a sense of autonomy rather than access to a variety of experiences. Crucially, even as Hamilton/Wilson eschews the Company's formula of consumption for its own sake as a way to achieve happiness, he becomes convinced that the purchase of a new identity can nevertheless enable him to obtain what he wants. The resonance of the name Antiochus enables the film to augment this dilemma of the modern consumer for its audience by situating it on the powerfully symbolic seam between the Pagan and Biblical.

12. I am grateful to Robert Harland for emphasizing the relevance of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in his comments on the conference version of this paper at the 2009 Annual Meeting of Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association.

13. Gruen (2005) 266–68.

14. 1 *Macc.* 1.10–16; 2 *Macc.* 4.7–20 and 6.1–11.

Rituals

The third point of contact with the classical world takes the form of a Bacchic ritual. In *Seconds*, ritual serves to structure Hamilton/Wilson's attempt to reconcile himself to life as a reborn, marking his moment of initial openness to the new life and of his final expulsion from it.¹⁵ The film's use of ritual serves to assimilate Hamilton/Wilson's life-altering business arrangement with the Company to the domain of the sacred, a move that employs a reception of Greek culture particularly reminiscent of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Finally, it establishes a sacrificial narrative, the logic of which informs the film's critique of corporate-driven consumerism.

There are two ritual moments in *Seconds*: the Bacchic festival midway through the film and the administration of last rites to Hamilton/Wilson at the end. The two scenes are thematically connected, appearing at significant plot points in the arc of the film's second half. The first drives Hamilton/Wilson to examine his life more critically, both his past mistakes and his current circumstances, while the second illuminates the latent sacrificial dimension of the first.

Hamilton/Wilson does not find his way to this remarkable occasion alone. While walking on the beach, he meets Nora Marcus (Salome Jens), a free spirit to whom he is attracted. The classical resonance of her surname and the fact that her character does not appear in the novel suggests that the name Marcus continues the string of classical motifs in the film.¹⁶ Her connection to the Company continues its alignment with Greco-Roman motifs. She has left a spouse and two children to pursue her own path in life and so seems a kindred personality. Unbeknownst to him, however, Nora is in reality a company employee. When she tells him one day that she is leaving with some friends to go to a festive gathering, he is interested.

Ever since Charlie's phone call, Hamilton/Wilson has been prompted to adopt a new model of identity formation, conducive to the Company's model of intensified consumerist existence. Appropriately, perhaps, for a senior banker of the time, his existing model is static, retrospective, and vault-like qualities reflected in the decor of the study where he takes Charlie's call. The room contains mementos of what he values in his life: deep-sea fishing (swordfish mounted on his wall; photograph of himself in fishing gear); his paintings; the tennis trophies (he has two) and the photograph together with Charlie.

15. In the film, clients of the Company are called "reborns." In some of the advertising for the film, as well as scholarship on it, they are referred to as "seconds" (as in Pratley [1969]; cf. below, n35).

16. I thank the anonymous reader of this piece and Yurie Hong for emphasizing the relevance of Nora Marcus' name.

The Company tries to coax him toward an outward-looking attitude capable of finding value in different sorts of experiences, the consumption of which could fill the void left by the rejection of his old identity. The wealth of Arthur Hamilton has been used in the acquisition and upkeep of possessions appropriate to a man of his position and hobbies. Although only a wealthy individual could have indulged in these pursuits (especially the deep-sea fishing) as he has done, his personality is such that he is unlikely ever to spend outside of these basic areas or in especially greater degrees within them. If the Company can transform conservative Arthur Hamilton into decadent Antiochus Wilson, instilling in him a need for new pleasures and experiences, it can radically increase his consumption of all sorts of products and root his personality more firmly in consumerism as a way of life.

Hamilton/Wilson does not understand that he must adopt the consumerist mindset, if life as a reborn is to prove in any way fulfilling and consequently he resists the Company's attempts to draw him in this direction. The Company manipulates one emotional bond (Charlie) to persuade him of the idea and deploys another to model the attitudes best suited to the lifestyle. Nora's openness to the unconventional, coupled with sensitivity to his concerns, wins his affection—not so much so that he converts to a new way of thinking, but he does allow her to lead him into new experiences. The first is the festival, the purpose of which is to give him the personal breakthrough that will smooth his way into the necessary outlook of the reborn.

The ritual depicted in the film is in fact the performance of a real festival celebrated near Santa Barbara at the time.¹⁷ Frankheimer films it in two sequences, allowing the ceremony to unfold in the manner that the celebrants typically performed it.¹⁸ First comes a procession to the festival place. When they arrive at the site of celebration, the processional leader, who wears around his neck a leopard skin (a token of Dionysus), invokes various deities (59:38–59:45), including Pan and "... the gods of this place." A participant, having been declared Queen of the Wine, strips, climbs into the vat, and begins stomping the grapes, followed by the leader and numerous celebrants. The rest gather around, dancing and drinking. Two separate shots of the area around the vat reveal a statue modeled broadly after the archaic Greek style (1:01:59)—in the second shot it is adorned with flowers (1:03:41). The identity of the statue for the revelers is not specified, but it likely represents for them either Dionysus himself or at least the ancient Hellenic pedigree of the festival.

17. Pratley (1969) 143–44.

18. Pratley (1969) 143–44. Frankheimer (1998) DVD Commentary 59:15–102:43. See also Champlin (1995) 44. Changes to the ceremony were limited to the construction of a higher than normal grape vat to hide any (male) nudity below the waist—which for the most part it does.

An anxious Hamilton/Wilson (Rock Hudson) accompanies Nora Marcus (Salome Jens) to a wine festival in *Seconds* (1966). Paramount.

When the vat is packed with the naked bodies of men and women of various ages, a drunk, ecstatic Nora Marcus approaches the distinctly uncomfortable Hamilton/Wilson, exhorting him in Dionysian terms to yield to the wildness and freedom of the moment (1:03:50–1:04:39):

- (Nora) "Now the season ends, and the old vines are buried deep. Now, in dying, Bacchus gives us his blood . . . so we may be born again . . . laughing, laughing—Come dance with me."
- (Hamilton/Wilson) "Nora, I don't know any of these people. I don't think. . ."
- (Nora) "Don't think me, Tony! Don't! I came here to feel—to be! I'm dying—and that's the world (*gesturing toward the vat filled with revelers*)—the whole bloody world!"
- (Hamilton/Wilson) "It's not a question of dancing. I'm not part of this!"
- (Nora) "I'm dying—and that's the world—the whole bloody world!" (*reels toward vat, stripping off her clothes*)
- (Hamilton/Wilson) "Don't! Nora! Nora! Hey Nora!"

Before Hamilton/Wilson can stop her, Nora strips and jumps into the vat. Shocked and annoyed, he moves to pull her back, only to be seized, stripped,

and thrown in after her. When he emerges from this baptismal experience, he is changed. His inhibitions are gone. He is joyful.

Frankenheimer intended his Dionysian scene as "... a liberation for Hudson, the return to a natural state and some kind of innocence."¹⁹ As such, the episode is differently conceived from the traditional Greco-Roman themed orgies in Hollywood films, which invite viewers both to participate vicariously in a world of pagan sin and to condemn it.²⁰ Here is where the Company's purpose and Hamilton/Wilson's experience part ways. The Company means for it to make him free, in Nora's words, "to feel, to be," but what he feels most is that life does not need to be as it has been—or is. The liberation that he experiences is his glimpse of the possibility of autonomy.

As a Company agent, Nora Marcus is of course delivering a script meant to speak to Hamilton/Wilson's condition. A critical perspective particularly useful for illuminating the importance of this moment for the film is Nietzsche's idiosyncratic reception of Dionysian drama in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this account, Nietzsche contends that the Greeks experienced a transition in the fifth century B.C.E. with major implications for European civilization. The shift, in Nietzsche's terms, was from a tragic to a theoretical culture, a move he finds reflected in Athenian tragic drama's increasing prioritization of the actor's role over that of the chorus. The chorus' decline tracks the dissolution of a collective, ritualized confrontation with life's pain under the auspices of Dionysus. In place of this, society comes to prioritize the concerns of the individual, such as happiness and betterment through rational inquiry.²¹ The society that emerges from such a transformation never quite recovers from the trauma of losing this mode of collective experience. It therefore combs its own past, as well as that of other cultures, for fragments of tradition to compensate for the loss.²²

It is therefore apposite that the film uses a Greek-themed festival to explore an anxiety that Nietzsche connects to ancient Greece. This Nietzschean perspective accounts not only for the character of the festival, but also for its futility

19. Champlin (1995) 94. See also Frankenheimer (1998) DVD Commentary 59:00–59:45. Although Frankenheimer wanted to do a transformative scene of this sort, it was not until his producer Edward Lewis—whose production credits also include the 1960 *Spartacus*—contacted him about a wine festival put on near Santa Barbara that he felt he had found the appropriate vehicle.

20. Wood (1975) 185. See also Toepfer (1991) 15: "Cecil B. DeMille . . . earned enormous success by titillating the public with glimpses of orgy, in which the screen eventually revealed to the 'ordinary', vicarious spectator that even if he or she was not able to 'afford' to participate in orgies, the price in the end was really not worth paying."

21. Nietzsche (1999), esp. 44–45 on the tragic chorus and 54–56 on the transition in the role of the chorus and Euripides' part in it.

22. On the decadence of theoretical culture, see Nietzsche (1999) 85–88.

in the specific case of Hamilton/Wilson. The festival is open to interpretation as a hodgepodge, compensatory gesture, which—characteristic of theoretical humanity—grants only temporary diversion from discontent. It attempts to cover over the loss of collective experience that generates the very cultural malaise and disorientation from which the celebrants are fleeing. It therefore offers the appearance of a collective experience, but only in order to restore happiness to each individual participant through diversion. There is no coming to terms with the traumas of life.

The film offers further support for this interpretation. After the festival is over Hamilton/Wilson himself speaks in terms that disparage the significance of the experience at a cocktail party that he and Nora give for the neighbors. A guest (Dorothy Morris) inquires about his creative technique. Quite drunk, he responds as follows (1:12:39–1:13:15):

- (Guest) "I just love your paintings. However do you do it?"
 (Hamilton/Wilson) "Well, you see—. . . I paint naked . . . the only way to get at the truth."
 (Guest) "How interesting."
 (Hamilton/Wilson) "Of course. In this way my inner essence is revealed and I am presented to the canvas in direct relationship to my primeval state without its sociological trappings."

The conditions under which he regained his innocence at the festival have become part of his caricature of himself as an artist, a vocation to which he believes that he has no real claim.²³

Ritual appears for a second time in the film at its conclusion, allowing the sacrificial logic to complete its narrative arc in a devastating final sequence. Hamilton/Wilson, in return for his refusal to recruit another customer, is turned over to the company's cadaver procurement section. As he is wheeled to his death on the surgery table, a chaplain (Karl Swenson) accompanies him, anxious to confirm that he was raised Protestant and did not convert during his time as a reborn (1:41:25–1:43:57). The chaplain clarifies (1:41:42–1:42:00):

"Now I am not suggesting that being a Protestant is any better than being a Catholic or a Jew. As a matter of fact, I am qualified to care for you in either of those faiths as well. I was ordained in each—rabbi, priest, minister. I admit it unusual. Ah, maybe a bit advanced."

23. Hamilton/Wilson undergoes a drug-assisted interrogation from the Company to determine his ideal vocation. He mentions becoming an artist only after his first choice of professional tennis player is dismissed.

Far from a humanistic, let alone mystical, assertion of any sort of shared worth of these sects as paths either to the divine or to some sort of psychological fulfillment, the chaplain represents the Company's *de facto* position that questions of religious and denominational difference are simply one dimension of its commodification of all human experience.²⁴

The chaplain rambles through his ceremonial duties, mingling Protestant and Catholic last rites, shifting between Latin and English as he goes. In this respect, he recalls another brief, but memorable exchange with a minor character. At the cocktail party mentioned above, another guest (Elizabeth Fraser) briefly traps the intoxicated Hamilton/Wilson in conversation (1:12:05–1:12:39):

- (Guest) "There's such a religious climate out here. Don't you agree?"
 (Hamilton/Wilson) "I love the climate."
 (Guest) "Yes. I belong to a special kind of group."
 (Hamilton/Wilson) "Nothing subversive, I hope."
 (Guest) "Oh, good heavens, no! We change sects."
 (Hamilton/Wilson) "I beg your pardon?"
 (Guest) "Oh, no, no. Good heavens. You thought I meant . . . Sects. S-E-C-T-S."
 (Hamilton/Wilson) "Oh, sects! . . . Well, thank God!"
 (Guest) "We change every month. Right now, we're in Aztec. Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, virgin sacrifice and all."

Hamilton/Wilson's humorous remark "Nothing subversive, I hope" makes an important point. The guest's spiritual practices are subcultural rather than countercultural. Her participation in Aztec religious ceremony, his in the Bacchic festival and, for that matter, in his own last rites form a consistent representation of religious practice as an instrumental, therapeutic exercise. As such, it recalls the Nietzschean diagnosis of theoretical humanity's cultural impoverishment and reveals the shared discourse underlying the worldviews of both the outwardly countercultural and corporate, institutional agents in the film.

It is therefore appropriate that it is the chaplain who summons the orderlies to restrain Hamilton/Wilson, as he is wheeled into the operating room. The ho-

24. The novel stresses the financial dimension of the Company's ecumenical perspective, as the chaplain complains to Hamilton/Wilson about his position. Ely (1963) 171–72: "The workload is already tremendous, Mr. Wilson. Too much for any one man, actually, especially when one has to keep switching back and forth from Gospel to Torah, depending on the client. And then, you can imagine my trepidation, sir, when I consider it is a distinct statistical possibility that one day I may be confronted by a Moslem! . . . I've warned them, Mr. Wilson. I've given them plenty of notice. But they merely keep putting me off. 'Budgetary problems'."

rizon of the “the whole bloody world” that Nora Marcus offers now contracts to the dimensions of the gurney onto which he has been strapped. The revelers who seize, strip, and hurl Hamilton/Wilson into the vat of grapes have been figuratively transformed into the Company orderlies who brutally restrain him. He has travelled a path from the Bacchic moment of unbounded experience in a limitless world to total immobility and imminent death.

Hamilton/Wilson’s end returns us to the importance of the recruitment scene and the combination of trophy, photograph, and inscription. After the anesthetic has begun to take effect and the fatal cranial drill is clearly audible, the screen dissolves into an image of a father and young daughter walking together on the beach, which then divides and disappears. Frankenheimer comments, “I think people could read into it that this was his dream, that’s what his first life should have been, but it never was.”²⁵

The last mental act of Hamilton/Wilson’s life is to grasp at a lost idyll of happiness, which once again he finds buried in his own past. His investment in life as a reborn begins when he gazes at an image from the past—the youthful happiness recorded in the photograph of himself and Charlie at the tennis doubles.²⁶ His life as a reborn, and in all other respects, ends in his absorption into an image of himself and his daughter. It is another edition of his life as it should have been, represented as a relationship to another individual. As morally unimpeachable as the life narrative implied in this image may seem, memory for Hamilton/Wilson has so far proven anything but *fidelis* in its capacity as a guide for action in the present. Although he has sought autonomy through separation, he now imagines connection. Yet, it was the image of connection (with Charlie) that helped to spur him onward into the myriad separations of the reborn’s existence. As Hamilton/Wilson’s time for action is passing into death, the audience is left to wonder whether this final reverie can be any the more trustworthy.

The Sacrificial Logic of *Seconds*

The film’s critique of corporate-driven consumer culture is not limited to the pathos of Hamilton/Wilson’s subjective experience. The Company’s use of ritual sets up a narrative that reveals a sacrificial logic at work in the Company’s business model. Importantly, it reveals that the domain of the sacred is not a refuge from the Company, but an available space for business like any other. Thus, Nora Marcus’ invocation of Dionysus is both a Company tactic and an explicit

25. Pratley (1969) 144.
26. His stated desire during the Company interview to become a professional tennis player expresses a wish to have back the experience recorded in the photograph.

call to both the audience and Hamilton/Wilson to view the festival experience through the lens of the sacred.

The progression of the film from its Bacchic moment to the scene of last rites creates a sacrificial narrative. When this sequence is interpreted as a whole, Hamilton/Wilson demonstrably fulfills the roles both of the “scapegoat,” or *pharmakos*, and the initiate. Human sacrificial victims in ancient scapegoat rituals are typically appointed on the basis of their marginal status. They may, for instance, be a beggar, a criminal, or simply be deemed physically ugly. Once selected, they receive royal treatment, undergo ritual consecration, and are put to death, either symbolically or in actuality.²⁷

Marginal status is also decisive in *Seconds*. Charlie Evans recommends Hamilton/Wilson to the Company according to its guideline that possible clients be selected based on their failures in life. The Company equips him, during his time as a reborn, with the raw materials for a life of ease and pleasure; it gives him a mark of royalty in the name Antiochus and ritually consecrates him to the god Dionysus. Finally, it puts him to death in order to bring about new life, in the sense that his corpse will stand in for that of another client whose death must be faked for his existence as a reborn to begin. The *pharmakos*, whether or not he is actually slain, is disposed of beyond the city’s boundaries. Hamilton/Wilson’s death takes place on Company property, but it happens as part of a surgical operation undertaken to make his death seem the result of an auto accident. Hence, he will die elsewhere and as someone else.

An initiate in mystery religion has a *mystagogos*, or sponsor. Charlie Evans plays this role vis-à-vis Hamilton/Wilson and the Company employee Nora Marcus takes it up for purposes of the festival.²⁸ The candidate for initiation may also be condemned to a symbolic death of the former self, followed by rebirth in the Mysteries. Accordingly, Hamilton/Wilson dies in the public and legal sense as Arthur Hamilton. He undergoes a transformation of social identity and appearance as he moves from the category of married elder citizen to that of a younger, attractive bachelor. Nora Marcus’ words of Bacchic initiation, transferred to this context, clarify the nature of the sacrificial substitution taking place: “Now, in dying, Bacchus gives us his blood . . . so we may be born again. . . .” Hamilton/Wilson serves as a substitute for the dying Bacchus, giving his blood (or, rather his body as a cadaver) so that another may be reborn. Again, the symbolic role of Bacchus in ritual anticipates a literal outcome for Hamilton/Wilson.

27. Burkert (1985) 82–84. On the *pharmakos*, see also Girard (1977) 9–13.
28. Burkert (1985) 285.

Like Euripides' *Bacchae*, the sole surviving tragedy dedicated to Dionysus, *Seconds* embeds the imagery of ritual initiation into the depiction of its central tragic figure.²⁹ Both play and film literalize their metaphors of initiation as sacrifice. Euripides' Pentheus and Hamilton/Wilson both meet very real ends, unlike the cult initiate who undergoes a merely symbolic death in ritual. Richard Seaford suggests that the imagery of initiation surrounding Euripides' Pentheus serves to underscore his etiological role as the figure whose actual death in myth, as penalty for his hostility to Dionysus, prefigures the symbolic death of the initiate.³⁰

These similarities speak to the power of the Dionysian mythic paradigm of the *Bacchae*, which, as Seaford shows, retains considerable power for modernity. The tyrant's wealth and power isolate him from his family, society, the natural world, and even the gods—a condition that anticipates the similar threats besetting his modern descendant: the moneyed consumer. The difference is that the citizen-capitalist is no longer a single figure atop the state, but a multitude of individual agents endowed with the wealth and mobility that in the fifth-century Greek world described the tyrant alone.³¹ Hamilton/Wilson conceives of autonomy as separation from outward connections, including those of family, employer, age-status, and the Company. His quest for it thus accelerates his descent into the tyrant's isolation. Accordingly, Hamilton/Wilson's glimpse of liberation amidst the revelers proves illusory not least because he fails to reject the Company's premise that happiness may be found through a final, defining act of separation—that of self from self through the reinvention and sale of identity.

As we have seen, Hamilton/Wilson's only divergence from the Company—and it is extremely important to him—is that he wants autonomy in creating his next identity. Autonomy is the specific form of happiness that he seeks in his new life. The Company officer (Jeff Corey) does not object to accommodating him, but he does have one condition. Hamilton/Wilson must recruit, or “sponsor,” a new client for the Company (1:29:30–1:30:22). During his visit to its headquarters, he discovers that his friend Charlie also failed in his new life and recruited him only in order to meet this same condition. Hamilton/Wilson ultimately refuses to recruit anyone else (1:36:20–1:37:10); however, denying the Company this service means that he removes almost all his value to it. The only use that he retains is as a cadaver, raw material for someone else's faked death.

The condition that the Company places on meeting his request for a new iden-

29. On the imagery of initiation in the *Bacchae*, see Seaford (1996) 42–44.

30. Seaford (1994) 405.

31. On the tyrant as paradigm for the modern consumerist, see Seaford (2004) 305–8 and (2006) 146–51.

tity recalls an earlier scene in the film in which Arthur Hamilton (pre-surgery) is at the bank, dictating a loan refusal (14:01–14:50):

“Therefore . . . in view of the differential between your present equity. . . . Between your present equity and the amount necessary for capitalization . . . we cannot extend to you the loan you require. Should your equity increase, . . . do not hesitate to call on us for a personal reappraisal. . . .”

Due to the fact that he does not recruit a new client, he lacks the equity necessary to receive a new identity. As such, his fate involves a reversal of roles that now puts him in the position of the powerless customer.

Yet, Hamilton/Wilson is explicit that his reasons for refusing are rooted in what he believes are his rights as a customer (1:36:40–1:36:47): “If I did sponsor someone, wouldn't that delay my trip to surgery, in the event that I were needed from time to time, to, say, advise him?” The sharpness with which he delivers the last two words is telling. He has learned that he was recruited to facilitate a new identity for Charlie Evans and that his difficulties caused a postponement of the procedure. This suggests that Hamilton/Wilson now views sponsorship as the Company's attempt to dodge its responsibilities to him as a client.³² In adopting this course, however, he unwittingly puts himself in the position of those whom, as a banker, he so off-handedly declined. Hamilton/Wilson's refusal to duplicate Charlie's act of predatory opportunism is thus not a moral stand—except insofar as he is defending what he believes are his rights as a consumer to satisfaction in what he has purchased. At the broadest level, however, he fails to understand the Company's sacrificial logic.³³

This logic enables the Company to submerge its responsibility for the individual client beneath a claim of larger moral purpose. At the same time it projects onto the suffering client its own condition of moral and practical powerlessness.³⁴ Having done this, the Company removes and destroys the scapegoat who

32. The Company representative is explicit in his view that Hamilton/Wilson is purposely withholding possible candidates (1:36:52–1:36:58):

(Hamilton/Wilson) “I'm sorry. I don't seem to be able to think of a single soul.”
(Company representative) “You mean you deliberately won't.”

33. Armstrong (2008) 111–12. Armstrong suggests that Hamilton/Wilson acts selflessly in refusing to recruit someone else. I argue that, insofar as he clearly expects to receive a new identity, he cannot be said to understand the consequence in store for him. Conversely, his emphasis on the point that to sponsor someone else would entail a delay in his own transition to another identity indicates that he is making a deliberate refusal rather than simply failing to think of a suitable candidate. The novel's version also supports this reading. See Ely (1963) 166–68.

34. On the Company president's evasion of responsibility and the critique of corporate structure as a means of diluting responsibility, see Cornea (2011) 234.

embodies its failures. Its president (Will Geer) addresses Hamilton/Wilson who, though he is about to be taken to his death, believes that he is going to receive surgery for his next identity (1:38:46–1:39:51):

“... [W]e do have a high percentage of failures. I guess that’s to be expected ... but it hurts me. Some reborns make a go of it. We’re always working to find ways to improve the system. Yeah, we make mistakes. The fact is, when our clients first started coming back here I just wanted to chuck the whole thing, but I couldn’t. The organization was pretty big by then. Now, a board of directors, on a profit-sharing basis. ... All those people. ... You’ve no idea what a financial responsibility it turned into. Heck, we make mistakes, but we admit them.”³⁵

Responsibility for enduring the outcome is forced back upon Hamilton/Wilson alone. The redirection of responsibility upon the consumer as initiate/*pharmakos* is a sacrificial mechanism that enables the Company to persist in claiming a sense of moral identity despite marketing a product that is dangerous and quite possibly fatal to any potential client, whatever their preexisting problems. The dissatisfied client in search of yet another chance may avert the role of *pharmakos* only by finding a substitute. Indeed, the Company appears to depend on failure and its clients’ dissatisfaction to provide new customers.

Classical motifs mark the Company’s attempts to adjust Hamilton/Wilson to life as a reborn. His long-forgotten Latin inscription is deployed to lend a sense of timelessness to a moment from his youth, yet the Company’s very conception of youth is as faulty as the young Hamilton’s Latin. The name Antiochus seems to suggest the grandeur to which he, as a reborn, should aspire; yet it is flawed by sinister connotations that make it emblematic of his alienation and indicative of his status as Charlie’s sacrificial substitute. The Dionysian festival is meant to serve as a transformative mechanism to free Hamilton/Wilson to live his new identity, but it liberates only his long pent-up dissatisfactions with the compromises he is asked to make and so intensifies his commitment to the modern tyrant’s isolation.

The immediate function of the classical in these examples, as in Nietzsche’s model of theoretical culture, is to offer a salve for the culturally disoriented citizen of modernity. This salve takes its form according to the Company’s sense of what Hamilton/Wilson should feel in regard to a particular aspect or stage of

35. Pratley (1969) 135: “... *Seconds* is not only Hamilton’s story, but that of the old man, the company president, who started the ‘second life enterprise’ as an idealistic venture, became the servant of high finance and found that his own existence, like that of the seconds he produced, was based on a fallacy; ... when he discovered the truth, he lacked the courage to change it.”

his crisis: a sense of permanence (the inscription); the grandeur of the limitless possibilities of life as a reborn (the name Antiochus); or the wild ecstasy of the moment as a taste of what awaits him if only he commits (the Bacchic revel). Taken together, these classical motifs also have a broader narrative function which impacts the film as a whole. They create a symbolically resonant, sacrificial narrative rooted in the legacy of Greek tragic drama to Frankheimer’s indictment of corporations and consumers.

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