

# *The Imaginarium of Terry Gilliam*

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This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfilment of the BA (Hons) Film degree at Dublin Business School. I confirm that all work included in this thesis is my own unless indicated otherwise.

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## **Abstract**

Terry Gilliam's career started out in animation but he always wanted to make films. He began directing films when he was part of the famous comedy group Monty Python. His first filmmaking experience was when co-directed *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Following this, he went on to direct by himself, making visually rich, thematically intelligent, and densely detailed films such as *Time Bandits*, *Brazil*, and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. His adamant determination to achieve and preserve his visions leads to many disagreements with studios over budgets and the final cut of his films, as well as some of the most incredible stories of film production in cinema. His Hollywood-produced films, while not always being his own scripts, become successful as a result of his distinct and unique visual style and the performances he captures from the stars he works closely with. Gilliam's fascinating position within the film industry is somewhere between mainstream and art-house but is nevertheless interesting and important. This dissertation examines what exactly makes Gilliam direct the way he does - with an eye for the visual – and the many factors that turn a movie into a Gilliam film.

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## Introduction

*“My imagination is the thing that frees me...I hope everybody tries to create their own worlds. My problem is that most people are happy to accept the worlds that are created for them. That’s what, I suppose, I’m fighting against.” – Terry Gilliam*

After the release of the *12 Monkeys* television series by SyFy in the January of 2015, I was inclined, being a fan of the original 1995 film of the same name, to revisit the show’s film counterpart, or more specifically its director, as the dystopian vision that the show portrays is directly influenced by Terry Gilliam’s 1995 film *12 Monkeys*. The television show, being

neither a prequel nor a continuation of the film's narrative, offers a new take on the story and its characters. The show has been praised for its "pacing", and adheres to a less complicated action-drama format; Neil Genzlinger, writer for the New York Times, comments that the show's simplicity is "...probably a good thing. Achieving mind-bendingness is harder today than it was in 1995."<sup>1</sup> Both versions of *12 Monkeys*, the film from 1995 and the television series made twenty years later, credit Chris Marker's 1962 short film *La Jetee* in the opening and closing titles respectively. However, Marker's *La Jetee* consists almost solely of still pictures; therefore it is the visual creativity of Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* that successfully transfigures Chris Marker's core plot into a visually stunning, atmospheric feature film with a complex story told masterfully, which then allowed the possibility to develop a television show that built partly on Gilliam's work.

Gilliam's visual style is a distinct one. American film critic Roger Ebert described Gilliam's work as a director that "always fills the screen with rich, visual spectacle. In *Brazil* (1985) and *12 Monkeys* (1995) and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988), in the past and in the future, his world is always hallucinatory in its richness of detail."<sup>2</sup> He has become synonymous with the use of wide-angle camera-lenses, so much so that the 14mm lens is informally known as The Gilliam. The prevalence of camera lenses with a shorter focal length, along with types of angles he uses, such as Dutch angles, partnered with the elaborate sets and special effects create in collaboration the unhinged, uneasy, unsettled worlds that his films use.<sup>3</sup> His films, especially *Brazil*, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, *12 Monkeys*, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), all have representations of paranoia that are conveyed expertly with the filmmaking techniques he applies. Gilliam also sees that his filmmaking style can be almost solely serving the visual; in an interview by Eric Vespe in

2009, a writer from the website AintItCool.com, Gilliam comments on his own filmmaking style as seen in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009), a film which he sees as a compendium of his works.

**Vespe:** *“One of the things I love the most about your new (at the time) movie is that it is like an amalgam of your work. You can see different aspects of you, like I can see Brazil in there. I can see Munchausen in there. I can see the cartoon work and of course Monty Python. I mean, the whole dancing policemen sequence is like right out of Python.”*

**Gilliam:** *“It’s a totally Pythonic moment. It’s very funny, because Tony Grisoni, who I co-write with on other things... That was the one bit he didn’t like in the film. He said “Oh fuck, what are you doing!?” I actually set out to do that. That was my feeling. It’s just compendium, I want to do a compendium. I kept saying “It’s my Fanny and Alexander” (1982, Ingmar Bergman) or my “Amarcord” (1973, Federico Fellini) which were the compendiums of those guys. At a certain point in their lives they said “Fuck it, I’m just going to put all of the things that I enjoy in” and that was it.”<sup>4</sup>*

Gilliam has garnered a reputation for going substantially over-budget on his films, long-been seen by Hollywood as blowing budgets on extravagant sets and special effects that the director wants specifically, as well as running over-time, creating tension between himself and the studios. Gilliam’s relationship has been infamously strained, especially early in on his directorial career, over films like *Brazil* for example. Before Gilliam’s 1985 film *Brazil* was released into theatres Universal Pictures, the studio behind the film, disagreed with its final cut. The studio wanted to change the ending before it was shown in theatres and Gilliam, standing by his original creative vision, protested this distribution move by Universal publicly. The studio wanted to alter the final cut by giving it a “happy ending”, an ending that would make people *“like the film and it would be better for everybody”*, an ending



that was far different from that of Gilliam's original vision.<sup>5</sup> Gilliam has stated in an interview with writer Salman Rushdie that he was, at the time, still adjusting to dealing with high-end film studios such as Universal Pictures and that his relationship with film studios then was partly due to inexperience:

*"The advantage of being in Monty Python was that we got away with murder and there was nobody telling us what we could or couldn't do. We just did it. And time after time it was successful. So, you build a certain amount of confidence, and a little bit of arrogance. So when it comes along to making a film and you've spent a couple or several years on it, it seems to me I have the right to make my mistakes, and not somebody else's mistakes. At the end of the day, the film was released in Europe with no problem with Twentieth Century Fox, but with Universal in America it was different. The great wonderful thing about Universal is it's housed in a black tower that looks like the monoliths in Brazil; it's not intentional, it just happens to be one of the little coincidences that keep occurring around Brazil."*<sup>6</sup>

Gilliam's experience was that of someone who had only ever had complete control of what he and his group were doing; no studios got involved with the comedy sketches of their television programme *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. And not even the other Pythons told Gilliam what way to complete the animation; he was given complete creative control with the animation portion of the show, told only the length of the necessary cartoons. With *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, the costs of making the film went far over the allotted budget and made less than a third of its budget back, a financial disaster for the studio, Columbia Pictures. Gilliam's fellow Python alumni Eric Idle, on being in *Munchausen*, said that prior to being in *Munchausen*, he had always been very smart about being involved in one of Terry Gilliam's films; "You don't ever be in them. Go and see them by all means - but to be in them, fucking madness!!!"<sup>7</sup> Like almost all of Gilliam's films, the behind-the-scenes

stories about their production process and release are almost as interesting as the movie itself.

Before he emigrated from America to England in 1967, Gilliam was employed as an assistant editor at *Help!*, a New York-based satirical magazine that ran from 1960 until its final issue in 1965, which was edited by Harvey Kurtzman, one of Gilliam's personal heroes.

*"I came to New York without a clue. The one person I had in mind was Harvey Kurtzman (co-founder of Mad magazine, then the editor of Help!), to whom I'd been sending my [own] magazines when I was in college. He'd written an encouraging letter, but then I said I was coming, and he wrote, 'Don't bother—it's a big city, there are no jobs. Don't do it, kid.' And I walked into the Help! offices, and this guy Chuck Alverson was quitting, and I got his job, just like that. This is why I believe in fairy tales."*<sup>8</sup>

In England, he worked on the later episodes of the television series *Do Not Adjust Your Set!*; a comedy sketch show featuring early performances from Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin, of whom Gilliam would join up with as part of Monty Python just five months after the final episode of *Do Not Adjust Your Set!*. Gilliam created the animated sequences that were used between sketches in the later episodes of the show. The satirical, often surrealist humour exhibited in the show was very much a precursor for the style and structure in which *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969) was presented.<sup>9</sup> Gilliam was part of Monty Python from the very beginning, but was originally credited as an animator as opposed to the other five members of the comedy group. His handcrafted animations involved photographs, magazine cut-outs, and images of famous art pieces and architecture that were fused with Gilliam's drawings. They provided a "visual counterpoint" to the absurdist sketches

performed by the Pythons, and acted as the “connective tissue for the series' stream-of-consciousness flow of sketches”.<sup>10</sup> Gilliam was given complete creative freedom with his animation by the other Pythons; the only limit was how much time he needed to fill for the show's interludes. Gilliam, speaking about his days at *Help!* magazine, describes a specific type of comic strip he did for the magazine, which would ultimately lead to him being asked to join Python, as well as give him a taste of the filmmaking process:

*“Basically, three people did the magazine; it was Harvey [Kurtzman], myself, and a production man. One of the things we did there were ‘fumetti’, which were a series of photographs done like cartoon strips. I think it was the beginning of my filmmaking, in a sense, because we had actors, we had sets, we had locations, we had costumes, we had lighting; all the things that go into making a film, except nothing moved. I was always in charge of putting those things together. Help! magazine was an amazing place at the time, because Harvey Kurtzman was one of the great idols of my generation of cartoonists.”<sup>11</sup>*

Here, in an interview with IGN.com, Gilliam describes “fumetti” which, in Italian, refers to all comics but when used in English it specifically refers to photonovels or photographic comics. It was during this time that Gilliam met comedian, and fellow Python-to-be, John Cleese. Gilliam also refers to fumetti having almost an introductory effect, of sorts, on his filmmaking career, as fumetti required “all the things” that the process of film requires, everything but movement. Gilliam recognises here that his early career making cartoon strips may have a direct influence on his filmmaking, or at the very least gave him an early filmmaking experience, an introduction into Terry Gilliam's filmmaking career.

In this thesis on the director's work, I want to examine where his preoccupation with the visual side of film comes from. To accomplish this, I have decided to first look at his early career as a cartoonist and satirist illustrator before he joined Monty Python and his famous animation work during his time with the now iconic comedy group. I will then examine the how and why he focuses on the visual and turns films into elaborate, rich texts with detailed, dynamic mise-en-scenes that portray recurrent themes that are prevalent in his films throughout his career. I will also look at his somewhat controversial position on the edge Hollywood, as well as the misfortune that has surrounded several of his films during his cinematic career and they are both incorporated into his filmmaking style. This will involve examining his own battles with authority, the unfortunate events that have occurred during the production of several of his films, and his, and his crews', determination to see through his unique visions.

## **Chapter I - Visuals**

Gilliam has, throughout his career as a cartoonist, animator, and filmmaker, has always had the visuals and spectacle of film as his priority. The density and richness in detail contained in his compositions are consistently praised by both critics and moviegoers, sometimes above the film's narrative itself. He has a certain freedom with the visual nature of his films; not only as a director that can be seen in many ways to be an auteur but, as his films contain many elements of the fantastic, Gilliam, who has shown a masterful knack for displaying these elements to any generation of viewer, is not limited by creativity or imagination.

“It’s always the visuals, in many ways, that come first and I try to work out a way of including dialogue and words but it was always the pictures. So I think I’m very primitive in that sense. I suppose that’s why I’m so obsessed with the medieval times...”<sup>12</sup>

Gilliam’s duties on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* were to direct the photography side of the film, whereas Terry Jones would direct the actors and performance portion. This gave Gilliam’s “obsession with medieval times” is evident in his debut film as a solo director which was *Jabberwocky*, in 1976. Based on the Lewis Carroll poem of the same name, the film starred fellow Python Michael Palin and, like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, was given a medieval setting. Gilliam said that *Jabberwocky* intrigued him because he wanted to specifically do a fairytale, and he loved the thought of a fairytale where the hero won everything he could win but it wasn’t actually what he wanted out of life. He thought it was saying something interesting and that it was funny; “...And I always loved castles and Grimm’s fairytales and monsters, and here was a chance to do it!”<sup>13</sup>

After *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Jabberwocky*, *Time Bandits* in 1981 became the third film that Gilliam would direct to feature a medieval setting, as well as featuring Michael Palin, when the protagonists in of the film end up in Sherwood Forest, inhabited by Robin Hood and his gang of thieves. Palin, speaking in an interview alongside Gilliam, talks of the how easy the writing process was and how quickly it had moved along. He says that it was “just like writing Python” as many of the Python sketches didn’t need to link to the next; Gilliam could just put together an animation that would be used as a way of getting from ‘A’ to ‘B’. Palin says that the film very much works in that Python style as Gilliam uses a magical map to transport the Bandits to the next historical setting and the story continues

from there. *Time Bandits* was Gilliam's return to directing feature length films after the Pythons made *Life of Brian* and *Meaning of Life* and was made in an attempt to convince Denis O' Brien, the head of the George Harrison-Monty Python film company "Hand Made Films", to allow Gilliam to make *Brazil*.

*"I always wanted to do more with the camera when I was younger. When I first started seeing stuff that Spielberg was doing I remember thinking, 'God, how does he move the camera like that?' That's brilliant.' And even Jim Cameron, too, I was so envious of that stuff. I know I can't do it. I don't have the money to do it. And I don't actually quite have the skills. The closest I ever got was stealing the tracking shots from Paths of Glory (1957) for Brazil. All those tracking shots of Kirk Douglas in the trenches, that's where I got it from. Those were the most elaborate shots I ever did. My stuff is really old, classical [stuff]. There's a wide shot, a mid-shot and a close. [Instead] it's about using juxtaposition or you counter something and let the ironies float through. To me it's always been about the ideas. It's not the technical skill because I've been limited in that."* <sup>14</sup>

In *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, Gilliam is used as an example of how dramatically the choice of lens can influence the composition and visual impact of an image. When films are made, the entire feature usually takes on a "visual strategy" that "capitalises on the look" of certain lenses, depending on the focal length that the director wants to use. "Many directors use a fairly consistent repertoire of lenses in which they are comfortable, and that becomes their style." <sup>15</sup>

Gilliam's preference for wide-angle lenses has definitely given him a distinct style with his choice of lenses, opting for lenses with shorter focal-lengths. Gilliam says that the reason he chooses to use wide-angle lenses is possibly because he feels "surrounded", that he feels as though he were "in the space of the film." <sup>16</sup>

*“If I have a visual style it’s incredibly eclectic. I’ve always been obsessed with viscera, guts of things, whether they’re physical or mechanical; showing the inside of things, not just the surface of things. When it comes to ironic, or disturbing, or surreal images, I rush back to Breughel, to Bosch, to Magritte, to Max Ernst. Goya is a favourite because he’s always been about the horrors of war. There’s terrible anguish in his stuff, but at the same time incredibly humanity. I’m not fascinated by just the bizarre for the sake of the bizarre. There has to be a humanistic side, which Breughel, Bosch, Goya, all show. They can see the bizarre side. They can see the tragic and horrific side; yet there’s a sense of humour, and joy, and love of all human beings.”*<sup>17</sup>

Here, Gilliam mentions several artists where he would draw inspiration from. His love of these artists’ work is very much reflected in his films; there are references to specific pieces of art in several of his films and the heavy influence of Max Ernst can be seen in his Python cartoons. The detail that Bosch and Breughel put into their works is seen in the rich mise-en-scenes that Gilliam’s wide-angle lenses are used to capture every last detail. He says that Computer-Generated Imagery has made filmmaking far more expensive than it needs to be and is becoming a limit on creativity.

*“The problem with the advances [in technology] is that they make your films more expensive. The more expensive you make the films, the more limited, I think you are, in the ideas you can play with. So I use it to keep my films cheap. In Parnassus, rather than doing elaborate naturalistic backgrounds, I kept the backgrounds more painterly. In fact, they’re a bit more like my cartoons in Python; they’re simpler. So we can do amazing backgrounds but they’re still quite cheap to produce rather than putting a tyrannosaurus-Rex in there.”*<sup>18</sup>

Gilliam has stated that, in his films, he does not want naturalism; instead of making his films seem realistic and believable in this world, he would rather show things that are believable to the world he is creating, making the films believable in their own individual worlds, similar to cartoons. Cartoons do not always share the same logic as the real world, and films can follow this philosophy also. It is very much a cartoonist's viewpoint on naturalism in film. It wasn't until after the major financial failure of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* that Gilliam directed a film for Hollywood. It was the first time he was not part of the scriptwriting or the storyboarding. It was significantly less visually ambitious as his other films had been, and Gilliam found that the challenge was how to shoot a contemporary story in a naturalistic setting. With the rest of his films, the only challenge was how much could he put into it?

*"The tricky thing is when you get a script, you read it, it's complete. How do you interpret it? That's always been my problem. In past films, it had not been that much of a problem: except for "The Fisher King", they were my own scripts, and Fisher King was a contemporary story. "12 Monkeys", which David and Janet Peoples wrote, has a lot of fantastic elements in it so I was fighting with myself on it; how far to go, how far not to go. In the end I always sort of give up and just go for visual spectacle and the things that excite me. If I'm doing scenes where two people are driving along in a car, talking, they don't get my juices flowing, because there's not much need for me in that. But, when we can create a future world with people living underground, then they do start flowing and we get...whatever it is we get."*<sup>19</sup>

Gilliam has stated on several occasions that he does put certain sequences or set-pieces into films for spectacle's sake and because they do, in fact, look good. It has been suggested that due of his background in "60's counter-cultural cartooning", and because his work is "so visually dazzling, we can forgive him for not knowing why" he places some of the imagery



into his films, even if he uses them repeatedly.<sup>20</sup> This view on the director's decision-making in terms of what he should and should not add to his films is a somewhat narrow look at his work. Gilliam is, in many ways, an auteur director; his work will always contain something personal no matter who pens the script or whether or not it is necessary to the narrative. Even the great auteurs of cinema, such as Ingmar Bergman or Jean-Luc Godard, would have added elements to their films that may not have been necessary to the overall composition.

In 1991, Terry Gilliam was assigned to a young Quentin Tarantino as his mentor in the Sundance Institute. Tarantino says that, at the time, he had a lot of ideas but had never made a film before and recalls asking Gilliam for advice on directing. Tarantino saw that Gilliam had specific visions for all of his films and the former wanted to know how he achieved that, asking Gilliam "how do you capture that?" Tarantino maintains that the advice Gilliam gave him was some of the best advice he has ever received. Gilliam told Tarantino that a director does not actually have to capture their vision by themselves; they just have to know what their vision is. Once they understand their vision, they can hire talented people to create the vision for the director; as long as the director understands their vision, they can articulate it to people that are talented and they will give the director their vision.

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## Chapter 2 - Themes

For many, it is the themes that Gilliam explores in his films that set him apart from being just a visual stylist. Although his outstanding visuals are married with the thematic concepts to convey their message further, it can be said that it is in fact the themes themselves that he explores that have distinguished him from most filmmakers. Gilliam, looking back on his career, saw that some of his films could be seen to be part of thematic trilogies. The stories are obviously not continuations as he has never made sequels to his films, wanting to make each project that he works on to be something original and fresh. The themes he expresses in one film sometimes recur in another of his films so much so that they can be seen to be thematically linked; having a similar message, or a similar environment, or a similar quest, yet have very different plots and characters. Gilliam's *Time Bandits* is the initial instalment of his first thematic trilogy entitled the "*Trilogy of Imagination*". Each film in the trilogy is seen from the point-of-view of a character representing the "three ages of man"; *Time Bandits* is seen through the eyes of child obsessed with history. *Brazil* is from the point-of-view of an adult office worker unhappy with the bureaucratic society he lives in. And *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* is told from the viewpoint of an elderly man creating exaggerated stories of his own. This trilogy has, at its core, themes of escapism and the necessity of imagination to, in one way or another, survive normal every-day life. The second thematic trilogy Gilliam has recognised within his cinematic oeuvre is that which he has called the "*Trilogy of Americana*". This trilogy is made up of the films he made during his time working with the Hollywood structure. These films, all shot in the United States, were all made in the 1990's. The first of this trilogy, *The Fisher King*, had significantly less special effects than that of his previous films as Gilliam was not the scriptwriter nor was he storyboard artist on this movie or the following two films in this spiritual trilogy, as he had

been previously on all his other works. The film surrounds the sudden co-dependent friendship between Jack, played by Jeff Bridges, and Parry, played by Robin Williams, the latter character on a quest to find the Holy Grail. *12 Monkeys* followed in 1995 and then *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1998. The lack of special effects due to character's creativity in the *Trilogy of Imagination* was replaced by the questioned sanity and drug-induced hallucinations of the characters within the *Trilogy of Americana*. A third trilogy can now be acknowledged within his work. The *Orwellian Triptych*, as Gilliam refers to it, is the thematically similar trio of films he has made with a dystopian environment; *Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*, and now his latest film *The Zero Theorem*, released in 2013. Gilliam refers to *The Zero Theorem* as more utopian than dystopian as the world around the main character isn't bad, it's just that he "desires to disconnect" from it.<sup>22</sup> Gilliam has stated in interviews that he does not, in fact, plan thematic trilogies, that he just goes from film to film. Even though this may be the case, it is something that gives a deeper understanding and appreciation to his films

His back catalogue of films largely contain moments of fantasy in various forms. These fantasy elements woven throughout his narratives create opportunities for actors to explore different possibilities in their careers, often being given the chance to go against audiences' expectations and do something different than what they have done before. Not only do actors in his films get to try something new, they have also been able to voice their ideas for the characters that they play, as Gilliam is extremely welcoming to artistic ideas. Sean Connery's unexpected appearance, even to the Pythons, as Agamemnon in *Time Bandits* was originally a joke in Gilliam's script, added by co-writer and fellow Python Michael Palin. The script featured the line: "...The character removes his helmet, revealing himself to

be Sean Connery, or an actor of equal but cheaper stature”. Gilliam comments that this line was taken literally by Denis O’ Brien, who oversaw Hand Made films, and who showed Connery the script. Just as interestingly, the magic trick Connery performs in the film was actually his own idea, and not part of the original script. Connery said to Gilliam “I can do this”, referring to the magic trick suggesting the idea for this brief scene and Gilliam, reflecting upon the scene, says that it was “incorporated beautifully”.

*“It was very simple. I think it was our first attempt at doing something simply and really effectively. Because you’ve got the right person playing it with all the baggage that he comes with and so, boom – simple. And it was really nice.”*<sup>23</sup>

Gilliam is known to be very open to ideas, especially when it comes to actors, and this is one of many examples of how Gilliam filters these ideas and incorporates them into his vision. Gilliam and Palin, who wrote the script for *Time Bandits* together, discuss the personas they gave to the Bandits’ characters. Gilliam likens, somewhat in jest, the Bandits’ personalities to that of the Pythons themselves, saying there are similar group dynamics at play. This sentiment is echoed by author Robert Hewison in his book on Monty Python.<sup>24</sup> Palin mentions that it was usually not a norm in cinema for Little People to have roles in film that had actual personas attached to them, as opposed to just seeing them as a form of spectacle, as something different. Palin, on the Bandits’ characterisations, says:

*“They don’t write parts for people like that, really. If you’ve got a dwarf in it, they’re there as sort of a freak character. We just gave the, sort of, ordinary suburban obsessions, which was really rather nice...”*<sup>25</sup>

Gilliam, later in his career, cast Verne Troyer as a supporting character in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, playing Percy, an assistant of sorts to the titular Parnassus. In the director's audio commentary track of the film, Gilliam talks about casting him as a character with depth and not as an exploitable sideshow to be the butt of jokes as he has been cast as in the past. Heath Ledger, who co-starred with Troyer in *Parnassus*, talked about his first experience being cast by Gilliam in the 2005 fantasy *The Brothers Grimm*, opposite Matt Damon. Ledger mentions that Gilliam gave them the option to play around with the characters and try new things that they had not been given the chance to before.

*"He gave us the opportunity to switch roles and create these characters that we hadn't been given the opportunity to do in the past. You know, for whatever reason, people hadn't entrusted these characters on us before; once we got there, his energy, his enthusiasm just kind of bled into our performances."*<sup>26</sup>

This creative leeway is something that Gilliam would later give Ledger once more in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, as Ledger ad-libbed many of the lines that are in the finished piece. Damon, who starred opposite Ledger in *The Brothers Grimm*, also talks about the experience of working with Gilliam. Damon, who was a fan of Gilliam from an early age after seeing *Time Bandits*, jumped at the chance to work with Gilliam. Damon notes Gilliam's ability to communicate what he wants from his actors and his overall honesty throughout the process made it an incredibly positive for him. Damon says that, initially, the role that was offered to him was that of Jakob, Ledger's character in the film, and both actors felt they had performed those roles before. Gilliam allowed them to switch, telling them that he had done something similar with Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt in *12 Monkeys* a decade prior.

He talks about this in an interview on a British morning-television programme in 1996, following the release of *12 Monkeys*.

*“[12 Monkeys] had all the possibilities of failing because neither of these actors (Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt) are doing what their films expect them to do...Maybe the audience is as intelligent as they think they are as opposed to what Hollywood thinks they are...What was interesting in this one is that they were both trying to prove something. They were both big superstars and they’re being neatly categorised; Bruce does action and Brad does blue-eyes blonde bimbo stuff. And [in 12 Monkeys] they’ve done the opposite; Brad becomes this incredibly manic, funny, fast-talking character and Bruce becomes very internalised, very vulnerable, it’s kind of amazing.”*<sup>27</sup>

Gilliam’s clearly allow for actors to explore new avenues in their art and challenge themselves in his films. He seems to provide a safe space for their ideas and input where suggestion is welcome. Gilliam has stated that he welcomes ideas and suggestions from anybody that is willing to give it, seeing himself not as an auteur but what he calls a “filteur”; a director that is the filter for all of the ideas that manifest themselves during the filmmaking process.

*““My joke is that I’m not an auteur, I’m a filteur. Because you start with a plan. And then you run out of money, you run out of time, it starts raining, the actor skews off in a different direction and you go with it. It’s all there. In everything I’ve done. But not necessarily in the same order I once thought.”*<sup>28</sup>

Gilliam, in an attempt to answer the question “what is *Brazil*?” in the film’s accompanying documentary of the same name, he replies with “...Franz Kafka meets Walter Mitty” or more specifically, on its thematic narrative, “...The impossibility to escape from reality”. The 1985 dystopian fantasy film is considered by many to be his masterpiece. It stars Jonathan

Pryce as Sam Lowry, a low-level employee who is just trying to get by in life working a job that he finds sufficiently rewarding. His friends, family and work-colleagues insist on him advancing higher in this paperwork-driven system as that is the way the bureaucratic society he lives in measures success. Lowry begins dreaming of a beautiful woman (Kim Greist), whom he finally meets in real life and struggles to help save from the bureaucratic system. *Brazil* has been described as “half-dream, half-nightmare” by Jonathan Pryce, adding that “normally you have reality and dreams; in this you have dreams and nightmares”. Michael Palin, who played the supporting role of Jack Lint, comments on *Brazil*, describing it as a “...dream and a fantasy, and it’s a comedy, but it’s also a chilling reality”. He continues:

*“I think in some of the ideas and thoughts and attitudes, the fears about the establishment, about authority, about people doing as they’re told unquestioningly, philosophically, comes from the same stable as [Monty] Python – but in visual terms it’s pure Gilliam”*<sup>29</sup>

As the visuals of *Brazil* were “pure Gilliam”, the nature of these visuals, just as in *Jabberwocky* and *Time Bandits*, would contain elements of fantasy. Due to Gilliam’s meticulousness with the detail of his compositions, the vision that he wanted to create would more than likely have been difficult to film. Julian Doyle, the editor on *Brazil* and who had also worked with Gilliam previously editing *Time Bandits* and as a production manager on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, had reservations about *Brazil* from the very beginning. Commenting on his apprehensions about the script during the production of the film, Doyle maintained that if anyone else had written the script it would’ve been an easier process filming it but since it was a Gilliam script, there were many different visual and thematic ideas that had to be incorporated somehow into a feasible production. Albeit being a skilled writer himself, as

stated by others in the documentary, Gilliam got in touch with playwright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard to work on the script with him. Gilliam and Stoppard had extremely different work habits; Gilliam, being a director, wanted to work together on a close and consistent basis with the writer. Stoppard, on the other hand, much preferred his process of meeting with the director several times early on before going away for two-to-three months, returning with what he hoped would be close to the final version of the script. Stoppard did not hide the fact that he was not collaborative in the way Gilliam would have wanted, and when Gilliam was given the script he, in turn, was honest in saying that he could now do whatever he wanted with Stoppard's *Brazil* script. Stoppard understood that Gilliam, like many directors, see themselves as the author of their own films. This led to Gilliam bringing in Charles Mckeown, whom he had met working on *Life of Brian*, as a writing partner to help with additional writing and rewrites to the *Brazil* script.<sup>30</sup> McKeown would go on to co-write *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* with Gilliam, and the two then co-wrote *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* twenty years later.

On the song 'Brazil' itself, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek discusses the very presence of the song that gives the film its name. In his essay *The Undergrowth of Enjoyment*, part of the *New Formations* 9 article subtitled "On Enjoyment", he examines the song's position within the film, recognising it as an "acousmatic sound"; a sound that does not have a clear or identifiable source within a composition, in this case Gilliam's *Brazil*.

*The example of 'voix acousmatique' with the most far-reaching implication for the practice of ideological critique is Terry Gilliam's Brazil. We all know 'Brazil' as the stupid song from the 1950's that resounds compulsively through the picture. This song, whose status is never quite clear, embodies in its noisy repetitions the superego-imperative of mindless enjoyment. 'Brazil', to put it briefly, is the content of the fantasy of the film's hero, the support and point-of-reference that structure his enjoyment; and it is precisely for that reason*



*that we can use it to demonstrate the fundamental ambiguity of fantasy and enjoyment. Throughout the film, it seems that the mindlessly obtrusive rhythm of the song serves as a support for totalitarian enjoyment, condensing the fantasy-frame of the 'insane' totalitarian order that the film depicts; but at the very end, just when the hero's resistance has apparently been broken by the savage torture to which he has been subjected to, he escapes his torturers by whistling... 'Brazil!' Thus, whilst functioning as a support for the totalitarian order, fantasy is, at the same time, that overflow or residue of the Real that enables us to 'pull ourselves out', to preserve a kind of distance from the socio-symbolic order. When we go crazy in our obsession with mindless jouissance, even totalitarian manipulation cannot reach us." <sup>31</sup>*

Gilliam's work often questions and reflects the current society that we live in. *Brazil*, as an example, questions the endless bureaucracy that goes on all around us while *The Zero Theorem* looks at the prevalence of technology and how it is disconnecting people from the world around them. It is this border between reality and fantasy that Gilliam's work operates. Gilliam stated in an interview with Derek Malcolm that his films are always operating on this borderline and can sometimes show the madness of reality, and likewise the mundane in fantasy.

## **Production**

Gilliam has made several films where numerous setbacks, budget-concerns and/or studio-meddling arose, as well as unprecedented misfortune occurring during their production, leading to infamous behind-the-scenes sagas. In reaction to these events, his scripts have often been tweaked during the filmmaking process to accommodate his vision. In some cases, however, his scripts stay rigidly to the original draft as a way of keeping the finished piece to be of his own authorship, minimizing studio interference. The most famous

example of studio interference in Gilliam's filmmaking career is undoubtedly that which took place before the release of *Brazil*. After screening his cut of *Brazil* for the studio executives at Universal Pictures, Gilliam knew there was going to be problems getting his version released.

*“[The people at Universal] were appalled by the film. They thought it didn't work. They wanted me to change the ending, give it a happy ending, because more people would see the film and like the film and it would be better for everybody. I said no, and then they embargoed the film and they started cutting it. I decided to wage a campaign and I said to the producer, 'Lawyers are no good—[Universal's] got all the lawyers in the world, they've got all the time in the world, and they don't have to release the film, so let's go public and personal.' And that's what I did.”*<sup>32</sup>

His film had been released by Twentieth Century Fox in Europe without any issues but it was the American audience that Universal felt that, not only did *Brazil* need a “happy ending” for viewers to respond positively to it, but that it was “unwatchable”, something they could not release, in its director's cut. Gilliam, responding to this in a public manner, rented a full page of advertisement space in *Variety* magazine, writing a message to Sid Sheinberg, President of Universal Pictures at the time. The message said: “Dear Sid Sheinberg, When are you going to release my film *Brazil*? - Signed, Terry Gilliam.” This public statement of resistance was described by Gilliam as “extraordinary, [that] nobody had behaved like that before”, that he was just being “naive and angry”. Sheinberg replied in kind with his own ad saying “For sale. Half price. A Terry Gilliam Film.”. Sheinberg stated that if

another studio wanted to buy it, they could distribute it.<sup>33</sup> Gilliam continued his protests by having private screenings of *Brazil* in the homes of Los Angeles' film critics, who realised that they did not need the film to be released for them to include it in competition for awards. When the film was chosen by Los Angeles critics as Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay at the Los Angeles Critics Association Awards, Universal, getting wind of this, were forced to release the film.<sup>34</sup>

Gilliam's next film *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* went astronomically over-budget, almost doubling its original budget of twenty-three million dollars.<sup>35</sup> Speaking with Derek Malcolm, he compares his going over budget on *Munchausen* to that of Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* from 1942. Gilliam, looking back at it, refers to it as a perfect "Wellesian" moment; a film author working outside of the Hollywood system ending up going over budget on his picture - in this case far more over-budget than Welles' film. Gilliam says it was a comeuppance given to him given to him by Hollywood, who he maintains loved hearing he had failed financially, and was given a reputation for being self-indulgent and was somewhat blacklisted from doing his own projects for quite some time. The disappointment of *Munchausen* led Gilliam to begin directing other people's scripts in Hollywood, something he had adamantly stayed away from until this point. He read the script to *The Fisher King* and, seeing that it was not only a very good script but would also be an easier task to film after the box office fiasco that *Munchausen* was, he agreed to film it. After the release of *The Fisher King* in 1991, his first legitimately Hollywood film, Gilliam started to develop several projects. One of these was a personal project titled *The Defective Detective*, a script surrounding a police detective investigating the disappearance of a young girl and ends up being drawn into an absurd fantasy world. The idea formed when Gilliam was looking through his files and finding various things that had been cut from his films *Brazil*, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, and the films he had completed prior. He

thought that *Detective* could become a compendium of all things Gilliam; a collection of the recurring themes, humour, and visuals that have made him distinctive through his career up to then. When talking about compendiums of a filmmaker's work, Gilliam has used Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) as an example on several occasions, as well as Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973). Gilliam's compendium, as he has claimed, is *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, which he used the idea of placing 2D cut-outs of objects in a 3D space, taken from his *Defective Detective* script. Gilliam also planned for an adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* around this time with Mel Gibson to play the lead but Gibson left to make *Braveheart* (1995). Liam Neeson was then brought in as Gibson's replacement but Gilliam left the project after disagreements with the studio about the allotted budget. Other projects that fell through for Gilliam during this period were a film adaptations of Mark Twain's 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and of Philip K. Dick's award-winning 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly*, the latter was made in 2006 by Richard Linklater.<sup>36</sup> He has attempted to adapt Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen*; Warner Brothers let Gilliam and his writing partner Charles McKeown rewrite an earlier script but it was subsequently abandoned by Gilliam when he learned the studio did not have their full trust in him, giving him half the budget he needed. He said that it was "un-makeable", and that the source material deserved more screen time than what one feature film could provide: "When you reduce it down to a 2-hour film, you're taking so much textured detail out that it kind of loses what it's about."<sup>37</sup> Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* was the second Hollywood film that he directed where the script was not his. This, similar to his experience filming *The Fisher King*, made the whole process easier for the director, as well as not having to storyboard the films himself, saying "*The films I made in Hollywood were the easiest films I ever made*" in his *In Conversation* interview with Derek Malcolm. He learned, during filming *The Fisher King*, that as long as the stars of his films are on his side your film is

safe from studio interference; “Once you know who is in the foxhole with you, the studio can’t touch you”. Star power worked in his favour, not only for the audience numbers that his films would draw in but his filmmaking process to begin with, lessening the studio’s meddling with his vision of the films. Gilliam continued this method with another script that was not his but this one was a personal project as he was a fan of the source material; *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, starring Johnny Depp, was the third consecutive Hollywood-based film that he would direct. Depp would go on to become close friends with both Hunter S. Thompson, who wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, as well as Gilliam himself.

Gilliam, in 1999, cast Depp in his next project *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, based on Cervantes’ novel about the adventures of a mad old knight. The film was to be documented as production finally started in June of 2000. The project was independently financed and to be entirely shot in Europe, not involving Hollywood at all. Gilliam’s script was a combination of an old *Quixote* he had written years prior and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, a project he had tried to make on its own previously. This twist on the story saw a modern day advertising executive is transported back in time to the world of Don Quixote. Orson Welles laboured over an unfinished modern retelling of *Quixote* himself and could never attain the necessary finances for the film; Gilliam’s luck was worse. During the first few days of shooting *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, scenes were interrupted by loud NATO planes flying overhead. Flash floods not only completely changed the landscape of the Spanish countryside but also damaged the crew’s equipment. The elderly actor playing *Don Quixote*, Jean Rochefort, ended up with a double-herniated disk and eventually could not return after production had been suspended several weeks. The shoot had to be cancelled and the project inevitably collapsed. The entire ordeal was documented

in *Lost in La Mancha* (2002). Gilliam has since attempted to revive the *Quixote* project several times to no avail. Following the disappointment of *Quixote*, Gilliam could not gather enough funding for a film adaptation of *Good Omens* by Neil Gaiman and the late Terry Pratchett. Gilliam felt the film would need a significant budget and, as he did not have the funds to make the movie that he wanted, he abandoned the project. His 2005 film *The Brothers Grimm* had problems during production over creative differences between himself and studio-heads Bob and Harvey Weinstein. They had disagreed over casting the lead actors; Gilliam wanted Johnny Depp to star opposite Heath Ledger but Bob Weinstein believed Depp was not a big enough “commercial draw” at the time, so Gilliam gave the role to Matt Damon. Damon speculates that Bob Weinstein must be “kicking himself” after the incredible success of the *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), which starred Johnny Depp and went on to spawn three sequels with another to be released in 2017, all films starring Depp. During long delays due to further disagreements with the Weinsteins on *The Brothers Grimm*, Gilliam filmed *Tideland* (2005) on a tight budget of eight-million dollars. His next film would almost become an unprecedented disaster that in a similar league as *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*. The omens were not good for Gilliam when, early on in production, broke his back when a bus backed into him, cracking vertebrae. After completing most of the “naturalistic” shots filmed in London, Heath Ledger died from an accidental drug overdose at the age of 28. Gilliam, for several days following this news of losing a friend, lost hope in the project, accepting the fact that he may have to abandon another film and Ledger’s work may never see the light of day. It was the people around Gilliam, his friends and crew, which revived the director’s interest in attempting to salvage the film any way that they could, as many of them had been through the *Quixote* saga with him and did not want to repeat it.<sup>38</sup> Gilliam re-wrote the script so that the film could be innovatively finished; he decided that the face of Ledger’s con artist character could change every time he goes inside the titular

Imaginarium. This partial re-write allowed Gilliam to find other actors to finish Ledger's part when his character is inside the Imaginarium. Gilliam would only allow actors that were friends of Ledger and Johnny Depp, Jude Law, and Colin Farrell were all brought on board to complete the film, and also gave all their earnings from the film to Ledger's daughter. Before post-production started, the film's producer William Vince also died. Gilliam managed to finish the film and, rather than ending it with "A Terry Gilliam Film" as he was supposed to, he credited the film as "A Film from Heath Ledger and Friends", dedicating it to Ledger and Vince.

The director has, over the years, surrounded himself with more and more crew and actors that he trusts to stay in his corner and battle on with him against the quotidian problems that occur on his film sets. The incredible work that they do for him allows him the space to creatively find ways around these numerous setbacks, overcoming them and turning difficult situations into astounding films. The failures and setbacks, the arguments with studios, the projects that have fallen through, and the astonishing amount of bad luck have played their part in making Gilliam the uniquely imaginative director he is today.

## **Conclusion**

Gilliam had always wanted to be a film director, not an animator. Working as a cartoonist and an animator were always, in his eyes, a means to an end. Gilliam, in a way, got to direct his own animations with complete creative control when he was with Monty Python. Being part of the Python group seems to have been the perfect way into the film

industry for Gilliam, as he has stated that he could never have gone through the traditional route of becoming a runner, or “tea-boy”.<sup>39</sup> There is far more to his filmmaking than just being an innovative and unique visual stylist. Looking at a single frame of a Terry Gilliam, it can often be recognised as a Gilliam film. But what that does not tell you is this is a director that learned his trade, as he says, “on the job”, while directing one of the most famous comedy films of all time, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*; a film loved by millions and watched repeatedly by them, and is endlessly quoted. His early films, *Jabberwocky* and, more so, *Time Bandits* may have been a means to an end but were nonetheless beautifully dark fantasies that contained the signature Monty Python humour Gilliam had been a part of writing for so long. *Brazil* was what he had been meaning to make for years; the condemnation of bureaucracy, that of which Gilliam hates all kinds of. *Brazil* influenced many films with its city’s jarring retro-futurist design, including Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989)<sup>40</sup> and more recently Zack Snyder’s *Suckerpunch* (2011).<sup>41</sup> Gilliam’s financial failure with *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* led him to direct other scripts for a change while working within the Hollywood system, something he thought he would never need to do. Gilliam, here, ended up perfecting his craft in terms of working with actors. He has become an actor’s director; letting the themes involved in his films provide new paths for the actors to go against type, against what is expected of them. Some of the biggest stars in Hollywood jump at the chance to work with him. He also realised that if he has the film’s stars in his corner, the studios cannot interfere as much as they usually would with a director’s projects otherwise, so he always has a very close working relationship with his actors. Gilliam would not compromise the integrity of his vision as per the studio’s demand after filming *Brazil*, and publicly took on the studio when the ending of *Brazil* was threatened to be changed, ultimately getting his version of the film released in the end. When concerns arose about how Heath Ledger’s character is introduced in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, hanging



from a rope, his response was that of a true film author keeping the initial vision, not only his own, but that of a friend, uncompromised.

*“That’s the film Heath and I set out to make and that’s the film that’s going to be made. I know it’s going to shock people. The first time I saw it, it was like, fuck! You can’t help but gasp. But I said, I’m not going to change this film. He wouldn’t have wanted it otherwise. That’s what was great about him, that’s why I loved being around Heath because he was fearless. I’ve always been pretty fearless and that’s what we shared in common. I wasn’t about to betray that.”*<sup>42</sup>

The fearless nature epitomised by Gilliam’s struggles in keeping his films as close to his original vision as possible is partnered with an adaptability in the face of the unprecedented. Gilliam, since *The Fisher King*, has made sure that he has a close working relationship with his film’s stars as they hold a certain amount of power when it comes to dealing with studios. He feels that as long as he has the stars on his side, studios will be less likely to become meddlesome with his overall vision. He says that “*filteur*” would be a better descriptive term of how he produces his work, as opposed to an *auteur*. An *auteur* takes their own idea and sticks strictly to it until the end, whereas the “*filteur*”, in Gilliam’s case, grasps the ideas not only of his own but of many people and filters them into one film.

Gilliam’s main theme that recurs in all of his films is that of the line between reality and fantasy. This theme is treated in different ways by the director. In some of his films, such as in his first thematic trilogy, the *Trilogy of Imagination*, escapism from mundane lives through

the mind's creativity is what provides the fantasy element in the film. In others, it is the questionable sanity of the protagonists that provide a shift in reality, as seen in his second thematic trilogy, the *Trilogy of Americana*. His other films show reality itself to have otherworldly elements that people cannot control, such as in *The Brothers Grimm*, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* and *The Zero Theorem*. Paranoia is prevalent in Gilliam's *Trilogy of Americana* and is conveyed partially with the use of camera angles, mainly Dutch angles. Gilliam touches on themes of identity, morality, and spirituality, using his black-comedy format to never become too embroiled in any one of these themes to alienate the audience. He also advocates the thought of "magic realism"; where fantastic, unexplainable things are allowed to happen in the worlds that some of his films operate in.

*"Well, I really want to encourage a kind of fantasy, a kind of magic. I love the term magic realism, whoever invented it – I do actually like it because it says certain things. It's about expanding how you see the world. I think we live in an age where we're just hammered, hammered to think this is what the world is. Television's saying, everything's saying 'That's the world.' And it's not the world. The world is a million possible things."*<sup>43</sup>

Gilliam strives to show worlds with ever-expanding possibilities where the viewer is accepting of an on-screen environment that may reflect reality but harbours elements of magic and fantasy, allowing room for imagination.

His run-ins with major studios have become infamous in Hollywood. His battle with Universal, over the final cut of *Brazil* that was to be distributed, is something that many thought impossible; a filmmaker getting one over on a big Hollywood studio. A David versus Goliath victory in its own way as he managed to get the film that he envisioned, that he made, distributed. He then got his comeuppance after almost doubling the budget on *The*

*Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, saying that the money had ran out after just the sixth week of the shoot. His position in film is somewhere between art-house and the mainstream, while often being neither.

“My movies are somewhere in between [art-house and mainstream]...They’re not really art-house movies; the [Michael] Haneke crowd, the [Pedro] Almodovar crowd, that’s a certain crowd. And then there’s Tim Burton, Michael Bay; that Hollywood thing. I’m stuck in the middle. I like it because on one hand it gives me a kind of freedom, and on the other hand I’m not sure either critics or audiences know how to deal with what I do sometimes. They’re comic, they’re silly sometimes, they’re visually extravagant and yet the ideas, I think, are quite serious.”

Gilliam, speaking here to Derek Malcolm in the latter’s programme *In Conversation*, recognises his unique position within the film industry. He knows he does not fit into one particular mould of filmmaker like that of Tim Burton or Pedro Almodovar. His awareness of his standing within the industry is, in part, what has made his career sustain such longevity.

The behind-the-scenes stories of how difficult it has proven to be for Gilliam to get several of his films finished is a testament to the director’s resolve as many people would have simply quit making films by now. His crew, who remain with Gilliam every step of the way, have just as much determination, sometimes more so, to get these projects made. This was definitely the case on *The Imaginarium of Parnassus* following the death of Heath Ledger; Gilliam was all but ready to give up - and it was his daughter Amy [Gilliam] and his long-time cinematographer Nicola Pecorini that told him that they had to finish the film.<sup>44</sup>

Some of Gilliam’s crew had been working with him since *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* and had seen firsthand one of cinemas most infamous cases of an unfinished film and did not

want to go through that process again. The films Gilliam made before and after *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* were, respectively, *Tideland* and *The Zero Theorem*, which were the lowest budgets he has had to work with since the 1970s. He has often said that his films are benefitted by the limitations of budgets and that the quotidian problems that occur during the filmmaking process make for a far more interesting and creative end result. Gilliam maintains that, if it were not for all of the problems that had to be solved on-set or the events that necessitated script rewrites, he would be a very mediocre filmmaker. Whether or not he is right, even the most mediocre of Gilliam films can be considered above many films that the Hollywood system has churned out. A visually and thematically stunning and stimulating director that risks everything to protect his art and finish his visions, Terry Gilliam is an agent of imagination and a genius in visual storytelling.

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