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**Terry Gilliam and Postmodern  
Society - A Critique from Within**

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# Introduction

## Terry Gilliam: Who Is He?

Terry Gilliam is an established film director, having directed "Jabberwocky" (1977), "Time Bandits" (1981), "Brazil" (1985), "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen" (1988), "The Fisher King" (1991) and his latest offering, "Twelve Monkeys" (1995). He recently took over directorial responsibilities from Alex Cox on the upcoming adaption of the Hunter S. Thompson novel "Of Fear and Loathing in Los Vegas".

Gilliam's route into the film business was by no means direct. While in Birmingham High School in San Fernando Valley he was drawing professional-quality cartoons. When Gilliam graduated from college with a major in political science he landed himself a job in New York drawing for Harvey Kurtzman's "Help!" magazine, a publication that Gilliam had been a fan of for its irreverence and its sense of humour. Gilliam lived on a mere \$50 a week during his three years at "Help!" but he looked on it as a free education. Gilliam worked for a while for an ad agency in Los Angeles before he travelled to London, where John Cleese introduced him to some television people. For a while Gilliam wrote sketches for a BBC show called "Do not Adjust Your Set". Later he got a regular slot in another show, "We Have Ways of Making You Laugh", as a caricaturist. On one occasion he persuaded the producer of the programme to let him do a short animated film. The resulting film was a forerunner of the later animated films he'd make with the "Monty Python" crew, with its efficient use of collage. The T.V. series "Monty Python's Flying Circus" was the next thing for Terry Gilliam. His distinct animated sequences have become synonymous with the series, and fitted right in with the anything-goes comedy show. The impact of these cut-and-paste stop-motion animations was Gilliam's irreverence towards establishments. He'd often incorporate icons from the Art world into his compositions, and then tear them down from their high pedestals making sacrilege of pieces like the "Mona Lisa" or "The Birth of Venus". Gilliam shows a suspicion of institutions and their position to dictate truths. This is





a theme that he returns to in his career as director. "Baron Munchausen" is a film about truth and lies. The official truth disseminated by the town clerk is called into scrutiny. "The Fisher King" and "Twelve Monkeys" also call into question the authority of institutions over truth, particularly the media. I'll look at these films in greater detail over the course of this thesis.

In 1974 the first full-length Python feature was released, with Gilliam and Terry Jones sharing directing chores on the film. Suddenly Gilliam was now a film director. Gilliam's solo directing debut was "Jabberwocky", a medieval skit where the Jabberwocky is a monster terrorising peasants of the kingdom of a King Bruno the Questionable. For Python's next feature, "Monty Python's the Life of Brian" (1979) Gilliam left the job of directing to Terry Jones. The film which Gilliam took back to America was "Time Bandits". "Time Bandits" had been financed by "Handmade Films" which had been set up by former Beatle, George Harrison and his manager, Denis O'Brian, to finance "The Life of Brian" when the film's original financial backers pulled out at the last minute. When "Time Bandits" was finished Handmade's best deal concerning an American release came from Avco Embassy Pictures, with none of the big studios wanting the picture. The film became Avco Embassy's most successful picture since "The Graduate". It was a success. However Gilliam was not big-time Hollywood. Gilliam's own disrespect for establishments, like Hollywood, was matched by Hollywood's suspicions of Gilliam as a volatile maverick; and thus a shaky investment. These differences all boiled to the surface in the much-publicised dispute between Gilliam and the studio head of Universal, Sid Steinberg over the cut of Gilliam's "Brazil" to be released in America. Steinberg wanted to make the film shorter, more accessible and give it a less ambiguous ending, while Gilliam wanted to keep his artistic vision, that motivated the film, intact. Gilliam eventually won out through persistence. It wasn't until "The Fisher King" that Gilliam began to win favour with Hollywood. For this film Gilliam worked with some of the big names in Hollywood (Robin Williams, Jeff Bridges), and to someone else's script. The outcome was a proficient film, but one which also bore Gilliam's distinctive mark. Again, in "Twelve





Monkeys" Gilliam worked with big names such as Mel Gibson and Brad Pitt. "Twelve Monkeys" also turned out to be a modest commercial success while still refusing to compromise artistic integrity.

### **Addressing the content of this thesis**

In this thesis I am concerned with Gilliam's solo directing career as opposed to his Monty Python days. The span of his career I'll be looking at are the films he made starting from "Time Bandits" working right up to "Twelve Monkeys". In all these films we can note similar concerns and debates in the themes that the films present. Also Gilliam's distinctive visual style can be seen as a thread that runs through his whole "oeuvre" - a style that shares common ground with Gilliam's early animated sequences with its unconventional juxtapositions and collage of different styles. It is through the analysis of thematic content and distinct visual style as linking the various films of a particular director that the auteur theorists of the sixties and seventies could arrive at a particular director and his films. However, much of this type of interpretation was very much grounded in a modernist aesthetic. Terry Gilliam's cinema is part of a different cultural climate.

It seems that for a long time film reception and criticism has carried over the baggage that always accompanied modernist literary texts; namely the assumption that there is a latent message in the text that an audience is expected to decipher. In his book, "A Cinema Without Walls", Timothy Corrigan notes this trend and advances to say that many films, until recently, have set out to actively engage their audience in this very system of reading-

Until recently, moreover, most films have willingly accommodated and encouraged this type of reception and have addressed their audience along a path whose reading (in one way or another) promises decipherment. (Corrigan, 1992, p52)

But this relationship often seems forced. Today's viewer is developing a different kind of relationship with a film's text.

This new viewer/text relationship can be understood as part of what is



theorised as postmodern culture. Postmodernism is in itself an ambiguous and much debated term. If modernism is understood as embodying the various forms of high modernisms in the Art world, the term postmodernism would suggest that we are concerned with something that developed after this cultural moment. To bring back the question of interpretation, we can see that all the various forms of high modernisms had their own specific rules and formulae for interpretation. It is this difficulty with interpretation that sets the stage for the postmodern receptor of texts. that sets the stage for the postmodern receptor of texts.

As far back as 1935 Walter Benjamin notes how the art of film renegotiates traditional modernist art. He hinges this renegotiation on the technology of reproduction applied by film which eliminates the "aura" of the "Work of Art". The "aura" of the "Work of Art" is seen as intrinsically bound up with its uniqueness and authenticity. In the age of mechanical reproduction we substitute- "a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (Benjamin, 1979, p852.) He also sees, along with art objects, natural objects being robbed of that same "aura" in-

..the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction (p853)

Thus the represented object operates at a remove from the object that is being represented and begins to exist on its own terms. Traditional evaluative mechanisms for such images cannot be applied and hence any interpretation is hindered. It is this same broken link with any evaluative mechanism that informs postmodernism. Images begin to exist in their own right. Spectacle dominates without any interpretive drive.

In this thesis I am going to look at the cinema of Terry Gilliam as operating a middle ground between modernist and postmodernist sensibilities. What I want to do is to show is that buried behind Gilliam's cinema, which is often dominated by spectacle in the context I have outlined





above, there lies a message which can be extracted. Within this context I will recognise the modernist bent idea of auteurism as a method for interpreting the films of a particular film director, while at the same time I will draw attention to the ambiguous relationship that exists regarding such a methodology in today's postmodern texts.

Much of this ambiguous relationship can be hinged around the domination of the spectacle over content that exists in postmodernism. It is not surprising then, that the relationship between Gilliam's texts and his images ultimately demonstrate the difficulty with interpreting the latent messages which I believe Gilliam is attempting to present to us. Referring to Gilliam's "Brazil" Tony Williams notes-

"Terry Gilliam's 'Brazil'(1985) attempts spectacular mechanisms to disavow its symptomatic origins in the reactionary climate of Thatcher's Britain....Although operating at a manifest level of spectacle and excess it contains a latent message which can be told" (Williams, 1993, p206)

It is this message which can be told that I am most interested in.

The main message I want to extract from Gilliam's cinema is a critique of today's capitalist, postmodern society. In this way Gilliam's cinema could be considered a critique from within. Also I will observe a certain nostalgia for humanism as recurrent in his cinema. This nostalgia for humanism can be considered a lamenting for a time when the individual had a unique identity that allowed him/her to readily negotiate his/her place in society. This type of unique individual operated under modernist sensibilities, and is discarded by postmodernist sensibilities. Gilliam's nostalgia for humanism is thus a desire to return to this moment of modernism. This again sets up Gilliam's ambiguous relationship with his own postmodern context, and in the course of this thesis I will develop this idea.



Before I move on to the first chapter of this thesis, in which I will look at Gilliam's representations of technology (a discussion which will ultimately reveal this very nostalgia for humanity), I want to make a parallel between this nostalgia and Terry Gilliam's own personal experience with the film industry. In his films Gilliam often presents us with the individual pitted against the system. This recurring theme parallels Gilliam's own experiences where he has often found himself on his own, battling a system that is attempting to suffocate his visions. I have already noted such a struggle in the much publicised battle over the American release of "Brazil".





# Chapter 1

## Science Fiction, Technology and the films of Terry Gilliam.

In the introduction to James Donald's book "Fantasy and the Cinema", he talks about a revival of interest in fantasy and the fantastic as a literary and cinematic genre or mode. He notes a renewed interest in popular genres such as Science Fiction, Horror and the melodrama in what he describes as

a greater wariness of pat formulae about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and a renewed sensitivity to both the tackiness and the sublimity of cinema. (Donald, 1989, p.7).

This development can be accredited to a new postmodern consciousness in terms of a move away from the canonistic tendencies of the high modernisms. For this reason I think it appropriate to investigate Gilliam's cinema in terms of such popular genres.

This said, it is worth noting that Gilliam's films can never be considered genre films in the classical understanding of genre. However, they can be seen to work on a generically transformed level - picking up on themes and reworking visual styles and conventions of particular genres - in particular those genres most overtly associated with the fantastical (science fiction, adventure, horror, etc...). Film noir can be mentioned here also, in terms of Gilliam's visuals.

During my research it became apparent to me that looking at Gilliam's work in terms of common concerns it shares with science fiction as a fantastical genre would help to further my investigations. One reason why I believe such a discussion would be constructive is the broader, perhaps even more ambiguous scope that science fiction allows as opposed to the more specific fantastical genres such as horror or adventure. Apart from this though, Gilliam's cinema shares some very particular common grounds and



concerns with those taken up by science fiction cinema throughout the ages, from "Metropolis" (Fritz Lang, 1926) right up to present day science fiction. The speculative exercises that occur in science fiction cinema is on such common ground. I will be taking a look at this in the next chapter under the heading "Terry Gilliam's Critical Dystopias". However, first I'm going to take a look at technology as a concern of science fiction cinema that Gilliam takes up in his films.

Technology and its relationship with man has always been a theme in science fiction literature, and afterwards, science fiction film. I suppose technology could be considered the "science" part of science fiction. Representations of technology within science fiction stretches across two extremes, from representations emphasising the bad potential of technology to those emphasising the good potential of technology. I have already mentioned Fritz Lang's "Metropolis". This film can be seen as science fiction which emphasises the bad potential of technology. "Metropolis" presents us with a future world where society is divided in two with the ruling classes living on the surface of the earth and the working classes living in a subterranean world beneath the city. This underground world houses vast machinery that needs the constant attention of the workers. An over-dependence on technology is seen to push the workers into unskilled and often dispensable positions, thus undermining the value of human life. In the end it is only when a scientist, the very purveyor of technology, is overcome that there exists any hope for humanity. Rotwang, a scientist who had created a robot in a plot to deceive the workers into their own destruction, falls to his death from a cathedral roof in a struggle with the hero, Freder, the son of the Master of Metropolis. Freder then acts as a mediator between the put-upon workers and his father to establish a common resolve for a better future. William Cameron Menzies's "Things to Come" of 1936, however, sees in technology possibilities for a better future. This film emphasises the good potential of technology. In "Things to Come" there has been a great global war, and the earth is left in ruins. It is only when a group of scientists endeavour to re-establish civilisation that things begin to look up. Under the





benevolent gaze of technology a better world begins to emerge from the ruins.

In either scenario, whether we are being presented with technology as either good or bad, technology is never presented as intrinsically good or bad in itself. Its potential is bound up with its relationship with humanity. Technology controlled by the wrong hands is seen as bad, and it is this type of technology that we are presented with in "Metropolis". The workers are often shown to die of exhaustion beside the vast machines that they are forever struggling to satiate, just so the upper class of society can enjoy the good life. The technology in "Things to Come" serves society only because the scientists use it for the benefit of the whole society. The question of who is in control of technology has always been central to determining technology's position in society, and we can see this idea carrying itself through into the cinema of Terry Gilliam. We can look at "Time Bandits" in this context.

"Time Bandits" is a fantasy adventure in which a young boy encounters a group of dwarfs in his bedroom late at night, and then finds himself travelling through time with his new acquaintances. The group of dwarfs have a map of time holes belonging to the "Supreme Being" with which they are supposed to patch up the shoddier parts of creation, but which they use instead to rob riches from different periods of history. Evil (Gilliam's manifestation of the devil) wants the map as a tool help him become the new Supreme Being. Playing on the greed of the group of dwarfs he lures them to the "Fortress of Ultimate Darkness" in a plot to get his hands on the map. Technology also features in Evil's plan. At one point we see Evil proclaiming that if creation had have been up to him he would have started with lasers on day one. The technology in the film, however, isn't portrayed as evil in itself. It is a question of who or what is in control of that technology. In the climax of "Time Bandits" the adventuring entourage of dwarfs enlist the help of different peoples throughout the history of time to endeavour to do battle with Evil. Randall, the leader, arrives in a military



tank. However, the tank goes out of control and one of its shells causes a large column to collapse on top of one of his fellow dwarfs. In initial dismay when the tank goes out of control Randall gasps "I can't control it!" and the retort given by Evil is "Of course you can't you silly little man - I control them". Here the consequent misfortune is shown not as a product of the technology that the tank represents, but is hinged on the question of control.

Gilliam's "Brazil" (1985) is probably his richest film in terms of its depictions of technology. In this film the question of control is more ambiguous than that of "Metropolis", or "Time Bandits". It is unclear if anybody or anything is in control of technology at all. Unlike in "Metropolis", where the upper classes reap the benefits of technology at the expense of the working classes; or in "Time Bandits", where Evil controls technology for his ends and at the expense of the dwarfs; in "Brazil" everybody seems to be victims within the system. This is an idea that I will look at in greater detail in the next chapter, "Terry Gilliam's Critical Dystopias".

"Brazil" is the story of a man, Sam Lowry, who escapes from the grey monotony of his world in his dreams. Sam works in the "Ministry of Information" where bureaucracy and paperwork are the staple diet. However, in his dreams Sam becomes a winged knight intent on rescuing his "dream girl" from the clutches of a Samurai warrior and a swarm of sinister-looking hooded figures. Sam becomes obsessed with Jill Layton, a girl that looks like his "dream girl". He is not a man of worldly ambition, but he accepts promotion to the "Ministry of Information Retrieval" because it is his only access to information on this girl.

Technology in "Brazil" is presented as temperamental and unreliable. There is an illogic present that turns the general assumption that science and technology are intrinsically logical on its head. Gilliam achieves this very strikingly on screen with a melding together of different technologies that seem completely inappropriate, and consequently very cumbersome. Brian Howell remarks -





The environment is a strange mixture of old hardware (pneumatic tubes) and miniature computers which need sheets of magnifying glass in front of them to make them legible (Howell,1985, p.27).

The resultant cumbersomeness of the technology often becomes too much, and things break down or don't do what they're supposed to. We thus have the domestic appliances that do everything wrong as Sam tries to rush into work; we have Sam's air conditioning system breaking down to such a ludicrous level that he has to jam his head in the freezer to escape the heat; and we have the lift that brings Sam past the reception desk and his dream girl at the Ministry of Information Retrieval, and instead brings him down to a basement area underneath the building. Technology in "Brazil" persistently eludes Sam's control, thwarts his everyday life. The "at the push of a button" promise for a future where appliances would do all the work while we engaged in recreational activities seems to have completely backfired in "Brazil".

Gilliam's cinema can be seen to incorporate the theme of technology and its ambiguous relationship with humanity that can be seen in science fiction films like "Metropolis" and "The Shape of Things to Come". However, both these films operated under modernist sensibilities, whereas Gilliam's cinema exists in a postmodern context. In this section of my thesis I want to look at Gilliam's cinema as a critique of our postmodern cultural climate. In such a climate the question of control and technology is also thwarted by more ambiguous ideological concerns. I will further explore these concerns specifically in relation to Terry Gilliam's work towards the end of this chapter and also in the next chapter when I will be looking at a new type of hybrid future dystopia that Gilliam presents us with in some of his films. However, first I want to demonstrate a division between a suspicion of technology under modernist sensibilities and that under postmodern sensibilities. To do this I will consider Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's essay, "Technophobia". Technophobia, as you might imagine, is a term used to



describe our suspicions of technology. "Blade Runner" (Ridley Scott, 1982/1992) is a technophobic film that is referred to in this essay. Like Gilliam's films it stands on the postmodern side of the fence.

In Ryan and Kellner's essay there is a delineation made between a technophobia that is conservative, and one that is more liberal. Conservative technophobia is seen to be rooted in a modernist tradition that can no longer be relevant in today's world. It is presented as follows -

From a conservative perspective, technology represents artifice as opposed to the spontaneous, the regulated as opposed to the free, an equaliser as opposed to a promoter of individual distinction, equality triumphant as opposed to liberty, democratic levelling as opposed to hierarchy derived from individual superiority. Most important for the conservative individualist critique, it represents modernity, the triumph of radical change over traditional social institutions. Those institutions legitimated by being endowed with the aura of nature, and technology represents the possibility that nature might be reconstructable, not the bedrock of unchanging authority that conservative discourse requires (Ryan and Kellner, 1980, p.58).

The essay sees liberal technophobia as a fear of technology not because it might endanger hierarchies, but because it could be used to perpetuate them. Ryan and Kellner see "Blade Runner" as a film whose technophobia lies in the liberal direction.

"Blade Runner" is a futuristic thriller set in a claustrophobic Los Angeles of 2019. The Tyrell Corporation have the technology to produce human replicants that can be used as a labour force within their own capitalist regime. Ryan and Kellner note how "Blade Runner" -

..calls attention to the oppressive core of capitalism and advocates revolt against exploitation. The Tyrell Corporation invents replicants in order to have a more pliable labour force, and the film depicts how capitalism turns humans into





machines, a motif that recalls Lang's "Metropolis" (Ryan and Kellner, 1990, p.63).

On top of this "Blade Runner" is shown to be a film which leaves more possibilities open than any conservative biased technophobic film. Again to quote from the essay at hand -

The film also deconstructs the conservative romantic opposition of reason and feeling . In the film, reason is represented by analytical machines that dissect human and objective reality. The police detect replicants with analytic instruments that observe emotional reactions in the eye. When Deckard (the hero) analyses the photograph of a room, he breaks down the reality into small parts until he captures what he seeks. The analytic gaze is thus represented as an instrument of power. Posed against this power is feeling. But the film suggests that feeling is not the polar opposite of reason. Rather, feeling, especially in the replicants, is the product of technology. And these machine humans are shown to be in many ways more 'human' than their makers. Analytic rationality is depicted as irrational and anti-human when used instrumentally in a policed, exploitative society, but it is also an instrument for constructing a more communal ethic. Thus the film deconstructs the oppositions - human/technology, reason/feeling, culture/nature - that underwrite the conservative fear of technology by refusing to privilege one pole of the dichotomy over another and by leaving their meaning undecidable (Ryan and Kellner, 1990, p.63).

This idea of allowing numerous different possibilities, while at the same time refusing to give one possibility any more credibility over another is very much part of the agenda of postmodernism.

In this context modernism is revealed to have qualities somewhat similar to an established doctrine. It operates under its own established canon of works. In this respect it can be seen to be self-contained, and consequently short-sighted. Conservative technophobia, then, is heavily laden with doom and gloom. This is perhaps because modernism only sees



the one possibility - that of itself. If this possibility is broken down it is seen as disastrous because there is nothing left. Liberal technophobia contains more distractions. We can even be made to laugh at our plight. To a certain extent this is what is happening in "Brazil", which is loosely based on a modernist text (Orwell's "Nineteen-Eighty-Four"), but which operates under its own postmodern sensibilities. In "Brazil" things have gone hay-wire, but it is the absurdity of Sam having to bury his head in the freezer to escape the heat when his air conditioning breaks down; or of the elevator by-passing the ground floor of the Ministry of Information Retrieval where Sam's dream girl is, that makes us laugh.

Technology in "Brazil" is often shown to be out of control. The film also portrays a society which has relinquished its potential to control its own destiny. "Brazil" fears a society that can't deal with change, and so resigns itself to what it knows. What it knows is represented as its own stagnant system of bureaucracy. However its bureaucratic system is shown as completely removed from the actuality of the individual lives within the society. Gilliam sets up this contradiction in many instances throughout the film. One instance that proves central to the chain of events in the film is the arrest of a "Mr. Buttle" in a case of mistaken identity. It was a "Mr. Tuttle" that should have been arrested, but a bureaucratic error was made in which the "T" was substituted by a "B". This is a mistake that is made out of the unreliability of technology that Gilliam emphasises in "Brazil". The error is made in a scene where a white-coated technician in his office sets about killing a beetle that is irritating him, with a rolled up newspaper. The beetle's carcass gets squashed to the ceiling, but then peels off and falls into a typewriting machine below that is automatically typing the name "Tuttle" on a series of forms. As the machine struggles to digest the carcass it types "Buttle" on one of the forms. This form finds its way into the bureaucratic system. Its authority is never called into question. If liberal technophobia fears technology for its potential to obstruct change, Gilliam plays this fear against the increasingly inappropriate power over society yielded by the beaurocracy in "Brazil".





This said, although "Brazil" fears a society that resists to move with the times, it also presents us with its own reluctance to leave behind many of the binarisms that are broken by "Blade Runner". In particular it seems to maintain the human -technology binarism. In this way "Brazil" still retains common ground with "Metropolis". This aspect of "Brazil" can ultimately be attributed to a nostalgia for humanism that runs throughout the cinema of Terry Gilliam. In "Brazil" we are made to sympathise with the humanity of Sam. Although we may laugh at his often ludicrous predicament, we are ultimately rooting for him to come out on top.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Terry Gilliam's Critical Dystopias**

Science fiction films are often set in, or deal with, some future time. This type of science fiction is engaged in speculating about the future of humanity. Although these pictures of the future take place in future times, or are even displaced in both time and place, allowing their events to unfold in a future time in a far off galaxy; these can be considered to be merely the displaced realms in which our most immediate cultural concerns are ultimately what are primarily at stake. In recent science fiction films these present cultural concerns occur often in a most distilled manner in the form of very bleak and pessimistic views of the future. Terry Gilliam's "Brazil" again springs readily to mind, as does his most recent film "Twelve Monkeys". Before I look at these films I want to take brief look at the driving forces behind a new kind of pessimism about the future that has taken hold of the film-makers today.

Pictures of dystopian futures are not new to our age. What is new is that more and more of the dystopian futures of recent times seem to take shape in a hybrid, schizophrenic, even sublime manner. James Combs puts it as follows-

'Dystopian' is a term invented in the wake of those modern writers, most notably Orwell and Huxley, who began to develop alternative visions of the political future but which shared the creation of an awful world. They saw forces in the course of modernity which if unchecked could lead to the exercise of awesome and demonic power. The experience of totalitarianism gave great impetus to this fearful vision, but the dystopian writers did not think us in the West immune either. Indeed, one of the legacies of the post-Cold War era is the awareness that the totalitarian potential did not die with it. A Romanian dissident in exile, after returning to Romania recently, wrote that now 'the two former oppositions of East and West will

join together in a new electronic globe that is not a good thing for human beings' Mark Crispin writes that 'Big Brother is you, watching'. And Jaques Ellul keeps insisting, following Huxley, that the triumph of technique is leading us toward a future of total efficiency and unfreedom. Orwell and Huxley belonged to what we might call the 'control' school of dystopian projection; others, such as some science-fiction writers and futurists, belong to the 'chaos' school, projecting a future beyond the complete, or even sometimes partial, control of anyone. (Combs, 1993, p.27).

What we are looking at here is what Combs calls the "chaos" school of dystopian projection. We have already touched on this idea when I looked at "Brazil" and how it portrayed a technology that didn't seem to be under the control of anyone or anything. Because it is ambiguous who or what exactly is controlling technology to our detriment, we cannot locate any fixed point from which we could possibly recover our situation. This is an important departure that contributes to this new "chaos" school of dystopian projection. I'm going to return to "Brazil" again throughout this chapter. "Twelve Monkeys" is also very relevant here and I will consider this film under the next heading, "Schizophrenia and 'Twelve Monkeys' ". The ideas in this latter chapter offshoot from the same concerns that I will explore in this chapter.

One thing that distinguishes these new dystopia projections is that they see these future dystopian scenarios as emanating from within our own cultural climate. I have already looked at this to a certain extent when I considered liberal technophobia and its fear of society becoming bogged down within its own shortsighted systems. By looking at the difference between Orwell's 1949 novel "Nineteen-Eighty-Four" and Gilliam's adaptation of that novel as "Brazil" we can see clearly the demarcation between this new "chaos" school of dystopian projection and the "control" school of dystopian projection.

"Nineteen-Eighty-Four" written in 1949 by George Orwell is a cautionary tale. "The Party" dominate every aspect of society, demanding





unquestionable loyalty from all its citizens. Under a totalitarian regime they even try to control the thoughts of its citizens through the feared "Thought Police". Individuals, like its protagonist, Winston Smith, are crushed under its weight. In Orwell's novel we can see the individual crushed under the weight of a system consciously geared towards keeping the structure of society such that the few at the top of that structure can remain there (at the expense of everybody else). It is presented to us as a very conscious, pre-meditated move on the part of the upper-structure of society-

After the revolutionary period of the fifties and sixties, society regrouped itself, as always, into High, Middle and Low. But the new High group, unlike all its forerunners, did not act upon instinct but knew what was needed to safeguard its position. (Orwell, 1969, p.165).

"Brazil", however, paints quite a different picture. "Brazil" encapsulates the hidden evils festering, possibly unknown to the purveyors of such evils, within our own capitalist/consumer agendas. In "Brazil" it is no accident that the film is set at Christmas time - a celebration which has become the ultimate indulgence for consumers in our western world. In one scene a kid tells a shopping centre Santa Claus that he would like his very own credit card for Christmas. Specific to Britain's political climate of the mid-eighties Tony Williams notes the slippery ground a capitalist society negotiates for itself -

Within its postmodernist parameters 'Brazil' presents a crisis situation illustrating the catastrophic dilemma of contemporary British society. Witnessing the rise of capitalist greed and rapaciousness, assaults on the welfare state, the development of homelessness, increasing attacks on 'permissiveness' and individual liberties, the British people suddenly found how fragile the humanitarian post-war consensus actually was. The characteristic tendency became to retreat into apathy and solipsism. A new Right achieved hegemonic victories. In both style and theme 'Brazil' represents a pessimistic crisis reaction to the mid-eighties victory of Thatcherite hegemony, a postmodern collision between history and individual





escapism.(Williams, 1993, p.205).

What Williams notes as central to such a hegemony is a people who have relinquished social perceptiveness in favour of a retreat into escapism.

This lack of social awareness is captured in "Brazil" in various different scenes. In one scene we see Sam on his way home in a transport cage/elevator. We see the rim of seats filled with tired-looking businessmen. The only person standing is a pregnant woman with crutches and only one leg. None of the men take notice of her, including Sam, who is preoccupied with his own thoughts and is drawing long flowing hair over portraits of Jill on a computer printout, making her like his dream girl. In this society where a narcissistic individual escapism reigns over any kind of social awareness we no longer need the Thought Police of Orwell's narrative. Hugh Aldersey Williams puts it as follows-

Gilliam's world is a dystopia of repressive tolerance, more seductive than '1984', with patterns we can readily see emerging in our own world. In 'Brazil' people disappear, but everyone knows that the security forces are just doing their job picking up terrorists, who else? No one really thinks, so there is no Thought Police. "Brazil" could be now-or never(Williams,1986, p.57).

As opposed to the brainwashed society under a totalitarian regime that is portrayed in Orwell's "Nineteen-Eighty-Four" what we are possibly looking at in "Brazil" is a braindead consumer society. In "Time Bandits" this idea is also explored and finds almost ultimate expression when we see Kevin's parents settling down for an evening in front of the T.V. and "Your Money or Your Life" comes on. "Your Money or You Life" is presented as just another banal quiz show. The show operates in a similar way to the way the \$10,000 question works,with high stakes resting on a single question. The penalty, though, if you get the question wrong, is your life. We see one poor lady who ends up getting strung up and dangles there in the centre of the studio while the show continues. It all passes as harmless late night T.V.



entertainment. Capitalist greed has superseded the value of human life.

One way in which this "chaos" school of dystopian projection can be examined in terms of its origin is through aligning it with the slippage from modernity to postmodernity. I have already noted the difficulty with interpretation of images in the age of mechanical reproduction, when these images begin to operate on their own level without any direct relationship with the objects they represent. A society dominated by this type of representation can be considered a society of the spectacle. Gilliam's cinema can be seen to offer a critique of such a society.

In the society of the spectacle it is theorised that people's realities and knowledge of the world stem from the media and the movies as opposed to real experience. In Scott Bukatman's essay "Who Programs You? The Science Fiction of the Spectacle" he notes Guy Debord's 1967 manifesto, "Society of the Spectacle" -

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation. (quoted in Bukatman, 1990, p.197).

Where, say Howard Hawks once made movies about life, today Quentin Tarantino makes movies about movies. If we let Gilliam's cinema stand outside this we can see how much of his cinema can be seen as a critique of such a society, and also the dangers inherent in such a society.

Futhermore in the society of the spectacle we, the spectator, can enjoy an illusory position of mastery and control under the banner of democracy. A T.V. has various possibilities in the amount of channels we can at every whim flick over and back from. However the content (or lack of it) always remains the same. Free-press is a fair enough concept, but who owns the press? Again to quote from Bukatman's essay in a way that echoes the redundancy of the Thought Police from Orwell's "Nineteen-Eighty-Four" in







today's society of spectacle -

The addition of the video-narcotic means that the control apparatus is already emplaced and invisibly operating to secure the false consciousness of cohesion, democratic order and freedom. Works such as "Fahrenheit 451" or Orwell's "Nineteen-Eighty-Four" ignore the postulate of Marcuse's democratic domination: an effective ideological state apparatus replaces the need for overt exercise of power. As Burroughs observed 'a functioning police state needs no police.' (Bukatman, 1990, p.199).

This sort of ideological state apparatus is seen as a danger in Gilliam's cinema, and is what makes today's dystopias more sinister than those of the past.

Central to this idea of the society of the spectacle is the surface level of the images that we are presented with -

..the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy (Bukatman,1990, p.197).

These pseudo-needs are a constant bombardment, suffocating the myth of the individual as a free-agent. Gilliam plays with this idea in "Time Bandits". Kevin's parents are seen to be subscribing to anything and everything that will perpetuate the capitalist system they are caught up in. We have already seen how they can even turn a blind eye to murder so long as it is in the name of consumerist ideology in "Your Money or Your Life".

Their apparent free-individual choices can be seen as the same illusory position of mastery and control that I mentioned already. At the start of the film we see a television advertisement for "Moderna Designs" offering a product that can make a meal from packet to plate in 15 and a 1/2 seconds. Kevin's Mom interjects that Marceys have one that can do it in 8 seconds and adds, "Block of ice to beef bourguignon in eight seconds - lucky things" with obvious sincerity. Ignoring his sons proclamation



concerning Greek warriors, Kevin's Dad reflects "Well - at least we've got a two-speed hedge-cutter". The choices that Kevin's parents make under the pretence of the free-individual are seen as limited to the range of various domestic appliances on the market. Like flicking through the channels on a T.V., the content always remains the same.

I want to take a look at "Twelve Monkeys" now in relation to Gilliam's critique of today's society of the spectacle. "Twelve Monkeys" contains similar critiques of modern society as "Brazil" and "Time Bandits", and I will accordingly in the following discussion make note of such critiques. However, the idea of schizophrenia and how it applies to a postmodern society is an issue I'm going to introduce here too. This schizophrenia is of course intertwined with the society of the spectacle and the fetishised commodity.





## Chapter 3

### Schizophrenia and "Twelve Monkeys"

I have noted in the introduction to this thesis a difficulty with interpretation of texts in our postmodern world. This difficulty can be understood as a breakdown of linguistic order. The idea of the breakdown of linguistic order is central to the understanding of schizophrenia in postmodernism. Giuliana Bruno alludes to Lacan -

..temporality, past present, future, memory are of a linguistic order: that is to say, the experience of temporality and its representation are an effect of language. It is the very structure of language that allows us to know temporality as we do and to represent it as a linear development from past to present to future.(Bruno, 1990, p.189).

Bruno notes how Lacan sees schizophrenia as a result from a failure to enter the symbolic order and hence it is -

..thus essentially a breakdown of language, which contributes to a breakdown of temporal order. The schizophrenic condition is characterised by the inability to experience the persistence of the 'I' over time. There is neither past nor future at the two poles of that which thus becomes a perpetual present (p.189).

In her essay Bruno also looks at "Blade Runner" as we have seen Ryan and Kellner do before. What concerns Bruno is how the schizophrenic condition can be seen as relevant to the replicants in this film. The replicants in "Blade Runner" have no past and simulated photographs are substituted for memory. Any real personal past lies out of reach simply because it isn't there. The replicants are denied identity in that they can't explain where they came from; they are always searching for knowledge of their origins. As Bruno notes -"Their assurance of a future relies on the





possibility of acquiring a past" (p.190). Since the replicants can't perceive their present as part of a larger set of experiences, the present for them is experienced with a complete intensity. A state of schizophrenia is imaginable in a postmodern world or society of spectacle where people experience their lives through the media, building up "past" experience in a mechanism which can only offer us pseudo needs and fetishised commodities. This kind of existence can be seen at work in Gilliam's "Twelve Monkeys".

"Twelve Monkeys" is set in 2035 in a subterranean world. A deadly virus that wiped out most of the earth's population lives and breathes on the earth's surface. A group of scientists send a prisoner, James Cole, back in time to try to trace the origin of the virus. In "Twelve Monkeys" James Cole becomes disorientated as he is shot back and forth across time -

The script, by David Peoples (*Blade runner*, *Unforgiven*) and his wife Janet, plays with the point of view of Cole, who perceives past, present and future as a jumble of faces, voices and places that overlap, or exist in more than one context. (Morgan, 1996, p18).

When he actually lands in 1990 he is diagnosed as schizophrenic by Dr. Kathryn Raily and is shut up in a mental institution.

Gilliam's film allows us to share in the kind of disorientation that Cole experiences. Cole experiences a very vivid future set in 2035 where he has been selected by a group of scientists for a mission to try to trace the source of a virus that wiped out almost the entire population of the planet in 1996. He also experiences the world of contemporary Baltimore in 1990 and Philadelphia in 1996. Gilliam's visuals, however, work constantly in blurring both future and present worlds together. Both the worlds of the mental institution and the future have white-coated scientists. On an attempted escape from the institution Cole stumbles into a CAT-scan ward, the actual CAT-scan machine resembling the kind of apparatus used to send Cole through time. Towards the end of the film we see the bear that Cole had encountered in a desolate Philadelphia of the surface world of the future,



only this time he encounters the bear on a large billboard in contemporary Philadelphia. There are countless other occasions where the visuals of the different worlds overlap.

On top of all this, of course, is Cole's dream which keeps replaying in his head. In the dream he sees a man getting shot and an anguished woman with blonde hair running from the crowd towards the man as he lies bleeding on the ground. The dream is like a very vivid memory. The style it is filmed in is in a very intense, almost blinding white light. However, despite its intensity, its significance seems to elude Cole throughout the film.

Cole, like the replicants in "Blade Runner", is unable to experience the persistence of the "I" over time. He has no identity. The only identities offered to him are imposed ones. In 2035 he's a convict. He seems to be understood to have had a history of violence. This is a history that is referred to only. We are not presented with it in the film. Both in 1990 and 1996 he is also understood as violent. It seems everywhere he goes he inadvertently is tagged as having been known to be violent (again this seems to blur the different times and places together). When he arrives in Baltimore in 1990 he is dressed in up in a nightgown and told that he is mentally disturbed. In the world of 1996 it is interesting to note the role the media plays in constructing an identity for him. In one scene Cole and Raily are in the car and they are debating Cole's sanity - Raily maintaining that Cole is mentally ill. The car radio announces that Raily has been kidnapped by Cole, an "escaped mental patient", and we see Raily nodding towards Cole as if to say "I told you so." Gilliam here is playing with the seeming authority that the media has on constructing our realities. Do we, in today's society of spectacle, construct our realities through the media as opposed to direct lived experience?

Cole's identity is so cloudy that we encounter a strained whispering voice of a man who constantly addresses Cole as "Bob" (Cole's first name is James). We eventually meet this man as a tramp on the street. He talks







to Cole in the company of Raily. Later on in the film we have a scene in which Raily bumps into this man again. She remembers him - he knows James. She implores him for help. However, the man just responds, "Who's James?", and walks away.

Despite this, throughout the film Cole is endeavouring to establish his own identity.

But his disjointed perspective only heightens his yearning for freedom, as he searches for a time in which he can exist not as prisoner or mental patient, but on his own terms (Morgan, 1996, p.18).

The only link he seems to have to that freedom is through his recurring dream sequence. In the end it is a link with the past, but one that ultimately turned out to be an unattainable link. The dream was a memory of Cole's from his childhood. What the dream played turned out to be his witnessing, as a boy, his own death as he is shot in the airport by a security guard while pursuing the man who in the end was responsible for the release of the apocalyptic virus.

This narrative also exposes Gilliam's nostalgia for humanism. Cole is searching for an identity that can only exist in the modernist concept of the unique individual. In "Twelve Monkeys" Gilliam, although he expresses this nostalgia, in the end of the film he also reveals that it is inaccessible in today's world.



## Chapter 4

### Gilliam's Post-Industrial Cities

In Peter Wollen's article "Delirious Projections", he looks at films like "Who Framed Roger Rabbit", "Blade Runner" and "Batman Returns", noting how they depict a world without an established hierarchy or truth. He then goes on to examine the environments in which these films are set, noting their abandonment of any stylistic 'realism' and describing the image of the postmodern city as "a chaos-hybrid, retro-fitted and violent" (Wollen, 1992. p.26).

We have already touched on this idea of the "retro-fitted" postmodern city when we were looking at the mish-mashed type of technology we found in "Brazil", often adapting old styles or technologies in the context of new ones. The computers in "Brazil" have keyboards resembling a 1930's typewriter and are fitted with magnifying glasses to make their screens legible. Peter Wollen sees this mish-mash as the foundations of the postmodern city. He describes how Sharon Zukin points out in her book "Loft Living" that the de-industrialisation of New York was accompanied by a rediscovery of the joys of freight elevators and industrial junk. He concludes that it is -"precisely this new junk-store, recycling, on-the-edge aesthetic which finally infiltrated Hollywood and helped to create the imagery of the postmodern city." (p.26).

Gilliam's "The Fisher King" (1991) is worth a mention in terms of the retro-fitted postmodern city. In "The Fisher King" Jack Lucas (Jeff Bridges) is a quick-witted New York D.J. with his own talk show. However, as a consequence of a phone-in with an ultimately unstable man called Edwin, this man storms into a restaurant and opens fire at random into the crowd. Jack has a chance meeting with a man going by the name of Parry (Robin Williams) whose wife had been shot in front of him in that very restaurant.





Due to the trauma of the incident Parry has since taken on a different personality and believes himself to be on a quest for the Holy Grail, which he believes is in a book case in the mansion of a millionaire on Fifth Avenue. He also suffers from visions of a menacing Red Knight on horseback from which fire can be seen issuing forth. After being beaten up one night by some kids Parry ends up in a coma in hospital. When Jack breaks into the mansion and brings the cup that Parry sees as the Holy Grail back to Parry's bedside, Parry wakes from his coma and is free from the trauma of his wife's murder and of the fearful visions of the Red Knight.

In the basement of the hotel where Parry lives we are shown a jumbled-together world . The basement is swamped with festering junk that seems to have built up with time. Also we get a similar picture in the scenes beside the Manhattan Bridge where Jack was once about to commit suicide. The surroundings are just one huge pile of festering post-industrial waste. Giuliana Bruno sees this waste as part of the baggage of late capitalism. She talks about the post-industrial wasteland of the film "Blade Runner" as follows -

The post-industrial decay is an effect of the acceleration of the internal time of process proper to post-industrialism. The system works only if waste is produced. The continuous expulsion of waste is an indexical sign of the well-functioning apparatus: waste represents its production, movement, and development at increasing speed. Post-industrialism recycles; therefore it needs its waste. A postmodern position exposes such a logic, producing an aesthetic of recycling (Bruno, 1990, p.185).

We can see the depictions of waste in "The Fisher king" as a commentary on this post-industrial regime.

It is this kind of aesthetic that prevails in "Brazil" and "Twelve Monkeys" also. In the future world of "Twelve Monkeys" we see technology similar to that of "Brazil". It is a collection of different technologies



randomly juxtaposed. There is a way in which the narrative of "Twelve Monkeys" can give an excuse for the type of technology we are presented with in that the underground world of the future can be seen as what was left of society after the apocalypse, where the quickest way for the inhabitants to rebuild any kind of technology would be to plunder and adapt what they could get their hands on. Gilliam points this out himself -

But if the world stopped today, and you can only take things down below now, what could you find down there? These people put all this stuff together, and then had to kind of make up things, jerry-rig machines together, so they're hydraulic and steam-driven (quoted in Morgan, 1996, p.20).

However I don't think it was ever a question of producing this kind of paraphernalia to serve the plot. It's a question of which came first - the chicken or the egg? Gilliam also hints at this - "In terms of lasers and all that stuff, we could have gone that way, but it's not as fun." (p.20). This reminds me of Melies when he said,

As for the scenario, the 'fable or 'tale', I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constricted in this manner has no importance, since I use it merely as a pretext for the 'stage effects', the 'tricks', or for a nicely arranged tableau.(quoted in Cuning, 1990, p.57).

Melies was one of the earliest film-makers, making films at the turn of the century, and it is interesting to note that today, film-makers seem to be returning to his philosophy of film-making. I will look at this whole area in the final chapter of this thesis. This philosophy reveals Gilliam's cinema as symptomatic of the very postmodern climate which I have thus far been considering it to be commenting on.

So far I have been looking at Gilliam's cinema in terms of how it critiques our postmodern society. To do this I have had to let his films stand apart from this cultural moment. However, we must also consider them within their postmodern context. These are films that are products of the





very culture that we have seen them critique. This is what my main focus will be in the final chapter of this thesis, "Terry Gilliam's Cinema of Attractions". Before I open this final chapter I just want to take a brief look at the idea of pastiche in postmodernism.

Pastiche is part of what Frederick Jameson, in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", along with the kind of schizophrenia we've already looked at, can be considered as relevant to postmodernism. Jameson defines pastiche as opposed to parody. For parody there remains somewhere "the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked" (Jameson, 1988, p.16). However, the postmodern condition has dissolved any linguistic norm. There is no hierarchy of truth. Pastiche is then blank parody.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior native, without satirical impulse, without laughter, without that latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (p.16).

The recycling aesthetic I have noted can be understood as pastiche. In "The Fisher King" the various bits of junk we are presented with have lost any of their original meaning. Whatever meaning they once had is evaporated and they have become lost within the anonymous backdrop of the film - a backdrop that offers no way of determining any hierarchical order between its components.

Also the Red Knight imagery can be considered pastiche as opposed to parody. The galloping knight on his horse seems apt in conveying the out of control, trundling and confused mind of Parry. Even the idea of the fire-breathing dragon is juxtaposed onto the apparition as flames leap from the knight. It's not a parody on knights and dragons, though it does perhaps



recall fairy tales that we might be familiar with.

So although "The Fisher King" can be seen as commenting on the recycling apparatus of post-industrialism, through pastiche it operates the same system. This considered, it is obvious that ,although throughout this thesis I have been organising an interpretation of Gilliam's cinema as commenting on postmodern culture, we can see here that it is also part of this very culture. Any kind of interpretation is ambiguous, and definitely exists in a different way to the kind of interpretation associated with modernism. In the next chapter I will further develop this idea of pastiche and its relationship with the collapse of History. Again we will be able to see Gilliam's cinema as consciously commenting on the aesthetic of pastiche, while at the same time operating under that same aesthetic.





## Chapter 5

### Postmodernism and the Collapse of History

"The Adventures of Baron Munchausen" (1988) is the story of Baron Munchausen who is known for telling tall tales. It is set in the 18th century in a town under siege by the Turks. A local theatre company is putting on a play about the legendary Munchausen who claimed many amazing adventures. An elderly man comes through the audience onto the stage proclaiming to be the real Munchausen. He proceeds to give the audience his story, ultimately narrating a fantastical story in which he saves the city from the Turks. At the end of the film we return to the theatre whereupon concluding his narration he leads the townsfolk out of the city gates and the army of besieging Turks are gone just like in Munchausen's story. It is left unclear as to how that present situation could have come about. It couldn't possibly have been merely through a story - could it? The concept of History is challenged. Within the contexts of the film we can see a sensibility at work that allows for alternate histories of the present rather than one indisputable History. As we have seen already, today there is a desire for a link with the past, but one that is at the same time irreconcilable to that past. The present could be explained by a series of events which produced it. The future could be imagined by applying the same logic. Pastiche might be considered in this context a lament for a time when things seemed to make sense through the cause and effect principle.

In Gilliam's films he can be seen to comment on pastiche as it operates within a collapsed History in narratives in which we are allowed to see things through the eyes of the various protagonists. The characters in Gilliam's films are constantly presented with a world in which fantasy is constantly blurred with reality. The scenarios can be seen to operate within a limited point of reference of his protagonists. In "Time Bandits" the



adventures may have been just a dream. The whole adventure takes place within the pre-existing width of knowledge of Kevin's interest in ancient histories such as Greece; and as the plot transpires these are exactly the context in which his adventures exist, with Kevin ultimately ending up in the court of Agememnon in ancient Greece. The whole thing could have merely existed in his head. In "Brazil" reality and fantasy become interchangeable. Tony Williams notes that Sam's dreams "finally move towards a position in which 'reality' and illusion become inseparable. Ultimately, the viewer may mistake the final dream sequence (where Tuttle rescues Sam from a torture chamber) for the mainstream narrative." (Williams, 1993, p.210). The same thing is true of Gilliam's "Adventures of Baron Munchausen". At the end of this film we are presented with numerous possibilities. Munchausen could either be dead, or he could be alive; depending on how we interpret the narrative, or should I say narratives. Again it is revealing if we look at it in terms of the pre-existing width of knowledge from the point of view of the narrative being the fantasy of the young girl in "Munchausen". In "Munchausen" we encounter a figure that represents "Death", and who is constantly seen in pursuit of the Baron. Here the fantastical apparition of "Death" also already exists in the external reality of the girl in the form of the statue in the square of the town. "The Fisher King" shows us a man living in contemporary New York whose reality consists of medieval knights and the Holy Grail. This imagery can again be traced back to Parry's own limited point of reference, when he is revealed to have formally been a professor of Medieval History. Towards the end of the film we encounter the image of the Red Knight on a stained glass window in the mansion on Fifth Avenue - again this would have been part of Parry's external reality. "Twelve Monkeys" again takes up on this theme, taking as a point of departure the concerns thrown up by Chris Markers 1969 "La Jetee" which theorised, among other things, that time travel is all in the mind. In the chapter about schizophrenia I have already observed how objects from Cole's various worlds overlap with no way of establishing their respective origins.





James Combs hinges the irreconcilability of the present with the past on the eclipse of the myth of progress -

If we do not believe in a progressive narrative, then popular art such as movies seeks alternative narratives that might resonate with audiences, certainly develops confused stories that attempt to incorporate irreconcilable motifs, or becomes subversive to the narrative genres to which it is heir through parody. In such an historical moment, we are no longer 'storied' and the stories we are told exist in a kind of limbo, since they possess no logical progression from past to future, or from social problem to sanctioned solution (Combs, 1993, p.21).

History, as it was once known, is inaccessible. Pastiche is an understandable reaction to this. However as Combs also notes this process -"sanctifies 'past motifs' as enlarged into positive mythology while the present is diminished into negative mythology" (Combs, 1993, p.21).

Frederick Jameson suggests one possible way out -

If there is any realism left here, it is a 'realism' which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement and realising that, for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach (Jameson, 1988, p.20).

Here Jameson talks of an accessible "realism" in the mere acceptance of how it remains for us to relate to the past. This seems constructive in that it presents a "realism" available to postmodern sensibilities. His reference to "stereotypes" is also of interest to me. In the cinema of Terry Gilliam we are often presented with stereotypes - but ones that offer new possibilities. For example we get, in "Munchausen", Vulcan the god of War sitting in a room that looks like an eighteenth-century salon in which he is delicately drinking tea with the Baron out of little demitasse cups; or we get the unlikely Robin Hood in "Time Bandits" who is portrayed as wimpy and ignorant and at the same time leader of an unruly gang of



robbers. In both cases the characters are dressed the part, but disappoint in their actions. We are seeing alternate perspectives to these stereotypes.

Alternate views or histories offer a cause for celebration for peoples previously excluded from History. One question that the "myth of progress" that once was a cause for official optimism asks is - whose progress is at stake? The progress of a patriarchal, white, supremacist regime/society? Robert A. Rosenstone notes -

The heart of postmodernism, all theorists agree, is a struggle against History - with a capital 'H'. A denial of its narratives, findings and truths claims. A view of it as the great enemy, the Oedipal father, the meta-narrative of meta-narratives, the last and greatest of the White Mythologies used to legitimate Western hegemony, a false and outworn discourse that fosters nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, sexism - and all the other evils of contemporary society.(Rosenstone 1996, p.202).

In this way postmodernism can be seen to offer a kind of jouissance. New dialogues can be made possible. For James Donald this word "dialogue" is very important. He notes Laura Mulvey's sentiments in her 1987 article "Changes" where she feels that the argument in "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" was hindered by binarisms. The article -

..hinders the possibility of change and remains caught ultimately within its own dualistic terms. The polarisation only allows an 'either/or'. As the two terms (masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/exhibitionist, active/passive) remain dependant on each other for meaning, their only possible movement as into inversion ... The either/or binary pattern seemed to leave the argument trapped within its own conceptual frame of reference, unable to advance politically into a new terrain or suggest on alternative theory of spectatorship in the cinema (Donald, 1989, p.227).

For Donald fantasy and the fantastic offer alternatives to the kind of dualistic principles that Mulvey now sees as redundant. He sees a sublimity in





popular culture and films. The particular type of sublime he is interested in is one that comes "to indicate a tension between the joy of having a feeling of the totality and the inseparable sorrow of not being able to present an object equal to the idea of that totality." (Donald, 1989, p.245).

This type of sublime is what is feeding into the cinema of today, and the cinema of Terry Gilliam (In this way, although we can consider Gilliam's cinema as commenting on postmodernism, we can also recognise it as operating within postmodernism). There is no longer the possibility for a film to encapsulate a "totality". There is no one way of interpreting the text of a film. Realism is not synonymous with reality. All of this feeds into what I'm going to look at next. This is the idea of Terry Gilliam's "Cinema of Attractions".



## Chapter 6

### Terry Gilliam's Cinema of Attractions

Tom Gunning introduced the term "Cinema of Attractions" into contemporary film discussion in his article "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant Garde". Gunning uses the term to express the exhibitionist confrontation he saw in early cinema as opposed to the diegetic absorption associated with the classic narrative. Terry Gilliam's cinema, and much of today's cinema, can be seen as a return to this kind of exhibitionist confrontation found in early cinema. In terms of Walter Benjamin's description of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction that I looked at in my introduction, this can be considered as a realignment with cinema's proper place within society.

At the beginning of the century cinema was a new art. Gunning notes in reference to Fernand Leger -

The potential of the new art did not lie in 'imitating the movements of nature' or in 'the mistaken path' of its resemblance to theatre. Its unique power was a 'matter of making images seen' (Gunning, 1990, p.56).

In terms of the discussion about science fiction we have in a way turned full circle on ourselves. Part of the attraction of science fiction film is its ability to make things seen - in terms of space flights, depictions of other alternate worlds etc. Gilliam's own constructed environments - particularly the extraordinary physical environment in "Brazil" can be considered as tapping in to the potential of the medium of cinema to make things seen. Melies' 1902 film "Voyage dans la Lune" is often considered the first science fiction film. It had the ability to show a man flying to the moon at a time when such an eventuality was still decades down the line. A lot of what Gilliam's cinema seems to be about is the urge to show, or present to the audience a rich broad range of scenarios. A review of Gilliam's "Time Bandits" stated - "This fantasy is not so much a ripping yarn as an after-lights-out-tall-tale - "and





then...", the time holes alone sanctioning each new escapade." (Pym, 1981, p.163).

In the context of the review the reviewer was disappointed that it wasn't a "ripping yarn" and dismissed the film as a "meaningless flight of fancy". This label is debatable, but the point can be taken that the entire structure of the film is such that it allows Gilliam's visual imagination to run riot, creating anything from life at the Minoan court to an encounter with Napoleon and his advancing armies. "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen" can be seen to be structured in the same way - the Baron's story functioning here as "the sanctioning of each new escapade", in the same way that the time holes operated in "Time Bandits". It does seem that this type of drive to realise images on the screen is part of what is behind Gilliam's cinema. He imagines images and then goes about constructing and realising them on a screen. After making the visually extravagant, large-budget "Munchausen" Gilliam on being asked what he might next pursue, confesses -

I think it would be nice just to do something smaller with a group of people I feel close to. But my real problem is that I am caught with these images that I want to put on film, and they're very complicated, expensive things. (Morgan, 1988, p.242).

In "the Adventures of Baron Munchausen" also, it is interesting to note how Gilliam, a film-maker familiar with the history of cinema (he once presented a BBC series about the history of cinema called "The Last Machine") seems to be positioning himself exactly in line with Melies and early cinema. In two instances the film recalls Melies "Voyage dans la Lune". In the opening of the film we are in a large theatre where a drama about the adventures of the Baron are taking place. The sets on stage are two-dimensional, elaborately painted, and through various levers and cogs are able to be moved about in a predetermined way. The whole "mise-en-scene" with its unashamedly two-dimensional painted appearance is reminiscent of the similar painted collage metos that Melies used in "Voyage dans la Lune". Also, later on in the film the Baron and Sally, the young girl who at the



beginning is the only one who has any time for the Baron, end up visiting the moon. We again encounter two-dimensional painted visages of buildings as they whizz by the two characters in a type of display. The fact that this sequence takes place on the moon is a fitting coincidence since journeying to the moon was what Melies film was about.

In Tom Gunning's article, the positioning of the spectator is seen as important to the cinema of attractions. If we position the cinema of attractions and narrative cinema as opposite extremes in relation to its audience we can come to understand the difference between these kinds of cinema. In the "magic" films of early cinema we are often presented with the magician bowing directly to the audience. In one such film Melies is shown gesturing out towards the audience drawing their attention to a lady who vanishes. Narrative cinema on the other hand, in pursuit of creating a self-enclosed diegetic universe attempts to draw the spectator into that world. To make the spectator conscious that he/she is sitting in a theatre watching a film in an overt way therefore becomes taboo. Having characters looking straight out at the camera, and hence straight out at us, the audience, is done away with. The difference between the two is demonstrated by Gunning -

Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative (Gunning, 1990, p.59).

In this way the whole event of the film stimulates a very self-conscious viewer. This viewer can take spectacles in their own right. This type of viewer then might not be as far removed from modernist sensibilities as might be imagined. This self-conscious viewer can be contrasted with the type of





viewer I looked at earlier - the viewer in a "Society of the Spectacle". The dividing line between these two types of viewer is debatable and can only be determined in the relationship between a viewer and a film - it's not something inherent in either the latter or the former. Going back to Tony Williams's article in relation to 'Brazil', we can get some idea of this. I have already quoted this particular statement in my introduction, but it is worth re-referring to -

Terry Gilliam's 'Brazil' (1985) attempts spectacular mechanisms to disavow its symptomatic origins in the reactionary climate of Thatcher's Britain...Although operating at a manifest level of spectacle and excess it contains an important latent message which can be told. This message intertwines within the anti-realist discourse of British cinema and an ideological re-working of the premises of George Orwell's '1984' to display a pathological example of a contemporary British postmodernist crisis (Williams, 1993, p.206).

Gilliam's cinema does appear to attempt a more direct address to its audience than a classical narrative structure would dictate. It's not intent on creating a self contained diegetic universe. It acknowledges itself as an abstraction. To look at "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen" again we can see this at work in the framing of the whole film as a story being told. Also, visually it calls attention to its own construction - particularly in the scenes I noted earliest which involved painted sets. Going back to Fernand Legers idea that the potential of cinema wasn't necessarily the ability to "imitate the movements of nature" (quoted in Gunning 1990, p.56), we can note in Gilliam's approach in these particular scenes that he isn't afraid of producing something that isn't "real". Talking about these scenes in "Munchausen" Gilliam once said - "I keep thinking that I want to make a film which is like that - everything painted. It's totally artificial and yet totally credible" (quoted in Morgan 1988, p.242) - the word "credible" here being the operative word in this discussion. He goes on to say that

"people are so literal now, so into naturalism or realism. Theatre and cartoons have always been abstract things. Films are abstract but people



think they're realistic or naturalistic; people seem to think that you have to have things that look real to be real" (p.242).

These kind of sentiments again demonstrate how Gilliam's aware of narrative film's reluctance to announce itself for what it is. Gilliam's highlighting of artifice brings him into line with the cinema of attractions in terms of its acknowledgement of itself as a construct, and its acknowledgement of its audience.

Gilliam's films can, in this context, be seen to celebrate this new text/spectator relationship in terms of how it opens up many new possibilities without the need to organise those possibilities into any hierarchy. Whereas the films often seem to point the finger at many aspects of today's culture and the dangers inherent in a capitalist society they do not offer any sanctioned solutions to the social problems they present. However, his cinema does offer a new framework for dialogue. I mentioned before Laura Mulvey's sentiments about a cinema caught within its own binarisms. Gilliam's cinema can be considered a reaction to such a cinema. On these terms Gilliam's cinema can be seen as a departure from dualistic confines in its sensibilities that refuse to work within any hierarchy. This sensibility, though does thwart the idea of a sanctioned solution to a social problem by way of its various distractions. The agenda is more concerned with dialogue rather than being politically specific. Also, through his highlighting of artifice he does not attempt to convey his images as intrinsically bound up with an external reality.





## Conclusion

In this thesis I hope to have touched somewhat on the cinema of Terry Gilliam; particularly in terms of its relevance as part of our culture today, and as part of never-ending dialogues. I have applied the terms "modernism" and "postmodernism" in accordance with their theoretical positioning as useful tools in developing discussion around both form and content in the cinema of Terry Gilliam.

Terry Gilliam has shown himself as somebody in the film-making business who consistently insists on seeing his visions come through from the production stage to the distribution stage intact. This came very evident in his battle with Universal executives to ensure his cut of "Brazil" would be released in the United States. Also, Gilliam struggled to keep his vision of "Baron Munchausen" intact on the big budget independent film with no proper financial backing.

This determination to carry his visions through to the end would make us imagine that Gilliam has a certain agenda for his films, which might otherwise be crushed under the kind of late capitalist cynicism and greed that Gilliam often presents in his films as a disturbing trend. I have documented this agenda in Gilliam's cinema as a critique of today's capitalist, postmodern society. However I have also noted the ambiguous nature of this critique, in that it operates under the same trends associated with the postmodernism that it calls into scrutiny.

Also I have observed a nostalgia for humanism at work in Gilliam's cinema. This nostalgia for humanism is understandable in a postmodern climate where our unique individual identity is sacrificed. In these terms, Gilliam's nostalgia for humanism can be considered as symptomatic of our postmodern climate, thus reducing Gilliam's cinema to symptomatic as opposed to a commentary on postmodern culture.



This said, although we must recognise to ambiguous nature of Gilliam's latent messages, we have to acknowledge that these messages do lie buried somewhere within his texts. In this thesis, I set out to uncover such latent messages. I have to conclude that Gilliam presents us with some disturbing trends at work within our own society, trends that threaten to undermine the value of human life. In today's capitalist society, we are in danger of slipping into a world where our lives are governed by pseudo-needs and fetishised commodities and our identities imposed on us as subservient to these very pseudo-needs.





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