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The Troubles with Terry: What the Career of An 'Independent Auteur' Can Tell us About Creativity in the Filmmaking Industry

Kevin Corbett, PhD
Associate Professor
School of Broadcast and Cinematic Arts
Central Michigan University
corbe1kj@cmich.edu

Statement of Purpose:
This critical essay overviews Gilliam's career, including an analysis of the stylistic and thematic patterns present in his films. In doing so, this essay will attempt to situate Gilliam within the larger film community/industry, addressing the question of whether or not he is in fact an "indie auteur." Finally, this essay will show that lessons learned from Terry's troubles include the problematic role of the creative process within the economically determined environment that is modern filmmaking, even "independent" filmmaking.

A Good Man in a Tight Corner?

Terry Gilliam may be the quintessential independent film auteur. From writing, to casting, to art direction to editing, Gilliam exerts some degree of control over every aspect of his films. But the one element of the filmmaking process that Gilliam has had little control over, across his 30-year career, has been the financing. This is a problem for any director, but it is even more problematic for one who is not only a "visionary" auteur but one whose visions tend toward complexity and expense while the industry tends toward efficiency and risk-aversion. So, considering Gilliam-as-auteur raises an issue with "auteur theory" itself: one (auteur) cannot have it both ways: total creative freedom within a highly constrained economic system. Gilliam has faced this problem since he released his first solo-directed film in 1977: he wants "industrial" (i.e. studio–scale) funds in order to realize his "independent" vision as a filmmaker. Some "indie" directors need only a few million dollars to make their films, which may involve few characters and simple locations. But Gilliam's films are typically elaborate by design, requiring tens of millions of dollars in order to accommodate ensemble casts working in extraordinary sets and locations. But Gilliam doesn't seem to see this as a 'problem,' at least not on his part. For him, any problems related to his films have more to do with the studio executives he battles in order to make and distribute his films, or the critics and audiences that just don't "get" his work.

With the 2007 release of Gilliam's film Tideland on DVD, the film industry and film audiences were greeted with a Terry Gilliam that was something familiar and something new. Gilliam, always defiant of mainstream industry (and audience) norms and expectations, appears more defiant than ever in a fairly creepy 'introduction' to the film. Gilliam, filmed in black and white and looking directly into the camera, says that "some of you will hate this film. . .some of you will love it." This is a Gilliam so fed up with having many of his films (but this film in particular) rejected by critics and audiences alike that he is pleading with us to "give it" (and him) "a chance." Asking audiences to work a little harder and give him the benefit of the doubt (while also rejecting those that don't as people who "just don't get it") goes back a long way for Gilliam. But what's interesting is that this apparent contradiction is intrinsically linked to his visual style.

Grappling with the "problem" that is Terry Gilliam and his films is not unlike watching the animations he has used throughout his career, including his work with the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* TV show and his solo directorial efforts: it is frustratingly surreal in its multi-layered 2-dimensionality, intriguingly thought-provoking, bothersome and often enjoyable. Such contradictions mark both Gilliam's career and his personality. For example, most Americans likely do not even know his name, yet his films have featured many of Hollywood's biggest stars: Robert DeNiro, Jeff Bridges, Brad Pitt, Robin Williams, Bruce Willis, Johnny Depp, Heath Ledger and Matt Damon. For those who do know him and his films, those films can just as frequently inspire awe and admiration of their visual style and scathing social criticism as they can frustrate thanks to a reliance on sketch-like (even slapstick) comedy and repetitive imagery. Furthermore, he typically imbues his films with a critical sociological and philosophical depth notably lacking from most mainstream filmmaking, yet he more than occasionally employs scatological humor, including sight gags and sound effects (especially of the flatulence kind).

Stealing Bears, Magazines and Monty Python

Beginning with Jabberwocky (1977), Gilliam has employed a consistent set of images and a thematic pattern throughout his career, including his two most recent releases: The Brothers Grimm and Tideland (both released in 2005). In fact, for Gilliam, style and theme are largely indistinguishable, and all of his films reveal a postmodern attraction to and distaste for cultural icons. Across many interviews, several books and a handful of documentaries, Gilliam shows disdain for what he considers superficial images, icons and symbols of American – or, at least, Western/Industrialized -- culture. Yet, he appears to have no problem using these images for his own

purposes, including setting them up for ridicule, or simply using them because he likes "the look." That disdain for and/or re-appropriation of such images may go back as far as a childhood "drawing contest," as described by Gilliam in McCabe's Dark Knights and Holy Fools. The contest followed a school field trip to the zoo:

> The students were supposed to draw an animal from memory when they returned. 'I cheated,' relates Gilliam. 'I had a book in my lap with a picture of a bear, so I drew this really good picture of a bear and I got a box of crayons as my reward. So my art career began by cheating, which I think I've done ever since.' (McCabe, 12).

But there is more to whatever philosophy might underlie Gilliam's style than simple theft. In fact, an epiphany he experienced in the 1960s about the essence of Disneyland seems to have not only determined his postmodern bent on the nature of art and culture; it influenced his decision to relocate to Europe. Gilliam's simultaneous appreciation of and disdain for Disneyland is an interesting one, considering that Walt Disney, like Gilliam after him, began his career as a cartoonist and ended up working in both TV and film. But Gilliam seems to have recognized the superficial nature of the Disney "universe" amidst the countercultural environment of the 1960s. "It [Disneyland] used to fascinate me because it was so beautiful" Gilliam says in Christie's Gilliam on Gilliam. He goes on to explain that, while he frequented the "Magic Kingdom" in his early years, "Later I became disillusioned when they began taking advertising and sponsorship." He adds that "I felt there were very precise rules about what could and couldn't be done, and when it became more commercial in the later 1960s I was deeply disillusioned." (Christie, 26-27) This disillusionment with American culture and consumerism was compounded when Gilliam later witnessed a riot where protestors were attacked by police, and these two occurrences precipitated Gilliam's relocation to England in 1967. (McCabe, 20-22; Christie, 29-31.) (This 'disillusioned' relationship with the Disney empire would prove ironic 40 years later, when Gilliam would attempt to make his most commercially viable film – The Brothers Grimm – with a wholly 'Disneyfied' Miramax.)

Thanks to connections he made as a magazine illustrator, shortly after moving to England, Gilliam found work doing animation for British television shows, most notably the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* program. His background in print illustration would influence his TV animation career in many ways, influences that would overlap his move into film. In some cases, Gilliam is aware of this influence: on the commentary track for Brazil he explains that, as an animator "You're looking at the world through a caricaturist's eyes, you distort, you make ordinary things appear grotesque." At the very least, this caricaturist's eye translates into a heavy use of wide angle lenses in his films, which tend to distort spatial relationships, even facial features (while making sure the audience sees the often lavish and intricately designed sets). But, grotesque distortion aside, it was Gilliam's use of the "cut-out" technique from his days as an illustrator and animator that would prove to be the single most influential trait carried over into his film work.

Using "cut-outs" involves literally cutting preexisting images out of photos and illustrations from newspapers, books and magazines, sometimes in multiple pieces so that they may be "animated" (however crudely) for TV and film. For the *Monty Python* TV show and films, Gilliam would assemble these cut-outs into animations that would also include his own drawings to create a new image that, if not entirely original, was certainly unique. Call it 'cheating' or simulacra, but Gilliam has employed the cut-out technique to a lesser or greater extent in nearly every one of his films. He may not be taking scissors to magazine pages anymore, but he still cobbles together his visual style from an apparently large stockpile of images he has amassed over his lifetime. The result is a style (and a narrative approach) that is at once familiar and weird, images and stories which seem to carry two or more meanings, at least for those who care to spend the effort to read them. Obviously, this process can be problematic for audiences who are not interested in "working" to "read" a film. But it can also cause problems for those who are interested, even for fans of Gilliam's that faithfully follow his career. Then, when Gilliam claims to be unaware of why he uses and even repeats certain images, reading his films becomes even more problematic, a fact not lost on Gilliam himself. Two examples from his commentary for Brazil illustrate this point. Speaking about the giant samurai warrior in Sam's dream sequences, Gilliam explains that

> I've always wanted to, being a Kurasawa fan, wanted to have a samurai warrior in one of my films. So we made this one out of computer bits and pieces. And maybe, you know. . .it's symbolic of one's fear of Japanese technology, that it's this monster that is now dominating. . .I'm not sure about it I think I just wanted to have a samurai warrior. But, we end up with really bizarre rationale for these things because, at the moment when he – lifts off the mask, and we see it's Sam himself, you can actually argue that the samurai means 'Sam – you are I.' Pathetic stuff.

Another image from Sam's dream sequences, one where Jill is trapped in a hanging cage, inspires the same sort of self-debate on Gilliam's part: "I always had this image of a woman in a cage, trapped, being pulled by both babies and death. Maybe it signified marriage to me in a strange way." But he warns –- himself, as well as would-be readers of his films –

> This is why I'm not certain whether these are analyzable on a Freudian level or not. Because I don't recognize most of these images as meaning something. Now that means, maybe I've repressed these things so much, they're so deep, but on the other hand, I think a lot of them are just – cute ideas that I've had, that I think are ironic, or funny.

Viewers of Gilliam's films, casual and dedicated alike, are left with the task of deciphering such elaborate images as 1) simply design-for-design's sake, or 2) functional, or 3) anti-functional, or, from a surrealistic and/or postmodern perspective, 4) all of the above. This raises the question as to whether or not Gilliam specifically uses imagery/themes not only to entertain or challenge viewers, but to provoke them. Or, maybe he "puts in" what he wants simply because he wants to, because he thinks it's "cute"? Unfortunately this question, like so many that surround Gilliam's motivations, is not easily answered. Even Gilliam himself seems unable to address it, admitting that many of his image/themes are not necessarily conscious decisions on his part:

> It's only afterwards that I read reviews and people start writing about it that I realize what I've done and, uh, I want to keep doing that, I don't want to be too self-aware. . .

In a film marketplace that relies on customer satisfaction (and not just with one viewing/purchase but multiple/ancillary purchases) challenging viewers in this way is perhaps not the most cost-efficient. As a result Gilliam has found it more and more difficult to find funding for his films. But he continues to work, making films that continue to challenge and provoke audiences – and frustrate critics and distribution companies alike.

Winking at Consumers, Bureaucrats, and other Assholes

Perhaps because of his background in 60s-counter-cultural cartooning, and/or because so much of his work is so visually dazzling, we can forgive Gilliam for not knowing why he 'puts in' some of the images that he uses, even repeatedly. But the question of theme is not be so easily digested, for three reasons: the notion of 'repeated themes' is another factor in determining a filmmaker's auteur status; much of Gilliam's imagery overlaps with his thematic interests; those image/themes are apparent across his oeuvre, even in the films he himself did not write.

One theme that Gilliam frequently employs that also overlaps with his "image stockpile" is a critique of technology. Nearly all of his films feature outrageous gadgets and gizmos (many designed, even constructed, by Gilliam himself) that don't quite work right. This theme is most obvious in Brazil, where Sam's Rube-Goldberg-like "breakfast" machine sets the stage (as well as a darkly-comic tone) for many failed technologies to come. Technology failures also appear in The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, 12 Monkeys and The Brothers Grimm. Frequently Gilliam ties this theme to another: his disdain for people who worship these gadgets and gizmos and rely on them despite their obvious superficiality and inevitable vulnerability. In fact, this is Gilliam's favorite target for critique -- what he sees as a vainglorious consumerism: people buying "stuff" simply for want as opposed to need, stuff that is ultimately technologically worthless and symbolically meaningless. This critique is pointedly clear in Time Bandits, where Kevin's parents are so fixated on acquiring the latest kitchen gadgets they all but ignore him. The climax of the film features the Evil Genius offering the game-show-prize-kitchen as "the most fabulous object in the world." The film closes with Kevin's parents literally exploding when they open the "cooker" holding a smoldering piece of the Evil Genius. Gilliam's critique of consumerism is just as obvious in Brazil where, among other images, he includes a "Consumers for Christ" banner.

If there is one Gilliam theme that doesn't have a readily apparent image analogue, it is his distaste for rationality or "reason," a mode of thinking that is, for Gilliam, yet another dubious technology. This theme is most clear in Munchausen, which begins with the title card "Late 18th Century, the Age of Reason, Wednesday" followed by the blast from an ornate cannon. (Brazil has a similar blasting-away-at-so-called-conventional-wisdom opening). Later, Jonathan Pryce's character, an accountant who has even warfare meticulously organized and departmentalized, tries to negotiate one more in a series of bartered "surrenders." In doing so he says "Let us concentrate on reaching a rational, sensible, and civilized agreement, which will guarantee a world fit for science, progress –- ." He is cut off when John Neville's Baron exclaims "-- but not for Baron Munchausen!" Many of Gilliam's films present "reason" as an oppressive force, but especially when it is administered by what he sees as a needless and needlessly oppressive bureaucratic apparatus. Gilliam's opposition to bureaucracy, probably his most prevalent theme, is discussed in more detail below. But if oppressive rationality structured by ridiculous bureaucracy is the problem, Gilliam presents fantasy and indulging in the magic of illusions as the resolution.

Throughout his career Gilliam has treated fantasy and illusion in two ways: as things that are easily confused with the oppressive structures of rationalism or as a corrective to those structures. (In keeping with his tendency toward contradiction, some of his films feature both approaches). In Time Bandits, the viewer is left to decide if Kevin's adventures with the titular thieves are real, or simply a young boy's dream. This decision is complicated by the fact that the toys scattered around Kevin's bedroom appear as larger-than-life set pieces in the Fortress of Ultimate Evil, suggesting that the film is indeed a dream. But, at the end of the film Sean Connery, who plays Agamemnon in one sequence and also appears as a fireman, gives Kevin a knowing wink. Then there is, of course, Kevin's exploding parents.

In Brazil fantasy is the only corrective to an ultimately totalitarian bureaucracy, what Gilliam (on the DVD commentary) calls an "organism" that will "do anything to keep itself going." The fact that Sam must resort to fantasy to escape his torture was one of the basic premises of the film. "I wanted to see if I could make a film where a man goes mad and it's a happy ending," Gilliam says. The famous closing shot of Brazil, where Sam is beaming, his wide eyes glazed over, seems to be another wink at us, the viewers. We see that wink again, literally, in Munchausen when the dismembered head of a character smiles and winks at the woman into whose lap it has fallen.

If Gilliam's pet theme of fantasy confusion/corrective turns darker in The Fisher King, it may be because he was not the primary author of the script. Gilliam was not the only one to "go dark" in the film: it was one of the first where Robin Williams took on a role that was not first and foremost comedic in nature. The plot involves Williams' character disassociating from the tragedy of his wife's murder by viewing himself as a knight on a quest. Similarly, 12 Monkeys, another script Gilliam did not write, is more consistently dark than many of his other films. Unlike Fisher King, however, it takes the fantasy/illusion-as-confusion approach: time-traveler Bruce Willis and even his psychiatrist (played by Madeline Stowe) question the reality of their plight. At one point Stowe even happily exclaims "It's alright – we're crazy" when she believes she's discovered something that disproves the possibility of a virus killing off all but 1% of the world's population. In Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Johnny Depp's Hunter S. Thompson sees the world warp – including people in a Las Vegas bar who turn into giant fornicating and fighting lizards -- thanks to drugs. The Brothers Grimm has the duo originally exploiting villagers' fears of the supernatural for financial gain then having to face the problem of these fearful fantasies made real. Tideland is about a little girl who escapes her troubled life through a series of elaborate 'rabbit-hole'-like fantasies, including conversations with dolls' heads on her fingers. In some cases Gilliam is more subtle about his attraction to fantasy and illusion; in others he is fairly transparent in his preference for it as opposed to "reality." No where else is this "fantasy bias" more apparent than in Munchausen. The film says, in no uncertain terms, that imagination and fantasy are so valuable that without them we may die: the Baron gets younger as he slips further into his fantasy world, and nearly dies – even wants to die – when that world seems lost.

If Gilliam sees fantasy as necessary to survival, he sees bureaucracy as its antithesis. Gilliam's films present bureaucracy as the ultimate, and ultimately unreliable, technology, the purpose of which is to eliminate fantasy while enforcing rationalism and promoting consumerism. He especially despises bureaucracy when it is raised to an absurd level of needless complexity. This theme is evident in Jabberwocky, where the town leaders think that having a monster (which occasionally eats people) running around in the woods is good for the economy. It is also apparent in Time Bandits: the creator's heaven is a highly departmentalized organization, each unit responsible for very specific duties (the thievish dwarfs for whom the film is named having escaped from the "trees and shrubs" department). But Brazil, as with so many of Gilliam's pet themes, offers the best illustration of his meditations on the theme of bureaucracy-gone-amuck.

On the commentary track for Brazil Gilliam says "what I hate to see is inefficiency masquerading as order." Here again Gilliam's contradictory nature appears, because he is obviously angry at, if not deadly serious about, the de-humanizing effect of bureaucracy, yet he frequently plays it for laughs. This is clear when he discusses a scene in the torture area of "Information Retrieval." A man in a "mail bag"-like constraint tries to escape, only to end up literally bouncing off the walls as if in a pinball machine (complete with sound effects):

> I love that moment 'cause people laugh, and then they don't laugh. That's what happens a lot in the film. Where we set people up to laugh, and they start to laugh then they realize – 'this isn't funny,' and there's a gasp. . .we raise them to heights of laughter and then say 'uh uh – not funny, this is terrifying.' . .and a lot of people resent that.

So, while inviting the audience to laugh at the silliness and inefficiency of the Ministry's bureaucracy, he also warns that such bureaucracies are de-humanizing, even potentially deadly. Such dual intentions – having the audience both laugh at and fear a monolithic structure -- frequently do not fare well in mainstream "Hollywood" cinema. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Brazil (and many of Gilliam's films) met with "mixed reviews," many critics heralding it as an instant classic and others (as well as a few studio heads) calling it unwatchable or, at least, unmarketable. (The "battle" over the film is intriguingly detailed in Matthews' The Battle of Brazil). The fact is Gilliam has had to battle to get most of his films made and delivered to audiences. From locating financing and mounting often elaborate productions on less-than-adequate budgets, to dealing with natural and even 'interpersonal' disasters during production, to watching his films improperly marketed (if at all), Gilliam's battles are legendary. After 30 years of such warfare, many filmmakers would have abandoned the industry. Others would have radically transformed, or at least modified, their tactics in order to keep working. But, the attempted commercial nature of The Brothers Grimm notwithstanding, Gilliam has persisted, evidenced most recently by his introduction to and commentary track for Tideland. Perhaps he persists out of pure passion for the art and craft of filmmaking and for the desire or need to realize his vision. Maybe he persists because he simply doesn't know how else to exist in the world. But the most compelling explanation for Gilliam's persistence, one that has been suggested in numerous articles about his work (at least since Brazil), is that Gilliam lives simply to "fight the system."

I'm a Lumberjack – is that Okay?: Outside of the 'Outsiders'

Since Brazil, and specifically the battle over the film, it is tempting to read Gilliam's films, but especially those that critique bureaucratic structures, as attacks on the Hollywood system. Gilliam's hatred for such structures (governmental, economic, scientific/ technological) stems from his belief that such structures exist only to reproduce themselves. So, when a Gilliam film is released to predominantly negative (or, at best, "mixed") reviews, and/or that film fails to recoup production and distribution costs, much less make a profit (as many of his have performed), Gilliam consistently blames that failure on the bureaucracy, the "Hollywood system" – not the film itself. In many interviews and DVD commentary tracks, Gilliam bemoans the fact that the distributors for his films do not know how to market them, how to get them to the audiences that will appreciate them. Gilliam blames this ignorance on the conservative and insular nature of Hollywood, which he sees as a sort of "village" of, well, idiots. Idiots in suits, who are afraid to take risks or, again, who "just don't get it."

Gilliam's conception of Hollywood as a 'village' tracks well with other opinions of the place. Several recent industry analyses (Epstein's The Big Picture, Hayes and Bing's Open Wide, and Thomson's The Whole Equation) offer similar perspectives. But, while Gilliam characterizes the Hollywood community as one motivated solely by profit, others have a more balanced view. Epstein, for example, describes how Hollywood studios approach profit-making in the 21st century, an approach he calls "the clearinghouse concept." According to Epstein, the studios' primary goal is to collect fees from the various intellectual properties they control, "and then to allocate those fees among the parties – including themselves – who create, develop, and finance the properties." (Epstein, p.107). But, for Epstein and others, the "Hollywood community" is not motivated by profit alone. Other motivations include striving for prestige and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

> If studio executives made only films that maximize the amount of money in their clearinghouses, they would do so at the serious risk of losing their standing in the community and, with it, their connection to the people, events, honors, and opportunities that brought them to Hollywood in the first place. With such a personal investment in their status and solidarity with the stars, directors, power brokers, and other denizens of Hollywood, they have concerns that go beyond that of the economic logic dictated by the balance sheet of the clearinghouse (p. 131).

Implicit to Epstein's assessment of the Hollywood community are two ideas that help clarify Gilliam's relationship to that community, or lack thereof. First, Epstein suggests that at least some of the people who control the "clearinghouses" have or had, at some point in their lives/careers, motivations other than pure profit. Such motivations might include the desire to 'create art,' a recognition of 'the importance of self-expression,' hopes for 'the betterment of humankind.' In other words, many of the motivations typically associated with the world of independent filmmaking. At the very least, Epstein's assessment reveals that the "controllers" recognize the importance of dealing amicably with "creators" who have those motivations. Therefore, the second implication is that there exists a necessary 'give-and-take' between the controllers and creators, that each side has a tendency to compromise at various points within the relationship in order to achieve, to varying degrees, both of those otherwise dissimilar goals: 'art' *and* 'commerce.' This give-and-take takes many forms. Directors have taken the "one (commercial project) for them, one (personal/artistic project) for me" approach to their careers. Actors seek "indie" film projects (wherein they sometimes work "for scale") in order to achieve and maintain credibility. Entire studio/distribution companies maintain separate in-house entities in order to generate both so-called "prestige pictures" and profit vehicles.

But Gilliam differs from the both the Hollywood "controllers" and the "creators" – even the ones that would otherwise be classified as Hollywood "outsiders" -- in two important ways. First, Gilliam never went to Hollywood with the intention of either making art or money: he went to England. Therefore, he was never faced with having to find, either immediately or gradually, a balance between those motivations. Second, because he has never lived or worked within the Hollywood community, he has never really bought into the give-and-take system. In fact, Gilliam seems to see the "controllers" as only wanting to take and he, therefore, seems unwilling to give. This is, of course, problematic. But another problem emerges when we consider Gilliam's relationship to the Hollywood community, even if that relationship is one of mutual distrust. Just as many film analysts and historians recognize the "mainstream" Hollywood community, they also recognize a community of "Hollywood Outsiders," filmmakers who work within and/or against the "system" in order to, like Gilliam, create films that do not follow the traditional Hollywood paradigm. The problem is that Gilliam lives and works outside this community too.

A number of recent books have examined the "Hollywood Outsiders," independent filmmakers whose work deviates from mainstream Hollywood cinema in terms of style, narrative, character and structure. These books include Levy's Cinema of Outsiders and Horsley's Dogville vs. Hollywood. Other books, like Biskind's Down and Dirty Pictures and Vachon's A Killer Life provide excellent insight into the economic, political and cultural environments represented by the two cinemas. All of the books tend to focus on the same basic list of filmmakers: John Cassavetes, John Sayles, Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, Steven Soderbergh, Kevin Smith, Christine Vachon herself, and Lars Von Trier. Some of the lists include "indie" filmmakers (e.g. Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez) who have either gone more mainstream or whose independence (their "maverick-ness") itself has made them famous. Some of the books overview the careers of lesser-known but critically respected filmmakers like Whit Stillman and Hal Hartley. Some of the books examine the work of female and/or black and/or homosexual filmmakers. Some touch on the importance of the work of documentary filmmakers like Errol Morris and, especially, Michael Moore in terms of the "independent film movement." In addition to these lists, the books share two important similarities. First, they either address, or at least help fire, the debate over the definition of "independent cinema." Second, except for the occasional reference to Brazil (and the battle over it), Gilliam's name is absent. Does this suggest that Gilliam is not an "indie" filmmaker, or just that he is not recognized as an important one?

As King's American Independent Cinema and other recent texts have pointed out, two basic ways to define/debate the definition of "independent cinema" have emerged within recent media history/criticism discourse. The first has to do with funding sources. This standard, at its most simplistic, holds that any film that receives any financial support from a major (or even a so-called "mini-major") studio cannot be considered truly independent. This 'no studio funding' standard is not the best measure by which to judge the "independence" of a film or filmmaker for two reasons. First, virtually all films that get any kind of distribution beyond the very smallest festivals eventually have the imprimatur of a studio or studio-owned distribution company. When such a company buys the rights to distribute a film, even a completed one, it frequently buys the rights to make changes to the film, changes often designed to make the film more "accessible" and "marketable." Biskind, in his Down and Dirty Pictures, provides an excellent critical overview of Miramax, perhaps the prototypical example

of this process. One of the (at least initially) non-studio-owned production and distribution companies credited with helping launch the independent film "movement," Miramax was headed by Harvey Weinstein, who quickly won the nickname "Harvey Scissorhands" thanks to his penchant for re-cutting – sometimes radically – films his company had purchased. Miramax (and in all fairness other so-called "independent" film companies) has battled with the original filmmakers over their films, sometimes resorting to threats to not distribute the film at all if the filmmaker resists the changes. Since virtually every film, "indie" or otherwise, that is seen by any audience at all goes through this process, the 'no studio funding' definition of "independence" is an impractical one.

A second reason that the 'no-studio-funding' standard is problematic is that the measure does not consider content, the film's style/form, narrative and characters, at all. This dimension is especially important to a discussion of Terry Gilliam because, as will be discussed below, Gilliam's content (at least the narratives and their structures) are actually more in keeping with the so-called classical Hollywood style than what many film fans would consider "indie film." Though it has been delineated more thoroughly elsewhere, the simplest way to conceive of the classical/mainstream Hollywood style is that the films tend to follow a linear 3-act structure, through which a proactive hero moves forward, in a clear cause-and-effect fashion, toward the completion of a highly important task or goal. The films tend to have at least a clear resolution, if not a happy ending, at which point the status quo is reaffirmed, characters learn and grow, etc. A formal hallmark of the classical Hollywood style is that the technique is invisible: audiences are not supposed to be aware that they are, in fact, watching a film, a fiction. Instead, the films offer a ready-made reality into which audiences can easily submerge themselves, preferably so satisfactorily that they do so more than once.

Some critics and film fans define "independent film" as everything that Hollywood is not, a cinema that deliberately breaks the Hollywood "formula" described above. Others take issue with defining something that is supposed to be independent as simply the opposite of something else (how can independent cinema "depend" on the classical Hollywood style to define itself?). In either case, both parties recognize that "indie" films are frequently character-driven as opposed to plot-driven like the classical Hollywood style, that the films sometimes employ alternative structures or, at least, do not rely on the cause-and-effect sequencing of events, with scenes often appearing as a series of vignettes in a character's life. Many independent films feature less-than-heroic characters and often have open endings that raise questions rather than provide answers. As opposed to the invisible formal technique of the classical Hollywood style, independent filmmakers sometimes employ formal tactics designed specifically to break the "illusion of reality."

It should be noted that there are many "independent" filmmakers producing films that clearly follow the classical Hollywood style, and occasionally there are "independent-spirited" films that do not follow the style produced and distributed by the "majors." Again, Miramax represents an excellent example here. The company made its mark first by distributing small, even gritty, 'art' pictures (Working Girls and sex, lies and videotape)and later with bigger 'prestige' period pieces (The English Patient and Shakespeare in Love). But the company also included the Dimension Films label, which specialized in "genre" films especially horror (e.g. the Scream and Scary Movie franchises), that were much more mainstream and, ultimately, profitable. Even independent film stalwarts like Steven Soderbergh and Richard Linklater have navigated back and forth between the mainstream and art/indie worlds. The question here is where Gilliam falls on the continuum between true independence and the classical Hollywood style, if he can be situated in that space at all.

Gilliam, like many filmmakers who would otherwise be described as "independent," doesn't quite meet the 'no studio funding' standard. Several of his films have been produced and distributed by major studios, including Brazil, The Fisher King and 12 Monkeys. Others have been produced via the more traditionally independent routes, including The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, and Tideland. Therefore, the 'no studio funding' standard doesn't help situate Gilliam on the independent vs. mainstream Hollywood continuum. A more practical way to situate Gilliam is to look at the content of his films. Given the discussion of Gilliam's stylistic and thematic preferences presented above (especially in terms of his penchant for challenging audiences) it is tempting to put him much closer to the "indie" side of the spectrum than the mainstream/classical Hollywood side. But there's yet another problem: if we can strip Gilliam's films of their unique visual style, and look at them without reading their antiauthoritarian themes, the films actually are not all that different from many mainstream Hollywood films.

With the exception of the time-travelling aspects of films like Munchhausen and 12 Monkeys, Gilliam's films have linear structures. With the exception of perhaps Fear and Loathing and Tideland, the films feature generally proactive characters that embark upon a task, even a quest that, in as many cases as not, is resolved in the end. In fact, many of his films follow the currently en vogue approach to storytelling based on Joseph Campbell's analysis of mythic story structure, subsequently outlined in widely-referenced books on screenwriting like Vogler's The Writer's Journey. And here is where maybe the biggest trouble with Terry arises, at least for fans of Gilliam-as-indie-auteur. Because his films are similar to many mainstream films in terms of narrative type, structure and character, and because, if his films are at all classifiable they fit most reasonably within the fantasy and science fiction genres, Gilliam's work invites comparison to two other not-so-"indie" filmmakers. This comparison is not to the Soderberghs, Jarmuschs, Sayles and Cassavetes of the world, but to two filmmakers roughly the same age as Gilliam, both of whom have done many fantasy/sci-fi films and both of whom – unlike Gilliam – seem happy to be the ultimate Hollywood insiders. Gilliam is actually more like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas than he, and many of his die-hard fans (who may shudder at this comparison), would like to believe.

In several interviews and DVD commentary tracks, Gilliam mentions Spielberg, Lucas, or both. These are typically not favorable mentions. But in nearly all of them one can detect if not an admiration of their work, at least an appreciation – maybe envy – of their success. To be clear, Gilliam does not want to make films like Spielberg's and Lucas': he is especially critical, for example, of the way children are presented in much of Spielberg's early films, and the way Lucas' characters are 2-dimensionally either 'good' or 'bad'. But one

does get the sense that Gilliam fantasizes about a world wherein he could make his movies with both the production budgets and marketing support that Spielberg and Lucas seem to enjoy.

The problem, once again, is that Gilliam is apparently unwilling to play the game, to take part in the Hollywood give-and-take that has made Spielberg and Lucas as successful as they are. Even when Gilliam has attempted to make a "commercially viable" film, it doesn't seem to work. The Brothers Grimm, easily his most obvious attempt at making a commercial product to date, has been described, by Gilliam and others, as a twisted fairytale. Fairytales are familiar terrain for both Lucas and Spielberg. But it is hard to imagine Lucas, or even an early-1980s era Spielberg making a fantasy film wherein a kitten is launched into a torture device that shreds it (a piece of the bloody kitten landing on a character's cheek – the character then eating it) and done for laughs no less. And certainly it is hard to imagine Spielberg, and definitely not Lucas, even considering a project like Tideland, which features a sort of love affair between a mentally disabled adult and a 10 year-old girl (there is strong sexual tension between the otherwise "innocent" characters and at one point they kiss and touch tongues). So how is it that Gilliam, a veteran filmmaker of more than 30 years, could even entertain the fantasy of having access to the resources enjoyed by Lucas and Spielberg while still having the freedom to make these kinds of films? Well, that's the trouble with Terry.

Shutting eyes

Comparing Gilliam to Lucas and Spielberg, especially given the apparent disparity in at least their motivations if not their status in the Hollywood community, may not be fair. So, given that Terry Gilliam is such an outsider, he has persisted in the passionate pursuit of his art for so long, and because that pursuit has been fraught with financial peril, marked by fits and starts and frustrations and rewards (for himself and his audiences alike), it might be better to compare Gilliam to another American-born "independent" filmmaker: Orson Welles. Both men began their careers in other media (Welles in theater and radio, Gilliam in illustration and television) before embarking upon their film careers. Both may be described as ex-patriots, working primarily outside of the US, while occasionally 'coming home' to work when need be (Welles as an actor, Gilliam as a director for TV commercials). Both men made failed attempts to bring the Don Quixote story to the big screen (Gilliam's attempt – The Man Who Killed Don Quixote – is documented in the excellent Lost in La Mancha). Finally, both men apparently had a childhood (even lifelong) interest in magic of the non-movie kind, as in sleight-of-hand "parlor tricks."

In Rosebud, David Thomson's book on Welles, he uses the concept of "shut-eye," the unfortunate tendency of some magicians to believe in the reality of their own tricks, as a running theme in Welles' career and life. In that so much of Terry Gilliam's life and career seems to parallel Welles' one might argue that Gilliam, too, has a tendency toward "shut- eye." Gilliam started his career in illustration and animation, realms wherein, by Gilliam's own admission, one creator controls everything, including time, reality, and physical space. But those things are not so easily manipulated in the world of filmmaking, especially when the creator's vision tends toward the elaborate, his conceptions of time and reality tending toward the fluid and contradictory. Those things are even less controllable in the economically-determined world of modern American media, even the so-called "independent" arena of filmmaking. Maybe, again like Welles, Gilliam is a Don Quixote charging the windmills of big-business film financing and distribution. Maybe his "impossible dream" is that he wants it all. He wants to be able to work independently, while requiring extraordinary financial resources. He wants the ability to rely on a resourceful creative team while insuring that his individual vision is ultimately the one that appears on screen. And he wants the freedom to do all of this within a cultural, economic and political environment that is not only at odds with his beliefs, but subject to occasionally withering criticism within his films. Maybe Gilliam's career-long case of shut-eye has led to the tendency to, when one of his tricks/films fails, he doesn't blame the trick but the rabbit and the hat: the studio gave him a cheap hat and an old rabbit. Sometimes he blames the critics, even the audience for their crippling insistence on rationality and coherence: he feels his tricks move too quickly and/or the audience is simply too slow.

In any case, examining the problematic career of Terry Gilliam reveals several things. The first is that filmmakers working outside of the studio system face extraordinary trials and tribulations, and those troubles are compounded the further away one moves, in terms of style, theme – even physical location – from the Hollywood community. Another thing Gilliam's career suggests is that the "auteur theory" of cinema analysis doesn't fully deal with the extent to which financial constraints, and even cultural/political 'community' environments, restrain or otherwise shape a filmmaker's work. Because of these constraints, the auteur theory cannot explain and certainly cannot predict the long-term success, acceptance or critical appreciation of a filmmaker's oeuvre. Nor does the auteur theory account for the fact that even a fighter like Gilliam will eventually react to the financial restraints placed on (if not critical response to) his filmmaking by at least occasionally trying to make films that are more accessible and marketable (e.g. The Brothers Grimm). In fact, therein lays the failure of much of the film studies cannon: an overreliance on the text as the primary (if not sole) unit of analysis, as opposed to a more holistic analysis of the many forces external to the text that ultimately shape the text. But perhaps the best lesson that Terry's troubles can teach us has to do with the nature of filmmaking as a creative endeavor, especially when that endeavor is considered within the larger context of American culture, politics and economics.

Film as an art form is unique in that it is dependent on collaboration. Even if it was possible for a single individual to create a film entirely on her/his own there is still the matter of getting it to an audience. Unlike the occasional poet or painter who might be satisfied working alone and never sharing their work with anyone, filmmakers almost always require other people to help them create their art, and they just as frequently want other people to see their films. And while the recent phenomena of web-based distribution of at least independent short films is worth noting, we have to assume that Terry Gilliam would not be satisfied, for example, making and distributing

animated movies, by himself, on his home computer. Therefore, Gilliam-as-creator is always going to have to collaborate to some degree. So, economies of scale shall apply: Gilliam tends toward big-scale productions, and his collaborators -- especially the distribution companies – tend to want as many people as possible to see the films. Here is where Gilliam's shut-eye becomes especially problematic.

The film production/distribution/reception process is a complicated one, full of calculations (and/or miscalculations), manipulations and expectations. And yet, Gilliam seems to be very matter-of-fact in terms of the simplicity – even naiveté? --with which he approaches the process. He admits that his films "aren't for everyone," that not everyone will like or even "get" his films, and that he never intends for everyone to like or get them. But he insists that "some people will love" them and that there is always at least some audience somewhere for each of his films. Even if this is true, the films themselves cannot magically find their own audiences. Therefore the distribution channel(s) – and, more precisely, the multi-national corporations that own them – come into play. And here again we have come full-circle in terms of Gilliam's problem: he despises corporate structures and bureaucracy, but he must rely on them to create his art and, especially, deliver it to audiences. This reliance makes him hate the "controllers" even more, so the fight goes on (not unlike the unending war in Munchausen?).

Just as he resists the corporate nature of modern filmmaking (even so-called "indie" filmmaking), Gilliam seems to resist a fairly plain, rational truth: more than virtually any other type of art form, filmmaking does not and cannot exit in a vacuum. In resisting this truth Gilliam, as he does is so many of his films, is ultimately resisting (maybe even rejecting) the 'reality' of the rational system that is American media. Saying the system is rational is not to say that it is a fair or even productive one in terms of generating 'quality' media products. Most people with any critical ability, including those in the industry, would likely not describe the system as either fair or productive in terms of "quality." "Rational" in this case simply means that the system is in keeping with the larger system of American capitalism. Quite simply, the studios (and their larger corporate-conglomerate owners), despite several 'independent film movements' over the last few decades, still control what most Americans see on their TV screens and in their local theaters. (Computer screens are another matter, but all indications are that the conglomerates are seeking to control those too). It should go without saying that this control is based first and foremost on the desire for profit, with the controllers willing to give-and-take a little in terms of this motivation, if only to maintain positive relationships with "creators" so that, at a future date, they will see more profit. Gilliam, however, wants to live in a world where art can exist for its own sake or, at least, where art (in this case his artistic vision expressed via his films) will naturally find its own audience, attract its own group of appreciators, fans who will then support his future endeavors.

Conclusion

This overview of Terry Gilliam's troubles brings to mind yet another American (arguably even "independent") auteur that has at least occasionally had similar struggles. Martin Scorsese is internationally recognized as one of the greatest (if not the greatest) American auteurs of his time (if not all time). But he too has had his struggles with the "controllers," especially since he moved away from the more character-driven stories that marked his early success (Taxi Driver, Mean Streets, Raging Bull) to the more lavish and epic-scale films like Gangs of New York and The Aviator. In fact, Scorsese apparently battled with Miramax over the making and distribution of Gangs of New York the same way many much younger, less experienced and less respected "indie" filmmakers have battled with studios/distributors. Gilliam, falling into the 'less respected' category, has had a series of near legendary battles. The battle over Brazil is the most obvious case, and the troubles that plagued Munchhausen are certainly notable (see Yule's Losing the Light: Terry Gilliam and the Munchausen Saga). And, most recently, Gilliam fought with Miramax (or, more precisely, its Dimension label) over The Brothers Grimm. If the "system"-controllers, in the form of a company like Miramax, are willing to go war with the likes of both Martin Scorsese and Terry Gilliam, maybe a glance at Miramax provides the best summary of the relationship between creativity and commerce within the world of filmmaking, "indie" or otherwise.

If Miramax cannot be credited with launching the "independent film movement" that started in the late 1980s, peaked in the early- and mid-1990s and then was transformed into something altogether different in the early part of the 21st century, at least the company can be said to have most successfully exploited the movement. In fact, during the period in question (roughly 1989 to 2005), Miramax, too, went through similar transformations. Excellently detailed in Peter Biskind's Down and Dirty Pictures, Miramax, which may at one point have represented the prototypical "independent film distribution company," was in 1993 purchased by a company that many perceived to be the antithesis to all things independent: Disney. According to Biskind, "it was clear the match was one of convenience, not affection, and most observers, dumbfounded, predicted it would end in a messy divorce" (p. 152). This prediction would come true when, in 2005, the contract between Disney and Miramax was not renewed. Harvey and Bob Weinstein left to form The Weinstein Company, but Disney retained ownership of the Miramax name. It was near the end of the Disney/Miramax marriage that the battle to produce and release Gangs of New York took place, a battle that included a shooting schedule that went 8 weeks over, and debates over images of a dog eating rats and a jarful of severed human ears. Ultimately, according to Biskind,

> (p. 466) If the *Gangs* fiasco proved anything, it is that the economics of the system of production trumps everything else: creative genius, experience, personalities, intentions. Karl Marx would have been pleased.

By most accounts, Martin Scorsese wasn't pleased with the experience, just as Terry Gilliam likely would not be pleased with Biskind's assessment of the relationship between (film) art and commerce. Scorsese, of course, was able to move on, including achieving the only honor that had eluded him across his 40-year career: winning the Best Director Oscar for the first time for The Departed. Given

Terry's troubles with the system, it seems doubtful Gilliam will ever even approach the kind of influence and freedom that Scorsese has. But then, how many filmmakers do? The more reasonable question is will Gilliam be able to move on at all? Will he continue to fight? Will he at least attempt the give-and-take process apparently required for success in the industry? Will he find his way back to making films that are both commercially viable and thought-provoking, like The Fisher King and 12 Monkeys, or will he focus more and more on purely commercial product along the lines of The Brothers Grimm? Or, will he shut his eye to his own magic and, like Jeliza-Rose in Tideland tumble down the rabbit-hole, taking his audience – or whatever audience manages to see his films – with him? For now, the answers to those questions lay through the looking glass and down the rabbit-hole.

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