

Writer/Director Terry Gilliam

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“I Want Movies to Surprise,
Stimulate and Shock
Audiences”

To mention Terry Gilliam’s name is to automatically start seeing Monty Python films in one’s mind again, as crusaders on imaginary horses bang on coconut shells and followers of Brian proclaim him the Messiah as he commands them to “fuck off.” But Gilliam has done much more than “Python service” as perhaps America’s prime gift to the global form of surrealistic dark cinematic humor.

For besides the Python films, Gilliam has been a director of *Jabberwocky* (1976), *Time Bandits* (1981), *Brazil* (1985), *The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen* (1988), *The Fisher King* (1991), *12 Monkeys* (1995), and *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* (1998). And it is thus fitting that we return to him as *Jabberwocky* is being re-released in the United States and as we re-examine how humor and horror *have* and *might* mix on the screen after such a tragedy as we are currently living through.

The following interview was conducted several weeks after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States. The original interview had been set up to take place in London on September 12th which turned out to be impossible, but was rearranged as a phone interview instead.

Gilliam sees screenwriting as being more involved than just writing, in the worldly sense, it involves broader think-

ing from experiences and also perspectives from a living in a multitude of countries. Even when he was not actually writing scenes and dialogue for the Monty Python films, for instance, he was always influencing the script and adding to the film through his directing, his art, animation, ideas, and humor. “It was very good for us to have an American in the group,” comments Michael Palin (Morgan, David. *Monty Python Speaks*. New York: Avon Books, 1999).

Is this current world crisis actually your *Brazil* with a much darker screenplay?

Not really. It’s just that one gets this terrible feeling that certain elements of the world out there want more excitement than is already out there.

The world hasn’t changed. But America’s perception of what the world is has perhaps changed. I mean, in many ways, America has been living in a blinkered state. As we know, the rest of the world has been dealing with similar problems—not at the same scale of course—to what we have just been seeing but then that’s American in scale, isn’t it!

You have not chosen Hollywood as a center for your cinematic activity. Could you say something about what it has been like for you as an American abroad, living and working in Europe?

It was actually a choice. You know, being American, you are in this incredibly privileged position as part of the richest and most powerful nation on the planet. And one of the reasons I left America was that I really felt its view of the world was so limited, so the only way as an American making movies and trying to say things and at least change people's view of what the world is to some degree, was for me to live outside of America. I had to be in the real world. That's one reason I've always stayed here in Britain, because I've wanted to work as an American with a perspective based outside of America. So I think I'm slightly more aware of what is really going on out there than so many in the States. Particularly working in the movie industry, people tend to have to gravitate to Hollywood, and unfortunately Hollywood is such a tiny, tiny village as far as the number of people actually involved in the business. And the mindset and view of the world is so limited that it scares the shit out of me, frankly!

Speaking of Hollywood, the Hollywood screenplay has, to a large degree, come to be a set of formulas that act like "rules" that one "must" follow if one hopes to succeed in the Biz, such as "three act structure," likeable main characters with clearly defined goals, etc. And yet you seem to thrive on breaking the rules, carrying out a spirit of cinematic carnival. Could you say something about what you feel is screenwriting for you? Are there any "rules" for you?

No, I don't think in terms of such rules. I mean, obviously, you try to get the audience's attention early on but then the reality is that they have paid their money to come to the film already so you shouldn't have to be tied down to that either!

I start simply with an idea and I see where it will go. Often I start with a lot of scraps of ideas, from previous attempts, or pieces I've never used, and I put them all on the table and see if I can force them into a single story even though none of these ideas related to each other when I started the process.

I mean, I just recently saw the popular French film, *Amelie From Montmartre* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet who made *Delicatessen*, and it breaks all the rules, and it's absolutely wonderful! He holds your attention, which is the main thing. You don't see a three act structure or anything like a traditional structure. Yes, there is a theme that runs through it, and there is a character who holds it together, but other than that, Jeunet is dancing all over the place, and it is truly wondrous because he's always engaging my attention and my emotions. And that, it seems to me, is all that one should be doing, not fitting things into these neat patterns that are a *typical* American thing of trying to explain the world in the most simplistic way.

Writing would seem to involve a certain amount of what I think of as "carnival of the soul"—a sense of freedom, fantasy and festivity. You have a lot of carnival in your writing, directing and film-making. Where did it all come from and where does it continue to come from for you?

I think it was always there, but it was looking for an outlet and finally found (that outlet) in Python (in) that (he) could use what I did. And, in fact, in doing the animated segments and sequences for Python I was working in a certain technique that I wasn't even planning to work in. And that freed me up in a way that I wouldn't have been freed up if I worked in a more traditional technique. And so my Python work gave me a sense of confidence that it was OK to do literally what pleased *us*, what made *us* laugh. There was no thought beyond us in many senses.

The fact that we were successful in pulling it off and found an audi-

ence, gave us confidence to continue on doing these things that everyone says can't be done, shouldn't be done, won't be done.

Strangely, however, as of late, I have actually been trying to restrain myself, and break down a film to a more traditional form of storytelling. Of course, I find this a bit frustrating because it's not what I have been doing, and I find myself wishing I was back where I was fifteen years ago just leaping in all directions.

And yet, perhaps, you can have your carnival and package it too, for a film like *The Fisher King* seems to hit a balance between story and character, and yet still having those wonderful crazy moments you create so well.

Well, it's an interesting aside when you talk about Americans writing abroad, that Chuck Albertson—who wrote *Jabberwocky* with me and started on *Brazil* with me—lives in Serbia! On one level he is totally American, and yet he has this wiser perspective because he lives in a bombing zone, basically, which is what Serbia became, that is, last year's Ground Zero.

You have always said you don't want people to feel "so-so" about your films. Rather, you prefer them to love them or hate them. Is this still true?

Yes! Of course it's partly my perversity of wanting to go against the flow of whatever is the common flow at the moment. And that's

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because most movies are lulling people into a false sense of security or giving them juvenile fantasies that encourage a lack of brain power. But I don't want that at all.

I want movies to surprise, stimulate and shock audiences and their brains, and ideas. I want them to come out of a film as slightly different people than they were at the beginning.

The joy with *The Fisher King*, for instance, was seeing people coming out of the theater walking the wrong direction. And that's because with the film, New York has been turned upside down for them. They are not the same people walking out of the film that they were walking into the film. It actually has physically affected them. That's fantastic!

I've heard one first hand story about a screening of *Brazil* and one second hand story. The second hand one is about a lawyer who saw the film and then went back to his office and locked himself inside for three days. And the first hand story is about a publicity lady at Universal who told me she went home after a screening and took a shower and started crying and couldn't stop crying. It was the film finally catching up with her, she said.

That to me is what I'm trying to do, to affect people that much. But, I mean, hopefully to affect them in a positive way, or perhaps to touch upon a part of their soul that they never realized was there.

So you have made millions of people laugh, but what I am hearing is that you think comedy can be serious business.

Totally. I mean that's the only reason for doing this! (he laughs) No matter how silly we get, it's always been serious business. At least I hope there is a serious intelligence underlying it anyway.

Many of your films have quick short clips from Marx Brothers films. In *12 Monkeys*, for instance, there's a brief shot from *Monkey Business*. Does this mean that Groucho is deep in your soul?

Yes, the Marx Brothers have always been there, and throwing in those references was great for me. I want to constantly remind people that there is this big continuum, this great cinematic continuum that we are all a part of. Because movies are so much a part of us and have made us who we are, and one should never forget that. So I've always loved throwing in those references. After all, the Marx Brothers taught a lot of us an awful lot!

Back to screenwriting approaches, you are not the usual or normal Hollywood kind of writer, aiming to turn out a 110-page script in correct format, style, and formula. Could you share something of your approach, however, any guidelines you do tend to follow when you write?

Ah, God, a lot has to do with just sitting there, but I think there really are two stages of writing for me. There's an early stage when I'm alone and I put down any idea that comes along. I literally have piles of scraps of paper everywhere. And so many of the ideas really are unre-

lated to each other. I mean I see them as pieces of some large jigsaw puzzle that surely will come together if you work at it enough. So I can sit there for ages trying to incorporate them. And sometimes they are incorporated and sometimes they change and become something else as they come in association with another idea. It is a kind of organic process for an idea to come together even if it isn't fully developed.

Then the next stage is to work on it with someone else. In fact I prefer to work with somebody else at certain stages. I'm not great with dialogue at any level, for instance, it's my weakest part. But it's just great fun throwing ideas back and forth, and slowly the thing evolves into whatever it is. But it never stops! We're still writing when we're editing the film. I think the last bit of screenwriting is when you do the last cut of the film or add the last sound effect or the last bit of music.

It's all screenwriting to me. I don't believe you have a script and then you make a movie. It's a constant process of WRITING. So when I'm doing a movie, the co-writer is usually around while we are shooting. On *The Fisher King*, for instance, I had Richard LeGuardie around and told him, "It's your baby, and I'm just the foster parent hanging around for a while! So I want you to be around and when it seems I am taking your baby down a road that you feel really uncomfortable with, you can shout at me and then we can talk about it."

A final question about the tragedy we have been living through after September 11th in New York and Washington DC. I've lived and worked as a screenwriter myself in the Balkans during these last decades of war and destruction. Yet, I'm aware of what a deep sense of humor—tragic and bright—the filmmakers have in these countries. Do you feel we can begin to laugh again after September 11th and make films about it?

I've been laughing for the last week. It's the way one deals with such tragedy and death. As far as I'm concerned, laughter is about the only defense against such pain. Joel Segel, for instance, the film critic, has been sending me lots of emails about jokes coming out of New York since September 11th. There you are. I think it is one of the greatest things humanity has: the ability to laugh in the face of tragedy. It's healthy and essential. ■



Andrew Horton is a SCREENTALK Staff Writer. He is at work on several new scripts while teaching as the Jeanne H. Smith Professor of Film & Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of the popular *Writing The Character Centered Screenplay* (2nd edition, 2000) as well as *Laughing Out Loud: Writing The Comedy Centered Screenplay*. He is currently completing *Screenwriting Around The World* which will appear next year.