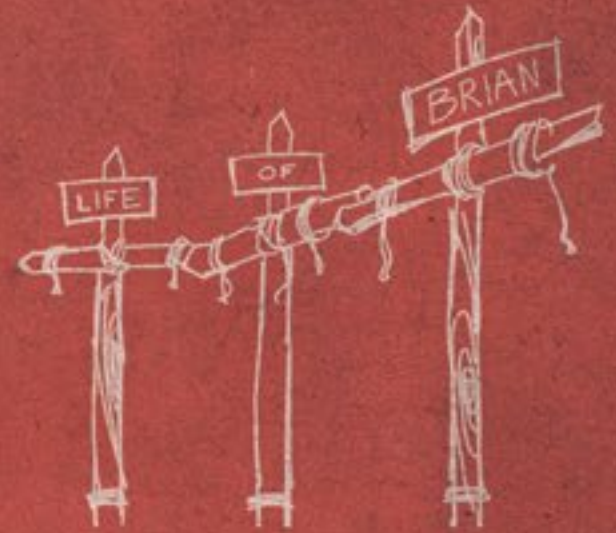


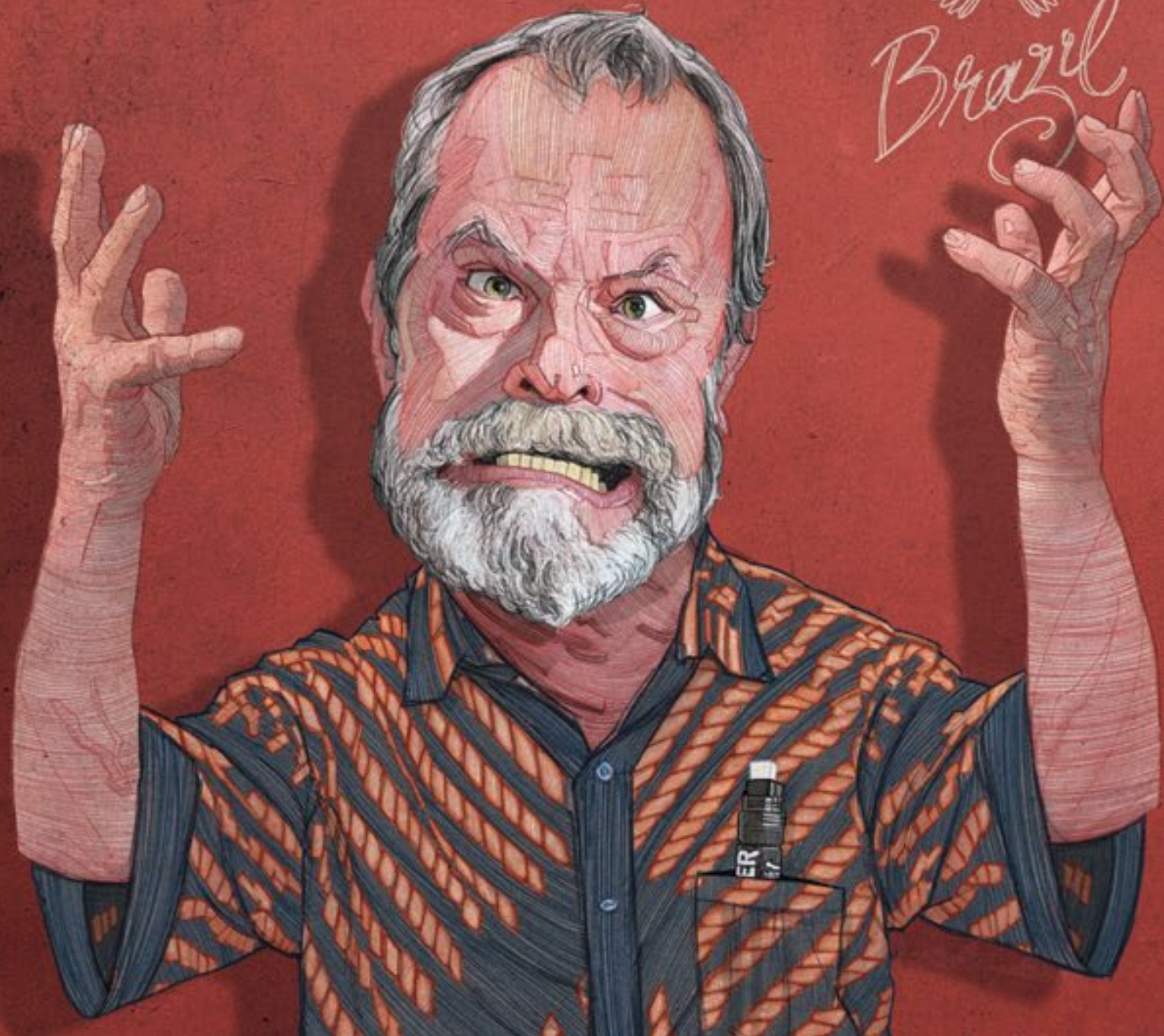


The Fisher King



Terry Gilliam

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Terry Gilliam is a whirling vortex of ideas and invented worlds.

Born in Minnesota, he moved to Britain in the late Sixties as one-sixth of the anarchic Monty Python that took his perverse and hilarious animations as the visual glue (barely) holding their surrealist humour together. Gilliam's fantastical forays later moved into his own projects, directing the dementedly enjoyable *Jabberwocky* (1977) and *Time Bandits* (1981). Never just an entertainer, his darker dystopian visions of *Brazil* (1985), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and this year's *The Zero Theorem* articulate anxieties over mass control and technology. An Old Testament prophet of cult filmmaking, Gilliam's career is one of fear and loathing, tilting at calamity and triumph, making enemies of studios and winning immense respect from his peers along the way.

So It Goes salutes a true original.

So It Goes: You're directing Berlioz's opera *Benvenuto Cellini* this summer, after your successful debut with *Faust* in 2011. Is it more of a case of filmmaking methods influencing your stage direction rather than the other way around?

Terry Gilliam: It's probably more the former. Opera meant learning a new skill, a new craft. It's very different to film. But for years before I did *Faust*, I'd been approached by people to do opera because they thought my films were 'operatic' or at least 'theatrical' if nothing else. So the transition wasn't as hard as I thought and luckily with *Faust* – and again now – I was surrounded by experienced people who could keep me from falling on my face too often. It's a totally collaborative business and I'm the novice trying to learn the job.

SIG: Your new film *The Zero Theorem* makes me think of *Brazil* in terms of the Orwellian future it presents. I came out of it feeling incredibly depressed.

TG: As you should! I'm curious to see what this film looks like in ten years. Most of my stuff splits the audience completely: those who think it's fantastic and love it and those who just think, 'What the fuck was that

all about, it's really tedious.' But that's what happened with *Brazil*. People now think *Brazil* is a masterpiece. At the time, half of the audience walked out. It's only that time has given it its gloss of prescience. Like *Brazil*, *The Zero Theorem* is trying to prophesy something. It was just my reaction to how I saw the world. I want to encourage people to learn to be alone, to find out who they are. It's a paradox. People can't do that because then they lose their only contact with humanity. But maybe they haven't had contact with humanity to begin with because they've been tweeting and working in this abstracted version of the world.

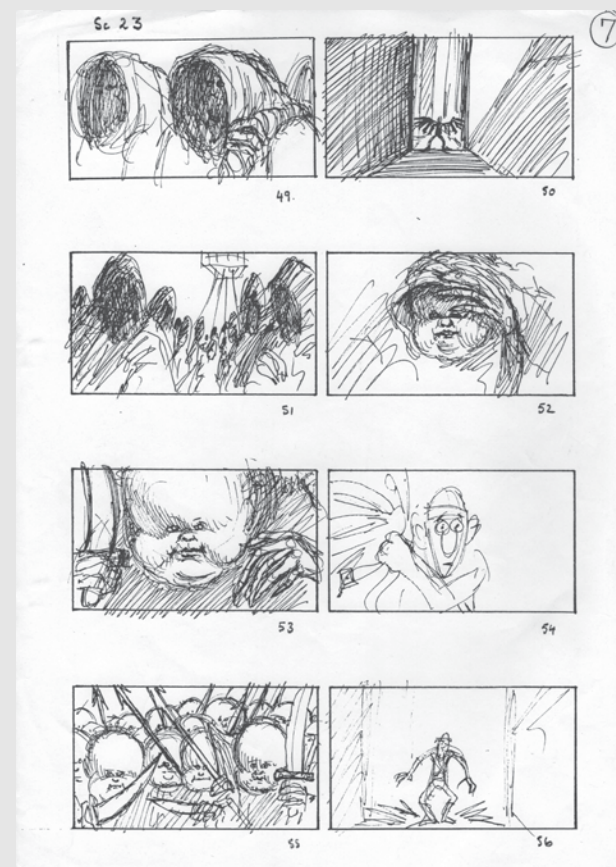
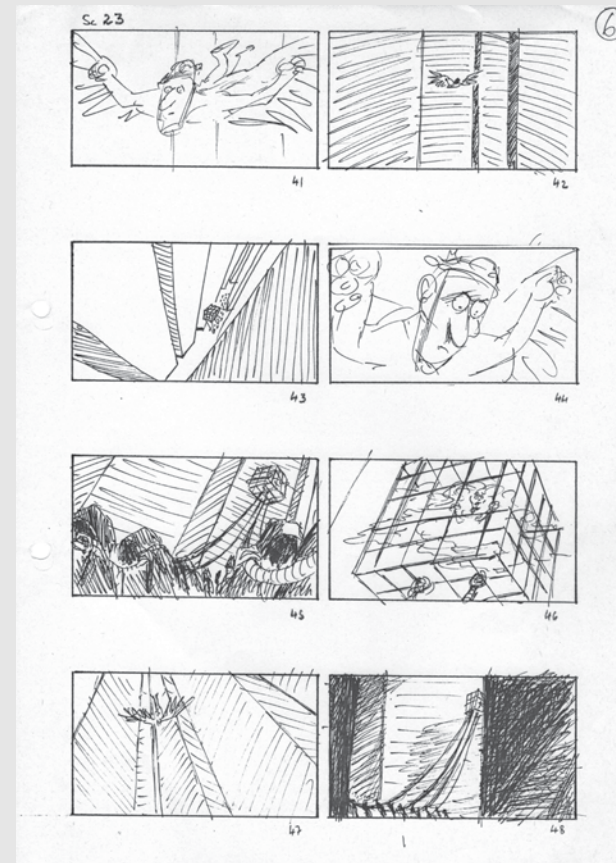
SIG: Those concerns have always been present in your visual style. In *Twelve Monkeys*, *Brazil* and *The Fisher King*, there's that 'Steampunk' design to your sets and costumes – a refined primitivism. As your characters speed towards technological complexity, they also seem to have retro facets. They're Neanderthal in many ways and can't achieve humanity.

TG: Maybe that is humanity. Neanderthals. It's that struggle. All my films are jihads or struggles. Too many people come to *The Zero Theorem* with a feeling that it's more intelligent or it's more intellectual or complex

than it is. It's not! It's very simple in a sense. My wife kept saying, "You just have to submit to it" which is what Islam means. So this is my first Islamic film – with a Zen ending.

SIG: Your creative beginnings were drawing cartoons for *MAD* magazine then using collage in Monty Python animations. There are certain filmmakers who have been very controlled about the special effects they use in their films and then there are others who have almost been bewitched by its possibilities.

TG: I try to keep my effects primitive. Look at the first *Lord of the Rings*, which I loved. I was never a fan of the books but I thought Peter really captured something quite terrific. But as the films went on, the orcs multiplied and we still had the same number of heroes running around, fighting thousands more. The characters aren't flawed enough to interest me. I'm always obsessed with gravity, how things really fall, the pain. I'm so frightened of doing things too grandly, I try to go in an opposite direction. Into something that's smaller, more internalised. That's why Christophe Waltz is so good. What I hear from other actors who understand this thing is that *The Zero Theorem* is the best bit of



Storyboards for scenes from *Brazil* (1985) drawn by Gilliam

acting he's ever done, but it isn't recognised because it doesn't have the charm or the outrageousness.

SIG: *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* is perhaps your grandest film in terms of production and ostensibly a child's film. But it's about the nature of storytelling, the creation of worlds. He's a fabulist like yourself...

TG: He's a master liar. I'd always loved the books. Apparently the only other book that sold more in the Fifties than *Munchausen* was the Bible. So here was this thing that was so much part of a culture. And then it was gone. That intrigued me. Also, I wanted to put Gustave Doré's illustrations on film. Like *Munchausen*, I was feeling old and burnt out. And at that point, I had two daughters. That's why we wrote it with the young girl Sally as the character who reinvigorates Munchausen and allows him to fabulise again.

SIG: Doré was an inspiration for *Munchausen* and you've said the painter Neo Rauch is a touchstone for the world of *The Zero Theorem*. Are these subconscious references?

TG: No, it's conscious. I start looking for images that capture something. For *Tideland* it was Andrew Wyeth's painting, *Christina's World*, the famous one with the girl in the foreground and the house in the distance. It's not necessarily being literal about it. I know in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* there were a lot of different references but in this one it was Neo Rauch. I think he's one of the great painters out there right now; he makes your brain work. He has different styles, he can hold different periods in the same painting and his sense of colour is fantastic. He works in a way that the Surrealists do for me, becoming a place to leap off from.

SIG: Talking of leaping off, you've probably wanted to do that from a tall building after some of the terrible luck you've had on films like *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* where filming had to be abandoned because of flooding among other reasons. Rumours abound that you're taking another stab at it...

TG: The script has changed since then, because I have to keep convincing myself it's a fresh idea. Back then, it was a man who is magically dragged into the seventeenth century. It's not about that anymore. It's the same character who's now a commercials director. Fifteen years earlier he did this student film

where he went to a Spanish village with locals who played parts in his *Don Quixote*. Because it was so beautiful and poetic, he got picked up not to make movies, but to make commercials. Now, a period of time later, he's in Spain doing commercials, strangely enough using the character of Quixote. He goes back to the village, thinking about how wonderful it was, the purity of his vision back then and the wonderful people he worked with and he realises he's fucked their lives up. [Pause] So that's the autobiographical part...

SIG: Very...

TG: That's what I like about film. It's impossible to really *learn* how to make films. There's always more to know, things are always thrown up at you. It's more about surviving each time. You get through it and say, "Yeah, I like that. I'm proud of that." That's my biggest concern, for 'I' in my utter selfishness to feel that I've done something I'm proud of – a craftsman's approach more than anything else.

SIG: Have you fallen short of that ever?

TG: *The Brothers Grimm*. I could have made a better film of it, but for my marriage with the Weinstein brothers – a bad marriage. It was a convergence; we were in the Czech Republic and the film pretty much had its cast and our studio MGM pulled out, for whatever reason. So we were there, all revved up, ready to go. The only vultures that spotted the carrion lying on the road happened to be the grim brothers.

SIG: You're also revisiting old material this year with Monty Python.

TG: In my view, *Quixote's* a new movie. And that's it. We just start again. It's the only way. Otherwise it becomes a feeling of going back and I don't like to go back. With this Python show, I feel why are we going back thirty years? It depresses me and I just want to keep going forward. Whoever I was then is no longer here; he's gone. I mean your life seems to be many, many deaths of who you were before, shedding skins like a snake as you move on.

SIG: Will you be creating any new animations for the Monty Python show?

TG: Not really. I was playing with stuff yesterday, trying to combine things, bits that already exist, in new ways, but I don't know yet. I've been focused on *Zero Theorem*, the

opera, and even *Quixote*. I've been doing all those things at the same time, as well as working on an autobiography. They all come out this year. I mean Python will be fine once it gets going. It will be a big show, and it will be great. Everyone will have a wonderful time and we will be fêted as living legends, egos will blossom again. But it's not exciting in any way. I just like new territories.

SIG: You came over the Atlantic to settle in the UK in the late Sixties. Let's say you met John Cleese over the Azores going the other way. What are the reasons you'd give each other for leaving your homelands?

TG: It's always a case of 'the grass is greener'. I was a huge Anglophile for a long time. From *The Goon Show* to Ealing Comedies – that was the stuff I loved. So to end up in England seemed a decent road to take, and John, well John has always been fascinated by American women... blonde American women.

SIG: Python has certainly left you your sense of humour. However sci-fi or fantastical your films are, you are more of the Pratchett than the Tolkien. Could you ever envisage making a film like *Dune*, a more 'serious' sci-fi drama?

TG: It has to have humour in it because that's what keeps me alive, so why would I exclude it from my films? No, I'd rather go through life having a wry look at things, no matter how tragic or painful, because it is the element that sustains me through all the shit I've experienced. If you can't find humour in life and all its aspects, then it doesn't seem to be worth living. People now approach life much more seriously than they used to. Everything has to be explained. I've always thought levity is the best way to deal with gravity.

SIG: Hunter S. Thompson felt that way. An angry humour. What were your experiences of him on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*?

TG: He was a handful, because he was used to being the centre of attention. He became a pain in the arse frankly. Despite all that, I admired the man so much. He forgave me for what I was like because I had certainly forgiven him for the shit he'd dumped on the premiere of the film.

SIG: What did he do at the premiere?

TG: He just had to dominate the whole show. He had a huge bag of popcorn and he

was throwing it everywhere and this was the first time we were showing it to a big paying audience and he... it just pissed me off. I don't normally get angry like that but I was like, "What the fuck are you doing!"

SIG: Were you more concerned about making him or Ralph Steadman [illustrator to Thompson's books] happy?

TG: Oh – Hunter. I knew Ralph and he was pleased. What was weird for me was that I was never satisfied that I'd captured the madness of his drawings. Ralph is one of my great idols because I just admire how brilliant he is. Not just his penmanship, but his intelligence, how he takes reality and puts it into something so powerful – and angry. At the same time it's so whimsical and beautiful. Both Johnny [Depp] and I were terrified Hunter wouldn't like it. We'd set up screenings and he'd always find a reason not to be there. He was actually as terrified as we were that he wouldn't like it. In the end, he saw it at someone's home cinema, and because Hunter always had a camera on him, there's a shot of him as the lights came up rolling around laughing. However much of a pain in the arse he was, it was a question of whether we could be true to Hunter. And, at least according to him, we were.

SIG: There's something preposterous about being a director. You have to be creative, individual, schismatic; but simultaneously a leader of men: focused and organised. How do you reconcile those two?

TG: Schizophrenia, it's very useful. Multiple personalities. There are a lot of directors these days who don't know anything about the technical side, they don't deal with it. Directors have different skills. I'm interested in all of it, so it becomes really crazy, but to me, I'm doing a big painting. I need lots of help: assistants, colourists, people who can do things better than I can, but I should be able to do all the jobs. That way, I'm not asking people to do ridiculous things or asking them to do things that cost money because we don't have the money to do them. On the other hand, I've got to be crazy enough to keep saying, "We're charging down this road." In the beginning, I was much better at banging through a brick wall with my forehead, but it hurts too much now. You need friends around you who aren't frightened to come up with input or tell you, "That is a brick wall Terry, that's a bad idea."



Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1998) wrap drawing by Gilliam for cast and crew