Gilliam Unmade

Contributed by Andrew Barker

Terry Gilliam is a visionary director without equal. His films, Time Bandits, Twelve Monkeys and Brazil, have earned him the stature of a maverick filmmaker, whose unique sense of cinema has placed his name amongst the great directors of our times. Starting out as a writer, performer and animator in the legendary ‘Monty Python’ team, he broke into the movies by co-directing (along with Terry Jones) their first feature, the medieval mock-epic Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974), after which Gilliam went it alone with quasi-fable Jabberwocky in 1977.

He was immediately seen as a force to be reckoned with, a director who pursued personal, uncompromising visions, at whatever the cost. His battles with the studio system have become legendary, particularly over the release of Brazil (1985). Although now often cried as his masterwork, at the time, the Orwellian paranoia and sweeping mythology that infests the picture was considered too much for Universal Studios, who for a time simply refused to release it. This sparked a David and Goliath-like struggle as Gilliam fought for his vision. Subsequently it became one of the most famous behind-the-scenes stories in cinema history (Read Jack Mathew’s excellent book, The Battle of Brazil, for more on the subject).

It has been said that the making of a Gilliam picture is just as interesting as the film itself. This does indeed ring true as his next picture, The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1989) became something of a byword in Hollywood for disaster. Many critics and studio insiders unfairly labelled Gilliam as an out of control director, who falls behind schedule and runs budgets up into the stratosphere. All of which is grossly untrue, and even though he brought in his next film on time and under budget, the multi-Oscar nominated hit fantasy The Fisher King in 1991, he was still seen as a filmmaker studios admired, yet didn’t dare hire.

It would be 1995 before Gilliam made another film - his biggest hit to date - Twelve Monkeys, yet in the four years between the two pictures he had tried and ultimately failed to get countless projects off the ground. Unmade films are something which has dogged Gilliam his entire career, right up to the present day. The films he hasn’t made far outweigh the ones he has. He is a filmmaker that cannot be defined, categorised or placed in a certain box, and it is this which frightens Hollywood. Whereas Tim Burton has honed his own unique style into a more mainstream, yet arguably, increasingly less interesting product for modern audiences, Gilliam has still retained his wild and eccentric nature; one has only to look at his amazing adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson’s classic piece of gonzo journalism, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1997), to see that. But it does seem that his meticulous craftsmanship and fantastical idiosyncrasies, which made him such a sought-after filmmaker in the first place, have also been his curse.

Hollywood doesn’t like taking chances, which is why cinema today is filled with sequels, remakes and the occasional adaptation, products with a guaranteed built-in audience. Gilliam doesn’t tick any of those boxes, his stories are strikingly original, filled with startling imagery and fantastical characters and situations; in other words, far too expensive and risky for the studio suits to try and sell.

The first major project to slip through Gilliam’s fingers was the mouth-watering prospect of him directing Alan Moore’s seminal comic book, Watchmen, in the early 90’s. Problems arose though when Gilliam found that the film’s producer, Joel Silver (Lethal Weapon, The Matrix) said he had the $40 million to make the picture, when in actual fact, he only had around $25 million. And since Silver’s last flick, Die Hard 2: Die Harder (1990) had gone wildly over budget and with Gilliam’s last film at the time having been Munchausen; no studio would back them making such a dark and expensive project. In Hollywood you really are only as good as your last picture. Throughout the 90’s Watchmen languished in development hell, with almost every director in town picking at its bones, although it now seems that the project will finally see the light of day, it’s rumoured to be helmed by Zack Snyder (300, Dawn of the Dead remake) to the tune of around $200 million.

After the success of The Fisher King, Gilliam embarked on several projects, the first of which was an adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s mind-bending novel, A Scanner Darkly. A lifelong fan of Dick’s writing, Gilliam wanted to make the first true adaptation of the Science Fiction writer’s work, after having been disappointed by both Total Recall (1990) and Blade Runner (1982). But even though he had just made a critically acclaimed hit movie, he found it next to impossible convincing studios to take on such an out-there project. Gilliam eventually abandoned it and moved onto other things. The film was finally made in 2006 by Richard Linklater.

During 1992-93, Gilliam became involved in two literary classics. The first, Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, satisfied Gilliam’s interest in returning to the dark, gritty medieval landscapes which he began his career with. He worked on the screenplay for almost a year, but then jumped ship at the request of Mel Gibson, who wanted Gilliam to direct a project the actor had been developing for a number of years, Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities. While working on the project, Mel asked Gilliam if he’d also be interested in

directing a film about the legendary Scottish figure William Wallace. When Gilliam passed on the picture, Gibson abandoned Cities and took the reigns on the Wallace film himself. Braveheart (1995) won several Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director for Gibson. Gilliam tried to get Cities made without Mel Gibson, eventually signing Liam Neeson for the lead, but ultimately the project collapsed.

The other projects Gilliam worked on throughout the 90’s were Theseus and the Minotaur, Quasimodo, and a film about the forgotten genius Nikola Tesla, the inventor of the alternating current, and inventor of radio, and even the inventor of a machine that created an earthquake in New York City. He was a fascinating character, and one who had intrigued filmmakers before, both Orson Welles and David Lynch also tried and failed to bring his story to the screen. But again Gilliam couldn’t find the money to finance the project. There was also a western called Anything For Billy, an adaptation of the Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman black comedy Good Omens and a sequel to Time Bandits, although that project was held up because of legal issues over the rights to the original film.

But the two films which have obsessed Gilliam more than any other for over a decade are The Man Who Killed Don Quixote and The Defective Detective. The latter is the story of a burnt-out New York cop who slips into a world of fantasies in search of a missing little girl. It is a world of one-dimensional cut out trees and newspaper forests, of immense towering walls of filing cabinets, and of removalable pieces of sky. After the success of Twelve Monkeys, Bruce Willis expressed an interest in playing the detective on the edge of a breakdown in a fantasy world, but even with an A-list superstar in the lead, Gilliam still found it next to impossible to get the project off the ground.

The Man Who Killed Don Quixote on the other hand did get off the ground, although only for little under a week. The project was shut down after a flood of biblical proportions destroyed the set, and the sudden illness of Gilliam’s Quixote, veteran French actor Jean Rochefort. The whole (un-) making was documented in Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe’s brilliant film Lost in La Mancha (2002). Gilliam’s take on Cervantes’ Don Quixote was to transport a modern day advertising executive, played by Johnny Depp, back into the 17th Century where he meets with the dreamer, adventurer and fabulist Don Quixote. What’s painful about watching the documentary is how amazing the footage Gilliam did manage to shoot looks.

It is not the first time a visionary director has struggled to bring Quixote to the screen. In 1957 Orson Welles began production on his own version of Don Quixote. The project would become Welles’ creative obsession for more than two decades. Welles took various acting and directing projects to help finance the film, and would shoot pieces of footage whenever he could. Although by the time of his death in 1985, his Quixote remained unfinished. The parallel between Welles’ own struggles within the Hollywood system and Gilliam’s are striking. Here was a genius artist, who at the age of 26, had co-written, directed and starred in Citizen Kane (1941), after which he was pretty much chewed up and spat out by the studio regime. Gilliam is still trying to get his version of Quixote back into production.

In 2005 Gilliam released the much mangled comic fantasy The Brothers Grimm, followed in quick succession by the intriguing and beautifully shot Tideland (2006). Yet both these films, especially the problematic Brothers Grimm, feel a little unworthy of Gilliam’s hand. Maybe, much like Stanley Kubrick before him, there is now so much expectation surrounding a Gilliam film they can only, to a certain extent, disappoint. Or is it that he still hasn’t had the opportunity to paint his visions on a large enough canvas?

Whatever the reason for these many disappointments, Hollywood producers should finally realise the worth of this stunning and truly original filmmaker, take a chance on some of these amazing project which have slipped through the net, and not let his genius meet the same fate as Orson Welles’.

Because Terry Gilliam, like Quixote, is a chaser of dreams.

Andrew Barker (This article is dedicated to my favourite distraction!!!)