


from Gilliam on Gilliam. Edited by Ian Christie. Faber and Faber London NY 1999: Chapter 6 1984 ¼ becomes Brazil, with the aid of ducts and De Niro; and what happened next
Brazil was the watershed in your career. Before, you could always be regarded as more or less an escaped Python; after, you were clearly a film-maker of high ambition—maybe too high for some tastes—when you took on Universal in a quixotic battle over the director’s rights. But Brazil had been brewing for a long time, hadn’t it?
I had this pile of ideas, a general story I was trying to tell, which was a loose collection of scenes running to about a hundred pages. First, I started working on it with Chuck Alversion, who had written *Jabberwocky*, but within a couple of weeks it was clear that we were going in slightly different directions. This led to a break in our relationship and a messy situation. In the end, a deal was done—the scene in the restaurant is the only one that’s close to what he’d written. After that I put it aside for a while. Because it had been a painful business. Then one day I was walking down the street and somebody mentioned Tom Stoppard’s name. Suddenly, I thought it would be great—his visual skills and my wordsmithing! Anyway, we met and he began to pull it together. For instance, the mistaken arrest already existed as an event, but Tom introduced the name and the single-letter mistake—Buttle/Tuttle—that connects them. This is the kind of thing he was so good at.

Meanwhile, there was the problem of getting the film going, which was harder than getting it written. Even after the success of *Time Bandits*—when I went round all the studio heads in Hollywood, just to meet them face to face—everyone I talked to about *Brazil* said it was a crazy idea. Then I met Arnon Milchan in Paris and really liked him. Even though many people had warned me against him. Certainly he’s a pirate; but he’s funny, smart and ruthless.

...I was obsessed with the idea of having unknowns. Because they come with no baggage, the audience discovers the characters as the film unfolds....In fact I chose Kim Greist partly because she wasn’t known at all, while the others were partly known—or maybe they were just too stunning for me. I always get nervous about this business of the leading lady—especially with a character who is supposed to be your dream girl—when you’ve got a wife and kids.

‘Tie me to the mast’—this is you as Ulysses telling the crew to pay no attention when the siren beckons.

That’s it: I know I’ve got to get the ship into port. Why I like making films is that, for a period of time, you have a higher cause you’re serving, and this may go back in some way, to my religious background. Everything is for the cause, but it gets complex when that cause is actually the product of my imagination: where’s the film and where’s Terry in all this? However, it’s possible to make that distinction most of the time.

Identifying so completely with the film and making it an extension of your own dreams and fantasies inevitably recalls Fellini. Was he a big influence on you?

Oh, definitely. I always cite him as my great inspiration, Ingmar Bergman too, with *Wild Strawberries*; and Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, which is another way of looking at different realities. But Fellini, most of all freed that up with 8½ and *Giulietta of the Spirits*. The only American equivalent would be Walter Mitty. We used to talk about *Brazil* being like Frank Capra meets Franz Kafka. The point about *Brazil* is that we’re starting at a level that’s already fantastic, but we’re trying to root that fantastical world in a kind of truth or hyperreality that everybody can understand. The dreams in *Brazil* are more juvenile, they’re escape dreams, and they were originally very literal before many of them became redundant.

There’s a story that’s often told about how Brazil started with you in Port Talbot, thinking about the incongruity of the song ‘Brazil’...

Except that the song was ‘Maria Elena’, Ry Cooder’s version of it, and it used to be at the beginning of the early drafts. Then it shifted to ‘Brazil’ via a recording by Geoff Muldaur, from an album called *Cottage Pie*. And it’s this version of ‘Brazil’ that we use when Jonathan is driving to Buttle’s flat—it’s a really silly version which I loved and used to play all the time when we were going to work. So I went from this sublime version of ‘Maria Elena’ to a jokey version of ‘Brazil’ and then somehow swung it back.

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How did Robert De Niro come to join what was otherwise very much your stock company of actors?

I think this was the first cameo role that De Niro did, and it was basically because Arnon was working with him on *Once Upon a Time in America*. He came over and I invited him to pick a part, anything he wanted to do, and of course he chose Mike Palin’s party, because Jack is a complex character and Bobby had always played complex characters. The part he ended up playing, Tuttle, was really hard for him to get his head round because it’s just such a simple, direct character. I said to him, ‘Bobby, you are that man, you’re a hero to all of us, and you don’t have to complicate it—just be.’

What happened then was tat he approached this small
part as if he was doing the main part. He kept flying to London and spent months arguing over every piece of costume and every prop. He was going to brain surgeons he knew in New York and watching operations because I’d said that the character, although a plumber, was like a surgeon. The glasses were his idea. We actually built a mock-up of the set just so that he could practise. It was as if we weren’t making the main film; the special effects and costume people were going crazy because they had so much other work to do, but every time Bobby came in, everything would stop and we had to deal with him preparing for his role. He’s just not aware of anything else in the world and he makes the most of whatever it is he has to do. He's very serious, very earnest and very hard-working, but it drove everybody else crazy.

Unfortunately this [requiring many many takes] set a very bad example for Kim GiREST, whose first major film it was. She wanted to have thirty takes too, but I told her that when she was as good as De Niro she could have thirty; until then she could only have four like everyone else. ...Then Jonathan began to feel pissed off, because De Niro was one of his heroes, but he’d started hating his hero because the hero’s taking up all the time and affecting his performance. It was rough but the end justified it all. Not only was De Niro great, but he gave the film a certain cachet and, ultimately, he accompanied me on to the major American chat shows for the final battle over Brazil. We had the right guy in the foxhole with us.

Brazil is, above all, a weird self-contained world and it looks as if it was a huge construction job, quite apart from the found locations. Did you build much?

Not as much as you’d think. What interest me more is altering a location, because there’s so much of reality there to begin with. Our main builds, like the gigantic Ministry foyer, were done at Lee’s on a relatively small stage. We built that very cheaply using four-by-eight-foot sheets of hardboard, which were marbled, just as you would marble paper. ...

A feature of the design of the Ministry is that it was supposed to be rectilinear and, the further you get into it, the more squared up and sanitized it becomes. As Sam goes higher, he reaches the floor with all the white tiles, and the torture room was going to be a forty-foot-square cube of white tiles, completely boxing you in. But when we were looking for locations, we visited Croydon Power Station, because we were searching for big façades. I looked inside the cooling tower—something I’ve wanted to do for most of my life. There was this great circular parabolic space that rose up 200 feet and I immediately knew we had to use this. But for what? Then I realized it was the torture room—almost completely the opposite of what I was planning, but I just knew it was right, because it would be a bigger surprise than finding the white cube which you’re more of less expecting. So that leap, and all the other leaps, saved me from my own mediocrity. I think my dreams and fantasies and images are often mediocre, until reality intrudes and transforms them.

Where and when is Brazil set? What were your visual references?

It’s everywhere in the twentieth century, on the Los Angeles/Belfast border. I wasn’t thinking of retro particularly, but there are bits of everything coming from all directions. There’s a lot of growing up in America in the forties: progress and the utopian vision were always there, with technology as the answer to all our needs, so you see a lot of that. The posters are very much the kind of thing you would see in Popular Mechanics. In fact, we were using all those magazines from the forties and fifties as sources, and, because we couldn’t afford to build things, we had posters extending the world beyond what you see images of, for instance, holidays and technology.

Some of the technology was a deliberate mixture of the futuristic and the Victorian, like the typist who has this weird thing on her hand. I think it’s a Victorian invention that was supposed to be for exercising the fingers or for giving them electric shocks; I thought it would be interesting to use it as a kind of typing machine that was recording her movements. There’s also a sense of German Expressionism, but because the Expressionist films were always in black and white. Roger Pratt used colours from Expressionist paintings, mixing yellows and oranges with blues and greens in the lighting. You see a lot of mixing warm and cold colours today, but people weren’t doing that in the mid-eighties; we took our cue from the way German Expressionist painters put contrasting colours together so that they jarred....

And the famous ducts?

The ducts which everybody talks about came from two sources. One was the Pompidou Centre in Paris, which has its guts on its outside; and the other was me coming to England and noticing these Regency buildings with beautiful cornices and mouldings which have been smashed through to run the pipe from the toilet down the outside. It was the violation of an aesthetic for the sake of the mod cons...that greed to get the goodies at the expense of beauty started me going.

...The other question that always came up in these discussions was: are the terrorists real? To which I would always say that I don’t know if they are, because this huge organization has to survive at all costs, so if there is no real terrorism it has to invent terrorists to maintain itself—that’s what organizations do.

In fact the initial spark for Brazil really came from a seventeenth century document I stumbled across, from a time when witch-hunts were at their height. This was a chart of the costs of different tortures and you had to pay for every bundle of faggots that burned you. I started thinking about the guy who was a clerk in the court and had to be present while the tortures were going on, to take down testimonies. It’s an awful job, but this man has a wife and kids to support, so how does he deal with it? That’s actually where Brazil really started, before Port Talbot. There’s a theory that the witch-hunts died out because they were a system that got too big for its boots and started going for ever bigger fish. They started nibbling at the lower nobility—at which point the aristocracy just clamped down and that was the end of witch-hunting; there was a pan-European collapse. Before that, it was a self-perpetuating organization that needed to find witches; they found them and, what was really grotesque, you paid to be punished.

This became the idea of the Buttles’ cheque, which was one of the earliest scenes I wrote. I knew that Sam thinks he’s a good Boy Scout; it’s Christmas time, so he’s doing his best for everybody by taking his chance. Normally you wouldn’t do that in the system, but he thought this was a great humane gesture, without understanding what he was doing. I think this is an important scene.

During the witch-hunts, there was nothing better than to have one come to your town. If you were an innkeeper or a local merchant, this was the big time: the circus comes to town and everybody pours in from the countryside to watch the burnings—great for business. Everyone benefited, except for a few. And it was the little guys, the Buttles, who fuelled this
horrendous system.

You wanted to show the logicality as well as the banality of evil? There's no Big Brother.
I didn't want it to be a totalitarian system like in 1984 or Brave New World. Even Mr Helpmann isn't the top guy, he's the deputy. There probably is no top guy, since everybody abdicates responsibility; the buck doesn't stop here, it always stops at the next person up. Although it's often described as a totalitarian world, I don't think it is, since the sum of the parts isn't quite the total that we're looking at in a totalitarian system. This may be why people around the world, whether in Eastern Europe or in Argentina, all recognized the place; it's not 1984, it's now. People have often said to me, surely you've been to Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Poland and so on, but I haven't been to any of these places; this is just what's going on, more or less, in every society; we only needed to push it a bit further in the film.

The ducts led us into the morality or the politics of the film...
One of our locations was the National Liberal Club, which seemed a perfect setting for this non-liberal society. We used it for Sam's mother's luxurious apartment, and again we ran the ducts through it. If you look carefully, you can see the ducts going through antique tapestries, violating everything. On the other hand, Sam has this modern flat, with all the ducts tucked away neatly, so that he can go through life not having to bother about how it works—except that it never does quite work properly: it promises everything but only does half the job.

For me, the architecture in the film as much a set of characters as those that speak and wear clothes. All the sets have a function within the whole process, they represent specific ideas. I think this probably sets me apart from many other film-makers, who think of background as just that and not an integral character. For example, Croydon Power Station, which we used for the exterior of the Ministry, was built in the thirties, at a time when we believed we knew the answers. There was a collective dream of progress and a centralized belief in the perfectibility of man—either through technology or through fascism, which effectively amounted to the same thing. The plastic-surgery clinic was shot at the house of Lord Leighton, the Victorian painter and collector, in a lush Moorish atmosphere that was just right for it.

What I love about London is the variety of buildings from a great variety of times. You can go from Lord Leighton's to Croydon Power Station, from the National Liberal Club to Victoria Docks, where we found a huge flour mill. In fact, the desks in the clerks' pool are Victorian wooden flour-milling equipment that we converted. I really liked the idea of putting them through the looking glass to make them into something different. When Sam rises to Warren's level, we were using the base of the great grain storage silos....We only had the money to build one corridor, which ran about fifty feet before it ended with a painted false perspective; then, between the uprights, we put the walls with doors—although only two of them actually opened. When Sam is looking down all the different corridors, we did a whip pan from our single corridor to blackness, then continued the movement with a whip back to the corridor, and repeated this. So there's just one corridor used again and again, which I like—even though we were forced to do it—because the uniformity is really disturbing.

For me, raising questions, instead of giving answers, is what I want to do in films. You don't cross all the t's and dot all the i's.

What about the film's different beginnings and endings? Why so many versions?
There was a wonderful beginning that Tom wrote, with a beetle in an idyllic rainforest, who is disrupted by a great tree-gobbling machine that reduces the forest to paper pulp, which is then poured into a truck that heads towards the city as the beetle flutters overhead. The truck enters a paper mill that spews out huge rolls of paper which are taken to a printworks, which then churns out reams of printed pages that are bound into a document, which lands on a technician’s desk. As the technician picks it up to swat the beetle that's now buzzing around his office, we can see the title page: it is a government paper on saving the rainforests. I thought that just encapsulated everything, but we couldn't afford to do it. Now it begins with a Central Services commercial that was written by Charles McKeown.

Doesn't it begin with clouds?
No, the clouds are in the American version. The English—or European—one just has the time come up, followed by 'somewhere in the twentieth century'; then, from the Central Services ad, there's a pull-back, and you see the window of a shop with TVs and videos, before it blows up....

The American version allows the song to be heard at the beginning. We start with 'Brazil, da, da, da,' then from that beautiful soaring, sweeping thing, it comes down to earth. There were two versions of the end in the original script and I could never make up my mind whether to leave the torture room bare, as we did in the European version, or to have it slowly fill with clouds, leaving Sam strapped in the chair while they float around him, which we did for the American version, so after looking at both for the laser disc, I went back to the original, hard, no-compromise European ending.

I remember after a screening in Chicago bumping into someone who had already seen the film in Europe and asking him if he'd noticed that the ending was slightly different. Interestingly, he thought there were clouds in the European version; he had experienced the effect of clouds filling the room through the music, which was what we had intended. In a strange way, it was meant to be a hopeful ending, since the film had started from the challenge: can you make a movie where the happy ending is a man going insane? I always thought the ending was chilling, but then it bursts out musically and suddenly it's wonderful—wonderful in the context of all the possibilities open to our boy—at least he's free in his mind. Again, with the clouds at the end, the clouds at the beginning made sense: there was a nice book-end feeling to it. Whereas, in the European version, you start hard and dark and you end as you began.

I feel that in films you should let the audience know very early on what they're in for, then you can take them in other directions, but at least you've warned them. I don't like it when endings are out of keeping with what's gone before, like the tacked-on ending of Blade Runner. That could have been a brilliant film, except that the compromises at the end betray the intelligence of the audience.

Apart from the Universal executives, were you surprised by the response to the film?
People were stunned by it and the reaction was very polarized; there was no middle ground. They either thought it was fantastic, or terrible, awful, unwatchable.
Many said they found it hard to follow. That even happened with Time Bandits. A lot of people just don’t seem to be trained to watch this kind of film, because everything is always handed to them on a plate. I think many were overwhelmed by the visuals and missed the performances. I remember the British reviews were mostly like that: only one mentioned Jonathan’s performance. They seemed to think it was all about visual pyrotechnics. But the great revelation was when I went to Paris to promote it. All the reviewers and journalists were thanking me for this wonderful work, and calling it ‘poetic’ and ‘symphonic’. This came as a genuine surprise, because there’s a side to me that’s trying to be the eternal bad boy, to stir things up and get reactions. It’s too dangerous to hope they love me, but at least I can make them hate me and wake them up. The reaction in France made me stop and think, ‘Maybe I am an artist?’

Around Europe generally it was a young person’s film, which is all right by me. If I ask myself who I was making it for, the answer would be myself at about age eighteen, when I was just waking up to the potential of film, to all sorts of books and ideas. Students loved it, but this also worried me because I didn’t want to be just an intellectual film-maker. I wanted to be a popular film-maker, yet much of the general public didn’t know what to make of it and just walked away.

I would say that about 60 per cent of the US reviews were really good, and the rest were hateful—which is fine. The worst thing is being dismissed: you want to be hated or loved, but not ignored. I remember the screening at Universal for the studio execs, in the Alfred Hitchcock Theatre. I made a little speech, being silly in order to get all these stiff men in stiff suits to relax. Then the film started and I left. Five minutes before the end, I sneaked into the projection box. All I could see were angry red necks, with muscles knotted; their shoulders had risen and nothing was moving. I realized they hated it, but of course they came out lying in their teeth, saying it was ‘interesting’ and ‘we’ve got to talk’—anything to get out of there. But Arnon was bubbling; he thought they all loved it and it was celebration time. That’s what I like about Arnon: he was naïve because he loved the film, but I had to break it to him that this was not where we were.

Before that, we’d done a lot of shifting around in the cutting. We would pull dreams from one place and put them somewhere else, or we would cut them in half and move bits about. Brazil was a bit of a jigsaw in that way; after each screening, we’d shift something or put a line in. In the restaurant scene, we had a line about how Sam must believe in something, he must believe in dreams—‘No, I don’t believe’—and we cut this because it seemed unnecessary, but in the end we had to put it back in. I was always stunned by how people had difficulty following what is basically a very simple story, but I think the problem is there’s so much detail in Brazil they get distracted. Hitchcock, for instance, will go into close-up on something that’s key, and hold it until he’s sure everyone’s got it. But I make it harder to spot what information is vital. The result is that you can see the film again and again and discover things; it’s a real world there and, as in life, it’s not always easy to judge where the real story is. I’m cursed by constantly wanting to bring real life—the reality of life, the experience of life—into the movie house. I may do it in a way that seems totally unreal, but this is only because I’m trying to deal with the unreality and weirdness and confusion of life itself.

After you delivered a version of Brazil eleven minutes longer than contracted to Universal, this started a struggle between you and the studio, with Milchan initially trying to mediate before he came out fighting on your side, which eventually became almost as famous as the film. Since Jack Matthew’s book, The Battle of Brazil, covers that in detail, I’m going to suggest we don’t go over the same ground again. Except I can’t resist quoting your famous whole-page ad in Variety, which read in full, ‘Dear Sid Sheinberg. When are you going to release my film, BRAZIL? Terry Gilliam.’

Most of the stuff is in Jack’s book, including how Kenneth Turan was first to write about it in the States and described it as ‘the masterpiece you’ll never get to see’. That was a good start. It let people know that there was an interesting film being suppressed, and soon there was a whole range of troops lining up for the battle. I think one of the nicest articles was Salman Rushdie’s piece on the film, in which he said, ‘We’re all Brazilians, we’re all strangers in a strange land.’ He was sharing the fact that both he and I are expatriates. I discovered later that Rushdie is a great comic-book fan, and Brazil is done very much like a Marvel comic. While everyone else is trying to film actual comic-books—and I’ve always wanted to do them too—in the end I think Brazil is as close to that as anything. The way it’s shot, with a lot of wide-angle lenses to force the perspective and distort things, makes it visually a kind of caricature. It’s trying to drag this second- or third-rate art up into the premier league, not as the Batman or Superman, films, but by dealing with what really goes on in comic books.

No superheroes or supervillains. That’s right. And where there is an attempt to create a comic-book superhero in the dreams, we can see how escapist and simplistic it is. However inspirational, comic-book heroes don’t solve any of the problems of real life...

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What are your earliest memories?

Snow White is the first movie I can remember and The Thief of Bagdad was the first film to give me nightmares. But I also remember having scarlet fever—one of the many fevers you could get in Minnesota—and that was the first time I really hallucinated. I was in the bedroom, and I could hear my parents in the kitchen and the refrigerator was blowing up and killing them all. It’s remained with me, as if I’m still in that room. I still have certain dreams that cling, which I’d swear are real, because my senses and my whole body seem to have experiences them. That’s always been the problem, not knowing what’s real and what isn’t. I’ve got this sense memory of dreams I remember clearly, yet other things that really did happen I don’t remember at all, so which is more valid? I only know that one has formed me more than the other: that’s been basic from the beginning.

The other thing that was important to me as a kid was radio. I’m convinced it gave me half of my imagination, or at least exercised those muscles. Whole worlds existed in this little box, and you had to people them with faces, build the sets, do the costumes, do the lighting, everything. It certainly introduced me to much more than I was getting in Minnesota. There were two worlds: one was real, with trees, and plants and snakes, which I loved and wallowed in; and the other was the exotic realm of The Shadow, The Fat Man, Let’s Pretend and Johnny Lujack, Catholic Quarterback from Notre Dame. The stories were always dark— somehow radio is good for shadows—and they tended to be urban.
You have to leave spaces for people’s imaginations to do the work. When I make a film, I lay things out but I don’t always show how they relate. I juxtapose things and the mind has to make the connections. It’s not that I want to confuse the audience, like it’s a puzzle to be solved. I try to make the audience work at it and do their bit, and if it succeeds then everyone comes out with their own film. I know the story I’m trying to tell, but the one they come away with may be a different one, which is fine and dandy because they’ve become a part of the film-making process.

From when I was a little kid, I always drew cartoons. The first contest I won, when I was about ten, I won by cheating—and so my career began. We’d gone to the zoo and we were supposed to draw an animal that we’d remembered. I’d slipped a book in under my desk and I copied a bear, which won me a box of crayons. So from the beginning I was cheating and stealing! I think my mother has kept some early drawings I did of domestic things, such as a Hoover, that became Martians. Instead of anthropomorphizing, I was alienizing them. The other very important element was that we were serious churchgoers and I read the Bible all the way through. . .twice. You can’t beat those stories for scale and drama and passion., and I grew up with all of that.

Thanks to all the church stuff when I was a kid, and with my father a carpenter and my mother clearly a virgin, I knew who I was, and my desire for martyrdom was considerable. A few years ago my wife Maggie said she’d never really thought about mortality, and I found myself saying that every single day since I was a kid I’ve thought about my own death. I always felt I was chosen and that I had something special—which is easy to translate into the wrong things if you’re not careful. That’s where humour has been my saving grace. When I look at other directors—all of whom are clearly mad and think they’re God—the question is: how to combat the feeling that you’re the Messiah with all the answers. I had a sense of what the truth of things was and I wanted to clear the world out a bit and do good, and yet my sense of humour always undercut these impulses. ‘I fight not for me but for the gift that I’ve got’—this idea comes from a religious background. Well, I’m not the Messiah, but I’ve got a lot of stuff here which has to be protected from all those other people who are trying to destroy it.

...In the end, I decided that religion is about making people feel comfortable—providing explanations and giving answers—while magic is about accepting the mystery and living with question marks. Mystery intrigued me more than answers. The difference between Close Encounters of the Third Kind and 2001: A Space Odyssey is that the end of Kubrick’s film is a question, while the end of Close Encounters is an answer—and it’s a really silly answer—little kids in latex suits.

In general America tends to be afraid of nonsense. That’s what I liked about English comedies—they weren’t afraid to be nonsensical—but America’s always too busy being earnest, moulding itself, wanting everything to be educational.

I came from a world where Doris Day and Rock Hudson films used to drive me crazy, because everyone in them was so clean and well-scrubbed and shiny, with perfect white teeth and hair always in place. The world isn’t like that, yet it was depicted this way in the cinema and people seemed to believe it, which really bothered me. . . .

I think that was why I moved to New York, to get away from all the cleanliness and neatness, which felt artificial, and to live instead in squalor, which felt honest and real.

. . .I have to say that one bit of reading that is absolute bullshit is what Eisenstein wrote about his music scores-composition of picture goes left, right, rising, so the music’s got to rise in the same shape. Rubbish. For years I believed this because the guy was a genius; in fact, I think a lot of my life has been spent believing in geniuses and their godlike stature—especially their total control over what they do, their complete understanding of everything that they do. But I’ve never experienced that: it’s always been after the event.

I think that was Eisenstein’s experience too. A lot of his writing . . .is really an attempt to understand what he’d done intuitively in his films. As he said, more than once, ‘No one ever asks if I follow my own principles.’ But it’s true that it can look as though he’s completely in control.

Did I tell you about my one trip to Moscow, when we showed Brazil? I went to the Eisenstein Museum with David Robinson, and I was already working on Munchausen. Suddenly I saw a copy of Munchausen on the bookshelf, but when I reached up for it, I knocked a framed drawing on to the ground, which was a cartoon that Walt Disney had done for Eisenstein. My plan all along was to make Munchausen as a Disney cartoon, but in live action. Wasn’t that wonderful? I forgive Sergei all the bullshit. In fact, I’ve always loved his appearance, with that great beaming face and Eraserhead hair.

David Morgan: The Saga of BRAZIL. Terry Gilliam discusses the making and near-unmaking of his dystopian fantasy.

Unlike many directors whose technical prowess seems to come at the cost of good performances, you draw some excellent work from every member of your cast. How do you balance the visual and dramatic elements?

There’s a script and a storyboard there to give us something to talk about, and we do spend a lot of time. I think the main trick is casting the right people, because if you get the right people it's quite easy to make a film. You don't spend a lot of time "directing" the performances because they understand exactly what it's about. And things they bring to the film which may be different from what I was originally intending, may be better than what we intended.

Now Ian Holm is just technically an unbelievably good actor, and some of the things that he was doing as Kurtzmann in BRAZIL just surprised everyone who was working on the film. He was doing things as Kurtzmann that he had never done before, and it was partly because he trusted me after playing Napoleon in TIME BANDITS, because I didn't make him look anything other than as good as he is. And so he allowed me more material than a lot of people would have given me as Kurtzmann because he was taking chances in his performance, and some of the parts didn't work and other bits did work but at least he tried it and so it's on film. You know with careful editing you can use those bits. It makes the character more interesting than he had been written, or even more interesting than Ian would have done if it had been the first film we had worked on together.

I really like working with actors; I've discovered that an awful lot of film directors don't. I think they think the actors get in the way of their special effects. The trick on BRAZIL that's so difficult was that the actors did have to act in these very
technically complicated scenes with lots of effects going on and
yet they had to behave as if it's all ordinary, as if nothing is
happening, and still put in a good performance.

How did the European distributor of BRAZIL react to the film, as
opposed to its American distributor?

Fox in Europe behaved just as most film companies would: there's
the finished film, it's got its flaws but there it is, and they were
really excited by it. And, in fact, in their contract they had the
same time clause as Universal had, which is a running time of 2
hours 5 minutes, and they just waived the clause. And
unfortunately with Universal, for a variety of reasons – some to do
with internal politics, some to do with the fact that it's a different
group of people and that Universal is far closer to the bureaucracy
that was portrayed in BRAZIL – they were just stunned by it. And
they didn't know quite what to make of it. And even though the
script was shot as approved and all of those things, they just
weren't sure, because they're very nervous people. They're paid
enormous sums of money to be able to predict exactly what the
public wants. And I think that can lead to real neuroses on their
part because it's an impossible task.

And so their immediate reaction was a nervous one:
'We're not sure what we've got, so let's try to change it into
something that we do understand.' And I refused to play ball with
them. I said, 'Sorry, this is the film that we agreed to make.' And
then it got into this legalistic argument. And the only thing they
really had over us was the time clause, and that's what they used to
try to make us change the essence of the film. There is in fact a cut
version of BRAZIL which I haven't seen but I've heard what it is
and it's a totally different film. And then it just got into this battle:
I wasn't going to budge, and Sid Sheinberg [President of MCA,
Inc., Universal's parent company] in particular had to show that
the studios were in control. So we were locked in this sort of silly,
long, drawn-out war of attrition. I don't think they were expecting
me to be as immovable as I was, because they're used to working
with people who live in Hollywood, and whose bread and butter is
very much dependent upon the whims and friendship of the people
at the studios, and I sit here 6000 miles away in London saying,
'Why should I change it if it's the film we agreed to make?' And I
don't think they were prepared for that attitude. And on it went.

I think what was awful about it was that it wasted a year
of my life, when I should have been getting on with the next film.
The frustrating thing about it was that it became like a repeat of
the film itself. It was so identical to the story, and the depressing
thing about it was that I knew how the film ended!

One thing I knew we couldn't do was take them on legal
ways because they had the lawyers, they had the money, they had
all the time in the world and we didn't. There was no way we
could win with them on it. It would just get tied up in the courts
and go on for years. And so that's why I decided the only way to
deal with it was to go very public and do a public battle, and to
tackle the names which was something they were totally unprepared to
deal with. Rather than say Universal was involved, I said, 'it's not
Universal, it's one man – his name is Sid Sheinberg. And that
really drove them crazy because they didn't know how to deal with
that. I think the only thing that kept me sane throughout all that
was how funny it was. So terrifying. The film could have just
disappeared and all I could do was keep being outrageous publicly
and hopefully get a few people on our side to make enough noise
to get it out of their clutches.

Could you comment on the rather cynical tone that infuses your
comedy, from JABBERWOCKY through to BRAZIL, and even in
your animated films?

It's amazing that you say cynical because that's come up
before. I don't think I'm cynical. I'm skeptical; I don't think I'm
cynical about things. The terrible fact is that I'm terribly optimistic
about things. I have a theory about BRAZIL in that if was a very
difficult film for a pessimist to watch but it was okay for an
optimist to watch it. For a pessimist it just confirms his worst
fears; an optimist could somehow find a grain of hope in the
ending. Cynicism bothers me because cynicism is in a way an
admission of defeat, whereas skepticism is fairly healthy, and also
it implies that there is the possibility of change.

Strangely enough, the characters in BRAZIL I actually
like. I don't agree with them, I don't approve of them, but I
somehow feel that they're all trapped in a world of their own
making. Even the bad guys, the shock troops. One takes his helmet
off and he's talking about his eyebrows. I left that in just because I
wanted to give those guys a moment, too, of being human beings,
with their own little sets of problems.

And they apologize for being rough to people.

Yeah. They're very polite but they still bash his brains out. I think
at times I despair at the way things are in the world, but I haven't
given up.

ONLY ONE MORE FILM IN THE FALL 2005 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:
Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti THE LEOPARD/IL GATTOPARDO 1963 (35mm)

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