The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus (2009, 123 minutes)

Directed by Terry Gilliam
Written by Terry Gilliam and Charles McKeown
Produced by Amy Gilliam, Terry Gilliam, Samuel Hadida and William Vince
Music by Jeff Danna and Mychael Danna
Cinematography by Nicola Pecorini
Production Design by Terry Gilliam and Anastasia Masaro
Art Direction by Terry Gilliam, Dan Hermansen, Denis Schnegg and David Warren

Cast

Andrew Garfield…Anton
Christopher Plummer…Doctor Parnassus
Richard Riddell…Martin
Katie Lyons…Martin's Girlfriend
Richard Shanks…Friend of Martin
Lily Cole…Valentina
Verne Troyer…Percy
Bruce Crawford…Face Changed Martin
Johnny Harris…Policeman
Lorraine Cheshire…Mum
Mark Benton…Dad
Lewis Gott…Diego
Sian Scott…Linda
Simon Day…Uncle Bob (as Simon Daye)
Moya Brady…Aunty Flo
Charles McKeown…Fairground's Inspector (scenes deleted)
Tom Waits…Mr. Nick
Mackenzie Gray…First Monk
Kis Yurij…Second Monk (as Yurij Kis)
Ian A. Wallace…Third Monk
Heath Ledger…Tony
Johnny Depp…Imaginarium Tony 1
Jude Law…Imaginarium Tony 2
Colin Farrell…Imaginarium Tony 3


(from Wikipedia) Terrence Vance "Terry" Gilliam (born 22 November 1940) is an American-born British screenwriter, film director, animator, actor, comedian and member of the Monty Python comedy troupe.

Gilliam has directed 12 feature films… The only "Python" not born in Britain, he became a naturalised British citizen in 1968 and formally renounced his American citizenship in 2006.

Early life
Gilliam was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the son of Beatrice (née Vance) and James Hall Gilliam. His father was a travelling salesman for Folgers before becoming a carpenter. Soon after, they moved to nearby Medicine Lake, Minnesota.

The family moved to the Los Angeles neighbourhood of Panorama City in 1952. Gilliam attended Birmingham High School where he was class president and senior prom king. He was voted "Most Likely to Succeed", and achieved straight A's. During high school, he began to avidly read Mad magazine, then edited by Harvey Kurtzman, which would later influence Gilliam's work. Gilliam later spoke to Salman Rushdie about defining experiences in the 1960s that would set the foundations for his views on the world, later influencing his art and career:

"I became terrified that I was going to be a full-time, bomb-throwing terrorist if I stayed [in the U.S.] because it was the beginning of really bad times in America. It was '66-'67, it was the first police riot in Los Angeles. [...] In college my major was political science, so my brain worked that way. [...] And I drove around this little English Hillman Minx—top down—and every night I'd be hauled over by the cops. Up against the wall, and all this stuff. They had this monologue with me; it was never a dialogue. It was that I was a long-haired drug addict living off some rich guy's foolish daughter. And I said, "No, I work in advertising, I make twice as much as you do." Which is a stupid thing to say to a cop. [...]"

“And it was like an epiphany. I suddenly felt what it was like to be a black or Mexican kid living in L.A. Before that, I thought I knew what the world was like, I thought I knew what poor people were, and then suddenly it all changed because of that simple thing of being brutalized by cops. And I got more and more angry and I just felt, I've got to get out of here—I'm a better cartoonist than I am a bomb maker. That's why so much of the U.S. is still standing.”

Gilliam graduated from Occidental College in 1962 with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science.

Animations
Gilliam started his career as an animator and strip cartoonist. One of his early photographic strips for Help! featured future Python cast member John Cleese. When Help! folded, Gilliam went to Europe, jokingly announcing in the very last issue that he was "being transferred to the European branch" of the magazine, which, of course, did not exist. Moving to England, he animated sequences for the children's series Do Not Adjust Your Set, which also featured Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin.

Monty Python
Gilliam was a part of Monty Python's Flying Circus from its outset, at first credited as an animator (his name was listed separately after the other five in the closing credits), later as a full member. His cartoons linked the show's sketches together, and defined the group's visual language in other media (such as LP and book covers, and the title sequences of their films). Gilliam's animations mix his own art, characterised by soft gradients and odd, bulbous shapes, with backgrounds and moving cutouts from antique photographs, mostly from the Victorian era.

In 1978, Gilliam published a book called Animations of Mortality, which was an illustrated tongue-in-cheek, semi-autobiographical how-to guide to his animation techniques and visual language in them. Roughly 15 years later, between the release of the Monty Python's Complete Waste of Time CD-ROM game in 1994 which used many of Gilliam's animation templates, and the making of Gilliam's film Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1998), Gilliam was in negotiations with one software company called Enteractive, Inc. to tentatively release in the autumn of 1996 a CD-ROM under the same title as his 1978 book, containing all of his thousands of 1970s animation templates as free license clip arts for people to create their own flash animations out of them, but the project hovered in limbo for years, probably because Enteractive was about to downsize critically in mid-1996 and later change its focus from CD-ROM multimedia presentations to internet business solutions and web hosting in 1997 (in the introduction to their 2004 book Terry Gilliam: Interviews, David Sterritt and Lucille Rhodes cited "the internet" overwhelming “the computer-communications market” as reason for why the Animations of Mortality CD-ROM had never materialised). Around the time of Gilliam's film The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus (2009), the project had morphed into the idea of releasing his 1970s animation templates as a free license download of Adobe After Effects files or similar.

Besides doing the animations, he also appeared in several sketches, though he rarely had any main roles and did considerably less acting in the sketches. He did however have some notable sketch roles such as Cardinal Fang of the Spanish Inquisition, the bespectacled commenter who said "I can't add anything to that!" from the Election Night Special sketch, Kevin Garibaldi (the brat on the couch shouting "I want more beans!" from "Most Awful Family in Britain 1974", Episode 45) and the Screaming Queen in a cape and mask singing "Ding dong merrily on high." More frequently, he played parts that no one else wanted to play (generally because they required a lot of make-up or uncomfortable costumes, such as a recurring knight in armour who would end sketches by walking on and hitting one of the other characters over the head with a plucked chicken) and took a number of small roles in the films, including Patsy in Monty Python and the Holy Grail (which he co-directed with Terry Jones, where Gilliam was responsible for photography, while Jones
would guide the actors' performances) and the jailer in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

**Directing**

With the gradual break-up of the Python troupe between *Life of Brian* in 1979 and *The Meaning of Life* in 1983, Gilliam became a screenwriter and director, building upon the experience he had acquired during the making of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Gilliam says he used to think of his films in terms of trilogies, starting with *Time Bandits* in 1981. The 1980s saw Gilliam's self-written *Trilogy of Imagination* about "the ages of man" in *Time Bandits* (1981), *Brazil* (1985), and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988). All are about the "craziness of our awkwardly ordered society and the desire to escape it through whatever means possible." All three movies focus on these struggles and attempts to escape them through imagination; *Time Bandits*, through the eyes of a child, *Brazil*, through the eyes of a thirty-something, and *Munchausen*, through the eyes of an elderly man.

Throughout the 1990s, Gilliam directed his *Trilogy of Americana: The Fisher King* (1991), *12 Monkeys* (1995), and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), which played on North American soil, and while still being surreal, had less fantastical plots than his previous trilogy.

**Themes and philosophy**

“Well, I really want to encourage a kind of fantasy, a kind of magic. I love the term magic realism, whoever invented it – I do actually like it because it says certain things. It's about expanding how you see the world. I think we live in an age where we're just hammered, hammered to think this is what the world is. Television's saying, everything's saying 'That's the world.' And it's not the world. The world is a million possible things.”

— Terry Gilliam: *Salman Rushdie talks with Terry Gilliam*

As for his philosophical background in screenwriting and directing, Gilliam said on the TV show *First Hand* on *RoundhouseTV*: “There’s so many film schools, so many media courses which I actually am opposed to. Because I think it’s more important to be educated, to read, to learn things, because if you're gonna be in the media and if you'll have to say things, you have to know things. If you only know about cameras and ‘the media’, what're you gonna be talking about except cameras and the media? So it's better learning about philosophy and art and architecture [and] literature, these are the things to be concentrating on it seems to me. Then, you can fly...”

His films are usually highly imaginative fantasies. His long-time co-writer Charles McKeown comments about Gilliam's recurring interests, "the theme of imagination, and the importance of imagination, to how you live and how you think and so on [...] that's very much a Terry theme." Most of Gilliam's movies include plot-lines that seem to occur partly or completely in the characters' imaginations, raising questions about the definition of identity and sanity. He often shows his opposition to bureaucracy and authoritarian regimes. He also distinguishes "higher" and "lower" layers of society, with a disturbing and ironic style. His movies usually feature a fight or struggle against a great power which may be an emotional situation, a human-made idol, or even the person himself, and the situations do not always end happily. There is often a dark, paranoid atmosphere and unusual characters who formerly were normal members of society. His scripts feature black comedy, and often end with a dark tragicomic twist.

As Gilliam is fascinated with the Baroque due to the historical age's pronounced struggle between spirituality and logical rationality, there is often a rich baroquequeness and dichotomous electorate about his movies, with, for instance, high-tech computer monitors equipped with low-tech magnifying lenses in *Brazil*, and in *The Fisher King* a red knight covered with flapping bits of cloth.

He also is given to incongruous juxtapositions of beauty and ugliness, or antique and modern. Regarding Gilliam's theme of modernity's struggle between spirituality and rationality whereas the individual may become dominated by a tyrannical, soulless machinery of disenchanted society, film critic Keith James Hamel observed a specific affinity of Gilliam's movies with the writings of economic historian Arnold Toynbee and sociologist Max Weber, specifically the latter's concept of the Iron cage of modern rationality.

**Look and style**

Gilliam's films have a distinctive look not only in mise-en-scène but even more so in photography, often recognisable from just a short clip; to create a surreal atmosphere of psychological unrest and a world out-of-balance, Gilliam frequently uses unusual camera angles, particularly low-angle shots, high-angle shots, and Dutch angles. Roger Ebert has said "his world is always hallucinatory in its richness of detail." Most of his movies are shot almost entirely with rectilinear ultra wide angle lenses of 28 mm focal length or less to achieve a distinctive signature style defined by extreme perspective distortion and extremely deep focus. Gilliam's long-time director of photography Nicola Pecorini has said, “with Terry and me, a long lens means something between a 40mm and a 65mm.” This attitude markedly differs from the common definition in photography which qualifies 40mm to 65mm as the focal length of a normal lens instead, due to resembling the natural human field of view, unlike Gilliam's signature style defined by extreme perspective distortion due to his usual choice of focal length. In fact, over the years, the 14mm lens has become informally known as "The Gilliam" among film-makers due to the director's frequent use of it since at least *Brazil*. Gilliam has explained his preference for using wide-angle lenses in his films: “The wide-angle lenses, I think I choose them because it makes me feel like I'm in the space of the film, I'm surrounded. My prevalent vision is full of detail, and that's what I like about it. It's actually harder to do, it's harder to light. The other thing I like about wide-angle lenses is that I'm not forcing the audience to look at just the one thing that is important. It's there, but there's other things to occupy, and some people don't like that because I'm not pointing things out as precisely as I could if I was to use a long lens where...
I'd focus just on the one thing and everything else would be out of focus. [...] 

“My films, I think, are better the second and third time, frankly, because you can now relax and go with the flow that may not have been as apparent as the first time you saw it and wallow in the details of the worlds we're creating. [...] I try to clutter [my visuals] up, they're worthy of many viewings.”

In another interview, Gilliam mentioned, in relation to the 9.8mm Kinoptic lens he had first used on *Brazil*, that wide-angle lenses make small film sets "look big". The widest lens he has used so far is an 8mm Zeiss lens employed on *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*.

**Production problems**

Gilliam has made a few extremely expensive movies beset with production problems. After the lengthy quarrelling with Universal Studios over *Brazil*, Gilliam's next picture, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, cost around US$46 million, and then earned only about US$8 million in US ticket sales. The film saw no wide domestic release from Columbia Pictures, which was in the process of being sold at the time.

In the mid-1990s, Gilliam and Charles McKeown developed a script for *Time Bandits 2*, a project that never came to be made. Several of the original actors had died. Gilliam also attempted to direct a version of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, which collapsed due to disagreements over its budget and choice of lead actor.

In 1999, Gilliam attempted to film *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, budgeted at US$32.1 million, among the highest-budgeted films to use only European financing; but in the first week of shooting, the actor playing Don Quixote (Jean Rochefort) suffered a herniated disc, and a flood severely damaged the set. The film was cancelled, resulting in an insurance claim of US$15 million. Despite the cancellation, the aborted project did yield the documentary *Lost in La Mancha*, produced from film from a second crew that had been hired by Gilliam to document the making of *Quixote*. After the cancellation, both Gilliam and the film's co-lead, Johnny Depp, wanted to revive the project. The insurance company involved in the failed first attempt withheld the rights to the screenplay for several years but the production was finally restarted in 2008.

Gilliam has attempted twice to adapt Alan Moore's *Watchmen* comics into a film. Both attempts (in 1989 and 1996) were unsuccessful. Most recently, unforeseeable problems again befall a Gilliam project when actor Heath Ledger died in New York City during the filming of *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*.

**Box office**

On the other hand, Gilliam's first successful feature, *Time Bandits* (1981), earned more than eight times its original budget in the United States alone; Gilliam's infamous box office flop *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988) was nevertheless nominated for four Academy Awards (and won, among other European prizes, three BAFTA Awards); his $24 million-budgeted film *The Fisher King* (1991) (his first film not to feature a member from Python) grossed more than $41 million at United States box office; and *12 Monkeys* went on to take over US$168 million worldwide; whilst *The Brothers Grimm*, despite a mixed critical reception, grossed over US$105 million worldwide. Gilliam's $30 million-budgeted film *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* had also become an international box office success, grossing over $60 million in worldwide theatrical release. According to Box Office Mojo, his films have grossed an average of $26,009,723....

*The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*

*The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, directed and co-written by Gilliam, was released in 2009. In January 2007, Gilliam announced that he had been working on a new project with writing partner Charles McKeown. One day later, the fansite Dreams reported that the new project was titled *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*. In October 2007, Dreams confirmed that this would be Gilliam's next project and was slated to star Christopher Plummer and Tom Waits. Production began in December 2007 in London. On 22 January 2008, production of the film was disrupted following the death of Heath Ledger in New York City. *Variety* reported that Ledger's involvement had been a "key factor" in the film's financing. Production was suspended indefinitely by 24 January, but in February actors Johnny Depp, Jude Law, and Colin Farrell signed on to continue Ledger's role, transforming into multiple incarnations of his character in the "magical" world of the film. Thanks to this arrangement principal photography was completed 15 April 2008 on schedule. Editing was completed November 2008. According to the official ParnassusFilm Twitter channel launched on 30 March 2009, the film's post-production FX work finished on 31 March. During the filming, Gilliam was accidentally hit by a bus and broke his back.

The film had successful screenings including a premiere at the 62nd Cannes Film Festival. The UK release for the film was scheduled for 6 June 2009 but was pushed back to 16 October 2009. The USA release was on 25 December 2009. Eventually, this $30 million-budgeted film had grossed more than $60 million in worldwide theatrical release and received two Academy Award nominations.

The film's end credit states that the film is dedicated to the memories of Ledger and William Vince. Depp, Farrell, and Law donated their proceeds from the film to Ledger's daughter. Gilliam has been married to British make-up and costume designer Maggie Weston since 1973. She worked on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, many of the Python movies, and Gilliam's movies up to *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. They have three children, Amy Rainbow Gilliam (born 1978), Holly Dubois Gilliam (born in October 1980), and Harry Thunder Gilliam (born on 3 April 1988), who have also appeared in and/or worked on several of Gilliam's films.

In 1968, Gilliam obtained British citizenship, then held dual American and British citizenship for the next 38 years. In January 2006 he renounced his American citizenship. In an interview with *Der Tagesspiegel*, he described the action as a protest against then-President George W. Bush, and in an earlier
interview with The A.V. Club, he also indicated that it was related to concerns about future tax liability for his wife and children. As a result of renouncing his citizenship, Gilliam is only permitted to spend 29 days per year in the United States, fewer than ordinary British citizens. Gilliam maintains a residence in Italy near the Umbria-Tuscany border. He has been instrumental in establishing the annual Umbria Film Festival, held in the nearby hill town of Montone. Gilliam also resides in North London.

From Terry Gilliam, Gilliamesque (HarperDesign, 2015):

My imagination was always stimulated by enclosed worlds with their own distinct hierarchies and sets of rules—whether they be the virtual reality of Disney’s Tomorrowland, or the medieval castles or Roman courts of the ‘sword and sandal’ movie epics, which I loved just as much. Such well-defined social structures give you something to react against and take the piss out of, and I’ve always—and I still do this—tended to simplify the world into a series of nice, clear-cut oppositions, which I can mess around at the edges of. It’s when things become more abstract and unclear that I start to struggle.

There are few more exotic and compelling examples of a self-contained community than the travelling show, and some of my most vivid childhood memories were supplied by the annual visits of the Clyde Beatty circus, which used to set up in the car park in Panorama City and put the word out for local kids to come and help raise the tents. They’d give you a bit of money in return for the work you did, but I found the carnival atmosphere so intoxicating that I’d probably have done it for nothing. They always needed extra pairs of hands and one year, when I was thirteen or fourteen, I ended up helping out in the freak-show tent. The experience of seeing all the exotic circus acts sitting around playing cards—just like everyday people, except they were pinheads or dwarves—has stayed with me to this day. It wasn’t just the revelation that these extraordinary people would behave in such a normal way that fascinated me—in retrospect that should have been obvious—it was the moment when the show would begin, the barkers would introduce them, ‘All the way from the darkest Africa…’ and they’d have to instantly make that transition to being ‘the leopard man’ or ‘the alligator boy’….

I was always very gregarious and loved making people laugh, but I think ultimately the reason I was never going to become a performer first and foremost—and certainly not an actor—was at heart I don’t have the neediness or incompleteness that will ultimately drive you in that direction….

I’d gone there with no expectation of getting a job, but I’d saved enough money working at Camp Trinity to buy a bit of time, and I just wanted to give myself a chance to make something happen. The first time I stepped out of the station at Times Square, the impact of the looming tall buildings hit me right in the guts. That’s the fundamental difference between LA and New York—the former is flat, while the latter is way over your head. People didn’t generally look at the best part of the buildings—which was the tops—because their gaze was glued to the pavements, but my neck was craning upwards. I think that’s why so many of my films (Brazil and The Fisher King being the obvious ones, but it applies also to Baron Munchausen and Time Bandits as well) ended up having a vertiginous aspect—because it’s taken me decades to process the overwhelming impact of my first arrival in New York…

When you grow up—as I did—reading Grimms’ fairy tales and the Bible, there’s no question that you see it as your duty to change the world for the better. And I think that’s why, for all my frequent recourse to irony and/or sardonic sarcasm, my films have always been repositories of idealism—both in terms of the process of making them and the subject matter of the films themselves. Cynicism can often be the way of covering up one’s own inability to do great deeds. In a way I think that was what had so drawn me to the British sense of humour, because the Brits had almost patented that response—they’d failed an empire, but then by learning to accept failure and make fun of it, they’d almost turned that into a positive thing….

In film-making terms, a lot of directors I’ve been friendly with—from John Landis to Martin Scorsese—have tended to shoot with a trailer full of reference videos (now it would probably be Netflix) so they can study various classic templates of the scene they’ve got in mind. But being one of the those guys who sits in the National Gallery trying to get a perfect copy of the Rembrandt has never been what it’s about for me. I’m much more interested in using what I think I remember of something as a template, rather than going back to check the actuality, because that way I know it’s been through my alembic (the alembic being the distiller that alchemists use for turning base metal into gold, although in my case it does tend to work the other way round)…

Losing one leading man in the middle of filming—as we did when Jean Rochefort’s double herniated disc killed Quixote—
was very bad luck. Losing two was starting to look like carelessness. I wish I could say that somehow wrestling *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* onto the screen after Heath Ledger died in the middle of the shoot was the heroic last stand of a director who refused to bow down to the dictates of a malevolent destiny. But it wasn’t really like that.

Everyone was utterly stunned when the news of Heath’s death came through—it was beyond horrible. It was impossible, unbelievable, unbearable. Not only had we lost a wise and joyous friend, a part of our family, but an extraordinary talent who, I have no doubt, would have been the greatest of his generation. I just said, ‘I don’t give a fuck about the film. I give up. It’s finished. I’m old and tired and worn out and I want to go home.’ Luckily, I surround myself with people who don’t listen to anything I say. My daughter Amy—who was one of the film’s producers—Nicola Pecorini and my friend Ray Cooper kept telling me, ‘You can’t do that, you’ve got to finish it for Heath.’ Whatever arguments they used for a full week and a half—or maybe even two—to rouse me from my slough of despond. Even then, I didn’t personally have the strength and resilience to find a way forward, they just pushed me to the point where I had no other choice, so it became the line of least resistance.

My thought process started off like this: ‘OK, you’ve got to get someone to replace Heath, but there’s no one person who is good enough, and even if there was, I don’t want to work with him even if he was available—which he won’t be at this short notice—and we don’t have the time to re-do the whole film.’ Then I realized, ‘He goes through the magic mirror three times, so maybe we could get three different actors to play him.’ I was partly thinking of Luis Bunuel’s *That Obscure Object of Desire*, where two different actresses play the same character but mainly about how if the part was divided into three, Heath’s three replacements would only need to turn up for a few days.

It’s amazing how often the most satisfying and effective solutions to seemingly insurmountable film-making problems turn out to be completely counter-intuitive. If you need someone to play a giant, it’s always best to ask a short fat-arse. And if you’re agonisingly short of one A-list male lead, why not just get three to replace him?

I was determined that it was only going to be people who really knew and loved Heath, so my first call was to Johnny Depp, who said he would do anything to help. His promise stopped the frantic retreat of the money people, who knew the film would never be finished, and bought us time to get Jude Law and Colin Farrell to join the ride to the rescue. Not only was it extraordinary for those three to step in at such short notice, they gave their fees to Heath’s daughter. Heath’s spirit seemed to be infusing all of us. In fact, when we finished *Dr Parnassus* I thought it was one of the best things I’d ever done.

I remember watching it all the way through and thinking, ‘This is so good—I can’t make a better film than that.’ As it turned out, not as many people as I’d hoped agreed with me and Sony Classics, the American distribution company, didn’t help by barely promoting te film despite its stellar cast (unlike the Italians, who did a bang-up job, making almost twice the money in Italy that we did in the US). At times like that, you find yourself wondering ‘What’s going on here? Have I been wrong, and they’ve been right all along? But then you—or at least I—just think, ‘Fuck ‘em.’

*From Gilliam on Gilliam* edited by Ian Christie, Faber & Faber, London & NY, 1999

(The figure of comparison Gilliam evokes is Welles, thinking of his struggle with Hollywood from *The Magnificent Ambersons* onwards, and perhaps also of his unfinished *Don Quixote*, another long-planned Gilliam project. Welles, of course, was also a magician. A fabulist. And in his own way an exponent of the quest theme. But if there is another illuminating comparison, it is surely with Sergei Eisenstein. Although Gilliam rejects the Eisenstein of ‘audiovisual counterpoint’, just as Tarkovsky scorned the Eisenstein montage he had been taught, it is arguable that these two film-makers are reacting more to a lusty image of Eisenstein than to the quicksilver, questioning reality of ‘the little boy from Riga’ behind the legend. There are striking parallels between Eisenstein’s graphic understanding of cinema as an art of construction and combination and Gilliam’s multi-layered, allusive works; and they share a mordant, self-deprecating cartoonist’s wit. The anecdotal fact that, on a visit to Eisenstein’s museum-apartment in Moscow, Gilliam dislodged a Disney cartoon while reaching for Eisenstein’s own copy of

![Image](https://example.com/gilliam-image.jpg)

Munchausen seems a sure sign of poetic kinship.)

**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 salvation. 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.

What church did your family belong to?
Presbyterian. Actually, I think we were Episcopalians in Minnesota, then we became Presbyterians when we moved to LA, because out there you could either be Lutheran or Presbyterian.

What in you didn’t do was go down the road that extra block and become a Catholic—one of those papists and slaves of Rome! . . . 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.

Terry Jones and I went crazy over Borowczyk because his films were so much about atmosphere and texture. 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 Munchhausen. Suddenly I saw a copy of Munchhausen 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 Munchhausen 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.
COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 31
Dec 1 Béla Tarr, The Turin Horse, 2011
Dec 8 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, A Matter of Life and Death/Stairway to Heaven, 1946

PRELIMINARY SPRING 2016 FILM LIST
1929 Pabst: Pandora's Box
1939 Renoir: Rules of the Game
1946 Hitchcock: Notorious
1955 Ray Pathar: Panchali
1968 Leone: Once Upon a Time in the West
1970 De Sica: Garden of the Fitzini Continis
1971 Friedkin: The French Connection
1980 Scorsese: Raging Bull
1996 Pacino: Looking for Richard
1997 Kurosawa: Ran
1999 Claire Denis: Beau Travail
2008 Folman: Waltz with Bashir
2012 Haneke: Amour
1951 Powell & Pressburger: Tales of Hoffman

CONTACTS: ...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Dipson Amherst Theatre, with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News.