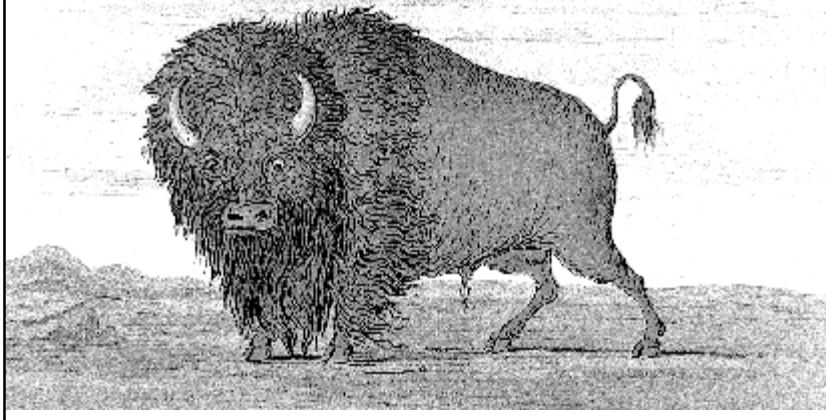


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975) 91 minutes

Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones

Written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones & Michael Palin

Produced by Mark Forstater and Michael White

Original music by De Wolfe, Neil Innes

Cinematography by Terry Bedford

John Cleese....Second Soldier with a Keen Interest in Birds/Large Man with Dead Body/Black Knight/Mr Newt (A Village Blacksmith Quite Interested in Burning Witches)/A Quite Extraordinarily Rude Frenchman/Tim the Wizard/Sir Launcelot the Brave

Graham Chapman....King Arthur/Voice of God/Middle Head/Hiccoughing Guard

Eric Idle....The Dead Collector/Mr Blint (A Village N'er-Do-Well Very Keen on Burning Witches)/Sir Robin the Not-Quite-So-Brave-as-Sir Launcelot/The Guard Who Doesn't Hiccough but Tries to Get Things Straight/Concorde(Sir Launcelot's Trusty Steed)/Roger the Shrubber (A Shrubber)/Brother Maynard

Terry Gilliam....Patsy (Arthur's Trusty Steed)/Green Knight/Soothsayer/Bridgekeeper/Sir Gawain (The First to be Killed by the Rabbit)/Animator

Terry Jones....Dennis's Mother/Sir Bedevere/Left Head/Voice of Cartoon Scribe/Prince Herbert

Michael Palin....1st Soldier with a Keen Interest in Birds/Dennis/Mr Duck (A Village Carpenter Who is Almost Keener Than Anyone Else to Burn Witches)/Right Head/Sir Galahad the Pure/Leader of the Knights Who Say 'Ni!'/Narrator/King of Swamp Castle/Brother Maynard's Roommate

Connie Booth....The Witch/**Carol Cleveland**....Zoot and Dingo/**Neil Innes**....The First Self-Destructive Monk/Robin's Least Favourite Minstrel/The Page Crushed by a Rabbit/The Owner of a Duck/**Bee Duffell**....Old Crone to Whom King Arthur Said 'Ni!'/**John**

Young....The Dead Body That Claims It Isn't/The Historian Who Isn't A.J.P. Taylor At All/**Rita Davies**....The Historian Who Isn't A.J.P. Taylor (Honestly)'s Wife/**Avril Stewart**....Either Piglet or Winston/**Sally Kinghorn**....Either Winston or Piglet

TERRY GILLIAM (22 November 1940, Minneapolis, Minnesota) acted in, wrote much of, and directed some of everything the Monty Pythons did, from *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Live at Aspen* 1988 all the way back to the beginning of the series in 1969. In *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* 1983 he played Fish #4, Walters, Zulu, Announcer, M'Lady Joeline, Mr. Brown and Howard Katzenberg. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* 1975 he was Patsy (Arthur's Trusty Steed), the Green Knight, the Soothsayer, the Bridgekeeper, Sir Gawain (The First to be Killed by the Rabbit) and the Animator. Gilliam, clearly, is a man of many aspects. He's directed *Good Omens* 2002, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 1998, *Monty Python & the Quest for the Holy Grail* 1996, *Twelve Monkeys* 1995, *The Fisher King* 1991, *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen* 1988, *Brazil* 1985, the "Crimson Permanent Assurance" segment of *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* 1983, *Time Bandits* 1981, *Jabberwocky* 1977, *And Now for Something Completely Different* 1971, and the cartoon sequences of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" (1969). The best book on Gilliam is *Gilliam on Gilliam*, interviews edited by Ian Christie (Faber and Faber, London, 1999). A filmography with links:

<http://www.smart.co.uk/dreams/tgfilm0.htm>. Interviews with Gilliam and notes on his films at

<http://members.aol.com/morgands1/closeup/indices/gillindx.htm>

ERIC IDLE (29 March 1943, South Shields, Tyne and Wear, England), one of the original Pythons, has appeared in and wrote much of everything they did. Some of his films are *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* 1999, *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* 1997, *Monty Python & the Quest for the Holy Grail* 1996, *Nuns on the Run* 1990, *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen* 1988, *The Secret Policeman's Private Parts* 1984, *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* 1983 (Fish #3/Singer/Mr. Moore/Mrs.Blackitt /Watson/Atkison/ Perkins/Victim #3/Front End/Mrs. Hendy/man in Pink/Noel Coward /Gaston /Angela), *Life of Brian* 1979 (Mr. Cheeky/Stan/Loretta/Harry the Haggler/Culprit Woman/Warris/Youth/Jailer's Assistant/Otto/Mr. Frisbee III), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* 1975 (The Dead Collector/Mr Blint [A Village N'er-Do-Well Very Keen on Burning Witches]/Sir Robin/The Guard Who



Doesn't Hiccup but Tries to Get Things Straight/Concorde [Sir Launcelot's Trusty Steed]/Roger the Shrubber [A Shrubber]/Brother Maynard). He composed several unforgettable songs, among them, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," "Death," and "One Foot in the Grave."

No point in all this repetition: **TERRY JONES** (1 February 1942, Colwyn Bay, Wales, UK), **GRAHAM CHAPMAN** (8 January 1941, Leicester, England—4 October 1980, Maidston, England, spinal and throat cancer), **JOHN CLEESE** (27 October 1939, Weston-Super-Mare, Somerset, England, UK, sometimes AKA Kim Bread and Nigel Farquahar-Bennett) & **MICHAEL PALIN** (5 May 1943, Sheffield, Yorkshire, England) were involved in just about everything the Pythons did—the Flying Circus tv shows, the movies, the stage shows etc. They all acted, wrote, directed. Each of them also did a bunch of interesting other stuff.

from *The First 280 Years of Monty Python*. Kim "Howard" Johnson. St. Martin's Griffin, NY, 1999.

The six individuals who would become Monty Python grew up in postwar Britain, with the exception of American Terry Gilliam, too young to experience much of the devastation World War II (although Graham Chapman wrote in his autobiography of seeing "bits of people hanging from the trees" following an aircraft explosion when he was three years old).

Times were tight and rationing was relatively common following the war, not unlike the times depicted in Michael Palin's *A Private Function*. Still, the Pythons lived a comfortable lifestyle Palin referred to as "middle-middle class, with aspirations to upper-middle class." Gilliam also enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle during his first years in Minneapolis, moving to California when he was eleven years old.

It was that middle-class existence that may have laid the foundation for their comic attitudes, exposing them to widespread respect and a comfortable adherence to conformity that fed their rebellious natures. In other words, it gave them something real to rebel against, but not in a meanspirited way. In fact, it was quite the opposite—for all of the silliness and sometimes shocking sketches in Python, there was still a gentleness to most of the humor that was discarded only during occasional satirical moments.

There were a few indications even during their childhood that the comic potential was there. Palin often tells of his stage debut when he was five years old; while playing Martha Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol*, he fell off the stage. John Cleese theorizes that he began making people laugh as a defense mechanism; he was six feet tall when he was twelve years old and made jokes in order to feel less of an outsider. And Gilliam remembers being a fanatical reader of *Mad* magazine and hiding it from his parents in their garage.

It was at college, however, that their comedic talents were truly honed. Cleese, Chapman, and Eric Idle gravitated toward Cambridge University. There, the Footlights society, famed for producing David Frost and *Beyond the Fringe*, held a strong attraction for the trio. Palin and Terry Jones likewise wound up at Oxford and became involved with the theatrical world there. On the other side of the ocean, Gilliam continued cartooning when he arrived in Occidental College in California, but none of them could have guessed what was to come.

The writing proved first rate and very funny with all of the group turning out some of their best material/ Although the Cleese/Chapman team usually write most of the verbal material, one of the funniest visual jokes was written by them as well, involving the killer bunny rabbit attacking the knights.

Carol Cleveland recalls a great many problems early in the production when she first arrived to shoot her scenes. "When I arrived on the set a few weeks into the filming, totally oblivious to the problems they were having, the crew was near to mutiny. I arrived to hear them talk of walking off the set. There were various problems with having two directors, which is going to create problems anyway, but especially if neither

Cambridge University held a certain allure for would-be actors, writers, and humorists in the early 1960s. Although the school's Footlights society had been in existence since 1883, the club had just mounted its most successful revue to date.

The 1960 Footlights show, *Beyond the Fringe*, was written and performed by Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett, and Jonathan Miller; the show ran for years on London's West End and on Broadway, and revitalized satire in Great Britain. Its creators, like the future Pythons, were all fans of Spike Milligan's *The Goon Show*, which was presented during the 1950s on BBC-Radio. Created and performed by Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, and Peter Sellers, its anarchic, unconventional humor and wordplay provided a heavy influence on the then-teenage Pythons.

Monty Python's Flying Circus was first broadcast in a late time slot on the BBC and changed comedy for a generation of viewers. The original shows sideswiped traditional TV conventions—there were no guest stars, very little music, and the sketches did not always have a beginning, middle, or end—at least not in that order.

Even stranger was the form the shows developed—there was very much a stream-of-consciousness approach to each program; any given show was linked by means both obvious and subtle, including Terry Gilliam's animations. . . . The group broke new comedic ground in their use of such less-than-traditional themes as cannibalism, royalty, and dismemberment. They waged a battle with the BBC over their innovative use of sex, violence, and language.

The true turning point for Python was the success of *Holy Grail* in 1975. By that time, the TV series had ended for good, and the members of the group were preparing to go their separate ways. Had *Holy Grail* been a failure, they would have likely drifted apart permanently, despite the return of John Cleese for the filming and the success of the TV shows in America. . . . The group had toyed with the idea of writing a full-length feature since the beginning of the third series of shows, and they had all begun writing with an eye in that direction.

has ever directed before—which they hadn't—and especially if those two directors happen to be two loonies! . . . Apart from that, the weather conditions were appalling. It was Scotland in the middle of winter, and it was extremely cold, so everyone was very uncomfortable. The fellows had to wear these chainmail outfits which apparently were very itchy and horrid to wear, full of fleas and things, so there was a lot of moaning, especially from John, who disliked any sort of discomfort. In addition, Graham Chapman's drinking was worse than ever.

The only Python stunt Cleese ever backed out of was in *Holy Grail*, and involved running across the Bridge of Death. "I had tried crossing it the previous day, Cleese says. "I walked across, to try to work myself up to running across it. I came back and said 'There's no way I can run across there!'

It was slippery and we were in those strange, knitted-string chain-mail outfits. On the soles of our feet was just a plain bit of leather. Nothing on them at all—no rubber, no indentations—so, they got a mountaineer to do it. He ran

From Gilliam on Gilliam. Ed. Ian Christie. Faber & Faber NY 1999

So where did the impulse to launch out into Python films come from?

Terry Jones and I were the main voices. In the shows, we were constantly pushing for scenes where we could have shadows and dramatic lighting. In comedy—or light entertainment as it was called—they didn't use dramatic lighting. We were also in the editing room, dealing with how the show was put together. Ian Macnaughton produced and directed it, but we were always backseat-driving—'Ian, why is the camera there?'—with increasingly clear ideas about how things should be or shouldn't be. Terry really handled the editing, though the rest of us, in different combinations, were involved as well. By the time we reached *And Now for Something Completely Different*, I was pissed off by the way certain things were being shot; this was no longer television, but it was still being shot like television. So when the offer came to do *Holy Grail*, Terry and I said we wanted to direct it—not Ian—to show what we could do after all our moaning.

How did you and Terry Jones split in the responsibilities?

I started storyboarding and designing with Rot Smith, and Hazel Pethig did the costumes. With great energy, Terry and I ran around the nation looking for castles and locations, and then we went off and shot it in less than five weeks for £460,000. But, of course, everything went wrong. On the very first day of our very first film, the camera broke down on the very first shot. We were up in Glencoe, miles away from any replacement, so what were we to do? I was in makeup as a bridge-keeper and we've all got our gear on. Did we shoot the wide shot? No, we panicked and did close-ups which we could have done anywhere in the world. It seemed like chaos but, in fact, we were working fast and learning on the job.

Terry and I had always been close and seen eye to eye. But when we started working together in this way, the differences soon became apparent. My obsession about the look of things used to irritate the others, because they just wanted to get on with doing the comedy and not have to squat in odd positions to get the angles right. I began to realize this was not as much fun as it was supposed to be. And, of course, there were two voices—Terry's and mine—shouting slightly different orders; so we decided to combine our voices in the first assistant, Gerry Harrison. But it turned out that Gerry wanted to be a director too, so though he was the only voice shouting, he wasn't saying what we wanted him to say. We shut him up and divided the responsibility so that, basically, Terry was with the guys and I was with the camera. I'd say to him, 'Let's set up here, and do this,' then he would tell the others to do this and that, and it worked surprisingly well.

Looking back now, I don't know how we did it in the time and for the money, but we didn't know any better and just worked flat out. By the time we reached the editing room, Terry and I were not seeing eye to eye. There was the last sequence with the Black Knight: Graham and I were in the wood, so it was dark behind us. We cut to the Black Knight, and it's light behind him; then the reverse shot back to me and Graham, and it's black behind us. Terry insisted that it looked like two separate places and demanded we reshoot. I got completely pissed off by this and just got on a boat and left, because they couldn't reshoot it if I wasn't there. Terry's very forceful—he likes fighting even more than I do—and sometimes I would just back down because it wasn't worth the fight. Then I'd go back late at night and recut what had been done during the day, and he wouldn't notice what I'd done. It

was very silly at times, but in the end we were both happy and it worked well.

across it as though it were a road. Quite extraordinary! That's the only bit I ever chickened out of." . . . It proved as much of a joy to watch as it was an ordeal to film.

was very silly at times, but in the end we were both happy and it worked well.

What was striking at the time, and seems even clearer now, is how much Monty Python and the Holy Grail is really quite a serious medieval movie disguised as a spoof. Even Leslie Halliwell couldn't resist praising its 'remarkable visual sense of the Middle Ages'.

We admired Borowczyk's *Goto* and *Blanche*, as well as the Pasolini films, so we approached it as seriously as either of those film-makers. We were doing comedy, but we didn't want it to look like light entertainment. I'm not sure how many film-makers before us had taken the sense of place so seriously in comedy—even Mel Brooks was always very pastiche. But, for me, it was important that the settings were as believable as possible, so that we could be completely off the wall. We were all excited about films; we wanted to make an epic, except we didn't have the money to do it properly. I think the restrictions made the film better, because if we'd had the money for real horses there would have been no coconut shells, which are far funnier. So we were saved by poverty from the mediocrity to which we aspired!

A Samuel Bronson-style epic, like El Cid or The Fall of the Roman Empire—not that there isn't a lot to be said for those. Yes, we really wanted it to look as rich as that, but there was a lot of Bergman in the background, *The Seventh Seal*, and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. They were part of a common culture at that time which was a lot more interesting than the common culture of *Terminator* and *Mission Impossible*: *Impossible*; they were things we all got incredibly excited about. We all wanted to be serious film-makers. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is really no more than a series of sketches, some of which are done more realistically than others—but this is what I like about it: it was an eclectic jumble and, because the rules kept changing, it has a certain freshness. For me, it was about textures—the mud and shit—which you certainly hadn't seen in comedy before. And the best jokes came out of this: 'How do you know he's the king?' 'He isn't covered in shit.' You couldn't so that unless you'd set it up properly. My feeling was that the grittier and more realistic it was, the funnier the jokes would be. Anyway, we didn't have time to theorize: we just ploughed into it and learned on the job.

In films, it's when you plan things really carefully that everything goes wrong. On the *Holy Grail*, within two weeks of the first shot, the National Trust took away all the castles we'd chosen. Their line was that they were afraid we wouldn't respect the dignity of the fabric of the buildings. These were places where the most awful tortures had been practiced, where terrible crimes had been committed, and now they were going to collapse because some comedians had come along. So, suddenly we were without castles, and we had to make cut-out ones. Besides our principal castle at Doune, the only real castle we could use was privately owned, and we found it at the last moment, so we just had to shoot it on the spot. The whole crew arrived in the morning and we had to wait for the owner's son to fly in on a private plane with the keys to let us in.

We were also supposed to have a sheep to be thrown from the battlements but, because the schedule was all screwed up, we didn't have it. Then one of the crew remembered passing a dead sheep on the road several days earlier, so they went and got this rotting carcass, which had everyone throwing

up in the car. We arrived to find the prop master up to his shoulders in gore, gutting this sheep; we were scornful when he warned us not to go near it—until the wind shifted and it hit us. Stuffed with hay, this is what was duly thrown from the battlements. And because we didn't have the costumes for the big battle, the only thing we could shoot was the sequence when a police car comes in blocking the charging army. So the entire crew, with their families and kids, were holding up pikes in the foreground, with a few bits of costume seen in the front row. If things hadn't gone wrong, we would have done it carefully and properly—and learned nothing. What you discover in these situations is that you can get away with murder; also, how inventive you can be if you think on your

From the The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester (<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/grlmenu.htm>)

THE HOLY GRAIL

The Holy Grail is generally considered to be the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper and the one used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch his blood as he hung on the cross. This significance, however, was introduced into the Arthurian legends by Robert de Boron in his verse romance *Joseph d'Arimathie* (sometimes also called *Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal*), which was probably written in the last decade of the twelfth century or the first couple of years of the thirteenth. In earlier sources and in some later ones, the grail is something very different. The term "grail" comes from the Latin *gradale*, which meant a dish brought to the table during various stages (Latin "gradus") or courses of a meal. In Chrétien and other early writers, such a plate is intended by the term "grail." Chrétien, for example, speaks of "un graal," a grail or platter and thus not a unique item. Wolfram von

David Nash Ford, "An Introduction to King Arthur in Popular Literature"

The earliest full stories concerning King Arthur and his exploits appear to be the little known Welsh tales of "Culhwch and Olwen" and the "Dream of Rhonabwy". Though dating from before the 11th century, these two stories became a late attachment to a collection of Welsh mythological tales taken from the 14th century White Book of Rhydderch and Red Book of Hergest. Together, they are known as the "Mabinogion": an introduction for aspiring poets....

The much-maligned Geoffrey of Monmouth, Archdeacon of Monmouth and later Bishop of St. Asaphs, first popularized King Arthur's story, around 1139, in his "History of the Kings of Britain". Though he was writing some six hundred years after Arthur's death, there is no reason to suppose that Geoffrey's history was "made up...from an inordinate love of lying" as both contemporary and modern historians almost universally insist. Geoffrey claimed he had taken most of his information from an earlier British source, unknown to us today: and why not? The early portion of his history clearly relates the mythology of the Celtic peoples and the stories of their Gods, whom his source had turned into early Kings: Bladud, Leir, Belenus, Brennius and so on. Later, however, he turns to real history. From the time of Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain in 55 bc, which both Geoffrey and the great man himself relate at great length, we can no longer be sure that the Archdeacon is reciting mere legend. Much of his information has corroborative historical sources like this. Who is to say that everything he tells us, from then on, is not pure fact? Furthermore, Geoffrey was the only source to hail the existence

feet. I love it at the same time I fear it—and that's how I've gone on ever since. You plan everything carefully—secretly hoping that things will go wrong—and almost always something interesting comes out of it, as long as you have good people around you who can think fast. It happens on every film, and I scream and shout, but in retrospect those are often some of the best moments.

Anyway, we shot the thing, it went out and it was a big success. And the credits said, 'Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones', so I was a film director—just like that. Before, no one would touch me with a barge-pole, but now I had directed a film and the offers started pouring in.

Eschenbach's *Parzival* presents the grail as a stone which provides sustenance and prevents anyone who beholds it from dying within the week. In medieval romance, the grail was said to have been brought to Glastonbury in Britain by Joseph of Arimathea and his followers. In the time of Arthur, the quest for the Grail was the highest spiritual pursuit. For Chrétien, author of *Perceval* and his continuators (four works take up the task of completing the work that Chrétien left unfinished, two of which are anonymous, one is by Mannesier, and a fourth is by Gerbert de Montreuil), *Perceval* is the knight who must achieve the quest for the Grail. For other French authors, as for Malory, *Galahad* is the chief Grail knight, though others (*Perceval* and *Bors* in the *Morte d'Arthur*) do achieve the quest. Ten

myths was popularized by Jessie Weston in her book *From Ritual to Romance*, which was used by T. S. Eliot in the writing of *The Waste Land*. Eliot's poem, in turn, influenced many of the important novelists of his and succeeding generations, including Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

of King Tenvantius of Britain, until modern archaeologists began finding Iron Age coins bearing his name: "Tasciovantus". What other gems of the Archdeacon's history have been dismissed by today's historians?

It was the French medieval poet, Chrétien de Troyes, however who, not long after Geoffrey, introduced us to most of the characters and tales that we now think of as an integral part of the Arthurian story. He specialized in tales of Arthurian courtly love and thus brought us: *Erec & Enid* (1160), *Lancelot* (c.1162), *Cligés* (1164), *Yvain* (c.1170) and the *Count of the Grail* (also known as *Perceval*) (1180). He transformed the names of Geoffrey's characters from Welsh to the medieval French used today. It was Chrétien and those who followed him who distorted the Arthurian story, so that the true historical Arthur became lost in an amalgam of Celtic myth and literary fantasy. For example, neither *Lancelot* nor the Holy Grail were part of the Arthurian legend before Chrétien came along. Both do have origins in early Celtic myth, but there is little justification for including them in Arthur's story....

Sir Thomas Malory's 15th century work, "*Le Morte d'Arthur*" is, perhaps, better known than Geoffrey or Chrétien. He took their stories and retold them with an epic unity, creating the Romantic Age of Chivalry. With one stroke of his pen, he transformed Arthur's Court from Dark Age obscurity to the height of medieval pageantry. Being written in English and printed by Caxton, "*Le Morte d'Arthur*" was instantly available

to the masses, and it remains highly popular, even today, as a classic work of literature. Malory's work, however, is just that: a work of literature. There is little history left amongst his pages.

Arthur's modern popularity owes much to his re-emergence during the Victorian Age at the hands of Alfred,

Lord Tennyson. His huge poetic elegy entitled "Idylls of the King" led to a resurgence in interest in this early monarch, as reflected in much of the pre-Raphælite art of the time. The fascination is still going strong today....

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