The Man Who Killed Don Quixote: Terry Gilliam's latest tribute to non-conformism

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31 May 2019

Directed by Terry Gilliam; written by Gilliam and Tony Grisoni

The Man Who Killed Don Quixote is a film directed and co-written by Terry Gilliam. The American-born Gilliam is a director, screenwriter, animator and actor, known—among other things—for his innovative and imaginative work with the Monty Python comedy troupe in Britain in the 1970s. His feature films include *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), *Jabberwocky* (1977), *Time Bandits* (1981), *Brazil* (1985), *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988), *12 Monkeys* (1995) and *The Brothers Grimm* (2005).

Gilliam has been attempting to make a film inspired by *Don Quixote*, the 17th century novel by Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), for decades. Filming on an earlier script actually began in 2000 but had to be abandoned for a number of reasons, including the illness of French actor Jean Rochefort. The painful and costly failure became the subject of a documentary, *Lost in La Mancha* (2002), directed by Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe.

The film Gilliam was finally able to make opens in contemporary rural Spain where a successful, self-absorbed director of television commercials, Toby (Adam Driver), along with a substantial cast and crew, is making a pointless advertisement of some kind with a Don Quixote theme, complete with windmills and giants.

Gilliam, who has had no shortage of difficulties in his career with interfering, money-grubbing Hollywood executives and assorted "backers," takes scathing shots here at the film and television world. Toby's superior, simply known as The Boss (Stellan Skarsgård), is a pretentious thug, who beats his promiscuous, younger wife (Olga Kurylenko). The Boss leaves the set at one point, explaining: "I gotta go. I got a meeting in Nice, potential client, Russian vodka. They got me on their private jet."

Toby breaks away from the crowd of sycophants—including his scheming agent Rupert (Toby Watkins)—in the midst of shooting the commercial, after his attention has been drawn to a student film he made a decade previously, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*. He eventually sets off for the nearby village, **Los Sueños** ("The **Dreams**"), where he and two friends shot the amateur work.

Toby is not only searching for the physical location of the earlier film, but clearly seeking to recapture some of the excitement and freshness that has been lost in the tawdry, unrewarding business of directing television ads. Watching a DVD of his first film, Toby is reminded that "the old man [playing Don Quixote] is wonderful" and that he had not used actors "but real people, villagers, He was a shoemaker, I think." Cynically, he adds, "It must have been my passport to Hollywood!"

Toby later explains that he was "very young" at the time he made *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*: "It was a student's film. If you could call it that. I mean you can call it very much a student film. It was a passion project. A passion project." The passion is obviously now missing.

In any event, once in **Los Sueños**, Toby inquires as to the whereabouts of Angelica (Joana Ribeiro), a young country girl who appeared in his amateur film, and learns she went off and is leading an apparently disreputable life (her angry café-owner father calls her a "whore") in the big city. Toby also searches for and finds his original "Don Quixote," the former shoemaker, Javier (Jonathan Pryce), who only reluctantly and falteringly played the lead role ten years before, but who now delusionally believes himself to be the legendary knight.

Javier-Quixote salutes Toby as his "Sancho Panza" (Don Quixote's comical, down-to-earth squire and companion in the Cervantes novel) and a series of mishaps unfolds, triggered, above all, by Javier's belief that he has been born, like Cervantes' protagonist, "to revive the lost age of chivalry" and that he is "the man to whom all dangers are expressly reserved, grand adventures and brave feats."

Javier first rescues Toby from the police, into whose hands the director has unluckily fallen, in the course of which a cop is shot and wounded. The pair, now mounted on a horse and donkey, respectively, are semi-fugitives. Naturally, in keeping with the spirit of Cervantes, one of their first misadventures involves Javier's "tilting at a windmill," believing the latter to be a giant. After the older man receives a head wound in an unhappy encounter with one of the windmill's blades, a local woman takes Javier and Toby to a run-down encampment. For Javier the fantasist, the wretched place is a "splendid castle that defies gravity."

When Toby sees one of the inhabitants bowing down and praying, he becomes convinced the residents are Muslim terrorists ("They'll probably send bits of us back to our families!"). Significantly, the people there turn out to be undocumented immigrants, Moroccans, someone observes, "just poor people, illegal."

Eventually, of course, Toby encounters Angelica, who explains that after performing in his film she went to "Madrid, and Barcelona, and Marseille, a lot of places. A village girl can't go back to a little bar after starring in a movie. … Modeling, mostly escort work." She has become, in fact, the mistress of a Russian oligarch, who mistreats and abuses her.

Toby and Javier-Quixote, after the latter jousts with the "Knight of Mirrors" (who proves to be Angelica's father in elaborate disguise), end up following Angelica to the castle of the Russian businessman, Alexei Miiskin (Jordi Mollà), where an extravagant costume ball is taking place. Their quest becomes to rescue Angelica from her demeaning situation. Events take various unexpected turns.

Cervantes' classic novel, published in two parts in 1605 and 1615, was written at the time of the transition from feudal to bourgeois society. The "gaunt-faced" gentleman, Don Quixote, whose wits are "quite gone," has given himself up "to reading books of chivalry with such ardour and avidity" that he has neglected every other aspect of his life and household. He has even sold many acres of land "to buy books of chivalry to read, and brought home as many of them as he could get."

The inevitably disastrous character of Don Quixote's decision to "make a knight-errant of himself" and roam "the world over in full armour and on horseback in quest of adventures" aimed at "righting every kind of wrong" results from his effort to impose outmoded rules and values,

centered on personal honor and valor, on a society increasingly dominated by money-based relationships. The latter society (in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*) is in the process of drowning "the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation."

Indeed, it was Karl Marx who observed wryly in a footnote in *Capital* Volume 1 that Don Quixote had long ago paid "the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society." French socialist Paul Lafargue once recalled that Marx, his father-in-law, had "ranked Cervantes and [Honoré de] Balzac above all other novelists. In *Don Quixote* he saw the epic of dying-out chivalry whose virtues were ridiculed and scoffed at in the emerging bourgeois world."

Things apparently come full circle. In Gilliam's film, of course only partially rooted in Cervantes' novel, Don Quixote's single-minded and even soft-headed idealism is held up as a positive *virtue* contrasted with the crudity, deceit, greed and stupidity of modern media and corporate operations. When Toby-Sancho explodes at the ridiculous and eccentric measures Javier-Quixote takes to prove his love to Angelica-Dulcinea and calls him "insane," the older man responds: "Insane? Are you sure? … You're not just trying to please me?" When Toby yells at him further that he is "deranged," Javier almost melts with gratitude, "Oh, Sancho! Thank you! Thank you so much!" Insanity is identified, a little too easily, with rejection of the status quo and its human representatives.

This is very much Gilliam. The writer-animator-director has entrenched himself over the years in child-like imagination and non-conformism directed against the establishment.

The Man Who Killed Don Quixote is a cautionary tale and a type of a *Bildungsroman* —a novel of education, or here, *re-education*. Toby regains, through a tortuous process and through the example of the holy-mad Javier-Quixote, his one-time idealism and innocence. He turns his back on the television advertising world, in fact one might say it entirely ceases to exist for him.

Gilliam's newest film is not entirely successful, or even mostly successful, but it is still more interesting than the overwhelming majority of the movies currently in theaters. Gilliam is angry at certain things, including clearly the filthy, corrupt "entertainment industry," individuals with great amounts of money and power (regarding the vodka oligarch, for example, Toby is told, "Think puerile, think toddler on a sugar rush, think fucking Trump") and government propaganda and lies about "terrorism."

Those are not bad starting points. And the performers bring an obvious sincerity and commitment to the work.

Unfortunately, there are too many red herrings in *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, strands of the comedy-drama that go nowhere—or at least not terribly far. The scenes involving the television crew and hangers-on are precise, sharply focused. Some of the more fantastical elements and sequences seem strained, murky. The attempts to introduce or duplicate elements in the Cervantes novel are not always fully thought through and convincing. A sinister Russian billionaire is not precisely an innovation either these days.

Gilliam's radicalism is real but amorphous. He has directed his feature films in a generally stagnant period. Not identifying any social force capable of turning things upside down in reality, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the words of a commentator, "freedom in a Terry Gilliam film is often an imagined liberty." The anarchistic, even "terroristic" streak in his work, which speaks to the same general political-cultural problems, is also genuine.

The filmmaker's greatest achievement to date may well be *Brazil* (co-written by playwright Tom Stoppard), which, despite its many humorous moments, offers a bleak-satirical vision of modern capitalist society as crushing and totalitarian. Released in 1985, Gilliam's film owes a definite debt to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

Sam Lowry (a much younger Pryce) is the central figure in *Brazil*, inhabiting a bureaucratic-corporate nightmare. A low-level government employee, Sam only survives his dreadful everyday existence, including the presence of a mother dedicated to one round of grotesque cosmetic surgery after another, by daydreaming he is a winged warrior rescuing a beautiful young woman. (The movie's title, honoring Ary Barroso's popular song from 1939, is bitterly ironic. The world in the song's lyrics, with its "greenness," "coconut tree," "bright moonlit nights" and "murmuring fountains," is the exact opposite of the dreary, cramped, frightening existence portrayed in the film.)

The government in *Brazil* combines cheerful, smiling consumerism and murderous repression. By mistake, an innocent cobbler is arrested, "hooded" and hauled away by the authorities as a suspected terrorist. His bewildered, terrified wife is told by the brutal police intruders that her husband is being "invited to assist the Ministry of Information with inquiries" and asked to sign a "receipt for your husband." Not only are individuals rounded up and tortured, in this case to death, they are also liable for the cost of their imprisonment and questioning! (A government official: "People want value for money. That is why we always insist on the principle of Information Retrieval Charges. It's absolutely right and fair that those found guilty should pay for their periods of detention and for the information retrieval procedures used in their interrogation.")

When Lowry himself, accused of a host of trumped-up crimes, falls into the clutches of the authorities, he is informed by a series of officials (in a quite brilliant sequence): "Now, either you can plead guilty to seven or eight of the charges … which will help keep costs down within your means … or borrow a sum to be negotiated from us at a very competitive rate. We can offer you something at eleven-and-a-half percent over 30 years … but you will have to buy insurance to qualify for this scheme. If you prefer something more specific … say, against electrical charges over 70. ... All you're requested to do now is sign this form. Think carefully before you sign. Thinking ahead in financial matters is always a wise course."

The cruelties, banalities and privatizations of the Reagan-Thatcher years find echo here, but *Brazil* is also quite prescient in its anticipation of the "war on terror."

In 2006, after having renounced his US citizenship in protest against the Bush administration and its wars, Gilliam told an audience at a film screening in New York: "I'm thinking of suing George Bush and Dick Cheney for making the remake of *Brazil* without my approval. … Their version isn't as funny, though."

He went on: "It is absolutely frightening. … Homeland Security is just like [*Brazil* 's] Ministry of Information, because if your job is counter-terrorism, what do you need to keep in business? You need terrorists, and even if they aren't there, we may have to create new ones. It works very well."

The Man Who Killed Don Quixote is not everything it ought to be, probably not even everything it aspires to be, it is stretched too thin, about too many things and not enough about any one of them, but it is still more intriguing than most other films out there.