

Between *8 1/2* and '1984 1/2': the construction of ambiguity in Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*

By Christian Hayes

One of the working titles for Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) was '1984 1/2',¹ referring to Orwell's novel but also to Federico Fellini's film *8 1/2* (1963). *Brazil* is a kind of reflection of that earlier film in various ways; both films investigate the relationship between fantasy and reality and as a result both are highly interpretive texts that resist clear definitions. In this essay I will investigate what makes these films ambiguous and how their dream sequences complicate the texts.

Brazil and *8 1/2* are similar films in that both films present an imaginatively constructed world through unique visuals. Both are about men in mental anguish who find the respective worlds they are in making less and less sense. The similarities between these films, I would argue, are no coincidence in light of the fact that Gilliam was heavily influenced by Fellini and cites him as perhaps his greatest influence.² Aesthetically, Gilliam and Fellini are closely related; bold, striking and bizarre visuals occupy both bodies of work. Even their biographies contain similarities; both were cartoonists before becoming filmmakers. Their ability to translate their visions (and in Fellini's case, his dreams) into imaginative drawings became an integral part of their filmmaking processes. Fellini's *8 1/2* and Gilliam's *Brazil* are both filled to the brim with visual information along with dense and complex screenplays that contain a variety of themes that run

¹ Jack Mathews, *The Battle of Brazil* (New York: Applause Books, 1998), p.45

² Ian Christie (ed.), *Gilliam on Gilliam* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p.121

together at once. One of these themes is the relationship between dream and reality, and both films oscillate between these two states. In *Brazil*, Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce) imagines himself as a superhero in elaborate dream sequences that become darker and more closely integrated with his reality as the film progresses. From the start of *8 1/2*, the fantasies of film director Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) are closely integrated with his reality, causing a stream-of-consciousness-like effect centered around the protagonist. Dreams are so integral to these characters that we are in fact introduced to both of them through their dreams. We find Guido trapped inside his car, and when he finally escapes he flies away into the sky. Sam is first seen as his superhero alter-ego flying through a cloudscape that echoes the cloudscape of Guido's dream. For Sam, however, dreams are a means of escape, but for Guido they are a site of anxiety where he is forced to realise a combination of childhood memories, guilty fantasies, problems with his parents and with women, and the burgeoning creative block that is preventing him from progressing on his latest film. These two distant characters, however, are both connected in that they are both using dreams as a way to avoid responsibility. In Sam's case, the moment he takes control of his life and accepts promotion (crucially for a selfish desire to pursue his dream girl), his life falls apart. Guido, however, is allowed to aimlessly wander through his life and constantly regress into his fantasy world, rejecting both work and responsibility.

Primarily, it is the interpretive quality of the texts that lead to an ambiguity as to what the films are actually *about*. *8 1/2* is a loosely structured collection of approximately

forty different episodes³ through which Guido wanders as he tries to combat his creative block. A character inside the film, Daumier, comments upon the problems that arise with such an approach. Talking to Guido about the script for the film he plans to make, Daumier says, ‘You see, what stands out at first reading is the lack of a central issue or a philosophical stance... That makes the film a chain of gratuitous episodes.’ Peter Bondanella argues that Fellini’s cinema is one that rejects any clear ideology, and if it does have an ideology, it is ‘a courageous defense of the imagination as a valid category of knowing and understanding’.⁴ In this respect, then, Fellini does not have a singular *meaning*. In fact, it seems as though Fellini was not too concerned with what the film made its viewer think. Fellini was heavily influenced by the writings of Jung which allowed him to view his dreams and fantasies as ‘a means of gaining access to an imaginative world of far greater significance’,⁵ rejecting Freud’s intellectual approach. Of the two theorists, Fellini said, ‘Freud with his theories makes us think; Jung on the other hand allows us to imagine.’⁶ In light of this, Fellini seems to be against cerebral responses to his cinema but to instead allow an instinctive, emotional experience to occur. At the time of Fellini’s discovery of Jung, he began to keep extensive notes of dreams he had, cartoon-like illustrations along with an explanation as to what was happening within

³ Peter Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.169

⁴ Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.2

⁵ Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* p.152

⁶ *Ibid.*

them.⁷ It is this particular interest that Fellini had in (his own specific) dreams that lead to their direct manifestation in *8 1/2*. That these surreal dreams are so prevalent in the film immediately provokes a desire to ‘read into’ the symbols we are presented with in relation to the reality we observe, forcing greater mental involvement from the viewer as well as greater scope for varied interpretations.

What actually *happens* in *Brazil* is also a question for debate. Its ambiguous ending, for example, does not spell out what has happened to the catatonic Sam, nor the meaning of the subsequent elaborate climax that turned out to be a dream. Its story is a complex one that stems from two plots which later entwine. In one, a malfunction creates a typographic error that leads to the wrong man, Mr. Buttle, to be arrested and murdered instead of Mr. Tuttle. In the other, Sam Lowry, when pursuing (literally) the girl of his dreams, gets involved in the cover up of Mr. Buttle’s murder. This is complicated by numerous subplots, such as Sam’s mother’s obsession with plastic surgery and the social battle against terrorism. Yet it is the combination of the multi-themed screenplay with the fantasy world that the film depicts which gives the impression that *Brazil* is an allegory of wider social and political meaning. What these alternative meanings actually *are* are never specified, yet it is the often unexplained content and visuals that results in a particularly intense engagement with the viewer as they project their own meaning and logic upon the material. The interpretational possibilities of the film are greatly highlighted by the documentary *What is Brazil?* (1985) in which even the cast and crew give different suggestions, Jack Mathews concluding that, ‘Jonathan Pryce, the film’s

⁷ Ibid., p.154

star, said that he knew when he started working on it, but had forgotten.’⁸ These ambiguities, however, are clearly intentional. In answering questions about the film from the general public, Gilliam said that many people wanted to know,

Are the terrorists real? To which I would always say that I don’t know if they are... This always came as a big surprise to them, and they wanted answers: was the explosion in the restaurant a terrorist one? Again, I said I didn’t know...⁹

These questions are left open-ended on purpose, so much so that Gilliam himself refuses to maintain a singular point of view. When Ian Christie remarks that in *Brazil* ‘There is no Big Brother’, Gilliam agrees, saying that, ‘Even Mr Helpmann isn’t the top guy, he’s the deputy. There probably *is* no top guy, since everybody abdicates responsibility;’¹⁰ In the same way that what exists at the top of the system is an unknown, the final meaning and answer to the film are also unknowns; all that really exists are speculations about its meaning.

The film also constructs ambiguity through its costumes and sets which are a fusion of different styles from various eras. The opening titles state that *Brazil* is set ‘Somewhere in the 20th Century’. Its world is not the future, then, but the past and the present. The clothes suggest the 1940s, the hybrid computers suggest the 80s fused with classic typewriters of the past, and the buildings suggest 30s art deco fused with the

⁸ Mathews, *The Battle of Brazil*, p.49

⁹ Christie (ed.), *Gilliam on Gilliam*, p.131

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.144

ambiance of 40s film *noir*. This chaos of different styles and time periods create difficulties for the viewer as to where to place the film in history. This distancing from our reality strengthens the film's impression as an allegory for wider social and political themes. Yet inside of this fantasy film there are self-contained dream sequences which provide insights into a world doubly removed from our own; in other words, dreams within a dream. Sam's fantasies further complicate the comprehension of the world of *Brazil*. At first they provide a refreshing escape for the viewer from the chaos of the film's reality, enjoyable for their sheer spectacle. Yet as they grow darker, Sam is presented with more complex scenarios. Not only his dream girl trapped in a cage (a symbol easy enough to decipher) but the baby-faced, decrepit forces of darkness; an unspecified face that appears from bricks in the ground and warns Sam: 'Don't go'; and the computer-chip samurai. Does this samurai represent the system he is fighting? Does it, with its computer-chips, represent technology? Why is it specifically a samurai at all? From the fusion of different styles already noted, it almost does not appear out of place. Of course, when Sam defeats the samurai and removes its mask, he finds that he himself is inside the suit. Does this mean that Sam is fighting himself? Or that his fight is futile and he is ultimately hurting himself? Like in *8 1/2* these fantasies provoke the viewer's desire to read into the symbols they are presented with, but as Gilliam himself would probably affirm, there are no straight answers to these questions. These fantasies create self-contained conundrums within a labyrinthine world already filled with questions, ultimately deepening the sense of ambiguity that the film constructs.

8 1/2 purposefully disrupts its own sense of time and space. Like in *Brazil*, it juxtaposes different time periods through its costumes, being a combination of the 1920s (the time of Guido's childhood) and the 1960s (the present). The film sometimes refuses to include establishing shots at the beginning of scenes and will sometimes shift between reality and fantasy without warning, causing a spatial disorientation for the viewer. The boundary between fantasy and reality in *8 1/2* is less distinct than in *Brazil* (excepting its ending), and Guido will sometimes walk into a fantasy, such as the harem sequence in which all the women of his past rendezvous, or the viewer will be thrown into a fantasy without Guido as a guide, such as his childhood memories of La Saraghina the prostitute. These sequences create a rich psychological texture to the film, intimately exploring its central character's secret inner life. Yet they clearly disrupt the stability of the film's reality, causing it to be untrustworthy to the point at which the audience is asking, 'is this reality or fantasy?' These two states really do merge at the end of the film when all the characters from the film we have just seen conjugate at the site of the rocket launchpad constructed for the now disbanded film-within-the-film, which also happens to be the site of a circus ring. With the cast of characters, Fellini seems to be presenting the audience with a deconstruction of the film we have just seen, and with the circus ring, he seems to be reaffirming the illusionary and playful nature of cinema, and of this film in particular.

8 1/2 and *Brazil*, then, purposefully construct ambiguities through both their form and their content. They use fundamental aspects of the filmmaking process, such as sets and costumes, to disorientate the viewer. Particularly in the case of *8 1/2*, conventional scene construction is disregarded and rules of continuity are broken in order to blur the

boundary between fantasy and reality. The films' screenplays overflow with concepts and ideas that complicate the narratives and make the relationship between its content and its form more complex. Added to this, the dream sequences themselves create an extra dimension of unreality to the films that both inform and complicate readings of their realities. Both *8 1/2* and *Brazil* have the power to alienate the viewer through their ambiguity, but they also have the power to create a more intimate relationship with the viewer by engaging them in a process of investigating these ambiguities. Which effect these films will have on their viewers ultimately depends upon what the viewers themselves project back onto the screen.

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Filmography

Brazil (Great Britain, 1985), dir: Terry Gilliam

8 1/2 (Italy, 1963), dir: Federico Fellini

The dream sequences serve to complicate this, adding an extra dimension that both enriches the films' realities and

of **ambiguity** which

these devices similarly occur in *8 1/2*. Like in *Brazil*, there is a juxtaposition of different time periods; the costumes are a combination of a 1920s style, the time of Guido's childhood, and the present (1960s) and the representation of space is also disorientated. The film refuses to include establishing shots at the beginning of scenes causes difficulty for the viewer to place themselves within the scene and heightens the viewer's disorientation when a transition is made between 'reality' and Guido's dreams or nightmares, sometimes jumping suddenly between the two. As Bondanella tells us, the background even changes between shots within seemingly continuous scenes, replicating the behaviour of a dream. Some of these techniques are apparent in a dream sequence earlier on in the film. After having made love to his mistress, his mother appears in the bedroom as Guido is sleeping. She appears to be wiping an imaginary surface. A dissolve causes her to now be standing in front of a window, polishing it. She walks away to into a desolate landscape as Guido appears, following her. He notices his father passing fleetingly by and now follows him. The camera floats, Guido often out of shot. Later in the dream, he helps to lower his live father into a grave before his mother appears again and kisses him passionately. When she is released, she suddenly turns into Guido's wife.

Another way in which the film constructs ambiguity is through its use of costume and set design. The opening titles state that *Brazil* is set ‘Somewhere in the 20th Century’. The strange dystopian world we are presented with is not the future, then, but the past and present. The clothes suggest the 1940s, and Gilliam suggests that they are reminiscent of the early 50s, amidst the optimism of post-war Britain along with the American fashion of wholesome icons like James Stewart.¹¹ The strange hybrid computers suggest the 80s fused with the classic typewriters of the past, and the buildings suggest 30s art deco fused with 40s film *noir*. But even these dates and styles are debateable. Gilliam himself describes it as being set, ‘everywhere in the twentieth century,’¹² and this fusion of styles immediately creates difficulties as to where the viewer can situate the film’s world within history, as well as themselves within this strange new world. The sheer detail of the costumes, and particularly the striking sets present the viewer with a rich tapestry of visuals. Add to this the fact that Gilliam used many wide-angle lenses¹³ which flattened all this information into one shot, causing the eyes to be spoiled for choice as to where to look and demands the viewer to digest a large amount of visual information at once whilst attempting to make sense of the complex story.

¹¹ Terry Gilliam, ‘Director’s Commentary’ on *Brazil* DVD (U.S.A., Criterion Collection, 1999)

¹² *Gilliam on Gilliam* p.129

¹³

Clearly this is not the superhero of Sam's dreams. In the case of *Brazil*, Sam's fantasies complicate the reading of a world that is already a fantasy. Sam's dreams are, therefore, fantasies within a fantasy. These sequences provide a refreshing escape from the film's reality not only for Sam but also for the viewer. At first, when they are still blue-skied and bright, they are enjoyable for their sheer spectacle. As they grow darker and more complex and bewildering events occur within them, such as the appearance of the baby-faced Forces of Darkness and the battle with the micro-chip samurai, they also appear more and more symbolic of Sam's struggle and add to the complexities that the audience is attempting to cope with.

[The oppressive society that the film depicts immediately suggests an Orwellian (and therefore allegorical) struggle between the little man and the monolithic, faceless government. This in turn appears as a comment on the fatal flaws of society outside of the film. Indeed, it appears to have even greater relevance today, twenty years later, as obsessions with plastic surgery, paranoia over terrorism, and the awareness of oppressive governments and corporations abound. Because of the allegorical nature of its subject, an audience, afraid of appearing unintelligent, will worry about arriving at a concrete definition of what the film is *really* about. However, it is also a possibility that, like with Fellini, *Brazil* lacks a singular ideology and is also a celebration of the imagination. Or it could be that *Brazil* lacks a singular ideology for the very reason that it contains a combination of different ideologies running concurrently. **Like?**]

; the possibility that Jill may be a terrorist; the friendship Sam has with Jack Lint, torturer and family man; the malfunctioning of Sam's apartment; the meddling of Central Services technicians; and the heroics of renegade mechanic Harry Tuttle.

The Cinema of Federico Fellini: p.170: Rapid jumps between Guido's "reality" at the spa, his dreams or nightmares, and his projected fantasies visualized for our examination destroy any traditional sense of time. ~~Our natural desire to pinpoint the time of the narrative is frustrated to some degree by Fellini's confusion of costumes, which juxtaposes characters dressed in the style of the 1920s (the era in which both Guido's and Fellini's childhood took place) with those of the present (1962) in the same scenes.~~ The film's editing further disorients and dislocates out conventional perspectives. Traditional establishing shots are avoided to deny us any confidence in our sense of space and place. Without such establishing shots, the constant jumps in the narrative flow between "reality," Guido's waking fantasies, and flashbacks to Guido's past or privileged insights into his dreams and nightmares are even more disconcerting than they might otherwise be. Even backgrounds from shot to shot of the same sequence, particularly in shots reflecting Guido's subjective stream of consciousness, may change without notice. As a result, transitions from one shot to the next do not match, producing the same puzzling sensation we often experience during a dream.

Each viewer will see different things inside the same film and come away with differing views and experiences.

Between *8 1/2* and '1984 1/2':

8 1/2

This same ambiguity occurs in *8 1/2*. The costumes are a combination of a 1930s style (that of Guido's childhood), and that of the present (the 1960s).¹⁴

I will now look at how these worlds (and ambiguities) are constructed inside of the film.

A combination of minutely detailed set and costume designs, along with wide angle lenses that condense and flatten all this information into one shot, demands the viewer to digest a large amount of visual information at once while attempting to keep up with the story and dialogue, and trying to find their place within this strange new world.

They refuse to take control of responsibilities and are lead through a disconcerting world

Both characters are lead through their lives by other people; they refuse to take control. When Sam does take control, accepting a promotion only so he can find his dream girl, it leads to his final incarceration and madness.

¹⁴ Bondanella

This ambiguity as to what the film is *about* is articulated by a character within *8 1/2*. Talking to Guido about the script for the science fiction film, ---- says, ‘You see, what stands out at first reading is the lack of a central issue or a philosophical stance... That makes the film a chain of gratuitous episodes.’ Bondanella tells us that Fellini has fallen out of favour with modern film scholars for this very lack of a discernable ideology and can therefore not easily be explored through sociological categories such as gender, race and class.¹⁵ He writes,

Rather than ideological pronouncements, Fellini’s images typically aim at the communication of emotions or sentiments rather than ideological statements. Fellini honestly (some would say, naïvely) believed that one human being can communicate something of significance to another, without ideological interference. Much of contemporary film criticism is premised on the assumption that such a thing is impossible.¹⁶

¹⁵ p.2

¹⁶ p.5

Fellini's cinema, then, and in particular *8 1/2*, is highly personal. It is often noted that the Guido character is an onscreen representation of Fellini. If the director of *8 1/2* is inside the film itself, then, it is apparent in certain sequences where Guido appears omnipresent. The camera floats from face to face in the garden of the holy water scene, many of these faces looking straight to camera. No reverse shot has been given, so the perspective of the shots is unspecified, until Guido later appears from off-camera. At times he seems to control the camera himself: where he looks, the camera looks, but using angles and movements that are clearly stylised. Added to this, the film refuses to provide establishing shots for many of its locations, so the viewer is disorientated and cannot place themselves inside of the film. Details of the scene are revealed in a stylised way, but for every detail that is revealed, something else remains hidden. The viewers wish for the Guido's ability to look around freely but instead is lead, perhaps at times unwillingly, through the film. It is this unclear perspective that makes *8 1/2* such a disorientating experience.

Omnipresent Guido

[see intro of Bondella, critic. Reception. Fellini without ideology.] stream of consciousness LACK of gender/race studies, etc.

Lack of establishing shots. Characters out of frame. Details are revealed, in a stylized way, but with everything that is revealed, something also remains hidden . Unspecified locations.

In a footnote, he writes, 'Contemporary critical categories of race, class, gender, or other sociological approaches to Fellini's cinema have limited explanatory value for a very simple reason: Fellini's cinema is fundamentally not concerned about the issues upon which contemporary theory fixates. To attempt to force Fellini's cinema into directions that are fundamentally alien to its intentions is doomed to failure.'¹⁷

p.152:

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¹⁷ p.163

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Escaping responsibility, p.170

and enter into the ambiguities of these complicated films and attempt to find out how they construct such grey areas.

Although emerging from different eras and countries, Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (Italy, 1963) and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (U.K., 1985) are more closely connected than are at first apparent.

In this essay I will enter into

POSE SOME QUESTIONS AT THE OUTSET

I will investigate

'What is Brazil?'

Fellini's film is explicitly *about* undecidability.

One of the most interesting **oppositional/dialectical elements** is the ~~Marcello/Marcello mirror: the actor Marcello playing the character Marcello~~. It is often cited that Mastrioni is an explicit on-screen representation of Fellini himself. The mirror, therefore, would appear as Marcello/Federico. This is only one example of how *8 1/2* blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, in other words the ambiguous interplay of Fellini's fiction with Fellini's reality.

[he enters this dreamspace at the end of the film

film's reality and reality

The Marcello/Marcello (Marcello/Fellini) mirror

Fellini's *8 1/2* oscillates between fantasy and reality

Gilliam is a great fan of Fellini

8

CONFUSE YOURSELF – INVESTIGATE THE GREY AREA!

Gilliam and Fellini are connected in various and interesting ways. They are both filmmakers with a very strong visual sense, heavily influenced by the relationships between dreams, nightmares and reality. They were both cartoonists before becoming filmmakers, and their ability to translate their visions (and in Fellini's case, his dreams) into imaginative drawings became an integral part of their filmmaking processes. Gilliam, of course, was heavily influenced by Fellini and cites him as perhaps his greatest influence.¹⁸ Fellini's *8 1/2* and Gilliam's *Brazil* are both filled to the brim with visual information along with dense and complex screenplays that contain a variety of themes that run together at once. One of these themes is the relationship between dream and reality, and both films blur the boundary between these two states. In this essay, I will interrogate Gilliam's *Brazil* and Fellini's *8 1/2* and question how they construct the ambiguities between fantasy and reality, entering into these grey areas and... [pose questions]. How? they are ambiguous for an audience...

These are fantasies (within a reality just as fantastic) that are at first clearly delineated from their reality. As the film progresses, these two states merge. From the start of *8 1/2*, Guido ----'s fantasies are closely integrated with his reality, suggesting that reality is an unreliable place where surreal and dreamlike events are just as likely to happen. It is hard to discern what is fantasy and reality in *8 1/2* and as *Brazil* comes to a close, Sam finds himself running through these dream sequences in his final nightmare, suggesting that his sense of reality and fantasy too have merged. In fact, we are introduced to both characters through their dreams. We find Sam flying through the sky as his superhero alter-ego, and we find Guido trapped inside his car. When Guido escapes his car he too flies through the sky and clouds, recalling the skylines of Sam's dreams. For Sam, his dreams are a means of escape, but for Guido they are a space in which he can sort through his problems.

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¹⁸ Ian Christie (ed.), *Gilliam on Gilliam*

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Both films oscillate between reality and fantasy. In *Brazil*, Sam Lowry imagines himself as a superhero in elaborate dream sequences that become darker as the film progresses. These are fantasies (within a reality just as fantastic) that are at first clearly delineated from their reality. As the film progresses, these two states merge. From the start of *8 1/2*, Guido's fantasies are closely integrated with his reality, suggesting that reality is an unreliable place where surreal and dreamlike events are just as likely to happen. It is hard to discern what is fantasy and reality in *8 1/2* and as *Brazil* comes to a close, Sam finds himself running through these dream sequences in his final nightmare, suggesting that his sense of reality and fantasy too have merged. In fact, we are introduced to both characters through their dreams. We find Sam flying through the sky as his superhero alter-ego, and we find Guido trapped inside his car. When Guido escapes his car he too flies through the sky and clouds, recalling the skylscapes of Sam's dreams. For Sam, his dreams are a means of escape, but for Guido they are a space in which he can sort through his problems.

In a contemporary documentary entitled *What is Brazil?* members of the cast and crew are asked what the film is about. Each one gives a different answer and its star, Jonathan Pryce, says 'He knew but had forgotten. [get bloody footnote and correct quotation!]. Since *Brazil* is such a visual film, it is difficult to articulate it in words. [It is a film that lends itself to wild interpretation.]

will worry about, and find difficulty arriving at, a concrete definition of what the film is *really* about. It is also very possible that

Indeed, the obsessions with plastic surgery, the paranoia of terrorism, and the oppressiveness of governments and large corporations the film depicts are perhaps even more prevalent in modern-day society.

Battle of Brazil: p.22 for plot summary (character summary)

p.49

This ambiguity as to what the film is clearly *about* is also apparent in *Brazil*, so much so that in a documentary entitled *What is Brazil?* (1985) even the cast and crew gave varying answers. This however, runs alongside numerous subplots, including It is the themes of the film