

# Brazil (1985 film)

---

*Brazil* is a 1985 [dystopian](#)<sup>[9]</sup> [science fiction film](#)<sup>[10]</sup> directed by [Terry Gilliam](#) and written by Gilliam, [Charles McKeown](#), and [Tom Stoppard](#). The film stars [Jonathan Pryce](#) and features [Robert De Niro](#), [Kim Greist](#), [Michael Palin](#), [Katherine Helmond](#), [Bob Hoskins](#) and [Ian Holm](#).

The film centres on Sam Lowry, a man trying to find a woman who appears in his dreams while he is working in a mind-numbing job and living in a small apartment, set in a [dystopian](#) world in which there is an over-reliance on poorly maintained (and rather whimsical) machines. *Brazil*'s satire of [bureaucratic](#), [totalitarian](#) government is reminiscent of [George Orwell](#)'s *[Nineteen Eighty-Four](#)*<sup>[11][12][13]</sup> and has been called [Kafkaesque](#)<sup>[14]</sup> and [absurdist](#).<sup>[13]</sup>

Sarah Street's *British National Cinema* (1997) describes the film as a "fantasy/satire on bureaucratic society"; and [John Scalzi](#)'s *Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies* (2005) describes it as a "dystopian satire".

Jack Mathews, a film critic and the author of *The Battle of Brazil* (1987), described the film as "satirizing the bureaucratic, largely dysfunctional industrial world that had been driving Gilliam crazy all his life".<sup>[15]</sup> The film is named after the recurrent theme song, [Ary Barroso](#)'s "[Aquarela do Brasil](#)", known simply as "Brazil" to British audiences, as performed by [Geoff Muldaur](#).<sup>[16]</sup>

Though a success in Europe, the film was unsuccessful in its initial North America release. It has since become a [cult film](#). In 1999, the [British Film Institute](#) voted *Brazil* the [54th greatest British film of all time](#). In 2017 a poll of 150 actors, directors, writers, producers and critics for *Time Out* magazine saw it ranked the 24th best British film ever.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Plot

---

In a dystopian, hyper-bureaucratic future, Sam Lowry is a low-level government employee who frequently daydreams of himself as a winged warrior saving a [damsel in distress](#). A fly gets jammed in a printer and creates a typographical error, resulting in the incarceration and accidental death during interrogation of cobbler Archibald Buttler, instead of renegade [air conditioning](#) specialist and suspected terrorist Archibald Tuttle. Sam is assigned the task of rectifying the error. Visiting Buttler's widow, Sam encounters their neighbour Jill Layton, and is astonished to discover that she resembles the woman from his recurring dreams. Jill has been trying to help Mrs Buttler establish what happened to her husband, but her efforts have been obstructed by bureaucracy. Unknown to her, she is now considered a terrorist accomplice of Tuttle for attempting to report the mistake of Buttler's arrest. Sam approaches Jill, but she avoids giving him full details, worried the government will track her down.

Sam reports a fault in his apartment's air conditioning. Central Services are uncooperative, but then Tuttle, who used to work for Central Services but left because of his dislike of the tedious and repetitive paperwork, unexpectedly comes to his assistance. Tuttle repairs Sam's air conditioning, but when two Central Services workers, Spoor and Dowser, arrive, Sam has to [fob them off](#) to let Tuttle escape. The workers later return to demolish Sam's ducts and seize his apartment under pretence of fixing the system.

Sam discovers that the only way to learn about Jill is to be transferred to Information Retrieval, where he will be able to access her classified records. He has previously turned down a promotion arranged by his mother, Ida, who is obsessed with the rejuvenating plastic surgery of cosmetic surgeon Dr Jaffe. Sam retracts his refusal by speaking with Deputy Minister Mr Helpmann at a party hosted by Ida. Having obtained Jill's records, Sam tracks her down before she can be arrested, then falsifies the records to indicate her death, allowing her to escape pursuit. The two share a romantic night

together, but are apprehended by the government at gunpoint. Charged with treason for abusing his new position, Sam is restrained in a chair in a large, empty cylindrical room, to be tortured by his old friend, Jack Lint. Sam is told that Jill was killed while resisting arrest.

As Jack is about to start the torture, Tuttle and other members of the resistance break into the Ministry, shooting Jack, rescuing Sam, and blowing up the Ministry building. Sam and Tuttle flee together, but Tuttle disappears amid a mass of scraps of paperwork from the destroyed building. Sam stumbles into the funeral of Ida's friend, who has died following excessive cosmetic surgery. Sam discovers that his mother now resembles Jill, and is too busy being fawned over by young men to care about her son's plight. Guards disrupt the funeral, and Sam falls into the open casket and through a black void. He lands in a street from his daydreams, and tries to escape police and monsters by climbing a pile of [flex-ducts](#). Opening a door, he passes through it and is surprised to find himself in a truck driven by Jill. The two leave the city together. However, this "happy ending" is a delusion: in reality, he is still strapped to the chair. It is implied that he has been [lobotomised](#) by Jack.<sup>[18]</sup> Realising that Sam has descended into blissful insanity, Jack and Mr Helpmann declare him a lost cause and leave the room. Sam remains in the chair, smiling and humming "[Aquarela do Brasil](#)".

## Cast

---

### Main cast

- [Jonathan Pryce](#) as Sam Lowry. Pryce has described the role as the highlight of his career, along with that of [Lytton Strachey](#) in *Carrington*.<sup>[19]</sup> [Tom Cruise](#) was also considered for the role.<sup>[20]</sup>
- [Kim Greist](#) as Jill Layton. Gilliam's first choice for the part was [Ellen Barkin](#); also considered were [Jamie Lee Curtis](#), [Rebecca De Mornay](#), [Rae Dawn Chong](#), [Joanna Pacuła](#), [Rosanna Arquette](#), [Kelly McGillis](#), and [Madonna](#).<sup>[21]</sup> Gilliam was reportedly dissatisfied with Greist's performance, and chose to cut or edit some of her scenes as a result.<sup>[21]</sup>
- [Robert De Niro](#) as Archibald "Harry" Tuttle. De Niro still wanted a part in the film after being denied that of Jack Lint, so Gilliam offered him the smaller role of Tuttle.<sup>[22]</sup>
- [Katherine Helmond](#) as Mrs. Ida Lowry. According to Helmond, Gilliam called her and said, "I have a part for you, and I want you to come over and do it, but you're not going to look very nice in it." The make-up was applied by Gilliam's wife, Maggie. During production, Helmond spent ten hours a day with a mask glued to her face; her scenes had to be postponed due to the blisters this caused.<sup>[23]</sup>
- [Ian Holm](#) as Mr. Kurtzmann, Sam's boss.
- [Bob Hoskins](#) as Spoor, a government-employed heating engineer who resents Harry Tuttle.
- [Michael Palin](#) as Jack Lint. [Robert De Niro](#) read the script and expressed interest in the role, but Gilliam had already promised the part to Palin, a friend and regular collaborator. Palin described the character as "someone who was everything that Jonathan Pryce's character wasn't: he's stable, he had a family, he was settled, comfortable, hard-working, charming, sociable – and utterly and totally unscrupulous. That was the way we felt we could bring out the evil in Jack Lint."<sup>[24]</sup>
- [Ian Richardson](#) as Mr. Warrenn, Sam's new boss at Information Retrieval.
- [Peter Vaughan](#) as Mr. Helpmann, the Deputy Minister of Information.

### Supporting cast

- [Jim Broadbent](#) as Doctor Louis Jaffe, Ida Lowry's plastic surgeon.

- [Brian Miller](#) as Mr. Archibald Buttle, the man imprisoned and accidentally killed for Archibald Tuttle's crimes.
- [Sheila Reid](#) as Mrs. Veronica Buttle, Archibald Buttle's widow.
- [Barbara Hicks](#) as Mrs. Alma Terrain.
- [Kathryn Pogson](#) as Shirley Terrain, Alma's daughter.
- [Bryan Pringle](#) as Spiro, the waiter.
- [Derrick O'Connor](#) as Dowser, Spoor's partner.
- [Elizabeth Spender](#) as Alison "Barbara" Lint, Jack's wife.
- Holly Gilliam, daughter of director Terry Gilliam, as Holly Lint, Jack's daughter.<sup>[22]</sup>
- [Derek Deadman](#) and [Nigel Planer](#) as Bill and Charlie, workers repairing the Buttles' ceiling.
- [Gorden Kaye](#) as the M.O.I. porter.
- [Myrtle Devenish](#) as Jack's secretary.
- [Roger Ashton-Griffiths](#) as the Priest.
- [Jack Purvis](#) as Doctor Chapman.
- [Andre Gregory](#) as Luke

## Cameos

- Co-writer [Charles McKeown](#) as Harvey Lime, Sam's co-worker.
- Director Terry Gilliam as the smoking man at Shang-ri La Towers.

## Production

---

### Writing

Gilliam developed the story and wrote the first draft of the screenplay with [Charles Alverson](#), who was paid for his work but was ultimately uncredited in the final film. For nearly 20 years, Gilliam denied that Alverson had made any material contribution to the script. When the first draft was published and original in-progress documents emerged from Alverson's files, however, Gilliam begrudgingly changed his story. This was too late for either credit on the film or a listing on the failed Oscar nomination for Alverson; he has said that he would not have minded the Oscar nomination, even though he didn't think much of the script or the finished film.<sup>[25]</sup> Gilliam, McKeown, and Stoppard collaborated on further drafts. *Brazil* was developed under the titles *The Ministry* and *1984 ½*, the latter a nod not only to Orwell's original *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but also to *8½* by [Federico Fellini](#), a director whom Gilliam often cites as one of the defining influences on his visual style when directing.<sup>[26]</sup> During the film's production, other working titles floated about, including *The Ministry of Torture*, *How I Learned to Live with the System—So Far*,<sup>[27]</sup> and *So That's Why the Bourgeoisie Sucks*,<sup>[28]</sup> before settling with *Brazil*, relating to the name of its escapist [signature tune](#).

In an interview with [Salman Rushdie](#), Gilliam stated:

*Brazil* came specifically from the time, from the approaching of 1984. It was looming. In fact, the original title of *Brazil* was *1984 ½*. Fellini was one of my great gods and it was 1984, so let's put them together. Unfortunately, that bastard [Michael Radford](#) did [a version of 1984](#) and he called it *1984*, so I was blown.<sup>[29]</sup>

Gilliam sometimes refers to this film as the second in his "Trilogy of Imagination" films, starting with *Time Bandits* (1981) and ending with *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988).<sup>[15]</sup> All are about the "craziness of our awkwardly ordered society and the desire to escape it through whatever means possible."<sup>[15]</sup> 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 man in his thirties,

and *Munchausen*, through the eyes of an elderly man. In 2013, Gilliam also called *Brazil* the first instalment of a [dystopian](#) satire trilogy it forms with 1995's [12 Monkeys](#) and 2013's [The Zero Theorem](#)<sup>[30]</sup> (though he would later deny having said this<sup>[31]</sup>).

Gilliam has stated that *Brazil* was inspired by [George Orwell](#)'s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—which he has admitted never having read<sup>[22]</sup>—but is written from a contemporary perspective rather than looking to the future as Orwell did. In Gilliam's words, his film was "the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for 1984." Critics and analysts have pointed out many similarities and differences between the two,<sup>[13]</sup> an example being that contrary to [Winston Smith](#), Sam Lowry's spirit did not capitulate as he sank into complete [catatonia](#).<sup>[11][32]</sup> The film's ending bears a strong similarity to "[An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge](#)" by [Ambrose Bierce](#).<sup>[33]</sup> The [tragicomic](#) tone and philosophy of the film bear many resemblances to [absurdist drama](#), a genre for which *Brazil* cowriter [Tom Stoppard](#) is widely acclaimed.

## Production design

Logo of the Ministry of Information

[Michael Atkinson](#) of *The Village Voice* wrote, "Gilliam understood that all futuristic films end up quaintly evoking the naïve past in which they were made, and turned the principle into a coherent comic aesthetic."<sup>[34]</sup> In the second version of the script, Gilliam and Alverson described the film's setting like this: "It is neither future nor past, and yet a bit of each. It is neither East nor West, but could be [Belgrade](#) or [Scunthorpe](#) on a drizzly day in February. Or [Cicero, Illinois](#), seen through the bottom of a beer bottle."<sup>[35]</sup> In the 1988 documentary *The Birth of Brazil*, Gilliam said that he always explained the film as taking place "everywhere in the 20th century, whatever that means, on the Los Angeles/Belfast border, whatever that means".<sup>[36]</sup>

The result is an [anachronistic](#) technology, "a view of what the 1980s might have looked like as viewed from the perspective of a 1940s filmmaker"<sup>[37]</sup> which has been dubbed "[retro-futurism](#)" by fellow filmmakers [Jean-Pierre Jeunet](#) and [Marc Caro](#).<sup>[34]</sup> It is a mixture of styles and production designs derived from [Fritz Lang](#)'s films (particularly *Metropolis* and *M*) or [film noir](#) pictures starring [Humphrey Bogart](#): "On the other hand, Sam's reality has a '40s noir feel. Some sequences are shot to recall images of Humphrey Bogart on the hunt and one character (Harvey Lime) may be named as an homage to *The Third Man*'s [Harry Lime](#)."<sup>[37]</sup> A number of reviewers also saw a distinct influence of [German Expressionism](#), as the 1920s seminal, more nightmarish, predecessor to 1940s film noir, in general in how Gilliam made use of lighting and set designs.<sup>[38]</sup> A brief sequence towards the end, in which resistance fighters flee from government soldiers on the steps of the Ministry, pays homage to the [Odessa Steps sequence](#) in [Sergei Eisenstein](#)'s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).<sup>[22]</sup> Strong references exist to the overcomplicated humoristic machinery of British illustrator [W. Heath Robinson](#), published between 1915 and 1942.<sup>[39]</sup>

The lighting and set design was coupled with Gilliam's trademark obsession for very wide lenses and tilted camera angles; going unusually wide for an audience used to mainstream Hollywood productions, Gilliam made the film's wide-angle shots with 14mm (Zeiss), 11mm, and 9.8mm (Kinoptik) lenses, the latter being a recent technological innovation at the time as one of the first lenses of that short a focal length that did not [fish-eye](#).<sup>[40]</sup> 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 *Brazil*.<sup>[41]</sup>

The numbering of form 27B/6, without which no work can be done by repairmen of the Department of Public Works, is an allusion to [George Orwell](#)'s flat at 27B [Canonbury Square](#), London (up six half-flights of stairs), where he lived while writing parts of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>[42][43]</sup>

## Music

[Geoff Muldaur](#) performed a version of [Ary Barroso](#)'s most famous 1939 song "[Aquarela do Brasil](#)" ("Watercolor of Brazil", often simply called "Brazil" in English). The song is a musical ode to the Brazilian motherland. Geoff Muldaur uses the song as a [leitmotif](#) in the film, although other background music is also used. [Michael Kamen](#)'s arrangement and orchestration of Barroso's song for Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1984) made it more pliable to late 20th century tastes to the extent that film trailer composers often use it in contexts that have little to do with Brazil and more to do with Gilliam's dystopian vision.<sup>[44]</sup> Kamen, who scored the film, originally recorded "Brazil" with vocals by [Kate Bush](#). This recording was not included in the actual film or the original soundtrack release; however, it has been subsequently released on re-pressings of the soundtrack. Gilliam recalls drawing the inspiration to use the song as follows:<sup>[45]</sup>

This place was a métallurgie city, where everything was covered by a gray metallic dust... Even the beach was completely covered by dust, it was really dusky. The sun was going down and was very beautiful. The contrast was extraordinary. I had this image of a man sitting there in this sordid beach with a portable radio, tuned in those strange escapist Latin songs like Brazil. The music took him away somehow and made the world seem less blue to him.

Sylvia Albertazzi in her article "Salman Rushdie's 'The location of Brazil'. The Imaginary homelands of the Fantastic Literature", stresses even further the importance that the soundtrack had upon the movie's plot and meaning, she suggests "... the opening question 'where is Gilliam's Brazil?', may be answered, quite literally, 'in a song'; just as it is in a song that there is to be found that world where 'all fall down' in children's games".<sup>[46]</sup>

## Release

---

### Battle for final cut

The film was produced by [Arnon Milchan](#)'s company [Embassy International Pictures](#). Gilliam's original cut of the film is 142 minutes long and ends on a dark note. This version was released internationally by [20th Century Fox](#).

US distribution was handled by [Universal](#), whose executives felt the ending [tested](#) poorly. Universal chairman [Sid Sheinberg](#) insisted on a dramatic re-edit of the film to give it a happy ending, and suggested testing both versions to see which scored higher.<sup>[47]</sup> At one point, there were two editing teams working on the film, one without Gilliam's knowledge.<sup>[48]</sup> As with the cult science fiction film [Blade Runner](#) (1982), which had been released three years earlier, a version of *Brazil* was created by the studio with a more consumer-friendly ending. After a lengthy delay with no sign of the film being released, Gilliam took out a full-page ad in the trade magazine [Variety](#) urging Sheinberg to release *Brazil* in its intended version. Sheinberg spoke publicly of his dispute with Gilliam in interviews and ran his own advertisement in *Daily Variety* offering to sell the film.<sup>[49]</sup> Gilliam conducted private screenings of *Brazil* (without the studio's approval) for film schools and local critics. On the same night Universal's award contender [Out of Africa](#) premiered in New York, *Brazil* was awarded the [Los Angeles Film Critics Association](#) award for "Best Picture".<sup>[50]</sup> This prompted Universal to finally agree to release a modified 132-minute version supervised by Gilliam, in 1985.<sup>[51][52]</sup>

## Reception

---

On [Rotten Tomatoes](#), the film has a 98% rating based on 47 reviews with an [average rating](#) of 8.7/10. The site's critical consensus reads "Brazil, Terry Gilliam's visionary Orwellian fantasy, is an audacious dark comedy, filled with strange, imaginative visuals."<sup>[52]</sup> On [Metacritic](#), it received an 88/100 score based on 12 reviews.<sup>[53]</sup>

*Los Angeles Times* critic [Kenneth Turan](#) described the film as "the most potent piece of satiric political cinema since *Dr. Strangelove*".<sup>[15]</sup> [Janet Maslin](#) of *The New York Times* was very positive towards the film upon its release, stating "Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, a jaunty, wittily observed vision of an extremely bleak future, is a superb example of the power of comedy to underscore serious ideas, even solemn ones."<sup>[54]</sup>

[Roger Ebert](#) was less enthusiastic in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, giving the film two out of four stars and claiming that it was "hard to follow". He felt the film lacked a confident grasp on its characters' roles in a story "awash in elaborate special effects, sensational sets, apocalyptic scenes of destruction and a general lack of discipline". Ebert wrote positively of certain scenes, especially one in which "Sam moves into half an office and finds himself engaged in a tug-of-war over his desk with the man through the wall. I was reminded of a Chaplin film, *Modern Times*, and reminded, too, that in Chaplin economy and simplicity were virtues, not the enemy."<sup>[55]</sup>

## Accolades

In 2004, *Total Film* named *Brazil* the 20th-greatest British movie of all time. In 2005, *Time* film reviewers [Richard Corliss](#) and [Richard Schickel](#) named *Brazil* in an unordered list of the 100 best films of all time. In 2006, [Channel 4](#) voted *Brazil* one of the "50 Films to See Before You Die", shortly before its broadcast on [FilmFour](#). The film also ranks at number 83 in *Empire* magazine's list of the 500 Greatest Films of All Time.<sup>[56]</sup>

*Wired* ranked *Brazil* number 5 in its list of the top 20 sci-fi movies.<sup>[57]</sup> *Entertainment Weekly* listed *Brazil* as the sixth-best science-fiction piece of media released since 1982.<sup>[58]</sup> The magazine also ranked the film No. 13 on their list of "The Top 50 Cult Films".<sup>[59]</sup>

The film was nominated for two [Academy Awards](#); for [Original Screenplay](#) and [Best Art Direction](#) ([Norman Garwood](#), [Maggie Gray](#)).<sup>[60]</sup>

According to Gilliam in an interview with [Clive James](#) in his online programme *Talking in the Library*, *Brazil* is—to his surprise—apparently a favourite film of the [far right](#) in America.<sup>[61]</sup>

## Home media

*Brazil* has been released four times by [The Criterion Collection](#), as a five-disc [LaserDisc](#) box set in 1996, a three-disc [DVD](#) box set in 1999 and 2006, a single-disc DVD in 2006, and a two-disc [Blu-ray](#) set in 2012. The packaging for the 1999 and 2006 three-disc box sets is identical in appearance, but the latter release is compatible with [widescreen](#) televisions.

Except the single-disc version, all versions have the same special features: a 142-minute cut of the film (referred to by Gilliam as the "fifth and final cut"), Sheinberg's 94 minute "Love Conquers All" cut for syndicated television, and various galleries and featurettes.

A Blu-ray of the 132-minute US version of the movie was released in the US on 12 July 2011 by Universal. It contains only that version of the film and no extra features.<sup>[62]</sup>

## Influence

---

### Film

Other films that drew inspiration from *Brazil*'s cinematography, art design, and/or overall atmosphere include [Jean-Pierre Jeunet](#)'s and [Marc Caro](#)'s films *Delicatessen* (1991) and *The City of Lost Children* (1995),<sup>[63]</sup> [Rocky Morton](#) and [Annabel Jankel](#)'s *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), the [Coen brothers](#)' *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994),<sup>[64]</sup> and [Alex Proyas](#)' *Dark City* (1998).<sup>[65][66]</sup>

The production design and lighting style of Tim Burton's *Batman* have been compared to *Brazil*.<sup>[67]</sup> Tim Burton and production designer [Anton Furst](#) studied *Brazil* as a reference for *Batman*.<sup>[68]</sup>

The ending of [Neil Marshall's \*The Descent\*](#) was much inspired by *Brazil's*, and Marshall explained in an interview that "the original ending for *Brazil* was a massive inspiration for the original ending of *The Descent* – the idea that someone can go insane on the outside, but inside they've found happiness."<sup>[69]</sup>

## Technology

The highly technological aesthetics of *Brazil* inspired the set design of Max Cohen's apartment in the film [Pi](#).<sup>[70]</sup> *Brazil* also served as an inspiration for the film [Sucker Punch](#) (2011).<sup>[71]</sup>

*Brazil* has also been recognised as an inspiration for writers and artists of the [steampunk](#) subculture.<sup>[72][73][74]</sup>

The dystopian premise of 2018's [We Happy Few](#) video game is largely inspired by *Brazil*.<sup>[75][76]</sup>

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazil\\_\(1985\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazil_(1985_film))