DISTURBING PASTICHE IN *12 MONKEYS* (1995)

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Abstract: *The focus of the study is Terry Gilliam's 1995 production 12 Monkeys, approached from the perspective of a postmodern narrative framework, which sweeps the viewers across multiple worlds. The director's cross-genre mixture of comedy and science-fiction maintains the viewer in a permanent sense of unease at the levels of cinematography and narrative strand, under scrutiny in this paper.*

Key words: *Insanity, Postmodernism, Pastiche, SF, Time-travel*

Science-fiction films cast a nostalgic glance on the past in view of shaping a possible future. As Hutcheon (1988) points out, the postmodern subgenre "exploits and subverts" what came before, giving way to unique and enriching interpretations of history, which anchor us in the present and near-future. In modernism, science-fiction used to be subject-centred, sequential, and concerned with the impact of progress, celebrating man's triumph over nature, most often aided by advanced technologies. It lacked "undermining of the underlying unity of the self. Subjectivity was relatively coherent, relatively centered and stable" (McHale, 1992:254).

Postmodern science-fiction expresses concern over the realms of progress, demographic explosions and biological weaponry. Science fiction is the successor and functional equivalent of historical fiction, and it "helps us to historicize our present by reimagining it as the past of a determinate future, just as historical fiction helped us in a similar way by reimagining the present as the future of a determinate past" (McHale, 1992:238). Postmodern science-fiction has become part and parcel of mass-culture, and one strategy it employs when looking back is *pastiche*, which completely lacks the humour associated with *parody*, replacing it with mournful melancholy.

Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* presents James Cole, played by Bruce Willis, a futuristic time-traveller sent from prison in 2035 backwards and forwards through time to uncover the origins of a deadly virus that has destroyed 99% of humankind in 1996, the present-time in the film. The

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other 1% of the population is forced to live in desolation underground. Cole's ability to "remember things" is the reason why he is chosen to take a risky expedition above the ground. An ironic proof of his capacity is represented by the memory of his own fatal shooting at an airport. By mistake, Cole arrives in 1990, and is committed to a mental institution, being considered a dangerous lunatic. Dr Kathryn Railly is his doctor, and Jeffrey Goines is the first person he meets. Later on, Cole will find out that Goines is the instigator of the "Army of the 12 Monkeys", an animal rights group of extremists, believed responsible for the release of the deadly virus.

Cole is dragged back and forth through time before being sacrificed by the scientists in order to cover for the culprit, Goines' father's lab assistant. The night before Cole's shooting, Railly and Cole are hiding from the poilice in a 1960's style antiquated movie theatre, where an Alfred Hitchcock movie marathon is playing. The cinema billboard displays famous titles, such as *Psycho*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest.* Cole and Railly kiss in front of a movie poster of *The Birds*, and the action rolling on screen is paralleled by cut-away shots which provide an ironic comment on the climatic events in the real movie. As Railly dresses Cole in disguise, he appears helpless and submissive, in between parallel editing shots of the action happening outside, where Goines is carrying out his plan to lock his father, Dr. Leland Goines, in a city zoo and release the animals in the streets. Meanwhile, inside the theatre, Cole and Railly are watching *Vertigo*. The meta-message prompts us to relate the story of the detective who was afraid of heights to Cole's situation. The girl Scotty loves, Madeline, apparently falls to her death. The two of them walk toward a cross-section of an old felled tree. With significant moments of history encrypted on its rings: BIRTH OF CHRIST, DISCOVERY OF AMERICA, 1930 TREE CUT DOWN. Madeline says to Scotty "Somewhere in here I was born. And here I die." (*12 Monkeys*, 1995)

This is framed pastiche employed in order to comment on the ensuing events concerning Cole. The animals in Philadelphia zoo are released onto the streets and viewers are constantly wrenched from outside events into the cinema hall. As birds are attacking people in *The Birds*, Cole says: "I have seen it, but I don't remember this part. Funny. It's like what is happening to us, like the past. The movie never changes- it can't

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change- but every time you see it, it seems to be different, because you're different. You notice different things". (*12 Monkeys,* 1995)

Another instance of evident pastiche is related to the Victorian look of the mental institution in which Cole is committed, as it recalls Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, with its drastic punishments and constant surveillance, rather than treatment or care. The TV placed high above the ward plays 1940s cartoons in black and white, while an outdated typewriter contextualizes the setting of the SF action.

Dressed in disguise, both Cole and Dr Railly look like middle-aged hippies; she is wearing a short skirt with a floral pattern, and Cole has put on a moustache, long hair, sunglasses and a floral shirt. In terms of musical tastes, Cole's favourite tunes are Louis Armstrong's 'What a Wonderful World' and Fats Domino's 'Blueberry Hill', from the 1960s. When Cole is briefed for his second trip back in time, the panel of scientists test him in a parodic TV show setting, with Cole stranded above the ground in an old barber's chair.

"BOTANIST: If the symptoms were first detected in Philadelphia on December 28 1996, which makes us know that...?

COLE: It was released in Philadelphia probably on December 12 1996

BOTANIST: And it appeared sequentially after that in…?

COLE: San Francisco, New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, Kinshasa, Karachi, Bangkok, then Peking." (*12 Monkeys,* 1995)

The scientists, in turn, look grotesque, made-up and wearing spectacles. The TV monitor in front of Cole is shaped as a huge disco ball, a collage of facial features and magazine or newspaper articles.

When Cole attempts to escape from the mental institution, heavily sedated and bruised, Goines is causing a riot in the ward as diversion. Guards are pursuing Goines, the rest of the mental patients are in total roar, while Cole is staggering towards the locked gate. On the TV screen, shown in cut-aways, the Marx brothers in the 1931 *Monkey Business* are involved in a hilarious chase.

The juxtaposition of the comic and the disturbing increases the viewer's sense of unease. The comic interludes do provide a break from the bleak drama, but increase our guilt by implication in the crime we have anticipated from the onset of the movie. Sunshine, fresh air and music will be forever lost, along with laughter and human affection, as Cole indicates in his lamentations back in his dark iron cage of 2035.

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The lunatics in the mental institution provide plenty of amusement for the viewer. Filtered through Cole's heavily sedated, yet cynical perspective, "crazy people" such as Goines and L.J. Washington appear silly as the camera pans and tilts down, dressed in bunny slippers and drawing maps on the floor.

"GOINES: "If all these nuts could make phone calls, they could spread insanity, oozing through telephone cable, oozing to the ears of all these poor, sane people, infecting them; wackos everywhere, plague of madness." (*12 Monkeys,* 1995)

After the failed attempt to send Cole back to 1996, the scientists attempt to reassure him he will arrive safely to the right year as he is secured into the time-travelling capsule. But he ends up, completely naked, on the battlefields of the Western front, in the midst of a gas attack. Where he is shot in the leg before being transported 'back' to the correct year, 1996. His experience is related to Railly's lecture on the 'Cassandra Complex', pointing out the consistent recalling and circling of events and ideas typical of postmodern texts: "Cassandra, in Greed legend you will recall, was condemned to know the future but to be disbelieved when she foretold it. Hence, the agony of foreknowledge combined with the impotence to do anything about it." (*12 Monkeys,* 1995).

In response to a question about the use of postmodern architecture in *12 Monkeys,* Gillian stated "I've always used architecture as if it was a character, so it seemed to me this truncated room was right for multiple personalities. In three ways it extended into infinity or escape into the future- and which one do you choose?' (1996, interview with Nick James)

He choose to juxtapose worlds and spaces, and choose Philadelphia for its "amazing mixture of architecture, nice nineteenth century stuff and 20s power stations which are now disused. The city hall is this wonderful Beaux Arts building which we used as a centrepiece for the above ground future." (id.)

The director acknowledges his own propensity to identify with objects from a remote yet redundant past. Much of the simulacra in the movie point back to Victoriana. A long-lasting shot depicts the City Hall, Greek columns, stone blocks covered in graffiti and garbage having become refuge spaces for the homeless.

As well as borrowing dead styles, stylistic references and voices from the past, postmodern SF loops postmodern works. The recurrent apocalyptic

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dream Cole has in *12 Monkeys* is based on a twenty-seven minute French movie made in 1962, called *La Jetee*, the story of a man tortured to the point of obsession by an image from his childhood prior to the dropping of an atomic bomb.

The visual exposure of violence is a potentially alienating strategy, engaging the viewer while triggering the viewer's rejection simultaneously. When the police arrive at the seedy Globe Hotel, Wallace the pimp calls from the bathroom "Hey! That the police? I'm the innocent victim here. I was attacked by a coked-up whore and a crazy dentist." (*12 Monkeys,* 1995)

He presents Cole as the aggressor, as the latter had used Wallace's knife to remove a tooth so he would not have to return to the future.

Cole is blunt in is accusations when he insults the panel of experts from the institution "You've got a lot of nuts here." (*12 Monkeys,* 1995)

This is Gillian's way of blowing up the idea of grand narratives and scientific certainty. In the postmodern world Railly's words ring true: "I'm not sure anymore." (*12 Monkeys,* 1995).

"It is part of the postmodern stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this contradiction is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both" (Hutcheon, 1988:106)

Postmodern science fiction is a product of a fluid society which acknowledges the unpredictability of the future as a result of the displacement of the present. Pastiche and simulacra are used in the movie to re-visit the past and prevent its closure. In a medium concerned with representing the future, the scars of the past stand as a pointed social comment on our present, in the form of visual entertainment.

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