

Why We Have to Learn to Live With Fear – The Age (Opinion Page, 2003)

In the mid-'80s American director Terry Gilliam (of Monty Python fame) released *Brazil*, his critically acclaimed satire of the information age. Gilliam was told by Tom Stoppard, who worked with him on the script, that his ideas were a bit too close to George Orwell's *1984*. Gilliam replied that he hadn't heard of *1984*, let alone read it, proving once and for all that great minds do indeed think alike.

But not totally alike. Orwell's classic doesn't include terrorists. Gilliam's does. Gilliam's treatment of terrorism has the same resonance for us as Orwell's vision of a state-controlled society had in the Stalinist era.

In *Brazil*, a foppish British government official is asked how he explains the success the terrorists are having. "Beginners luck," the official replies, going on to add cricket metaphors: the government will bowl the terrorists over; keep your eye on the ball, etc.

However, the audience is privy to the irony of his statement. In several scenes bombs explode in public places, setting people alight, sending them screaming and running for cover. It's clear the terrorists are having a good innings. Adding further comic effect, some people appear protected from the explosions and chaos around them.

The main character, Sam, sits at a restaurant table with his high society mother and two other women. An explosion goes off in the restaurant, upturning tables, blackening faces; people run and scream and police and fire sirens blare. The waiter places a screen behind Sam and his party's table; he fusses around telling them how sorry he is for the inconvenience.

Yet Sam and his party continue eating and talking as if nothing is happening. They're obviously hardened to these kinds of attacks. In the audience we laugh because we know that life could not possibly go on as normal in such a situation.

But today the Australian government has asked the public to begin to act like those at *Brazil's* fictional restaurant table. A terrorist threat has been made against Australians on their own soil and we have been asked to go on as normal, perhaps hoping that the Bali bombing was just "beginners luck".

How can we do what the government asks, and live normally after such a threat? How do we go about our business as if nothing might happen? We've seen footage of what happened in New York and Bali when these threats were made and then carried out. There's nothing normal about people being killed in explosions. We can't put up a screen, real or imagined, around our restaurant tables, car trips or visits to major centres and think everything will be okay.

But at the same time we're told to act normal, we're also told to take precautions, "keep our eye on the ball". What precautions can we possibly take? Our government knows it can't tell us where or when a terrorist may explode a bomb.

In *Brazil*, Gilliam shows us the futility – even the black humour – of trying to live through a terrorist war by going on as normal. That kind of humour wouldn't be lost on people in the Middle East, Northern Ireland or, lately, in the US. They'd see the humour for what it illustrates: you can't live in denial.

We have to live life as it is. Life for Australians now, unfortunately, must include living with a measure of fear. Fear is the very thing the Australian government, in this mandate for how to deal with terrorist threats, wants us to deny within ourselves.

We're told that making radical changes to how we live will play into the terrorists hands, let them know they've won. And perhaps the government is concerned that fearful Australians aren't productive Australians: fear will affect our economy. Or they're worried that fearful Australians won't travel within our country: fear will, again, affect our economy. Or maybe our government is trying to be like the parent who shields a child from bad news so the child can go on living in a naïve wonderland.

But fear can mobilise us. If we're scared of a snake on a walking track we get out of the way. If we're fearful about the consequences of medication we're prescribed we ask questions of the pharmacist.

Fear could mobilise Australians to demand more of those who fight this “war on terror” on our behalf. To treat us like adults and to not attempt to have us live in denial. The Australian Government can't bowl over terrorists without the people they are supposed to be leading living with an appropriate level of fear.

Because the terrorists have shown they have had more than “beginners luck”.