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Film Reviews

The We and the I. Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Michael Brodie, Teresa Lynn. Jouror Productions / Next Stop Production / Partizan, 2012. Film.

Michel Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind* (2008) was truly a Zeitgeist movie. Unlike *The Social Network* (2010) which merely gave an account of a contemporary phenomenon, Gondry's film not only drew upon the culture of amateur film-making that had exploded with the advent of *YouTube* but also greatly contributed to it. *Be Kind Rewind* involved its protagonists creating ten-minute versions of their favourite blockbusters using camcorders, house-hold props and public spaces. Claiming that the films were from "Sweden," the term "sweded" has since become a genre of movies in its own right, many of which are available on *YouTube*, and has even been the subject of a film festival in London.

I mention this earlier work for what it informs us of the aesthetic, production and content of Gondry's latest movie *The We and the I* (2012). The earlier film marked a departure from his previous aesthetic in its use of studio cameras in order to emphasiZe the amateur nature of the sweded movies within the movie, and his next high-budget studio feature, *The Green Hornet* (2011), found Gondry perfecting his use of such mainstream techniques. Thankfully, however, *The We and the I* finds Gondry back on the hand-held cameras that informed the aesthetic of his two masterpieces, *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *The Science of Sleep* (2006). And it is a method which allows him to roam the tight confines of the space that provides the film's setting: a public bus.

Beginning with a remote-control boom-box mocked up to look like a New York bus, the opening credits appear as the kids flee their high school for summer break and the travelling tape-deck blares out old-school hip-hop, only to be crushed under the wheel of the bus that will take these kids home to the Bronx. Anyone who has ever shared a school-run bus route will be familiar with the mixture of dread and amusement that comes with such a ride, and through the handheld footage and a sometimes Altmanesque

sound-mix of voices, we are positioned as passengers who observe these twenty teenagers in all their cruelty, humiliation, joy and pathos.

The context of the film - that these kids have been taking the same bus journey with one another every day of the school year - allows for various narratives to criss-cross the various sub-groups of teenagers, and, eventually, specific individuals. Rather than charting the process of disillusionment that informs most teen movies, Gondry's approach is to give us the natural progression from the We to the I, or from the peer group to the individual, that takes place every day on the bus ride home. For older viewers, the movie evokes a long, long night at a bar or coffee-house in its winding down from chaos into self-reflection.

About the Chaos... as with *Be Kind Rewind,* here the *zeitgeist* also figures through the component of mobile-phone footage. More than just a gimmick, such material taps into a vital aspect of these characters' mode of experience: teenagers all over the world are glued to their phones. The footage also recalls the videos that have leapt from *YouTube* and into the mainstream news: the bullying of a bus monitor, and, more recently, the sight of a bus driver upper-cutting a female commuter. The danger of this world of self-surveillance that kids are now born into forms one of the narratives of this film. There is a frankness to such stories that arises from the collaborative nature of this project - a return to the collective film-making Gondry had explored in *Be Kind Rewind.* Although the script is credited to Gondry, Jeffrey Grimshaw and Paul Proch, the film had been developed by the actors over several sessions, suggesting a retroactive script written on the basis of improvisations. Most of the characters share the names of the actors portraying them, and a letter from one of their mothers recalls the incident that informed the mobile-phone video, suggesting other scenes, too, may have been born from the experiences of the cast.

The film is not without its possible shortcomings: the use of old-school hip-hop on the soundtrack rather than the thuggish rap music that is current today evokes the kind of paternalism used in Jason Reitman's *Juno* (2007) when the eponymous teenager was said to be obsessed with garage-rock. However it is possible that Gondry's use of old-school rap songs is there to situate the characters within the rich cultural history of their surroundings. Overall, *The We and the I* is a return to form for Michel Gondry. Dream-like sequences remain his strong-point - here a

protagonist brags of how he would spend the night making out at a party, but his mental confusion is signaled by the sight of a limo appearing on the dance-floor. This return to a more personal film-making allows Gondry to explore other areas of invention and we are given a unique film that bodes well for his future work.

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