

Be Kind Rewind: Fast forward to Michel Gondry's utopia

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The act of “sweding” a Hollywood blockbuster in French filmmaker Michel Gondry’s new movie, *Be Kind Rewind*, involves the twin notions that technology should be subordinated to imagination and that filmmaking should not be under the thumb of the giant studios. “Sweding”—coined by Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) for the film—is the practice of reenacting and remaking films using the most common materials, including the individual and his or her ability to be creative.

While these conceptions may not be earthshaking, they play out sweetly and, for the most part, humorously in *Be Kind Rewind*.

Jerry (Jack Black) and Mike (Mos Def) are childhood friends struggling to get by in a run-down neighborhood in Passaic, New Jersey. In the horizon, Manhattan’s glittering skyline conspicuously calls attention to the fact that their community, like many others in America, has long since been abandoned and forgotten.

Jerry, a mechanic and conspiracy theorist who lives in a trailer next to the town’s power plant, wears a metal food strainer to slow down the process of brain destruction from the utility’s “microwaves.” Mike lives and works in the local VHS-only store, *Be Kind Rewind*, owned by his unofficial father, Mr. Fletcher (Danny Glover), who propagates the myth that his establishment was the birthplace of jazz great Fats Waller. While this invention does little for his run-down business, it boosts the morale of the alienated working class quarter.

Leaving Mike in charge of the store while warning against allowing the accident-prone Jerry onto the premises, Mr. Fletcher leaves to make a Fats Waller commemorative voyage, using the trip to go undercover and discover the secrets of success (“fewer choices, more copies”) in the movie-rental world in order to save his building from the gentrifiers. (He learns that his store needs only two categories—Action and Comedy.)

Meanwhile when Jerry attempts to sabotage the power plant, he somehow becomes magnetized and inadvertently erases *Be Kind Rewind*’s entire inventory. (Erasure of a different sort is a theme in Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine*.) As customers such as the daffy Miss Falewicz (Mia Farrow) militantly demand rentals, Jerry and Mike start remaking such popular works as *Ghost*

Busters (“I’ll be Bill Murray and you’ll be everyone else”) with their own primitive equipment. Buying time in order to handle the booming demand, customers are told that the films are imported from Sweden. Hence, the verb to be “sweded.”

Soon, with the help of the dead-pan Wilson (Irv Gooch) and Alma (Melonie Diaz), a young firecracker from the dry cleaner next door, the production team is “sweding” short versions of *King Kong*, *RoboCop* (“I’ll shoot you. And I know robot karate!”), *When We Were Kings*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Boyz n the Hood* (“What’s happening to our ‘hood?” Jerry wails), with pizzas standing in for blood stains. In the “sweded” *Driving Miss Daisy*, Mike applies freckles and sullenly chauffeurs Jerry in drag.

One of the most intricate—and charming—of the improvised special effects involves day-for-night shooting; Mike and Jerry put the camera on “negative” and reverse the image by wearing negative photocopies of their faces. As the “sweded” remakes gain in popularity, Alma wants to involve the neighborhood residents in the productions, making them “stockholders in their own happiness.”

All is going well and enough money is being raised to save the store from demolition until a Hollywood lawyer (Sigourney Weaver)—in a lovely cameo—shows up to threaten \$3 billion in fines and prison terms of 60,000 years for piracy! The film industry representatives make sure to bulldoze the local bootleg products. Once again, the community is mobilized.

As an anti-establishment film, *Be Kind Rewind* highlights a number of issues. The opening shot of a town decaying in the shadow of New York City is the first indication that the film is preoccupied with a section of the population little dealt with in mainstream movies. Mr. Fletcher’s store is called a video thrift store to denote the second-hand nature of its VHS collection, that is, hand-me-downs of the obsolete. The *Be Kind Rewind* storefront evinces something of the community’s overall poverty. And there are many such signposts. Furthermore, Mr. Fletcher, a long-time resident of the community, is pitted against government officials who, oblivious to their constituency, do the bidding of real estate sharks for whom the fabric of a neighborhood counts for nil.

While much of the supporting narrative is insubstantial, it is the making of the “sweded” films that forms the basis of the

film's appeal. In these segments, everyone and everything bristle with life. Alma in particular is a recognizable and endearing type: the resourceful, lively, quick-witted neighborhood girl.

Not only are snippets of the "sweded" productions hilarious, but they tap into something quite vital. The recent screenwriters' strike demonstrated how many of the film industry's "talent," as well as wide layers of the public, despise the economic and cultural domination of a handful of studio moguls. This sentiment is brought out in the scene in which Weaver portrays a Hollywood hatchet woman. With obvious relish she dramatizes the vindictiveness—on great display during the strike—of companies that have no problem suggesting ludicrous fines and prison terms be imposed for so-called infringement of intellectual property rights. Gondry's antidote is that people be the "stockholders of their own happiness" by making their own "movies with heart and soul."

In an interview with *avclub.com*, speaking of people going to the movies, Gondry spells this out: "I find it particularly shocking that people work all week long, and then on the weekend they give their money to another big corporation."

Gondry's use of Fats Waller (1904-1943) also points to his goal of enriching the cultural landscape. Waller was a brilliant musician, who both studied classical piano and organ and took lessons from legendary Harlem stride pianist James P. Johnson. The film pointedly refers to his familiarity with Bach.

The oblique references to rent parties, which were the product of hard economic times, are also not haphazard. Says Gondry in the same interview: "It's important in the story that there's a parallel between what's happening in the film and what happened in the past with rent parties, which were very real. Fats Waller became the great musician he was through those parties. When someone could not afford the rent for one month, they'd make a party. You'd bring a dollar, and there would be a piano contest all night long." Consider this in light of the present day isolation of people being thrown out of their homes by the banks and lending institutions in the sub-prime mortgage catastrophe!

Gondry locates his inspiration for the film in the works of "the more socialist" filmmakers like Vittorio de Sica, which he counterposes to those of American directors like Frank Capra: "Some of the American comedies are very conservative. They feel good. And they're great. But if you look at what's being said, it's really very, very conservative. [De Sica's] *Miracle in Milan* is a great film about this community of homeless people that create their own system.... At heart, it's really about the people. It's not about the bank or some corporation. It's really about the people."

In *Be Kind Rewind*, Gondry has tried to create an alternative to the reality that "everything has to be a business." He describes as his utopian fantasy the notion that "people can create their own entertainment." He says his characters are "much more creative than what they think they are. And then

they realize that they don't have to copy movies; they can create their own. I think it's very important that people not just make their own entertainment, but that they create it, that they really *invent* the story."

The idea "that three losers start a business and it becomes huge and it's absurd" is perhaps the best summation of the movie's comedic allure. It is the "losers" who are truly in sync with the population.

Without question, Gondry is on to something important about contemporary culture. We agree with him: Hollywood, a collection of massive corporations protected by lawyers and politicians, is turning out mostly junk. Extraordinary imagination and sensitivity exist in the population, which are almost entirely absent from movie and television screens. Only the most degraded and degrading products of the "streets" are encouraged and played up. There is more drama in Passaic's daily life than in all the blockbusters put together. Gondry is right about this.

Our only criticism is that he hasn't gone deep or far enough. Big social issues are crying out for a voice in the film, a cry that is only given vague expression. If the residents of Passaic were truly given the opportunity to make films about their lives, what would they make them about? Cultural heroes perhaps, but also pressing social problems. Here Gondry stumbles, or falls silent. Politics and social views come into play.

The picture of the neighborhood and its population is vague, even prettified at times. Much that surrounds the "sweded" remakes is a bit weak and amorphous. The film could make a deeper impact. The characters suffer: Glover's Fletcher is the ghetto Everyman, while Black's Jerry and Def's Mike are less individualized human beings and more mere scaffolding for the comedy. Fleshing them out would require a broader social understanding. Diaz's Alma is the exception to the rule.

But while *Be Kind Rewind* stops short, it goes much farther than most in its disdain for and insight into the Hollywood movie machine. And there are some wonderfully comic moments.



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