

Michel Gondry's *The We and the I*: A complicated bus ride in the Bronx

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Independent French filmmaker Michel Gondry has chosen to investigate intriguing territory in his latest film, *The We and the I*. The work centers sympathetically on the lives of working class teenagers in the Bronx, New York City's poorest borough. These are young people generally dismissed or treated as criminals by the politicians, media and entertainment industry.

Gondry is best known for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *The Science of Sleep* (2006), *Be Kind Rewind* (2008) and *The Green Hornet* (2011). The director has also directed music videos for the likes of Bjork, Radiohead and The White Stripes.

The storyline in *The We and the I* is straightforward and simple enough. It is the last day of school and more than 30 boisterous Bronx teenagers are taking a city bus home one last time before summer vacation. The film's 103 minutes treat this single bus ride. Conversations and flirtations take place, friends fall out, tensions emerge. The film, even in its imperfections, has a relatively appealing resemblance to life.

As the loose narrative unfolds, two central figures emerge: Michael (Michael Brodie) and Teresa (Teresa Lynn). The latter climbs on the bus wearing a ridiculous blond wig (apparently in some sort of homage to Lady Gaga) in a desperate attempt to appear cool. This backfires as she receives a torrent of abuse from Michael and his three cohorts, Johnathan (Jonathan Ortiz), Little Raymond (Raymond Delgado) and Big T (Jonathan Scott Worrell).

However, the tables are quickly turned as Teresa, a burgeoning artist and no pushover, counters the boys' banter with a description of the time she drew Michael in the nude. Naturally, this embarrasses Michael no end and makes him the butt of his friends' jokes from then on. The scene is hilarious!

Michael and his aggressive friends dictate to all and sundry from the back of the bus. They have little respect

for anyone but themselves and are willing to go to such lengths as forcing an elderly lady off the bus simply for their own amusement.

A scene that could easily have descended into the merely gratuitous is thankfully infused with humor by Big T. Sitting down next to the old lady, ice cream cone in hand, he playfully launches into sexual innuendo. The woman is naturally disgusted and exits the bus, but not before exclaiming, "You belong in Africa with the rest of the apes." Big T responds by squirting the ice cream in her face. Although it has more serious overtones, the scene is played out in a lively manner.

A second plot line emerges with the introduction of Laidychen (Laidychen Carrasco). Her 16th birthday is rapidly approaching, and with the assistance of her rather uptight friend Niomi (Meghan Niomi Murphy), she is whittling down the potential guest list.

Understandably, Laidychen feels a certain disdain for the rude boys at the back of the bus and has therefore ruled them out. However, her feelings for the seemingly more sensitive ones encounter other difficulties. When a talented young musician tries to woo her with some acoustic crooning, it only embarrasses her.

Unfortunately for him as well, his singing repels (or makes jealous) one of the bullies, Little Raymond, who interrupts the tender serenade with the question: "Have you heard The Who's version of this song?" "Who?" responds the shy teenager. "The Who!" repeats Little Raymond, grabbing the guitar from the young man and smashing it to pieces. Thankfully, this moment was also executed with a degree of restraint.

Characters disappear from our view as each disembarks at his or her stop. The number of youthful passengers eventually dwindles to a handful. Among the first to leave is Big T. One is genuinely sad to see him go. Despite his roguish antics, his comic touch stays in the memory. Jonathan Scott Worrell is memorable in this role.

At its mid-point, the film threatens to stagnate, as Gondry and his cast seem to run out of humorous anecdotes and incidents. However, a shift does occur with the introduction of the trials and tribulations of a gay relationship between Brandon (Brandon Diaz) and Luis (Luis Figueroa). The painful scenes involving these characters are handled with a good deal of care and sensitivity by Gondry. Diaz and Figueroa give spontaneous and moving performances in their roles.

Indeed, the cast is uniformly excellent. The teenagers all came from The Point Community Development Corporation, a non-profit youth development center in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the country.

In an interview at the 2012 Cannes film festival, Gondry stated, “We found the kids, we didn’t select them. We started the workshop, we said we are going to make a movie on the bus, whoever wants to be in it can come, and we took the first 40 names that went on a list. I had written the basic structure of the story. The bullies. The girl who likes them, but can’t take it anymore, being bullied. When we started, we did interviews for two years with them.”

Asked during the same interview whether this had been a life-changing experience for the non-professional performers, Gondry responded, “Yeah, and that scares me a little, I want to keep their feet on the ground.” This is refreshing, as it shows the filmmaker cares about the teenagers. A rare thing to encounter in the cutthroat industry these talented young boys and girls are now aspiring to enter.

In another media interview, Gondry said he wanted to “explore the phenomenon of people, how different they are in groups and large numbers, and how they become more interesting and complex when they are in smaller groups.” (Hence the film’s title.)

Gondry achieves this in the closing stages of the film. Michael’s bullying peers have now exited, leaving him alone with Teresa and the unobtrusive Alex (Alex Barrios). Michael approaches the latter in an attempt to connect and show his more humane side. What ensues is a touching conversation about their respective backgrounds.

However, Alex is not a superficial individual, and when Michael invites him to spend the summer with him and his family, the latter indignantly rejects the offer, remonstrating with Michael for being so disrespectful to him and his classmates the rest of the year. This scene could have felt contrived, but, again, in this reviewer’s opinion, the director and his performers execute it in an

organic and convincing manner.

Gondry’s notion that the youth become “more interesting and complex” in smaller groups does raise some issues. Especially in the film’s early scenes, the backward antics of the youth tend to dominate, and the film runs the danger of pointing its finger in a somewhat moralizing fashion. The backwardness on display, in fact, comes from somewhere—poverty, deteriorating conditions of life, the decline in education, a lack of culture. As the characters grow and become more sympathetic, the focus of the film shifts for the better.

However, the filmmaker pays the price for failing to think through some of the social and historical issues. Gondry’s notion that large groups incline toward bullying and aggressiveness speaks to a specific, stagnant social atmosphere. Anyone involved in the working class movement knows from experience that nothing frightens the powers that be more than mass movements, mass meetings, mass strike votes. There is a reason that the employers and government always push for secret ballots. In turbulent times, the collective is a radicalizing force, in America too.

The We and the I ends in a reasonably optimistic, yet ambiguous fashion, as Michael and Teresa are left to contemplate their future. Indeed, audience members are also left to wonder what the future holds for the two characters, and for the others, as they enter a challenging world with few opportunities because of their class backgrounds and the crisis of the profit system. Although the economic realities these characters all face do not play a central role in the film, one senses strongly that the restlessness and anger expressed throughout stems from those conditions.

One could accuse Gondry of over-indulging in the backwardness of the youth, but to his credit he rides that initial wave and for the majority of the work portrays these Bronx teenagers as real and complex human beings.

The question has to be asked: Why aren’t films of this type being made on a more consistent basis by contemporary American filmmakers? One can only hope that Gondry’s sincere effort might help shift the situation. We shall see.



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