MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH
MICHEL GONDRY

Michel Gondry is one of the most creative contemporary directors, known for his astonishingly inventive style that combines complex technological innovation with an almost childlike playfulness, and an ability to move fluidly between dream and reality. Gondry has directed feature films (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Be Kind Rewind*, *The Science of Sleep*), documentaries (*Dave Chappelle's Block Party*), music videos for Bjork, Radiohead, The White Stripes, and Daft Punk, and numerous award-winning commercials. He is also an installation artist who has been featured at Deitch Projects. In this conversation with Chief Curator David Schwartz, Gondry discusses his remarkable career.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Michel Gondry moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (May 9, 2008):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Please welcome the birthday boy, Michel Gondry. (Applause) So what do you think of when you watch these videos; do you think of how hard they were to make?

MICHEL GONDRY: No, actually. I was thinking that they look alright. (Laughter) I was pleased with myself. I mean, the Björk video is fifteen years old and the Rolling Stones video thirteen years old. They look not too bad for all this time.

SCHWARTZ: No, they hold up very well.

GONDRY: That's a good thing, in a way, that they were not so exposed. I wasn't privileged enough to get hit songs for those videos. But I realized later that it was sort of a blessing because, for instance, they were still not too exposed when I put them on my DVD. If I had done a video that was a big hit as a song, then it would have gotten sort of washed away by time.

SCHWARTZ: You had practice making videos for your band, Oui Oui. Could you talk about that? First, how did you get into that band as a drummer?

GONDRY: Well, we were in art school. A lot of musicians actually started bands in art school so it's not very original. (Laughter) I met my friend for life, in a way, when we were sixteen and we moved into this art school for bad students that could

draw. And we started a band in maybe '81, '82, that lasted ten years; it was called Oui Oui. I had done some experimentation with animation at an earlier age, and then one day I bought a film camera—I mean, I was flatmates with my friend Jean-Louis Bompoint, who is my DP now. He had some equipment and he was a director, so he helped me a little bit. That's how it started. I was doing two minute animated pieces to fit our music, because the songs were quite minimalist and short, so they were easy to illustrate. The good thing about that was I would never be allowed to impose upon them any personal vision. I had to share with their ideas, because they—especially Étienne [Charry], the leader of the band—were coming from a visual world as well, so he had as many ideas as me. It taught me to collaborate with artists and be able to take in what they have to bring, what they have in mind, and just not ignore it.

SCHWARTZ: And Björk knew these videos: wasn't it these videos that drew her?

GONDRY: Yes, she saw one. I had done six with my band: three were like try-out minimalist and three were a little less minimalist. She saw, actually, the last one we did. It's called "La Ville", and she liked it. Then she went to see me in Paris and she saw all the Oui Oui videos that were not on my show reel, because I guess people thought it wouldn't be good for me to show them. But she was the first one to really respond to this early work. She couldn't stop laughing, which was very overwhelming. I think we have a very similar sense of humor. Sometimes when we are having dinner I'll

make a completely flat joke and hear a big laugh; I turn, and it's Björk! (Laughter) She's a good audience for me. She always thought I should be a stand-up comedian or something. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about the collaboration on "Human Behavior", the video that we saw with her?

GONDRY: Well, she came to visit me in Paris. The good thing with Björk was that we were sort of at the same level. I mean, she was pretty successful with her band and she was moving into being a solo artist. For me, that was my beginning as well, so we were sort of equal. But the good thing with her is that she would never—even now—put people in competition. She's very aware of that. She thinks that if you select people by putting them in competition, you [lower] their confidence. You're going to end up with the people who are the most charismatic or who are a little more aggressive, but this doesn't mean that it's going to be the best project. So she has an instinct to pick the right people for the right projects, at least for what she needs. That's one thing that's great with her, and it's always been like that.

As I was saying, it was the same way I had been working with my band: she would throw [out] a lot of ideas, and *I* would throw [out] a lot of ideas. We had very fast and animated conversations; she would talk about *Night of the Hunter* (1955) for instance. We also talked about cartoons we liked—Eastern European animation versus Walt Disney; crafted and handmade; a lot of things that we grew up with. She's three years younger than me, but in Iceland they would probably see more similar programs to those in France than those in America. We were very much into these types of TV shows. In France in the sixties and the early seventies, there were a lot of things coming from Poland or Czechoslovakia; you saw this handmade quality that you would not see coming from the Walt Disney Studio.

SCHWARTZ: Were they handmade live-action animation or stop-motion animation?

GONDRY: Well, stop-motion and [animation] with puppets. There's this film that's great by Yuriy Norshteyn called *Hedgehog in the Fog* (*Yozhik v tumane*, 1975) and there were actually more in the

eighties. He works with texture and he has this system he puts together, very multi-layered. When you see the film, nothing's hidden; it invites you to understand how it's made. For me or people like me, it's stimulating. You want to do the same because it's not something very sleek and impenetrable, perfect. I've always liked the idea that the creation you see includes "the making of" within the frame.

I remember in '81 or '80, I went to see The Cure in concert. At the time, they were three. The music was so simple and great that it would stimulate you—emotionally; it was very powerful. But you would also come back home and say, "Okay, I'm going to start a band." Of course, The Sex Pistols and those guys, that was their strength. Everybody started a band after seeing them, because they seemed so simple! (Laughter) That's something I've always thought of as I continued working. Even if the technique is pushing boundaries or trying to be complex, there is a sort of simplicity that says, "You can see how it's made and you can do it yourself."

SCHWARTZ: Were you responding, in a way, against what you were seeing on MTV or in conventional music videos, which are much more elaborately produced and slick?

GONDRY: That's something that bugs me sometimes, because people who are not really part of the video world say I'm "MTV generation," I'm coming from TV. But my videos were hardly seen on MTV. Many times I've seen, even in recent years, the 100 Best Videos of All-Time, and I had zero in there, so… (Laughter) It's fine! But then afterwards if people say, "Oh yeah, that's MTV generation," and they include me, I find it unfair. At least if I am from the MTV generation, I should be represented on MTV—which I never am! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: So you were really drawing on different traditions: early animation, early film?

GONDRY: Well, I don't know if I was drawing on early animation. I was trying to be unconventional. I bought this camera—a Bolex 16mm camera—and I tried to explore every possibility with it. I think that's how I define my style. I would rather make things myself than have to ask people and fill out applications for grant money. Which I did once and

it didn't work out, so I decided, "Okay, I will do the stuff I want to do on my own." I somehow defined my style by learning my limitations, and then trying to work within this perimeter.

SCHWARTZ: Did you always make things with your hands? That's an incredible quality that carries through all your work.

GONDRY: I've made stuff with my nose, actually—a Rubik's cube, once. (Laughter) No, okay—sorry. I have Tourette's Syndrome about bad jokes. (Laughter) It just comes out, and I apologize. I'm going to make bad jokes, so…

SCHWARTZ: We're here for your bad jokes.

GONDRY: We wanted to do—with my girlfriend—a toilet paper roll where on every sheet we would write one of my bad jokes. It was something to save paper, because you would not tear two, three feet of paper for one wipe. You would just use one sheet because you would want to read it. (Laughter) This itself is another bad joke. But this was true.

SCHWARTZ: Your video with solving the Rubik's cube with your nose has been seen by…

GONDRY: Two million people. Yes, that's a paradox of YouTube. You think it's something very democratic, but it's a big ego booster, because you do something completely stupid and then you see how it explodes.

But yes, I like things that are made by hand for the reason I said before: I think it's good if you can make things yourself first. Later on you need a crew when you do a feature film—unless you can spend ten years on it, which would be great—but it's difficult to frame that in a conventional production. When you have something that's a little awkward, generally people will resist it, because it's not the way things are supposed to be done. So, if you've done it yourself first you can say, "Well, you can do it this way or you can do it that way, and don't tell me it's not possible." So that gives you strength.

Especially when I started, the crew on my shoot was very reluctant and not believing. You've got people who are double your age and who have been shooting for twenty years—and then you

come with something that seems silly to them. They sort of mock you. Like this guy, on the first shoot I did when I was twenty-six-years-old. I asked this grip, the guy who pushes the dolly, to move the dolly from the window, turn around the bed, and then frame a close-up of the clock. It was quite specific because I needed that for my video. I walked away from him, and then I turned back to him to give him more specificity, and he was doing that [mimicking me behind] my back! (Laughter) He was like, forty-years-old and I was twenty-six; I didn't know! Now, I would maybe fire him just to enjoy the action. (Laughter) But at the time I was shy, and I said "Oh..." I was embarrassed. That will tell you what you have to deal with when you are a young director and you have to work with crews who are a little fed up with everything.

So, to come back to the idea of doing stuff yourself, that's good because at some point you're going to prove to those guys that it's possible. They're going to think, "Oh, yeah! It's not as stupid as I thought." It's like my friend Jean-Michel Bernard, who composed my score. He's an excellent piano player and a super-*virtuoso*. So, when he has a big orchestra to direct, he sits at the piano and plays a little piece, which immediately shows that he knows what he's talking about. A little bit of virtuosity is not bad to convince people that they are in good hands.

SCHWARTZ: The Rolling Stones were extremely well-established when they came to ask you to do that video for ["Like a Rolling Stone" (1995)]

GONDRY: They were established for forty years or so.

SCHWARTZ: What was working with them like, and where did you get the inspiration for the style? It's such an amazing-looking video; it seems to really be responding to the song and capturing what it's like to be on drugs.

GONDRY: To be honest, this type of video is not my style, but the morphing, the technique and the way it looks, this is really me. The idea to cut from the band to a parallel story is something that I tried to fight when I started to do videos—but the Rolling Stones wanted it a certain way. They wanted to have the pretty girl; they wanted to have the performance; the parallel story. I have to say, I

compromised because I wanted to do their video. So the way it's put together, it's not exactly a drug trip. It's funny because some people ask me if I was doing drugs. I'm sure if I was I would have done something more conventional, because they kind of slow your brain a little. (Laughter) I'm trying to convince my son of that, but… (Laughter) He doesn't really stand for it.

Anyway, morphing was very in fashion at the time. It had only started a few years before with, for instance, this video by Michael Jackson ["Black and White," (1991)], where he transforms his face into all of those faces. That was the main reason to use morphing, to do something becoming something else. I had this idea to morph a picture with the same picture half a second later. So we took the still camera and we took pictures, like four frames per second. I sent them to Paris, and I asked a company to just try to morph one picture to the next one. You get this gooey effect, where they follow the arm, for instance. Since they don't separate the layers, the background is going to stick to the hand, and it gives this effect.

I was asking a guy who had done acid what it looked like. He told me, "The world looks like the surface of tea when it gets cold." He was very specific, and I thought of that idea of the surface getting a little skin. It was like stopping time. The idea was to shoot with two cameras at the same time, from two different angles, and then morph from one to the other. That became the effect that, as you said, was used for *The Matrix* (1999) as well, but there was also another guy who claimed [that he invented] that. He actually hates me. (Laughter) It's quite funny to mention, because he had the idea to use a hundred cameras—which I had too, but I couldn't do it—and he did it, and I did that, and so it goes. So I can't say I *invented* the effect for *The Matrix*. I participated.

SCHWARTZ: How difficult was the process of animating with Legos ["Fell in Love with a Girl," The White Stripes, (2002)]? It strikes me that you might have come up with an idea that *seemed* really simple, but what was it really like?

GONDRY: Like every simple thing, it's very complicated. The main difficulty is that Legos are not like Plasticine or moving paper—where you have a shape and then you turn the shape and you

take another picture. It's something you have to do from scratch. When the thing is in pieces, you have no reference of what was there before. Therefore, we had to have a guide on paper. We shot everything on video because I knew that with the layers of Legos, you had to recognize the shape very easily, otherwise you would not get anything. So I shot the most conventional video possible, with performances and things from the street that, with shape and color, would obviously allow representation by Legos. Then we pixelized it in similar shapes to the Lego blocks with a very simple program—actually, my dad and my brother worked on it. We printed every image on a piece of paper, and then the animator built a world of Legos following the shapes exactly. Then after that, we put it in front of a 16mm camera and shot it.

It sounds like a lot of work—which it is—but we worked three weeks with maybe ten people. It's particularly interesting to me when you have to come up with a system for how to organize the work. If you do a classical animation there are a lot of rules to follow. It's all calibrated, with a protocol to follow, and then you get to the result. But when you start something that has never been done, you have to create the protocol. That's really fun for me—finding this system that everybody can follow and producing a result with it.

SCHWARTZ: Your work has often been noted as having a kind of childlike quality, and you suggested your childhood's importance by calling your autobiographical film *I've Been Twelve Forever* (2003). What was your childhood like and how do you think it affected your work?

GONDRY: This title is really not like a statement, but I can explain how I came up with it. Of course, by choosing it, I made a statement—but for me it was not so important. I had a girlfriend at the time and she always asked me, "At what age did you do that?" And I always said, "When I was twelve." It's when you move to the next school, and it was the soccer World-Cup or some event in my life that made me remember this age more than any other. So she said, "You always say you were twelve!" and that's how I got the title. Of course, it also fits the style or the quality of the work.
There is also a sense of when your brain was younger, there was less connection, and you absorbed more —I have this very simplistic way of

seeing the connection between the brain and the outside. It's sort of blank at first and you have pre-connection—depending on what type of neurology or linguistics you believe in. But basically, I made my own theory that in the beginning, the information has a greater importance or impact on you because your brain is forming and you don't have a frame of reference. As you grow older, you store smaller and smaller bits of everything that gets through your senses to your brain because you have already so many references. Maybe you just record the differences.

I try to put myself back to the stage when my eye or my senses were very hungry for the outside world, and much more absorbing. As I grow older, it seems like I see through layers of glasses. And I don't wear glasses—this is another bad joke. (Laughter) I'm aware of what's inside and what's outside, but it seems like I see it through a window, whereas when you're a kid, it seems to be directly connected. I remember walking in the forest with my mom when I was maybe four or five years old. I think that I still had acuity, or a sharpness of information, that I don't have anymore. It's like when you look at the eyes of people who get older, there is a little glaze that makes them a little whiter… it's kind of a sad image. But coming back to the youth, I try to perpetuate that in the present time.

SCHWARTZ: In many of your videos you give yourself very difficult technological challenges. Does keeping this quality you're talking about, this childhood, help you?

GONDRY: Yes; maybe somehow. I'm always showing-off a little bit. I like to hear people say "Oh, how did he do that?" I know how to get that response in general. Maybe it's also a way to protect myself. Hitchcock would say, "You run for cover." You do something you know. Sometimes, I wish I could do something really simple and the quality of it would burst out, without any technology or any complexity. Unfortunately, every time I start something, it ends up being complicated on some level. But I like the challenge.

Basically, when I do a video, I listen to the track and I have a range of ideas. I think, "This is really ridiculous." And I pass it. Then I go back and say, "Oh, wait a minute… Maybe it would be fun to do

because it's stupid." If you have something that's so tenuous, like holding by a thread, it's going to take a lot of effort to make it work. Like, "Okay, let's do a video entirely with Lego blocks." That sounds kind of pointless or vain. But you're going to have to work so hard to make it exist that that's going to become what's interesting about it. So I have to work double hard on it, but it's stimulating.

SCHWARTZ: Let's talk about your transition into films. Your first film, *Human Nature* (2001), is about a character who literally grew up as a monkey and is brought in to be civilized. How did you get involved in this film with Charlie Kaufman?

GONDRY: I was friends with Spike Jonze, and I had moved to Los Angeles hoping to direct a movie. I had worked on the screenplay of a project called *The Green Hornet*, which could have been great but I don't think the studio liked what we came up with. I kept reading screenplay after screenplay, and they were horrible. I asked my agent to give me the screenplay of a movie I liked, let's say *Taxi Driver* (1976). I'm not a big Scorsese fan, but I have to say, this movie is amazing. I wanted to check if screenplays were boring by themselves. But *Taxi Driver* was also amazing on the paper. It was kind of depressing to figure out that I got given bad material all this time. It was taking me forever.

Spike was working on *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and he let me read this screenplay. One more time, it was amazing. Generally, it would take me six to eight hours to read bad screenplays; this one took me two hours, and it would take maybe one hour for any English-speaking person. I realized that you needed quality in the writing as well. So I met with Charlie Kaufman, and we talked about the way we conceive geometry in story-telling. Most of the videos I have done, and still do, are sort of a geometrical pattern. When Charlie tells a story, he's also very much into this type of thinking, so we got along very well. Later on, my friend Pierre Bismuth, who's a contemporary artist, gave me this concept about memory erasing, and through Charlie Kaufman it became *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). He was writing it, but it took forever, so in the meantime I read another of Spike's screenplays, *Human Nature*, and I asked him if I could do it. It's like when you try to get a taxi and it's raining, and you struggle for hours. You

finally find a taxi and go back home, and then you have ten taxis passing by.

SCHWARTZ: When you made this move to directing feature films, you began working with actors in a way that was different, more nuanced, than working with musicians and singers. You have amazing performances by Kate Winslet and Jim Carrey; could you talk a bit about *Eternal Sunshine*?

GONDRY: Well, the main thing in directing those actors is that they were coming from such different backgrounds that I had to put them in tune for the tone of the film. Charlie and I, we like Jim Carrey and, obviously, we needed somebody solid to finance the film. It's no secret that that goes by the actor. So we have Jim Carrey, and then we have Kate Winslet—we found her amazing, especially in *Holy Smoke* (1999*)* by Jane Campion, in which she had some similar unpredictable mood swings that she did wonderfully. Jim Carrey is great, too. I like how he's always sort of an outsider, but obviously he puts in a lot of physical energy, he's very graphic, and he is very aware of the camera. But he comes from television, from broader comedy, so I had to find a way to undertone him and push her, in order to bring them to the same level of acting.

When I met Kate Winslet, I liked how she was really aggressively trying to get the part. She said, "I'm going to block Jim Carrey in the corner. *I will be Jim Carrey instead of Jim Carrey*. And Jim Carrey will have to find something else because you can't have two Jim Carreys, that's bad news." (Laughter) She said, "I will be so big that he has to be small." I think that it's thanks to her that his performance was as good as it was. I contributed by tricking him, because an actor like that comes to the shooting with a lot of preconceived ideas.

For instance, he wanted to do forty-eight takes and I knew that after seven takes, he wouldn't be as good. He was great during the first two takes, when he didn't really know what was going on, or he was lost and trying to find his mark. As soon as he would find his mark, the shtick would come. But the first two takes were amazing because he was very eager to do well, so he learned his lines, which was appreciated since it's not so often that an actor does so. And Kate really pushed him and went over the top.

When I would communicate my direction, I would talk to them separately. To Kate I'd say "Go ahead, make it over the top!" and to Jim I'd say "This is not a comedy, make it very minimal." If he had heard me talking to Kate this way, he would have exploded! (Laughter) For instance, there is this moment on the train when she hits him in the shoulder with her fist. I told her, "This time you're going to punch him as hard as you can." And when she did, he looked at her with such a look like, "Fuck you, Kate Winslet." (Laughter) He didn't say anything, but the look was so real! That's how I got that take.

There was also one time when I had this idea that when he saw an elephant, he would become an elephant with his jacket and play with his sleeve to make the trunk. When he was doing it, I said to Kate, "Okay, leave the frame now. Disappear." When he looked for her reaction, she was gone. He was looking for Kate Winslet, not for [her character] Clementine at this time, and he had this lost look on his face that was really touching—like a child who is hiding and nobody is looking for him. (Laughter) So I found ways to trick him. It's not only that… But see, actors are like children sometimes.

SCHWARTZ: You had this amazing script by Charlie Kaufman and great actors, but there's also an incredible lightness of touch that you bring to this film. What was your most important job as a director?

GONDRY: It was a lot about how we would go from one memory to the other, from reality to the flashbacks, as there are a lot of transitions. Also, how the memories would decay as they were erasing them. There was something repetitive [about them] because it was the same process that occurred every time the memory disappears. So we were trying to find an original way, without showing off, to entertain the audience for every transition, transformation, or disappearance. Charlie had written stuff that was great. I remember he was talking about the husks of the insects—you know, when they change skins? It was undoable for me unless I had tons of money and CGI or whatever. But I think he wrote his screenplay with poetry, so I had to find a corresponding way to put that visually, without transcribing every word, because it was not the same language.

To me, it might be memories of some sort of texture—like the corrugated fiberglass to protect you from the rain in the garden when you're a kid, I had that to protect my bicycle—this sort of very textured memory. I tried to mix them in a sort of appropriate way. Like when suddenly the top of the table is replaced by that [material]; or it's raining inside the room; just misplacing things instead of having special effects do it. So I thought of many, many ways to bring this element of alteration to the moment.

I remember we had this big frame and we put over this transparent plastic you use to protect the screen from the rain, but that diffused the image in a very artistic way. The frame was carried by guys behind Jim Carrey, and we'd shoot, obviously, without showing it, but you would just see all the background blurry. It's something that would look very common if you do it in post-production. But because we actually went into the trouble of doing it physically, I think that makes it different.

Or for instance, we started a scene in a Chinese restaurant, and then we continued it in Barnes & Noble because in my brain it was very satisfying to think of dressing a restaurant within the bookstore. This type of thing sounds technical, but I think that through this process, I managed to illustrate what Charlie had written.

SCHWARTZ: Your next film, *The Science of Sleep* (2006), was the first screenplay you originated. You filmed part of it in the same building in Paris where an ex-girlfriend lived?

GONDRY: Well, yes. But in this case, it is the mother of my son. I think she deserves a different title.

SCHWARTZ: Well, what do you…? Okay. (Laughs)

GONDRY: Well, she's an ex-girlfriend, but she's the mother of my son so it's more… You get attached for life to her, no matter what happens, because you have this child. (Laughter) So yes, we lived there with her and my son in the same building, two floors below. It was the same kind of apartment.

SCHWARTZ: So tell us how the script came about and what element of autobiography there was?

GONDRY: Well, I think it started when I did the video for The Foo Fighters, where each one was having their own dream but they could still interact. I started to see the possibilities of that. Initially, it was much more about the character [played by Gael García Bernal], Stéfane. Stéphanie [Charlotte Gainsbourg] was more like a muse, not really existing in the real world. And I met this girlfriend—we worked together—and I had the same situation that's going on in the film. There's this sort of creative connection but non-reciprocal attraction. This is a very difficult situation, but pretty common, unfortunately. So I gave much more substance to the character of Stéphanie because of that person I knew. It became more about creativity; about the moments when you feel you're so close and that should stay forever, but it doesn't work like that in real life.

SCHWARTZ: Yes, it's great how you feel throughout the whole film that they are meant to be together, they seem to be kindred spirits, but they just don't quite connect. You were then invited to MIT, I guess, because you made a film with science in the title. (Laughter) Tell us what you were doing there.

GONDRY: They invite artists but I like mathematics and geometry, and I responded immediately when they reached out to me. That's a great thing about my job, I go to universities. I've felt a lack in my education in some ways, because I didn't go to school so much, and I could have tried harder. Now I go back to school and have this nice energy from being there, I learn to express more of myself and my feelings. [It's a] good use of my time.

Going to MIT was great because they come up with great stuff there. I went one week, one year; and the next year, another week. I met all these guys who were working and mixing with computers and technology. It's a brainstorm, basically, so I got a lot of ideas, and I met amazing people. The last time I went there, I had the delight to meet and talk with Noam Chomsky, [whose work] I had read and watched a lot of documentaries on. It was great to be part of this space where all these brains were communicating.

SCHWARTZ: I read that you were doing experiments there where you were trying to combine computers and digital technology with chemical reactions.

GONDRY: Yes. Well, we worked on this thing that's called cornstarch. You mix this corn powder with water. I forget the name of this type of texture: it's solid when you hit it hard, and it's soft when you go slow. They have this game in Japan where you can run on it, but if you run too slow you just dive. (Laughter) It's just amazing: if you take a very little scoop and you put a speaker underneath with a precise frequency, it has geometric patterns and it starts to rise. If you film it with a strobe light, you get this crazy shape that looks like an alien.

The second week I went, we did a workshop where everybody brought an idea. Mine was, "Okay, all the special effects now are completely done by computer, but something is missing from the chemistry of the physical world." I was trying to find ways to use digital technology to control the duration and the repetition of the effect, and use the analogy of chemistry or the physical elements to create the complexity of the effect, because there are so many parameters when you mix [the two]. Let's say you mix two products and they're going to interweave. It's something that you can never reproduce with a computer. So if you can mix technology and chemistry, you could achieve something really strong.

SCHWARTZ: The film after this is a real change of pace, very spontaneous. It's *Dave Chappelle's Block Party* (2005), your first feature documentary. Dave Chappelle decides to throw a concert in a block in Brooklyn. It's the same kind of do-it-yourself concept: taking an idea and making it actually happen and this great combination of a performance by Kanye West and this marching band that he found in Ohio.

GONDRY: The production that hired me didn't really care what was outside the concert. But I didn't want to just shoot a concert. So we found this idea with Dave that he would go into places and try to sell or give away tickets for his concert. He went to his hometown in Ohio and he was stopping people in the street, and we shot all of that. It was funny because it was quite hard, actually, to find people that would commit to go to Brooklyn.

He's asking the most unexpected people, and some people just don't like rock music; or this lady going to Canada for a trip... It's funny because of course, I started to do movies very precisely and

Human Nature was very—I wouldn't say contrived, but it was very prepared. I realized I was missing a little bit of life there. When I went to do *Eternal Sunshine*, I made sure I was not so ready the day of the shooting. I was ready in terms of what I wanted to achieve with the scene, especially for the camera position and framing …even not sure of that, but I would really give much more space to the actors.

When I did *Block Party*, I went on the set, on the street, with nothing in mind. That's really totally scary, but that was the challenge. And then nothing happens. You get this tension. "I'm going to go back home tonight and I will have nothing!" It's noon and there's nobody in the street—so you say, "Oh, let's go to this pizza parlor," and there's nothing happening there. Then you go, "Let's go into this bookstore. I know those guys are great," and then it's dead there. Then we go to a barber. It's like very, very little happened! So "Okay, I know who those guys are, they are great..."

So we go by this high school. It's the end of the day, and there are these kids who are running late for their rehearsal in the marching band. I say to Dave, "Okay, go talk to them!" Because of course, they're going to recognize him—and then suddenly something happened. They all grouped around him and they wanted to show him that they knew this Kanye West song. So they start to play the song, and he plays with them. Then later on, he invites them to come to the concert—most of them had never been to New York, so we have to organize the trip, and they have to get authorization from the head of the school. They have to negotiate with him, and you see the guy talking. He's going to say yes, he's going to say no…. And finally he says yes to the conductor, and the conductor says, "Yes, we're going to New York!" They really explode in joy.

I think what's great is that you build up this tension by wasting film—we were shooting on film—and I think that's a good thing. If it was on tape you would just roll and roll and roll. But on film, you're making crucial, excruciating decisions. "Okay, let's roll ten more minutes," and then nothing happens. You add up nothing to nothing and you feel you're wasting your day, and the people for the day, and the budget. But then when there is one little thing that happens, it's just wonderful.

It's something I learned from Raymond Depardon, a French filmmaker who does amazing documentaries. He has this rule he applies to himself. He used to shoot in film; I don't know what he shoots now. But the mags are ten minutes long, and when he starts a mag, he's not allowed to stop the camera. So he creates this tension where he says to himself, "Oh, there's nothing happening." He did this amazing one where he followed a police precinct through their week. So he starts the camera and he's wasting film away! He said that this tension is creating such suspense—then, when you get the slightest little event, it's just amazing. He gets amazing scenes.

He visits a place where the guy called the police because he found his wife dead, only he doesn't know she's dead yet. They come and they say "*Dcd*; Dingo, Charlie, Dingo." That means deceased, but they don't want to say it outloud, so the guy will not collapse. They have to manage. How are they going to break the news? They arrive and you see their faces when they say that the wife is dead. Then he stops the camera, because he's very decent, and then you see the guy—he just found that his wife is dead. He's thinking, "Oh, what are we going to do with the body?" He's so in the moment, completely lost, that he's just grabbing the most trivial question.

You have to be so unprepared—so prepared over the years but completely unprepared in the moment—to achieve that. All his documentaries are a compilation of these moments that are amazing. Of course, I will not compare myself to him. That was really my first documentary, but I had in mind going out with nothing prepared and just waiting for things to happen. Then you have magical moments. For instance when The Fugees re-formed—they hadn't played together in six or seven years, and they were waiting to go on stage, and you see Lauryn Hill on the side—this moment gives me goose bumps when I watch it! And the music is just amazing. That was great, a complete different experience.

SCHWARTZ: Did some of that carry over into *Be Kind Rewind* (2008)? Because you used real people from Passaic, New Jersey…

GONDRY: Yes. I was asked by Dave Chappelle to do this documentary concept that was a celebration.

But I didn't know what it was for, and I don't think people really knew, when I would ask them, what it was. It was basically African American musicians, rappers, with a political conscience; but Kanye West is a little different…. So it was very hard for me to define what I was doing—which was interesting, because I had to find the subject as I was shooting.

I eventually sort of understood that it was a celebration of the idea of community. I was sensitive to it, but I didn't have much knowledge about it because there is no sense of community where I come from, a very white bread neighborhood, a suburb of Paris. It's all about consumption and the family there... So through Dave Chappelle—well, all his humor is based on race and confrontation, differences—I started to look into that.

Initially, I wanted Dave to do *Be Kind Rewind* with me. I felt, "Okay, it would be fine to talk about racial issues and even make some jokes about it if he were with me, because that's what he does all the time." He's black, so I would be allowed. But then he went and I was on my own. I decided, "Okay, I'm still going to do it." I felt really awkward, but I had learned a lot from that idea of shooting with people who are not necessarily used to the camera. The idea to represent a group of people and talk about more than two people—which was the case in my previous movies, it was always about two or four people, or even one person—became a bigger group of people.

SCHWARTZ: You came up with this great idea of a video store where all the movies are erased accidentally, and so the video clerks—Jack Black and Mos Def—decide they're going to reenact every movie: they'll make their own *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Rush Hour* (1998). You came up with this term *Sweding*, which is like a do-it-yourself version of a Hollywood film.

GONDRY: Remaking, yes.

SCHWARTZ: When you were filming the *Sweded* movies, what was the process like? Was that all sort of improvised?

GONDRY: Oh no, it was prepared because all the tricks have to be ready, and it has to be safe, so

you cannot just improvise that. Some of the dialogue was improvised, and sometimes we had extended shots, where they were really having fun and being silly. But it was hard for me to convey to them the idea of not overacting the bad acting. (Laughter) It's a little bit embarrassing to say to an actor "You don't have to act badly. If you act good, it's going to be bad enough." (Laughter) It's true! I have seen that in so many movies, where actors pretend they are not actors. They think they are so good as actors that if they were not acting they would be terrible. The fact is that there is not so much of a difference. (Laughter)

I am saying that because I don't expect too many actors to be in the room tonight, so I'm excused. I will not dare say that to their faces. No, I'd tell them, "Try to do it as good as you can." (Laughter) I find it a little condescending from the actor world: when they act as if they are not actors, they act terribly. It's very hard to ask somebody who sings in tune to sing out of tune. They would generally overdo it, and it makes no sense. If I try to sing in tune, I would be out of tune. It's not going to be completely absurd. The same thing when I ask people to make props and make them handmade. In the beginning they were painting totally in a rubbish way. I told them, "Okay, these guys are not the best artists, but they can paint something white without having a big patch of cardboard apparent." (Laughter) They were overdoing it. They were overacting the painting.

SCHWARTZ: So you took this idea to the next level by taking the sets of *Be Kind Rewind* to do an installation at the Jeffrey Deitch Gallery. You invited people to come in and use the costumes and sets and make their own movies.

GONDRY: Yes. This was my initial idea for *Be Kind Rewind*. It's a concept I've had for a very long time, and I want to insist on that, because I know there are other [similar] movies. Like when we did *Eternal Sunshine*, *Memento* (2000) came out just before. There are always people who say, "Oh, you know, he's just trying to do what's in the mood of the time." There were those kids who did *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1989) and there's *Son of Rambow* (2007)—great things—and there is YouTube...

Personally, my concept came very early. When I moved to Paris, I moved onto this street which had many theaters that were abandoned or transformed into other businesses, shoe stores or whatever, because all the small theaters collapsed in the seventies when the big multiplex emerged. I wanted to take one, use it to create a community around the theater, and give a camera to the neighbors and ask them to shoot whatever they wanted. Then we would edit it in a fast way, and screen whatever they had shot during the weekend. They would pay the price of a regular ticket, and then the next week, we would use this money to re-shoot. Every week you would have your neighbor's movie [playing]. They would probably be terrible, but it would be great because they'd see themselves in it. I wanted to do it for real, but I didn't really pursue it. Being a director, that's one of the things you can do. You can create something—a utopia, for instance—that doesn't seem to be possible in the real world, but you construct the world around your idea, and then you make the idea work. So that's why I did it.

SCHWARTZ: It's a little bit like what the Kuchar brothers were doing in the Bronx, going to see big Hollywood movies and then making their own low-budget versions. What surprised you most about the movies made at the Jeffrey Deitch Gallery?

GONDRY: It's a hard question because they are very different. What surprised me is—it's hard to answer your question directly, I don't like to do that. (Laughter) The goal was not the films themselves but to see the process of people going through this protocol I was talking about earlier to shoot. Basically, people would walk in and there were lots of rules to follow. You had all the sets at your convenience, and you had two workshops. In one workshop you had to start with the genre, the title, the storyline, and then a more detailed storyline. Then you would go to workshop two and have this big grid you would fill up.

The principle, basically, is that each storyline that makes sense becomes a scene. If you can illustrate each sentence of the storyline, then you make a movie that can tell a story. That was the idea. Then you had your grid that would include the action. Not the dialog, but the accessories required, the location. Then you would have a camera and edit in the camera. For one hour you would shoot. Then you would go into the video store from *Be Kind Rewind* that we reproduced, and watch the movie just after having shot it.

Every time, it was the same reaction. Because of the fact that you're in the film, you see what's in between the takes, all the mistakes. In the case of our film that we did the last day, we had the biggest group, twenty people; Tim Robbins, even Susan Sarandon came. It was very funny, because they really were playing with us. For instance, the cameraman—if I go to switch off the camera for two minutes, we hear all our conversation: How [are we] going to set the next scene? He came up with the line, "I'm a hit man, so what? You have a problem with that?"

All the mistakes are something that you appreciate because you remember doing them. This is the connection [between] making your film and watching it that I was trying to explore. It was really successful because every time you would see people watching their work or their game, they would have the same kind of excitement. Maybe what surprised me the most is, like you, I got the same result in terms of interest or creativity from people who were from the film world as from people who have nothing to do with it—which is the point I was trying to make. I feel we are a little club of people making movies.

You know, I was meeting somebody this morning and he said, "Oh, I met this person in this place and then I realized he worked with you; it's such a small world!" I said to this person, "Yes, it's a small world because we don't want to share it." Meaning that we are all lucky in this world to be creative, but we all do everything we can not to have too many people know that they could do it. (Laughter) Because then we won't do it so much and make so much money off it! My opinion is, if you give a camera to a lot of people, they would do a better job than me. I'm telling them by doing these types of things; but overall, they are not told that.

SCHWARTZ: I don't think they'd do a *better* job…

GONDRY: No, okay... well, I'm fishing for a compliment maybe. (Laughter) It's true. But I think there is a privilege here that is not being shared enough.

SCHWARTZ: Well, before we end, I want to congratulate you on winning a Webby Award, I guess both for the spirit of *Be Kind Rewind* and what it's saying about this kind of do-it-yourself generation. I think that's one reason you won, and also these two YouTube videos, where you solve Rubik's cubes with your feet and your nose, which have been seen by four million people. Congratulations on that award, and we look forward to all your future work. Thanks a lot for being here.

GONDRY: Thank you. (Applause)