

## THE WE AND THE I



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A film directed by  
Michel Gondry, 2012

Niveau

Lycée

## I. What the film is about

The main theme of the film is the influence of social environment on the behaviour of persons, here American teenagers. The long journey in the bus is a "huis clos" situation in which characters forced to stay together on a closed stage will interact on different complex levels. Youngsters from a south Bronx high school are returning home and share space with adult passengers on the regular MTA line bus. The day is special for the children, it is the end of summer term and the prelude to three months of holiday.

The large group of school children melts down at each bus stop as they leave to their homes. The tense and often aggressive talk and interaction relaxes progressively until the last couple is left in the night at the end of the bus route.

## A. A varied set of interactions between the characters

We see at first the exuberance and youthful energy of pupils running out of school after last class and bringing noisy chaos into the bus they are boarding. The driver who knows them well affirms her strong presence and authority. The bullies start setting up their dominant position by monopolizing the back seats, away from the driver's direct control. Jonathan, Little Raymond, Michael play big bosses. Big T pushes away a couple of small boys, steals the yoghurt snack one is eating, and is rude to an elderly white lady.

Lady Chen takes up the front seat for herself and Niomi with whom she has an important business to manage, setting up the list of the guests she wants to invite to her Sweet Sixteen birthday party. A quiet disliked boy is asked insistingly to move, which he does meekly without resistance. A trio of loud girls mock him savagely.

In the middle of the bus sits Big Raymond an older boy who plays guitar in a band with his friend Kenny. In between are a few adults who were already sitting in the bus before the kids came in, they keep uninvolved but disapproving, they stay wary as long as their privacy is not directly infringed upon.

Soon after the bus has started a blond girl is allowed in, this is Teresa whom the driver likes. She goes directly to the back seat and starts a bitter row with the three boys already there. She missed school for a few days before end of term.

## B. Fast and violent confrontations

Between these poles several unconnected conversations develop, the kids interact verbally in a quick, loud manner, often on the verge of violent confrontation. Several children isolate themselves from the turmoil but stay attentive. The universal presence of cell phones complicates the interactions; we also see flashbacks of video films taken at a wild party a few days ago, a recurrent clip of a boy falling on a slippery kitchen floor, a chase that will end tragically. Cell phone videos will be exchanged.

## C. The Good Life

In a nightclub scene a talkative boy develops a cliché fantasy of his dreamt Good Life for the benefit of girls who mock him.

## D. The bus brings back the children to their homes

At each bus stop a few of the passengers get off the bus and the constellations rearrange themselves, the tension ebbs and as the day is waning, more attentive and careful talks take place at last. The film ends when the last couple has left the bus in the night, "the existential summer homework of growing up" for the next months and later is still to be done.

# II. To the attention of teachers

## A. Problems of comprehension for English language learners

The main difficulty for non native speakers of English in this film is its authentic language and local cultural references. The fast, often coded and obscure exchanges will present a stiff challenge for students of English as a foreign language. The conversations between the numerous characters will often be cut off by a sudden change of focus, then start again at a later point.

The enclosed crowded space of the moving bus allows for only limited physical action that could make situations obvious even with partial grasp of the language. The added chaotic video sequences, fast texting, dreamt scenes illustrating tales, all add to the confusion. It is not customary to set English subtitles (for the deaf) to an English-speaking film, so we will have to resort to the available French subtitled partial translation.

## B. The appeal of the film to teenagers

On the other hand, many situations will remind our teenage students of their own experiences, dreams and worries. The dialogues have been rewritten in the course of three years of work in collaboration with the actors who play themselves. The film was shot inside an MTA (New York's Metropolitan Transport Agency) bus driven by a professional driver who plays her own part. The bus travelled for long days of several weeks looping on different set routes, then the whole harvest of footage was cut to size and set up in studio. The effect of immersion in a foreign culture is guaranteed and certainly a plus for students of English.

## C. The making of videos on the DVD version

The interviews of the young unprofessional actors show they enjoyed the challenging work, they are very proud of having taken part in this community project. Michel Gondry met the actors at a South Bronx community centre.

But the situations in the film are exaggerated and concentrated for more drama. Several actors insist they would not use such crude language outside fiction, nor behave so rudely to adults, or even to each other.

Please watch the making of part of the video to rebalance the impression. French pupils might form a very negative image from the intended effort at « realism » as directed by Frenchman Michel Gondry. It is unthinkable in the USA of nowadays that such an unruly mob would be let alone for long in a public bus without educational supervision.

This backstage part should be shown to pupils if possible, first because it is much easier for them to understand than the film itself, and because the young actors have a fresh and direct way of expressing themselves that will speak to people their age. Mr Gondry's English comments about his intentions and his work directing are also very helpful.

### III. What to do before viewing the film

The bus ride situation is not a documentary on the Bronx as geographical subject. Even if the background images of the neighbourhoods along the route bring an impression of locality, the long journey from the end of a summer school day to dusk in the last stations is certainly unrealistic. *The\_We\_and\_the\_I* can be seen as an urban road movie focusing on character evolution more than on landscape.

The film features teenagers from the South Bronx, a borough of New York City east of the Harlem river, north of Manhattan. Since the bloody riots and arson of the 1980s, the Bronx has been in the eyes of many outsiders a place of exciting horrors and frightening violence, a vision of nightmarish hell on Earth.

A better balanced view on this very large urban area inhabited by over a million residents, with a long history and the most diverse population of the USA should be brought to our students.

- **Map of the Bronx**

<http://www.nycgo.com/maps>

→ *The map can be used to localize the South Bronx and Hunts Point area where the actors come from.*

- **Slideshow of 156 pictures about the history of Hunts Point in the Bronx from 1609 to 2011,**

<http://fr.slideshare.net/pderienzo/history-of-hunts-point-crucial>

A chronological collection of picture and text documents in English, a history of the Bronx from its Mohegan pre-Columbian origin.

The Bronx is one of the oldest settlements in the New York area with over 2000 years occupation. Diverse themes could be the object of oral presentations as there are often several short texts on one given subject that have to be browsed and selected to illustrate.

Examples of themes: Indians, slavery and abolition of slavery, ethnic diversity over time, industry and industrial pollution, destruction and development, enterprising citizens, musical tradition, political activism, crime.

- **The cradle of hip-hop**

A documentary film about hip-hop that started in the South Bronx hip-hop in the South Bronx.

[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xf0kx\\_from-mambo-to-hip-hop\\_shortfilms#.UR-DOyKyAZIM](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xf0kx_from-mambo-to-hip-hop_shortfilms#.UR-DOyKyAZIM)

→ *This film shows views of the Bronx after the 1980s riots and how a new culture was born out of the ruins.*

- **The Point community centre at Garrington Avenue, South Point, The Bronx**

<http://www.thepoint.org/index.php>

The actors featuring in the film were met by Michel Gondry at The Point.

→ *Browse the programme of The Point centre and imagine how you would fit in there.*

- **Diversity in the classroom**

The issue of racism among teenagers is absent in the film even if the cohabitation of people of different ethnic backgrounds, or “diversity” is often given as a motive for conflict.

Ethnic classification of people is used commonly in statistics in the USA, here an example of a chart showing the “diversity” of the school population in Bronx County 1986 to 2006, one of the most diverse counties in the New York City area.

Five different groups are defined for this chart, the place of birth, or mixed family background of individuals is not taken into account here, so the chart blurs the issue of recent immigration.

<http://projects.nytimes.com/immigration/enrollment/new-york/bronx>

## IV. What to do after viewing the film

### A. Pour introduire une discussion après avoir vu le film

Video montage d'extraits du film sous titrés en français et quelques courtes remarques de lycéens parlant français :

<http://education.francetv.fr/videos/regards-jeunes-sur-le-cinema-nbsp-nbsp-the-we-and-the-i-v111753>

→ *What can you tell about the film?*

## B. The title of the film

### The We and the I, a song by Captain Kid

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpgO6lhi3pY>

#### Lyrics

We walked for hours,  
In winter's arms,  
You broke your ankle  
And felt with pride

You sent me a picture,  
On which you cried  
It's hard not to answer,  
I'll give a try.

I'm selfish and jealous,  
Is that a crime?  
Selfish and jealous,  
Pleasure is mine.

You'll share all your secrets  
And I'll keep mine  
We'll spend life together,  
Just We and I.

→ *Can you figure how inspiring that song and its lyrics were for the film?*

## C. The cast

Photos of the cast to help you identify the different characters:

- Little Raymond and Michael



- Jonathan "Angelface" ne of the backseat boys



- Michael and Big T



- Teresa, Little Raymond Michael and Little Chen



- Lady Chen giggling



- Teresa and bus driver blowing bubblegum



- Y and Z connecting for a date



- Alex and Jonathan at the back



- Teresa and Michael



- Jonathan, Teresa, Little Raymond and Michael mocking the man with the stunted mouth



- Full cast together with Michel Gondry at the Point café



- Can you name everyone now?
- You may use this photo to start a brainstorming discussion with pupils after viewing the film; a number of the characters will be recognized and named.
- After that, pupils can be asked to choose a set of two or more characters and speak about what they understood of each character, about his or her behaviour.
- Is there a difference in relationship at different times? When the bus fills up with students and in the end of the route when most have left for home.

Name of character	Friends	Opposed to	Change in attitude over time



## V. Analysis

It is expected that many spectacular and/or violent scenes will be enjoyed superficially by French teenagers as a show, at the cost of missing the fine nuances of a carefully written and mastered scenario. There is more than just fights and bad attitudes here, so we think a precise analysis of a couple of sequences might help to deepen understanding and lead to a useful discussion with our pupils.

- **Sequence 0h23'06'' 0h25'44''**

Three girls talking about using condoms and the attitude of men.

Girl 1: "You didn't use a condom? Are you out of your mind? Are you late or anything?"

Girl 2: "No, I use the morning after pill"

Girl 1: "He does not know how to use it?"

Girl 2: "No he knows that, he wanted me to put it on"

Girl 1: "He does not know how to do it, he is lying"

Girl 3: "Also you can't have sex with that kind of guys"

"I do not go out with that kind of guys (...) I did not say this, I am saying a guy, am just saying they are all the same (...) One day they are going to cheat you, another day they are going to play you (...) They are not trying to please women, they just want to please themselves (...) Everything they learn is from porn (...) They are jacking off so let them enjoy it by themselves."

At this point Sam gets into the conversation: "There are pulsions that you cannot control"

Girl 2: "Why are you talking to us ?"

Sam: "The other day I was at a party"

→ *This sequence will be a provocative starting point with pupils for a discussion about the contrasting cultural images of sex from the girls and the boy's point of view.*

→ *As the perception of this scene will be probably fragmentary, it will be useful to recoup the information gathered from pupils before discussing with the group.*

Fill in the grid in your own words,

In this sequence	girls	boy
Fiction and reality?		
Ambition		
Image of the other sex		
Feelings towards others		
Image of self		
Symbolic objects		
What is it to be an adult in the children's eyes?		

→ *Exchange with the group to formulate sentences.*

- **Sequence 0h43'08'' to 0h48'06'' - Pizza stop, reacting a sequence**

One of the few sequences when the bus stops and some of the passengers leave the bus for a short time offers a better opportunity for description of actions.

Traffic is stopped while a medical team is loading a wounded or dead person onto an ambulance; Jonathan and Little Raymond ask the driver to allow them to buy a pizza in a neighbouring shop. A group of girls also ask for permission to step out of the bus in order to have a look at the accident, the shy boy follows them. A short exchange with the girl he likes, she passes him a slip of paper with her phone number, telling him she likes him too after all.

- *Using figurines (chessmen, paper cut-outs or plastic playmobil guys) and a model bus or box, you replay the situation of the stopped bus and of the moves of the passengers getting off then back onto the bus precisely.*
- *This will be an occasion for interactive oral work, with puppets acting as support for the story*
- *The dialogues will have to be recreated from memory within the given frame, interventions from the class will be welcomed until an agreement is reached.*

- 1 : initial position of characters by closed doors
- 2 : bus is stopped, movement starts, negotiation
- 3 : front door opens
- 4 : back door opens
- 5 : in the pizza shop
- 6 : out of the bus
- 7 : back with the pizza
- 8 : doors close, bus starts

- **Sequence 0h52'26'' to 0h55'48'' - The angel cyclist**

Jonathan looks out the window, a young woman wearing a light summer dress is cycling in slow-motion alongside the street, the sight attracts his attention, the apparition has the conversations and the tension halt for a magical few seconds. Mesmerized Jonathan seeks eye contact, imagines he gets a smile, Little Chen breaks the spell with a crude obscenity, this leads to a violent confrontation. The Chens, Lady and Kit side with their brother, the backseat boys watch but stay out at this stage.

Enters Kon Chen, older brother who smothers with quiet authority the conflict by a formal Christian tainted apology, he is made to look like Jesus Christ Peacemaker, the fight ends before it escalates to blows. The Chen clan returns to their seats and their face saved. Everybody is relieved.

The sequence ends up with a negative general remark about religion and a cartoon image of hell, but the intervention was very timely and effective.

Video Fight Jonathan-Chens 1'51''

[http://www.allocine.fr/video/player\\_gen\\_cmedia=19391456&cfilm=179165.html](http://www.allocine.fr/video/player_gen_cmedia=19391456&cfilm=179165.html)

→ Use a grid to analyse the situation's dynamics.

	Actions	Language : tone rhythm vocabulary
Initial situation		
The apparition		
Effect on the viewers		
The spell is broken		
Confrontation		
Escalation		
Intervention		
De-escalation		
Conclusion		
Last image		

→ What happened?

→ What is at stake in this sequence?

→ What consequences will this have in the future?

→ Do you know of similar conflict situations that will escalate mechanically?

• **Sequence 1h12'34'' 1h21'12''**

Towards the end of the journey: Now the bus is almost empty, Michael is left alone and starts talking to Alex who has been reading a magazine and listening to his own music. Both boys talk about their family, gather the information that they share about their lives.

Persons they talk about	Alex	Michael

→ What do both boys have in common to be friends?

→ Can you understand Alex's final attitude?

## VI. Links:

Une analyse du film en français du point de vue de son intérêt pédagogique  
Site InterNet Zéro de conduite

<http://www.zerodeconduite.net/blog/index.php?itemid=18912>

Les films de Michel Gondry :

<http://www.maisonimage.eu/festival-cinema-Michel-Gondry.html>

la Maison de l'Image d'Aubenas