

REVIEW: *The Work of Director Michel Gondry (2003)*

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I am part of the first generation of adolescents weaned on music videos. Those early images of rock stars flitting by the television at an exaggerated rate became forays into a visionary world where musicians, available twenty-four hours a day, were a novelty. And thanks to the Much Music programming cycle you were guaranteed to see something you liked at least twice a day. Figuring out this program loop was essential to taping those few favourite videos for learning the words to songs or trying to copy dance moves by the likes of Vanilla Ice. (Yes. I was that lame.) While the majority of these videos were of fairly bland concert footage, or of one-hit wonders singing directly into the camera from a desert/city/bedroom, there were a few landmark moments.

The Work Of Director Michel Gondry is the third DVD release by the Directors Label (a boutique imprint of Palm Pictures) created by Gondry, Spike Jonze and Chris Cunningham. Not that this numbering system really matters since all three discs came out at the same time in the fall of 2003. The Gondry disc is easily the best of the bunch. It is easy to praise this collection when Gondry's ability to be technically proficient, innovative, and aesthetically mind-boggling shines through every item on this disc. The disc interface itself has gone through the process of being Gondryfied, whereby linear order is rearranged into a series of loops and circles. The main menu screen is probably the first and best example of how Gondry understands the materiality and potential of DVD menu loops. In this menu screen, Gondry is playing a drum beat which cycles in time to make a song. The central melodic element is provided by the two boys who scream at

different pitches whenever Gondry strikes the drum they have their head in. This is your introduction to the wacky and surreal world of Michel Gondry. Before you think this is some form of cruel and unusual torture, it should be noted that one of the boys is Gondry's son, Paul, a budding horror film director.

The circular structure of this DVD is evident in the reverse chronology whereby 'side A' covers the years 2003-1996 and includes part two of the documentary *I've Been 12 Forever (Age 12- 12)*. While this structure makes some sort of sense insofar as the most recent (and best known) material is presented first, drawing the viewer into the older material on 'side B' (1995- 1987), it also has the effect of drawing a circle around the video career of Gondry. The title of this documentary is particularly telling of this circular world where the end is really just a return to the beginning. To top this off, when part one of the documentary ends on 'side B' and the credits pass, a short sequence of a young boy playing basketball begins and then repeats until the viewer stops it. I have to admit that I got suckered the first time I watched this sequence, waiting for several minutes until I realized that it was just a repetitive loop. I quickly came to realize that this is one of the new potentials of DVD technology, whereby seamless loops can be created and run until the player burns out, the viewer gets sick of the repetition, or the power goes out. We are beginning to see the legs of a new medium being stretched out with experiments in temporality and continuation. I like the image of the young boy who is endlessly practicing, repeating actions with no end goal other than to complete the action. He is a suitable metaphor for Gondry who never seems to lose

his delight in the action and practice of his craft.

The loop is an interesting way to describe Gondry's work as it has implications in both the histories of film and music. In film, the loop goes back to the phenakistoscope, the zoetrope and the Edison Kinetoscope, that latter of which filled parlors with people eager to see 20 seconds of repeating, motionbased excitement per nickel. In music, though the looping mechanical music box has existed since the late 18th century and the disk-based Symphonion box exploded in popularity during the late 19th century, the loop is often considered a newer concept brought about by electronic music wherein small excerpts from pre-existing songs or isolated drum beats (aka samples) are repeated as a loop via analog or digital sequencing equipment to form the backbone of a new composition. The perfect example of how Gondry represents the loop in both film and music is in his video for Cibo Matto's "Sugar Water" where he visually illustrates the symmetry of the music by constructing a video palindrome. In Gondry's hands a rather simple idea becomes a study in movement and timing whereby the musicians Miho and Yuka end up in the places where they started. To achieve this effect, Gondry made a single-take film which follows Yuka and then Miho in equal halves. To achieve the effect of the palindrome, Gondry employs a split screen where the left side runs forwards and the right side runs backwards in perfect synchronization.

Gondry has a rare ability to actually make the music better with his videos. Kylie Minogue's "Come Into My World" is just one example of a video being so interesting that the song suddenly becomes incredibly enjoyable. It is another one of Gondry's audio-visual loops whereby Kylie Minogue walks around a Paris block only to multiply every time that she passes by the same launderette from which she enters the camera's view. The end result is similar to Zbigniew Rybczynski's TANGO (1982) only that with each pass around the block the people who populate the background multiply as well, creating a crowded mass in the streets around whom Minogue performs her song. I like this video because it condenses all the potentialities and multiplicities of people in urban space into one shot. The quotidian tasks and actions of all the people in the video amounts to a depiction of history and inhabitation that is normally invisible. The tangibility of the space and multiplication of people does not show history as a trace ghost presence but rather as an endlessly present and changing action.

Another one of my favourite aspects of Gondry's

videos is his ability to literalize material from the song without it being tasteless or obvious. A good example of this is "La Tour De Pise" by Jean Francois Coen, where the whole video is comprised of different signs from around Paris spelling out the lyrics of the song. However, my favourite example of this technique is "Star Guitar" by the Chemical Brothers, wherein the landscape as seen from a train window matches the different beats of the song. What I especially enjoy about this video is that the repetition does not feel forced, but instead becomes unified with the natural landscape and sound field. The train is a perfect setting because it is a technology that operates with regard to the rhythm and synchronization of different component parts. There is a celebration of harmony and motion as it is embodied both by this dance song and its re-situation into the monotony of daily transportation.

Every single video included on *The Work Of Director Michel Gondry* has something interesting and technically stimulating that is worth talking about. So much so that I have started to regard these clips as porno for film formalists: there are so many great explorations into the materiality and possibility of film.