

IS THE MAN WHO IS TALL HAPPY?

AN ANIMATED CONVERSATION WITH
NOAM CHOMSKY

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF
"ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND"

A FILM BY
MICHEL GONDRY



IS THE MAN WHO IS TALL HAPPY?

een film van Michel Gondry
in gesprek met Noam Chomsky

89 minuten | 2013 | Frankrijk | Engels, Frans gesproken

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Deze film wordt uitgebracht door



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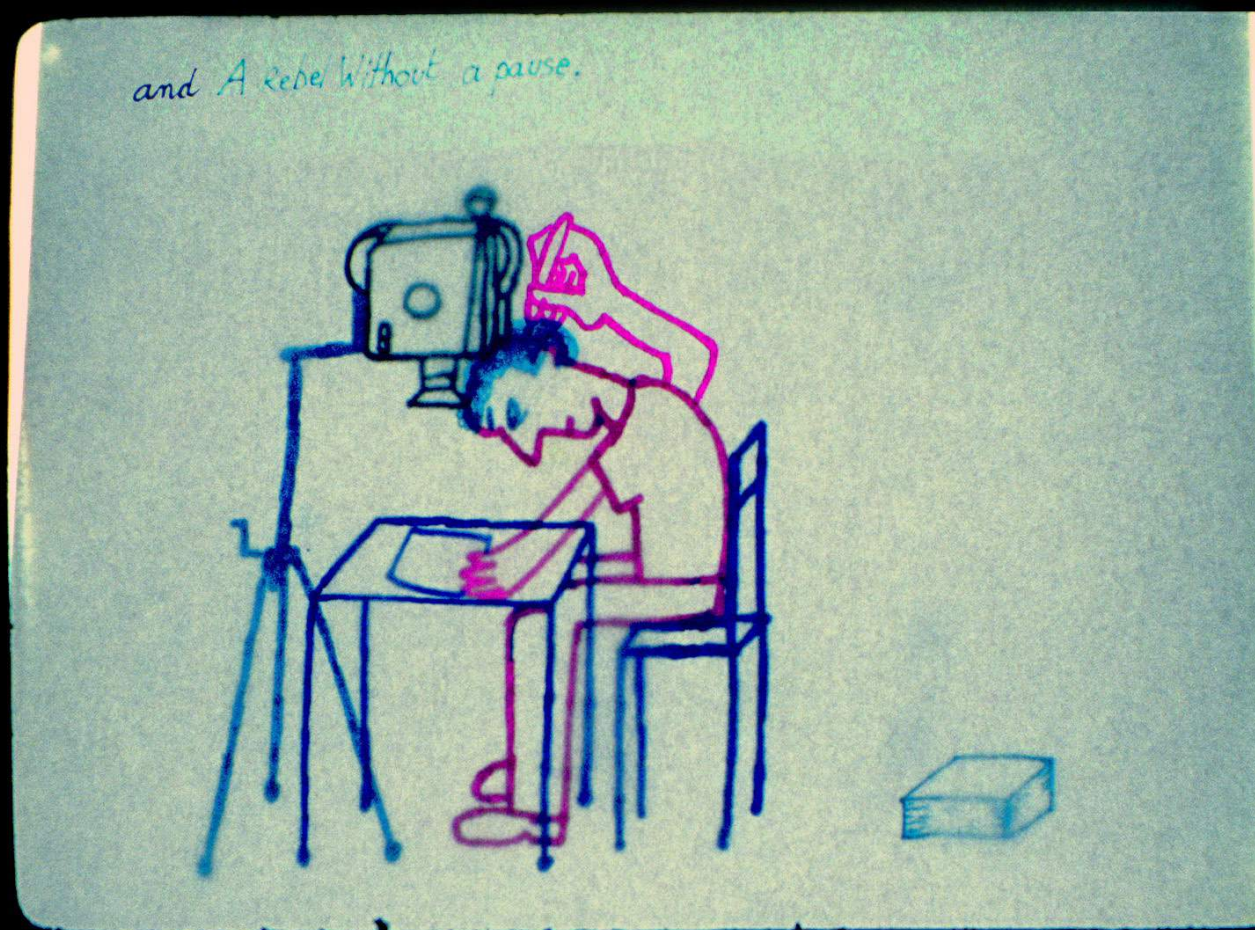
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SYNOPSIS

Een exceptionele, innovatieve film waarin Michel Gondry de fascinerende ideeën van de beroemde taalwetenschapper en filosoof Noam Chomsky omzet in beelden die je instinctief meteen begrijpt. Als een emotionele ondertiteling van een rationeel verhaal. Een film over hoe wij de wereld ontdekken en begrijpen, wat de rol van taal en verbeelding daarin is.

Chomsky is beroemd vanwege zijn ontdekkingen rond taalbegrip en daarmee de werking van onze hersenen. 85 jaar oud, vertelt hij met wonderbaarlijke scherpte en eloquentie over zijn ideeën en leven. Over waarom bijvoorbeeld kinderen instinctief begrijpen dat een ezel die verandert in een steen, nog steeds de ezel is. Maar ook hoe hij als kind van 10 al met zijn vader Hebreeuwse klassieken bediscussieerde. Daarbij tekent Gondry de associatieve animaties die aan Chomsky's woorden een sterke lading geven die je laten begrijpen zonder na te denken. Een samenwerking van twee bijzonder vindingrijke mensen die ons helpen de wereld begrijpen; de een door de kracht van wetenschap, de ander door de kracht van kunst.

Michel Gondry

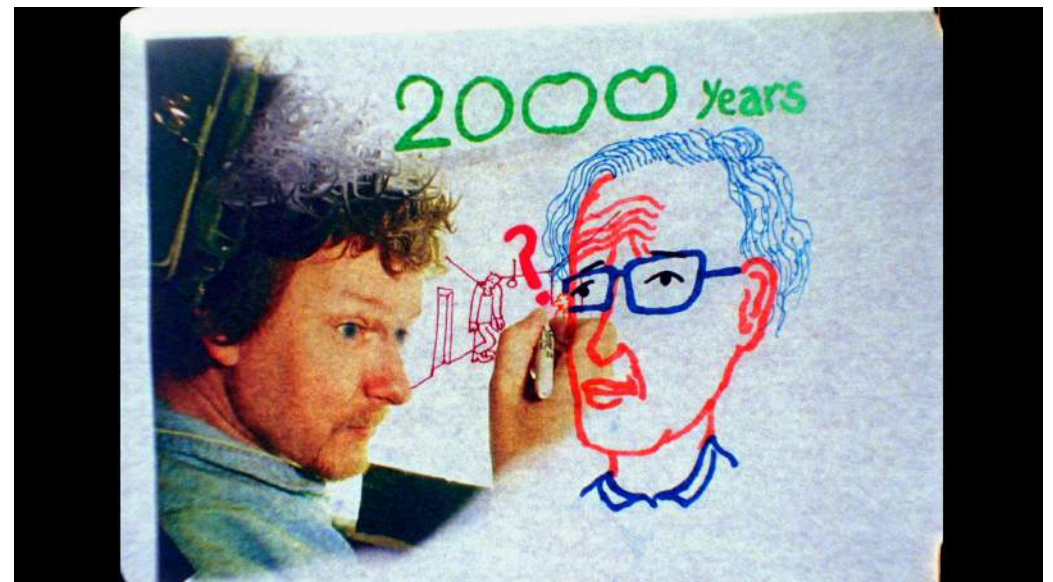


Michel Gondry is geboren en opgegroeid in Versailles. Hij begon op jonge leeftijd met tekenen en had als kind de ambitie om kunstschilder of uitvinder te worden. Gondry's grootvader had een muziekwinkel, die later werd overgenomen door zijn vader. De zaak ging na een aantal jaren failliet, maar vlak daarvoor gaf hij Michel en zijn broer een drumstel en een basgitaar. Samen speelden ze in enkele bands, totdat Michel naar Parijs vertrok om aan de kunstacademie te studeren. Daar vormde hij de band *Oui Oui* met een groep klasgenoten. *Oui Oui* bracht twee studioalbums uit, maar viel begin jaren 90 uiteen.

Voor *Oui Oui* besloot Gondry (behalve de muziek) zich ook bezig te houden met het maken van de muziekvideo's. In deze video's probeerde hij vaak de 'echte wereld' met animatie te combineren. Een belangrijk punt voor Gondry's carrière was de samenwerking met Björk. De zangeres nam contact met hem op nadat ze enkele video's van Gondry had gezien. Björk besloot hem de video voor "Human Behaviour" te laten regisseren. In de zomer van 1993 werd de muziekvideo uitgebracht. Hij werd zesmaal genomineerd voor een MTV Video Music Award en eenmaal voor de Grammy Award voor Best Music Video.

De "Human Behaviour"-video leverde bekendheid op voor Gondry en in de daaropvolgende jaren mocht hij video's voor onder andere The Rolling Stones, Daft Punk, Massive Attack, Kylie Minogue en Beck produceren. In de jaren 90 hield Gondry zich ook bezig met het maken van reclamevideo's. Zo werkte hij onder meer voor Levi's, Nike en BMW. In 2002 verscheen Gondry's eerste speelfilm: *Human Nature*, gebaseerd op een script van Charlie Kaufman. De film bleek minder succesvol dan zijn vervolg: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, met Jim Carrey en Kate Winslet in de hoofdrollen en wederom met een script van Kaufman. De film werd lovend ontvangen en leverde Gondry een Oscar op voor 'Best Original Screenplay'. De prijs werd gedeeld met Kaufman en Pierre Bismuth. In 2006 volgde een samenwerking met Dave Chappelle, met wie hij de film Dave Chappelle's Block Party maakte.

In hetzelfde jaar voltooide hij de film *The Science of Sleep* met in de hoofdrollen de Mexicaanse acteur Gael Garcia Bernal en de Franse actrice Charlotte Gainsbourg, een film die de droomwereld en de animatieelementen van Gondry goed naar voren bracht. Het jaar daarop volgde de komedie *Be Kind Rewind* met Jack Black, Mos Def, Danny Glover en Mia Farrow over een bijna failliete VHS videotheek. In 2011 verscheen *The Green Hornet*, een 3D superheldenfilm, met Seth Rogen in de hoofdrol over een misdaadbestrijder die vecht tegen de slechterik Benjamin Chudnofsky (Christoph Waltz).



Noam Chomsky



Geboren 7 december 1928 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, als zoon van Dr. William Chomsky (geleerde in de Hebreeuwse taal- en letterkunde) en Elsie Simonofsky. Ging naar de Hebreeuwse school en schreef zich in 1945 in aan de University of Pennsylvania. Hij studeerde filosofie, taalkunde en wiskunde. In 1955 haalde hij zijn Ph.D. (doctoraat) en werd hij researcher aan het Research Laboratory of Electronics van het Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 1957 werd hij er 'associate professor' en drie jaar later was hij hoogleraar.

Zijn linguïstische ideeën, die hij begon te ontwikkelen in zijn doctoraat, schreef hij verder uit in zijn boek *Syntactic Structures* (1957), waarschijnlijk zijn beroemdste taalkundig werk.

Chomsky, die zichzelf een politiek activist noemt, stond al snel in nauw contact met allerlei organisaties en bewegingen, met een kruisbestuiving tot gevolg. Politiek bekeerde hij zich tot het 'left libertarianism': geen partij, maar een bundel losse ideeën.

In de jaren '60 begon hij zich ook metterdaad politiek te engageren. Hij was een hevige tegenstander van de Amerikaanse betrokkenheid in de Vietnamoorlog, die hij aanvalt in artikels, boeken en vanop het podium. In

1969 publiceerde hij hierover het essay *American Power and the New Mandarins*. Deze New Mandarins zijn de technocraten, bureaucraten en universitairers die Amerika's recht verdedigen om de wereld te overheersen.

Sindsdien voert hij onafgebroken strijd tegen de funeste gevolgen van de kapitalistische wereldorde, de mondialisering en het neoliberalisme, tegen censuur en de "engineering of consent" (het in slaap wiegen van de burger) en tegen de manipulaties van de media door verschillende belangengroepen (vooral multinationals, maar ook politieke pressiegroepen). In boeken, artikels en conferenties neemt hij de buitenlandse politiek van de VS op de korrel en hun betrokkenheid bij politieke broeihaarden over de hele wereld: Nicaragua, Cuba, Haïti, Oost-Timor, het Israëlisch-Arabisch conflict, de oorlog rond Kosovo en de Golfoorlog. Naar aanleiding van de aanslagen van 11 september schreef hij *9/11* en later *Hegemony or Survival* (in het Nederlands vertaald als *De Arrogantie van de Macht*). Zijn conclusie is onveranderd dat voor de VS big business en dito winstbejag altijd primeren op mensenrechten, rechtvaardigheid en moraliteit.

Bij een breder publiek is hij vooral bekend om zijn politieke werken, maar zijn hoofdbezigheid blijft nog altijd doceren en taalonderzoek.





Director's Statement

In one of the first interview I gave about my film debut, I was asked what I would like to direct the most. I was looking for the most counterintuitive response : shoot an animated documentary. I like unreasonable ideas because they need a very special focus to be materialized. And this extra bit of work gives them their quality. And well, yes it is unreasonable to plan to do an animated documentary : the lack of control necessary to the truthfulness of the documentary is contradicted but the way animation is supposed to be executed...

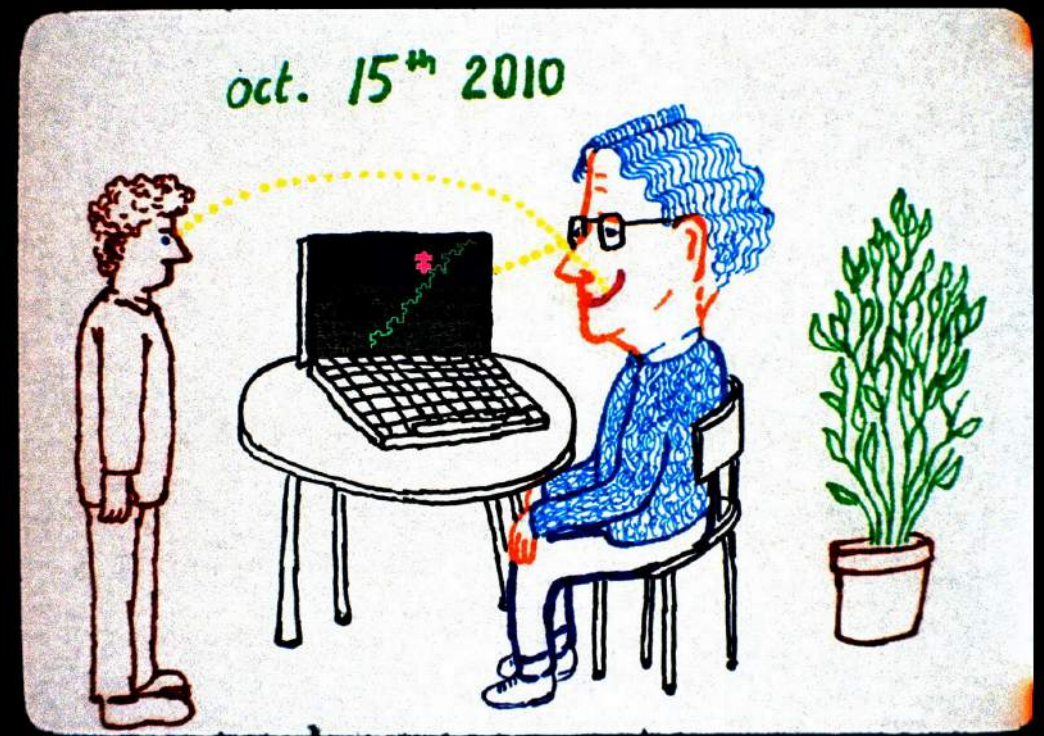
Therefore, when I had the luck to meet Noam Chomsky and hear him talk about generative grammar, this idea jumped back at me and yelled, demanding to be executed. My ideas are impatient. They can wait decades in a corner of my mind. However, if they see the possibility to walk outside, they jump at my throat right away.

The conversation with professor Chomsky is alive, sometime complexe yet always very human. Through my illustration, we follow the winding path of my stuttering understanding. Noam is often patient, sometime less so the trail always uses unexpected bends. This lead my animation to unexpected places. The mechanisms, repetition and logic of Noam's stream of ideas have determined the drawings's transitions and evolutions. For how bending the concept of « animated documentary » was, it finds a perfect justification here.

I never had the ambition to bring proof, demonstrate theories, but rather use my creative or artistic capacities to produce something different, stimulated by meeting one of the few scientist following the tradition of the enlightenment today.

Film maker Georges Clouzot or Photographer Brassai did it before me with the genius picasson. Each time, the difference of function of to minds who meet and talk is producing the work. Professor Chomsky has a memory, a blinding knowledge of science and history so i had to find a way to not end up overwhelmed and let the dialogue exist. My way is to draw 24 different pictures per second and expose them to the brain each second. When the shapes i draw start moving, that's in fact a lot of information going right to the audience's brain. In this process I find a sort of equivalence that let me see a balanced relation with the professor.

Moreover animation is expressed by it's subjectivity : The audience is constantly reminded that he is watching the point of view of the author.



In opposition, traditionnal film making is hiding this subjectivity in creating a feeling of naturalness that allows the audience's manipulation by hiding the process. In this the juxtaposition of animation and documentary finds another reason to be tried.

At the heart of the conversation, we witness Noam's explanation of a possible emergence of language in history. And i repeat to myself, 24 time per second that I was there, listing to what was said. Like it would have been like listen to Edwin Hubble talking about the red shift he observed from distant galaxiea and how it led to the theory of the big bang. Well that is a lame comparison but a long way to say i felt privileged. Yet what is the most remakable in thes discussion is Noam Chomsky humanity, the way he respects people's different way of life, their beliefs and above all, the way he often includes is wife in the conversations, maybe to keep her alive next to him.

- Michel Gondry

Interview with the director

The Flow of the Conversation: An Interview with Michel Gondry

Written by David Cairns | Published on 20 June 2014

Michel Gondry's documentary *Is the Man Who is Tall Happy?* billed as "An Animated Conversation," is playing at Edinburgh International Film Festival, and "playing" is a particularly apt word for what the movie does. Gondry uses an interview with philosopher Noam Chomsky, only part of which was captured on film (via an ancient Bolex camera), the rest as audio, and constructs "an animated conversation" using hand-drawn images which illustrate, elucidate, question and bounce off of the questions under discussion. In broad terms, if you know both men's work you can probably judge whether you're likely to enjoy it. I did.

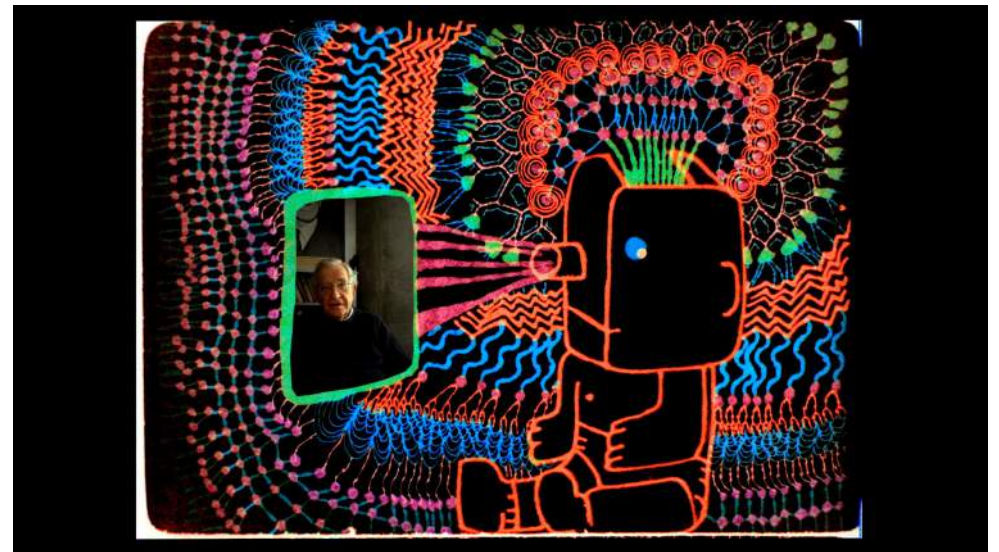
I spoke to Gondry by phone, with an ancient tape recorder scotch taped to the receiver, thinking this jury-rigged approach might be in keeping with the film's lo-fi approach.

NOTEBOOK: How did you meet Chomsky?

MICHEL GONDRY: I was visiting MIT—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I've been invited to be artist in residence for several years. Then I realized he was teaching there and I asked if I could meet with him. And so we met on several occasions, we had conversations... And I had this project for maybe ten years, to do an animated documentary on a scientific subject. And then I realized I should do it on him, so I asked him and he said "yes" right away.

NOTEBOOK: What was it about Chomsky's work or personality that drew you to him?

GONDRY: He's an amazing scientist, he revolutionized linguistics in the fifties by bringing the field into biology when it was more like a literature subject. And of course he's an amazing activist and has



an immense knowledge of politics and world affairs. I don't know many people on this planet who are competent and exceptional on both scientific and political subjects. Often scientists are very vague on political opinion, and politicians have contempt and zero interest in science. It's quite amazing to meet someone who is equally a genius in both fields.

NOTEBOOK: It must make it difficult to decide which aspects of Chomsky to focus on. How did you select?

GONDRY: Well, I had the ambition to take a scientific subject to make an animated film. His activism and political work is exposed a lot, through the net and the papers and his books, of course, and his scientific work, which is equally important, is much harder to access. His books are very technical and there's much less discussion about them. There have been five or six movies done on his activism, so I thought I could focus on this. In Europe and especially in France, he's been ignored both as an activist and scientist because he criticised a lot of the French media...so that was one reason I wanted to focus on the scientific aspect of his work.



NOTEBOOK: At the start of the film you explain your reasons for using animation (partly to expose the artifice of filmmaking).

Are you really troubled by the way films pretend to be real?

GONDRIY: At the time of starting the film, I had seen a few documentaries that were really reorganized to be dramatized, and I felt that when it's been said it's a documentary, the audience has a perception, a vulnerability, they absorb everything as something that is true, like your parents would tell to a child, or your teacher will teach you. I think sometimes this could just be abused by the way things are organized to present surprise, and keep the big reveal at the end, to make it more dramatic and more commercial. And I felt that at least animation was not pretending to be real, because it was the point of view of the person who was doing the drawing and animation. This isn't to say that all documentaries which are not animated—which is most of them—are dishonest. There are those, like the Maysles brothers in the US, or Raymond Depardon in France, who are extremely honest and ethical. It takes a deep honesty to do that. Some other filmmakers who do documentary use manipulation to dramatize the work and I was against that, especially when I started this project.

NOTEBOOK: One of the things that's charming in the film is the way that you admit mistakes and things that haven't worked and

so I think the audience gets a sense that they can trust you because you're prepared to admit when things haven't gone to plan.

GONDRIY: Of course there is the problem of different tongues with Noam, but I think it helped me with my lack of knowledge of the subject: I have an excuse in a way because I don't speak the English language very well. And when I have a conversation with somebody, I really dislike having to pretend to understand when I'm lost. I prefer to stop the flow of the conversation and ask for this word or that word to be explained to me—

At this point the flow of the conversation was interrupted when my phone went dead. I plugged it in and called back.

NOTEBOOK: I wanted to ask how you worked with the rest of your animation team.

GONDRIY: Well, to be honest, there's not really an animation team. I mean, I have two animators helping me at the end, most of the drawing and animation I did myself. That's why it looks a bit clumsy at times, but I really wanted to do a personal project. I had no production to start with, of course I used Partizan Productions to finish the film, but most of the film I did on my own. I didn't want to ask for money or explain what I wanted to do, I just wanted complete freedom to do it.

NOTEBOOK: You obviously love the home-made aesthetic...

GONDRIY: Yes, but especially in this case it's not necessarily my taste, it's more by necessity. Because I don't know how to work the computer to make animation, and the Bolex, the mechanical camera I used, I had this for 25 years and I know exactly how it works and it never failed me. So it's just the most natural way for me to express myself. Of course it looks old-fashioned now, because it's a camera that was made maybe fifty years ago, but it still works as well now. It's not being nostalgic... Let's say you want to do a billboard. And instead of taking a picture into Photoshop to compose it, you take a brush and painting and you make it like that. It's a different way of expression, it doesn't necessarily mean it's from nostalgia.

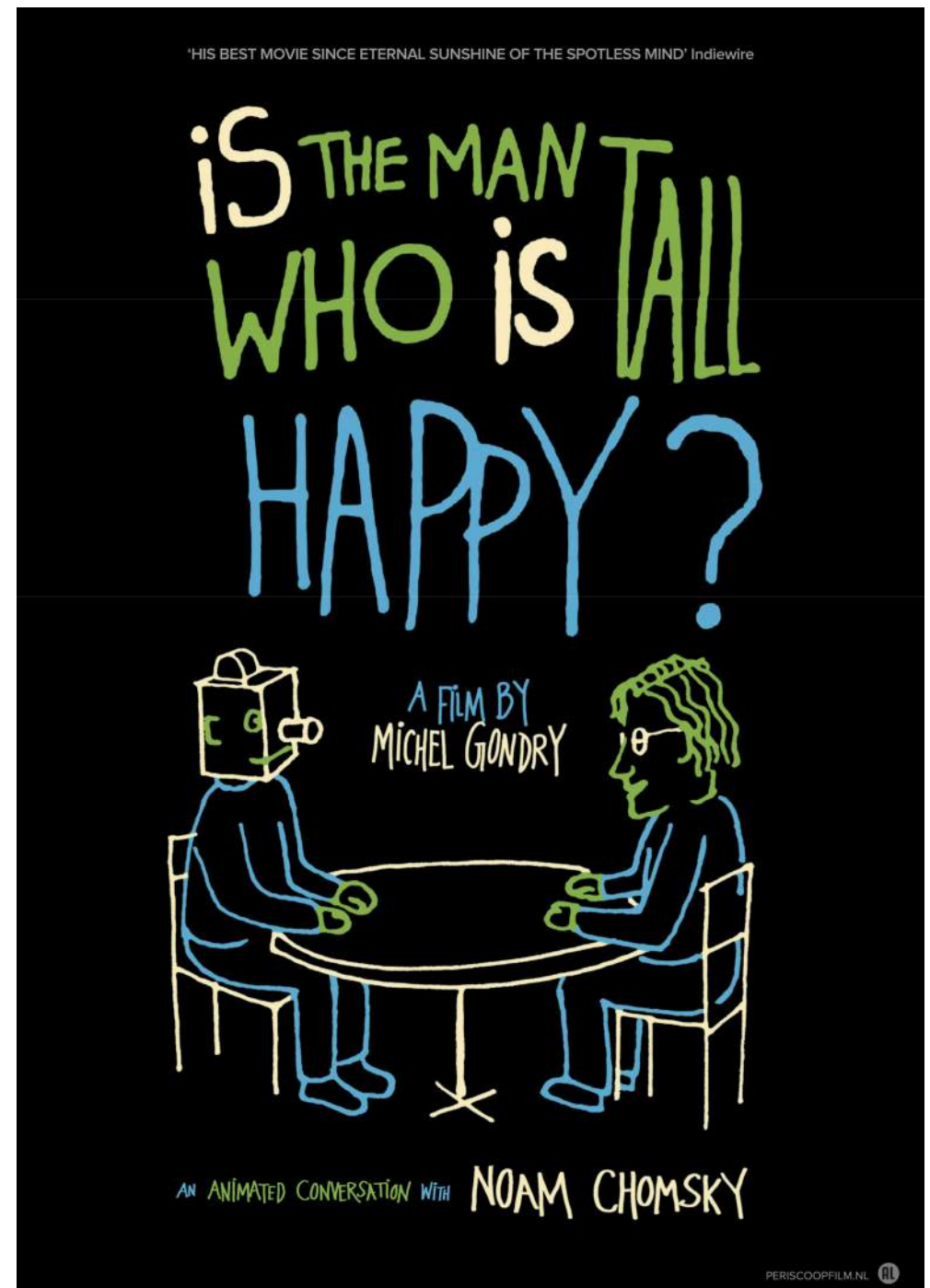
NOTEBOOK: It must have been refreshing to work this way when you were also making a Hollywood movie.

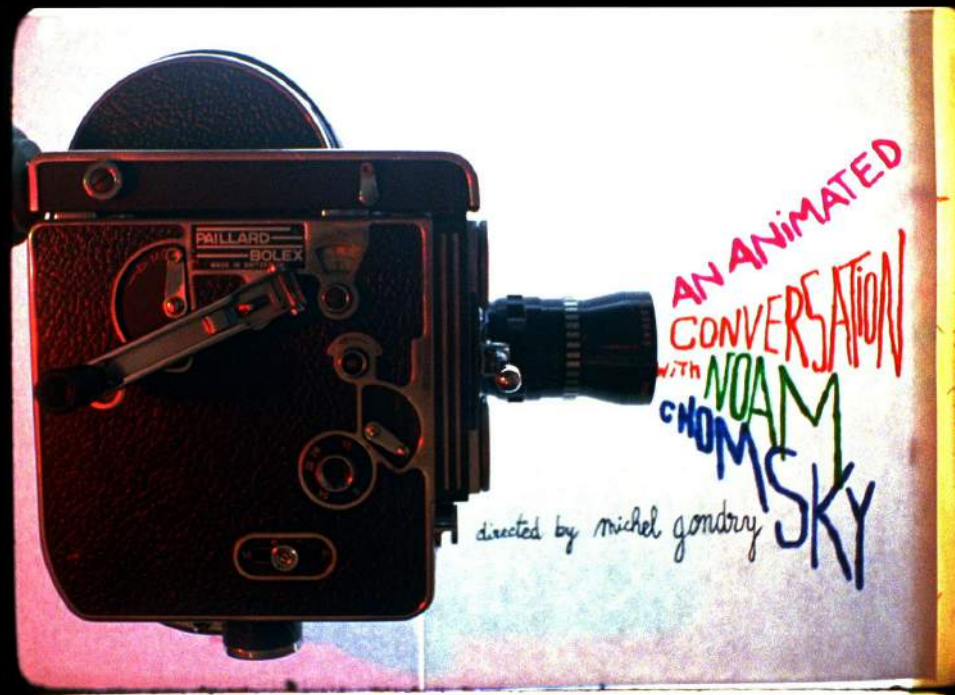
GONDRY: Yes, completely. When I was editing *The Green Hornet* it was very stressful and frustrating at times, and I would go home, put my pajamas on, and my cameras and lightbox and paper was all ready in my room, and it would be like holidays. Sometimes I would play Noam's voice when I was drawing, or I could play a book on tape, and that was really great. I played a lot of Russian novels. To me it was exactly like playing a video game is for other people. I have the same excitement. Also, when I finished playing, I had something which had been built.

NOTEBOOK: There's a subplot in the film about you trying to finish the film in time for Chomsky to see it. Has he seen the film now, and what did he think?

GONDRY: Yes, he has seen the film many times and he really likes it. It really made me happy because he never goes to a movie theatre, I think he went three or four times to see this movie. I made him sit next to me. It really made me happy that he liked it. I think it was my work, my interpretation of his thinking, so he feels he's watching my work. He never watches documentaries about him because he doesn't care to see himself.

Notebook is a digital magazine of international cinema and film culture. <https://mubi.com/notebook>





Credits

Director:	Michel Gondry
Screenwriter:	Michel Gondry
Cast:	Michel Gondry, Noam Chomsky
Cinematographers:	John Gianvito, Paul Turano
Editor:	Sophie Reine, Adam M. Weber
Production:	Raffi Adlan, Georges Bermann, Julie Fong, Michel Gondry
Music:	Howard Skempton
Sound editor:	Gautier de Faultrier
Sound:	Brent Lestage, Aurélien Guégan, Haydée Parcollet
Animation:	Michel Gondry, Timothée Lemoine, Valérie Pirson