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Bringing 'Where the Wild Things Are' to the Screen

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In February 2008, a blogger named Devin Faraci led off a post on the Hollywood news site CHUD (Cinematic Happenings Under Development) with a solemn proclamation: "We're on the verge of losing a movie." He was referring to "Where the Wild Things Are," a big-budget adaptation of Maurice Sendak's classic picture book for children. According to Faraci, executives at Warner Brothers had deemed an early cut of the film "too weird and 'too scary' " and were now contemplating extensive personnel changes and reshoots. The news rippled through Hollywood's online underground. At Slashfilm.com, it generated 88 reader responses. At Firstshowing.net, another 25. Some readers pleaded with the studio: "Please please please follow through with the original." Others took a more authoritative tone: "Do not turn 'Where the Wild Things Are' into something common and forgettable!" There were calls for fan solidarity and several threats of boycott, or worse: "I will personally face-punch anyone who stands in the way of this film being released." Such variations aside, though, a common theme emerged: "Jonze is brilliant"; "Jonze is an artist"; "Trust Jonze!"

Spike Jonze, who is 39, has directed just two feature-length films, "Being John Malkovich" and "Adaptation." Both were critical and commercial successes, praised for their originality and absurd humor, and yet they represent only a small fraction of the work that Jonze's fans admire. He is part of the first generation of filmmakers to come up through the music-video world — in the seven years between 1995 and 2001, he was named best director three times at the MTV Video Music Awards — and his inventive, adventurous style is evident not just in the Hollywood movies he has worked on but also in his videos, skateboard-company promos and TV commercials for companies like Ikea, Nike and the Gap. These miniatures, which Jonze considers to be of no less artistic merit than his longer works, will be celebrated next month as part of a 10-day retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, an unlikely honor for a filmmaker with his background. He never went to film school — or, for that matter, to college. When "Star Wars" had its first run in the movie theaters he went to see it eight times, but he didn't see "Citizen Kane" until he was well into his 20s, he told me, and he has never seen a single movie by Howard Hawks or John Ford.

Jonze avoids Hollywood, preferring to stick close to the fashionably scruffy neighborhoods where he lives and skateboards (Los Feliz in Los Angeles and the Lower East Side in New York). Even so, the Hollywood establishment has largely embraced him. In 2000, "Being John Malkovich" was nominated for three major Academy Awards, including best director. Two years later, Jonze was an executive producer for "Jackass: The Movie," a desultory collection of stunts and pranks that was made for just $5 million and became an unexpected hit, ultimately grossing more than $79 million at the box office. In 2003, "Adaptation" garnered four more Academy Award nominations and one Oscar (Chris Cooper's, for best supporting actor). Jonze, it

seemed, was that rare breed, an American filmmaker who had managed to find mainstream success without doing anyone else's bidding. And then, that summer, he decided to make his first big studio movie.

"Where the Wild Things Are" is arguably of a piece with Jonze's earlier works; it features moments of transcendent beauty and moments of profound silliness. Just as in "Jackass," characters smash things and throw things at one another. But it is clearly Jonze's most personal film to date, and it is also his most ambitious. To bring Sendak's characters to the screen, Jonze used a complicated mix of computer animation and giant monster suits. He shot in the forests of southern Australia, which required convening a crew of more than 150. The costume department alone was larger than the entire crew of "Being John Malkovich." Variety put the film's budget at $80 million, and other estimates go as high as $100 million. Jonze's next most expensive film, "Adaptation," cost only $19 million.

"Where the Wild Things Are," in other words, cost about as much to make as did "Shrek" and "Madagascar," and yet in almost every other way it represents a sharp departure from those family-friendly blockbusters. Most kids' movies are brightly, mouthwateringly colorful; Jonze favored a mushy-vegetable palate of greens and browns. Most kids' movies have a clearly defined plot and an unambiguous moral lesson; Jonze's film has about as much plot as an episode of "Jackass." Most kids' movies crackle with one-liners; in "Where the Wild Things Are," the characters talk over one another and spend a lot of time stumbling over their own words as they try to articulate their feelings. Jonze told me that one of his models for the dialogue was the work of John Cassavetes, which may be exciting news if you're a fan of avant-garde cinema, but might not sound quite as good if you're the president of Warner Brothers. Cassavetes, who once said that he found scenes with crisp dialogue "corny and boring," is arguably one of the most brilliant American filmmakers of all time, but his movies never made much money, and he was effectively banished from Hollywood by the time he was 40.

Last winter, I spent an afternoon with Jonze at a postproduction studio in West Hollywood, where he had sequestered himself with members of his trusted creative team, a group he referred to as his "pack." Jonze has worked with many of the same people for almost his entire career, including Lance Acord, his director of photography, and his production designer K. K. Barrett. Many of them had no feature-film experience before Jonze plucked them (as he himself had been plucked) from the margins of the industry. "I like hiring people based on a feeling — this person gets it — rather than what they've done in the past," he explained. When I visited, the newest member of the pack was Sonny Gerasimowicz, a 36-year-old art-school dropout Jonze had hired first to work on the design of the creature suits and later to wear one of them in the film. At a recent office party, Jonze decided that it would be fun to try to throw Gerasimowicz through a wall. A Gerasimowicz-size hole in the Sheetrock attested to the success of that endeavor.

Along one wall of Jonze's office was a bookshelf lined with DVDs that he referred to while making the movie — "The Black Stallion," "E.T." and "The Red Balloon," along with various dirt-bike and skateboard videos. Jonze was perched on a couch with a copy of Sendak's book on his lap. "It's amazing how few words there are but how strong the sentences are," he said, slowly turning the pages. "You can just stare at the drawings and take in all the detail." Jonze has bright blue eyes, a bony nose that twists slightly to one side and a skateboarder's spare physique. From the ankles up, he dresses like a 1950s studio director, in tailored suits of gray and tan, but then you look at his feet and see he's wearing skateboard sneakers. He speaks in a small, halting voice and sprinkles his sentences with words like "cool" and "awesome." Although he has no

children of his own, his feeling for what it's like to be a child seems to be stronger and more immediate than that of most people his age, and children are often drawn to him. Catherine Keener, who was nominated for an Oscar for her work in "Being John Malkovich" and who plays a divorced mother in "Where the Wild Things Are," told me that her 10-year-old son, Clyde, once asked her why Jonze didn't live with his parents; apparently Clyde didn't realize that Jonze was an adult.

In Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are," a child hammers some nails into a wall, is sent to his room without any supper and finds solace and wild fun on an island of monsters who pronounce him king. Considering Jonze's own propensity toward mischief, it was tempting to see his fight with the studio (which, by the time I sat down with him, was more than a year old) as an embodiment of the eternal struggle between freedom-seeking child and authoritarian parent. Jonze chose a different family metaphor. "It's like the studio was expecting a boy, and I gave birth to a girl," he told me. "And now they're learning to love and accept their daughter."

The studio, for its part, was doing its best to give the impression that it had fully embraced Jonze's vision. "This is an incredibly personal and intimate movie, and that's going to work with all audiences," Sue Kroll, the head of marketing at Warner Brothers, assured me. But observers both inside and outside of Hollywood remained skeptical. One former high-placed Warner Brothers executive I spoke to said that the studio had, in recent years, become less hospitable to unconventional directors like Jonze. Faced with a strange beast like "Where the Wild Things Are," he explained, Warner's executives didn't always know what to do. "The studio is set up to be a big-movie, big-star, big-spectacle money-making machine," he said, "and it views anything other than that with enormous trepidation."

For a time, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the prospects for unorthodox moviemaking in Hollywood appeared promising. Prompted by the phenomenal success of "Pulp Fiction" in 1994, the big Hollywood studios tentatively opened their gates (and their wallets) to a new generation of "independent" directors, among them Jonze and his friends David O. Russell and Alexander Payne. In 2003, when Jonze was just starting work on "Where the Wild Things Are," Warner Brothers established a boutique division that went on to put out movies like "Before Sunset" and "Good Night, and Good Luck." But five years later, Warner Brothers Independent, like many other prestige units in Hollywood, was shut down by its parent studio, and "Where the Wild Things Are" began to feel a little like a relic, an artifact from some freewheeling, irretrievable past. When I sat down with Jonze, I'd just seen a rough cut of the movie, and although I'd been expecting something unusual, I hadn't quite been prepared for either the Cassavetes-speak or the lack of any clear conflict or resolution. I told Jonze I'd imagined something more along the lines of a traditional children's fantasy film, something like "Harry Potter," for example.

He looked at me as if I'd let him down. "It's in the visual language of, like, some sort of fantasy film, and it is a fantasy film to some degree," he acknowledged, "but the tone of it is its own tone. We wanted it all to feel true to a 9-year-old and not have some big movie speech where a 9-year-old is suddenly reciting the wisdom of the sage." He hadn't set out to make a children's movie, he said, so much as to accurately depict childhood. "Everything we did, all the decisions that we made, were to try to capture the feeling of what it is to be 9."

When Spike Jonze was 9, he was Adam Spiegel, a shy, sensitive kid growing up in Bethesda, Md., a suburb

of Washington. His father, Art Spiegel III, the grandson of the founder of the Spiegel catalog company, lived in Manhattan, where he ran a multimillion-dollar health care consulting firm. When Adam was 2, his parents divorced, and his mother took Adam and his older sister first to New Jersey, then to Philadelphia, before finally settling in Bethesda. At home, Jonze would later write, discipline was “erratic.” At school, Adam fared poorly. “What they were teaching didn’t interest me,” he told me.

What did interest him was BMX, or bicycle motocross. The sport originated in the late 1960s, when 12-year-old boys began racing their dirt bikes on motorcycle tracks, though by the time Adam bought his first bike, BMX was less about racing and more about emulating what skateboarders were doing — riding on half-pipes and quarter-pipes, doing tricks in the street. Adam, by many accounts, was a very good trick rider, and he wound up with a job at a bike shop in a local strip mall, selling grips and cranks to other teenagers. Except for the 19-year-old owner’s family members, who took occasional shifts behind the register, all of the employees were under 21. They all wore surf shorts, and they all had nicknames: Tinkerbell, Wild Bill, Rootgirl, Sweetness. Because of his unruly hair, Adam became Spike.

In the summer of 1987, the day after his senior-year final exams, Jonze and a friend packed their belongings into the trunk of a beat-up brown Plymouth Colt and struck out for the West Coast. The college-application process had not gone as well as Jonze had hoped. Of the six colleges to which he’d applied, only Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, accepted him. The top film and art schools — U.C.L.A., CalArts, N.Y.U. — turned him down. Not that he particularly minded. “I was only going to go to college because that’s what I thought you were supposed to do,” he told me not long ago. Fortunately, Jonze had a backup plan. In high school, he wrote a handful of freelance articles for Freestylin’, a BMX magazine, and when he and his friend reached California, they steered the Colt to Torrance, the industrial city half an hour south of Hollywood where the magazine had its editorial offices. The editors, Andy Jenkins and Mark Lewman, were 21 and 19. They had been looking to hire someone new — not a professional journalist but a BMX kid like themselves, a young person who knew the sport and loved it. They chose Jonze.

One afternoon in February, Jonze drove me around Torrance in a white 1969 Porsche that he borrowed from Lance Acord, his cinematographer. (When Jonze is by himself, he gets around on a Vespa.) He was dressed stylishly, if a bit raffishly, in an untucked lavender dress shirt and a gray tie with lilac stripes. There was a skateboard in the backseat. For most of the ride, he was chatty but not particularly forthcoming, asking nearly as many questions as he answered. We turned into the sprawling industrial park where the editorial offices of Freestylin’ were once located, and he slowed the car and grew quiet. A sign on a warehouse said “Global Communication Semiconductors Inc.” Jonze pointed to the sun-bleached concrete building where he and his friends used to work. “There were so many amazing people, and we had such an amazing time, but it’s the most banal place,” he said. Behind the warehouse, Jonze told me, was the low-rise, low-rent apartment complex where he lived after arriving in Torrance, sharing a living room with two other teenagers and a drum set. The carpet was spotted with grease stains from people constantly tearing apart their bikes. Kids drifted in and out, crashing on the floor for weeks at a time. (“There was a guy living in the dining room for a while,” Jenkins told me.) In the mornings, Jonze and his roommates would throw their skateboards over the wall in a back alley and glide to the office through a couple of parking lots. After 5 p.m., the members of the editorial team — none of them older than 21 — had the company warehouse to themselves. “We had a refrigerator full of film,” Jonze told me. “We’d skate ramps. We’d build

rails. We had everything. It was, like, way better than any college."

Although Jonze had been hired at Freestylin' as a writer, by the end of his first year he was mainly taking photographs. "He was always experimenting," Lewman told me, "climbing on top of something high or hanging out the door of a van or lighting a fire or wrapping somebody in tinfoil and shooting him with flashes." Jonze and his friends started a skateboarding magazine called Homeboy, and it was through Homeboy that Jonze met Mark Gonzales, a famously innovative local professional skateboarder. Jonze idolized Gonz, as he was known. "He just looked at the world in a different way," Jonze told me.

When Gonzales started his own skateboard company, Blind, he hired Jonze to make a promotional video. For all skate culture's reverence for rebellion and self-expression, skate videos, which were generally commissioned by skateboard manufacturers and sold at skate shops, tended to stick to a rigid formula; they showed the company's sponsored skaters performing one trick after another. Jonze's video was different. Many of the qualities that would come to characterize his work — the roguish sensibility, the technical ingenuity, the formal originality — first appeared in this 24-minute video, titled "Video Days." It was the only skate video, certainly, to depict a carload of skateboarders consuming what appeared to be vast quantities of Bacardi rum before plunging into a canyon. (To get the shot, Jonze placed a brick on the gas pedal.) Among skateboarders and within the alternative cultural circles in Los Angeles and New York that admired the skateboard ethic, the video was hailed as a minor masterpiece. "We were amazed by it," Mike Diamond, a member of the Beastie Boys, told me. "Instead of a perfunctory sports video, there was this whole imaginative narrative, which, at the time, people hadn't really done."

One day, in the parking lot at a Sonic Youth show, Gonzales walked up to Kim Gordon, the bassist for the band, and pressed a copy of "Video Days" into her hand. Six months later, Gordon hired Jonze to contribute some skate footage to the video for the band's song "100%." Jonze's profile grew, and Satellite, a small music-video production company, invited him to join their roster of directors. By this point, he had started yet another magazine with Jenkins and Lewman, this one called Dirt, a boys-only spin-off of the irreverent girls' magazine Sassy. Jonze photographed the Beastie Boys for the cover of the debut issue. The band had recently built their own recording studio near Griffith Park with money that their record label had set aside for renting studio space, and Jonze was deeply impressed. "They were operating outside the record label, doing whatever they wanted to do," he told me. "They would just have an idea and make it." After Dirt folded in 1994, the Beastie Boys asked him to shoot a video for "Sabotage," the first single off their new album.

Jonze and the band members had been spending time at an apartment in Los Feliz, where the band was hanging out and cultivating an appreciation for afternoon cop shows like "Starsky and Hutch" and "The Streets of San Francisco." One day Jonze showed up at the apartment wearing a white tank-top and a gold chain with a freshly grown mustache and his hair slicked back. According to Jonze, it was the combination of that 1970s outfit and those 1970s television reruns that inspired him and the band to create their very own three-minute 1970s-style police drama. They decided to shoot everything illegally, without permits. The band members dressed as plainclothes detectives in fake mustaches, polyester suits and aviator shades. Adam Yauch (another Beastie Boy) and Jonze did all the stunt driving. By the end of the two-day shoot, they had destroyed two cameras — the first, an $84,000 Arriflex, while speeding around a bend with the camera bolted to the hood, the second while trying to get an underwater shot with the camera protected only by a

Ziploc bag. “We did it the way we did everything,” Jonze said. “Not necessarily the right way, but our way.” In 1999, MTV named “Sabotage” the seventh-best music video of all time.

“Sabotage” played on MTV in heavy rotation in 1994, and at the MTV Video Music Awards it was nominated for best video and best director. It didn’t win, but along with a few other Jonze videos, it captured the attention of John B. Carls, a producer who had just started a family-film production company with Maurice Sendak. Carls and Sendak had signed a production deal with TriStar Pictures and its parent company, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and they were searching for someone to adapt “Where the Wild Things Are” into a movie. They had also bought the rights to several other children’s properties, among them “Harold and the Purple Crayon,” an acclaimed 1955 picture book by one of Sendak’s mentors, Crockett Johnson.

“Harold and the Purple Crayon” tells the story of a boy who lives in a world of his own imagining; whatever he draws becomes his reality. It was in many ways the perfect vehicle for Jonze. “Spike is Harold,” Vince Landay, Jonze’s longtime producer, told me. “He’s an imaginative kid who for one reason or another has been allowed to fully explore his imagination.” Carls wanted Jonze to direct the movie, and he arranged a meeting between Jonze and Sendak. In spite of their 42-year age difference, the two men hit it off. “They’re both still very much connected to that child self,” Carls told me. “There’s a valve in all of us that shuts itself off between childhood and adolescence and adulthood. With Maurice, there’s a leaky valve. Spike is the same way. He sees the world as a big playground.”

Jonze spent more than a year on the “Purple Crayon” project, supervising a team of storyboard artists and production designers. He planned to combine live action and animation in a way that had never been tried before. “In the third act,” Carls recalled, “you had a live-action boy riding an animated rocket out into real space where he battled live-action characters to rescue a real space mission.” But two months before principal photography was scheduled to start, TriStar pulled out. When I asked Carls about this, he told me that there’d been a regime change at the studio and that Jonze’s vision was a bit too “bold” for the new executives.

When I put the same question to Jonze, he shrugged. “They didn’t like my ideas, and they thought it would cost too much.” The project’s demise, Jonze told me, actually brought him an “odd sense of relief.” TriStar had been pressuring him to make the script jokier, he said, and he’d given in to the point where he barely recognized his own work. “I realized only then that it happens millimeter by millimeter,” he told me. “If you compromise what you’re trying to do just a little bit, you’ll end up compromising a little more the next day or the next week, and when you lift your head you’re suddenly really far away from where you’re trying to go.”

As soon as the project was dropped, Jonze went back to doing what he’d been doing all along: making quick, cheap, whimsical music videos on his own terms, without any studio kibitzers meddling with his ideas. Again and again, Jonze reinvented the form, inserting the members of Weezer into old “Happy Days” footage, hiring child actors to act out a Notorious B.I.G. song, creating a Busby Berkeley-style musical dance number for Bjork. Movie offers began pouring in, mostly for studio comedies like a sequel to “Ace Ventura: Pet Detective,” but Jonze rejected them one after another. In 1997, a producer named Sandy Stern called him and complained: “I’m sending you all my scripts and you keep turning them down. Isn’t there anything you want to make?” There was one script, Jonze said: a bizarre piece of science fiction by an unknown TV

writer named Charlie Kaufman. Getting it greenlighted would be no small feat. It was about a self-loathing out-of-work puppeteer married to a woman with a quasi-erotic relationship with a pet chimpanzee who gets a job as a filing clerk on the seventh-and-a-half floor of a New York office building and discovers, behind a file cabinet, a portal into the actor John Malkovich's mind. Also, it required John Malkovich to play John Malkovich.

One day in December 1997, Malkovich told me, he got a call at his home in the South of France from Francis Ford Coppola, whose daughter, Sofia, had been dating Jonze for a few years. Coppola asked Malkovich to go to Paris and meet with Jonze. Malkovich made the trip, but the meeting didn't exactly go smoothly. Jonze was nervous, and, as usual, he had some trouble finding words to express his thoughts. "He mentioned some projects he'd worked on, and they were interesting," Malkovich told me, "but none of them showed that he was necessarily well-suited to make this film." After about an hour, Malkovich asked Jonze if he was American. "I thought he was Czech," Malkovich told me. "He had such a funny way of expressing himself. It sounded like he'd learned English as a second language." Nevertheless, Malkovich said, Jonze was "funny and charming and strange, and he seemed to desperately want to do this film."

"Being John Malkovich" went into production in 1998 with financing from PolyGram. The first scenes to be filmed took place in the basement apartment of the melancholic puppeteer, played by John Cusack. To capture the appropriate sense of gloom, Jonze and Acord lit the set mainly with ordinary household bulbs and completely dispensed with the Hollywood custom of using fill-lights on the actors' faces. "The footage couldn't have been more depressing," Vince Landay, a producer on the film, told me. "And here PolyGram had been sold on this wacky comedy. So by the time they started reacting to the dailies — it's handheld, there's low light — they were freaking out." After a few more disagreements, PolyGram threatened to shut down the production. Then, in the spring of 1998, the company merged with Universal. New executives came in. By the time anyone got around to checking on Jonze and his team, they'd already been editing for almost a year. Jonze had made the movie he wanted to make.

"Being John Malkovich" opened in September 1999 to glowing reviews. It was a big year for Jonze. In addition to "Being John Malkovich," he appeared alongside George Clooney and Ice Cube in "Three Kings." He won three MTV Video Music Awards, including best director, for Fatboy Slim's "Praise You," a strange and hilarious six-minute fake documentary Jonze shot with a cheap handheld camera outside a movie theater in Westwood. He helped propel "Jackass" onto MTV. And in June he married into Hollywood royalty, wedding Sofia Coppola at her famous father's vineyard in the Napa Valley. To Jonze's surprise as much as anyone else's, he had become, at 29, one of the most sought-after and well-connected directors in Hollywood.

Sendak, meanwhile, was still searching for someone to direct "Where the Wild Things Are." He and Carls had spent about two years developing the project at Universal Studios with two different directors, but in the end they weren't happy with either approach. They asked Jonze if he was interested. Though he loved the book, he didn't see how he could expand a 10-sentence story into an hour-and-a-half-long movie. As Jonze put it to me: "How do you adapt a poem?"

Sendak, who is now 81, wrote "Where the Wild Things Are" in 1963, when he was 34. He had already written and illustrated five highly regarded children's books, all of which drew in one way or another on his

childhood, which by his own account was lonely and bleak. He was raised in Brooklyn by Jewish immigrants — a mother who suffered from depression and a garment-worker father who was endlessly regaling his three children with horror stories about life in the shtetl. “Where the Wild Things Are,” as Sendak told a reporter for The New Yorker in 1966, was a “personal exorcism,” and Max, the boy who runs away from home to rule over the wild things, was his “truest creation.”

The book was published to much controversy, with many librarians and reviewers pronouncing it too scary for children. A writer for one educational journal cautioned against leaving it “where a sensitive child might find it to pore over in the twilight.” What worried adults weren’t just the wild things, with their unreadable expressions and steak-knife teeth, but also the boy, Max, with his wild behavior, his wild emotions, his refusal to listen to his mother. “I’ll eat you up!” he shouts at her — and soon kids were eating up the book. It has now sold more than 10 million copies.

Growing up, Jonze told me, he completely identified with Max. In 2001 and 2002, while filming “Adaptation,” Jonze would read the book at night in his Los Feliz bedroom. “I’d read it and put it down next to my bed and think about it,” he said. Every once in a while, Sendak would call and they’d talk about work, art, Mickey Mouse, their lives. But whenever the subject of a “Wild Things” movie came up, Jonze told me, his answer was the same: “I love it in this form, and I don’t want to add something on that seems extraneous.”

Then one night in 2003, Jonze opened the book again. He had been going through a difficult time. After more than a decade together, he and Sofia Coppola were splitting up. He found himself contemplating the wild things anew. “What would they look like?” he wondered. “What would they talk like?” He decided they should talk like people, not like monsters. They were “complex emotional beings,” he told me, with wild emotions roiling inside them. Then he began to think of the wild things as actually being wild emotions, embodying all the intense things children — and grown-ups — sometimes feel. “I felt that I could write infinitely about that, because that’s so much of what we are,” he told me. Excited, Jonze scribbled down some notes and called Sendak. At some point during what he described to me as “10 minutes of rambling,” he managed to get across the essential piece of information: he wanted to do the movie.

Jonze asked Dave Eggers, the novelist and nonfiction writer, to write the screenplay with him; they had met a few years earlier after Eggers wrote Jonze a fan letter. In 2004, his divorce from Coppola finalized, Jonze moved to San Francisco, where Eggers lived. The two of them wrote in Jonze’s house. For inspiration, they’d watch “The Wizard of Oz.” To unwind, they’d ride around the house on skateboards and shoot each other with BB guns. Sendak had instructed Jonze to make the movie personal, so Jonze gave Max a single mom. He and Eggers spent hours talking about their childhoods and their families. Though they were creating a strange, allegorical fantasy, they wanted it to feel as true-to-life as possible.

With the script under way, Jonze and Landay began exploring the practical challenges of bringing the story to the screen. Jonze wanted the wild things to look like real creatures, dirty and feral, with bits of leaf and twig ground into their fur, and at the same time, he wanted to maintain the fantastic proportions of Sendak’s drawings. Jonze and Landay met with puppetmakers. “We went to Spielberg’s dinosaur guy; the Henson company,” Landay recalled. “Anybody who had half a brain in the creature world said: ‘You can’t do it. You want these creatures to have these giant heads, and you want them to run around and be as wild as

possible? You have to choose one or another.' "

In the spring of 2005, Jonze presented the script and his production ideas to Universal. The meeting didn't go well. One issue was the cost, but the bigger problem, according to Jonze, was with the script. As Eggers explained it to me, the executives were unhappy that there wasn't "any real easy plot arc: 'Let's go find the chalice! Where is it? Here are some people we meet along the way.' "

Universal decided to pass on the project, and Jonze began shopping his script to other studios. The head of production at Warner Brothers, Jeff Robinov, had recently had success transforming filmmakers generally considered to be on the independent end of the spectrum into directors of big-budget brand-name blockbusters; he had hired Christopher Nolan to direct "Batman Begins" and Alfonso Cuarón to direct "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban." Robinov saw Jonze as potentially fitting into the same mold. Jonze saw Robinov as an executive who would be supportive of his vision. They struck a deal, and a few months later, Jonze and his crew were on location in a fire-blackened forest in southern Australia.

The problems began almost immediately. In July 2006, less than six weeks before the start of shooting, the Henson-built monster suits arrived at the Melbourne soundstage where Jonze and his crew had set up their offices. "They were beautiful," Landay recalled. Then the actors climbed inside and began moving around. Right away, Jonze told me, he could see that the heads were absurdly heavy. Only one of the actors appeared able to walk in a straight line. A few of them called out from within their costumes that they felt like they were going to tip over. Jonze and Landay had no choice but to tell the Henson people to tear apart the 50-pound heads and remove the remote-controlled mechanical eyeballs. This meant that all the facial expressions would have to be generated in post-production, using computers.

At the conclusion of the four-month shoot in December 2006, Jonze told Warner Brothers he needed more money for additional photography. The executives replied that they'd first need to see a "director's cut." Usually, Robinov told me, when a studio asks for a director's cut, they expect it to be delivered in three months. Three months passed. Then another three months. "We spent a lot of time hunting through the footage trying to find that nuance that Spike wanted," Landay told me. Finally, in September 2007, Jonze screened a cut for executives at Warner Brothers. Robinov had concerns. "We felt that the movie was too slow," he told me. There was also "a question of intensity: Is it too intense for kids? Is the audience for the movie that we're making broad enough?" A test screening was convened in Pasadena, and some reactions were later posted on a blog. One viewer wrote, "I don't think it's for young children." Another claimed that some children in the audience began to cry and asked their parents to leave the theater.

The back-and-forth between Jonze and the studio over the next few months, Robinov told me, was "a rough process." He and Jonze had a series of "disagreements" about the movie's "tone and pacing and clarity." It was uncertain, he said, "whose cut of the picture and what cut of the picture would ultimately prevail." I asked if there was any truth to the rumor that he'd considered firing Jonze. "There wasn't a conversation about firing him per se," he replied. "We certainly reached a place in talking about the movie where I can imagine it would have been easier for Spike to walk away, and it would have been easier for me to be talking to someone else, but we never got there."

Jonze wouldn't talk about the rift, but Megan Baltimore, a former roommate from Torrance who remains

one of his closest friends, told me: “I think he got in a pretty dark place at the time. I think he got to the point where he was spending more energy in the battle than on making the movie, and I think it was defeating for him.”

In March 2008, Jonze turned in a revised script. He hadn’t made major changes — he’d removed one scene and added two — but Warner Brothers acquiesced, giving him the money he needed to finish the film. “We felt that the changes Spike made in the movie really addressed the majority of the issues,” Robinov told me.

Vince Landay told me, “In the back of my mind, I wondered whether they were still hoping maybe we would turn it into ‘Shrek.’ ”

In “Adaptation,” a story about the impossibility of telling stories, a depressive screenwriter played by Nicolas Cage struggles to adapt a book without a plot and spends the whole movie trying to escape from Hollywood’s confining rules of narrative, which require that there be crisis and resolution and unexpected reversals and a character who by the end of the movie is changed. In desperation, Cage takes a seminar from a famous screenwriting guru, and during the question-and-answer session, he sheepishly asks for help. “What if the writer is attempting to create a story where nothing much happens,” Cage says, “where people don’t change, they don’t have any epiphanies, they struggle and are frustrated, and nothing is resolved?” Wouldn’t that be more “a reflection of the real world”?

The guru, played by Brian Cox, flies into a rage. “You write a screenplay without conflict or crisis, you’ll bore your audience to tears!”

In Hollywood, successful children’s movies operate on rules straight from the Joseph Campbell playbook. Heroes take journeys, they go on quests, they get lost and try to find their way home. Their motivations are precisely stated, their obstacles clearly identified. In “Shrek,” an ogre sets off on a quest to save a swamp and a princess; in “Spy Kids,” a brother and sister set off on a quest to save their parents. In “Where the Wild Things Are,” Max leaves home as well, but not on a quest. He sees his mother kiss a man who is not his father, and in the next scene, he’s standing atop a kitchen table, arms folded across his chest, shouting, “Woman, feed me!” The outburst escalates into a screaming match, Max bursts into tears and then he’s running — running nowhere in particular, just running, face flushed, tears streaking his cheeks. There are no princesses awaiting him, no swamps in need of rescue, only his frustrated, mixed-up emotions driving him onward. Max is confused about the way he feels, and that confusion, for Jonze, was exactly what it felt like at times to be 9.

Although there were plenty of factors that contributed to the movie’s endless delays, what caused Jonze the most grief with the studio seems to have been his insistence on shunning a more traditional narrative in favor of directly conveying, through moments and images, those raw, untamed feelings. The blogs that reported on Jonze’s disagreement with Robinov and other Warner executives tended to frame the dispute in familiar terms, as a conflict between Hollywood’s love of all things light and an auteur’s “dark” vision. Really, though, the quarrel was about something more unusual in Hollywood than darkness versus light, something more central to Jonze’s identity: the question of plot versus attitude.

Jonze’s attitude, much more than the ability to spin an enthralling tale, is at the heart of who he is and why he matters to people. His music videos don’t tell stories; they capture a feeling. “Jackass” is probably the

most successful plotless movie in American film history. The narratives in “Adaptation” and “Being John Malkovich” were formally groundbreaking, to be sure, but in both cases it was mostly Charlie Kaufman who supplied them. What Jonze contributed to those films — and what earned him most of the acclaim he received for them — was an attitude, a feel: a deadpan sense of humor, a do-it-yourself production style, an eye for naturalistic detail in everything from the set design to the performances. In nearly all of his works (as in the Torrance of his youth) the realistic and the banal merge with the fantastic and the extreme. To borrow a phrase that Sendak once used to describe his best-known creation, Max, Jonze inhabits a world in which one can “skip from fantasy to reality in the conviction that both exist.”

In Jonze’s video for Fatboy Slim’s song “Weapon of Choice,” Christopher Walken does a little soft-shoe in a hotel lobby, and then suddenly, without any warning at all, flies into the air and starts bouncing off the walls. In the lyrical skate video “Fully Flared,” a skateboarder leaps off a graffiti-covered staircase in super-slow motion, and just as he touches down, the staircase explodes, sending him skittering across the ground with frightening force. There are no clear motivations driving the people in these videos, no explanations for their absurd predicaments, and when you watch them, you might wonder whether Jonze’s own creative decisions were motivated by anything other than an impulse. An implicit question precedes his artistic choices: Wouldn’t it be cool if . . . ? Wouldn’t it be cool if we made Christopher Walken fly? Wouldn’t it be awesome if we rigged a staircase with blast caps?

That sensibility pervades “Where the Wild Things Are” too, in the monsters’ propensity for jumping 20 feet in the air and crashing into trees, in the astounding skyscraper fortress they build out of logs and branches. And for some potential viewers, the sheer coolness of those moments will likely be enough to transcend what others might see as the movie’s narrative shortcomings. In July, Warner Brothers screened 10 minutes of the movie at Comic-Con, the annual gathering of comic-book artists, science-fiction authors, movie executives and assorted nerds in San Diego. Rapturous blogging ensued. Devin Faraci of CHUD wrote: “It is not acceptable for a grown man to be getting teary-eyed at out-of-context snippets of a movie played at a comic-book convention. And yet there I was, sitting in Hall H, fighting back tears.”

Peter Sciretta and David Chen, editors at Slashfilm.com, were so excited by the footage that instead of sitting down to type the usual post, they just turned on their video camera, stood in front of it and gushed. “I’m actually getting chills right now just thinking about the film,” Chen said, looking a little embarrassed. “It was really one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.”

Sciretta, wearing a “Ghostbusters” T-shirt, agreed. “It’s so insanely crazy and awesome and so untraditional,” he said. “It feels like a movie that was written by a child who knew what he was doing but had never seen a movie before.” The fact that Sciretta’s compliment would sound in another context like a criticism is telling: people who hate the movie will probably say that the story was poorly crafted, and people who love it will praise its childlike quality.

“Where the Wild Things Are” seems sure to appeal to the sensibilities of a certain cohort of urban young adults — the type who read comic-book novels and wear skateboard sneakers; who might concur with a note I saw one day scrawled on a legal pad in Jonze’s office: “There is no difference between childhood and adulthood.” Finding an audience beyond that demographic, though, may well pose a challenge to Warner’s marketing department, which is trying to position the movie as a family-friendly film for kids of all ages.

They have adopted a broad-based strategy to lure children into the theater, buying advertising on Nickelodeon and the Cartoon Network. They'll also be making a special effort to reach what one executive described to me as "hip, tastemaker" kids: Ugg will be selling a special "Where the Wild Things Are" kids' boot, and Urban Outfitters has a collection of "Where the Wild Things Are" T-shirts and shadow puppets.

Jonze's team, meanwhile, has been pursuing its own marketing strategy, one not particularly oriented toward children. Jonze directed a short documentary about Maurice Sendak that will be shown on HBO. Eggers wrote a novelization of the movie and is publishing it (with a fur cover) through his own publishing company, McSweeney's. There's a line of "Wild Things" skateboards, a soundtrack album by Karen O of the art-rock group Yeah Yeah Yeahs and branded "Wild Things" jewelry for sale at a boutique near Jonze's Lower East Side apartment.

"Where the Wild Things Are" will open on Oct. 16. A week later, Jonze will turn 40, having devoted most of his 30s to bringing it to the screen. As invested as he is in the movie's success, it's not hard to imagine that he'll be happy to have it behind him. "I don't think he wanted to spend six or seven years of his life working on one movie," Megan Baltimore told me. Indeed, despite the elaborate demands of marketing a big-budget film, he has already returned to his usual work routine. Earlier this year, he directed a couple of commercials for a Japanese cellphone company, in Japanese, starring Brad Pitt and a sumo wrestler. He made a hallucinatory 10-minute movie with the rapper Kanye West, set for release on iTunes this month. And he just finished shooting a short film about a romance between two robots — his first love story. He isn't sure what he wants to do next, he told me, but he knows how he wants to do it. "Just come up with an idea," he said, "and make it."

Saki Knafo last wrote for the magazine about Gabriel Roth, the co-owner of Daptone Records.

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Bringing 'Where the Wild Things Are' to the Screen
by Saki Knafo

Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. "When "Star Wars" had its first run in the movie theaters he went to see it eight times, but he didn't see "Citizen Kane" until he was well into his 20s, he told me, and he has never seen a single movie by Howard Hawks or John Ford."

Look up Howard Hawks and John Ford on the net (imdb or any other reputable internet site). What does the above statement say about Jonze?

2. Explain what Jonze is talking about when he says, "It's like the studio was expecting a boy, and I gave birth to a girl. And now they're learning to love and accept their daughter."

3. Explain why "in the 1990s and early 2000s, the prospects for unorthodox moviemaking in Hollywood appeared promising."

4. Give a brief synopsis of Jonze's unorthodox route to becoming a successful director.

5. How did Jonze destroy two cameras in the production of the music video *Sabotage*?

6. What is the premise for *Being John Malkovich*?

7. "The head of production at Warner Brothers, Jeff Robinov, had recently had success transforming filmmakers generally considered to be on the independent end of the spectrum into directors of big-budget brand-name blockbusters;" To prove this point, the author points to two directors: Christopher Nolan and Alfonso Cuarón. Look up these directors. What independent films did each direct that gave him critical acclaim?

8. What does the author mean when she writes: "In Hollywood, successful children's movies operate on rules straight from the Joseph Campbell playbook." (Look up Joseph Campbell if necessary).

9. Look up David Eggers. What novels has he written?

10. Explain what Eggers is making fun of when he says, "Let's go find the chalice! Where is it? Here are some people we meet along the way."