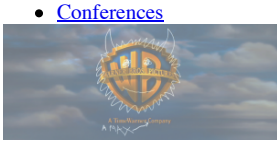

“We’ll eat you up we love you so”

J.D. Connor / 06.29.11

I

The teaser trailer for *Where the Wild Things Are* dropped on March 25, 2009. The production had been a long and notoriously troubled one, with tales of angry studio execs and suitmation gone awry. Fans of Spike Jonze, the director and co-screenwriter, and Dave Eggers, the other co-screenwriter, were eager to see what they had come up with—that is to say, what they had gotten away with. On the net, the teaser quickly racked up a million embeds on traileraddict.com. And it was perfect.

There are, famously, ten sentences comprising 338 words in the original book, and *none of them* are in this trailer. Those sentences are definitive, and what they define is the experience of having this story read to you. Over and over. Which is to say, those words are the words of a mother, or a father, or a grandmother; those are some of the words by which you come to language in safety.

So the experience of this trailer is the experience of the absence of *that voice*. The voice of your grownup, your protector, your absolver. This is the voice that gave you a world: "and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max" (Sendak). Every time you had that book read to you, or you read it to someone else, that voice—ultimately *your* voice—became that private boat.

However, until you have actually had the experience of losing that sheltering voice, the trailer does not strike you with the force of a cataclysm. Seated among children watching it with their parents or grandparents or trusted older brothers or sisters, I saw them not get it, and they didn't get it because the cure for unprotected silence was in easy reach. They nuzzled up; they reached into a lap for popcorn; they breathed in deep and smelled their way back into a sort of shelter. This is, of course, how Sendak brought Max back from the land of the wild things—not with a touch, or a voice that would compete with the voice that was reading the story right then, but with the smell, and warmth, of dinner: "and it was still hot" (Sendak).

This sonic apocalypse has a visual corollary. Halfway through the trailer, there is a montage of four shots of Max running away from us, followed by a couple of him running to us, and then falling into a snow cave. Yet this movie is not *Crank* for kids; something else is at work.

Kids run. We know this. And they run in different ways—in fear, in expectation, to see how quickly they might go, to beat someone to the ice cream truck, because their coaches have told them to—and a rather amazing thing about people is that we can tell the difference between those styles of running—we can register them the way we register the nuances of a glance or a sigh or a shrug. Movies capture those nuances exceptionally well. But in this montage, those differences are sanded away, and we are left with only the experience of speedy departure: "Children don't grow up," the song says. "Their bodies get bigger, but their hearts are torn up." Every piece of the trailer is drawn into a drama of aging, and loss, and absence, and, ultimately, the contingency of shelter. Fun for the whole family.

In theaters, then, the *Wild Things* teaser never quite worked. Psychology is part of it, but context has certainly played a role in undercutting the impact of what is, surely, one of the great pieces of contemporary corporate art. The teaser first ran before DreamWorks' *Monsters vs. Aliens*, a jokey action-parable about fitting in. Later in the summer, it would run in front of *G-Force*, a jokey action-parable about being special.

G-Force, the Jerry Bruckheimer-produced, Disney-distributed, $150 million monster, represents the frictionless heart of the contemporary kid movie system. The tale of a guinea pig secret agent force, it is a training film for kids too young to care about the historical doodads in the *National Treasure* series, itself Bruckheimer's junior varsity action franchise. And in order to make it palatable to the parents who are paying full fare, Tracy Morgan's "edgy" pig will scream things like, "This is offensive!" Testify.

The Will to Edginess is strong with the studios these days, largely because they are in the process of stripping away any actual commitment to independent or quasi-independent filmmaking. The last two years have seen many of the studio indie arms get crumpled: Warner Independent and Picturehouse shuttered; Paramount Vantage assimilated into the mothership; Miramax halved, then closed, then sold off for parts. 1

Less than a decade ago, the studios had a plan. They aimed to find the sweet spot where smaller budget films would routinely pay off. It had many different versions—festival purchases, transcontinental coproductions, in-house development—but what it offered the major studios was a much better sense of the talent in the room and a way to keep their stars inside the corporate fold when they wanted to make something "different." The plan, in other words, was to invest in authenticity.

But with the death of this sort of indie, the cutting edge of the middle of the road has been folded back into more mainstream product in the guise of raunchier, more aggressive humor. Seth Rogen gave voice to one of the monsters in *Monsters vs. Aliens*; a month later, he starred as the psychopathic mall cop in Warners' *Observe and Report*. In July, Zach Galifianakis was the geek behind the guinea pigs in *G-Force*. But in June, his skewed sentimentality vouched for the good heart of Warners' *The Hangover*—a good heart that culminated in a digital snapshot of him receiving a blowjob in an elevator.

If they had it to do over again, Warner should have put the *Wild Things* teaser in front of their aggro comedies. Or, better, afterward, if they could somehow have kept everyone around through the credits, because *Wild Things* answers the question of where these guys who could feel so much but be so oblivious came from in the first place. Spike Jonze, after all, produced *Jackass*.

How should we take this strange pattern of sync and slippage between *WtWTA* and the films of the summer of 2009? One way would be to look for the zeitgeist, its contradictions and elaborations. Another, though, would be to look at the studio itself. Both stories are worth following, and following closely, because they want to be versions of each other.

II

The teaser trailer for *Where the Wild Things Are* arrived too late. With its Arcade Fire soundtrack and its contentless exhortations—"Inside all of us is…HOPE," "Inside all of us

is…FEAR"—it belonged to the era of High Modernist Obamaism, an era that—who knew?—was already passing.

The peak may have come three weeks later, on April 13, when Obama read *Where the Wild Things Are* at the White House Easter Egg Roll, ad libbing to the crowd. It was a carefully crafted scene—special invitations went out to a group of same-sex parents—but there was still a deep sincerity at its heart. Obama is an actual Sendak fan, and in his reading, you could see how easily parenting in public came to him. He was ideally cast in an event that in every detail was designed as the antithesis of that horrible, shell-shocked morning of 9/11 when Bush sat in Florida while a second grade class read *The Pet Goat* aloud.

The Pet Goat sounded dreadful but, it turns out, it is not a standalone work. Instead, it is part of "Direct Instruction"—a "results oriented" education protocol built on scripted repetition and underwritten by massive governmental funding and research. DI is the mortal pedagogical enemy of "inquiry-based learning." You can see it on display in the Bush video. As the teacher whacks her pencil against lesson 60 to encourage the students to "read the fast way," every clack seems designed to quell the wild rumpus before it can start.

Perhaps no president had emphasized "reading" as much as Bush had. No Child Left Behind, the only durable achievement of "compassionate conservatism," made a fetish of the literacy numbers: Laura Bush, whose central philanthropic effort was "Ready to Read, Ready to Learn," now heads up the Foundation for America's Libraries. Reading was essential, but strangely instrumental. Even the Nixon era's emphasis on the *fun* in "Reading is FUNdamental" seemed to have leached away. (In 2007 RIF's "National Book Program" was renamed "Books for Ownership," ideologically securitized in the waning days of Bush's "ownership society" bubble.)

Some thought it was unfair to epitomize the Bush administration by his glazed audition that morning, but a DI-driven No Child Left Behind is our best indication of what the Bush administration might have produced without 9/11. It was big, it was technocratic, and, most of all, it was tricky to oppose. The legislation had Ted Kennedy's imprimatur, so there was no establishment liberalism to call upon to oppose it. If you thought it overemphasized testing, that put you on the side of the NEA, and the endless drumming of sensible centrist critique had effectively cast the union as the biggest obstacle to educational reform. ("Why should we trust teachers to fix the system when they've been in charge of it for decades?") Most of all, it was hard to doubt the sincerity of the bill's principal sponsors: they really did want to fix failing public schools, and who were you, someone who wanted to leave these children behind?

The only coherent option was to work outside schools as such. NCLB cut through two decades of stymied right/left debate over charter schools and vouchers by recommitting almost everyone to internal solutions. Gone were the days when corrosive mantras like "the problem with public education is that it is public" would be taken seriously. Instead, district after district tried some form of extended school day. Intensification, direction, commitment, accomplishment, standards—it was something like the last gasp of Total Quality Management, now directed at the schools.

By contrast, Dave Eggers and the 826 network of tutoring centers wanted not to drill students into becoming a nation of readers but to plug underprivileged kids into the nation of writers. Longer school days would only have made that project that much more difficult. Add to that a carefully crafted ethos that implied writing as such was subversive, and you had all the necessary elements to channel time, money, and talent from young adults who believed in teaching writing to the kids who needed to be taught. One-on-one.

For *WtWTA,* Eggers served as Jonze's one-on-one writing tutor, more or less. "I mean, really, he worked with me as… I mean, he brought a lot to it, but he also was a great editor. 'Cause I think I had so many ideas and it was just unfocused. And we would just go through it and refine it down" (Moriarty). They spent five years working seriously to get their version of *WtWTA* written and then made, about as long as it took Obama to go from Senator to President. (The sync was more than chronological: Jonze turns the whiff of fatherlessness in Sendak's book into fullblown single-parent Freudian strife; Eggers and Obama had both become famous writing their stories of life without parents.)

It may have been happenstance that Obama was an actual Sendak fan and that Sendak sent him an autographed, extra-illustrated copy of the book. But when it came time to cut the trailer, Jonze and Warners and the folks at The Ant Farm (the trailer house that made it) hitched the film to Obamaism as explicitly as they could. In the Great Depression, Warners had gone all in for FDR on films like *Footlight Parade, G-Men,* and *Angels over the White House*. In the Great Recession, it would do the same for Obama.

It did so at a time, however, when the atemporality of hope was being replaced by a hyped-up and looped new timeline. The fetish of the first 100 days was itself a bit of New Deal nostalgia, and the calendar was being manically second guessed even before Obama took office; the town hall madness seemed to go on longer than any summer vacation ever. The manifest strangeness of Obama's Nobel epitomized the new temporality: he must have been nominated within three weeks of his election, yet the award seemed nostalgic by the time he got it in October—part of an era when the promise of doing something seemed like enough.

The same thing was happening with *WtWTA*. In July, really before anyone had seen the movie, the teaser won a Golden Trailer award for best music (a finalist for Best Trailer, it lost to the *Star Trek* reboot). *WtWTA* was a year late, already lauded, already processed, and still to come.

The studio lurched around, trying to solve its audience problems by changing its marketing. As great, nigh on transcendent, as the teaser trailer was, the full-length one was plodding. It sold the film to kids by letting Max narrate it. People got their own voices; the story came into shape; the "wild things" took on personalities. The ad campaign swapped the anxieties of independence for the assurance of identification: "There's one in all of us." Which Wild Thing are you? Posters for individual characters began cropping up. Are you Carol, KW, Ira, The Bull? (Grassley? Snowe? Baucus?) Still, a grammatical wiggle in the tagline preserved just a hint of the collective aspirations that marked the teaser trailer: not one in *each* of us, but one in *all* of us. *E pluribus unum torvum*.

Inside the möbius strip temporalities of contemporary Hollywood and contemporary politics, the synchronicities can be eerie: Max's existential anxiety emerges when a teacher explains that while, yes, the sun is going to die and swallow the earth, it won't matter because everyone you know will be dead long before then anyway. In that unfathomable October week that adults were joking about blowing up the moon ("NASA's Mission"), there was Obama, standing with middle school students and astronauts on the White House lawn, proving to them that the moon was there, and that you could go there, and come back. It was a perfect event, a reminder that the Bush era was dead and gone. Unfortunately no one seemed to remember why it had seemed so necessary to kill it.

III

Critics call studios "risk-averse" as if that were a bad thing. (Critics also call studio execs who make $100m flops "idiots." Critics, in short, have it both ways.) Most of that aversion is attributed to the audience in a collection of incompatible just-so stories: the audience this, and the audience that; the audience is more intelligent than the studios think; the audience loves *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* and *Couples Retreat*.

Being risk averse has less to do with audiences than with the studios' own complex position. The majors are caught between two markets, one for capital and one for labor. On the one hand, they can't afford to screw up their major investments. After chewing through the surplus capital of Long Island dentists in the tax shelter era, the largesse of the German government (and others) in the tax credit era, and the easy money of the hedge fund era, in 2009 studios were back where they were sixty years ago: borrowing money at interest from banks. On the other hand, they have to return to the talent well for each new production—stars and directors and writers aren't under contract—and if talented people get the impression that working with a particular studio will be a nightmare of micro-management with an eye on the middlebrow, then those great, elusive, "risky" projects will go elsewhere. So will the not-so-great projects that don't yet know they won't be great.

Warners' solution to this quandary was twofold. Like everyone else, they made their own independent films under their own banners. That operation collapsed in the summer of 2008. The second prong in the strategy, though, was unique. The studio had committed itself more intently than any other to making almost exclusively big "tentpole" films—so many that it brought in long-term financing partners to underwrite its expensive slate—but with surprising frequency, Warners turned those films over to indie directors. Alfonso Cuarón got a *Harry Potter* installment, Christopher Nolan got *Batman*, the Wachowskis got *Speed Racer*. When Universal put Spike Jonze's *WtWTA* in turnaround after years of development, Warner Bros. picked it up. If the movie did not make sense for Universal, it seemed inevitable at Warner Bros—at least until the studio began pulling the plug on its indie labels.

At just about the same time that this was happening, moreover, the tension between Jonze and the studio became public. There were rumors that the studio would fire him and reshoot the movie. (Jeff Robinov, production chief, gave the *Times* the following ultra-oily quote about the whole thing: "There wasn't a conversation about firing him per se...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" [Knafo].) Unwilling to put up with its auteur, unable to foresee that it would be unwilling to put up with him: in the contemporary talent market, this is exactly the situation no studio wants to find itself in.

Warner head Alan Horn attempted to strike a balance. As he told Patrick Goldstein of the *LA Times*, “We’d like to find a common ground that represents Spike’s vision but still offers a film that really delivers for a broad-based audience. We obviously still have a challenge on our hands. But I wouldn’t call it a problem, simply a challenge" (Goldstein and Rainey).

So far, so good. But balance wasn't enough. For Warner to maintain its position as the home of the indie-auteur-blockbuster, the studio had to want Jonze's movie, not just tolerate it. Horn went on: "No one wants to turn this into a bland, sanitized studio movie. This is a very special piece of material and we’re just trying to get it right.” And because he was speaking mainly to insiders and those who want to be insiders, he explained the strategy: “We try to take a few shots...Sometimes they work and sometimes they don’t. The jury is still out on this one. But we remain confident that Spike is going to figure things out and at the end of the day we’ll have an artistically compelling movie.”

After getting past the irony or shock produced by the fact that this is *the head of a major studio* decrying "bland, sanitized studio movie[s]," you'll see that the affect is crucial. Resignation and confidence, but not where you would expect them. They didn't know whether they would make any money; they were pretty sure they would make art. The movie made $100m at the box office globally, which means it will probably net out near zero once all the revenues are in.

Horn's confidence came from a belief in Jonze's team—or, more accurately but more convolutedly, a belief that they needed to be seen believing in that team. Beyond hipster icon Eggers, the crucial technical jobs went to Jonze veterans but relative outsiders: KK Barrett handled production design (and was nominated for an Art Directors Guild award 2), Casey Storm designed the costumes, Lance Acord served as cinematographer, Eric Zumbrunnen edited alongside David Fincher's editor James Haygood. Novice Karen O of the Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs did the music paired with old hand Carter Burwell. Their movie, their way. 3

Whatever its box office, however poorly it did among kids—not to mention those crucial foreign territories where Sendak's story was not the cultural touchstone it is in the US—this film was canonized before it was even finished. Seen from the future, this will be the project around which these veterans of the creative underclass and their sensibility came into their own. Or, if you think that sensibility has been there throughout Jonze's career simply waiting to break into the mainstream, then this is the project where someone decided to risk $80m on it. That is, this is where the skate punks achieved hegemony.

Warner desperately wants to have an anchor among them. The studio logo in the film is scrawly and twee, just as the logo in a *Batman* film is ominous and batty and the logo in a *Harry Potter* film is hewn from the same digital stone as the onscreen Hogwarts. Redesigned logos are the way a studio says "I love you" to its movies.

In the case of *WtWTA*, though, love and assimilation are never far apart. You could say that it's all a matter of who's reading and who's writing. In the run-up to its release, the idea that the film somehow came out of Max was everywhere. Warner attempted to make the movie seem more kid friendly by having Max narrate the second trailer: "My name is Max," he began. (It's a million miles from whispering, "I didn't want to wake you up, but I really want to show you something.") In the book, Max has drawn one of the wild things; in the film, Max's ambitions are of a different scale altogether. He designs two great constructions, a fort and a tower. Conceptually, "It's at the level that a 9-year-old can draw in sand," Jonze told the *Times*.

For KK Barrett, the production designer who actually had to build the things, they were monuments to Maurice Sendak's style: "The interwoven sticks look very much like how he would shade in the crosshatching in the book." 4 Carol, the lead wild thing, the one voiced by James Gandolfini, has built an amazing model of the entire island using the same hatched texture on a micro scale.

If you think Max designed the tower and the fort, you can believe he drew the hatched logo at the beginning. Charlie, an anonymous reviewer whose early take appeared on aintitcool.com, thought that was how the corporate suturing worked: "The audience was engrossed the minute the opening Warner Brothers logo came up, designed as if Max had drawn it to put on the fridge" (Merrick). Enough magical thinking and you can come out of the theater believing that Warner Bros. is ruled by nine-year-olds and built by wild things, that is, by artists who know how nine-year-olds feel.

Of course, you could also believe that story is so much costume drama. Jonze, who spent more than a year "finding the film" in post, was committed to the topsy-turvy timeline: "It was like working backwards, finding what I wanted it to feel like and then creating a process," he told *Ain't It Cool News* (Moriarty). In its deep need for credibility in the community, Warner was happy to leave unquestioned Jonze's genius for feeling.

When he took charge of Paramount in the late sixties, Robert Evans followed Stanley Jaffe's advice: "Every half-assed guy in the business is making films about where it's at. Let's take a different road, Bob...give the audience they haven't had for a while—stories about how it feels" (Evans 192). 5 This idea turned the New Hollywood into something more than a set of formal revolutions, and Paramount would channel it into *Rosemary's Baby, The Godfather,* and *Chinatown*. In our contemporary moment, when transformations in technology, distribution, and finance have undermined the confidence of mainstream studios and independent filmmakers alike, the production of *WtWTA* has been a lesson in inquiry-based learning for Warners. From Jonze, the studio relearned the importance of selling feeling. 6 But unlike the director, they weren't working backwards. They had the process first: hire the indie. They even had the sincerity down—there was no hiding the strategy from everyone involved.

All that it took to learn this lesson was a relentless disavowal of aesthetic agency. The film was always Spike's to find, not Warners' to meddle in. The trailer, though, was a different matter. The voice you don't hear in the teaser might be yours or your mom's or your dad's or Obama's, but it more plausibly belongs to Warner Bros. When Max and Spike and Dave begin telling their versions of the story, you feel free to nuzzle up to them. But when Warners told its version, there was nothing to cuddle, no matter how fuzzy the logo might have been. It was edgier than the film could have hoped to be.

J.D. Connor is Assistant Professor in the History of Art at Yale. He is completing *The Studios after the Studios: Hollywood in the Neoclassical Era, 1970-2010*.

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1. #1 The definitive *in medias* take on this horrible summer appears in Gill. For a more elaborate account of the relative implication of the indies and the majors see Connor. [↩]
2. #2 Nominated for any number of critics awards for design, costumes, and screenplay, *WtWTA* won none of them—except the award for its trailer. It also won the more prestigious *Hollywood Reporter* Key Art award for Best Teaser Trailer PG-13 and Below. [↩]

3. #3 For a version of the production history that makes all the complications internal to the process, see the authorized *Heads on and We Shoot: The Making of* Where the Wild Things Are. Emblematically, the authorship of that book goes to the editors of *McSweeney's*, the copyright to Warner Brothers. [↩]
4. #4 For further insight, see Barrett. [↩]
5. #5 However unreliable Evans's accounts are, the emphasis on feeling survives in the contemporaneous pitch/documentary he made for the Gulf+Western brass, pleading with them to keep Paramount operating. [↩]
6. #6 Faced with the inevitable demand for ancillary revenues, Jonze wanted to avoid "the generic, cynical fast food tie-in or other merchandising that feels like more fodder or garbage." Instead, he proposed doing a TV special that would give "kids the chance to talk about their feelings—cause I know when I was a kid, I would hear other kids' feelings and what they were going through, and you're just so hungry for that" (Moriarty). [↩]

P45

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