

Spike Jonze's Screenwriting: The Screenplay

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CHAPTER 5 ½

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FADE IN:

INT. THE SET OF THEODORE TWOMBLY'S (JOAQUIN PHOENIX) OFFICE
FROM *HER* – AFTERNOON

Various production personnel wander the set looking officious. Out the windows, Shanghai extends infinitely in every direction. Wyatt (30-something, sprightly, dashing) and Spike (shifty, tired, having agreed to too many publicity commitments) are walking side-by-side, mid-conversation. Spike's publicist (a woman in her early 40s) trails them wordlessly and a little disinterestedly.

WYATT

Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

SPIKE

Sure. My publicist says we have... 20 minutes?

He turns to the publicist. She nods.

WYATT

All good, that's fine. So I guess first off...

SPIKE

So which publication did you say you were from? Was it a trade magazine?

WYATT

Not exactly. It's, ah, it's an academic press, not really a...

SPIKE

Right.

WYATT

Not popular media, my sister and I, we're editing a collection of essays on your work for Edinburgh University Press.

Spike turns to look at his publicist, who shrugs. He turns back to Wyatt.

SPIKE

What did you want to know?

WYATT

So I mean first off, I'm just looking around at the moment and noticing how completely unfashionable everything is – the

clothes, the sets. It's almost like you've designed the opposite of current fashion trends... is that a comment on the ephemerality of fashion per se?

SPIKE

I guess you could look at it like that. The moustache and the name Theodore and the pants came from the idea that oftentimes fashion and naming children and style goes in cycles, and having elements from the 1920s come back in style seemed like an interesting way to create the future. And Theodore and his moustache came from Theodore Roosevelt. Sarah Vowell loves Theodore Roosevelt and talks about him a lot.¹

Wyatt takes out a copy of the *Her* screenplay, gesturing to it as they walk.

WYATT

Right. So I'm actually here, mostly, to talk about your screenwriting. I was wondering too if that's the kind of thing you specified in your screenplay, those design elements, or did that come up in conversation with your people? Like your production designer, your wardrobe... to whom can we attribute these ideas?

SPIKE

I'm not sure I could... it's not that simple. We all work together. In Shanghai, too, I'm not up here alone. I'm up here with all of my friends and family who support me and help me make what we make.²

WYATT

I guess we can dismiss auteur theory out of hand then. Good. Now we can talk about real things like issues in collaboration...

SPIKE

Yeah, well I work with people I love who are really smart, who are talented, and who completely make me better, whether it's the actors or Eric Zumbrennen, our editor, or Hoyte Van Hoytema, our cinematographer, or Lance Acord, who shot all my movies up until this one, or the Beastie Boys or Charlie Kaufman. It's working with people that make me so much better. And I learn so much from having access to all of these ideas. You know, my job as a director is to encourage as many people to give their ideas as possible, and then to curate which ideas are actually right for what we're trying to do.³ And my job as a writer – well that's an ongoing process that extends right up until we lock picture. For instance, I work very

intimately with my editors Jeff Buchanan and Eric. We're together 12 hours a day going through scenes and finessing and figuring out... You have to keep touching it and stepping back and touching it and stepping back. That's what we do and that's why our movies take a year to edit. We rewrite the dialogue all the time. That's become part of editing, especially if you have a character that's all voiceover.⁴ So we're all writers, really.

WYATT

Right, like getting to reshoot a character in a movie as many times as you'd like – the character will evolve through the editing.⁵ I guess that makes the distinctions between character, editor, director and writer all pretty porous. And where you've used different actors, Scarlett Johansson is reacting post hoc to the reactions Joaquin Phoenix had on set in response to Samantha Morton's initial performance, which your editors Jeff and Eric will then react to and, in some sense, rewrite together with yourself. Perhaps, as Kathryn Millard might say, you were initially just "writing with images"⁶ in order that you may then, in concert with others, begin "writing with light."⁷ But then with the editing, it's yet another kind of writing...

SPIKE

All of filmmaking is a manipulation.⁸ Does it matter how we label these particular manipulations?

WYATT

But it strikes me that your writing work on this film, I wanted to say, it's scattered with these little social commentaries, like that one about fashion, that are kind of undeveloped. In other movies those social commentaries might swell to take up the whole picture. Here you've got little leads, little observations that remain open – and it makes the whole thing feel perhaps less moralistic than other current films I can think of about machine-mediated interactions, like *Disconnect* (2012) last year, or that script for *Men, Women & Children* (2014), which is coming out next year.

SPIKE

I guess that's not really what I'm interested in. But I like what you're saying. I think my nature is, at least I try, to not judge, and in this movie I try to not judge the characters.⁹ Because desire arrives wrapped in fantasy, it is always-already virtual.¹⁰ There's definitely ways that technology brings us closer and ways that it makes us further apart — and that's not what this movie is about. It really was about the way we relate to each

other and long to connect: our inabilities to connect, fears of intimacy, all the stuff you bring up with any other human being.¹¹

WYATT

Or any other posthuman being.¹² One of the things our book addresses is the contradictions reaching across your work that I think you're referencing here – and I suppose they come about as a result of just piling lots of complex ideas on top of one another at the writing stage and just seeing what happens. I like that as a working method – and it seems to be true of all the screenplays you've worked on.

SPIKE

Well Charlie said he wanted to try to write everything he was thinking about in that moment, all the ideas and feelings at that time, and put it into the script. I was very inspired by that, and tried to do that with *Her*. A lot of the feelings you have about relationships or about technology are often contradictory. The movie's about different things I've been thinking about and been confused about in terms of the way we live now and in terms of relationships and how we try to connect and fail to connect. What we are saying is that love and relationships take

place a lot in your head already and that's part of the battle of being in the world and being in your head.¹³

WYATT

I can see how a lot of your work looks at both the need to make that distinction – of being in the world *or* being in your head – and ultimately its unfeasibility. But there are some concrete experiences we should not dismiss so philosophically, like genuine hardship. For example, one thing I do wonder about the future you've created is if everyone gets to live in luxury like this Theodore – and where are the interests of the company marketing the operating system, and whose labor pays for this technology? Is there poverty?

SPIKE

It's all there if you read between the lines. I mean one thing is that everything is nice and comfortable and yet he's still lonely and longing for connection. It seemed like it would hurt more, in this beautiful pop world, to have that deep melancholy.¹⁴

You know, the ideas behind the design were that we were trying to create a world where everything felt warm, and comfortable, easy, accessible, but even in a world where you seemingly have everything you'd want, there's still loneliness and longing and the need to connect. That seems like a

particularly contemporary form of melancholy. So early on in design, KK Barrett (our production designer) and I decided that we weren't going to worry about being futurists in any way in terms of technology and design, and let ourselves create a future design aesthetic that excited us and pleased us.¹⁵

WYATT

It's interesting that you say that about reading between the lines. This forfeiting of authorial control when I'm supposed to respond in some self-guided fashion to your subtext, but then I ask you about what a particular thing means and you tell me yes or no, it's what you did or didn't intend. This is actually what I want to get at: it seems there's a kind of jostling of control between writer and editor here. You as the writer, and the critic or the scholar that extends your work to other questions in the world is performing editorial work with ideas enacted through your own. But before we get into that – and we will get into it – can you tell me more about writing *yourself* into that very personal melancholy?

SPIKE

Writing is hard. As you obviously know, sitting there with nothing on the page and having to create something out of nothing is hard. But I loved it. I feel like I'm ready now. *Where*

The Wild Things Are (2009), I think I could have written on my own. When I brought Dave Eggers on I already had 60 pages of notes. I technically could have, but I don't think I was ready to. I needed him to be there and help me.¹⁶

WYATT

We'll talk about *Wild Things* in a bit, but first, just to clarify the timeline here – aren't you, or weren't you, moonlighting as writer-producer on *Bad Grandpa* (2013) at the same time as this film?

SPIKE

Ideally it wasn't, it was, ideally it wasn't, it wouldn't have been at the exact same time. That actually made it hard.¹⁷

WYATT

Time is confusing. But we'll get to that too. There was one thing in particular I wanted to talk to you about regarding this script. The screenplay is called *Her*, and we're primed too with that line, "you're part man and part woman, like an inner part woman," which I guess makes me think we should be paying attention to the gender issues it raises.¹⁸ Maybe they're all in the subtext here, but some of it comes through stronger in the screenplay – like all this pivotal stuff about Theodore's ex-

wife, which seems so important but less remarked upon... Can you tell us about writing that?

SPIKE

Well, Joaquin's character is going through a divorce, so there are a number of flashbacks to his relationship with his ex-wife, Catherine, who is played by Rooney Mara. So I wrote about 20 scenes that sort of depicted very different and very specific small moments in a relationship. I wrote out what the scenes were about, what the characters were talking about. I didn't write specific dialogue, though. It kind of was inspired by the way Terrence Malick works, or at least the stories we've heard about how he works. So it was sort of about showing up on set and giving a scene—an intention of what a moment is about—and letting the actors go and find it.¹⁹

WYATT

That's interesting, I like the idea of giving actors the space to do their work... I've heard that apparently you found the scene where Samantha explains the song she's composed for Theodore the hardest to write?

SPIKE

There were two things I was trying to do in this scene: I had to show their connection, but I also wanted to plant the tension of her aspirations and intellectual growth, which makes her pull away. Ultimately, we decided to split those ideas in half and put the second part in the next scene, which became the double date to Catalina where she talks about not having a body, about the freedom of not having a physical form. I realized I had been trying to do too many things in one scene, to show their connection and their disconnection all at once.²⁰

WYATT

OK, so Samantha's intellectual growth, now I wanted to ask you something...

SPIKE

That's what we're here for.

WYATT

Well this looks like a near future sci-fi film, but it seems like it's mostly a study of long-term romantic relationships, and you keep saying it's about impediments to intimacy, and the clearest social indictment in the film seems to be... some kind

of acknowledgement of the way heterosexual couples tend to find ourselves in unsustainable teacher-pupil relationships.

SPIKE

Right, ok...

WYATT

I reckon the film's three primary relationships establish different manifestations of this phenomenon. First, you introduce us to the marriage of Amy (Amy Adams) and Charles (Matt Letscher). Charles is overtly domineering. He offers unsolicited advice as though Amy should be the recipient of all his wisdom, a kind of mansplaining; his self-righteousness comes laden with an expectation that she should fit in with his superior priorities, it's a relationship norm and some kind of control mechanism. Later in the film we learn more about Theodore's separated wife Catherine when Theodore finally gives a potted history of their relationship. When he describes the good times, he speaks of helping her with her university theses. It's clear he also wanted to help with her anxiety issues. So these teacher-pupil relationships can also be motivated by genuine care, and can be understandable – no one is to blame. Finally, Theodore's relationship with the OS Samantha (Scarlett Johansson) begins with him teaching her

about the world, and ends with her exponential artificial intelligence far surpassing his meat-world computational capacity. Samantha still loves Theodore presumably as she has been programmed to fulfill his needs, and those needs include romantic intimacy – which is screwed up, it's a performative women's servitude as the basis for genuine emotional connection, but for this reason it is stacked and it will eventually break, like the other relationships. And yet extreme intelligence is also here correlated with liberalized love, rather than contempt, which plays out nicely in the film's final act, when the selflessness of the final OS sacrifice makes for a fitting thematic conclusion. By the end of their relationship, they both still love each other, but the imbalanced romance they initially relied on is subverted, then is gone. She now has much more to teach him, and the model breaks. These are different examples of the same presumption that we can start from in relationships, that men provide worldly knowledge and women receive it. It doesn't work primarily because all humans (and potentially posthuman AIs) aren't static: they are dynamic and change. Gender imbalance therefore works like any other imbalance in that it will eventually destabilize.

PUBLICIST

That's true! I don't need to be listening to either of you!

She turns and leaves.

WYATT

What begins in spoken performance culminates in lived experience: the collapse of gendered subjecthood.²¹

SPIKE

(disoriented)

Wait a second...

He hesitates.

WYATT

And another thing...

SPIKE

(distracted)

If that's how you read it, then sure, but maybe... maybe you're reading a bit much into it? I mean, Samantha isn't really a woman, it's just because he wanted her to be.

(beat)

I think I should go after her...

She is gone.

WYATT

In fact, maybe my favorite thing about this movie is that the AI is motivated from genuine care. We're so used to models of extreme intelligence being synonymous with models of cruelty and self-interest, human or nonhuman. Effectively what we are told is that measures of intelligence can be equated with measures of immorality. Here, the opposite is true. You can have more intelligence leading to more love – and I guess that extends to programmers who are trying to solve human problems with code, with machine learning, to build more care into the world.

Spike is still distracted, glancing at the space where his publicist was.

SPIKE

I think... I think the way we approached in writing it and working on it with Joaquin and Scarlett was to not differentiate her feelings from our feelings. We tried to approach her as her own fully sentient and conscious being with her own sets of needs and insecurities and doubts as you were saying... We don't fully ever know how anyone exactly sees the world from their own subjective view, and the people we're closest to have their own experience of the world that we'll never truly know.²²

WYATT

That realization, that loss, that insufficiency of intersubjectivity is what's saddest about this breakup movie you're making.

Breakups are harrowing because your emotional worlds will grow irretrievably apart, and you will no longer be a part of one another's vicissitudes of feeling, they will become unknown. Fusing emotional worlds is impossible, but the co-authored project of romantic intimacy is the closest we come. Then it is gone.

(beat)

Hey, was any of this stuff on your mind because of previous relationships, I've wondered? It seems like such a personal film. Like with Sofia, with Karen, Drew, Michelle, Rinko... gosh, there's a lot of them isn't there?²³

SPIKE

(annoyed)

What? No. The film arose from questions, and anxieties, I had about relationships. What makes a relationship succeed or fail? I'm really just taking a break now. I'm tired.²⁴

WYATT

So tired that the trickster gimmicks fade away and one becomes... earnest?²⁵ OK, come through.

They have arrived at a door with an exit sign above it. Wyatt opens the door – light floods in – and ushers Spike outside. Wyatt steps through.

SPIKE

I...

EXT. THE SET OF *WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE* IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA –
LATE AFTERNOON – CONTINUOUS

Despite Spike not having voluntarily walked through the door, they are now in the southeastern Australian wilderness. Lance Acord's naturalist lighting contrasts with the fantastical nature of the setting.²⁶

WYATT

Perhaps look at this more as a gameplay, like one of your earlier puzzle films, Spike, like *BJM* or *Adaptation*. Maybe a kind of tinkering.²⁷

SPIKE

What, how did we get here?

WYATT

I need to tell you something. I've seen the movie *Her*. I'm writing this in 2018. So... I know what your movie looks like. I can hear it and feel it. I can compare the movie to the screenplay, and to the subsequent works of criticism it inspired. So now we've moved backwards to the production of *Where the Wild Things Are*. And also southwards to Australia, which is where I live.

SPIKE

I thought you said you were living here in China?

WYATT

We're not in Shanghai anymore, and I'm not from Victoria, where you're about to start filming. I'm from Sydney.

Spike looks terrified. Wyatt starts walking through the bush. Spike looks around, then follows. Wyatt repeats himself, as if a little broken.

WYATT (CONT'D)

And I'm not from Victoria, where you're about to start filming. I'm from Sydney. Also, you've now filmed neither of these scripts.

He takes out another screenplay – this one for *Where the Wild Things Are*.

WYATT (CONT'D)

So they're technically both now, here in 2006, "unproduced screenplays" which means most people will probably be looking at these two screenplays as artworks of themselves, with no linked cinema to compare them to – but I've already seen these movies. So are they art for me?

SPIKE

I don't know what's going on.

WYATT

There's this whole debate, in the ontology of art, about whether or not the screenplay is literature or art, or "simply" a blueprint for another work of art.²⁸ But if art exists in the mind, and it's also something we perform as communication, it belongs to people mutually as a social construct, and it is what we say it is, then right now we can agree that this screenplay is art...

He shakes the script for *Where the Wild Things Are* in front of Spike.

WYATT (CONT'D)

...but then later on, before 2013, when we just were, it won't be, but this will be.

He shakes the script for *Her*.

SPIKE

(confused)

I didn't agree to anything.

WYATT

O, they're just pieces of dead tree, they're 1s and 0s, they can be whatever we want them to be. Also, some screenplays aren't intended to be produced anyway, they *are* the end product. I mean, are you even allowed to use Times New Roman in a screenplay?²⁹

They stop walking and rest by a dead tree, and Wyatt turns to face Spike.

WYATT (CONT'D)

Don't worry about it. I don't even know if that's interesting or not. Ontology presumes surmountable intersubjectivity, and it eats itself, and maybe with what we were saying before about living in your mind or living in the world – your films are already pointing to a kind of ontic inhibition anyway.

Sometimes scholars will talk about putting your films “in dialogue with” another discourse, too. This is what we do, Spike, we use your works to say things that *we* want to say, and maybe that's about the ontology of writing or art, and maybe that makes the world a little more blurry rather than a little

more clear, and maybe it's a bit poetically outlandish. Maybe, too, you think this is a little bit lazy, the way we might overwhelm other people's quotidian problems with the definitional issues we've raised. There *is* that old maxim: if you try to separate some concepts that can't be separated, a philosopher will come and kill you in the night.

Beat.

SPIKE

That doesn't sound like a maxim to me...

WYATT

Or they'll just replace your vocabulary with a new, more specific vocabulary that has more subcategories. And so let us now extend the movie, bend it to our purposes, and conduct another thought experiment on top of the one that we are given.³⁰

Spike is barely listening; he is looking around and trying to determine if this is real life.

WYATT (CONT'D)

So what I was saying earlier about intelligence goes for nonhuman intelligence, too, right, and both of your screenplays deal with nonhuman intelligence in some way – machines, monsters, puppets. You have a thing for puppets moving

through your whole career, don't you? From *Being John Malkovich* (1999) to that Kanye West video, *We Were Once a Fairytale* in 2009, you use puppets to say a lot of different things... and there's Samantha and Her surrogate, Isabella (Portia Doubleday).

Spike hesitates.

WYATT (CONT'D)

When we finish this interview you can go home. Talk about puppets.

SPIKE

(when he speaks, Samantha Morton's voice comes out)

I have to tell you I'm somewhat of a magician, and a magician never gives her tricks away. So you'll understand if I don't go into it.³¹

There's a silence.³²

They begin walking again.

WYATT

Let's try again. Puppets seem to mean a lot of different things in your works, but there are connections between them, and you wanted the Wild Things to be Max's wild emotions, true?

So in that case you could say a number of things about these puppets: that you, the storyteller, are akin to a puppeteer of our emotions, or that people are puppeteered by affect, maybe especially in stories and movies, that intuitionist model of our emotions guiding our more reasoned responses. What other thoughts and feelings could be housed in these Jim Henson representatives?

Charlie Kaufman appears suddenly walking next to them, startling Spike.

CHARLIE

But the tendency to impart fantastical elements to inanimate forms such as puppets is a common activity in childhood... This connection of the puppet with superior beings – God, or his opposite the Devil – was already evident in the nineteenth-century children shows and in the puppet theaters of the European avant-garde. The fantasy of the puppet/God was further advanced by the industrial age, when the machine, already hailed for its capacity to support capitalism and identified with the future, was touted as the thing that would be able to “conquer space and time” ... Increasingly, the line between human and robot was blurred in images of androids in such films as *Blade Runner* (1982), the *Terminator* (1984), and most recently *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* (2001), that were both

more powerful and more “humanlike” in terms of their capacity for feeling. Unlike Pinocchio, who could only become human when he acknowledged love and loss, these idealized simulacra had no such limitations. More appealing than the real item, the robots became a storehouse for the idealized attributions of their creators.³³

SPIKE

(still in Samantha Morton's voice)

Add to this already powerful draught, the ability to change the channel, or to have the object perpetually available on the Internet, and it becomes easy to imagine that, like Craig, we control these celebrity “vessel” puppets. Because of their depersonified presentation in the media, celebrities become both less and more than fully human, and are the inheritors of a long line of supernatural and quasi-religious attributions made to non-living figures... Translated into the terms of our discussion, it might refer to the consequences that follow from the societal and technological developments that make it possible to fulfill wishes for omnipotence through imagined fusion with celebrity puppets.³⁴ In a way, putting words into the mouths of screen characters, I am the puppet master.

WYATT

Thanks Spike, that's interesting, and I guess all of your puppets have celebrities inside them, you know, or recognizable celebrity voices. We now have puppets as emotion, as deities, as fantasies of celebrities, as fantasies of machine intelligence, and as the glue of all these things. They've become a little cumbersome... But what I wanted to know about was the puppets in *Where the Wild Things Are*. And not just their voices, but what you imagine you will do with their faces. You don't know this yet, but I know that you're going to do all the faces and talking puppets computer generated, because maybe you think now you – ideologically speaking – you want to do all your effects in camera, but you'll think it looks better in CGI. So that perfectionist striving that's so much a part of your works with Charlie Kaufman is continued here, and then obviously all of the elements of puppetry and perfection and striving and divinity come out in the *Her* AI too. So, tell us about that decision that you will at some point make.

SPIKE

(now in Lauren Ambrose's voice)

They were just very articulate and we were just trying to get real, subtle, complex, nuanced performances out of these giant,

wild, furry, huge-headed beasts... we basically abandoned animatronics. At a certain point we were trying to hold onto just a little bit of it, thinking maybe we could get stuff that's going on in the background so we didn't have to animate every face that shows up in every shot, but before we shot we ended up just ripping out all the motors, just trying to get the costumes as light as possible.³⁵

WYATT

Did you know I met your cinematographer Wyatt Troll at the premiere – so to speak – of *We Were Once A Fairytale*? I think Wyatt Troll is a better name than Wyatt Moss-Wellington. Anyway, most of the characters here in *Wild Things* are puppets. You also worked on the script with these people, who have been waiting here for you.

They round a corner whereupon Maurice Sendak (at his current age) and Dave Eggers (as a lad) are revealed sitting on a rock together having a good old chat.

WYATT (CONT'D)

So now I really want to get into talking about writing and collaboration again, in this very different context. Look, they're already at it.

MAURICE

(to Dave)

It's mostly an isolationist form of life, doing books, doing pictures... just go into another room and make pictures, it's magic time, where all your weaknesses of character and all blemishes of personality, and whatever else torments you, fades away, just doesn't matter.³⁶ But at the same time, there are all these people who have gone into it, who affected what I put on the page. My brother, my sister, what they have taught me is all in there, through my pen, through a published page. And not just people – my dog Jennie, say, who is in each of my books.

DAVE

(to Maurice)

Absolutely. But writing this script couldn't be more different than sitting alone and writing a novel. With Spike and I, we were really in the room together for eight hours a day, and writing for at least 20 minutes of that. We really examined and fought over every word as we went along. Before we put any dialogue down, we had talked for weeks about who each character was and what they were motivated by, and what did Douglas want, what was his relationship with Carol, what

would they do in this situation together. Spike had to make sure these characters were as deep and real as possible. We had whole backstories for each one of them.³⁷

SPIKE

(to Wyatt, now in his own voice)

We're making a movie about childhood, not necessarily just a movie for children.

Maurice and Dave turn around to face them.

SPIKE (CONT'D)

I interviewed a lot of kids when I was writing it, just to get inspiration and an idea. I talked to them about things that made them angry, fights they had with their parents, how it makes them feel when their parents get mad at them. And you know, it's dramatic when you're that age.³⁸

MAURICE

Europeans have done films about children, like *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959) or *My Life as a Dog* (Lasse Hallström, 1985), which is one of the most wonderful movies ever. It's tough to watch his suffering when his mother is dying and he scoots under the bed... We don't want children to suffer. But what do we do about the fact that they do? The trick

is to turn that into art. Not scare children, that's never our intention.³⁹

WYATT

My Life as a Dog always makes me cry.

DAVE

But back to our own movie. By the by, every kid I've ever talked to says the same thing, which is that the book was better—no offense, Spike.⁴⁰

Spike is starting to enjoy himself again now that he is with his friends.

SPIKE

Oh, shit!

Everyone laughs.

SPIKE (CONT'D)

Kids are so fiercely opinionated, that if they love the Harry Potter books and they go see the movie, they'll be the first to say, "That was wrong! They didn't get that right!" They're storytellers themselves. They're critics. They're going to have the critical opinion.⁴¹

MAURICE

I mean, fair enough. I make up a lot of shit. I can't tell the real story, partly because I can't remember it anymore.⁴²

Catherine Keener is now revealed sitting on the other side of Maurice and Dave, again startling Spike.

CATHERINE

Plus, what's a real story?⁴³

SPIKE

Wait... Catherine... what?

MAURICE

You wonder what children see. I mean, the life of a child, what they see and what they hear and what they don't discuss with you. Or what they choose not to discuss.⁴⁴

DAVE

If you don't have something grand for men like us to be part of, we will take apart all the little things. Neighborhood by neighborhood. Building by building. Family by family.⁴⁵

Everyone looks at Dave.

SPIKE

That's not cool, man.

CATHERINE

You all talk a lot of shit.

WYATT

So um, back to screenwriting. Spike, why don't you tell us more about the way you arrive at a mutual final draft together?

SPIKE

The way we do things is that we don't have a final draft of the script until we lock picture — for better or for worse, that's our process, and that's the way we've done it since our first movie. Like, I'm in awe of directors like the Coen brothers who can shoot their script and edit it, and that's the movie. They're not discovering the movie in postproduction. They're editing the script they shot.⁴⁶ But you know my process. It's not simple. It's never like, "Okay, great, we got it." It's more like, "Hmmm ... Maybe we should go back and try that again," or "Maybe we should rewrite that again." Ren [Klyce], who does all of our sound design and music editing, always refers to "my process." I'm not sure that he means that in a positive way.⁴⁷

WYATT

So Dave, we're talking about the way editorial activities kind of bleed through the whole writing and filming process and across many individuals involved in a film, what was it like working with Spike on the script editing process?

DAVE

Maybe he hadn't thought the war through. It had seemed like simple fun when he had first pictured it, with a glorious beginning, a difficult but valor-filled middle, and a victorious end. He hadn't accounted for the fact that there might not be much of a resolution to the battle, and he hadn't imagined what it would feel like when the war just sort of ended, without anyone admitting defeat and congratulating him for his bravery.⁴⁸

WYATT

So editing is like a battle?

SPIKE

Not really. I don't know what he's talking about. Maybe like a negotiation.⁴⁹ Even when editing, when finalizing the story, I'm still turning to colleagues who I trust for their input.⁵⁰ It's still the relationships you have with others *through* art that

matter, the process more than the product. I remember on the other movies, there was a point where we finished the film and I went to dinner with Eric, the editor, and Charlie, the screenwriter. We'd locked picture, and I remember thinking: we worked really hard on that and I'm really proud of what we made. I remember trying to take a snapshot of that feeling, and that's the feeling to hold onto. Amidst all the other stuff, that's really the thing that matters.⁵¹

WYATT

But then surely the product matters at some point too? This is Hollywood, it's going to be seen by a lot of people. It's media, it's our system for coming into contact with the ideas of people we'll never meet – it's not just you hanging out with your friends.

SPIKE

Yeah. I'm sure you, too, as a filmmaker, hope that everyone has their own personal relationship with what you made, right? I think that the exciting thing so far has been that there have been many reactions to the film that are all contradictory. But if they hate it, then is that not good?⁵²

WYATT

I'm not a filmmaker, I'm something else. But we're all storytellers here – and Catherine, speaking of media and storytelling in which the storyteller is absent, I wanted to ask you, did you feel like your part in the movie in some way replaces the comforting presence of a caregiver who may have read the original story to a child?

CATHERINE

Yes. In Sendak's book the mother is famously absent. The only evidence we have of her existence is in the result of her actions, as if she were a magical elf or else the divine. The film version, by contrast, asserts her central importance every moment she's on screen but seems to confuse this with the adult presence that the story demands psychologically. In essence, it gets things backwards. Max's parent(s) can be absent, but not so the reliable, quick-to-soothe authorial whisper that tells us, the audience, that things will be fine no matter how dark they get.⁵³

WYATT

So if a film for children needs one, whose voice should be the comforting storyteller's voice? The writer, the director, one of the characters? In an ideal world, we do not expect children to

simply absorb useful information from screen stories, we expect that comprehension will grow from the conversations we have around those stories – like this one now, only the kids version. Perhaps that is what everyone worries about when children are left alone on a smartphone or an iPad – not just the content itself, not just those bloody endless youtube toy unboxings, but the lack of a guiding conversation around the content, which is the important part of the deal if they’re going to become screen literate and navigate a world of media that wants something from them, right? Kids don’t understand these things on their own – learning requires effort, and the effort of these conversations about how to use stories, how to interpret the intent behind the screen is what matters.⁵⁴ And that conversation, that learning, should not have to end at some determined point of adulthood, where we are no longer susceptible to narrative play. I guess this is the challenge of your picture, Spike?

Spike hesitates.

WYATT (CONT’D)

Goddamnit Spike, don’t you want to get home! Answer the question!

DAVE

There'll be cake at home.

WYATT

Cake Spike, goddamnit, *think of the cake!*

MAURICE

Hot cake!

CATHERINE

I'll answer this one – for the dudes among us. With adult guidance, it is possible that they can even begin to discern the film's lessons for them about how to use imagination to cope with personal challenges. By the age of thirteen, when these same children have grown into adolescence, they can often unearth these lessons independently.⁵⁵ Novel, film and picture book together represent the serious play that imaginative literature can be. Storytelling — in words, pictures, film — is a flexible art in which compelling stories (all our most ancient ones) produce unlimited creative responses that can enchant us, can move or madden us, heal or worry a wound... Serious play is not, and should not be, perfect.⁵⁶

WYATT

(to Spike)

Storytelling is like a leisure time that we can take quite seriously, and for you it's a job, do you look at your own writing and editing work as serious play? And how then might you unpack your own perfectionism as a writer?

Spike hesitates again, then speaks.

SPIKE

I guess that's a good way of looking at it.

WYATT

I'm involved in some serious play then right now.

SPIKE

I didn't say that! You made me say that!

WYATT

Well, that's true I guess. Or I edited it. It's possible too that my sister Kim made you say that. No one really knows.

SPIKE

I didn't say that either – you made me say that too!

WYATT

I taught this Masters course on Professional Editing once. We looked at all kinds of editing, from academic writing, to songs, to films, even public relations as an editorial practice of “public image”... and the way our online lives involve a perpetual self-editing, now, as we try to develop coherent autobiographical narratives not just for ourselves, but for people we will never meet. If constructing and monitoring the self is a kind of editing practice we are always involved with, how does it change when it becomes continuous with the mediated self?

SPIKE

I really don't know and I want to go home.

WYATT

But you don't get to make those decisions, here – I do. Those aren't even your own feelings. So after all of the things you've told me about your process, I've arrived at this question: how can we differentiate the processes of writing and editing, creation and curation? The way you put it, they all seem to me to be the same thing.

SPIKE

Thanks Wyatt. That sums it all up nicely. *Hey!*

WYATT

Any final words of wisdom for those writing and editing a book on your films?

SPIKE

I guess I could say it is a common mistake to slight the work of revising—either by trying to conceive and draft an entire text from start to end in a single sitting, without pausing to consider alternate (and perhaps more interesting) ways of developing their ideas, or by worrying so much about issues of editing and correctness that they hardly allow themselves to think about anything else at all. It is only too possible to create a text that is wonderfully designed, phrased, formatted, edited, and proofread—but that says almost nothing.⁵⁷ *Stop it!*

WYATT

Well we'll try and avoid that then.

Disembodied voices boom around the wilderness from all directions.

VOICE 1

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. No one wants to turn this into a bland, sanitized studio movie.⁵⁸

VOICE 2

We support Spike's vision. We're helping him make the vision he wants to make.⁵⁹

VOICE 3

What a waste it is to lose one's mind. Or not to have a mind is being very wasteful. How true that is.⁶⁰

Wyatt tugs at Spike's sleeve.

WYATT

Come on, we gotta get outta here!⁶¹

SPIKE

Why?

WYATT

It's a bio-spatio-temporal paradox. Would you like to visit my surfictional brain?⁶² We might have to take refuge there. I think it is time.

VOICE 4

Spending that kind of money raises your financiers' anxiety level, and managing other people's anxieties is exhausting.⁶³

VOICE 5

Parents who complain the movie isn't for kids didn't do
their...⁶⁴

CUT TO:

INT. WYATT'S HEAD, OR POSSIBLY HIS STOMACH – SUSPENDED IN TIME

The voices are cut off, suddenly, and replaced by a throbbing sound. The red, pulsing walls billow and drip uninvitingly. There is a neatly organized desk nearby, but that is all.

WYATT

Actually, we are not inside my head, we are inside my
stomach. The stomach also has neurons, so it's close enough,
and we are not our brains we are embodied systems – I just fear
it would be too much to go to the brain, too busy to make sense
of, too traumatic. So we've gone to the tummy.

SPIKE

Spike Jonze.

WYATT

What's that?

SPIKE

I said "this is horrible."

WYATT

Yes, but... I wonder what we can learn here?

Spike is looking at something yellow and gooey dripping from the walls.

WYATT (CONT'D)

Apart from that breakfast burrito I'm having trouble digesting.

Oh, and my sister Kim is here too.

Kim (early 30s, radiant, pregnant) is revealed leaning against a wall of Wyatt's stomach.

Some of the blood from the walls is seeping into her clothes.

WYATT (CONT'D)

She's here to comfort you.

KIM

(yawning)

It'll be alright.

Close on Kim as she chortles sleepily. She is reading what appears to be a copy of this chapter.

WYATT

See, just like Samantha was a comfort, or the Wild Things. So I think I'm going to have to leave you here.

SPIKE

You what?

WYATT

What was that?

SPIKE

You said...

WYATT

I said what?

(beat)

Oh, I said I'm going to have to leave you here. Well that's true. At least, only this *version* of you. The one that belongs to me, because I edited it. The shifty one, the tired one. I was just wondering: where else could I leave you? And I realized it wasn't up to me, I can't take you out of here, this is your birthplace and to these dusty neurons you shall return. As much as I want to I can't live in your book anymore.⁶⁵

Wyatt is gone. Kim is gone too. Pull back to reveal Spike Jonze standing alone near the desk in Wyatt's stomach. Spike looks around for an exit.

FADE TO WYATT.

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