The Report committee for Donovan Lee Gentry

Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

Master of None: My Adventures in

the Realm of Greater Academia

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____

Allucquere Rosanne Stone

_____

Joseph Straubhaar

Master of None: My Adventures in

the Realm of Greater Academia

by

Donovan Lee Gentry, B.A.

Report

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Master of None: My Adventures in

the Realm of Greater Academia

by

Donovan Lee Gentry, MA

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SUPERVISOR: Allucquere Rosanne Stone

This report attempts to trace a path through my time in higher education, from an undergraduate degree in English to the completion of my Master's degree in Media studies. The report will focus on examining how school has differed from my expectations, and how my difficulties and struggles therein led me through various class models and modes of learning. In the course of retelling the projects and studies I worked on, I will compare different methods of pedagogy, from the typical grad school class to the free-form space of the ACTLab. I close by reflecting on how a report on my own time here at UT might be useful to others unsure of how grad school is supposed to go, much I was when I started out.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE:

A Short Introduction:

I have cut a wide and sloppy swath through the fields of higher learning. My career ambitions have ranged from physicist to poet to professor to bartender, and it seems appropriate that the report that will grant me my Master's degree should be used to reflect on the experience and the motivations that lead me to pursue the Media Studies program in Radio Television Film and how I came to work with Sandy Stone and Joseph Lopez of the ActLab and decide to pursue an independent project in my final semesters of the program.

Undergraduate Career: A Failed Mad Scientist gets a Liberal Arts Degree and Thinks about Film

I attended the University of Oklahoma in Norman for four years immediately after graduating high school. Despite floundering major-less for a semester and generally not knowing what to pursue, I graduated on schedule with honors. My official degree is in English, writing track, with minors in Latin and Philosophy; or as I like to say, the most useless education imaginable. The bitterness is half-joking. I feel privileged to have been able to pursue a purely liberal arts degree in fields that I found to intellectually stimulating, but also somewhat dis-serviced by a school system that took very little responsibility in making sure my time was being put towards a reasonable purpose. But

that's part of being an adult, I suppose, having to make decisions that effect your life before you understand the consequences. I also discovered that it's possible to do almost everything right, academically speaking, and still set yourself up for failure.

My college education began with lofty goals: the class I had gotten the most out of in High School was Physics and I had taken the AP for Calculus, so naturally I decided the realm for me was Nuclear Physics. I think that I was suffering under the impression that I was a smart guy (my mom had often told me so, why not?) and that I needed to ply my great intelligence towards the betterment of our understanding of the laws of the universe. Atom smashers sounded like a load of fun, I figured I'd look good in a white lab coat, and I was hoping maybe my discoveries working at CERN would get me into an intergalactic space ship a little bit faster. I was looking to step into science fiction.

The truth is, the life of a real world physicist is to Star Trek as real archaeology is to Indiana Jones. High school physics appealed to me only because it dealt in terms of visible phenomena; hyperbolas described by fired cannon balls, the effects of gravity and acceleration on a mine cart, the weight-driven trebuchets we built for our final. The physics I discovered in college we the physics of tiny particles buzzing with electricity, acting on each other invisibly, and to me, absurdly. Physics began delving into charges and atoms, and started to look like the science I did not grasp as a high school student: chemistry. Chemistry boggled me. In my memory it seemed arcane, like sorcery instead of science. I was plagued by headaches during that year and found keeping up in

chemistry a constant struggle. Having physics return to this realm of torment for me was distressing and I quickly lost interest in continuing. It was not what I had signed up for.

In retrospect, I should have pursued engineering rather than physics. The realm of engineering more closely matches the aspects of physics I found enjoyable. I like designing things, I like solving problems instead of equations. Mostly I need to be hands-on. This would have probably lead to me falling out with engineering as well, to be honest. In the end I dropped my scientist dreams altogether, going major-less for the first semester of sophomore year, then deciding to play to my strengths and pursue an entirely different course: English. I had done well with English in high school, but not purposefully pursued it. I didn't bother with English AP exams and so had to go through the basic levels in my freshman year, which I passed through with ease. Switching majors to English presented me with a choice of two different tracks: the writing track and the literature track. The difference lay in the requirements of two extra creative writing based courses for the writing track, whereas the literature track only required one and focused instead on literature course and studies. At this point in my career I chose the writing track. I had no intention of studying English in order to become a professor or a literature critic, I wanted to create art of some kind (back to the hands-on aspect of my personality).

I returned to creative writing endeavors I hadn't pursued in years, and settled into poetry classes. The classes taught me essential lessons about being conscious of your language and word choice, and the importance of writing densely. Alas, poetry was not

for me. I was looking for a direction in life, something I could make a creative career out of, and I couldn't see a way to turn this kind of writing into a living. I value poetry, but I've mostly lost my enthusiasm for it by this point in my life. Needing another writing credit, I found a screen-writing class cross-listed with Film and Video Studies. This lead to me looking at film in a new way, understanding it from a structural, practical point of view. The idea of putting together a script and making a movie from it seemed so matter of fact, and my passing interest in film developed into a more serious interest.

I was enrolled in literature and theory courses this whole time as well, laying down a sparse familiarity with the canon of theorists and schools of critical analysis. I was later to discover that my education at OU lacked many of the founding theorists that I would encounter in full force once I entered grad school: Adorno and Horkheimer, Karl Marx and his cronies, even Barthes and Baudrillard were unknown to me except in passing during my undergrad years. The benefit to this theory-light curriculum was that the focus was on pursuing subjects rather than scholars, and I chose my classes based on what I wanted to read. I built a library instead of a tool box.

It was by this method that I meandered into my first film studies course. The English department at OU was home to a single film professor, Dr. Joanna Rapf, who taught classes every spring and fall that were open to students from the English and FVS departments. While I was learning basic screenwriting in FVS and Intro Film Studies in English, in the Honors college I was learning to dissect the messages in media and becoming painfully aware of my own white, male, normalness. During this period I was

working in the Honors College with Associate Professor Jane Park, whose focus was on race portrayals in film and television.

Park served as a role model for me at this point in my education. She was the first professor I had encountered that I felt strong similarities with. She was young, struggling with her own responsibilities within academia, and also working on her own projects while teaching. It made the life of an academic seem like a viable, fulfilling career for the first time in my life.

My interests in film and in media studies manifested themselves in two ways as I prepared to graduate. I received a grant for the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programs in order to create a mini documentary where I approached academics from various fields at OU and Robert Jensen from UT with questions regarding the role of whiteness in a person's decisions and behaviors, and how to "do the right thing" as a white person who is conscious of his or her whiteness. My other film related undertaking was to write my honors thesis entirely concerning film and race studies. Working with Dr. Rapf, I set out to compare the then-recent Peter Jackson *King Kong* remake to the 1933 original in terms of its racist and masculine images. The thesis was the largest piece of writing I had completed at the time; actually it still is. It represents a time when I was comfortable in my role as a media scholar, writing unselfconsciously about the portrayals of race and sex in monster movies.

Post College and Graduate School: An Education in Academia

All of my time during my final semester was dedicated to getting these projects completed and I did not apply to any graduate programs. I took the next year off to work menial jobs, hoping a my creative impulses would take off. They did not. Living without structure or set goals didn't foster my creative pursuits so much as encourage my video games playing habits and drinking, so I decided I needed a change of scenery and a step towards structure in my life. In working with Jane Park, a UT RTF alumnus, and Robert Jensen during my UROP project, I had learned about the University of Texas' film program--Park had given me a short list of schools for film-making and studies with her Alma Mater near the top--so I applied to the program starting in the fall of 2007. In applying to RTF I had a choice between the terminal Master of Fine Arts and non terminal Masters degree. Applying to the MFA side meant I needed a finished sample film or script, and despite my documentary project and my script writing class, I didn't have anything I considered to be acceptable for submission. I applied to the MA program for Media Studies; my assumption was that I could continue to sharpen my analytical skills regarding film, while making film projects on the side. The follow excerpt from my Statement of Purpose illustrates my goals at the time:

> The program at the University of Texas is where I want to pursue my interests and
> passions. Austin is a hotspot for film right now, both in terms of media studies and

production, which is exactly what excites me. By conducting my research for the UROP Project, I found myself learning more and more from the people I talked to than from any book I read. I learned that true research and learning is a product of your atmosphere, your environment and your connections with your colleagues and faculty. I trust the faculty at UT, having already worked briefly with Dr. Jensen and with Dr. Park, who did her doctorate work at UT, and I trust that there is enough activity and creativity taking place there to satisfy both my desire to continue learning and to keep my mind open to creative ideas as well. I hope to pursue a career that will allow me to continue learning about film, as well as the chance to occasionally work with film when the opportunity arises. I would like to be a part of the environment and atmosphere that makes up the media studies program in Austin.

It was the only school I applied to, and I was (miraculously) accepted.

Austin seemed like a sort of laid-back version of LA, where everyone has a script in their pocket and small roles in film production. I had figured that the RTF department would be similarly saturated in film-making, with a lot of cross germination between the production and studies sides. The Film and Video Studies department at OU had operated like that, but I now realize that was due to the department's very small size. The RTF department proved to be a completely different beast altogether.

The culture shock I experienced upon entering UT was the result of several factors, and they require a bit of full disclosure on my part. First, I had a skewed idea of what academia was like and how once you become a graduate student you essentially give yourself over to academia. The second problem was that I had personally failed to research ANYTHING about the RTF department, its faculty, its output, or its masters

program. When I applied to RTF, I did so blindly. The decision to go to grad school was taken out of desperation and uncertainty about what else to do with my life. Austin was the only town I wanted to go to, so I wasn't interested in any of the other schools I had on my short list, but if I had investigated the department further I might have opted for a different program or waited until I had a decent sample film project and applied to the MFA program.

Once I settled into the Media Studies track I realized that the production side was not as easily accessible as I had hoped. From the start, the program proved to be fast paced and strenuous, and balancing my energy between the studies classes and the production classes was a tall order. Hopes I had of doing independent production on the side were soon abandoned.

The first semester of the program involved one production course, Andrew Garrison's "East Austin Stories" Advanced Documentary class. The course was a hands-on, guerrilla-film-making style crash course into documentary making and got pro-level camera and audio equipment into my hands for the first time. The class forced my immersion into Austin as well, as I had to get out and explore a city I had only just moved to in search of suitable documentary subjects. The experience was worthwhile, but less than successful. My knack for documentary making was woefully underdeveloped, and most of the leads I followed proved unfruitful. The final subject for the project turned out to be an east side taxi company; unfortunately another student in the class was related to the family than ran the company and so joined our group in order

to work on the documentary with us, resulting in some awkward tensions and conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, the short film project saw completion, and while I'm disappointed in the quality of the research and some technical missteps we made while shooting, I'm very pleased the editing and pace of the final piece. It represents a first step towards getting my production chops.

Meanwhile I was getting battered by the theory class all the masters students had to take. RTF 395, Theory and Literature introduced me to how much I didn't know in media theory and analysis. It was here that I discovered that I had somehow never been introduced to most of the fundamental theorists that the entire class, and by extension, the entire curriculum of the department, would hinge upon. On the one hand I recognize the value in starting at the beginning for theory: go back to Marx, so you can understand Althusser, and the rest that followed. On the other hand, I found that I was quickly falling towards disinterest and bitterness in my studies. My reaction to RTF 395 was the same as my reaction to the higher levels of physics theory. The stuff was getting too far removed from the material I did have interest in, and I didn't have enough resilience to suffer through the difficult texts for the sake of my studies.

I've often wondered how much of my difficulty with the drier aspects of any given topic is due to a personal lack of resiliency or patience or maturity, and how much is due to my never finding a field that speaks to my intellectual desires. My colleagues seemed to either have a greater aptitude in the subject of painfully dry, fundamental texts, or a greater ability to tolerate the unsavory in return for future rewards. I struggled to

find a kernel from which I could draw some passion or inspiration, to little or no avail. In 395 and many of the courses that would follow, I would typically finagle a final paper topic out of the fringes of what we had covered and cobble together some scraps of what I had learned in order to produce work that was acceptable, but just barely. I suffered the constant dread that I was simply doing it all wrong.

The RTF department is large and varied, with faculty pursuing a wide variety of intellectual pursuits, studying a a wide spectrum of media from most possible angles. And yet I never was able to find a place within it that made feel comfortable. The lessons I had learned at OU seemed to not fit anywhere here, it was an entirely different ballgame.

The Grad School Crisis

The purpose of the graduate program, as near as I've been able to derive, is to develop your depth of knowledge and expertise, with less emphasis on your breadth of knowledge. By the time you reach grad school, you should either know what you want to study and pursue intellectually or at least you should be able to dedicate yourself to pursue a topic to a sufficient depth that allows you to write solid, publishable work. I had come to UT to continue film studies of the type I had cut my teeth in at OU, while moonlighting in creative, production endeavors. I was looking for some content analysis, digging into studies of narrative and storytelling, and doing in-depth "readings" of

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movies and television media. I found very little of that among the courses and faculty leanings.

From my perspective, RTF resembles a large pie chart: it's split between production and media studies, the latter of which is split again between people working with a social sciences approach and people working from more of a critical analysis angle. Within the critical analysis group, their are people focusing on different media, with a current emphasis on television and internet sources and less people working strictly with film. Within the small subset looking at film, very few seemed interested in examining narrative structures and doing interpretive readings just for criticism's sake the way I was used to approaching it, and thus I felt like I had claim to a very small piece of the pie.

The only professor I felt in league with was Charles Ramirez-Berg, whose film history and Alternative Poetics classes were the closest thing I had to a comfort zone. Unfortunately, that comfort zone did little to push my academic growth, as they tended to lean more towards a basic level than was useful to me, leaning more towards breadth than depth. Other film-focused professors certainly work in the department, namely Janet Staiger and Thomas Schatz, but I have either not had the opportunity to take their classes or the time to develop a working relationship with them. By and large, the more time I spent in the program the greater my sense of isolation grew.

The new environment and new challenges, along with higher levels of stress and what felt like my entire life at stake, quickly crushed my ability to cope reasonably with the decisions I needed to make. I entered a stage of my life that has been defined by crippling insecurity and self imposed exile from my academic colleagues. The situation I found myself in only a few months into the graduate program called for boldness, dedication, and motivation; I instead found myself impeded by shyness and the inability to commit to things. Projects such as the undergraduate honors thesis I had produced years before seemed beyond my capacity; even the statement of purpose I submitted for admission carries a bolder, surer tone than the tone that characterizes the writing of my grad school career.

The writing block stymied three semesters' worth of thesis and report writing hours. Deciding to build on my relationship from two classes with Ramirez-Berg, I had asked Charles to be the advisor for my thesis. My topic was drawn from a sample proposal I had produced with Mary Kearney in the second part of 395, a proposal for a paper that planned to examine the non-linear storytelling capabilities found in comics and how they compare to other forms of narrative media, like film. Charles had some advice, but was basically on-board, and Mary had approved of the proposal when I presented it to the class the semester before--the only person that kept the paper from happening was myself. The idea of this thesis, the master's thesis, constructed over two semesters and endlessly polished and revised and potentially publishable--the complete opposite of this report, here--seemed impossibly weighty, like a defining statement of an academic career,

of your academic life. It loomed up over me whenever I attempted to approach it.

I told myself I needed to do more research. Who was I to write a thesis about comics storytelling? The topic seemed huge, entirely too much for me to cover as it was. I put off writing while I found new books and conducted half-hearted research, all the while with Charles helping me to prune down the topic to a more manageable size. During this time I was exploring other options for my creative urges (to be touched upon in the next chapter) and was approaching my wit's end in my regular coursework. On top of all of this, I had started a job over the summer which I needed to maintain through the school year in order to cover my expenses. Not surprisingly, I found plenty to do to fill my time that did not involve writing my thesis. The end of the semester approached and I had not written more for Charles than a rough outline. I sized up my situation and had to accept that I would not be graduating along with the rest of my Masters cohort. This added more fuel to the fire of my self imposed exile from the rest of the group, who from a distance all seemed quite functional, happy, and rewarded by their studies. I had no choice but to swallow my failure and vow to work harder the next semester.

That spring semester saw me breaking down frequently due to my adventures outside of RTF. In order to fulfill the requirement of two classes for a minor, I enrolled in the Folklore department's Introduction to Folklore, but found than my problems followed me. I was in a small class, made of incredibly bright individuals who arrived at 9 am every Wednesday ready to dig into the driest and most unbearable material I have ever encountered (my appraisal of these other students is exaggerated of course, by my

skewed perception of myself and my self doubt in the academic world. I have it on good record that other students found this class unbearable as well, but they still fared better than I did).

Still working my retail job (which was growing far more rewarding by comparison), my motivation to continue with my thesis crumbled. I had sat on the subject so long that I had become obsessed with its flaws and completely dispassionate about the subject. My meetings with Charles quit happening. As the semester wound to a close, I became incapable of producing any work. Desperate, I had to approach the professor of my folklore class with a plea for an incomplete, as I was weeks behind on the abstract due for the final paper and could see no way of completing the paper in time. The thesis was abandoned, and I faced the end of the most unproductive, damaging semester I had ever faced.

What exactly had happened? The effects of the stress and self doubt could not be ignored, even though I wanted to. I wanted a reason for why things had gone this way, but I still lack a good answer. I know what I felt: I had early on discovered that I just had no interest in the classes I was taking, and couldn't find it within me to put out the effort necessary to succeed in them with so little reward. I understood, on an intellectual level, what was required of me, but without any passion for the work I had nothing to give. I was suffering from the same ennui and depression that caught me as a physics major in undergrad, but I felt like I had no escape from the position I was in and the ennui turned into desperation. I had lost any channel for my creative interests, I could find no

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place for them in the curriculum I was fighting through, and all of my productivity shut down.

I still feel deeply conflicted over this reasoning. I feel as if you can't justify failure with your feelings. I come from a family that doesn't recognize emotional problems as forms of disability, and I've internalized that. The side of me that wants to succeed, that wanted to keep pace with my cohort and earn my place in academia tells me that my failures are due to me not working hard enough, not being well organized, and letting my emotions take precedent over my obligations. The side of me that needs to be creative and feel passion for things that I create tells me that my failures are due to my incompatibility with the system, to the fact that maybe I don't belong in academia, or at least not in this program. Part of me wants to believe that I'm not inferior, just out of place, and part of me only sees things in black or white, success or failure.

So how to make sense of this mess. That has been my lingering goal for the past year and a half. In that time I found an alternative approach to education and academia, within RTF yet radically subversive of it at times.

CHAPTER TWO

ACTLab: An Academic Alternative

In the fall semester of 2008 I was in need of another course to fill in my schedule. I was enrolled for my first semester of thesis hours and a course on women filmmakers, so I wanted to find a class that would involve some element of production if I could. As classes were about to start my decision time was short, and I remembered hearing about the ACTLab from a friend who had taken one of their classes the year prior. And so, partially out of desperation, partially out of curiosity, I enrolled into my first ACTLab course.

The class that I took part in that semester was called Extreme Freestyle Hacking. I possessed only the most basic idea about what this might even mean, and I was nervous by the mention of the word "hacking"; I was worried that the course was going to be focused on computer hacking or on electronics that were all beyond my understanding, but I was assured by the graduate coordinator and an email from ACTLab founder and professor Sandy Stone that I needn't worry. I have to admit that I approached the class with a touch of apprehension and held my breath to see what I was in for.

The other person I knew who had taken an ACTLab class had taken Weird Science instead of Extreme Freestyle Hacking, hereafter abbreviated to EFH. In a way similar to how professors offer certain classes as part of a rotating cycle, the ACTLab

offers two out its ten different classes each semester, with the recent addition of the meta-course Blackbox each semester. Her appraisal of the class wasn't as glowing as one might have hoped. Despite the name of the class, she seemed a bit taken aback by just how *weird* things in the class had been. She remarked on how the open-ended nature of the "projects" and lack of traditional academic expectations had left her feeling like the whole experience had been rather unuseful. She also didn't respond well to some of the other people enrolled and the amount of weirdness they brought to class experience. I went into the class hoping that where she had found the lack of traditional academics frustrating, I would find it a relief.

I was partially correct in my assumptions. While the break from research and theory-related studies was welcome, ACTLab was by no means a place for slacking off, and certainly not a place to come and be comfortable. From the get go, Sandy Stone's goal was to shake things up and get people out of their comfort zones. While in another class this would most likely involve getting up and introducing ourselves and saying a bit about our interests, the first day of the ACTLab course took it a step farther and had the class moving around the space doing body movement exercises and making weird loud noises. Not participating was an option, but a very conspicuous one and most people were compelled to join in.

The classroom itself was a strange space to be in; a converted media lab in one of the studios of CMB served as the ACTLab space, outfitted with large, heavy duty custom

made wooden tables on casters, covered with various paint splatters, doodles and scars and dents from years of use and abuse. When regular class discussions were taking place, these tables occupied the center of the room to form a round table in spirit, if not in actual shape. When the various movement exercises or certain projects were underway, these tables could be rolled into gaps between the bays of iMacs and computers along the walls, leaving a wide cement floor space open to mayhem. At the front of the room hung a large projection screen over a slightly elevated wooden stage, a constant reminder to the importance that performance and presentation would play in the course. Although I had taken a class that used a studio space before, nothing had used the space in quite this way. With the versatile tables and rows of computers lining the walls, the ACTLab certainly felt like a laboratory for creating stuff.

The strangeness of the introductory activities and the unusual classroom environment were accompanied by a stern warning from ACTLab TA Joey Lopez, which Sandy echoed: take this seriously, and if you aren't comfortable being uncomfortable, leave the class now. The sentiment was that the ACTLab embraced all kinds of interests, skills, talents, and curiosities, but it did not accept people who weren't willing to put effort into producing good work and learning a thing or two. The message was ominous, but honest, and I decided to stick it out. I'm not sure if anyone actually dropped the class after that warning or not, but at least we had all been warned.

Extreme Freestyle Hacking and Other Strange Things

Soon we got down to the business of Extreme Freestyle Hacking, or whatever that was supposed to mean. The funny name emphasized the fact that hacking could be taken to mean nearly anything. The definition I came to understand from the course was that hacking could mean the exploitation of any system for an unintended purpose. This could range from accessing a computer program in unintended ways to repurposing the components of a household object to make a musical instrument to various types of performance art or culture jamming. To this day I approach all ACTLab projects as if they were EFH projects, and it represents to me one of the central tenets of ACTLab's philosophy.

Joey showed us all some examples of past projects from various students' web pages on the big screen, as well as some examples from interest people outside or the ACTLab. The suggestion was, here's some stuff other people have done that we thought was pretty cool, so aim for that kind of quality. There were no training wheels other than that, no framework within which to create, just the rules that your project can't be harmful to yourself or others (so no indoor flamethrowers, jumping onto moving trains, or recitations of epic poetry). The ACTLab websites has the following to say regarding projects: "A project can be anything -- video, sound, performance, sculpture, painting, assemblage, projection, movement, film, or anything you can think of that can be made. **"Make Stuff."** It does suggest that the project have some connection to whatever

the theme of the course is, but as I stated earlier hacking is a fairly universal concept and can be applied to nearly anything. I was offered a huge amount of freedom for my first project, and naturally had no idea what to do with it.

A short time before first projects were due, Joey had everyone check in with their progress on their projects, urging us to say so if we had no idea what we were doing still. At this point I was still thinking about comics a lot, and made some claim that I wanted to try and make a webcomic that utilizes unusual narrative techniques, maybe exploring the use of links and alternate passages through the narrative. Drake Wilson, a longtime ACTLab participant and expert parade-rainer, said dryly, "Oh, so you want to invent hypertext." Someone had called bullshit on my ruse.

So I had no idea what to do for this first project. Numerous ideas were spinning around in my head, and with first projects due soon I had to go with one. My job had me working at a booth during the Austin City Limits Music Festival at Zilker Park, where dozens of bands and musical acts would be gathered for three days of performances on multiple stages. I thought about Austin's reputation as the live music capital of the world and the nature of "indie cred" for knowing about obscure bands, so I decided to invent the most obscure band of all: one that didn't exist. The idea is hardly my own, but my plan was to implement it by creating all of the peripheral material that would surround a band--the Myspace pages, the show flyers, the photos of the members--without any actual music. The grand coup was to get pictures of the band performing a gig (which would

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just be the band members hanging around at somebody's house) and photos taken with me at ACL, showing that I had met the band.

Neither of these last steps actually worked, but I got a decent Myspace account created, full of pictures and show listings at made up venues. When I presented my project to the class I proceeded to share the webpage and photos of the band as if I were just sharing something that I liked with them. I made this part of the presentation purposefully boring, hoping to mislead the class for the big reveal that it was all made up. The reveal wasn't big or dramatic, but it was effective enough; I had gotten the idea behind EFH.

The next project was where I got things to really click. I was at this time getting into the idea of steampunk, and its various possibilities for projects. Steampunk is a movement in fiction that takes the science and technology of the steam and early industrial eras and extends it into the realm of technology today, i.e. the future as imagined by a person of the past. The genre has come to influence aspects of art and fashion, and since I got became interested in Steampunk in the fall of 08 it has become a pervasive movement online. The idea of taking the technology of the past and reassembling it into a so-called "high tech" device seemed a naturally fit for an EFH project. The iPhone was relatively new at the time, so I thought to make an old fashioned version of the all-in-one media and communication device, including a mini grammaphone, telegraph and zoetrope. The scope of the project was growing out of

hand, until I decided to combine it with a personal project. Project 2 fell close to the

beginning of November, and I had decided to be a Victorian/Edwardian era time-traveler

for Halloween so I decided to go all out and build a wrist mounted time machine prop for

use with the costume, and have that be my project. Instead of the working telegraph and

grammaphone elements, I wanted the clockwork on the time piece to power a small DC

generator, just small enough to power a tiny LED or make a quiet noise. As the day came

and I worked all through the night, I realized that the generator was not going to be

sufficient to power anything, and that the mechanism I had wanted to show off was a

failure. I needed something to present, and if I didn't have a good project I at least

needed a good performance. I decided to up the surprise factor and put on a bit of a show

for the class.

I waited outside the class in the wash room while all the students arrived for

presentations. Giving them a few minutes for Sandy to have people sign up and such, I

then burst into the room in old fashioned clothes and goggles, yelling about how my

project was backfiring and that I needed to get it far away, then warning them to not let

me activate it when I came back in. I returned a minute or so later, completely

composed, with a large bag in tow. I preceded to present to them my experimental time

machine, and boasted that I would use it to return 15 minutes prior in order to not be late

for class. I turned a deaf ear to the spirited protests they made about me activating the

machine and leaped from the table with the gears spinning and rushed out the door. I

would have preferred to have had some sound effects or a fog machine or something, but

I think I made due fairly well with just my act and the construction of the time machine itself. This project remains my most satisfying to date and the archetype for how I'd like my own projects to go down.

The overall quality of the class was very dependent on what was put into it, both by myself and the other students. Sandy and Joey did not bring lesson plans for most of the days, instead letting the class follow its own course through varied discussion topics and conversations. Sometimes this ended poorly, with no one having much to talk about or being unwilling to speak up, and some days the topic of conversation would wander to far adrift for my tastes and leave me with little to contribute. However, one important factor is that these classes almost never induced the same kind of painful experiences I encountered in my other studies classes. Perhaps it was because the class never felt beholden to anything, whether it be a canon of theory, an academic institution, or even a lesson plan. If the class was unrewarding, it was your doing, not the curriculum.

Not all of the projects the participants brought in were of the caliber I could have wished for; I have high standards for myself, and sometimes they project harshly onto other people. I made a mandate for myself that I wouldn't be satisfied with a project unless I had learned something new in the process of creating it, and so when I saw someone else pass up an opportunity to gain a new skill along the way, I disapproved silently. On occasion a project would fall clearly short of what was expected. This judgment was based on whether the class believed the person had actually put out an effort or produced something worth bringing in. Sometimes a student would cast the first

stone, sometimes it would be Joey or Sandy themselves, but either way the presenter was lauded or criticized by the will of the class as a rough whole. This is not to say that I haven't had disagreements with how hard the class has come down on certain projects while other lackluster projects have been praised; if there is one flaw to this system it is inconsistency. But the looming threat that someone will call you on your BS is ever present, and keeps most ACTLabbers earnest.

The Rock Opera Project and Renewed Interest in Production

I finished EFH with a very large project, the Leaf Spring Sound Machine, a large xylophone/bell type instrument made out of automotive suspensions. The project was big and impressive, but not as satisfying as my previous one for the difficulty and cost it took to pull off. During this time I was miserably failing to write my thesis and struggling painfully to get the final written for my film class. Spring semester came and I tried to enroll in thesis writing plus two minor courses simultaneously in order to fulfill the requirement that would let me graduate. I was only able to get into one class outside of RTF, and with space in my schedule decided to go back to the well again and take another ACTLab course, this time Dream and Delirium.

This semester saw Sandy and Joey start off things with what they called a Make-a-thon in lieu of a first project. This took some of the heat off of first project

presentations by scaling down expectations a bit and enforcing a mandatory time limit of 2 minutes per presentation, but not much else really changed. I made a last-minute short film about falling asleep after your alarm has gone off and dreaming you'd already left the house, something I found appropriate given how little sleep I was getting. Another project followed where I built a little paper mache house with a door peep hole viewer pointed inside that changed appearances when the light inside went on and off. Neither of these really felt like winners to me, I wanted something bigger and more expansive than these little one shot projects. I had wanted to, since EFH, create a set of three projects that would all build upon one another into something really impressive, but no suitable ideas had yet surfaced.

During spring break I was making the drive to my parents' house and listening to The Who's "Tommy" when the idea struck me to make a short film/rock opera for my final project. I spent the rest of the drive brainstorming ideas for the project, thinking up different sets and costumes and the overall theme of the piece. Drawing further inspiration from Electric Light Orchestra's album "Eldorado," I created the themes of the opera to concern the tribulations of a dreamer whose waking life stresses and fears begin to follow him into his dream life, leaving him no respite from his problems and forcing him to address the flaws within himself. His demons would be represented by various robot and cyborg creatures, symbolizing the way in which the man falsely scapegoats technology for causing many of his problems. Throughout the three separate movements of the opera he would face technology as a form of failed enhancement, confusing

distractions, and finally the inescapable presence of technology all around him and incorporated into his very life. Upon returning to Austin, I promptly got to work on this new project.

As mentioned previously, I did not have a lot going for me academically at this point. My abandoned thesis had become embarrassing and painful to think about, and my minor class was proving to be a huge struggle. I wasn't sure what I would have to do to graduate, or whether I even wanted to. The only things I was putting effort into successfully were my job and ACTLab. Regardless of my failures and missteps, ACTLab allowed me to explore realms in more rewarding, creative ways than I was finding in my regular studies. I don't want to discredit the fact that many of my colleagues can find creative and rewarding means of reaching their academic goals, but I was simply falling apart on the way there through the stress of regular class meetings and a complete disinterest in any and all study materials that were offered. I knew for sure I wasn't graduating along with the other members of my cohort; all others were either right on track or had dropped out completely long before this point in time. Realizing this was disheartening to be sure, but in a way it also freed me from being beholden to the usual expectations of the master's degree. I knew I didn't want to pursue an academic career into a PhD program, so why should I put emphasis on media studies and traditional academic work when I was finding it so discouraging? Work in the ACTLab was stressful and difficult in its own ways, but the problems I had to overcome there felt more internal rather than systemic; the solutions to the puzzles in ACTLab could be found

within myself, by pushing my creative skills and learning new talents, while the problems in my greater academic life seemed to stem from being unable to operate within the program.

So I decided to just try and carve what I wanted out of the whole RTF experience; I wanted to just take ACTLab courses so I could have free run of the production equipment and the time to devote to making a film project, so I could maybe finally get a short film out of my time here and move on with life. I set out to make this happen in the fall of 2009, setting myself up for more lessons about working in RTF, ACTLab, and film production.

I began work on what I mistakenly assumed to be a modest project; after all, it wasn't like i was doing a feature length rock-opera, this would only be 20 minutes or so and have three songs. I just needed to make all the costumes and do all the cinematography and write and record all the music, and there was also going to be a stop motion segment but I had done that before, no big deal. I also intended to reuse elements of my old projects, namely the giant Leaf-Spring Sound Machine instrument and maybe the time-traveler project. I worked on the project in a rotating fashion: nibbling on different parts a little at a time, first the steampunkish mechanical automaton mask, then the see-through plastic cyborg armor, then getting old CRT computer monitors to use for retro graphics. I constantly jotted down notes about the premise and imagery of the

opera, developing and tightening the plot and the scenes I would need. Meanwhile, nothing on the project was actually coming together into something cohesive.

The hardest aspect to creating the project proved to be the music. The premise and plot of the thing still far too nebulous for me to actually compose lyrics about it. The images I had in mind were very clear, however. And thus on final project day, I came to campus extremely frustrated and disappointed, hauling in the only semi complete element of the project I had to show: the costume of the Gearman.

As the project grew and evolved, there was one thing I knew it needed to have: a steampunk inspired initial sequence with a big, clunky brass robot man. The three movements I had planned for the project would roughly represent past, present and future, and I wanted the technological element in the steampunk scene to manifest as a large gear-driven man who would play the leaf-spring machine like a mechanical puppet in an animated clock. The costume started as a boxy helmet made of cardboard spray painted to look like old brass and copper and covered with rivets and pipes. The mask narrowed down to a thin face with two eyes oriented vertically on one side, all intended to give the wearer a less human-like appearance. The second element of the costume required a huge backpack (also spray painted cardboard) with huge gears projecting out of the back. The gears, made out of heat-cut styrofoam, presented a unique problem, as the gold spray paint I applied to them to make them look metallic actually melted the styrofoam. I eventually got around this by coating them with watered-down Elmers glue

first, then spray painting over the glue. The backpack was built into a cheap vinyl jacket with the sleeves hacked off. The rest of the outfit consisted of heavy leather welders gloves and heavy leather boots. The narrow frame of vision out of the single eye hole causes the wearer to constantly move their head around in a creepy, inhuman way.

Overall I was happy with the costume, but I felt like it was a non-project. I didn't like how my final presentation was simply a part of a project, rather than anything complete. It went over well enough with the class, who were excited to see what else I would come up with. They would be left waiting a long time.

CHAPTER THREE

Inside the Blackbox

The fall of 2009 was going to be different. It was going to be special. It was going to be a semester dedicated to nothing but ACTLab. I had big ideas going into the classes, and a definite project I wanted get out of the process. I was in my first semester of academic overtime, free from the expectations of a thesis and by now I considered myself a pro at ACTLabbing, so I was ready for playtime. I was not prepared for the semester to follow.

Being that I wanted to work on a musical project, I enrolled in the Soundscapes section of ACTLab. I assumed I would find advice and wisdom on making music from my peers, and maybe even some fellow musicians willing to lend their talents to the project. Sandy Stone's personal background includes an impressive history of working in sound production while Joey is a huge stereo buff, so I was looking forward to their perspectives on things as well.

The other class offered that semester was Blackbox. The origins of Blackbox remain unclear to me; I believe it is a class they used to do that got revisited due to extenuating circumstances, namely pressure from the department for Sandy to take on an additional class, meeting at 9 am on Friday mornings. After one-such meeting, the time was changed to a more leisurely 2 in the afternoon.

Blackbox was exclusively set aside for ACTLab's most diehard multiple offenders, folks who had gone through at least one ACTLab class if not more in order that they be able to turn their experience and expertise toward class discussions. As stated before, Blackbox was a meta-class designed to examine the very structure and meaning of the ACTLab, focusing on the topics of pedagogy. However, like any ACTLab course, Blackbox wasn't a prescriptive "how to teach students the ACTLab way" and more of a free-ranging discussion deconstructing academia and traditional forms of class structure.

Amidst all this talk we were expected to produce projects, as per usual. Since the theme of Blackbox was more meta, the themes of the projects were left fairly wide open, so long as they had something to do with ACTLab or teaching. When Blackbox was being discussed the semester previous, the idea of doing "Special Projects" with Sandy was introduced. Now by this point I knew I wanted to write a Master's Report rather than Thesis, but I knew that the report had to be about something I *did*. The rock opera would make an ideal special project, I thought, and would give me something to base my report upon while also providing fodder for projects aplenty. Three different sound projects for Soundscapes, and three scenes of a Rock Opera, culminating in the finished piece for Blackbox with a report in the bag. Perfect.

In retrospect it's easy to see I had bitten off more than I could chew, but at the time I thought very highly of my capacity for being productive under pressure, and was determined to finish up my degree with only one semester overtime. I had approached

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Sandy with my idea for the special project and the report writing and she approved, but on the condition that I take the project seriously and complete it was planned. Thinking this would be doable, I went into the semester ready to work.

A Different Sort of ACTLab Experience

The first project I planned to execute for Soundscapes was the first number for the opera, the steampunk inspired piece. But what does Steampunk sound like? Being a literary genre first and an aesthetic and fashion movement separate, its sound is open to interpretation. The fact that I already possessed one instrument for the piece helped; for the rest of the sound I simply followed what seemed natural for the subject material, looking for old, antiquated types of instruments. The entire nature of the project changed when a rare find fell in my lap: a busted, worn out accordion showed up in a vintage store, setting me back a mere $20. As soon as I had this fantastic contraption in my possession, I forgot the pressing time concerns of the rest of my project in order to work on restoring and altering the instrument.

I intended to first of all, get the accordion in semi-working condition, and second to transform it into a unique sound producing machine. Knowing that the Gearman needed a creepy robot voice, but wanting to produce that voice effect acoustically rather than electronically, I decided to try and convert the accordion into a makeshift Talk-Box effect, where the sound from the instrument is pumped via a tube into the mouth cavity where the performer can articulate the raw noise into words and vocal-like sounds. The

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build took up quite some time, and I eventually discovered that even the mighty bellow of the accordion was not powerful enough to create a talk-box effect without electronic amplification, which I had no time to procure. My first Soundscapes project, instead of a complete song, wound up simply being a semi-working instrument with a new plexiglass case and a piezo pick up mic.

The setbacks continued in Blackbox. I soon found out that biggest trouble with being in two ACTLab classes simultaneously was the need to work on two projects at the same time, something I had great difficulty with considering how I tended to sink all of my effort into a project at the last minute in order to get it done. Trying to pull all-nighters for two projects at once was impossible. With no song to show I could hardly have produced any video segments for my first project, and had to pinch hit. ACTLabber Izzy had tried to launch several different homemade mini hot air balloons in class as one of his Weird Science projects, but sadly none of them had taken flight. I had recalled that at the time I had thought that I could probably get it to work with a different kind of heat source, and so I decided what better for a meta-ACTLab class than to revisit past experience and give an old project another go. I built a tiny pressure jet stove from Red Bull cans that ignited beautifully (with surprising volume), but sadly also could not get the balloon off the ground. While my knowledge of penny stove design was adequate, my knowledge of how a hot air balloon works was not. The project went over well enough, but didn't get me any closer to having my special project done.

By this time I knew what I wanted out of the accordion project. I had found an

alternative version of the talkbox called the Sonovox. While instructions for homemade

talkboxes exist online, they were a little too ambitious for for my taste, while the

Sonovox setup had no instructions available but seemed simple enough to create myself.

Rather than pumping the instrument sound into the vocal cavity via tube, the Sonovox

uses a set of strong loudspeakers pressed against either side of the throat to transfer

vibrations directly into the vocal cavity. Without creating sound through the voice box,

you have to just physically enunciate the sounds you want to make, which get picked up

by a microphone positioned in front of your mouth. The system was developed during

roughly the same time period as the talkbox, but it also found applications as a speaking

aid for people without use of their voice boxes. With practice, it becomes possible to

enunciate almost-coherent language into the microphone while also playing an instrument

(electric keyboard in this case) to sound through the Sonovox speakers.

I presented the sonovox setup for my second Soundscapes project. I had realized

that I could not actually run the accordion sounds through the sonovox to create the

singing accordion effect I wanted, and settled for just playing an electronic

approximation instead. For class I brought in my sonovox build with a mess of wires and

pre-amp in tow and proceeded to give a really lackluster show of the setup in action. The

fact that it worked was enough to make the project successful, but the fact that I hadn't

actually been able to use it yet for any actual song piece or performance kept it at a pretty

mediocre level. Furthermore, I had nothing to show for Blackbox, which had

presentations during the same week. I brought in the sonovox for another, better

demonstration, but Sandy let her dissatisfaction be known. The fact was, I wasn't living up to my plans for getting my special project done "no matter what," as I had thoughtlessly promised in the emails over the summer, and now I was facing a problem much larger than just a single failed project.

My notebooks from the time recall how frustrated I was becoming with how Soundscapes was going. The round of first projects was discouraging, as I found that most were either simply an exercise in the sort of sound production that the student was already very comfortable with, or was a project undertaken by a student with no knowledge of sound design that had seemingly taken no efforts to learn any. These both clashed with my personal philosophy that a project wasn't worth doing if you didn't learn something new in the process. To be completely frank, I also had very little patience with the newcomers to sound and video production, whose eagerness and enthusiasm greatly outpaced their ability to produce anything compelling for class. From a selfish standpoint, they had nothing to offer me, nothing I could learn from them. In an environment like ACTLab, where the point is to teach each other than just receive knowledge from the professor, I found their contributions lacking. Meanwhile the student who did come into the class with skills and know-how were simply delving into their own projects with little interest in branching out or working together. As the semester went on, I saw some students bring in project after project that seemed to just be reiterations of their previous work; their work was skillful, but *boring*. A few projects and students kept things interesting in the style of ACTLabs past, but they were few and

far between. I came to dread project presentation days, as most students were not keeping themselves to the suggested time limits, sometimes taking up 4-5 times as much class time on one presentation.

I believe that Soundscapes was just suffering from a less-than-ideal mix of students. Great projects still came out of the class, but there was just not enough students occupying that middle region between expert and complete newcomer, and the class lacked the same adventurous spirit I had come to expect. Complicating matters were my own selfish desires for the class, namely wanting it to serve as a means to finishing my rock opera. The discussions we were having may have been eye opening to students just breaking into the creative realms, but I found little to gain from them. Lacking any "traditional" academic classes, with their carefully laid out syllabi and goal-oriented assignments, I was looking for more structure in my schedule and didn't find it in the open-ended ACTLab environment.

Another place where lack of structure was hurting me was in the report writing department. The report/thesis task had been on my plate for over a year without me breaking word one on it, and it remained hanging in front of me like some vague, distant threat. The projects that at hand always seemed much more pressing than the report writing did, plus I was balancing it with work and issues with my living situation. Backburner doesn't do justice to where I had placed my report writing. I was once again reevaluating my academic career. The freedom I had sought in enrolling in all-ACTLab classes was now exposing me to other demons, those of procrastination and aimlessness.

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All around I felt like I just wasn't "getting" ACTLab the way I was accustomed to, especially Blackbox. It soon became abundantly clear what I *wasn't* getting, as I was brought face to face with the conflict between the media studies program I had left behind and the ACTLab agenda.

ACTLab in Action: Hacking the Ivory Tower

At the end of October, RTF's grad student run online journal FlowTv celebrated its fifth year of publication and hosted a round-table discussion about the changing and growing prescence of technology and new media in academia. The name for the event was Hacking the Ivory Tower: The Intersections of New Media, Academic Scholarship and Pedagogy. Editors Jacqueline Vickery and Alex Cho invited representatives of the faculty and student variety from departments across campus. Notable guests included the RTF department chair, Sharon Strover.

Flow publishes small, thoughtful pieces about current television programs and other media. By keeping the pieces short and the publications frequent, Flow aims to move as close to the speed of television as possible. Compared to the purely tradition modes of academic publishing, which involve lengthier research periods, extensive peer reviews, and the long delay inherent in print publishing, FlowTv does in fact move very fast. The limitations, however, are obvious: smaller pieces contain just the germ of a thesis, typically presented and explored in brief before being left open. Compared to the

massive, heavy texts familiar to media scholars, these mini articles may be swift but less satisfying. FlowTV isn't intended to replace the tradition modes of publishing so much as provide an alternative, an easily browsable assortment of quickly sketched out ponderings on current media topics.

The Flow staff had invited their guests to round table around this idea, the changing face of academic publishing and what successes and failures everyone had encountered with moving their work into the post web 2.0 era. But hacking the ivory tower? Perhaps not. As stated before, my own interpretation of hacking involved exploiting or using something in an unintended way; simple having an online presence does not constitute being "hacked." I soon found out I was not alone with my misgivings about the name.

Emails quickly circulated about the event and the desire to have an ACTLab presence there. With "new media" and "pedagogy" right in the title, it seemed odd for ACTLab to be absent. As the date approached, the emails contained desires to make things more "lively" by attending, with a certain tone of good spirited aggressiveness in the language. People congregated an hour before the panel was to start to formulate a game plan, something I missed out on entirely due to my chronic lateness, but I arrived to the panel in time to see the ACTLab contingent established along the back wall.

I had the distinct sense that the ACTLab folks were going do something to disrupt or hack the proceedings, and found myself in conflict. In most situations, I would not be

opposed to the usual ACTLab methodology of shaking things up and making things interesting by making things weird. But I had worked on Flow in the past as a column editor and I valued what they had done and were trying to do. Many of the people on the panel were people I admired and I wanted to know what they had to say, and the editors Alex and Jacqueline were members of my master's cohort, and my friends. I understood that there were long boiling differences between Sandy and Sharon, things that made the existence of the ACTLab never quite secure, and I was worried that her presence on the panel was provoking the ire of the ACTLabbers in attendance. I was torn between wanting ACTLab to do its thing hack the panel and wanting them to just play nice and let FlowTV enjoy its success. I hadn't felt this stranded between my failed stint in traditional academia and my new allegiance with alternative pedagogy since taking my first ACTLab course.

The discussion was set to take place during our usual Blackbox meeting time, so the entire class simply showed up in the room instead. Upon showing up and greeting with Vickery and Cho, Sandy and Joey were met with a revelation: Sharon's spot on the panel had initially been intended for Sandy, whose invitation had apparently become lost in the aether (ironic, considering the panel's focus on technology). They quickly offered her a seat at the front of the room, which she declined with the suggestion the Joey take it instead. The rest of the ACTLab group assembled at the rear of the room; a literal wall of solidarity. I took a place somewhere near the center of the room, next to one of my friends from American Studies and waited for the panel to get underway.

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Introductions went down the row, and from the start Joey threw curve-balls. He ran purposefully, comically long with his introduction, choosing to wrap it up by reading the Hacker's Manifesto with the panel moderators trying to make sure others got to speak. While most other panel members sat quietly waiting for the opportunity to speak, Joey jumped in with the kind of energy and bluster typical of a lively ACTLab discussion. He wasn't hostile, but he wasn't obsequious either, just seeming somewhat out of place. Adding to the overall effect was his appearance: Joey is rarely seen wearing anything other than basketball shorts, a t-shirt and mohawk, and the panel was no exception. His presence clashed with the overall tone of the panel and things felt tense on occasion. It was clear to bystanders that there was a conflict bubbling to the service in the discussion.

About 50 minutes into the panel, that conflict broke to the surface in the form of Dan Hemingson. Having sat quietly amid the squad of ACTLabbies in the back of the room, Dan patiently held his hand up waiting to make a comment. Dan is an older gentleman who is highly respected in the ACTLab, for his technically superb projects, his thoughtful, collected participation in class discussion, and his willingness in engaging the ACTLab philosophy and pedagogy to its fullest extent. When Dan got a chance to speak, the members of the panel were discussing online publishing, essentially retreading the worthiness of the Flow model. Dan, with a hint of annoyance in his voice, stated that he would like to discuss the topic that he *thought* would be the point of the panel: actually hacking the ivory tower. It was a battle cry:

"Hacking the Ivory Tower; which means making change, taking risks. To hell with peer review, what we need to do is to change the peers. The peers have to grow, the peers have to take risks... I don't care if they're tenured or not, the peers need to get off their duffs and move along. [...] We need to change. And if we think 'New Media' is this new cute little term that means 'online', then have a lot to discuss in this meeting that we're not going to get done with today."

Dan's contribution was met with applause from the ACTlab and complete and utter indifference from the rest of the panel. It makes sense, in a way; Dan had essentially called for the established members of the department to shuffle off or shape up, while they were sitting in the room. It was chilling how no one chose to answer to him, though. It was as if someone had drawn a clear line between who counted and who did not. Dan had brought the heat, but had no position to back it up and was subsequently buried.

At the end of the discussion, Sandy raised her hand. Having foregone her position on the panel in order to sit back and take it all in, she chose the moment to revisit Dan's assertion. She pointed out how even though the panel was meant to celebrate FlowTV and its progressiveness, there were people in departments all over the place, and in RTF itself, who "fight bitterly" to keep something like FlowTV from existing, and the same can be said about the ACTLab. She pointed out how Dan had spoken and no one had heard him. She advised to attack the Ivory Tower at its root, at the risk of making enemies. The only solution is to "be the change you want to see." She concluded with a powerful analogy: Guerrilla warfare, defined as warfare that you never win. The best you can do is just never lose, and eventually you might see change.

The aftermath of the panel was interesting. Joey thought the entire thing had gone very well, and I think he found the discussion and tension exciting, while others were understandably left confused and upset about what had gone on. I expressed my own uncertainty about whether the ACTLab had conducted itself properly. I felt the tension between the academic side and the ACTLab side acutely, and I wasn't sure that I would have conducted myself the way Joey had were I in his place. I had intended to air my grievances at the next meeting of Blackbox, but Sandy came to me first. She reminded me that I had, in spite of my difficulties within academia and the media studies program, had things really easy. The guerrilla warfare she had spoken of was something she had been engaged in her entire stay at the department. Dan joined in the conversation, filling me in on how the panel hadn't been the first time he'd been denied a voice within the university. The point was, for people who had been dealing with the department far longer than I had, the time for politeness and fairplay was over. ACTLab was engaged in a battle to remain visible within a culture of elitism. I had been participating in ACTLab at a fun level, making projects for myself and taking for granted that ACTLab was around to support that.

I also realized that I didn't have the conviction to ever fully understand the ACTLab philosophy, the *fu qui*. I was still caught between the desire to make it in the traditional academic world I had tried to abandon and the danger and excitement of the ACTLab. It seemed like a battle, and you had to pick sides if you really wanted to get

involved. I had to admit that I just didn't know myself or what I wanted well enough to dedicate myself fully to either.

I felt like there should have been a way for ACTLab to exist alongside traditional academia without conflict. What I had learned about pedagogy from Sandy and Joey seemed like it should have translated into other classrooms, yet it felt like there was a dichotomy in place that prevented that exchange. It was upsetting to me that I had stumbled into a conflict with roots far predating my own academic career, more complicated than I imagined. I felt like things should have been different but I had no idea what to do.

It's a personal failing, really; Sandy had flat out said it herself, be the change you want to see. Trying to build a stronger bridge between ACTLab and the rest of the department would have been a hard fight, but I'm sure people on both sides would love to see it happen. After the Flow panel, someone raised the question, what if ACTLab hosted a panel? Who would we invite? What would be discussed? It's still something I'd like to see happen. By this point in the semester however, I had enough on my plate just trying to keep up.

The Gearman Cometh and Independent Film Making

Scared straight by a failure in Blackbox for project two and the heavy business that had been the Flow panel fallout, I buckled down on my work for project three. I had recorded most of the song and was now just struggling to figure out what to do with it. I

was determined to present at least one section of the rock opera in some form or other, and while I wanted to get it filmed and have a video to present, things weren't lining up that way. I took counsel from ACTLabber par excellance Dustin Younse who reminded me that video was great and all, but few things trumped live performance in terms of impressing your audience, especially an ACTLab audience. Literally the night before the presentation day I built a set of curtains on a collapsible wooden frame. The curtains were strung and weighted in such a way that they could be drawn from one side, then when released would pull themselves shut. With a few hours to burn I shoved the furniture in my house out of the way, donned a mad scientist outfit and began filming a video.

The next morning found me transporting a costume, curtain framework, and the leafspring instrument to campus. The guy helping me was probably not amused. Toward the end of presentations I requested some time to set things up. With the curtains set up on the studio's stage, I effectively had a smaller screen I could project my video onto, blocking my leaf spring machine from view. Dustin helped me set up the projector to display on this smaller screen, and I was ready to go. I introduced the theme of my project, contextualizing this number for those not familiar, then proceeded to lay down on the stage. The room went dark and the video and song began to play on the screen. While on-screen a mad scientist "Doctor" cavorted about with gears and tools, describing the sorry state of the dreaming protagonist who found himself without hands or the ability to speak, I was hiding behind the curtain frantically donning the gearman outfit. As the

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Doctor completed his part of his song, I emerged in costume from behind the curtain, bathed in red light from the projector. The gearman's vocals were already recorded of course, so I merely pantomimed onstage until the Doctor urged the Gearman to do what he was built to do. I went to draw the curtains and reveal the leaf spring instrument.

It was at this point that things began to go severely wrong. The gearman costume allowed for precious little vision, and I was on a stage bathed with a small amount of red light. In addition I was wearing thick heavy gloves and the string for the curtains was extremely thin. I was completely incapable of manipulating it through the gloves. I finally gave up on the curtain apparatus, and just tried to throw the curtains aside, ineffectively. As I went to instrument, I realized I could not find the mallets needed to play it. I was fumbling for them in the dark while the music was cued up for me to start banging on the machine, expressing the pent up rage of the gearman. I did the only thing I could think of: I tore leaf springs out of the machine and began to slam them together. I tore the machine apart, building to the climax of the performance which was *supposed* to have been the sudden shutting of the curtains, which were teetering about the stage by this time. Not sure how else to end the performance, I just sort of pushed them over and ducked behind the nearest thing, the leaf spring instrument. The lights and sound went off and crouched, panting and terrified about what had just happened.

The performance proved that if you're going to fail, it helps to fail big. People were impressed enough with what I had managed to pull together, snafus and all. This

was the first incarnation of my work anyone had seen, and most were very excited about what I had done. The "performance" outshone the music, and a good deal of the class hadn't seen the gearman or the leafspring machine before so they wanted to discuss that rather than the music I had spent so long working on.

I was then hit with the realization that I still needed a final project for Blackbox. I thought about what the class had been about: learning about ACTLab and pedagogy. For me the big lessons had come from the Flow panel, when I finally got the bigger importance of the lab and why it did things the way it did. I decided to carry on with the musical theme and wrote a quick little song telling the story of my career in ACTLab, from my boredom with paper writing to my time machine to my decision to write a rock opera to my inability to produce said rock opera,and finally to the lessons about guerrilla warfare and just trying to keep up with the pace of things. I brought in my keyboard and set up it on-stage to perform live. It was hardly the most polished performance I could have done, but it got the job done. It summed up my feelings, and in a way was the first draft of this report.

I made the decision not to take more ACTLab courses in the spring semester. I actually didn't take any courses, instead enrolling only in report writing hours in order to avoid taking out any more loans and putting myself deeper in debt. I also had come to the realization that taking an ACTLab course requires flexibility and agility of mind that seemed incompatible with trying to accomplish a major project long in the planning

process. Going into an ACTLab class with a goal in mind could only result in frustration, and it's not fair yourself or other people in the class. So I resolved to go independent, working with Sandy on my report throughout the semester and working on my rock opera on my own time, at my own pace, this time with more realistic goals. Sandy and Joey met my proposition for getting the report written with concern bordering on skepticism, but I set a timeline for the chapters and have stuck to it closely like a contract, not *perfectly* on time but keeping abreast of it for once.

Strangest of all that after all this time in grad school, going through all the missteps and tribulations of regular academia and ACTLab and everything in-between, I had finally stumbled back onto the thing I had come to UT looking to accomplish: independently working on a film project while finishing my other studies.

Have I finally found success working independently? Heck no. I have yet to complete the second piece of music for the opera, although I have it about 50% done as I write this. Not taking out student loans has meant that I've had to work increased hours in retail, leaving me much less time each week to do anything, and I've faced the growing concerns of being an adult who's not a full time student, like running out of insurance and the looming spectre of loan payments. The disappointment of not having a complete rock opera is at the moment bearable due to having the freedom to know I can do it on my own time. Completing it without access to the school's equipment and editing software may prove a challenge, but I still have friends from ACTLab who liked my project and

were interested in helping to see it done, so I know there will be a way when I finally get to that point. It has time to develop, and the longer I hang on to it the more it evolves. I have other things in my house that I need to get in order right now, so it's good to know that project will get finished out of my own desire, and no one else.

Conclusion:

  I complete my graduate school career in a time of change, for both the RTF department and ACTLab itself. The chair of the department, Sharon Strover, who has defined so much of the department's behavior and the relationship with ACTLab, has moved on. At the same time, Sandy Stone has chosen to accept a retirement package while remaining a professor emerita. Currently there are no ACTLab classes scheduled for the fall of 2010, even though as a professor emerita Stone retains the ability to teach classes should they be offered. It is uncertain at this time what lies in the future for ACTLab, whether it will return to the University for the fall or not. The students and supporters of the ACTLab wish to see it continue and are spearheading a movement to get the classes put back on the schedule.

    I prepare to move on from academia without any certain plans for further education. My experiences within RTF and ACTLab have taught me to value school as a means to create something more than a degree. This report reflects upon my decisions to focus on the projects I made with others and the lessons I learned about academia and pedagogy and alternative routes through the university system rather than a research paper. The report is as much for me as for the committee reading it.

For every difficult experience I had completing a course, I was learning about myself and how I learn, and for every failed project I presented I learned about my limitations and how to accept the expectations of others. I wanted to present these findings in this report so others can read it at my website. It might be helpful to someone, in its own way, despite not being a piece of research or publishable work, and that will be good enough for me.

VITA

Donovan Gentry attended most of High School in The Woodlands, TX, after which he enrolled in the University of Oklahoma, Norman, from 2002-2006. Upon graduating this school with honors, he collected materials for graduate school applications and submitted to the University of Texas, Austin, in the Radio Television Film Department, which he has attended since 2007 in pursuit of a Master's degree in Media Studies.

Permanent Address: 4 Wind River Ct

Conroe, TX 77384

This report was typed by the author.