A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT CONDITION OF NICHE MARKET, INDEPENDENT MOTION PICTURE PRODUCERS

By

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter

Mackenzie Morgan Cole

You are so bright and beautiful. You can do anything you set your mind to!

I want to thank my wife Courtney for all of her love, patience and support as we went through this process. It wasn't easy, but we did it! I want to thank my brother Joe who pushed me to be my best and encouraged me to keep going when I was ready to quit. "Boom goes the dynamite." Thank you to my best friend Scott Smith for dragging me along with him to the pinnacle of higher education. Thank you to my parents; Charles and Judy Cole, my in-laws; Kevin and Sonya Morgan, my brother John, my sister-in-laws; Melissa and Sandy and all the rest of my family and friends who cried, laughed and sweated over this thing with me. I love you all.

Abstract

This dissertation provides researchers with a window into the field of motion picture production from an inside-looking-out viewpoint filmmakers actively working in the field of motion picture production. Through a series of in-depth interviews, producers discuss the complexity of their roles and give first-hand accounts of what it means to be a filmmaker working outside of the corporate studio system of production. The study substantiates Bourdieu's model of the field of cultural production and shows how it is applicable to the study of producers. The study also expands previous research, helping to build a more complete account of the current state of the field of motion picture production.

Producers interviewed for this study include: Ted Hope, producer of over sixty films and selected for this study because of his particular involvement as producer for the film *American Splendor;* Eric Gitter, who produced 2010's surprise hit *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, a film based on the mildly successful graphic novels created by Bryan O'Malley; Christine Walker, who produced over fifteen films and worked on both *American Splendor* and *Howl,* a film based

on popular beat poet Allen Ginsberg; Marisa Miller Wolfson, who directed and co-produced the 2010 film *Vegucated;* Ben Steinbauer, director/producer of *Winnebago Man*; Bradley Beesley, producer of six films such as *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* and *Okie Noodling*; Sarah Price, producer/director for *American Movie, Summercamp* and others; Tracy Droz Tragos, producer for *Be Good, Smile Pretty* and *Rich Hill*; Tim Kirk, *Room 237,* a film exploring the theories behind Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*; Jon Betz, producer for *Queen of the Sun* and *Seed: The Untold Story;* Jon Reiss, producer of street art film *Bomb* It and author of *Think Outside the Box Office;* Stan Lee, former president and CEO of Marvel Comics and executive producer of *Spider-Man, Hulk,* and *X-Men*; and Grant Curtis, the producer for three *Spider-Man* films directed by Sam Raimi, as well as Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell*.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

There are many factors that influence the production of a motion picture, and one of the strongest is the role of the producer and his or her decisions. The central theme of this dissertation is to discover the current practices of independent film producers and how they perceive their own motives, and how those motives in turn impact the decisions they make during a film production. By capturing the motives, decisions, and practices of independent producers we have a snap shot of what it is like to take part in contemporary independent motion picture industry. The motion picture industry is situated within the larger framework of capitalistic society of the United States, thus giving definition to the culture contained within. This culture of independent motion picture production are those artists and makers who operate outside of the traditional Hollywood studio system in order to bring their creations to a wider theatrical audience. This study seeks to bring clarification of independent motion picture producer's role by examining their motives through common themes that emerge through a series of case study analyses. The analyses will help identify the motives and influential factors that may have an impact on the process of a motion picture's production. This study

exposes some of the variables that are shaping the independent motion picture industry and the relationship between audiences, producers, and motion pictures.

Statement of the Problem

A majority of motion picture research is focused on textual analysis of narrative, audience reception, and interaction, or the political underpinnings, or social commentary, of motion pictures. Most of this research does not give direct insight about the motives of producers as they make decisions; particularly, as they work to produce motion pictures relevant to a niche audience or target market. This study expands current research and examines producer's motives in the context of independent film production. The delineation of these factors could help those studying media and film production to have a better understanding of impact that niche market independent film producers have on the motion picture industry and on society in general.

According to the Producer's Guild of America (PGA), a producer is the person who is with a motion picture from concept to distribution, giving them the unique perspective of knowing the most intricate details of the entire production process (2012). The PGA breaks the roles of motion picture producers into four main categories

development, pre-production, production, and post-production/marketing. Individuals seeking membership to the guild can be inducted through a nomination process and proof that they have served in at least one role established in their guidelines. On larger corporate studio productions with large multi-million dollar budgets there may be the luxury of having multiple individuals serving the various functions of the producer; many independent producers must fulfill these roles by themselves or with the help of very few others. The guidelines used by the Producer's Guild will be used as a baseline in this study to compare/contrast the activities of those producers interviewed and to help us see just where the role of independent motion picture producers diverge from the standards (see appendix A for list of PGA standards).

The motion picture industry is an economically dangerous business, with the potential to make or lose millions of dollars on each project. It is no surprise that business and marketing experts have long taken interest in the process for choosing which films are 'green lit'. With motion picture producers rising through the ranks from all areas, there is a desire to understand what influences these individuals to make decisions.

> "Decision-making style varies across the different parties involved in the production and distribution of movies. Motion picture producers, coming from artistic backgrounds, tend to believe in more intuitive styles. In contrast, executives in who interact more closely with retailers and consumers, generally see more value in formal decision models" (Eliashberg, Weinberg, Wierenga 437).

It is this desire to understand the minds of those in a position to move a film production forward and thus impact a large amount of individuals and the economy that is at the core of this dissertation. Exploring the minds of producers who are risking their social and economic viability every day is an area of largely untapped research potential.

The product of this research is a document of the thoughts and language of producers who are active in the cultivation of motion picture projects that are a balance of economic and artistic capital. Allowing producers to discuss their motives and their decision making process, in their own words, will provide data that can be analyzed for tendencies and patterns which may lead to a better understanding of the economy and social expectations of motion picture producers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the motives of niche market, independent film producers in light of the

shift in the ways in which films are being made in a highly interactive environment. It is an exploration of the role that independent producers occupy within motion picture production and the decisions they make. The concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production in which economic, cultural, social, and educational capital are a means to power within an ever-changing hierarchy provide a basis for us to better understand the field of independent motion picture production. Bourdieu's (1993) concepts are at the center of an argument that examines the role of cellular components of culture, such as the independent motion picture production industry, and shows us how they influence a larger society.

Need for the Study

Many things have changed in recent years in regard to the things that can influence a producer's motives, which in turn impact the decisions they make. Examples of this are the large shifts in the way motion pictures are created via instantaneous feedback of audiences with producers. If media producers can find ways to better communicate and incorporate their audience's desires, they may in turn be better equipped to create more meaningful and personally gratifying films, while maintaining profitability for corporate entities.

If it is true as Bourdieu states, that the field of cultural production is a collective space, then a thorough study should consider not only target audience, but all agents within motion picture production. And currently there is a void in regard to the role of the modern independent motion picture film producer. So, Bourdieu's analytical construct of "the field of cultural production" serves as the basis for a divergent method of understanding the role that producers occupy. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu makes the argument that cultural works are the result of all agents within a specific field. In order to understand the construction of cultural artifacts within these fields Bourdieu cites Howard Becker:

> …Inquiry must extend to all those who contribute to this result, i.e. the people who conceive the idea of the work (e.g. composers or playwrights); people who execute it (musicians or actors); people who provide the necessary equipment and material (e.g. musical instrument makers); and people who make up the audience for the work (playgoers, critics, and so on) (Bourdieu, 35).

This study seeks to expand the understanding of how independent producers operate and the ways in which they impact the media industry, to fill a gap in the previous research. Exploring the role of the producers within the

production of a motion picture will give a better understanding of the strongest factors of influence in independent producers decisions.

Research Questions

In order to uncover the intricacies of how a film is produced from the perspective of a modern, niche market, independent producer, the following research questions were developed. Through initial conversations and observations of media producers working in the field, questions arose as to the ways in which they operate and the motivations for their actions. The investigative nature of this research lends itself to the development of questions that would allow for each producer to respond specifically to questions that address their motives, whether they are driven by economic capital, social or cultural capital, or their autonomous artistic desires.

Research Question One

What impact do the potential gains or losses in economic capital from a motion picture project influence the decisions of a modern, niche market, independent motion picture producer?

Producers are the heart of a motion picture and serve a variety of functions depending on the type of producer

they are and the type of film they are producing. They have the potential to generate a variety of types of capital. And according to the Producer's Guild of America, their role is directly responsible for overseeing all areas of a motion picture's production, including levels of artistic creativity as well as economic capital. As the maestro of their band of financial, creative, and technical individuals, they have the authority to guide a production to benefit whichever areas they see fit.

Research Question Two

What impact do the potential gains/losses of cultural and/or social capital from a motion picture project have on decisions of a modern, niche market, independent motion picture producer?

This addresses the question as to what extent social or cultural capital is part of the equation as a film is considered for production. For producers, the promotion of their status in peer groups (societal capital) and the promotion of their status by audiences, or the larger culture (cultural capital) influences the decisions they make and their own professional and personal goals.

As the way in which producers and audiences communicate has shifted to more immediate forms of

communication, audiences' demands have begun to drive the direction of content. As a way to explore this concept, the perspective of motion picture producers, whose viewpoint can sometimes be lost in the discussion of media studies, will be examined for ways to fill the gaps in current literature. The process of motion picture production is a team effort and every film production is its own experience. This question approaches the issues of who or what has the largest external influence in the direction of a film.

Research Question Three

Are the artistic desires of niche market, independent motion picture producers fulfilled by motion picture production?

Within the field of motion picture production, producers occupy a position of power upon which they balance the responsibilities of bringing both artistically creative and economically viable products to the market. It is the aim of this study to discover the intentions of the producers in the cases examined to determine how much of what they do fulfills their own desires to create works of art.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this dissertation revolve around the exploration of what influences the decisions of motion picture producers in today's convergent media landscape with high levels of audience interactivity. This research expands the literature on the role of a producer and gives researchers a better understanding of the meaning of motion picture productions, as well as giving industry professionals a better idea of how to manage their own productions.

Motion picture producers are at the crux of a rapidly changing media environment. Those operating within the frame of a capitalistic society make decisions that place them between the poles of corporate profitability and artistic autonomy.

The self-perception of producers and how they view their actions should offer researchers a better comprehension as to why independent motion picture producers take on the projects they do, and leads to more precise definition of how producers make decisions during a motion picture production.

Objective One

Provide baseline qualitative data on motives that can influence the decision-making and production focus of independent niche market motion picture producers.

Objective Two

Provide qualitative data that provides insight to the potential relationships that exist between financial and cultural expectations, and any existing intrinsic, artistic desires of an independent motion picture producer. This study will give new revelation of the thought process in which a modern motion picture producer goes through.

Objective Three

Provide qualitative data that reveals the hierarchy of capital in the decision-making process of the independent niche market motion picture producer. Bourdieu's model of the field of cultural production provides a structure of capital that we can compare to the motivations of motion picture producers to gain a better understanding of how and why decisions are made.

Motion picture producers in the United States operate within a larger field of capitalistic society and thus are almost always motivated, at least in part, by economic capital. Somewhat linear in nature, a producer's position within the field of motion production varies from project

to project and is dependent upon many variables, including size of audience, budget for the motion picture, and the subject matter of the film amongst others. For this study, the definition of a producer refers to creative leaders involved in a filmmaking project who strive to maintain the artistic vision of their project by working outside the largely corporate studio system that is driven by demands for profit.

In addition to seeking independent financing outside the major studios, many independent producers will also seek distribution deals that take their films to major film festivals, or 'art-house' theaters. Independent producers may or may not seek to sign distribution deals with major studios after a film has completed production.

One of the aspects of the modern motion picture producer is that they are dealing with the profound impacts Internet technology has had had on the communication process between audiences and industry professionals. As audiences become more active and have more control over the media they consume, motion picture producers must become savvier in the ways they market their products. Over the past 10-15 years society has seen the rise of a much more influential and fanatic audiences who are no longer

ridiculed but rather celebrated in a rapidly expanding consumer culture.

The direct marketing of media to these niche audiences who self-identify with cultural artifacts, such as motion pictures, for social or economic capital is a prominent element achieving success as a modern independent producer. As audiences have more choices they can utilize cultural artifacts to help create their own identities. By doing so, it allows savvy producers to create products that directly fill the needs and desires of these niche groups.

Money is a medium that has value beyond the value it brings to the exchange of goods and services. Economic capital drives capitalist society and dominates all other forms of capital. It is what gives the Haute Bourgeois, of Bourdieu's Field of Cultural Production, their dominance over the field and the pursuit of economic gain influences even the most autonomous artists in the field.

Motion picture producers must work to gain social capital with multiple groups, both their professional affiliations within the motion picture industry as well as the relationships with their audiences. Particularly audiences who may also have their own system of credentials in the form of fandoms surrounding cultural artifacts, for instance such as films, television shows or comic books.

Bourdieu defines social capital as "...membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them" (Bourdieu 1986). These are the non-material credentials carried by individuals, which gives them authority and respect within a field, usually in the form of official titles, education, etc.

John Fiske (1989) refers to the bourgeois of Bourdieu's field as the dominant class. Although his claims of undermining of the dominant class through appropriation and oppositional reading are important, he fails to acknowledge that by reading and appropriation of the texts, people are still under the dominant culture's reign. The readers have entered and are participating in the media industry's field. By entering and participating in the field they empower the dominant class. Foucault (1995) implies the dominant class in the watchtower of the panopticon surveys popular culture, capitalizing upon consumers while distracting them from truly important issues, thus keeping them suppressed.

For this study, niche audiences are considered as a group of consumers within a field of cultural production who have similar characteristics and interests. Many times independent films cater to niche audiences. Sherry Ortner (2013) points out a 1996 study by Michael Curtin, she quotes Curtin as saying, "the industry has been increasingly restructured to seek, and to take advantage of, niche markets, markets that may be smaller in size but that generate greater 'intensity' in their audiences" (Ortner, p.43). During the 1990s, around the time of Curtin's study there was a reemergence of films and cultural events that catered to these niche groups. Acceptance of media fandom as a legitimate pastime as seen in the rise of fandom scholarship, and the explosion of sci-fi, fantasy and comic book related media were all a part of this phenomenon. As Curtin notes:

> One of the consequences of this new environment is that groups that were at one time oppositional or outside the mainstream have become increasingly attractive to media conglomerates with deep pockets, ambitious growth objectives, and flexible corporate structures. As the channels of distribution have grown more diverse, the oppositional has become more commercially viable and, in some measure, more closely tied to the mainstream (Ortner, 43).

The definition of a producer refers to creative leaders involved in a filmmaking project who strive to maintain the artistic vision of their project by working

outside the largely corporate studio system that is driven by demands for profit. Motion picture producers in the United States operate within a larger field of capitalistic society and thus are almost always motivated, at least in part, by economic capital. Somewhat linear in nature, a producer's position within the field of motion production varies from project to project and is dependent upon many variables including size of audience, budget for the motion picture, and the subject matter of the film amongst others. In addition to seeking independent financing outside the major studios many independent producers will also seek distribution deals that take their films to major film festivals, or 'art-house' theaters. Independent producers may or may not seek to sign distribution deals with major studios after a film has completed production.

One of the aspects of the modern motion picture producer is that they are dealing with the profound impacts Internet technology has had had on the communication process between audiences and industry professionals. As audiences become more active and have more control over the media they consume motion picture producers must become savvier in the ways they market their products. Over the past 10-15 years society has seen the rise of a much more influential and fanatic audiences who are no longer

ridiculed but rather celebrated in a rapidly expanding consumer culture.

With the exclusion of Grant Curtis, Eric Gitter and Stan Lee, the producers interviewed here mainly work outside the corporate studio system seeking to primarily fund their project without the aid of the studio system in order to ensure the most autonomy possible. Currently there are six major corporations that control over an overwhelming majority of the content Americans see, hear and read. Since 1983 concentration of media power has gone from more than fifty major companies to five traditional media companies specializing in television, film, print and radio (Bagdikian). Many of the film studios controlled by these conglomerates utilize methods of vertical and horizontal integration to control the market.

As the future of distribution was a major issue of the interviewees the term should be clarified. In general when the producers in this study discuss distribution they are talking about reaching an audience any way possible. While a theatrical release of their films seemed to be the goal for most participants, many were also very interested in various forms of digital distribution such as video on demand through cable and satellite providers as well as

internet based streaming services such as Netflix and Youtube.

One of the most difficult aspects of working in the field of media is trying to define or generalize a wide variety of media formats delivering similar, or identical, content. In most cases the terminology used depends on the distribution methods intended for the production. Films or movies are most often used when speaking about productions created for screening in large format movie theaters. The term video is most often used when discussing made for television or Internet productions. For this study, a motion picture refers to any kind of film, video, or other moving image intended for theatrical presentation.

The rapidly changing technologies of media production and consumption have led to major shifts in the ways in which our media is being produced and is having a major impact on the creative individuals driving the content we consume. In order to gain a perspective on the challenges and possibilities now open to those motion picture producers facing these changes, a series of qualitative in-depth interviews was conducted to obtain the first-hand accounts from producers working in the industry. Having a better understanding of the purpose of this study, we will

next look at the relevant literature pertaining to the subject of producers working in a convergent media landscape.

`Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Capturing the motives, decisions and practices of independent producers through a qualitative study such as this, allows us to grow our knowledge about how contemporary independent motion picture industry and builds a database of experiential knowledge. In order to understand how the decisions and practices of independent producers working in the motion picture industry have changed, we must first examine the existing framework of literature that surrounds producers and the study of production methods. Surprisingly, there has previously been little interest in understanding the producer's motivations in motion picture production and much more focus placed on the two areas of audience interactivity, and the day to day functions of film crews on set.

This review of literature draws from a wide variety of disciplines, including business texts, film history, production studies, and cultural studies revealing the lack of focus on the motivations of motion picture producers, and the holes in film and media literature regarding the role of producers. Provided here are examples research that give a general overview of the state of current literature about this subject and are helpful in understanding how

this research was developed and led to the thesis of this study.

BOURDIEU'S FIELD OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu makes the argument that cultural works are the result of all agents within a specific field. In order to understand the construction of cultural artifacts within these fields we must extend inquiry to all those contributing to the field (Bourdieu 35). If it is true that the field of cultural production is a collective space, then a thorough study should consider all agents within that field, including the producers.

In *Not Hollywood* (2013), author Sherry Ortner points out that there is "an assumption of a relatively clear-cut boundary between the world of independent film and the world of Hollywood studios." She goes on to note that "Bourdieu has pointed out that the idea of such a boundary is an ever-reproduced effect of the underlying structure of and field of cultural production, the oppositional duality of art and commerce." In her argument she points our that Bourdieu argues that within any field of cultural production there is a struggle:

> The boundary of the field is a stake of struggles, and the social scientist's task is not to draw a dividing line between the agents involved in it by imposing a so-called operational definition, which is most likely to be imposed on him by his own prejudices or presuppositions, but to describe a state (long-lasting or temporary) of these struggles and therefore of the frontier delimiting the territory held by the competing agents (Bourdieu 1993:42)

From this Ortner draws the conclusion that "Many people in the world of independent film would agree with Bourdieu that the boundary between "indies" and "Hollywood" is a kind of structural illusion."(Ortner p.46)

The hierarchical structuring of the field, combined with a concentration of capital at the dominant pole, makes achieving success within the field of motion picture production difficult. As corporate film studios within the field possess the most capital become entrenched, they work to defend their dominant position and contain and/or co-opt those agents who oppose them (i.e. the rich get richer). As production and distribution models shift there are shifts in the control and domination within the field. Smaller independent filmmakers may not be able to achieve the same level of success that some of the studios have, the access to concentrated niche audiences via social media such as

Facebook and Twitter, and innovative crowdsourcing techniques, Kickstarter and Indie Go-go make it possible for independents to earn a living creating their own projects.

While it is true that recent developments in audience interactivity have forced motion picture producers to more closely monitor their audiences, too often the research regarding this phenomenon is focused on audience empowerment and less on those producing the motion pictures, and the shifts in power, production and distribution.

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the field of cultural production, in which the accumulation of capital is a means to power in an ongoing struggle to maintain dominance, are the basis of an argument that shows how cellular components of culture such as the motion picture industry are functioning in a capitalistic society. Bourdieu's analytical construct of "the field of cultural production" serves as the basis for a method of understanding the role that producers occupy within the motion picture industries.

A benefit of using Bourdieu's model to study the dynamics of the motion picture industry is that the field of motion picture production is filled with hierarchical structures that allow for shifts in power to occur, which can result in the overthrow of established dominance. The

industry is filled with individuals working to define their position through the collection of various types of capital (economic, political, social and cultural). These individuals then have the opportunity to come together to form groups in which they can work together to gain or maintain status within the field. These communities within the field are governed by two principles of hierarchy as outlined by Bourdieu: "the heteronymous principle, favorable to those who dominate the field economically and politically," and "the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake'), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise" (Bourdieu, 40-41).

Situating the field of motion picture production within the larger economic field of capitalism allows us to better understand the relationships of power and the corporatization of cultural production that allow creativity to meld into that capitalist system (John L. Sullivan in myers, banks, caldwell 45). We must enter this study of culture, knowing that the artifacts created within the field of motion picture production will be shaped and conformed to meet the expectations of a society driven by

economic profitability. Longtime proponents of audience empowerment have even begun to acknowledge the realities of operating within these larger societal norms, Jenkins, Ford and Green yield to this reality in *Spreadable Media*:

> We accept as a starting point that the constructs of capitalism will greatly shape the creation and circulation of most media texts for the foreseeable future and that most people do not (and cannot) opt out of commercial culture. Our arguments are thus often directed toward corporations, recognizing that the policies that most directly impact the public's capacity to deploy media power are largely shaped by corporate decision makers - true in the U.S. in particular and increasingly so in a global context.(jenkins, ford, green xii)

Capitalist society is a system of constant motion and shifting of power. There are no definite lines, but blurry divisions between groups vying for position creating a spectrum of power between those at the top of culture and those at the bottom. The rejection of some ideas and the naturalization of others through this system of inculcation and arbitrary legitimacy can lead to a breakdown and stratification of cultural power and a tendency to favor the bourgeois.

The field of motion picture production in the United States can be viewed as a highly concentrated version of a capitalist consumer culture. In a capitalist society economic capital is the most powerful driving force and all other sources of power are subjugated to the power

of economic capital. Cultural, artistic, and social capital are used as a way to generate even more revenue. In this system, those who control economic capital in turn control many other aspects of society and most other forms of capital.

Jeffrey Brown (1997) goes on to say that much like our capitalist economy, the cultural system is distributing its resources on a selective basis to create a non-fiscal distinction between the privileged and the deprived. This system values certain "tastes" while devaluing others. This cultural divide is reinforced by the ruling classes' naturalization of preferred tastes by controlling institutions such as universities, museums, and art galleries. As Brown also says, "High culture is socially and institutionally legitimated as the 'official' culture, distinguishing between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.'"

Motion picture production is a good example of Bourdieu's concept of the field, "a social arena in which people are maneuvering and struggling for resources" and the struggle to accumulate capital.

THE LACK OF PRODUCER FOCUS

Media studies over the past several decades have seen a lack of focus on the means of production within the motion picture industry. With a few exceptions, most notably Todd

Gitlin's *Inside Primetime (1983),* Horace Newcomb's *The Producer's Medium* (1983), and more recently John Caldwell's *Production Culture,* Mark Deuze's *Managing Media Work* there has been comparatively little study of the way media is actually made. Led by Caldwell's scholarship, there has been a resurgence in 'production studies' that seems promising for those who are interested in examining what goes on behind the scenes of motion picture production. Denise Mann, points out media studies' proclivity to focus on other things, "Production studies are still a relatively new phenomenon given an ongoing preoccupation in media scholarship with texts and audiences or, alternatively, with political economic trajectories (Myers, 103).

This shift in research toward production may be because the lines between producer and consumer are becoming increasingly blurred as we move further into the age of media convergence. In *Spreadable Media,* Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua green point out the differences between the old 'sticky' model of media and media that is spread by consumers through new channels of distribution. "In a stickiness model, it's clear who the 'producer,' the 'marketer,' and the 'audience' is. Each performs a separate and distinct purpose. In a spreadable model, there is not only an increased collaboration across

these roles, but in some cases, a blurring of the distinctions between these roles.(Jenkins, Ford, green 7)

Early research for this dissertation grew out of the interaction between motion picture producers and the niche audiences they cater to, addressed aptly in what is sometimes called the second wave of fandom studies. In their text *Fandom,* Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and Lee Harrington classify the study of fandom into three distinct "waves." The first wave of scholars, such as Henry Jenkins (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), John Tulloch (2000), based their emphasis on the struggle of deprived and disempowered audiences against a dominant and belittling mainstream culture. These early scholars took their academic cues from the studies of sociologists such as Michael de Certeau (1984), who championed the plight of social minorities and those affected by classism. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) refer to this romanticizing of audiences as the "Fandom is Beautiful" phase of fan studies, which was an attempt by fan/scholars to make it socially acceptable to be a fan of popular culture while also celebrating the power of active audiences.

In this era of convergence and media conglomeration, society has moved past the alienation of fans and into the second wave of audience studies in which fans are viewed in

a more positive light and their celebrated for their role as the ultimate consumer. As Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington point out, "None of the high profile fan cultures in recent years – from X-Files via Eminem fans to *Sex in the City* enthusiasts – has to endure the derogatory treatment of *Star Trek* fans" (Gray, 5). Being a fan is not only acceptable; in many cases, it is now encouraged or celebrated. Fans and fandom now permeate our culture, magazines, DVD bonus features, Facebook fan pages, television shows, and even entire TV networks are built to cater to audiences of popular culture. Motion picture fanaticism has reached a level of acceptability formerly reserved for sports fans.

> It was in the second wave of fan studies that scholars utilized the models of social order developed by Pierre Bourdieu to explain how fandoms and fans do not always counter hegemonic power and often perpetuate unequal social hierarchies, specifically Bourdieu's work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* This second wave of work on fan audiences highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subcultures, as the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital… Scholars were still concerned with questions of power, inequality and discrimination, but rather than seeing fandom as a tool of empowerment, they suggest that the interpretive communities of fandom (as well as individual acts of fan consumption) are embedded in the existing economic, social, and cultural status quo (Gray, 9).

Scholars of the second wave saw the taste hierarchies among audiences as a continuation of larger, more pervasive, social inequalities. As Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington state, "Fans were no longer seen as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies and structures, but, in sharp contrast, as agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies" (Gray, 9). The second wave of audience scholarship painted a truthful, but rather bleak, picture for those who celebrate the power of fanatic audiences.

Even though audiences perpetuate some of the traditional hierarchies and structures of society, there was a strange willfulness and even joy that the participants within the field exuded. The third wave attempts to uncover the reasons why fandoms exist in the first place and what meaning and uses they have for individuals. Where Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington fall short in their classification is in the fact that they only include the devotees consumer audiences in their consideration of fandoms and fan studies. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington neglected to address the creators of fandoms. They neglect to discuss the usefulness of fanatic audiences to the producers within the field.

It was the second wave of fan studies, in which researchers "highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subcultures," (Gray 2007) mainly through the utilization of Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus and distinctions of taste" that are useful to consider for this dissertation. The second wave revealed "fans are seen not as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies and structures, but, in sharp contrast, as agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies" (Gray 6). And although the works cited in the research by Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington do refer to Bourdieu and terms such as structure and hierarchy, they do so mainly in reference to arguments of high art vs. low art, and do not place them in reference to Bourdieu's concept of "the field." Furthermore, the so-called second wave focuses mainly on the thoughts and actions of ~~fanatic~~ media audiences and fails to discuss the thoughts, function or actions of producers within those audiences.

The research presented here attempts to further reveal the organization and operation of motion picture culture in which communities of moviegoer consumers, motion picture producers, and media corporations come together to create and support media products. This examination of motion

picture production falls more in line with the second wave of fan scholarship contradicting some of the more optimistic first and third wave fandom scholars.

In order to grasp the complexity of culture, one can think of these niche communities and social organizations that surround motion pictures as cellular structures. These living organisms are models of culture that function on a smaller scale and which maintain the same structure and functioning of the larger culture. Much like a biological cell, each organization is centered on a core nucleus of dominant members (studios, producers, actors, audience, etc.). Larger cells can be broken down into smaller cells of specific interest, which form around individuals who are dominant within the field. Individuals who are dominant are those who have established the highest levels of capital whether it is in the form of economic, cultural or social.

Historical Context of Motion Picture Producers

The term producer is troublesome as it holds various meaning depending on the context of usage. Throughout the history of motion picture production there has been an arc that has seen producers go from one-man operations to multi million dollar projects with hundreds of people

contributing to the production, and now we are seeing a return to smaller more intimate crews sometimes of just one or two people. Beginning with the Auguste and Louis Lumière's development of a small portable cine camera in 1895 (Bordwell 2010), individuals with cameras could shoot, develop and project their films in a single day. The individuals running the cameras were often producing and directing films, promoting them and many times projecting them as well.

As equipment grew more sophisticated and studios formed to capitalize upon the growing film audiences, the productions became more and more elaborate. There were early efforts to break from the studio system, such as the formation of United Artists and the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers (SIMPP) (Bordwell 2010). But it was during the 1960s and 70s when filmmakers within the United States and abroad began creating films with more realistic representations of sex and violence that were well received by audiences and financially successful. But by the mid-seventies blockbuster films such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars* shifted the dynamic of filmmaking back in the studios' favor. Hollywood was able to invest massive amounts of revenue into marketing campaigns for their films, and since they controlled most of distribution chain as

well, they could manufacture blockbuster events with relative ease. As blockbusters grew in success Hollywood was spurred to look for more of the same, propelled by increasingly expensive ad campaigns.

During the early 1990s there was another flourish of 'independent' films and filmmakers mainly working under smaller independent studios such as Mirmax (Spaner 2012) that saw some success such as Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction.* These smaller studios were quickly bought out by larger studios that used the various brands to expand their ability to create low budget films with sometimes riskier content. The 90s also saw a dramatic increase in the number of film festivals as events where studios could shop for promising projects with little up-front costs. This model still persists but the system is undergoing rapid change.

With dropping costs of production due to relatively inexpensive equipment there is a proliferation of aspiring filmmakers who are able to create high-quality, low budget motion pictures without the assistance of the studio system. Relatively recent changes in distribution are set to change the image of independent films even more. The rise of digital distribution models such as Netflix and Youtube have given those filmmakers a way to take their inexpensive films and get them seen by a large audience. In a sense

filmmaking has come full circle with individuals taking control of projects and serving as producer, director, and now distributor.

THE NEW PRODUCERS

Studies of media seldom focus on the motivations of motion picture producers. The variance in producer attitudes towards their audience, accessibility to producers, and the secretive environment of the media industry, all create a formidable barricade to researchers wishing to study the motives of the motion picture producer. Producers working within the creative industries feel the pull of art and commerce, each producers has his or her own motivations but they struggle between the two poles of autonomous art and feeding consumer culture. As Sherry Ortner claims:

> Any field of cultural/artistic production is structured by the opposition between commerce and art, with commerce lining up with the dominant fraction, and art with the dominated fraction, of the haute bourgeois. These points perfectly describe the relationship between the world of Hollywood movies in the world of independent film... (Myers, 186))

The job functions of motion picture producers are well defined by the Producer’s Guild of America (PGA). Although

the PGA states on their website that "...it is rare to find one individual who exercises personal decision-making authority across all four phases of production … in order to earn the credit of "Produced by," one must have taken responsibility for at least a majority of the functions performed and decisions made over the span of the four phases. Most of the modern niche market independent motion picture producers interviewed for this study felt like they took on these responsibilities and more. The goal for most Hollywood and independent producers is to make a profit as Marcus Banks says, "For the most part the role of the manager is to ensure that creativity is disciplined to the instrumental purposes of the firm-- making money remains the overarching objective that structures how creativity is defined, developed and employed"(Banks, 73).

INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING

> The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum - even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate (Chomsky,43).

A traditional Chinese text, the Tao Te Ching states, that "By not dominating, the Master leads" (Laozi 2000). In this instance, by giving audiences what they want, motion picture industry is able to capitalize upon audiences by giving them a vested interest in their favorite motion picture franchise. Corporate media oligopolies are not concerned with defining art. Their main objective of corporations is making a profit and sustaining consumption levels. Marshall Sella (2002) articulates this point in his article, *The Remote Controllers*:

> While the audiences feel more invested in their favorite shows, the medium might become more geared to precisely what the old neo-Marxist intellectuals dreaded: a hyperactively-numbed consumer culture, resulting not in art but in a "culture industry" that demeans and deceives rather than enlightens, even if the message boards' input is "active" and has an impact on the narratives of the shows (Sella 2002).

Many times coercion and dominance within the motion picture industry are the logical extension of the principles of 'good business' set in place by capitalist economy in the United States. There is no doubt that today's audiences generate a lot of ideas and contribute in many ways to the creative process of devotees. It is simply a condition of a capitalist consumer society that audiences, while having fun and being creative, are still

assisting media producers in maintaining established forms of revenue. In this day and age of media savvy audiences, producers who wish to be successful must make it fun for those willing to participate in their own subordination. Producers are able to gain the consent of audience through perceived transparency and open invitations to participate in the creative process. Douglas Rushkoff, a marketing scholar and social commentator, describes his view of this phenomenon noting:

> Producers in a renaissance era must come to think of their companies as collaborative minisocieties, whose underlying work ethic will ultimately be expressed in the culture they create for the world at large. Such cultures are created from the inside out. Only a truly playful enterprise will be capable of attracting others to the party and then keeping them there" (Rushkoff 75).

Although Rushkoff is describing the way a media company develops internal protocols, he is also describing the playful atmosphere of motion picture audiences. In some cases, special interest markets and audiences have become an extension of the corporation. Followers willingly submit ideas and promote the culture of the industry because they are having fun and getting something out of the relationship. Because capitalistic consumer driven society envelops motion picture industry, the relationship between the producers and audiences is already

predetermined to be capitalistic in nature. As Andrejevic says, "The invitation to viewers is not to seize control but rather to participate in the rationalization of their own viewing experience." Again, for Andrejevic, the responsibility shifts to the viewer to recognize who is in control. John Fiske (1992) in his essay *The Cultural Economy of Fandom* says, "The people are never at the mercy of the industries – they choose to make some of their commodities into popular culture, but reject many more than they adopt."

It is the independent filmmaker who embodies this representation of adaptation and working to build new models of financing and distribution to bring their works to life. As Sherry Ortner describes:

> From the point of view of the indie world, independent films are made from passion, from the filmmakers's intense personal commitment ("personal" is another keyword here" to tell a particular story in a particular way. Passion is the opposite of a commercial sensibility; the heat of passion is opposed to the coldness of cash. Passion is also the opposite of a mechanical filmmaking sensibility; a film emerges from the filmmaker's personal vision, as opposed to (in the worst case) the formulas and franchises and mechanically stamped out "cookie cutter" movies of Hollywood. P.35

The resistance to forego wealth, to pursue an artistic vision, and work outside the existing structure of the existing Hollywood system, is what makes an independent dangerous to established corporate models. Because of the shifting of roles and the "disintegration of tight control," Studios are seeking ways to more subtly maintain their dominance. They present media as interactive and democratic in nature. The niche markets that are targeted for motion picture productions serve as a prime site for the exploration of how media producers are reinventing their roles and maneuvering to maintain their dominant status within their field.

Ortner points to an interview she conducted with Bob Rosen, one of the founding board members of IFP/West, his definition of what made a film "independent" was fiercely debated. Ortner says, they came up with four criteria that make a film independent:

"that the film be 'risk-taking in content and style,' embody a 'personal vision,' be funded by 'non-Hollywood financing,' and embody the 'valuation of art over money' (Ortner p.32). She goes on to state that "Would-be and practicing independent filmmakers are encouraged/liberated to make 'personal' films, in which they tell the stories they want to tell, in the ways they want to tell them."

CONVERGENCE CONUNDRUM

One of the most overwhelming aspects of contemporary media research is the rapid rate in which the media landscape is transforming. We live in an age of change, the era of convergence, described by Henry Jenkins as "a moment of profound and prolonged media transition: the old scripts by which media industries operated or consumers absorbed media content are being rewritten" (Jenkins, 5).

Media producers are riding and in many cases shaping the shift in audience roles, from consumers to participants. Changes brought about by convergence carry with them benefits and drawbacks for both consumers and producer:

> These shifts in the communication infrastructure bring about contradictory pulls and tugs within our culture. On the one hand, this 'democratization' of media use signals a broadening of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities to tell stories and access stories others are telling, to present arguments and listen to arguments made elsewhere, to share information and learn more about the world from a multitude of other perspectives. On the other hand, the media companies seek to extend their reach by merging, co-opting, converging and synergizing their brands and intellectual properties across all of these channels. In some ways, this has concentrated the power of tradition gatekeepers and agenda setters and in other ways, it has disintegrated their tight control over our culture. (Jenkins 6).

In his text *The end of Privacy,* Reg Witaker suggests a modification of the Jeremy Bentham's concept of the Panopticon to address issue of punishment stating, "The contemporary Panopticon is strikingly different. It is a consumer Panopticon based on positive benefits where the worst sanction is exclusion" (Whitaker, 139). For dedicated audiences, the threat of segregation from their community through the withholding of valuable knowledge, comes the incentive to maintain an unbalanced relationship. Users gladly share information with those in dominance in order to get a "personalized" devotee experience on the web and to be in the know. Submission of personal tastes and preferences allows the user to establish an identity while also gaining valuable feedback and/or rewards. Fiske outlines the way that those within the media industry inculcate their power.

> Discursive power, that is, the power to make common sense of a class-based sense of the real, is held by the same social groups who exercise economic power. The difference, however, is that economic power is open and obvious, discursive power is hidden and it is its hidden-ness, its repression of its own operation, that enables it to present itself as common sense, as an objective, innocent reflection of the real (Fiske, 1989: 42).

The Comic Book, "X-Men" created in 1963 by Stan Lee is an ongoing story about a breed of humans born with

superpower mutations that don't emerge until puberty. Some of these "mutants" are good, some are evil, but all are looked down upon by "normal" people (Gordon, 2007). In much the same way, members of some niche groups are born as "normal" people who deviate from the set standards of "official culture" established by official culture. Joining forces with other similar people, these niche audiences can form tightly knit communities who share their enthusiasm for any number of "worthy" subjects. In other words, participation in niche culture is a way of expressing individuality and at the same time a sense of community with others within our society. Individuals and communities develop intimate attachments to certain forms of mass-produced entertainment that, for whatever reason, satisfy personal needs. Producers who are wise, have seen the value in catering to these groups who self segregate into easily targetable niche audiences. The ease in which producers can communicate with viewers (and visa versa) allows for almost instantaneous feedback and collaborations.

Jenkins says, "The history of media fandom is at least in part the history of a series of organized efforts to influence programming decisions" (Jenkins, 28). Communication with the producers of media, whether by phone, mail, email or message board begging for desired outcomes

to plot development or character integrity, often appears to have had a limited effect on media in the past. Audiences were looked down upon by the culture industry and their efforts to influence the industry were not taken seriously. Jenkins once touted that, "Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualize our celebration of strategies of popular resistance" (Jenkins, 1992: 26).

There are however, very vocal and active participants within niche audiences that take the act of appropriating mass culture to make it their own very seriously. Reactions to films and television shows are not based so much on things such as the money that is put into production but on certain creative analysis and adaptation of the narrative by the audience that creates a feeling of a relationship between the individual and the production. Henry Jenkins states in *Textual Poachers* (1992) that:

> Fans display a particularly strong attachment to popular narratives, and act upon them in ways which make them their own property in some senses they are also acutely and painfully aware that those fictions do not belong to them and that someone else has the power to do things to those characters that are in direct contradiction to the fans' own cultural interests. Sometimes, fans respond to this situation often they respond with hostility and anger against those who have the power to "retool their narratives into something radically different from that which the audience desires."

Most comic book fans lack access to the means of cultural production that motion picture producers and other artists enjoy. Jenkins once said that the exclusion of the audience's opinion upon reception of the media is the mirroring of their exclusion during production of the media and thus, "their cultural interests are delegitimized in favor of the commercial interest of the authorized authors" (Jenkins, 1992: 25). When fans are not allowed to participate in the construction of "legitimate" texts, they may borrow or "poach," as Michel de Certeau (1984) calls it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the narratives and characters and reshape them for their own uses in some form of fan produced text. Jenkins points out that de Certeau's "poaching" analogy "characterizes the relationship between readers and writers as an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings" (Jenkins, 1992: 24).

Marshall Sella (2002) writes in his article, *The Remote Controllers*, that by using the Internet, devotees are being allowed to quickly and articulately express their opinions to media producers. He says, "A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation, but a man with two machines (a TV and Computer) can belong to a community." One of the first television shows to really feel the

effects of fans' use of the Internet was *The X-Files*. Audiences gathered information about the show sharing articles, images, fan fiction, and analysis. As Christine Wooley (2002) points out in her study *Visible Fandom: Reading the X-Files through X-Philes*, "the interpretive activity of the online fan and the relationship of that discourse to the series as a cultural commodity make visible the fan's attempt to configure their relationship to the X-Files." She goes on to say:

> In online newsgroups, fans do not hesitate to address Carter or Ten Thirteen (the director and production company for *The X-Files*) directly in their posts – a practice that is informed by the knowledge that Carter's assistants, and some of the writers have stated in interviews that they read the newsgroup. Because fans cannot be certain how seriously Ten Thirteen takes the advice and demands voiced by the newsgroup, the relationship that fans construct between themselves and The Powers That Be is tenuous at best (Wooley, 2002).

As an example of audiences influencing the contents of a film, we can look to the controversy stirred by fans of the comic book *The Incredible Hulk.* The viewers were enraged when they found out that Ang Lee, director of 2003's film of the same title, had plans to do away with The Hulk's iconic purple pants featured in most comic book versions of the character. After months of discussion and threats of boycotts, the film finally opened and The Hulk appeared on-screen in his purple pants. Hunt (2003)

reports that "No one at Marvel will admit that specialist film websites are forcing Hollywood studios to make changes to the portrayal of comic book characters but they do accept that their influence is growing in a number of ways." Said a spokesperson for Marvel in the same article, "Producers and directors at Marvel studios are aware of them (the specialist film sites). They do reference them from time to time and they are aware of how much the fan base means to these characters and the films. There is an element of respect for these sites."

Communities of would be critics now flood the Internet. It seems that every show has its own site that includes some sort of viewer feedback. Marshall Sella (2002) points out that one site aptly named televisionwithoutpity.com (TwoP) provides critiques of shows that are relentless in their attacks on everything from "arcane appraisals of a program's story line to their hatred of an actor's leather jacket." Sella writes, "Ever since *The X-Files* sparked the proliferation of Internet message boards in the mid-90's, TV creators have gradually come to realize the value of these feverish Web discussions." Sella later added:

> It would be simple to underestimate the intensity with which Web sites fetishize TV programs – and the impact they have on the show's creators. Sure, a good review in the print media is important, but the boards, by definition, are populated by a program's core audience

– many thousands of viewers who care deeply about what direction their show takes.

Another influential site for movie and media criticism and viewer discussion is Harry Knowles' AintItCoolNews.com. Quoted by Justin Hunt (2003), Knowles compares film websites to the life of an American folk hero. Knowles continues saying, "The Internet is the Paul Revere of news. It's the first place you hear what is going on and the rest of the world scrambles to find that out." Harsh reviews by Knowles of Joel Schumacher, director of *Batman and Robin* in the late 90's in which Knowles accused Schumacher of taking the Batman film series away from its dark comic book origins has led to what some have seen as the delay of any subsequent Batman films. Reports have been that the latest installment of Batman films, *Batman Begins*, due out in early Summer of 2005 is a return to those dark comic book origins that Knowles and others had called for (Hunt, 2003).

The film and television industries are continually forced to deal with the demands of devotees who are their "hard-core" audience, but these fans are often criticized and condemned by more traditional viewers. The problem of pleasing viewers is a common one for these industries. On the one hand, films and television shows, their characters and situations, hold exceptional or extraordinary value in

the lives of a fan. Conversely, trying to convey those feelings of attachment to a larger audience may result in a loss of meaning for the true devotee. This loss in meaning can also cause a decrease in interest for the fan or result in an adaptation or transformation of the original media by fans to regain the meaning of the product that they desire (Jenkins, 1992).

COURTING THE NICHE AUDIENCE

Many films today cater to niche audiences. Sherry Ortner (2013) points out a 1996 study by Michael Curtin, she quotes Curtin as saying, "the industry has been increasingly restructured to seek, and to take advantage of, niche markets, markets that may be smaller in size but hat generate greater 'intensity' in their audiences" (Ortner, p.43). Beginning in the early 1990s, around the time of Curtin's study there was an emergence of films and cultural events that catered to these niche groups. Acceptance of media fandom as a legitimate pastime as seen in the rise of fandom scholarship, and the explosion of sci-fi, fantasy and comic book related media were all a part of this phenomenon. As Curtin notes:

> One of the consequences of this new environment is that groups that were at one time oppositional or

> outside the mainstream have become increasingly attractive to media conglomerates with deep pockets, ambitious growth objectives, and flexible corporate structures. As the channels of distribution have grown more diverse, the oppositional has become more commercially viable and, in some measure, more closely tied to the mainstream (Ortner, 43)

One of the most fruitful areas for subject matter is the world of comic books. Comic book audiences, like most devoted audiences, are exaggerated or magnified examples of how popular culture functions in contemporary society (Brown, 1997). Comic book readers create a culture that simultaneously resists "official culture" and forms what John Fiske, in his 1992 essay *The Cultural Economy of Fandom*, calls a "shadow cultural economy" that mimics bourgeois standards. Fiske's term is derived from Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) metaphoric model of culture described in terms of economic capital that he outlines in *Distinction; A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Those with the most cultural and economic capital rise to the top of Bourdieu's system and become the decision makers for "official culture."

Comic books are gaining more acceptance as a legitimate form of "high" culture, due in part to their crossover to already established forms of media that are

accepted as "official." The adaptation of comic books to films has given comic book culture exposure that it had never previously known. Part of the reason for this rise in comic book adaptation films and their popularity is the fact that the filmmakers who grew up reading comics are now in a position to control cultural output.

But whether these filmmakers are truly "independent" can be debated. Ted Hope, well know independent film producer and interview subject for this research is quoted by Ortner (2013) about the danger of filmmakers who work with the Hollywood studios.

> Today's new media giants are embracing the independent film but as a marketing concept only; every day they bring more and more of the production, distribution and exhibition apparatus under their control. Although we celebrate our independent "spirit," the logic of the studio film – its range of political and social concerns, its marketing dictates, and even its narrative aesthetic – is slowly colonizing our consciousness. The screens are controlled by the studios and sooner or later every filmmaker winds up working for the studios. (Ortner, 49).

As Ortner goes on to point out, Hope remains optimistic about the future of independent filmmaking and champions his cause of "the truly free film" through his influential blog and public speaking appearances. Filmmakers working to make films that follow their vision run the risk of compromise when working with the larger budgets of the studios. The acceptance of independent films and the

subject matter they cover shows how willing the studios are to bring fringe into the mainstream if it can generate an economic payoff.

As an example of the comic book film's acceptance into official culture, we can see how well received comic book adaptations have become. In David Kronke's (2004) article in the Los Angeles Daily News, he states that the film *Spider-Man 2* "has been praised for characterizations and nuances rare in summer movies. The New York Times took notice, dedicating a cover of its Sunday magazine to the phenomenon." No longer are comic books relegated to childish, or immature content. Comic books, and graphic novels deal with personal conflict and adult themed situations.

Some comic book readers who are witnessing the shift of comics to a form of acceptable culture, may have a strong resistance to allow their specific knowledge of comics culture to be "incorrectly" distributed by the bourgeois Hollywood film industry to a mass audience which may change their base of knowledge and making them look uninformed. For many readers, their only hope is to try and reach the media producers to let them know what should or shouldn't be allowed. As Bourdieu suggests in *The Aristocracy of Culture*, "The most intolerable thing for

those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes, which taste dictates shall be separated" (Bourdieu, 1984: 253). Motion pictures definitely mix tastes, treating texts of popular culture as if they deserved the same degree of appreciation as any other "legitimate" text.

As Jeffery Brown (1997) states in his article, *Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital*, "The problem with comic fandom gaining legitimacy within contemporary society is that it contradicts the standards of 'good taste'." Most "normal people" still perceive the comic book medium as childish. They believe comics consist of immature, simple stories and simplistic art. This stereotypical perception of comics is a common criticism of all popular fan cultures. However, comic fan culture challenges this so-called "good taste" of bourgeois by dealing with highly complex issues in mature and innovative ways that reflect the narratives of accepted literature.

In his article, Brown goes on to say that the "close scrutiny, collecting, analyzing, rereading, and accumulation of knowledge is deemed acceptable for a serious work of 'art' but is considered to be ridiculous when applied to a mass medium." The mirroring of practices of "official" culture is how members of the viewing

community attempt to raise their cultural standing within their own network. Traditionally, producers in the culture industry may have assumed viewers were passively absorbing the meaning of their content without question. It seems that many cultural elitists would see any difference of opinion or deviation of that meaning as a failure by the viewer to understand the producer's intent.

As readers began to find each other they were able to form more powerful groups to influence media producers. But those larger groups, in turn, became easy targets for marketers with a product to sell. Beginning in the 1970s, there was an emergence in comic book culture that is now known as a comic book specialty store. These stores, as Jeffrey Brown says, "became the focal point for the entire culture of comic fandom, including not only comics but other comic book related items such as t-shirts, action figures, trading cards and videos" (Brown, 1997). As the popularity of specialty stores grew, customers became more comfortable shopping for and discussing comics and comic related items. Readers were able to meet other readers and the occasional writer or creator, thus forming a fan based community.

Along with specialty stores came the comic book convention also known as a comic-con. "Cons" were and

still are a major event in comic book culture. Much like specialty stores, cons give devotees an opportunity to completely indulge in the universe of comic books and feel completely comfortable about doing so. Marlene Sun of Las Vegas, a devoted reader of the comic book Elektra who was in attendance at the 2004 Comic Con International, said about the con, "People make fun of you if you read comic books. But here, you get to make fun of people who don't read them" (Bowles, 2004). According to Jeffery Brown, many fans see the cons "as an individual's final point of entry into the social order of comic culture. It is a place for them to accumulate and demonstrate their cultural knowledge of comics" (Brown, 1997: 17).

The Internet has also had a great impact on the structure and operation of fandoms. Fandoms as they are known today, really began to take shape in the early to mid twentieth century during the rapid growth in popularity science fiction and supernatural stories (which coincidentally spawned early comic books). These early audiences communicated via letters and on occasion gathered at conventions. This model of fandom laid down by these sci-fi pioneers was readily adapted to multiple genres. Ineffective communication made organizing large numbers of individuals difficult (Jenkins 1992; Moskowitz 1954).

However, the advent of the Internet has increased communication and allowed audiences to form virtual communities where they can easily meet and share ideas and information (Baym 2000; Hellekson 2006). Pierre Levy claims, "Such virtual communities bring about a true actualization (in the sense of effectively putting people in contact) of human groups, groups that were merely potential before the arrival of cyberspace" (Levy, 11).

Devoted audiences will go on struggling with and against the meanings imposed upon them by "official" culture complaining or rejoicing at the decisions being made and discussing it all on the Internet. As Robert Thompson, a media expert at Syracuse University said, "If this were happening at any other time in history, we'd celebrate it. When readers hold parties for Bloomsday and discuss James Joyce, we consider it an apex – people taking culture seriously. But when viewers discuss the minutiae of a TV show, we call them crazy" (Sella, 2002).

NORMALIZING THE NICHE

People may not identify themselves as a fan, but many so-called interests, hobbies, or even scholarly pursuits take on the same level of enthusiasm of many pop culture

audiences and many are considered niche markets by those creating media. What is the distinction between an enthusiast who studies the works of Bach; who collects recordings of Bach's music, has visited Bach's home in Eisenach, Germany, and has learned to play many of Bach's works on the piano, and an Elvis fan; who has collected all of Elvis' records, learned to play Elvis' songs on the guitar and visited Graceland 20 times? The distinctions between fans and aficionados serve only the bourgeois. What sets a cultural artifact such as a motion picture apart as being good/bad or high/low is inculcation of taste via institutionalization. What Louis Althusser referred to as Ideological State Apparatuses, our worldview is shaped by the normalization of thought through our systems of education, religion, media and other established power centers.

RIDING THE WAVE OF NICHE AUDIENCE

Instead of a few major networks there are now hundreds if not thousands of television channels (not to mention Internet outlets) that are controlled by only a handful of corporations. Through clever marketing techniques and the use of new labor strategies, such as crowdsourcing,

corporations are selling things that were created by the audience themselves and thus removing the middleman.

Crowdsourcing is highly controversial amongst media producers. Autotelic motion picture producers, those creating "art for art's sake," see this trend as troublesome for those seeking to make a career in the industry. The impact of corporate crowdsourcing via the Internet on the creative industry really began to emerge at the turn of the millennium. A 2006 article in *Wired* magazine discussed how online stock photography sites such as iStockphoto are impacting photographers by utilizing the production of millions of photography enthusiasts. Instead of corporations looking overseas and outsourcing production to cheap labor, they can now crowdsource and pay pennies on the dollar to "part-timers" and "dabblers" and increase their profits exponentially (Howe 2006)

Industries such as television and film have also taken note of this ready and expendable resource. 2011's documentary film, *Life in a Day, was* created entirely from videos submitted by amateur videographers through Youtube, and was compiled by directors Ridley Scott and Kevin MacDonald. With over eighty thousand submissions, the filmmakers working with their corporate sponsors such as Youtube, and National Geographic eagerly cashed in on a

ready and willing sea of amateurs. As expert independent movie marketer Sheri Candler wrote in her blog, "For the corporations, the motivations seem to be profit potential and an army of unpaid volunteers to take on the work that might otherwise take years and substantial financial investment to accomplish all in exchange for a credit in the closing titles" (Candler 2011).

The concepts of capitalistic free labor, a playful workforce, and the advent of the Internet all seem to be very applicable to the activity of fans within the fanatic field. They also make the application of principles of panoptic structures, first introduced by Jeremy Bentham's discussion of prison structures, relevant to the co-opting of devoted communities. The Panoptic structure, as adapted by Michael Foucault, not only applies to the physical structures of institutions, such as factories, schools, hospitals and prisons, but many scholars (Andrejevic; Campbell and Carlson; Kovacs; Whitaker), contend that it can also be applied to other social constructs including virtual structures such as online communities of fans.

It could easily be argued that the websites for films and their official message boards, along with social media sites are being woven together to serve as the contemporary media panopticon with media corporations manning the

observation tower and maintaining watch over the fanatic field. Michael Sella notes this observation of the fanatic field:

> "We always have someone on the writing staff assigned to keep track of them," John Wells, executive producer of "E.R." says. "Though we don't often need to assign that duty. There's always a writer who's in there all the time and can give you a clear sense of what's going on. I don't overreact to the boards, but I pay real attention to messages that are thoughtful. If you ignore your customer, you do so at your peril" (Sella, 2002).

Audiences who enter devoted communities are having fun and finding uses for the things they celebrate; but they are in turn also aiding in the construction of cultural artifacts and simultaneously creating economic profits for capitalistic corporations.

SUMMARY

The literature reveals that many studies of media are focused on the actions and feelings of the audience and their uses of media in their daily lives. Contemporary media scholarship tends to focus mainly on the ways in which audiences push for content that satisfies their

desires. For the most part, producers are portrayed as gatekeepers of information. Even in studies of production culture the focus tends to be on the daily activities of those on set. Recently, producers who share information and encourage open communication are shed in a more positive light and are implicated to be good business people.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research is to gives an inside-looking-out perspective of independent niche market motion picture producers and their motives for the decisions they make and the actions they take. This, subsequently, will aid in a greater understanding of their subjected influences and motives. Specifically, this study examines how the decisions of the producer have shifted with the advances in technology that have increased the speed and quantity of audience/producer interaction.

This chapter outlines a method for answering the research questions and objectives of the study. Close analysis of interview data and an examination of the language used and its intended meaning will be utilized to examine how those interviewed view the world (McCracken 1988). The worldview of the participants may contain emotion, hidden motivation, and subtle meaning. Examining the producer's perspective will reveal the perspective of those individuals who occupy the role of a creative producer experience, as well as the ways in which they are motivated to make decisions.

By understanding the producer's perspective and comparing this to trends in scholarship as described in the

review of literature, a better conceptualization of a producer's roles and motivations can be developed. This process entails using qualitative interview data to contextualize and reinforce, or perhaps dismiss, what is present in the current literature. This analysis places media producers within a spectrum of economic, social and artistic needs and desires, and examines how these factors might impact the independent producer's decision-making process.

The following information details the method that was used to accomplish the objectives of this research. These interviews will examine the shifting role of the motion picture producer utilizing an inductive research design. Before analysis of this phenomenon can take place, extensive data gathering, recording, and organization of relevant information must be completed. In-depth interviews were the primary tool used to achieve an inside-looking-out perspective of the producers in this study.

Research Design

Qualitative analysis has been chosen for this study due to its ability to allow for in-depth guided discovery of data and robust discourse analysis. The use of a qualitative approach is utilized in this study because it will allow for greater information exploration, reflection,

and give deeper understanding of the unique environment of the producer and film production industry.

According to Grant McCracken (1998), the in-depth interview is one of the most powerful forms of inquiry available to researchers utilizing qualitative methods. For analytic and descriptive purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing. Long conversations with participants allow the researcher to probe interviewees' thoughts more deeply. Exhaustive questioning and requests for further explanation will aid in obtaining rich descriptions from the interviewees. The goal of this research is to describe the role of the producer and the producers' perceptions of themselves, requiring the ability to get into the minds of the participants.

McCracken (1998) says that qualitative research does not simply survey the terrain, it mines it. Therefore, the selection of respondents must be made as carefully as possible. One of the most important principles in in-depth interviewing is the premise that less is more. "It is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more superficially with many of them. For many research projects, eight respondents will be perfectly sufficient" (p.17). Each respondent was given in-depth attention, and as questions are answered, careful follow up

questions will be asked to exhaust each answer. Depth, not breadth, is what is important to the success of this study. This result will be achieved by keeping the number of interviewees limited.

In-depth interviews are used to collect the data to allow participants to guide conversations and pull data towards what they feel are the most relevant topics within the subject. Valerie Yow says, "The in-depth interview can reveal a psychological reality that is the basis for the ideal the individual holds for the things he or she does. There is no better way to glean information on how the subject sees and interprets her experience than to ask in the context of the life review" (14).

During the data analysis a combination of selective and open coding will be used to answer specific research questions but also allow themes and concepts to emerge freely. Glaser says that "open coding is the beginning, trying to represent the data, ask it questions … what is actually happening here" (Glaser, 8). Selective coding will be implemented in order to allow for specific research questions to be addressed. Kathy Charmaz says that selective coding allows the researcher to adopt initial codes and questions to use in the synthesizing of the data collected (Gubrium, 321).

Memoing, theoretical "note-taking", will occur throughout the data collection and analysis process. As Matthew Miles and A.M. Huberman state, "Memoing helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, and building toward a more integrated understanding of events, processes and interaction in the case" (74). At each stage of research, concepts and themes that seem to connect will be jotted down and later organized to help build a clearer picture of this phenomenon.

In-depth interviews are the primary method that will be used for collecting data. Interviews will be recorded either face-to face or by telephone. Interviewing will begin by focusing on motion picture producers who identify themselves as independent. Purposive snowball sampling after the first few interviews may lead to additional producer interviews. Neuman (2011, 269) describes purposive snowballing as starting with a small set of cases or individuals and then spreading out based upon established links to the initial cases. Snowball sampling is effective because of the difficulty in establishing relationships with high-level producers. Snowballing allows the researcher to gain access to individuals who otherwise may

not be as receptive. For example attempts to contact Ted Hope were unsuccessful until Christine Walker offered to contact him and make a recommendation on behalf of the researcher.

Interviews were conducted with thirteen active producers a mixture of both major studio "Hollywood" productions and independent productions. It is projected that the interviews will last anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. The in-depth interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing for both closed and open-ended questions and discussion. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed throughout the process, allowing for an opportunity to determine potential themes prior to the end of the interview process. As potential themes become apparent throughout the interviewing process, the researcher will determine when saturation had been reached and thematic redundancies begin occurring frequently across interviews.

Interview Protocol

A series of base questions were developed to use as a guide during the interviews with producers to ensure that the three main research questions are addressed. These probing questions, while direct in nature, are open ended

so as to encourage producers to expand and share their own experiences. Each interview proceeded at its own pace, as the individual producer discusses his or her production background and describes the projects they have worked on. If these personal experiences provide insight, follow up questions will be asked to exhaust the anecdotes. The interview questions are designed with the purpose of eliciting responses that will provide rich descriptions and thoughtful recollection by participants, as well as answer some part of the three research questions of this study with an allowance for unexpected themes to arise.

Selection of Participants

As busy professionals, gaining access to film producers can be difficult. And it was discovered, that even when access is granted, individuals might change their minds about their level of participation. This project began with a narrow focus of looking at the role of one particular group of film producers who were working on a large project and the way they interacted with their audience. But as difficulties arose in access, the study changed in scope to focus more on the question of what a producer is, and specifically on producers of niche market films.

Grant Curtis was originally meant to be the main participants in the study, he became more and more annoyed at my probing, especially when I inquired about Sony corporate activity. Eventually, Curtis contacted me and said he would no longer be willing to participate, as he feared it would have negative repercussions to his career.

After this setback, the study was reexamined and it was determined that the research should be more focused on an examination of a broader set of more accessible filmmakers such as the independent motion picture producer. Research was conducted which led to a list of producers who are commonly referenced as leaders of independent filmmaking. Introductory phone calls and emails were placed to this list of producers. Only a couple responded positively to the initial inquiry: Christine Walker, line producer for *American Splendor;* and Eric Gitter, executive producer for *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. Although I had reached out to Ted Hope, it was not until I spoke with Christine Walker and had her send an email of support to Hope, that I was able to gain access to him.

With a few responses from well-known independent producers, I began to try to find ways to expand my data collection without destroying the integrity of the study. Marisa Miller-Wolfson was a visiting filmmaker at the Show-

Me Justice Film Festival, which I co-directed. While there, she gave a speech about her trials and tribulations as a producer for her film, which is targeted at a niche audience of vegetarians, vegans, or those who are considering that lifestyle. I approached her requesting an interview. Her experiences working with a highly active niche audience, and working to self-distribute and self-promote her film, made a great contribution to the study.

Invigorated by the experience of interviewing Miller-Wolfson, I wanted to reach out and include more filmmakers who were working on projects that were independent, quirky, and on the cutting edge of new methods of financing, production, and distribution. After researching producers and films that had been successful in utilizing social media, crowdsourcing and were featured on digital platforms such as Netflix, Youtube and Hulu, I reached out and was fortunate to gain participation from seven additional filmmakers who were making or had made interesting films catering to niche audiences and who have been working to find innovative ways to get their films made. Utilizing a personal connection with filmmaker Sarah Price, whose films include *American Movie* (1999), *The Yes Men* (2003) *and Summercamp* (2006,) I began to grow my list of participants. Ben Steinbauer (*Winnebago Man,* 2009*)* and Brad Beesley (*Okie*

Noodling, 2001 and *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo,* 2009) were next to fall into place because of their connection with Price. Another personal connection, Emmy award winning, Tracy Tragos (*Be Good, Smile Pretty,* 2003 and *Rich Hill*, 2013) provided much useful information due to her experience in new mediums of producing which utilize crowd sourcing, etc., and her experience in more established forms of production through working with groups such as ITVS (Independent Television Service) and the Sundance Institute. I also was able to conduct interviews with Jon Betz, producer for niche environmental issue films such as *Queen of the Sun: What are the Bees Telling Us?* (2010) and *Seed: The Untold Story* (2013); John Reiss, best known for his film *Bomb It* about street art/graffiti culture and author of multiple books on film marketing and distribution such as *Think Outside the Box Office; and* Tim Kirk, who's film *Room 237* (2012) was a Sundance Film Festival audience favorite.

Participant Information

The participants provided a good cross section of producers, both in the number of motion pictures they have produced and also in the economic scope of their projects. Although their experiences varied, redundancies in answers did occur and interviews were ceased after an acceptable

level of theoretical saturation was achieved. Participants in this study include:

Ted Hope – He has produced over sixty films and was selected for this study because of his notability as an influential figure in the world of independent filmmaking. Hope is also highly active in exploring new and innovative ways to engage his film audiences, and he co-founded the popular website *Indiewire.com*.

Eric Gitter – He produced 2010's surprise hit *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, a film based on the mildly successful graphic novels created by Bryan O'Malley. Gitter's production company, Closed on Mondays Entertainment, has partnered with comic publisher Oni Press and has a number of comic adaptations currently in development for film and television production.

Christine Walker – She has produced over fifteen films, most notably *American Splendor* and *Howl,* a film based on popular beat poet Allen Ginsberg.

Marisa Miller Wolfson - She directed and co-produced the 2010 film *Vegucated*, a documentary that caters to the niche market of vegetarians and vegans. She has taken a very active role in the marketing and promotion of her film to core audiences and utilizes social media heavily to promote her film.

Ben Steinbauer – He is best known for his 2009 hit *Winnebago Man* that documents Jack Rebney as he copes with the repercussions of becoming famous, or infamous, via viral video of his outtakes from a Winnebago promotional video. Steinbauer attributes a lot of the film's success to the fact that so many people were familiar with the original viral video, giving him a leg up in building an audience for the film.

Bradley Beesley - Beesley's focus on what he calls characters on the fringe of society requires him to have a strong understanding of film financing and building a network of co-conspirators in the world of independent filmmaking. With nine feature length films to his credit, Beesley has a lot to say about finding ways to finance his projects.

Jon Betz - Aside from producing niche market films for environmental audeinces (*Queen of the Sun*, *Seed*), Betz has co-founded the independent film distribution company Collective Eye with partner Taggart Siegele to help niche market films like his find a home with audiences.

John Reiss - Reiss' professional experiences in production, marketing, and distribution give him great insight into the future of the filmmaking industry. He is the author of six books on filmmaking and marketing (*Think*

Outside the Box Office) and is the filmmaker for *Bomb It* (2007) and *Bomb It 2* (2013).

Sarah Price - Her film *American Movie* (1999) launched her career, but she continues to make films and explore new ways to bring her vision to screens.

Tim Kirk - First-time filmmaker and producer, Kirk provided a lot of interesting details about the surprise success of his film *Room 237*, which details the many theories about the hidden meaning of Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining.* Especially fascinating is the way in which he and his director work with fan groups and theorists online to shape the film.

Tracy Droz Tragos - A personal friend and mentor, Tracy's films are heartfelt and personal. Her contrasting experiences of working on her first film *Be Good, Smile Pretty* (2003) and her new film, *Rich Hill* (2013) allowed her to talk about what has changed in the way films are produced. She and her co-director had just completed a successful Kickstarter campaign raising over $64,000 dollars when I spoke to her for this study.

Grant Curtis - He began his career as an assistant for director Sam Raimi. His production career started with working on Raimi's *Xena: Princess Warrior* and *Hercules* television series. He later went on to become a producer

for the three Spider-Man films starring Tobey Macquire, which were directed by Raimi, as well as Raimi's *Oz the Great and Powerful*.

Stan Lee - He is the former president and CEO of Marvel Comics. Lee co-created such memorable characters as Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, the Fantastic 4, and X-Men. Marvel comics, created by Lee, have been adapted into numerous films, television shows, and video games. Lee still serves as an advisor to Marvel Studios and works to promote films and other products that he created.

Role of Researcher

As an academic, the researcher should uses his knowledge to craft inquiries that address the research question but should also refrain from imposing his own ideas or presuppositions upon the participants. In this case, the producers are the experts and the researcher serves as a curious observer of cultural phenomenon, looking to reveal a rapidly transforming area of society. Although the investigator could have some bias in regard to the subject due to personal or professional experiences, those experiences should serve more as a way to probe the

informants rather than to force them to capitulate to the researchers preconceptions.

I came to this project with experience in motion picture and television production. This familiarity with the professional and academic realms allowed for a unique perspective to the problem at hand. Having knowledge of the ways in which a film is produced allows for questions to be crafted that address specific issues of "behind-the-scenes" activities that others who are unfamiliar with production may not know to ask. As an academic, I have the training to conduct the research and knowledge of current literature and theories to interpret the data provided by the interviewees.

Data Collection

In this study, face to face and telephone interviews were the selected form of data collection. Although media producers have a level of celebrity and are in many cases well known, they are often on tight schedules and often have several levels of insulation in the form of personal assistants or voicemail inboxes. As much as possible the interviews in this study were scheduled with several weeks notice for the producers to fit them onto their calendar. This method is acceptable given the difficulty of gaining access to the interviewees and the thorough responses given.

Overall the information collected was recorded in detail and provided many pages of detailed points (See appendix C). This information provided a candid insight into how producers view their role in motion picture production. Personal anecdotes and reflection led to revelations about how producers are balancing the task of pleasing an audience while maintaining artistic integrity. Participants were candid and open about their perceptions of their role and the role of the motion picture producer. For the most part, they seemed genuinely interested in the topic of research, and, on several occasions, stated the usefulness of the data being collected for understanding emerging concepts and practices within their field. Interviews often exceeded their time allotted because they became wrapped up in the discussion of the topic. Nine of the producers in this study are classified by the industry as independent, and were generally more open about their strategies of film production than the few producers who have worked with larger studios or corporate motion picture production.

Procedures

Media producers tend to guard franchises and creations with great care, monitoring carefully those who have access to their products. The control of information is a key

source of capital - both economic and artistic. Studying up, or seeking access to institutions of cultural power, is a difficult task of negotiation with gatekeepers. Examining the lives of individuals in power positions makes for intriguing research, but it also makes the investigative process much more challenging. Not unlike other forms of collecting data, participants had limited amounts of time they were willing to devote to participation in this research study. Producers, who tend to have great demands placed upon their time and resources, gave limited access as they were sought for participation in this study.

Networking plays a large role in the functioning of the motion picture industry and it also plays a large role in accessing those in dominant positions within the film industry. After receiving approval to move forward with research from the University of Kansas Human Subjects Committee, personal contacts with film and video producers were utilized to gain access to the field. After relationships were built and interviews were conducted, participants were asked to provide suggestions and recommendations for additional subjects.

INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to explore the behavior of the producer and their

interpretation of their roles and motivations in motion picture production. Interviews are typically used in case studies to develop rich descriptions and interpretations of an experience in the subjects own words (Yin, 1994; Lofland, 1984). The interviews here garnered a variety of information and provide a greater awareness of the meaning and motivation of the producer's role in motion picture production. Additionally, the interviews gave producers, and those who define their role, a voice, and allowed them an opportunity to discuss what it means to be a producer in the motion picture industry.

It is commonly suggested that a case study should include some form of systematic interviewing (Marshall, 2011; Yin, 1994). While it was not the aim of this researcher to impose rigid structure upon the interviews, some structure was needed to ensure a common set of questions were asked of all participants. During the interviews, questions were left open-ended to give participants a chance to answer in a way that drew from their own experiences.

> Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience

> affects the way they carry out that experience. Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action (Irving Seidman, 10).

Each interview was digitally recorded and each was transcribed in its entirety in a way that maintains the originality of thought and the response of participants' answers signaled by their inflections, speech rate, volume and pauses. After each interview, the researcher spent time reflecting upon the interview, jotting down important revelation, and utilizing the experience to prepare for future interviews. After transcriptions were complete, data was coded and emergent themes or concepts were grouped into similar categories. These categories were then used to address the study's research questions and to expose other unforeseen subjects.

Data was collected, organized, and analyzed to a point of what Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to as the ultimate criterion for determining whether or not to end the data gathering processes at theoretical saturation. Upon each reading, the information was coded in accordance to its relevance to the main research questions of this study. In addition, trends in data were noted and several additional themes in the data emerged. As data was analyzed,

reference was made to previous research on motion picture production in order to add additional support for existing theories or to help fill any gaps in previous knowledge.

The initial focus of the interview questions attempted to reveal how participants view the role of the modern motion picture producer and to give insights into the way in which producers define themselves. Because an answer sometimes leads to unforeseen follow-up inquiry, interview questions were flexible and allowed to flow with the discussion. Yet, a standard set of questions was used in all interviews.

SEE APPENDIX A

The above questions were created to allow for diversity in the answers and information that was gathered. As themes became apparent throughout the interviews, the direction of the research was slightly modified to focus more on those issues that the producers felt shaped their motives personally. The experience and knowledge of the individual interviewees also helped to direct each particular interview. Interview results were the main foundation for this research, with other content, such as

presentations and secondary interviews, offering a source for verification.

Coding of results was completed after each interview. After transcribing, open coding was used for the initial coding phase to allow for specific themes to be assigned a label (Neuman 2011 512). The initial themes developed in open coding were then analyzed using selective coding to find the most relevant themes from the research. The results presented in Chapter Four of this dissertation are the product of the selective coding process. Data collection ended when a level of saturation, or redundancy of information, was achieved. Saturation was recognized through the memoing process, when information and themes began to overlap and repeat.

While it is difficult to generalize the results of this study outside of the specific case studies included here, it should be kept in mind that the goal of this research is to form a foundation for further study of those involved in production of motion pictures. The most effective way to test for external validity will be through the replications of studies on similar subjects from the field of motion picture production. Because these case studies are focused on a handful of motion picture

producers, the end result should offer a model upon which other case studies will be able to replicate and improve.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The thirteen producers interviewed for this research shared many similar experiences. The initial research questions utilizing Bourdieu's model of cultural production were useful as a genesis for deeper discussion with interviewees who guided research results to a much narrower focus on specific topics that affect them as motion picture producers. Entering this research it was assumed that economic capital might be the driving force of motion picture producers operating within a capitalistic economy. The interviews revealed that autonomous artistic desires are what motivate a majority of the producers in this study. The ability to create a unique and personal story without succumbing to pressures of economic profitability is what most said they aspire to.

The data collected here answers the initial research questions about how various forms of capital impact the motivations of film producers. It provides a snapshot of the societal and industrial forces that are shaping filmmakers at this moment in time. The study provides researchers with a window into the field of motion picture production from an inside-looking-out viewpoint of the selected participants. The data collected for this research

falls in line with other studies of producers and production culture focusing on individuals within the motion picture industry, such as Ortner's *Not Hollywood*.

There were a few outliers in the study, producers who revealed they were motivated by the accumulation of economic capital such as Eric Gitter and Grant Curtis. The majority discussed utilizing the resources at hand to achieve their artistic vision for their projects.

The factors influencing the way in which filmmakers operate did not fit neatly into predefined categories, but rather they overlapped and in many cases were interdependent upon one another. Changes in technology were cited as one of the most impactful upon the workflow of those interviewed, from models of production (smaller less expensive equipment) to models of distribution (Video on Demand, Netflix and other digital distribution models), audience interaction (social media, blogging, audience activism), and new models of project funding (crowdsourcing via Kickstarter, etc.), these producers revealed how the industry is changing and allowing them the creative freedom they crave.

For Jon Betz making films is not just a job, it is his passion. After his first film *Queen of the Sun* he knew that he would not jump into the next project "just to make

another film." For him it is about finding a topic that he is passionate about, something that can keep his fire burning even when no one else seems to care. Speaking about his new film *Seed: The Untold Story*, he said, "even if people weren't interested, we probably would still be finishing the film." For Betz each project is a serious obligation that is more than just a paycheck waiting at the end, as he summarized:

> You're committing your life to it [the film] for a substantial amount of time. I don't know of very many other things like documentary filmmaking that, in terms of being a small business owner, the time that you're devoting to one singular project. You know, maybe building buildings, like architects. But these are large scale projects that take years. It takes a serious level of emotional commitment. And I don't think anyone has a commitment just because they think, oh, it will be a success. You have the commitment because you're smitten by the topic, you're continually inspired by it, you can't stop thinking about it, you're obsessed with it.

Betz knew they had the right project in *Seed* after he and Siegel shot some test footage at a local seed exchange near their hometown. At the event he said he found a group of people "just as obsessed with this topic" as they were. He

said knowing those other people were out there "fueled the fire" of his creativity.

Sarah Price corroborated this by saying that when she makes a film it is personal and she is living only to make that film. "The focus of the moment is telling the story and doing the story justice and covering what is happening before you," she said. Producing a documentary for her does mean she is involved in every aspect of the creative and business process and that seems to be how she likes it, and for her the producer credit on a small film is a signifier that that person did it all. "It kind of means that you created it, you made it happen. You were involved in every aspect of it. You were making it. You are making all the calls," she stated. For Price, working as an independent is "refreshing," she said, "you have people telling interesting stories and taking risks and cast and crew are all wanting to work on those stories because they are not cut and dried blockbuster business films."

Only a few of the participants included in this study, Curtis, Gitter and Reiss cited profitability as their primary motivational factor when making a motion picture. Gitter was direct in his answer about his role as a producer and indicated that when working with a major studio like Universal it is always about making a profit.

"You know, in terms of what I do… my job is to make sure it gets done and make sure it gets done right, make sure it gets done well, and make sure it gets done profitably," he said.

Grant Curtis has spent a majority of his career working on big budget studio productions. Most notably he was a producer for the three *Spider-Man* films directed by Sam Raimi. His perspective on the role of the producer provides a contrast to many of the other producers in this study. The *Spider-Man* films were one of Sony's "temple franchises" according to Curtis, a project that they were pumping lots of money and resources into in order to maximize returns.

Spider-Man is a franchise that has grossed over $2.5 billion worldwide for Sony, and Curtis was tight-lipped about any strategies for monetization of the film series. As Ted Hope had indicated in his interview, knowledge for the studios equals power. And for Curtis this seems to be true for audiences, too. As he states, "We tend to try to give away as little as possible and have people pay their ten dollars and get all the thrills and chills and story twists you know in real time rather than six months before on a website."

Jon Reiss came up with a plan to turn his book tour for *Think Outside the Box Office* into an opportunity to create a film. "To be honest I was looking for ways to raise more money for the travel and to make the travel more multipurpose," he said of the tour. He approached his partners at the website Babelgum.com to talk to them about continuing a series of webisodes he had been doing for them about street artists to help fund the travel, but it turned into something bigger. "We just started talking about doing, you know, more [webisodes]… and I posed that offer to them and they said well let's do *Bomb It 2,*" said Reiss. After his first film *Bomb It* was doing well on Netflix, he thought maybe he could also license *Bomb It 2* to them as well and keep the money flowing.

A condition of working within a capitalistic society is the need to generate economic profitability whether for one's self or for a larger corporate entity. A shared sentiment amongst those interviewed here was a desire to be able to find a level of economic sustainability while maintaining artistic autonomy for their career. Funding for their projects came from a variety of sources from self-funding through credit cards and personal loans to grants and the organization of non-profits to crowd-sourcing directly from niche audiences.

Some of the participants, like Tragos, did mention that financial longevity, not necessarily profitability, is something that all independent filmmakers need to consider. She passed on some advice she'd gotten from a mentor at the Sundance film institute, they told her "you guys need to think about sustainability, and think about your other films. And think about keeping a salary in there, and think about living expenses and all that and building it into the budget."

In that vein, almost all of the producers in this study had taken on some form of additional work outside of filmmaking. Ted Hope is the executive director for the San Francisco Film Society, Beesley, Price and Steinbauer take on work in commercial production and directing episodes of reality TV, Betz runs a non-profit film distribution company and Wolfson is the public relations director for a non-profit environmental group. These side jobs do not necessarily go to fund personal projects, but they give the producers a freedom to make the films they want.

Bradley Beesley says that if he did not have work as a director for reality TV shows, he probably would not be able to do the work he does as an independent filmmaker. "Had I not directed *Paranormal State* or *Roller Girls* or *Storm Chasers*… I can go do that for eight to ten weeks out

of the year and that enables me to not take any more jobs and focus on my own stuff the rest of the year," he said.

For a majority of the participants economics was expressed as a means to an end, a way to bring their artistic vision to life. When questions of finance arose most gave stories of piecemeal budgets cobbled together from a variety of sources that in the end gave them enough money to see the film through to completion. There were multiple accounts of productions financed on credit cards, lots of films supported by grants, and most producers had turned to some form of crowd-sourcing for funds at one point or another, most commonly Kickstarter.

Ben Steinbauer was one of several of the participants who discussed their willingness to take a financial risk in order to get their film made. As he bluntly put it, "mainly I funded the movie on credit cards and kind of shouldered most of the finances myself". Likewise Bradley Beesley, Tim Kirk, Tracy Tragos, Jon Betz and Sarah Price shared common stories of putting their own financial profits aside in order to "get it done." As Steinbauer summarized, "I just feel like if you are going for a large audience or trying to make money, that making an indie (independent) film is just not the way to do it."

Several of the interviewees had started non-profit organizations to help them to raise funds or reach their audiences. For her first film *Be Good, Smile Pretty* Tracy Tragos established a non-profit organization for families who have lost loved ones while in the military. Beesley created an organization to help support individuals coming out of prison for his film *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*. In both cases the organizations were used to allow the filmmakers to raise money from grants, but have continued on after the projects were over to support the subjects of the films, and many others like them. Beesley describes how he was able to create a scholarship fund at the prison thanks to his film. "It is a really gratifying experience to work with all these women on this film and still be in contact with them today. All four of the women featured in this film … are all out of prison and thriving. That is super gratifying."

Jon Betz's role as co-director of his non-profit film distribution co-op, Collective Eye, has given him connections to filmmakers from many various backgrounds. Betz sees a greater value in helping those with an independent spirit. He expounds upon his experience of working with others:

> we are helping those filmmakers in a non-exclusive model so they're still empowered to do their own thing. But we're helping get those films out because we now know the audience for those films, they're very similar audience to *Queen of the Sun* so we could kind of tap into that and say, this audience is really hungry for not just *Queen of the Sun* they're hungry for these other films too.

In the end a lot of what is important is building relationships with others and having a list of people he can count on to help him when he is in a jam. Or, as he says, "As a filmmaker, you're constantly growing a network of friends."

For his film *Okie Noodling* Bradley Beesley received grant funding and as part of the project he established a Okie Noodling hand fishing tournament that has gone on to be wildly successful and is now entering its fifteenth year. Beesley considers the audience he grew for *Okie Noodling* to be one of his biggest successes as far as outreach and interaction with his audience. As part of the film Beesley started an "Okie Noodling Tournament" that brings in over ten-thousand people every year. He says of the experience, "It is a cool part of making documentaries. It's why I like

it. Sometimes you create your own culture and your own community and being a part of that means a lot."

Filmmakers in this study emphasized two areas of importance when discussing their social influences; Audience interaction and collaboration with fellow artists. Audience was a major consideration for many of the participants. Knowing who their audience will be allows them to garner support financially because being able to show the number of potential consumers a filmmaker can bring to a subject often an indicator for financiers of what their return on investment might be. Even when receiving grants, most backers want to know who the audience will be and what the perceived impact on that audience will be. Filmmakers who can adapt quickly and avoid the bureaucratic red-tape of studio systems, are taking advantage of advances in technology to target niche audiences.

The role of the media producer in relation to their audience has shifted rapidly during the past two decades, due to the influence of technology and the extended pressures placed upon them by a system driven by profit. Some of these interviewees had worked with major studios but for a majority most of their projects began outside of studios and were at various times then picked up by

companies who would help the filmmakers reach a wider audience.

The organization of grassroots movements around their films is something that a majority of the respondents in this study implicated as being very useful to them in reaching a wider audience. Marisa Miller Wolfson, director of the independent documentary *Vegucated,* utilized social media to build a word-of-mouth campaign for her film. Wolfson describes the way her team built excitement for their first film festival tour:

> We did contests on Twitter and Facebook. Repost this, like us on Facebook, repost us and tag us in a comment, and you'll be in a drawing to win a box of vegan sweets or whatever it was, and it worked well.

Marisa says that their social media presence is even stronger than their own website. The films' Facebook page has more visitors per day than their website. She said "[Facebook] is our main portal where we interact with people."

When it came to collaborations, the filmmakers indicated a variety of reasons for partnering with others. Some found artistic balance in their fellow filmmakers, some felt it was good to have a network of friends who had

a variety of skill and resources available. Brad Beesley said he liked having a collaborator because it gave him extra motivation, a sense that someone was depending on him. Jon Betz likes the ability to get his collaborator's perspective, as he put it:

> We're kind of in each other's brains and how each other thinks. But we both sense different impulses and it's amazing how he'll see something, and it's something I won't, and then I'll see something and it's something he won't see, and great things can come out of both, so it creates a really interesting vision for the film.

For most these social interactions were about finding ways to complete a project, or to get their product seen by as many people as possible, and only a few indicated that they were thinking of growing profit margins by selling more to a larger audience, or lowering the overhead costs of production by bringing on a partner.

Even those producers like Eric Gitter who indicated was driven by profits, admitted that, without a good story, he's got nothing to work with. A majority of the filmmakers described their desire to make their films as "a passion" or "a lifestyle". Many depicted their projects as their

"baby" or visualized themselves as shepherds guiding their projects through the wilderness. Working in an industry that is encapsulated within capitalism, these producers walk a fine line balancing their artistic integrity while managing finances. Christine Walker felt that the importance of creativity outweighed the pressure to turn a profit:

> Often, you're trying to satisfy the business interests of the company. And unless you do that, you don't survive. Where, as an independent filmmaker, certainly you have to satisfy a business interest, but if you don't create something original, then you also can't continue to make work.

For a majority of these filmmakers the motivating factor behind for making films, comes down to their creative freedom. As Tragos summarized, "I don't think it [being independent] has anything to do with budget numbers, I think it has to do with basically final cut and creative control."

One shared trait amongst all participants was the fact that their films were created with specific niche audiences in mind. With more and more competition for audiences' attention filmmakers are having to find ways to selectively

create films that cater to specific tastes and interests. This is not the same as working within a genre, it is more specific than that, and this type of marketing allows filmmakers to build a core audience they can build upon for future projects. For *Vegucated* Wolfson relied heavily on a "core niche audience, of the vegetarian and vegan community." She says "even though they are niche, there are millions of them". Her plan, that seems to have worked fairly well, has been to rely on that niche audience to hold community screenings in living rooms and small theatres across the nation. The audience she is aiming for is "a very digital savvy, really well connected, young demographic." Although her research shows there are plenty of people in an older demographic interested in the topic, she says "it is the younger folks that are tech savvy enough to really spread the word."

In a little over two years Wolfson and her team grew their Facebook following to almost forty-three thousand followers and she says that the Facebook page is her main way of communicating with her core audience. Also helping Wolfson build social capital with her audience is the fact that she's had so many animal rights groups helping her spread the word about the film.

Walker says her team was keenly aware of the multiple niche audiences that their film would draw in. She recalls a strategy session with HBO that specifically addressed the issues. Walker stated:

> I know that they did put together marketing plan and I remember at the beginning of production we did have a meeting with the HBO team to talk about the different audiences for the film and you know, the jazz audience and the Harvey Pekar's fan base and about the way they might sell the film.

Even though he didn't set out to intentionally target the niche audience surrounding the subject of his film Steinbauer learned a quick lesson.

> It almost has to be a topic that is big enough and worthy enough to gain national interest. So you kind of have to have something that is on the cultural radar, because otherwise there are so many ethical battles already just getting your movie financed and made, to then fight that battle of getting people to watch it, it's just really, really difficult.

Combining the grassroots participation by a niche audience, VOD and other new models with more traditional theatrical releases filmmakers might have a way to get their films

seen. Betz insists that technology has made the world so big that it becomes overwhelming for many people. He thinks we will see a shift back to valuing what is small. Some of the filmmakers like Tracy Tragos were developing their projects for a niche audience but had hopes that they could reach a wider

Tracy Tragos discussed reaching her audience, "We know that we're making an independent film, we know that it's about niche … it's not going to be the easiest sell." But, because her film is about raising awareness of rural poverty in the United States, her hope for *Rich Hill* is that it will reach a wider audience, an audience that "doesn't see independent films." She said she and her co-producer/director talk a lot about the movies that their intended audience has access to. And she told about the idea of trying to get into outlets for DVD like Redbox and Walmart, where others who may be facing similar situations can see a story of "hope and inspiration."

The producers in this study indicated that one of their biggest challenges is giving people the ability to see their films. Overlapping with technology and audience interaction the methods and models of distribution have changed dramatically over the past decade. Obtaining a theatrical release is less and less likely for a majority

of filmmakers and many of them are foregoing large nation-wide theatrical releases in lieu of various forms of digital distribution such as Video on Demand via satellite and cable providers or steaming video services such as Netflix, Hulu or even Youtube.

Ted Hope has worked with studios quite a bit, and he admits that "all of my movies have benefitted when I had studio involvement," but he adds that the most beneficial support came in the form of marketing and distribution; reaching the audience. Having help in distribution was not uncommon amongst those interviewed, Marisa Miller Wolfson said she felt fortunate to have a digital distribution company contact her to establish a partnership. "Film Buff is one of the largest digital entertainment providers in North America, and they found us. They said food docs are hot right now." Film Buff worked with Wolfson to get the film on NetFlix, iTunes, Amazon Instant and other digital portals. Wolfson also participated in a workshop with another one of the interviewees from this study, Jon Reiss, and learned a lot about finding a niche audience to target for distribution. Filmmakers "have to be very, very active in the marketing distribution way before you get to the marketing and distribution phase," she said. Wolfson says that she was easily able to connect with her niche audience

and get them involved because that is what she has been doing while working as a vegan activist.

Jon Betz has a unique opportunity as both a filmmaker and as a partner in a film distribution co-op. He foresees a future where filmmakers can capitalize upon grassroots promotion more easily. Because, "getting press for your film is really hard," says Betz. If and when a film does rise above the fray, the filmmakers must be ready to act, and act quickly. Betz describes the dream of his future for independent films:

> So you're, you're really trying to get as many cities to be showing the film that first week. Whether it's in a theatre or in an organization. That's where you need a team of people who could, this is kind of a dream it's like, you're releasing it on VOD but you're also releasing it in theatres, and the cities that aren't picking it up in certain cities, you've got people in those cities with Sierra Club or with Slow Food or with Whole Foods or with any one of these, or just a seed bank in that town, but they're putting on a screening in that same zone. Wouldn't that be great? Then you're really hitting as wide of a swath of the country as you can. And that critical mass component is what issue driven documentaries need to get on a bigger radar.

Almost all the filmmakers in the study discussed how they utilized social media and online communities to build awareness, gather feedback and build a following that they could turn to for future projects and fundraising opportunities. For Jon Betz one of the most exciting aspects of being an independent filmmaker is his engagement with the audience. Building an audience and getting their participation is part of what Betz really enjoys. He knows that if he can get people interested in his films because as the interest grows so does his audience. As he says:

> Producing is also about growing the audience, and growing the awareness. Creating interest in the film and the subject. So you're doing everything at the same time, Facebook, all the social media platforms, really everything. Because we just want people to get really excited about it because when they get excited about it, they also share.

Betz says if a filmmaker is lucky, they may have what he calls "super fans." People devoted to the subject matter and specifically the film. He said these are the types of people who "are going to do ten community screenings in their area, they're going to create links to other networks for you, and just get the word out." Betz says in order for

a documentary film to be a success today, "you need an audience just as much as you need the filmmaker." As an example Hope discussed his film *Super* starring Rainn Wilson, pointing out:

> it was very appealing to the financiers and the distributors that Rainn Wilson had over two million Twitter followers. It indicated he had a very big following that he was engaged with. It was also appealing to them that the director … had written blog posts that had over a million hits. He had done webisodes that had been watched a million times. All those hits and audience engagement were very helpful in getting the movie made.

In order maintain a following Hope said he and his collaborators had to find ways to actively engage their audience. He expounded upon his experience with producing his film *Super* and the strategy for audience interaction through social media*:*

> With *Super*, we had a very active Twitter group that the cast and the crew all participated in. That develops a large following. All of that is very much tracked by the industry contributors. This time last year, we had premiered Super at the Toronto Film Festival, and it was the first film to sell. We sold it to North American Distributor for much more than we

> anticipated. I think some of it was because they all felt it was this large audience already within the story world that we were creating.

The access that technology gives filmmakers to reach and engage their audience is unprecedented. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and others are allowing these producers to build true grassroots communities of fans who often can help support films economically and by promoting the films.

Crowdsourcing websites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo offer filmmakers (and other creative) a way to monetize their fanbase. All interviewees discussed crowdsourcing as a potential for sustainable model of independent filmmaking, and several had utilized Kickstarter to successfully fund projects. Tragos and her co-director set ambitious goals for themselves to keep their production going. Their latest success was completing a Kickstarter campaign in which they rasied over sixty-four thousand dollars from five-hundred and fourteen individuals to fund their film *Rich Hill.* Wolfson, Hope, Reiss, Beesley, and Steinbauer have all used Kickstarter campaigns to start or complete some of their projects.

As technology has progressed and cameras and audio equipment get less expensive and higher in quality, we have seen an ever-increasing amount of competition in the field of motion picture production. Even though in many ways the equipment costs have gone down, with more projects being produced there are less funds available from the studios for producers to compete for. In order to get their films made artistically driven producers have to be resourceful find ways to get the highest quality possible for the least amount of economic input. Tracy Tragos said of her first film, *Be Good, Smile Pretty* that "it was basically, beg, borrow and steal." She said she put up a lot of her own money by wracking up debt on credit cards. "There wasn't a lot of time to wait around for grant cycles. So I just went full steam ahead." She further explained by saying:

> I was able to call in favors; my husband was working at a production company at the time so I was able to borrow their equipment. And at first those shoots didn't go so well. I knew that I needed to get my own equipment and so I just charged it on a credit card. I got a lot of advice and a lot of help, and you know, family worked for free on it and it was just cobbled together … But I think that's often how it has to start.

Once she had some footage to share Tragos was able to get support from the Kansas City Public Television station KCPT. Through them she was then able to gain the support of

Independent Television Service (ITVS). Tragos' story is not unlike many of the other interviewees who were able to find support from studios or distributors after their films were already made and showing potential for success. Ted Hope has had a lot of success getting his projects made but he sees the struggles that filmmakers today face. As he puts it the studios have a "cover your ass mentality" when it comes to producing films. As Hope elaborates:

> The film industry is about people keeping their jobs. That's the main thing. As long as it is justifiable, as long as there is enough evidence to say this is a wise business decision, that's what people love. They're not falling in love with it [the project] because of the passion for the story, they're falling in love with it because they can say, 'Look, it already worked in this one medium, so we can go ahead and do it in our medium.'

Hope's disillusion with the industry becomes apparent when he talks about the process that studios go through when deciding on what films they will make. His personal experience has been that while the studios at first look for films that are truly interesting they quickly switch gears to examine the margins of profitability.

Beesley echoes Hopes mentality towards the studios and has taken lengths to separate himself from influences Hollywood filmmaking. He says he focuses on creating films that are personally fulfilling for himself. Speaking about what he considers to be large budget films in the "five to six million dollar range," he comments, "I don't relate with that world at all. I haven't stopped to put it in context with the work that I am doing because I really have no reverence for it. It doesn't really matter to me." Creating a work specifically for a studio is not something Beesley has found appealing. "You give up the freedom that I have which is being able to recreate your own existence and life through filmmaking."

Repeatedly the filmmakers in this study talked about the growing burden placed on them to do more and more, with less and less. The growing number of films being produced each year leads to a smaller pool of money from traditional sources. Ted Hope summarized the situation he has found himself in by saying, "As a producer, I had to find the material, produce it well, package it, bring the money to it, I had to bring the distribution. And now, I have to bring some of the audience to it as well." Hope is not alone a majority of the filmmakers agreed saying that in

order to bring their projects in on budget, they are required to take on more of the responsibilities.

Independent filmmakers face a difficult task in balancing the quality of their art with economic profitability. In an industry that Ted Hope says values economic profits over quality of storytelling, this can be tricky. Hope illustrates this point by discussing his own encounters with corporate studios:

> I am at the top of my game in story telling, but at the same time, that's not where I am valued most by the industry anymore. They seem to not want me for the quality I can bring to the table, which is what I feel that I do. They want me for the quantity that I bring. They want me to keep delivering movies on a regular basis, but they don't care about the quality of what I do. It used to be, if you made a really good film really well, you would make more money. It's not the case anymore that I make more money for making a better movie. They just want me to keep delivering the movies on a regular basis.

Many of the producers used the analogy of "wearing hats" to describe the overworked conditions of independent filmmakers. Jon Betz described the duality of roles he and his fellow filmmakers experience when working on

independent productions as both a businessperson and a creative:

> It seems like everybody that I talk to, they're wearing both hats, most of the people I talk to, on some level anyways. There are some people that really have divided it into a more traditional structure. You'll go into certain things and they'll say, talk to my producer about that, but gosh that's rare.

Tragos said she felt that independent filmmakers should be ready to take on additional roles, especially when it comes to distributing films. She said, "Theatrical, self distribution, and video on demand. We kind of have to take it step by step, but ideally, but I think an independent producer needs to be prepared to wear all those hats." Betz declared, digital distribution and video-on-demand are "definitely part of the future," while Reiss further emphasized, "having someone who can kind of shepherd distribution and marketing process is really valuable."

Branding, marketing and distribution are all part of reaching an audience. As consumers have more and more options to choose from when it comes to media, filmmakers who want to have their films seen will have to craft their message, find their niche and keep doing more and more. As

Jon Betz said during his interview, "you've got filmmakers doing every single [thing], they're wearing all the hats throughout the process. They might be doing their best to not have to wear all those hats, but they really are the person who can call the shots on anything related to the film."

The flexibility of independent filmmakers is what allows them to survive, and thrive. The ability to change more rapidly, to stay abreast of technological changes and shifts in audience interaction and reception are what give independents the edge over the studios. As studios keep their focus on creating big budget action films, the independents can find a place delivering more refined stories and engaging their audiences. Right now, "the challenge is how to deliver good stories, good production value, on an ever decreasing budget" said Ted Hope. He stresssed the importance of finding projects that can build community or deliver to a niche audience thereby unleashing the incredible potential and value that will come from the those individuals. Hope recapitulated:

> The Hollywood model of today is really exclusively toward tent pole and family films. That's what that business is with a huge focus on international potential. As a result, we will keep starving

> audiences for more sophisticated content that speaks to them in a more direct way. Producers with a focus on that niche audience that know how to move them from consumers to active participants in an engaged community, there's a real tremendous opportunity in front of them.

In Hope's vision for the future it will be the independents who lead the way to more creativity and remain on the cutting edge of an industry that can supply fresh content can build and grow in both ambition and scale. Hope's concept is one of artistic freedom and the ability to create out of artistic desire, not economic dominance. As, Tim Kirk summed up his experience as an independent producer by saying, "If you feel really passionate about something and you think it might reach an audience it's not a bad idea to just get started and the people you need might just show up."

This study relied heavily on the model of cultural production as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu in his text *The Field of Cultural Production*. Bourdieu's model provides a fluid and flexible model that allows for the study of shifts of power that occur within the field of production. Within the field shifts in power are represented by the exchange of various forms of capital between agents in the

field, which in turn determines their position within the field. The types of capital considered in this study include economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital and what I refer to as artistic capital, which is in line with the general notion of cultural capital outlined by Bourdieu.

For this research, economic capital is recognized as any form of physical or constructed currency, that is to say, money. Bourdieu (1986) claims that the construct of capitalism has reduced "a universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange, which is objectively and subjectively oriented toward the maximization of profit." That is to say, that other systems outside of capitalism are not always about increases in capital, but because the field of motion picture production lies within the larger field of capitalistic society (at least here in the United States) those agents operating within the field are pressured to seek ever growing accumulations of all forms of capital which can be exchanged for economic capital.

When social capital is mentioned in this study I am referring to capital that is built through the network of collaborators that is built up by the motion picture producer over time to support their endeavors. As Bourdieu (1986) states this relationship is like "membership in a

group" and this membership "provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (51). For these independent motion picture producers these groups often times include members of a core niche audience as well as fellow filmmakers and collaborators. As Bourdieu points out, membership in these groups does not always come easily or naturally, the "existence of a network of connections… is the product of an endless effort at institution, of which institution rites – often wrongly described as rites of passage – mark the essential moments and which is necessary in order to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits" (52). In other words, it takes a lot of hard work for these producers to build up a network of resources that result in the ability to generate economic or symbolic profits.

Bourdieu's definition of symbolic capital, which we will use here is the build up of residual power that can carry over from project to project. As Bourdieu elegantly states:

> The only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through

> publication, exhibition, etc.) and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation (Bourdieu 75).

This power of consecration is what producers like Ted Hope have built up over a long and successful career in the film industry. By shunning economic profits in favor of social and/or cultural capital, the producer is recognized as more legitimate and adds to his or her credibility within their network.

Cultural capital as referenced here is mainly in regards to what Bourdieu calls the embodied state of cultural capital, "the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (47). In this state economic wealth or surplus of other forms of capital are "converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus, cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange" (48). The inculcation of beliefs and perception of life are built up over time through experience.

To better illustrate how niche market independent film producers differentiate between themselves we can look more closely at the language the producers use to describe the capital they accumulate and utilize in the process of working on their projects. To make this point the interviews conducted with Ted Hope, a producer who has been

in the field of motion picture production for over twenty years will be compared to Bradley Beesley who has experience some success within the field but is still relatively new in comparison to Hope. This process of comparison should provide some perspective and show how these producers can occupy a relatively small field together while maintaining their own identieies.

We can begin by examining the differences in perspective when the participants discussed their attitudes and the language surrounding economic capital and their projects. Ted Hope is a champion of independent filmmaking, blogging and speaking out in support of the independent artists whenever he can. But Hope is also a realist. He knows the struggles filmmakers today face, in an industry where most corporate executives have a "cover your ass mentality" when it comes to producing films. As Hope more clearly elaborates:

> The film industry is about people keeping their jobs. That's the main thing. As long as it is justifiable, as long as there is enough evidence to say this is a wise business decision, that's what people love. They're not falling in love with it because of the passion for the story, they're falling in love with it because they can say, "Look, it already worked in this one medium, so we can go ahead and do it in our medium."

Hope points out that the big challenge now for independent filmmakers is balancing the quality of their art with

economic profitability. In an industry that values quantity over quality, this can be tricky.

And while Hope seemed to focus the way the studios looked at the economic profitability of a project, Bradley Beesley directed the conversation more towards his own funding efforts. Aside from working as a reality TV producer to earn a living, the actual funding for each of Beesley's film projects has been different; credit cards, grants, Kickstarter, he even started a non-profit organization to raise money for his latest feature length film *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*.

Hope places a lot of importance on building an audience for his films and ultimately sees a lot of different ways to determine who makes up the audience. Hope has determined that he has to sell each of his films to several different audiences. He says, "In some ways, my first audience is the agency and the actor," he has to engage and convince them that he has a project that is worthy of their time. In order to convince them he works on the script to develop the characters. The next audience he has to convince are the financiers, giving them a concept of what the movie will be and helping them to see the big picture of the project and how they can benefit. He sometimes has to demonstrate how large the public audience

will be by flaunting the actors social media following or the popularity of his director. As an example Hope discussed his film *Super* starring Rainn Wilson, as Hope pointed out:

> it was very appealing to the financiers and the distributors that Rainn Wilson had over two million twitter followers. It indicated he had a very big following that he was engaged with. It was also appealing to them that the director … had written blog posts that had over a million hits. He had done webisodes that had been watched a million times. All those hits and audience engagement were very helpful in getting the movie made and ultimately gave the movie seed.

In contrast to Hope's focus on finding ways to entice studios with large audiences, Beesley seemed to consider the subjects and the audience for his film to be a part of his personal network. As an example, for his film *Okie Noodling,* Beesley started an "Okie Noodling Tournament" that brings in over ten-thousand people every year. He says of the experience, "It is a cool part of making documentaries. It's why I like it. Sometimes you create your own culture and your own community and being a part of that means a lot." As Bourdieu said, it is this build up of a network of peers that is important to those seeking social capital.

Beesley also collaborates heavily with other artists. On almost every one of his projects he says he has teamed

up with someone to, as he says, "it adds a sense of urgency and a little bit of self induced pressure when you show other people you are going to make a film." Beesley, who is from Oklahoma originally, often teams up with the alternative rock band The Flaming Lips to collaborate on projects. He has produced many of their music videos, and they often provide him with music for his films. Beesley has also built a network of filmmaking friends including his college roommate, Ben Steinbauer (*Winnebago Man*) and Sarah Price (*American Movie, Summer Camp*) to help him get projects done. As Beesley said, "I think it is very beneficial to have a partner in crime when you start a feature length documentary."

Hope is a producer who brings passion to his work and one who tends to choose projects that he has a personal connection with. This is most evident with his film *American Splendor,* a film about underground comic writer and artist Harvey Pekar. Hope is a true fan of Pekar and took on the project out of his passion to see it through. As Hope explained:

> I just really loved what he was doing with his work. And I always thought, "Wow. Wouldn't it be great to make a movie about him and his work?" I had the good fortune of having a relationship with Dean Hatfield who is a graphic novelist and who is a huge fan of Harvey and who has gotten the opportunity to do a piece for Harvey. He told Joyce Brabner, Harvey's

> wife, of my interest. One day Joyce called me and we worked out a deal to collaborate to try get a movie made.

At this same time, Hope had been offered a job producing Ang Lee's version of *The Incredible Hulk* he chose to produce *American Splendor* instead. "I felt much more connected to American Splendor on a personal level," and added that if he would have produced *The Hulk,* the studio would have pressured him into signing a two year contract of exclusivity.

Beesley also shares a desire to create meaningful works, and he describes his projects as a slow burning passion. He says that for most of his projects he will ponder them for years before taking action. As he elucidated, "With *Okie Noodling, Fearless Freaks,* and *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*, those are all topics I thought about for a decade before I made the films." However, sometimes events would force him into action, when something new or unusual happened surrounding a topic that he had been considering. He gave an example about *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* in which the Oklahoma penitentiary system decided to allow female participants in the rodeo. As Beesley explained, "when they decided to allow females, I decided I just had to go. I was compelled.

There are ideas you stew on and then something happens and it spurs these ideas into action."

Looking at these two interviews we can see the differences within this sub-field of the motion picture industry, the small-scale producers working alongside much larger scale producers. We see the variegations between what Bourdieu refers to as the consecrated avant garde in the statements of Ted Hope and the avant garde bohemia in the language of Beesley. The way that these producers speak about capital gives subtle clues to their levels of autonomy within the field.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

General Introduction to Conclusions

Initially this aim of this research was to answer several broad research questions based on Bourdieu's field of cultural production, in regards to how various forms of capital inform the condition of the modern independent film producer. The producers who participated in the study represent a variety of different perspectives and provide good contrast and balance to the research. The in-depth interviews conducted provided sufficient data to answer the three main research questions and also allowed for various themes to emerge via the participants. Generalizations in this type of study are limited due in part to the proprietary nature of qualitative data and the situational perspectives of the interviewees.

This research builds upon previous studies of motion picture professionals such as Sherry Ortner's, *Not Hollywood* (2013) while providing a springboard for additional research in this area. The study expands previous scholarship and is a basis for a new understanding of how producers operate within the field of motion picture

production. The findings are not juxtaposition to previous research, but are rather complimentary and supplementary. The desired goal of this research is to establish a foundation for examining other film producers through case studies of individuals working within the industry. As motion picture production becomes more competitive and prolific throughout the United States and globally, there will be a need to understand the practices of filmmakers. The findings presented here offer some suggestions for deeper appreciation of those practices.

Research questions of this study were developed to investigate the self-perception of independent motion picture producers and the variables that influence their motivations for motion picture creation. The data collected gives practical coherence to these objectives and has revealed the potential for additional research on the topic of the role of individuals within the motion picture profession. Qualitative analysis was chosen for this study because it allows for robust analysis of the in-depth interviews used to collect data. As stated in the methodology, in-depth interviews are one of the most powerful forms of inquiry available to researchers utilizing qualitative methods (McCracken 1998). Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone.

The participants represent a varied sample of the modern independent motion picture industry. A wide variety of producers were interviewed to give a contrast between different experiences and perspectives. Purposive snowball sampling was utilized to obtain additional interviews for the study after the first few initial interviews due to the difficulty in 'studying up." Studying up, or examining institutions of cultural power, such as the motion picture industry can be a difficult task given the multiple layers of insulation subjects have from the general public, often in the form of talent agents or other gatekeepers.

Interpretation of Results

RQ1 - To what extent do potential gains in economic capital from a project impact the decisions of a modern, niche market, independent motion picture producer?

Entering the study it was presumed that many of the respondents would be heavily pressured to seek economic profits over their autonomous desires. What was surprising was the apparent disregard for profit from a majority of the producers. A majority of the producers in this study indicated that they were not driven to create motion pictures out of the desire for economic profit. They did say that they felt a desire to raise funds in order to fund

their projects and help them complete bring their creative visions to life. As stated in chapter two, the field of motion picture production is situated within the larger field of capitalist society thus forcing all aspects of culture to be impacted by economic factors. Creating a motion picture is an expensive undertaking; unlike many other forms of art there are a lot of equipment and production costs involved. Even though economics may not be a direct motivating factor, finances do play a role in any major production.

There are many variables that could impact the economic desires of producers on any given production. Each project may be pursued for different reasons. Many of the producers in this study take on secondary jobs to fulfill their personal financial obligations, or even to raise capital for additional "passion" projects. The data here reveals that a large majority of the respondents are not as interested in making more than they need to finance their film and build a sustainable life as an artist.

RQ2 - To what extent do the cultural and/or social capital of a film project affect the decisions of a modern, niche market, independent motion picture producer?

The two main areas of social capital that impact producers are the interactions they have with their audiences, through social media and other community events; and their network of collaborators and fellow filmmakers. Factors that may skew this data include many unknown variables such as romantic relationships between collaborators, adversarial confrontations, political views, social issues or hopes of grandeur. The data collected clearly shows that filmmakers want to know more about how to effectively reach their audience, and to try and find ways to engage an audience and get them actively involved in a niche community surrounding the film. The data collected here effectively illustrates many points about audience interaction previously referenced as fandom scholarship in chapter two in which audiences are not always necessarily a counter force to culture but often support "existing hierarchies".

RQ3 - To what extent are the artistic desires of niche market, independent motion picture producers fulfilled by motion picture production?

Artistic desires are what drive a majority of the producers in this study. The ability to create a unique and personal story without compromising to economic

profitability is what most said they aspire to. There is a possibility that participants could be giving answers that they feel they should give rather than the answer they truly believe. There may be factors such as filmmakers wanting to be labeled independent because it makes them seem edgier to audiences, or in some way helps them build social capital amongst their peers. It is unlikely that is the case here as respondents corroborated data independently from one another in separate interviews. The data collected for this research question falls in line again with other studies of producers and production culture focusing on individuals within the motion picture industry such as Ortner's *Not Hollywood*.

Emergent Themes and Discoveries

One emergent theme that was repeated by almost all participants was the issue that they felt they were being required to take on more responsibility. This may be due to shifts in stability in the global economy, and/or increases in competition for finite amounts of resources. Most of the producers interviewed for this study worked in relatively small crews so it may be just a factor of working as an independent with a small budget that these producers get stuck taking on more responsibility.

Another emergent theme shared by eight of the thirteen respondents was the fact that they had taken on secondary jobs to either supplement or entirely support their filmmaking lifestyle. Many directly stated the reason they took on secondary jobs was in order to support their ability to have artistic freedom when creating their films. It would appear that many filmmakers who are truly working to create artistic works or works of passion are doing so by moonlighting as educators, television directors or authors.

Generalizations and Inferences

There are some overarching themes from each of the research question that did emerge yet it would be imprudent to think that there is a one-size-fits all formula for the motivations and decision-making processes of creative individuals. Each production is a different event and every producer brings with them the experiences from their life. Responses would indicate that there seems to be little variation in the perspective of the interviewees, and we can draw some general conclusions about the variables that impact independent filmmakers. Themes from this study that can be generalized when discussing independent filmmakers such as their autonomous desires, the shared yearning to

connect with audiences and build teams of collaborators, and the similarities in fundraising methods and philosophies. But it is important to follow Bourdieu's suggestion and remember that it is not the task of social scientists to draw dividing lines between the agents of a field by imposing our own presumptions (Bourdieu 1993:42).

The results of the data collection do mirror Bourdieu's model of the field of cultural production, in which those producers creating artistic works are still obligated to seek financial support in order to create works. And the study is in line with two principles of hierarchy as outlined by Bourdieu: "the heteronymous principle, favorable to those who dominate the field economically and politically," and "the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake'), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy. It will be interesting to see what changes occur in this structure we progress towards an environment where some artists are able to obtain financing directly from their audiences through crowd-funding and other direct sources.

Limitations of the Study, and opportunities for further research.

This study was a broad sampling from across multiple genres of film that included both fiction and documentary filmmakers. It was intentionally not focused on any one particular genre to ensure a general sampling from a variety of sources that could be compared to one another to find wider commonalities, or differences between those labeled as independent. Though was given to the range of producers selected for the study but because of the use of purposive snowball sampling the respondents could be skewed towards a group or groups of like minded individuals or collaborators. For future studies of this kind it may be interesting to take the model used here and apply it to a film producers working within a specific to see if more detailed generalizations can be tied to those genres. This research was also conducted with restraints on both time and access to the field. Much of the information about how producers operate is very difficult to access. If future studies could be made in collaboration with studios and or other high level producers at an early stage of project development, it could lead to exciting revelations about the nature of the industry.

There is a need for single-case study approaches to examine the challenges and opportunities facing independent

motion picture producers. The research conducted for this study will not be productive unless other case studies validate the findings presented here. Quantitative data could also be used to explore aspects of how a project's financial success is impacted by the amount of audience interaction a producer or studio utilizes on their project. All of this would require high-level access to proprietary information, but the results could be very useful in terms of further understanding the details of the motion picture industry.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

During the producer interviews, the following questions served as prompts in the occurrence of lulls in the conversation. The questions were not asked verbatim, the questions were designed to address the three main research questions and dealt with social, ecomomic and artistic capital. The producers were allowed to answer freely as the interviewer monitored their responses to make sure that all questions were addressed.

- Can you describe the process of how you came to work on _____?
- What were the most important duties of your role as producer?
- What strengths do you feel you brought to the production?
- Can you describe the characteristics of an independent production?
- How would you define the modern independent producer?
- Can you describe the management structure/hierarchy of the individuals involved in creation of _____? Who, if anyone, did you report to during the production?
- What motivates you most as a producer?
- How do you measure the success of your projects?
- Do you feel an obligation to ensure the financial success of a project?
- How do you balance the artistic elements of a production with the financial constraints/obligations?
- Do you think your own personal gains/losses have an impact on your decisions as a producer? Why?

- Do you feel the financial outcome of your projects defines you as a film producer amongst your peers? To your audience?
- Before you begin a project, do you always consider who your target audience will be?
- What methods are utilized to engage your audience with your project?
- In your opinion, which individual(s) in the filmmaking process have the most influence over the final product? Why?
- Where did the idea for your project originate?
- Did you consider yourself a fan of _____ before you became involved in the production?
- In what ways, if any, did you interact with the fans/audience of your project?
- What are your feelings regarding the instantaneous feedback of audiences, via the Internet and other technologies on the production of motion pictures?
- How were creative differences regarding the production of your motion picture resolved?
- Would you still be motivated to make motion pictures even if you weren't earning an income from them?
- How would you rank your knowledge of the subject of your projects against the rest of the cast, crew, and production staff? Versus the target audience?
- In what ways does your vision for a project impact the decisions you make?

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Appendix B - Example Communication

RE: Interview Request

My name is Jason Cole, I am a faculty member at the University of Central Missouri in the Department of Communication. Concurrently, I am also finishing my doctoral research requirements (i.e., my dissertation) at the University of Kansas in the Department of Film and Media Studies.

Let me get right to the point. I would like to conduct an interview with you for my dissertation. The research I am working on is a case study of the role of media "producers" within *Spider-man* fandom. I have already spoken with some other individuals, such as Stan Lee and Grant Curtis, who were involved in the production of the *Spider-man* films. Having your participation would be extremely helpful in completing a rigorous and thorough study of *Spider-man* fandom.

I have attached a copy of the interview questions to review before our discussion so that you may be adequately prepared and familiar with the topic. If you agree to participate, I will provide a consent form for you to review and sign before we proceed with the interview.

I know that your time is valuable and that I will need to arrange the interview around your schedule. Ideally, I would like to be able to conduct the interview during the time frame of **July 19-August 3**. I would prefer having an interactive interview either by phone, video-conference (Skype), or in person (I would travel to you) so that we are able to discuss your answers but email correspondence may also suffice.

Please reply at your earliest convenience to this e-mail at jcole@ku.edu, or feel free to call me at (660) 909-4747 to let me know if you are willing to participate in my research project.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Cordially,

S. Jason Cole

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Appendix C – Interview Transcripts / Raw Data

August 11, 2011
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Bradley Beesley

COLE: Hey, Hello.

BEESLEY: This is Bradley. Sorry I missed your call.

COLE: That's okay. This is Jason. How are you doing?

BEESLEY: I am doing good. Just getting back from working…back in Austin.

COLE: I got to talk to Ben Steinbauer a and he told me you were roommates for awhile, and he jokingly told me to ask you about your love of mesh vests?

BEESLEY: Hmmmm.

COLE: That must be an inside roommate joke, I take it.

BEESLEY: It's the remnant of a bachelor party, actually.

COLE: Ha! Well, anyway, I am a graduate student at the University of Kansas working on my dissertation. The topic is how over the past couple of decades the definition of what it means to be an independent film producer has undergone some radical changes, especially in the last five to ten years. What I am doing is having conversations with folks who I feel are truly independent film makers, and learning more about your experiences and the processes you went through to get your films made.

BEESLEY: Sure

COLE: I guess I am pretty familiar with most of your films and I also got to talk to Sarah Price who I understand you worked with on *Summer Camp.*

BEESLEY: Yeah, it was great. She taught me a lot about shaping a story and crafting a story arc. Some of my films

were a bit more impressionistic before I started working with her.

COLE: I was really interested to learn about the way…. I guess Chris [Smith] had more of a narrative background and she was more of a documentary person and how that shaped American Movie and those types of things.

BEESLEY: Right. She passed that along to me and I think my films after I worked for her like *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* had a more measured story arc to them. Which is why I think me collaborating with Ben or Sarah for years…I always like collaborating with someone. Just because I think it adds a sense of urgency and a little bit of self induced pressure when you show other people you are going to make this film and you don't have the money. I think it is very beneficial to have a partner in crime when you start a feature length documentary.

COLE: What is your latest project? What have you been working on?

BEESLEY: After I finished *the Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* film, I started to develop television shows, so my Okie Noodling concepts …we ended up doing 10 one-hour episodes for History Channel for that

COLE: Mud Cats is that what that's called?

BEESLEY: Yeah, so that's been three or four months taken up by that show…for better or worse.

COLE: I talked to Ben a little about that, because besides getting my degree I also work for a group called Ogden Publications and we do Mother Earth News, Grit Magazine, and several of those. When I was first brought on, I helped produce a reality tv that we had on RFD tv that was competition based where guys were doing farm chores and that type of thing. So, I didn't get to be involved as much as I would have like as far as the creative end of shaping the show originally, but I think it was pretty solid. As a side note, I would love to be able to talk to you about the whole process of working with history and some of that kind of stuff and getting your show on the air.

BEESLEY: Sure. Part of the reason I am able to be an independent filmmaker and fund some of these projects I am

a reality tv director. Had I not directed Paranormal State or Roller Girls or Storm Chasers… I can go do that for 8-10 weeks out of the year and that enables me to not take any more jobs and focus on my own stuff the rest of the year.

COLE: That's what Ben was saying about his The Bear media with commercial production and things like that. It basically allows him to do a lot of these other things experimental type projects that he is trying to get launched. Whether they do or not, it gives him that opportunity to explore those areas and try to get them going.

BEESLEY: Totally a mixed bag with commercial endeavors or tv or whatever. This summer I made a short narrative called Road Kill Zoo about teenagers that collect and sell road kill. I just finished the rough cut of that and submitted it to Sundance today, actually.

COLE: I have a friend, Tracy Tragos, who she and her partner just got their submission in. They are doing a documentary called Rich Hill looking at rural poverty and following three teenage boys as they struggle with that whole issue. Pretty interesting

BEESLEY: So they tracked their struggling? Poverty, struggling…that's awesome! Yay poverty!

COLE: Yeah, I like your rural sensibility. Okie Noodling was my first introduction to your work and then you also did River Runs Red.

BEESLEY: The Creek Runs Red.

COLE: Oh, sorry.

BEESLEY: It was another ITVS project.

COLE: I've seen it, but I blanked out on the title. I went to school in Joplin, MO so I was familiar with all the chat piles and all that too.

BEESLEY: Oh, right, right. Unfortunately, I spent some extra time in Miami, OK and we'd go to Joplin… worst three months of my life.

COLE: I don't know what to say about it, but it is not the best part of the country I guess. Can we go back and talk a little bit about maybe, Sweethearts is the most recent film project you've done, is that right other than your independent narrative you did this summer?

BEESLEY: Yeah, I just made a short documentary two years ago called Mr. Hypnotism about a hypnotist to the stars, Dr. Dante. I was considering developing that into a feature doc but he was cantankerous and wouldn't show up when he was supposed to….then he up and died on us.

COLE: How do you choose your projects and what you're going to work on? Is that personal taste or do you scour the headlines for things that you're going to work on.

BEESLEY: A lot of the times they go with me for a decade or something…that I think about. I think about ways to pull to topic off and then I forget about it if I don't get funding for it and then I come back to it. With Okie Noodling, Fearless Freaks, and Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo, those are all topics I thought about for a decade before I made the films. Then you tell enough people you are going to do something and you feel like a flake if you don't. It is self-imposed pressure and deadlines. With Okie Noodling, it was something I grew up knowing about….much like Prison Rodeo. It was almost this mythical act or something that came from Oklahoma. I knew about it. I'm from the suburbs, so it wasn't part of my culture upbringing to do noodling or to attend a prison rodeo. As a kid, you wind up constructing your own sort of narrative. I spent a lot of time thinking about what it would be like to noodle or go to the prison rodeo, constructing my own narratives. By the time I started making the films, I kind of knew how I wanted to make these films. The same with Fearless Freaks…I had shot for ten years on their music videos before I started trying to craft a feature length documentary or narrative. There was always some sort of spark that initiated the production for the Fearless Freaks film. It was the first time that I saw some super 8 films that Wayne's brother showed me of them playing backyard football. Then it hit me that I could make this film that encapsulates what the Flaming Lips are all about through this football team because they were making music for the film, they were making super 8 film, they were projecting the films, playing music to the films, they were scoring the films, they were coming up with posters. Wayne was in a

band before he was in a band and it was just a football team. It helped me in constructing narratives and then, with Prison Rodeo film in 2006, they had let the female participants that are in prison participate in the rodeo. That was the spark that I had thought about shooting the event not as a feature length documentary, but wouldn't it be cool to be able to shoot the prison rodeo. Then when they decided to allow females, I decided I just had to go. I was compelled. There are ideas you stew on and then something happens and it spurs these ideas into action. With Okie Noodling it was three years just trying to find a guy that noodled. Now these guys are on tv and all over the web, but at the time there was no tv show or facebook and it took three years just to find the guy. Once I found him, I was like, "Yes! Here we go!"

COLE: So that probably opened up a whole network of people….Once you found the one guy, you were probably able to find others?

BEESLEY: Right. Exactly. Now it is this monster of a sport that I didn't necessarily mean to create. We are in our 14th year of the Okie Noodling tournament. This is the 15th year coming up and that is something I am proud of. We've maintained…we started this event for the film so I could have a device for my guys to meet. Sort of constructing your own narrative.

COLE: It seems like a lot of the films with that narrative structure, there is some kind or event or climax built in so whether the fishing tournament or the actual rodeo itself or an American movie….the making of the film, the premier of the film, whatever…

BEESLEY: Sure. With Okie Noodling, we had to make our own climax. With Prison Rodeo, it is the rodeo that has been going on for over 60 years. The by-product of Okie Noodling was the tournament, and it keeps going. Now there are 10,000 people that show up to the event. People come from all over the world to check out the Okie Noodling tournament, which I never, ever anticipated. It is a nice by-product of creating this tournament. It feels very familial to go back and run this event each year. It is a cool part of making documentaries. It's why I like it. Sometimes you create your own culture and your own community and being a part of that means a lot. Sometimes

you work on narratives and the actors just go off to the next project, but with this people convene every year.

COLE: You build those relationships and have something more. It is actually living a life together.

BEESLEY: Right. More of an extension of your life rather than a job, which is how I look at being a documentary filmmaker. I am just living my life and I happen to have a camera sometimes. It is all my social life, my work life, my home life…they are all intertwined. That's how I like it.

COLE: Yeah, doing what you love. Talking about the groups of the community, is that something you consider before you start making the film? Do you ever think about the people around and want to make a film for these people or something along those lines?

BEESLEY: No, that just sort of develops. When you are in the trenches of production, filming, and stuff you really think about it. I thought about it a little bit in the pre-production of Prison Rodeo film because when you are a documentary filmmaker you are constantly writing grants and proposing all this outreach. You are planning after the film is released, we are going to go into prisons and show the film. We are going to have a scholarship fund for the girls who work in the saddle shop that were on the prison rodeo team. We are going to take these women around to all the screenings all over the world. That is the kind of stuff you write in your grant proposal for your outreach. Thanks to selling the film to HBO, we actually got to fulfill that. It was the first time in my career that I really was completely gratified by all the outreach we did. We did all those things: we went into the prisons, we showed the film, some of the inmates in the saw the film for the first time while they were in prison with their fellow inmates. Some of the girls had never been on an airplane that we took to New York for the HBO premier. We still have a scholarship fund at the prison thanks to the film. It is a really gratifying experience to work with all these women on this film and still in contact with them today. All four of the women featured in this film, including Danny Lyles (the one male we featured in the film), are all out of prison and thriving. That is super gratifying.

COLE: Do you ever think about doing a follow-up or a web extra? Is there something like that?

BEESLEY: We did all that stuff when we were going to the prisons, we would film that, do interviews. When an inmate was released, we would usually show up with cameras. We have done all that.

COLE: I am sorry. I just wasn't aware of all of that. I was aware of Sweethearts, but I just haven't had a chance to see that one yet.

BEESLEY: That's alright.

COLE: As far as grant writing and raising money for your films, how do you go about, other than grants, is there any other ways to raise money. I guess one of the things that fascinates me is the whole crowd sourcing stuff. Have you used any of that?

BEESLEY: Yeah, I did for this latest short narrative. But, it was really the first time that that was the pervasive and accepted way to raise money. Before that, every single project was different. I was lucky enough to get the two ITVS grants, but that was two out of my eight. The other ones you charge up $40 grand on credit card or, like with the Prison Rodeo film, we a non-profit and teamed up with the Austin Film Society and solicited donations. With every single project, you just have to be constantly creative about how you raise the money. With Kickstarter and such, it is a great way to raise money, but I bet I get two e-mails a day from friends fund-raising for their films and at what point is it counter-productive. I am giving money to all my friends, sometimes it is just $150 or whatever, and then they are doing the same thing for me. The same people are giving me money that I gave money to. It is not a bad thing, I don't think.

COLE: I think it just depends on the project. If you could find the niche audience where you could build a core audience that you could appeal to and reach out to, that kind of thing, it would be pretty good.

BEESLEY: Sure

COLE: A lot of the fringe ideas and subjects that I am drawn to and a lot of the documentaries I like are about

characters or subjects that are on the fringe. It might be a little harder to do. Can you talk a little bit about selling Sweethearts to HBO and how that came about. How did it work?

BEESLEY: Well, we premiered the film at South by Southwest in 2009 and we had given a sneak peak to HBO thanks to our sales rep, Julie Goldman. So they were aware of the film. The same week it premiered, HBO bought the film. With small independent films, you get to a certain level where the films are equally as good and the filmmakers are equally as competent. Then it becomes about who is your sales rep and could you even get a sales rep. 90% of the feature docs out there won't even attract a sales rep. If you are lucky enough to get one, your chances are obviously better to sell the film. I think one of the main reasons we sold our film to HBO is because our sales rep, Julie Goldman, has a great relationship with HBO and has a track record. So when she brings them something, they are more likely to want to watch that for their network as opposed to me just bringing it myself. I don't have a track record with HBO.

COLE: So your success with your filmmaking, is that how you have gotten into the directing of tv and things like that. Has that led to your ability to direct….how has that transition worked for you….how have you made that leap?

BEESLEY: They are strangely unrelated. The first tv directing gig I got was because of my track record, but no one ever hires me for a directing gig because they have seen one of my feature docs and they really like it. It's all based on the previous tv show that I directed or produced. I used to think that having a roster of feature length documentaries was really good for your television career and being able to sell your films and create tv shows. But the reality is, tv world and the documentary film world are very disparate. There is really no connection. My documentary sales rep doesn't know anything about selling a tv show, and my tv show rep doesn't know anything about selling a documentary. It is kind of strange that way.

COLE: What was your first directing gig?

BEESLEY: It was a show that was actually shot here in Austin called Roller Girls for A&E.

COLE: I haven't seen it, but I remember seeing the promos.

BEESLEY: Yeah, because I had worked with the owner, the production company that worked on that had shot some of the Fearless Freaks movie. After that, once you do your first tv show, then the tv world kind of embraces you. It was never really because they thought I was great at creating feature length documentaries. We're gonna hire him for our tv show. The skill set is completely different.

COLE: Much quicker turn around, I would assume.

BEESLEY: I like to be able to do both because you get so mired in your own ideas and your own concepts. It's nice to spend 10 weeks out of the year having someone else tell you what your story is and what you're going after. After a decade of making these, it becomes emotionally exhausting constantly working for yourself and employing other people. It is nice just to step back and let someone else tell you what to do for a little bit. It rejuvenates the independent spirit after you spend a couple months on a tv show. Then you come back to your own stuff and you are really hungry. I think if I didn't have that break of working on different television shows, my own films would suffer.

COLE: Did it help you build up your chops, or does it just refresh your creativity.

BEESLEY: The little technical stuff and how to cover the documentary scene….sure. It helps with that. The main thing is just taking a break from my own work. If I stewed in it all year long, I wouldn't be as productive. I like the fact that some of my time is taken up by things that I didn't create.

COLE: I had a question for you about Mud Cats. How did you pitch that whole idea and get it on the air.

BEESLEY: Well, the guys in my documentary Okie Noodling I and II knew that I directed some reality tv shows so they were constantly bugging me for a couple of years starting in about 2009. Why don't we have our own show? You know people! I told them, you don't want to be a part of that world. These guys will make you cut your hair differently, they'll make you wear a certain t-shirt, and I don't think you guys would really like that. The are more independent

than that. You want to go out on the boat and listen to Kid Rock and drink Coors Light, and they're not going to let you listen to Kid Rock and drink Coors Light on the show. It's hard work…why do you want to turn it into that? We have these noodling tournaments where I'd talk to these guys about why they don't want to have a tv show. I had been talking them out of it, and then I got wind that some of my characters from the Okie Noodling part II film had used Okie Noodling to pitch a production company that then pitched it to Animal Planet and they actually got a show called Hillbilly Cat Fishing before I got my Mud Cats show. I got wind of this and told my attorney. We settled out of court with this production company that had used my film to sell a show and my characters. Basically, my attorney said, "You know how this works. If there is one show about hog hunting, there's three. You can either cash in on your intellectual property that you've built up over the past 15 years or you can let somebody else. As soon as this show comes out, there's going to be a couple more." So, I went back to my guys and asked if they still wanted to make the show because I felt like we probably could. They said, "Yeah!!" I built a sizzle reel as they called in the tv world….a four or five minute trailer. I teamed up with original media that I had produced Storm Chasers with and they already had Swamp People on History. That's how that came about. It wasn't me going out there thinking I really want to exploit this documentary that I made. It was really the characters in my film wanting it and then somebody else using my film to sell a show that spurred me into action. Otherwise, I never would have created Mud Cats.

COLE: Part of my deal here where I work is that I have come up with concepts for shows and even shot a little bit of pilots of things like that. But I am not really sure who to get them to to see if they would be viable or not. I told Ben when we were shooting Tough Grit about farm competitors, we had some 4-H kids shearing sheep as part of the competition, and I was taking to this girl who had national champion sheep, ram and a ewe. She had been nationals and won before. But, she had also raised pigs and she told me this heartbreaking story about how she had raised this piglet up all the way and now it is two weeks before the show and it got bit by a brown recluse spider and almost died. They had to nurse it back to health. It didn't get to go to the show, but it did live. I was thinking that would make an incredible show. You could

shoot it kind of like Spellbound, which is one of my favorite docs. But, follow a handful of kids and show how they balance their life of raising their animals, and their schoolwork and home life, and all that other stuff. I think it would be pretty cool.

BEESLEY: Yeah, that sounds very viable.

COLE: But, like I said, if I get a sizzle reel, I may e-mail it to you and see what you think.

BEESLEY: Yeah, you should. I could direct you to the right folks, for sure.

COLE: That is off topic….sorry for pitching you stuff. Back to your filmmaking, what is your next project? Do you have any ideas in the works?

BEESLEY: I am constantly pitching tv shows: pitching a show on civil war reenactors, a guy that runs a freak show, small town professional wrestlers. I've been talking to Wayne from the Lips about a show. That's kind of my world now, and, to be honest with you, within the next year I will be starting another feature length documentary because I am tired of creating all these pitches that don't necessarily go anywhere. You have done all this work and spent all this money and there is no film festival at the end of the rainbow. It is just two executives in a room saying, "No thanks."

COLE: What is your relationship with The Lips? Is that a high school thing?

BEESLEY: They are a little bit older than me. I met Wayne's girlfriend, Michelle, in art school in the early 90's. I am still in contact with those guys. They are going to do the score for my short narrative film.

COLE: Yeah, that is nice. I was actually just working on a video today and thought I don't really have access to a good music library. So I am trying to figure out how to find independent, local folks who can create some music. I did find a place called the Americana, a little folk music place where they just get together and jam . I think I am going to go over and try to sit down with them and record so I can use some of their music. Personally, what kind of equipment….Ben said you like to mix in 16 mm stuff

sometimes to give it a higher production value. What is your preferred setup these days?

BEESLEY: Man, it really changes. Sometimes I just shoot myself with an HVX200 and sometimes I have a grade EP with a red camera….it is just project to project. Every project is different.

COLE: I didn't know if you had your own personal equipment that you shot with on your own or if you rented. How does that work?

BEESLEY: It is a mixed bag.

COLE: Sorry, again just kind of a personal interest thing. I'm being a bit of a fan boy here. It's good to get to talk to you.

BEESLEY: No worries.

COLE: Any other stories as far as selling your films or raising money or any of those types of things? Any kind of horror stories or success stories? Was it mainly through grants, is that the way you've done it?

BEESLEY: Well, no. I mean, like with Prison Rodeo, we became a non-profit. I teamed up with the Austin Film Society on Summer Camp and just used credit cards. When we sold the film to Sundance, we paid ourselves back. I will say that going into Summer Camp film, part of my pitch to Sarah was that we would spend three weeks at the camp and then 6 months editing. We were going to have a feature doc in record time. Seven months turn around as opposed to three years, or five years, or seven year, or whatever it takes. Then because of trying to find and craft a story, it ended up taking us two and half years, and we thought it was going to be seven months. I think that would be a high piece of advice to any feature length documentary filmmaker, especially first time filmmakers, is that count on a year to cut your film or two.

COLE: On your film that you worked on, are you listed as producer?

BEESLEY: On some of my films. I produced them all, but sometimes you work with people that you want to give them that credit or they want that credit. Even though you did

the producing, they brought something else to the table. You have to pacify them.

COLE: What does it means these days to be a producer? What all do you do as a producer? What does that mean?

BEESLEY: Everything! Mainly seeing the film through. Really, with the feature length documentaries, you may only shoot for three or four weeks, 30 days at the most. But then you spend a couple of years trying to figure out the story in post. What it means to me to be a producer is having resolve to follow through with your editing and all the logistics of post production, whether it is music, lights, balancing for color, story crafting. That is when the real work starts is when you stop shooting as far as documentaries go.

COLE: I think Ben and I talked about people like Wes Anderson and how everyone calls him an independent filmmaker, but he has huge budgets and works with these bigs stars. What does it mean to you to be an independent? Where do you draw the line between independent and studio?

BEESLEY: I guess being in the documentary world you are sequestered from the bigger budget. When I say bigger budget, I mean $5 to $6 million. I haven't even really stopped to think about it. I don't relate with that world at all. I haven't stopped to put it in context with the work that I am doing because I really have no reverence for it. It doesn't really matter to me. I like Wes Anderson films, but I don't ever see myself working that way. It is not what I care about. I am more concerned and in tune with what people….Barbara Brown, Sarah, and Sam Green, and what true independent documentary filmmakers are doing than I am the Wes Anderson's of the world. I have no connection or desire to be connected to that world. Then you give up the freedom of what I have which is being able to recreate your own existence and life through documentary filmmaking. I don't think I would have the same kind of adventures that I have if I had the kind of budget that Wes Anderson has. It is a trade off….he gets to make the big budget films, but I get to have a little more latitude and freedom with the content.

COLE: So, you don't think he has much freedom? Do you think studios control what he does?

BEESLEY: I don't really know. I am just making broad assumptions.

COLE: I guess I have that same assumption. He probably has to answer to someone above him. I don't really know. I am just using him as an example. When people are making large budget movies like that and there is that much as stake, it seems like somebody at the corporate studio is saying, "Hey, we need to make sure we make our money back on this deal."

BEESLEY: Right.

COLE: Is that guy out there screwing this up or is he doing ok?

BEESLEY: Yeah, exactly.

COLE: I was going to talk to you about an idea I had too. I thought you might like the topic. I haven't had a chance to work on it. I met this guy in Lawrence, KS who started out composting food scraps at the University for the cafeteria. He started a business locally composting pets, so he would do a high-speed compost process. You give him your dead pet and in two weeks, he would bring back basically a bag of soil that you could put in your garden. I found out there is a record store that had a bunch of cats. One of them passed away and he composted it and the record store planted catnip in the compost for the other cats in the store. I thought it was interesting and bizarre. It goes even further. He did some work in Tennessee at a Green Cemetery. He did some work with the FBI labs where they were doing high-speed decomposition of humans for green burials and things like that. I thought it was fascinating. He was really gun shy because the newspaper had done a story on him and made him out to be a complete freak. I've been slowly trying to build relationship with him and talk to him. I was going to ask if I could just hang out with him and participate before we even start filming so that he knows I am not making fun of him or going to burn him.

BEESLEY: You may even have to sacrifice one of your own pets!

COLE: Haha! I may have to! My dog is getting pretty old. He's 12. If he passes away, I'll think about it. It sounded like a topic you might like…right up your alley.

BEESLEY: Totally! Gates of Heaven and Mr. Death.

COLE: Yeah. You could make it short or make it long. I thought about dealing with different concepts of death, death rituals, burial rituals, and that kind of stuff.

BEESLEY: You should definitely pursue that. Probably the first shoot would be difficult, but once you get that first shoot under your belt, things become more real and concrete. You watch three or four hours or footage and put together a three-minute piece and use that for fund raising and it becomes real.

COLE: I sure appreciate you talking to me. If my advisor wants me to come back and ask more questions, is that alright if I give you a buzz.
BEESLEY: Yeah, no problem. Good luck with your filmmaking endeavors. Keep me posted on what you're working on.

COLE: Is there a place where I can see Mr. Hypnotism? I did see a clip for that but not the full thing online.

BEESLEY: You know, I could send you the link to it…same with Sweethearts. I'll do that.

COLE: Thanks so much. My best to you. Keep on plugging along. I'll be following along, and let me know if there is ever anything I can do for you. I am in that kind of world of sustainability and environmentalism, so if you ever need anything to be promoted, we've got a pretty good fan base on that kind of stuff.

BEESLEY: Cool. You live in Kansas City?

COLE: Just north of Kansas City.

BEESLEY: My girlfriend live up there for 6 years working for the Kansas City Ballet, so we are up there several times a year.

COLE: If you are ever in town, I'd love to have dinner or something. Well, we are friends on Facebook, so just hit me up on there and let me know if you are coming to town. Maybe my wife and I could meet up with you guys.

BEESLEY: Sounds great. Thanks, Jason!

COLE: Thanks, Bradley. Bye.

August 8, 2013
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Jon Betz

COLE: So the project I'm working on is kind of morphed as well, it started out as, I was really interested at first in how fans were influencing filmmakers, and how audiences were influencing the filmmakers. But looking at fan studies and all the fandom stuff that was out there, I don't know if you are familiar with any of that or not but it never really focused on the filmmakers and how they were building these audiences. It's my belief anyway that they kind of help build these fandoms, whether it's online, or they're at least aware of them in some way before getting involved in it. And so I'm just interested now in looking at how the role of the producer has changed over the last four or five years, especially with things like crowd funding and hyper, you know like the niche filmmaking and all those kind of things. Even what I'm doing, making things for Mother Earth News, like really concentrated, like green audience and focusing on sustainability and those types of things. Which in a way, you're doing as well. Can you tell me a little bit about how you came to work on 'Seed' and I know a lot of your projects kind of focus on that same theme. So how did you choose 'Seed' as your latest project? And how did that all get started?

BETZ: Well I think that coming out of 'Queen of the Sun' obviously we had seen a lot of success with building an audience for 'Queen of the Sun'. And the audience really, the film came out and the audience kind of took it. One of our key drives with that film is to self distribute, well, it was to get the film out as far and wide as possible and when you do that yourself as a filmmaker, you're not necessarily pigeon holing yourself to any one thing, say when you're running festivals and you're doing all that in effort to find a distributor to take it as broadly as you can imagine. The reality of distribution of film is ever changing and the big distributors at that time we were really in the flux in two thousand ten of empowering filmmakers with all sorts of online tools to reach out and so we were coming from a little bit of an old school model of let's look for a big distributor who can help us get this out there. That would be sort of the Holy Grail. But

who is that? And what distributor is going to actually work with this? Audience like 'Queen of the Sun' would have is obviously more a green, more sustainable, more grassroots audience. And then we realized, a ways into it, and this is all kind of coming off the reality film 'Farmer John' where Taggart had really worked early on with this kind of audience driven filmmaking in two thousand five, with community screenings, where he had a lot of success with that. Had a lot of success with grassroots marketing for the audiences in the theater to go see the film and so we always had in the backs of our minds thinking, if no one picks this up we're just going to take this on and do it with Collective Art Films, which is our non-profit. So we were sort of poised to do that. And every step of the way we were sort of building, we were never, our mantra was always that filmmakers can often be the victim when their film comes out and they are like, 'Oh, nobody wanted my film. The distributor didn't pick it up so it didn't go anywhere. That film didn't work out for me.' And there's a lot of victim that can go on with a filmmaker or the producer. And we said, 'No, we're going to be empowered and we're going to take it on.' And the other thing about giving it to distributors is that filmmakers begin to become passive. So you give it to a distributor and you trust that they're going to do everything that they promised to do and then when they don't, and it's kind of like, what gives. And this is my baby, but it's not their baby. And even though there had been a few offers and a few distributors who had taken on, and some deals that might work out, none of them were right for 'Queen of the Sun' and we said, 'Quit the vice set to do this, let's just do two things with this film. Let's get it out as far as we can, and at the same time build collective Eye to get films like this out into the world. So what happened when we released 'Queen of the Sun' was really just sort of the, audience empowerment took hold. We just gave it to the audience for community screenings, there were hundreds of community screenings for that film. And then really at the very least let's grassroots too. It was a lot of volunteers calling to the organizations to bring audiences to the theatre. And so it was the same mentality as a community screening, but it was more centralized and we were in charge in making it happen. And I think that's what took 'Queen' really into another level was getting all of the mainstream reviews and pushing it into more mainstream market so it wasn't just relegated through just organizational screenings which is a little more limited in

their reach. Now the general public can see it in a newspaper and come very interested. 'The Bee Crisis' is fairly appealing subject, it was one of those subjects where you didn't have to be an environmentalist to wonder why the bees are dying out. It was sort of, it was very mainstream. And so that was pretty awesome. And what came out of that for us, because I'm both the director for 'Seed' with Taggart and I'm also director of Collective Eye, the executive director, so we're also interested in how we can make this work for other films like ours and so one of the things that we started after 'Queen' was released was we started to bring on more of the films, like you're probably aware of the films, the film 'Ingredients.' It was a watershed that we brought on Green Horns Collective Eye, where we are helping those filmmakers in a non-exclusive model so they're still empowered to do their own thing. But we're helping get those films out because we are now know the audience for those films, they're very similar audience to 'Queen of the Sun' so we could kind of tap into that and say, this audience is really hungry for not just 'Queen of the Sun' they're hungry for these other films too. And so then it became more of a distribution model in a way to continue to grow, again Collective Eye and our reach and our ability to get these films out there. Other films, and besides 'Queen of the Sun' but 'Queen of the Sun' was always sort of the flagship of the main driving force. Because as filmmakers we knew exactly what it was like for a filmmaker to deal with a distributor. And all the negative and positive things that go into that. And eventually 'Queen of the Sun' was released and we used Music Box Films as the distributor to release it wider, beyond after our theatrical release in New York. We had a conversation with them and they picked us up and that led to Netflix and a lot of wider distribution things, that at the time were outside Collective Eye's reach, although now those are things that we might explore ourselves. So audiences were really the thing that made us realize that we could do this. Because audiences would write, they would connect the dots, they would help us create the network. And we just had to be, the very challenging thing as filmmakers is you have to be organized enough to put together that fabric of the network, to keep it together and functioning and alive. So then you come to 'Seed', sorry, that's a big preamble, so then you come to 'Seed' and 'Seed' really came out of the auspice that we were ready to make another film, that there needed to be another film. We just sort of felt this void that we could fill in.

It’s hard to kind of articulate what it was, I don’t know if it was so much filling a void, it was like, we were ready to make another film personally. But we weren’t going to just make another film to make another film. There had to be the right thing to really inspire us. Just like the honeybee thing. The honeybee issue really inspired Taggart right off the get go. He read an article and said, ‘I have to make a film about this.’ ‘Seed’ was a little different. ‘Seed’ we were just waiting and said we’re not going to, films are a ton of work, we’re going to like run our business and help other filmmakers. And if the spark comes, we’ll talk about making another film. And then an article landed on my desk from Taggart one morning about the small seed bank printed in National Geographic and I read through that and I looked at, and thought about it, and thought my God, this is an issue that I’d never even thought about. And I’m talking not just about Monsanto and which is just, much more well known. But the idea is seed diversity being lost and these seed banks keeping seed diversity alive because we’re not throwing it out because people are not saving seeds anymore. Farmers are only using a limited number of seeds from these major agricultural corporations so that was like a light bulb. And both Taggart and I looked at each other and we go, you know, would this be another food film, they are many, many food films, there probably doesn’t need to be another ‘Food, Inc.’ type film coming out there. Or is this different? And we talked about it and we realized that this was a film that had never been made before. No one had ever focused on the seeds specifically and in the way that we would. And so coming from that perspective of on reference like we did in ‘Queen of the Sun’, we decided it was really a fit for us for two reasons. One, because the subject matter was like ‘Queen of the Sun’ and we knew the audience was there for the film. That was empowering to us because it was like, oh yah, this audience is there, we know it, we feel the pulse of that audience. This film will fit and this is a film that they will want to see and it’s a film that will have information that they probably don’t know about. Because no one’s gotten that in-depth with seeds. It’s always been a bridge to food politics, it’s never been about the seeds themselves, to our knowledge anyways. And so that’s why we started making ‘Seed’ the untold story and it’s been a pretty incredible journey on both fronts. Both in what you’re talking about in audience enrichment, and the big thing that was different about this film from ‘Queen of the Sun’ is that from the get go we looked to the audience to

bring in the funding for this film. So there was some grant money that came in initially that got us jump-started, from Whole Foods and AFI, American Film Institute. Silver Docks, film festival, there was a joint grant that really helped push us into the film so we're very grateful for that. And then there were some other grants from the Cliff Bar Family Foundation??? (11:53) They have a big seed and they should have. And then we said we gotta launch a Kickstarter, this is the way they do it now. When 'Queen of the Sun' was there we didn't have that ability. Fundraising seemed like a lot more work in that sense because the tools, I mean the Internet was there, and we probably could have figured out a way to do it, but Kickstarter was just like, here's the whole tool set. It was in reach for us, I guess, and it was a totally brand new thing and we'd never done it, and we launched a campaign and that went very well. So that really funded the entire film production, now we're almost completely shot, ninety percent shot. And we're going to be coming back, ready to come back to that audience, in just a few weeks and expand. It's part of, it's not just about having the audience realize that they can help make this film a possibility, and fund the production, post production. It's also growing the audience, and growing the awareness. Creating interest in the film and the subject. So you're doing everything at the same time, Facebook, all the social media platforms, really everything. Because we just want people to get really excited about it because when they get excited about it, they also share. This would be an interesting thing, I would imagine, for you, but for documentary films specifically, the audience is also part of your research process. And so they email you with things that come up, you know, you've got to get this into the film, have you looked into this and have you been here, and have you seen this news article. So for instance when the GMO contamination of wheat hit, you start working. We were literally on the plane to go film and Taggart goes Jon, you've got to see this. And he pulled it up, it had been emailed by someone, I believe, and the information, so it just came to us. And so that's amazing. That's where documentaries, especially issue-based documentaries like this is pretty awesome. In terms of the audience being an interactive part of the film's development. And you know the filmmaker is always the visionary and the person taking the film and making it into the story. And the audience always has a pretty deep trust in that, which is pretty amazing. But it's pretty cool that it's become a sharing economy, in terms of the research and also the volunteering,

a lot of people just come out of the woodwork to volunteer and so you got to figure out how to work with remote volunteers through the Internet. Grow your ability to make the film faster too, 'Queen of the Sun' took three years to make and 'Seed' so far has taken just over a year and we think it will be out, so we think it will be under two years to make the film. So it's a lot, we've really accelerated the process, not because, I mean, you accelerate a process for a lot of reasons but the big one was that this issue is so timely that we felt like the film had to be out next year. This year alone has been one of the most exciting, exciting is maybe an unfitting word, I mean it's not all good things. There's been a lot of negative things about seeds this year. But there's been a lot of intensity in the seed issue this year. And I'm sure you've seen that too but it's just like, court decisions and hearings, worldwide marches against Monsanto, and GMO contamination stories, it's like what is going on? And so it's all kind of hitting on that point. So we just feel the urgency, the urgency can drive you crazy as a filmmaker but it sure helps get the film done.

COLE: And so is that something, I mean even kind of going and the topicality of the issues and those types of things. I mean it sounds like, I don't know how much of that drives what you do as much as maybe just, it sounds like you just have an interest in the subject, more so than anything, or maybe just a combination of both of those things knowing this is really interesting to us and it's also very topical.

BETZ: Yeah, it's one of those interesting things where it's great that seeds are very much an interest for people. But it's also like, once you start down the road on a film you're not going to stop usually so, if we thought that seeds were going to be a big interest to people and they weren't, we probably would still be finishing the film. But at the beginning you are gauging, and I think as a filmmaker anybody is gauging what their audience is going to be before they start. Because you're committing your life to it. For a substantial amount of time. I don't know of very many other things like documentary filmmaking that in terms of being a small business owner, the time that you're devoting to one singular project. You know, maybe building buildings, like architects. But these are large scale projects that take years. It takes a serious level of emotional commitment. And I don't think anyone has a commitment just because they think, oh, it will be a

success. You have the commitment because you're smitten by the topic, you're continually inspired by it, you can't stop thinking about it, you're obsessed with it.

COLE: At least I think independent filmmakers anyway, I don't know…

BETZ: Yeah, yeah, especially independent filmmakers.

COLE: I think there are definitely some films out there where they think, oh yah, we can definitely make a buck off this.

BETZ: Oh yah, definitely. In the world of like film producing, Hollywood film producing especially, but in independent film producing, genre film stuff I think it can very much just be about making the money off the interest and coat tailing off of you know hype and stuff.

COLE: I'm hoping to be able to talk to Josh Fox, who did 'Gasland' and then 'Gasland 2'. That was one of the things that I would like to talk to him about is like what drove, is it the fact that fracking is still an issue that drove the need for the second film, or is it more of the success of the first film that drove him to create a second one on the same topic. I know that's not really your deal.

BETZ: Yah, that would be really interesting, I've always felt that, yah, that would be really interesting. I mean for us it was, I mean we didn't make 'Queen of the Sun 2'. It's not like we made another film to get the bee issue out further. We felt 'Queen of the Sun' was doing everything that we had the ability to do, another film wouldn't do any more than 'Queen' could do. It was just, make 'Queen' go further to get the job done. And we are still working a lot with 'Queen' it's just aired on television and there are things just continually happening. With 'Queen of the Sun' we're still definitely behind the bee issue. It's hard as a documentary filmmaker when you go to a new film, because you're still married to your other issues. Fortunately seeds are pretty related to pollinators, so we can still kind of be in the same world, which is really nice. And not feel like we're abandoning something.

COLE: Well it sounds like you've made a conscious effort to work within your niche I guess of whether it's 'Seeds' or 'Real Dirt of Farmer John' and 'Queen of the Sun', I mean

they are all within that same, seems to me that the audience is very related for all of those.

BETZ: Yah, and also we started another film besides 'Seed' that like was more of a long-term project that is not really going anywhere right now but is of a completely different subject. Taggart's also made films on 'Among Refugee', 'Among Refugee Family' and so we were exploring making a follow up on that family ten years later as part of a trilogy. And that's still a possible film that will come out in the future. But it's interesting how that film could have taken us and we would never have made 'Seed', that's a very possible hypothetical situation, but it wasn't happening at the same level. It was like we went and filmed and things were going on, but it felt like we were kind of forcing it, and didn't feel natural. It also wasn't being propelled outside of our own, the two of us. You know. And so what I think is interesting about 'Seed' is, the tide carried us away, the wave carried us away, you know on this adventure. So it was kind of like, you know with 'Seed', what if we started 'Seed' and it was kind of not going anywhere? I don't know. It could have been a different world, I think it's a feedback process too. It's like we started it and just like after the first shoot that we did, which we went down to the Heirloom Expo in Santa Rosa and practically met some of the biggest movers and shakers in the seed world. And after we did that, it was just, there was a commitment. It was just like, yes, this is a film. Other people are as obsessed with this as we are, are as feeling that this needs to get out to the world as we are, and it needs to get out now. And that fuels the fire, like rapidly. And other people being like, yah, this is really great. Then there's like no tension, no drama, no need for it to happen right now. I think that often films are like this marriage of filmmaker interest and a need from society, or for the world, a need that you feel, when it comes to issue driven films like 'Gasland' or something. I mean, the bee issue is that way. It's like, no, people need to know about the bee issue in a more in-depth way than they're getting from just not, general journalism. And the way to do that is to put out a documentary about it and 'Seed', that is the exact same way. There's tons of stuff out there about seeds from many different places but the in-depth documentaries are not there. And for people, it's an incredible educational tool for people and an inspirational tool for people to actually rally and do something. I don't think anyone really knows why they do

things but I think once you get the inertia going, it's hard to stop.

COLE: Yah I guess I was just trying to think more about the financial setup for your film. It sounds like you had grants?

BETZ: Well we made, I mean, I don't know. Is this for your own private research, or are you publishing something on this?

COLE: I won't include specifics in the dissertation if you don't want me to but I mean, but it's mainly for my written research project so, if you don't want me to include this part I won't.

BETZ: Oh it's fine. I think everything's fine if it's, I'll talk to Taggart about anything and if he has an objection I can always write you an email. Basically, I think this is fine to include, Taggart and I both have families, and we're filmmakers and independent filmmaking is not a stable job. And so we both looked at each other and said we've got a non-profit that we're growing that has a certain stability to it and we could keep doing that. We could keep Collective Eye doing the same mission in helping 'Queen of the Sun' was doing. Keep working with 'Queen of the Sun', keep working with other new great films, and not be filmmakers for another few years, until the passion strikes us. But I said, if we start making a film on seeds, like I want to go there, and he wants to go there and we both got into it and we both started writing grant proposals and things. But we both agreed that we weren't going to green light, you know, shooting everything and basically committing to making a full film, getting the word out there that we were doing it, until financed on some level. And this came from 'Queen of the Sun' because 'Queen of the Sun' was largely a passion project. And very happened right in the middle of the session, very little grant money available for filmmakers. Very competitive. At the same time, documentary was very heavily democratizing and so there's a lot more people vying for the same traditional resources like to us, and other places. And so, it was a hard experience to make 'Queen of the Sun' financially speaking. Especially at the beginning, or by the time the film was released it was very difficult place, and then once the film came out we were able to make good on everything. But it was that first constant challenge. And

for ‘Seed’ I said, you know I'm at a different place in my life here, you’re at a different place in your life, let’s agree so that until money comes in and we feel a support network, then we’re not going to make this film. And it was actually a really good boundary to set as filmmakers because what it did is it created a world where we weren’t making it on an island, we made this film always being supported. Whether it was by Whole Foods and then ??? Bar grant (25:52), some private donations, then Kickstarter, which was a huge net of support. Or if it was, versus you know ‘Queen of the Sun’ was much more of an island to me. In a way it was a little bit lonely. We had our community, but it was much tighter community, and really dynamic beekeepers and it was Taggart’s inspiration and passion that I think helped fuel the film getting done. ‘Seeds’ got a lot more behind us, sort of a bigger foundation, I mean I think it’s really positive.

COLE: Yah, I kind of get that feeling from the crowd sourcing thing. It’s really a way to vet your project before you even get started in a way. It’s like is this worth doing? Is there an audience out there that’s hungry for this kind of thing? And then by them showing you support monetarily without you really get the product out there, it’s like, I haven’t done that yet but I bet it’s a pretty reaffirming feeling knowing that you’ve got support.

BETZ: Yah, it’s truly amazing. And one of the things that came out of our Kickstarter campaign that was totally, and this goes into the interaction with the audience, less on the research side, but more on the film producing side, but the actress Marissa Tomei??? (27:13) found out about, she had watched ‘Queen of the Sun’, she had put out an event about real food. And had been shown ‘Queen of the Sun’ while Donna Schuppa??? (27:21) was there. Somehow she had heard we were making a new film, she looked up our Kickstarter campaign, it was already over. She emailed us, she said I want to be part of this and now she’s Executive Producer for ‘Seed’. So major, you know major, and really not something, I can’t take credit for that, you know. It was just really out of her willingness and the platform being visible. The film having a visibility before it was even going. That was really earlier, much earlier in the year, so it was going strongly at that point, but it was not close to being done. Pretty incredible what opens up when all these tools are out there for filmmakers.

COLE: Right and you're able to share, yah, I mean I guess that would be a really affirming feeling kind of too to have someone like that, who's seen your previous work, and then come in and say, I've seen what you can do, I'm really interested in the subjects that you're working on now, let's do this, I want to be a part of it.

BETZ: And when you're a filmmaker and you make similar films that are in the same vein, it's a way certain filmmakers run their careers, I think. You've got people like Gary Hustwit doing movies like 'Helvetica' and 'Urbanized' and 'Objectified'. Like he hit a vein that he could do really well. And he had a need, there was an audience that had a need for these different types of things, and he did them. And you know, so it's this constant system of sort of an enterprise of entrepreneurial sensibility, a small business mindset you know. Coupled with a calling to, issue documentary making, like 'Queen of the Sun' or 'Real Dirt on Farmer John' or 'Seed', it's cool because it also feels really good. It's not a selfish pursuit of just success and money. And it renowned as a filmmaker, which to say not that any film's not that way but it's more than that, and most documentaries are more than that in some way. Whether it's 'Helvetica' about people pursuing type faces??? (29:45) and something like that, or it's like 'Queen of the Sun' where it's like, hey guys, wake up, there's something going on with the bees and there's something you can do about it. And there's also a lot of dark, environmental films and in the past ten years there's been a real wave of films that are trying to recalibrate how people view the environment, not as a the sky is falling, the world is ending feeling, but as an empowering grassroots. And it's influence on the next generation in a way and I think the next generation is really viewing the environment as a way to take care of on some level. Obviously a growing amount of people view it that way. And I think that many of these documentaries have helped, whether it's 'Real Dirt' and 'Queen of the Sun' or 'Seed' or a movie like 'Fresh' or some of these really inspiring, uplifting, 'King Corn', you know, that have a tone about them that says you can do it! That's something we're all about when we make a film because otherwise it's kind of an empty leaving the documentary because it's like god that is such a big issue and I am so overwhelmed and I'm just going to go home and stop thinking about it. You know, because I can't do anything about it. And so our big passion is to empower audiences to make change and there

are many filmmakers that are very, very good at that in terms of actually motivating audiences and distributors like participant media that are very good at creating change making campaigns. And those are a huge inspiration to us, I think. Because that's the next step. After you've made a great film, I mean, how do you, there's fifty percent, fifty percent. Fifty percent of the work is how you film, and then fifty percent is after the film. And how do you brand and identify and put your film out in the world in such a way that it is set up to create real change, whatever that is. That's really hard, much different than the filmmaking brain. One of the things that I think is really cool is how we made 'Real Dirt on Farmer John' and 'Queen of the Sun' and now 'Seed', we're branding them as a triology. We're branding it as a biodiversity trilogy, because it's really about maintaining the Earth's biodiversity, these three films together. And they go from more character driven, and the surface of the issue of a story that everyone can relate to of a farmer, to the pollinators to the foundation of everything, which is seeds and it's, finding out, we're finding out how to work with all of these films together, work with 'Seed' to put it out there in a way that's we did a lot of the work, obviously, we're setting it up for a lot of other people to do the work. That's the main thing. I think as a filmmaker now, besides some of these centralized campaigns, a lot more of it's organic. It's about hey go do with it what you can do with it because we're a non-profit, we're only so many people in this office and obviously we're limited in what we can do. So we need partners, whether that's other organizations that are going to create big campaigns out of this. I mean, for instance with 'Queen of the Sun' Whole Foods had a honeybee month last June, was it last June or a year before that? I think it was last June. Where they really, I got the honeybee thing and 'Queen of the Sun' was a big part of that. That's awesome because it's already a large, very established organization, taking your film and helping it make change. And that's the kind of documentary filmmakers that people like to embrace, and that we would like to embrace, or are embracing, because it's sort of like a big boost, it's like my film is out there making change the way I envisioned it to. Thank god I don't have to do all of it. Thank god other people are, are taking it on as their own baby, more or less. And you have these fans too, people call them super fans, or whatever you want to call them. You have just these devoted people who can't stop with your film, and that's awesome too and you really

try to empower those people, who are going to take it and make bookstores put it on the shelves in their area. And they're going to do ten community screenings in their area alone and they're going to create links to other networks for you to get the word out. The world needs the audience just as much as the filmmakers in order for a documentary film to be a success.

COLE: I'm really interested in that whole idea, well the whole topic of distribution and learning more about, well could you tell me more about, or give an example of one of your audience members who did something like that. I'm assuming that you're speaking from experience when you're saying that somebody who's went to the bookstore and got it on the shelves or those types of things so.

BETZ: Yah, like in other countries it's been big. Like we got an email from a guy in the Netherlands and I just got another email from him about 'Seed'. And this guy's just ordered, I don't know, upwards of hundreds of copies of the film to get out there in the Netherlands. You know in an area where it would be harder for us to work. So within a community of the Netherlands he's made a presence of the film, through, in this case a biodynamic community, a beekeeping community in the Netherlands. That network's not as a big in the Netherlands, there's only so many of those people interested in biodynamic beekeeping, and the biodynamic beekeeping community is passionate about 'Queen of the Sun'. And so this particular man has been like awesome, in just like taking it and getting it out there in a way that we could never get it out there on our own. And so you're looking for those type of links, I'm trying to think of another person like that. There was a person in Hawaii who was a lot like that. She was on Kauai, and she said I want to get your film out there. She called me up, we talked about what kind of strategy that she could do, and then we tried to get her set up as much as we could with packets and films and the gear she needed to go do. And in her case it was a set up of community screenings and selling DVDs and that kind of thing. In some cases it's just people who continually come to bat for you, like there's a guy in Portland who sells top hut beehives and he has a constant presence in the film.

COLE: Yah, Matt Reed?

BETZ: Yah, Matt Reed.

COLE: He got involved in Mother Earth News Fairs, so.

BETZ: Exactly. So he just loves, you know, talking about the film, and I think, was he our initial connection to you?

COLE: Yah.

BETZ: Yah, so there you go. So that opened the door to connecting with Mother Earth News, which is great. It's all single people's connections that open the doors a lot of times, whether it's with a magazine like UTNE or whether it's a connection like Roger Ebert reviewing the film. A lot of these things are personal connections that you develop over a life of filmmaking. And that's where Taggart as a filmmaker has been working for over thirty years making films. Versus me whose been working for five years, that's where there's a big difference. As a filmmaker, you're constantly growing a friend network, just a network of friends, you're just making friends.

COLE: Right.

BETZ: There's a lot to be said about that. I think that's a big part of the filmmaking world. Only time will create that, there's no fast solution to that.

COLE: It's interesting to me to see how many connections there are between the people I'm interviewing and things like that. That too and I know like a lot of times I would be like, oh yah I know….like I interviewed Sarah Price who did 'American Movie' and she worked with Brad Beesley who did 'Okie Noodling' and then he's worked with Ben Steinbauer who did 'Winnebago Man' so it's like I've got all these, it's interesting, it's like the three degrees of separation kind of thing.

BETZ: Right, like the connections. Yah, it's really, really interesting. Yah there's a lot of that, I mean Taggart knows a lot of other filmmakers from his past that have done many things. I don't know if you know Nina Davenport but she does a lot of autobiographical films. They're both in the movement and out of the movement but you connect with people. So you know a lot of people of course within the environmental film world. But then a lot of people aren't in them at all and they're all part of getting any

film out there because filmmakers are generally pretty awesome about helping each other out.

COLE: What about things like working with things like Netflix and some of the digital distribution stuff? How is that working for you all and is that, how are you building that into your plan?

BETZ: It's definitely part of the future. Like 'Seed' will probably be watched more Video-on-Demand than on DVD, I'm guessing, or at least equally. Versus 'Queen of the Sun' was very much a heavy DVD film. But I think it was maybe one of the last. It's hard to say, I just constantly feel that with our audience and this movement, there are still more people still in the old, quote, old school world of DVD. Because they're not as concerned about being up on the technology all the time. I mean in a way the concept of 'Seed' is, it's not that it's anti-technology but there are probably a lot of people who would not brand themselves as far as big fans of technology as forward progress but will love the film. So those people will probably buy a DVD I guess, but you never know. I mean we'll be going Blu-ray with this film because we shot it in high def and it looks great. I want it to be out in a way that people can watch it in its original form. And DVD's capable of high def and I think finding a good way of distributing, and iTunes is good, and iTunes is good because it's broad and fast, and Netflix is great because it's broad and fast. But there are emerging filmmaker VOD tools too like Vmail got a new service that we're exploring that's a pay-per-view service that's very much about self distribution. Distrify, I'm sure you've heard about. So clean's up on Distrify as a VOD option so right on the website you just click watch now and it's through Distrify. It's cutting out the middle man basically. Like Distrify in a manner of speaking is a middle man, but it's not quite as intense as going through a distributor and then through to iTunes. You know where you've got two cuts coming out of each view. And I think one of the challenges of VOD is that you have to really drive up more views on the film in order to get the same amount of income because the DVD costs twenty dollars and the VOD costs four. And so you've got to have five times as many views. It's really tough. And so I don't think for us, that VOD hasn't quite become the main stay at all. I think there's very much an auxiliary part of the distribution plan. But I do feel that with 'Seed', we've already talked about a distributor for 'Seed', that it's really all about

day and date VOD release with theatrical. And that seems to be a really great way to do documentary because 'Queen of the Sun' was released in our house theatres across the nation and really a very successful pickup by a lot of really incredible bastions of theatres across the nation, which gave me great hope for cinema. But those are only in one hundred urban centers across the country, or one hundred urban cities, they're all very urban. But the hundred places, if you're not in one of those hundred towns that we played in, how are you going to see 'Queen of the Sun'? Well, thankfully community screenings are available, a lot of people saw it but really VOD comes down and now that the Internet speeds have increased, and people are more familiar with VOD and more willing to do VOD, I think that 'Seed' will probably do a hybrid. We're not confirmed on that but I think there's a really great likelihood that we'll be doing some sort of hybrid launch where you're maximizing your reviews and publicity, at some central point, some date, and then trying to get the national awareness of the film as broad as you can. And then working with that. So 'Queen' was a very piecemeal release, it was a very unusual release than probably many other filmmakers that you'll talk to. Because we were constantly piggybacking on success to get the film out, so it took really two years for us to get 'Queen of the Sun' out there as far as we could to the point where it was on Netflix. That's a long time. Most filmmakers, it's like a three to six month window where they're trying to fit in everything. And then maybe Netflix will come in a year later but like everything else, it's going to come in that three to six month window, it's very concentrated. But at that point the only way we could work, in Collective Eye was a building process. So it took those three years to release the film as widely as we could. But with 'Seed' my hope is that we could make more of a slash and more of a presence for the film by doing a joint, VOD theatrical so that anyone that's not showing in a place in the theatres, they go on either a specific distributor's portal site, or to an iTunes, or to a, there used to be a site called pre-screen that was all about VOD that we were in discussion with for a while. They are no longer in existence but, so that's a sign right there, I don't think people have figured out VOD yet but there are films like, there are films that have really made it work really, really well. And have done very wide releases jointly with theatrical and I think that's some kind of thing that could really work because you know a lot of people are on Rotten Tomatoes looking at reviews to find

a new movie or on iTunes trailers. And if they click on our trailer on iTunes then they go to the theatres near you, and it's not near their city, then what are they going to do? But if they can just click watch, chances are, they might click on it. I think that we've been there for about a year where people can do that really, really well, maybe a little bit longer, but I think it's really picked up recently. And I think that in the next five years we're going to see that this becomes, I mean that's just my guess, that we'll see that this kind of model will become much more prominent for documentary and for independent film. Because it's a lot of work to get all that press and to get all that exposure. And then it does fade away, I mean, when your New York Times review is there for the day that it comes out in the paper, and it's a blurb in the back for the week and then, it's gone. And some online reviews have a little more longevity but it's still very much about the timeliness about hitting it on that, and that's true on the mainstream level. And so then with 'Seed' I think it would be really interesting to see how to mesh the hybrid. They hybrid with community screenings too. So you're, you're really trying to get as many cities to be showing the film that first week. Whether it's in a theatre or in an organization. That's where you need a team of people who could, this is kind of a dream it's like, you're releasing it on VOD but you're also releasing it in theatres, and the cities that aren't picking it up in certain cities, you've got people in those cities with Sierra Club or with Slow Food or with Whole Foods or with any one of these, or just a seed bank in that town, but they're putting on a screening in that same zone. Wouldn't that be great? Then you're really hitting as wide of a swath of the country as you can. And that critical mass component is what issue driven documentaries need to get on a bigger radar. I think a lot of films use celebrity talent to propel themselves too and so we can hope that with Marissa as an executive director, there might be some opportunities there too.

COLE: Do you think she might do some narration for you or things like that?

BETZ: Yah, we're not big on narration. We didn't do it on 'Queen.' I think it will be more of a, this is probably not something to print because I don't really know yet what's going to happen with it but I think it would be really great if she would become a little more solidified as the face of the film and can go on Dr. Oz and go on, you know,

get on national TV with it because they want to talk to an actress that's been in movies. Marissa Tomei is very charming and very great to talk to and why wouldn't you? And you know, and so that would be my hope. But since we don't know that for sure we won't put that in.

COLE: Yah sure. Well I know personally I was interested in, you mentioned you shot in HD, but what kind of equipment are you using for your documentary shoots?

BETZ: So we're shooting with a Sony FS700, which was sort of brand new at the time that we started shooting 'Seed'. And it's a great camera. And one of the great things about it is that it shoots super slow-mo. And so it shoots two hundred forty frames a minute slow-mo. And for the seeds, we've had to go in two directions and it's been really fun. Seeds don't move and so, you know, honeybees are really cute. They're like, yah, people want to go see a film with really cute honeybees in it and really eccentric, charming beekeepers. That was part of what made 'Queen of the Sun' amazing and so with 'Seed' initially I looked at Taggart immediately and said this is really great but seeds don't move. So we thought what are we going to do. So we started to develop some ideas on how we were going to visualize the seed world and it's really interesting how we took time apart, and so we said, okay seeds don't operate on human time, the same way that we can imagine on movie time. So how do you work with that? Well you go two directions. You go slow-mo and you go time-lapse. And so we've gone into setting up a lot of time-lapse experiments, to get interesting views on accelerating the time, so we can see the growth of the seed, which is not a new idea. I think the way we're doing it will be pretty cool for audiences to dive into the actual seed. And it's not just the average radish seed that you're seeing growing out of soil in a fifth grade science video, it's like an heirloom spotted pinto and a blue corn, you know, stuff that's really cool looking. But people will just be like, 'Whoa!'

COLE: We have Hank Hill here whose grandfather basically had like a seed catalog, but he's been experimenting with, it's called glass gem corn. It's really amazing, rainbow stuff. Really cool.

BETZ: Yah, glass gem corn is like phenomenal. Awesome stuff. Do you know native seed search?

COLE: I'm familiar with it, yah.

BETZ: Bill McMormon? They're doing a contest right now for people to send in pictures of their glass gem corn. That stuff's pretty amazing. So that's kind of, and then we've gone in the slow-mo direction so that we can create a different sense of time when people are winnowing seeds and the chats falling off in the air. In slow-mo you see that process much more fluidly and you kind of get in touch with the seeds perspective much more. So basically 'Queen of the Sun' was about the bee's point of view, 'Seed' is about the seeds point of view. And it's kind of a fun, creative challenge. So we worked with the Sony and then in addition to that, we've done a little more working with, we've generally Taggart's kind of an auteur personality in how he creates his films and he really shoots everything himself. And I run sound so we're a two man team. And then I also shoot still photos and interview, and do a lot of the, we're both producers so we're both doing all the things a producer would do. And so we're a co-director team, which is kind of an interesting dynamic. We did a lot of discussions about what we're going to do and we don't always agree, but we often end up agreeing and we've worked on 'Queen of the Sun' for a few years so we're kind of in each other's brains and how each other thinks. But we both sense different impulses and it's amazing how he'll see something, and it's something I won't, and then I'll see something and it's something he won't see, and great things can come out of both, so it creates a really interesting vision for the film.

COLE: You mentioned that you're both producing the film. What does that mean and do you take on a producers role? Can you just…

BETZ: Well, we're both, Taggart and I, when we made 'Queen of the Sun', I was not a director, I was a producer, editor. And so I really deferred to him on the vision although I ended up putting a great deal of input into the story, especially as an editor, and late in the shooting process too, but really we started to work in a way as co-directors on that film, even though it wasn't formally that way, and so he felt comfortable, and I felt comfortable, dividing things both equally. There's no rules to it, there's no real boundaries, it's just that we both take on the film as our baby and Taggart has worked with separate producer's before, on 'The Real Dirt on Farmer Johnny' he worked with

Terry Lang as a producer. She was not in any way a director, she was very much a producer. And I will definitely say there are pitfalls to not having a separate producer. Because you're both in the creative world and you're both in the world of audience, and distribution, and money, and the means to get the creative work done. So it can be a little schizophrenic, I think, and it can be a little bipolar. And you can have a day go by where, if you just focused on shooting, it might have ended differently but you've got swept away by creating pitch materials to send out. Or you got swept away by figuring out how to grow your Facebook audience that day. But I think the modern director, I just really think the modern day director, when it's not at a certain level, when the budgets are smaller, my guess is anything under a million dollar budget, you've got, especially anything under five hundred thousand dollars, you've got filmmakers on, doing every single, they're wearing all the hats throughout the process. And they might be doing their best to not have to wear all those hats, but they really are the person who can call the shots on anything related to the film. There's probably no one else that can quite do that. I really applaud the great director, producer Paris. I think that they're invaluable. And in some ways Taggart and I, at the same time that we're co-directors, personally I've always felt that I tend to do a little bit more of what I tend to call producing work, and he does a little bit more of what you call directing work. And that's like our happy balance. That's what works for us as a team. As a producer I'm managing a whole staff of volunteers and he is too, but if you're both doing it all the time, how are you going to be creative? You're going to get swamped. And so you have to create breaks for each other to get the creative work done. The creative work takes a whole different kind of headspace.

COLE: Is it more common now for directors, especially in small, to wear all those hats? Or are there more, with a lack of funding for independent films, do you think it's more common for people to have to wear all the hats of both director, producer?

BETZ: Well, I don't know. I mean, I can only speak for myself and the people that I know, but it seems like everybody that I talk to, they're wearing both the hats, most of the people I talk to, on some level anyways. There are some people that really have divided it into a more traditional structure. You'll go into certain things and

they'll say, talk to my producer about that, but gosh that's rare. Most people, they know everything that's going on with the producing team too. They know, all of that's part of their brain too and they've been thinking about it at night. It's a twenty-four hour job for a lot of people, filmmaking. I mean, you kind of think about it and go, wow, all the tools are there and if you really want your film to get out as far and wide as you can, and it's your baby, and it's your creative child, why wouldn't you be doing as much as you could? And there are a lot of times in the creative space where you have breaks from it and you walk in, and if you're working every day on a film like a nine to five job, which in a way is how we do it, as we run Collective Eye, we have an office that we're accountable to and we really run it as a job, it's our full time job. There are some days where creative things aren't moving forward, so you just switch into producing mode. Where's the line? I don't know. I'm not very good at boundaries.

COLE: Talking about distribution, too, I've been kind of pushing everybody here, at least my vision is, I think eventually, especially episodic television and those types of things, we're going to see more the HBO GO, Watch ESPN, those types of apps for Smart TV, Apple TV, Roku, all those types of things. Where you can download an app and watch all episodes of your favorite show from that channel. Or from that provider, basically building up a brand that's what I've been trying to talk to them about here at Mother Earth News is building some sort of an app where we can deliver video content that's in our wheel house. That's a long road and difficult to figure out how to get all those things figured out too, but that's something that I'm really interested in is distribution, and the whole future of distribution too.

BETZ: HBO Go has been revolutionary in the way that I think about media. Where there are a lot of shows that people are watching on TV that are on HBO, so people don't even, a lot of people in my generation don't even own TVs. Like in a traditional sense, they don't own cable, they just subscribe to Netflix, or HBO or whatever outlets create the media that they like. You know you see people like Giaim going to bat. Giaim's got their spiritual circle and got some other things. So it's got everything. I don't know if you've noticed, I've noticed, everything's going into subscription. Software, apps, movies, everything's subscription based. Amazon's on Prime and it's all about…

COLE: Have you heard about the artist thing called Patron, or whatever it is, where basically you can subscribe to your favorite, like if you have a favorite artist and musician or something like that, you can pay them basically a certain amount per month and you get exclusive tracks, or Google hangouts with them and things like that, so.

BETZ: So for me it's totally part of building an audience because it actually shrinks the world a little bit, and that's cool. Because technology has made the world so big, you don't even know what you're going to do. You go on the Internet and it's like, anything's possible and so I think we're getting back to what's small, and what you value as small. And I think part of these subscriptions in a way, even though they're growing reach, it's about going back to specifics, it's about being small and I think subscription stuff's awesome. So I definitely imagine in the environmental film world, or even just the independent documentary world, someone coming out as a real front runner. I mean, Netflix now is funding original documentaries. HBO, of course, has always been a big stalwart on funder for independent docs and most desired by filmmakers because we all take on risky things. And that's what filmmakers need, we need to have, where we can either build our own audiences, but not every filmmaker's like Taggart and I, and even Taggart and I, because it is, you never turn off when, and you're always building your audience. Some filmmakers, they want to make films, and can you blame them? They don't want to be dealing with distribution every single moment. They want to be dealing with making films. Well hey Jason I've got a call coming in from Taggart and he's off shooting so I gotta take this.

COLE: Okay, no problem. Thanks for taking so much time to talk to me.

BETZ: Yah, absolutely and email me if there's any other questions and if there's anything you can't print I'll let you know but I think I'm pretty comfortable with everything I've said so. Awesome, we'll be in touch. Good luck on your dissertation.

COLE: Great and we'll work on stuff with Mother Earth too. Talk you later.

BETZ: Wonderful. Bye.

June 12, 2008
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Grant Curtis

COLE: Alright, there we go, now we're good. Still there with me?

CURTIS: Yeah, most definitely.

COLE: Okay, sorry about that, um, I guess I've got a few, I mean, a list of questions. I don't know how much time you have today.

CURTIS: You know. I'll-I'll, you know I think we'll, unless I get pulled away about thirty minutes.

COLE: Okay. Um, well and I was thinking about, you know we'd talked about the possibility of me coming out and doing an interview, kind of situation, kind of just shadowing around for, you know, I don't know how…we can talk about that later but…

CURTIS: Yeah.

COLE: …that was a possibility I was still thinking about too.

CURTIS: Yeah.

COLE: Um, I guess just kind of some preliminary questions, though, like are you still working with pretty much working with the same crew that you have been working with, like for the Spiderman films?

CURTIS: Well, not the exact same, there's, there's people who, you know a crew, there's inevitably going to be some people who aren't available. Um, you know cause, although, you know like Sam and I will stay on the show beginning to end, you know the, the D.P., or the grips, or the costumer, or the, the um, or the wardrobe person goes on to do other shows. Sometimes you fall out of sync. Sometimes when you're making a movie, a lower budget like we are now you can't afford, you know, everybody because everybody has their certain rates and um, so some people are back that we've worked with multiple times now and some people we're working with new people so it varies.

COLE: Yeah, one of the things I'm specifically looking at is uh, like the interaction of producers with fans online.

CURTIS: Uh hmm.

COLE: And that was kind of one of the things you specialized in with Spiderman 3, I guess especially but…

CURTIS: Yes.

COLE: Um, so but you mentioned like with Drag Me to Hell that it's not quite the same. I guess because of the, well you said the lower budget is that why? Because I was looking online and there really not a, I didn't, I couldn't find it at least, an official site with the same kind of like fan setup or anything.

CURTIS: Yeah, well there will be eventually. It's just, it's one of those things where…it's hard to ever compare anything to the Spidey stuff and say that what we did on Spidey is kind of the norm or whatever. I mean, Spidey is Sony's temple franchise…so, you know, it's going to be full tilt on all aspects on that franchise. And you don't, you don't necessarily have that built in anticipation all the time on all your movies. In fact it's so rare, it was a blessing to have that but um, so you know we're a smaller movie and a lot of people are extremely, extremely, um, uh, excited and are anticipating Sam's return to the horror genre…

COLE: Right.

CURTIS: …but uh, it's just not nearly the juggernaut that Spiderman is nor is, nor is, nor are very many movies.

COLE: Yeah, I, I…that's what I kind of anticipating, I knew it was kind of his return back to the horror thing, you know for like the Evil Dead fans I guess kind of but I know it's kind of a little, a little different for him so…

CURTIS: Well, it's a little soon for an online presence at this time. We'll have one, um, we just don't have one yet.

COLE: Right. How, how do you usually, um work that, like as far as setting up the, the online presence? Do you launch

that like after as that goes into like post production do you usually start the…

CURTIS: Well, you really have to look at the materials you have cause you never at that point you never want uh your site to go stale you always need to be providing new materials. it's kind of one of those things where after you get into shooting we'll circle the wagon and we'll see some of the stuff cut together and we'll see uh where um is the best place and how is the best place to present those materials. and you know quite honestly I, I, we have yet to confirm if that we will do an official site, I'm just saying, it's just one of those things you gotta be careful about you can't just put up a site and just say, we've got a site so you can just check that off the list you have to constantly be keeping the viewership or reason to be coming back to that site or they're going to get frustrated and uh gonna feel uninvolved and uninterested and you don't want anybody ever associating your movie with something that's uninteresting and um, not exciting. so it's a tough line to tow, I mean you really have to be serious about it and go into it with uh you know with your eyes wide open.

COLE: Right, so um I guess going back to the Spiderman thing how did you keep fans interested? I mean I guess they already had that level of excitement that you were talking about but were there things that you had to do specifically to keep them interested or did you feel like you did?

CURTIS: Oh, always you gotta always be putting up new material or else, like I said there is no reason to have a site I mean we were, we were lucky, I mean we had, we did Spiderman one we had the forty plus years of anticipation built up and people were knew the name brand and were excited about the prospect to see you know the comic book jump to a movie um thankfully we did the first one correctly and then we started piggybacking off, of, of that excitement and anticipation as well. Not only did we have the built in anticipation of the comic book but now we had one film under our belts that was received very well um so it, you know Spidey was one of those rare um opportunities one of those rare movies where I'm not saying you don't have to, to um to publicize, you always have to do that but there was already a bunch of built in publicity uh just from the, just from the name of the project and uh, and uh the comic book itself and then it's just um, like I said, it's just really, you know Sony has a great online

department um, just top of the line. They're very good at what they do, they know what they need to be giving the fans, they know what the fans expect, they know how often the fans expect something, they know how to reach out to em, uh makes the fans feel at home and make em feel like um that they're being serviced correctly you know you don't, if you're going to put something out there you gotta make sure that it's quality too cause you don't want to just keep on, you know oh here's a, here's another piece of manilla infor-, or vanilla information about Spidey here's another piece of vanilla information…it's gotta have real content or else it's going to have a, it's going to backfire on you as well.

COLE: Um, how did, so you said that Sony kind of provides, did they provide the crew of like I guess, I know that's not something you spend all your time building the site and all that stuff so I guess they provide a crew of some type that maintains, and do they monitor the site? I mean how do you…

CURTIS: Oh yeah, I mean, I-I think Sony, Sony um, you know there's a group of Sony executives that really oversee their site and they probably, um, um, have a vendor that really specializes in site setup and all that. And uh, um, and Sony monitors it all the time and you really rely on um, Dwight Caines, over at-at Sony to really be, um, the overseer of the site and pushing us, um, for uh, what we need to be doing and the aspects that we can take advantage of too on the Sony site of getting the word out there of getting the pictures out there um, when are we putting out too much content when are we not putting out enough. So uh they're great at their jobs, you know it's not something, it's not something that you like the movie you crew up and you take care of it as a producer because Sony is a whole corporation in it's own right obviously so uh it's one of those built in departments in its own studio it's online material and that's how that's taken care of.

COLE: So I mean, I guess like, as far as like, you know they had the whole ask Grant a question, did they, so the online department did they come to you and say to you, you know here are some questions that you should field or did you actually go on and pick those out? Get the answer…

CURTIS: No, um, it depended, you mean when you, when they could just write back any question?

COLE: Right.

CURTIS: No, as long as the question wasn't malicious or crude or inappropriate, all those questions went and then I picked them out, which ones I could answer. Quite honestly one of the most frustrating parts of that process is there are so many questions that you simply cannot answer.

COLE: How so?

CURTIS: You know when we were doing two I couldn't write down who the villain was going to be for number three. Um, when they ask about when, you know early on in the process, when they ask about when um, you know when the DVD would come out or the album of the score and all that, I can't say that stuff cause those are, those are you know press releases as you know, in their own right and those need to be done properly to get maximum exposure not me on the Internet telling, answering one guy's question of uh, you know, um, who the composer's going to be, it's not, it's not, so it's a weird give and take and uh, it's really finding those questions that you can answer cause you can't give away story points, nor do you want to, we want, we want, we tend to try to give away as little as possible and have people pay their ten dollars and get all the thrills and chills and story twists you know in real time rather than six months before on the website.

COLE: Yeah, so, like I guess, probably I would assume a lot of the fans probably especially with like Spider-man one with the organic web shooter, you know, like with that whole thing um, how did you respond to those like kind of critiques and things about the storyline and characters like what kind of…

CURTIS: Well…

COLE: Was there a strategy or anything like that?

CURTIS: Well, it's a very vocal um intelligent community that follows the Spider-man series extremely so and you always have to be aware of how they're reacting to things and what they're also looking for in the movie. But at the end of the day you have to look at the story and put together the best elements possible to tell the best story possible. And then you just gotta have the fans trust that

you know what you're doing. Um, I think there was a lot of uh, of people to a certain degree when everybody found out that they were going to be organic web shooters but I think most people once they saw the movie they realized that oh, it was actually better for the character it makes him seem more self-conscious it makes him more different than other people and it makes him have to internalize more and he can't share this with other people. So uh, I-I think in those moments they understand that and they go with it and then, you know, it's on to the next thing to talk about on the web.

COLE: Right. So, do you actually, um, I mean, I'm sure not now but when the whole Spidey thing was going on, did you get on other sites other than like the official Sony site check out what things, what fans were saying, or did you have enough time to do that kind of stuff?

CURTIS: I-I don't spend a big time of my day doing it but I'm definitely, usually uh, either active myself tracking or have other people I work with tracking like uh, ain't it cool news, Spiderman hype dot com those, which I think is now coming soon dot com but I think um, those, those main sites so yeah, I do track them but not everyday.

COLE: Yeah, so are some of those people still, are they in your office? Are they people like if I came out there that I could possibly be able to talk to or you could you put me in contact with them…

CURTIS: No, no it's usually, you know it's usually my assistant who kind of takes a look at that, or you know we really have enough people who work in the office that uh, um, that uh, people will um, if they see something they'll email it to me.

COLE: Yeah.

CURTIS: But you know right now all the people who worked on Spidey three or the people who did that are um, they're all on doing other jobs and stuff.

COLE: Right.

CURTIS: And it really wasn't necessarily something, that was not their full time job. That was always something that, you know people pay attention and you know I don't check it

everyday but you know my assistant would check it every other day and I would check it every other day so, somebody would kind of be looking at stuff almost daily.

COLE: Yeah, when I talked to Stan Lee I asked him kind of the same thing, how he monitored that, he would say, he kind of said the same thing, like if somebody pointed out something like oh you should check this out.

CURTIS: Yeah, that's what it comes down to. Because believe me it's one of those things where if any of the stuff that's ever on one of those websites that you're not putting out there any of those plot points or stories spoilers or potential scripts, you know about the stuff, it's almost as if it's on automatic pilot, um, you just know about it because somebody on the production is going to be looking at something and uh, email you, oh did you just hear that this person did a review of the script and you get on there and you realize they're truly just making stuff up to be heard.

COLE: (Laughs) Right.

CURTIS: Or vice versa, you know, you never know.

COLE: Yeah. Well, um, how would you, would you describe your, how would you describe your experience with the fans?

CURTIS: They're great, you know, I just feel bad when I disappoint them like I said earlier because uh, I can't answer the real questions that they really want to know, I can't answer. Um, I can answer production questions, I can answer you know how I got started, my advice to breaking into movies, what a technocrane is and stuff like that and there are some little tidbits that I can float their way but you know when they want to know who the next villain is, to simply, that's always the time that I always get kind of bummed out when um, um when I just um, I know their frothing at the mouth but, it's uh, it's not the movies best interest to break that type of information in that forum.

COLE: Um, so was there anything like uh as far as like as either you or I don't know the corporation or anything, is there specific information, are they trying to get information from the fans as well as like give them information or how does that…

CURTIS: Yeah, I mean it goes both ways I mean um, I do think there was, I think they've done just some rough, not scientific polls about favorite villains, you know favorite parts about the movie, what you liked etc. and when they get that information they pass it on to us and in terms of sending stuff and um, what was the other part of the question, it was?

COLE: I mean I guess I mean I don't know is there anything that they were like specifically trying, like information about that fans or like or things that the fans would say, that, that the company itself would pay attention to?

CURTIS: Um, you just always, it's, it's never one thing in particular or not but you just kind of pay attention to what people are tracking um what they're thinking about the movie what's the chatter about on the website you know do they, you know do they like the fact that we hired Topher Grace do they like the fact that we hired Thomas Hayden Church and you just, you just feel it out.

COLE: Right

CURTIS: You know in a lot of instances there's nothing you can do about the, you know if there was a negative reaction, there's actually nothing you could do or want to do but still you know you made that decision for the movie's best interest but you are curious about certain aspects of the process that uh, you're curious about what they think…

COLE: Yeah, I was wondering about that too because we talked the other day I had mentioned that uh, unofficially Spiderman four had been announced and like it was in um, in like (laughs) I looked it up on Internet Movie Database and they've already got you listed as producer for that.

CURTIS: Yeah, they jumped the gun.

COLE: And so, and so, and um, I had just talked to you the day or two before and I was like um well I don't know if that's true so I was wondering like how much, do the fans have an influence on who does get picked for certain assignme-, I mean I guess does the company look at that and say oh the fans, you know have really like how Sam Raimi has done the previous three, you know we should definitely

try to get him back or like you said with certain actors or anything. Does that play a role at all?

CURTIS: You know, not really from my experiences on Spiderman because specifically on the Spiderman movies, it takes so long to make em you really can't forecast who the fans are going to want at that particular time so um, so what you really have to do, or the approach that we've taken, is you hire the best actor or the best person for that job and you move on, you know you can't worry about who's the best flavor of the month of whatever because they might not be the flavor of the month thirty six months from now so um you just you just gotta do what's best for that story, for that actor or that actress or that um, crew member or department head at that time.

COLE: Cool, yeah, um, I'm trying to look through my notes here and I guess, I guess kind of a more general question how do you think the Internet has affected the film making process especially like the interaction with audiences?

CURTIS: Well the interaction with audiences is great because it keeps them engaged um, the impact on the physical process and I think you know everybody's different, the only time that it gets tough is when it gets frustrating is when they leak plot points that really are not supposed to be, that you do want the viewer to enjoy for the first time right then and you know, and I think you know, I wrote the making of Spiderman three book… and I was trying to explain why we hold back, um, certain pictures or story points why we try to keep those, um, um, you know under wraps because I truly vividly remember you know sitting in the campus twin in Warrensburg, Missouri and watching Empire Strikes Back and remember the feeling I had when Darth Vader reached out his hand to Luke and told him he was his father. My jaw just dropped. And we have those moments and always have those moments in our films too and I would hate, and I would have hated going into the Empire Strikes Back knowing that already, it would have ruined that moment and you know I would hate for somebody going into the movie knowing all the major plot points. Um, so you know it's a give and take, it's very rewarding and very frustrating at the same time because at the end of the day all you're trying to deliver is the best experience and even though they may want certain story points and certain aspects of the story where you expose beforehand really in

their own best interests, it's not the best thing to do because uh, it erodes their experience.

COLE: Kind of going back I remember now a question… you know a lot of times the fans were given the opportunity to ask you questions other than like the polls of like who's your favorite villain and things like that, was there, were you given an opportunity to ask questions back to the fans?

CURTIS: Um, I always had the opportunity but it was something, because you know I could always interact with the fans because when they would answer me a question I could answer one right back but um, no it, just the way the website was set up there wasn't always necessarily user friendly in my for me for my interface in terms of interface and a constant stream of interaction you know back and forth so I had the opportunity but it was one of those things where that really wasn't the forum to find out or ask questions um to try to uh to try to uh gauge knowledge or anticipation or excitement.

COLE: Right.

CURTIS: You know, if you want those answers, Sony has a whole um, you know data department and a whole survey team…

COLE: Really?

CURTIS: …you know when you were tracking awareness and stuff like that that they do themselves.

COLE: Wow, that's pretty amazing and do you have contact with those people I mean could you give me contact information or a person who I might get a hold of in that area?

CURTIS: I will look, it's just, it's Sony's, they do market research so it's just their market research department.

COLE: Right, okay.

CURTIS: I don't know the name off the top of my head it has been a year and half now since we have dealt with them but they do exist.

COLE: Right, that's pretty, that's kind of, you know, I guess that's kind of the just that I'm going for too is

looking up the marketing aspects to fans and how they, you know ways to please the fans and those kind of things.

CURTIS: Exactly.

COLE: So you talked about the website and how it evolved over the course of the, of the three movies were there things, certainly things that were added or changed for specific reasons, do you remember?

CURTIS: Um you know always adding stuff because you know we kind of when like, I remember when the Spidey three movie went up, I don't think we were even shooting yet you kind of start with just like the shell of just the initial foundation of the building blocks and as we continue shooting there's more stories to tell or more anecdotes or more pictures to come out of the unit photography or um, you know one of the online Spidey games is finished and you're constantly adding stuff until by the time you know the movie's coming out the website kind of quote unquote crescendos if you will it's, it uh, the best that it can be, its got the most interactive possibilities and uh, it's as good as it can be, so it's a constant build um, I don't think we ever took things off the internal website because everything was already really thought out and um, and uh, that process was already, that bridge had already been crossed, you know the only time we would ever take something down is if you know we've got this picture of Venom but we actually have a better picture now that has been updated um but it would never be, you know, so we would trade stuff out maybe but um, by the time that it is up there on the site it has already been strategized and there for a reason so normally a lot of most stuff would not be taken down.

COLE: Yeah, so um, does this market research team, would they like have archives of the site those kind of things, like the messages, all those kind of things?

CURTIS: And well, let me just backtrack a little bit about the market research team, that department is not generally hooked up with and I don't want to speak for them I don't know but they don't, like, the market research team it's part of like going out there and finding awareness, I mean you've seen them at the mall or something, somebody comes up and says what are the summer movies you want to see this year. So it's not tied to the website per say it's

marketing research that Sony the company is trying to come up with not necessarily what um, related to any online aspects.

COLE: Okay.

CURTIS: Yeah.

COLE: Um, and you talked about, and I was going to ask you this too but you mentioned your, the Spiderman Chronicles and I guess what really prompted you to publish that? I mean was there a specific reason why you published that or was there…

CURTIS: Well there's always a companion book made with the Spiderman movies and on Spiderman two that's where my real participation with the online um website with Sony really began and that's where I would write to the fans, I would talk about the editing process or I would talk about the sound designer Paul Ottoson would come up with the sound or a trip that we took to the Sony Image Works to look at the latest digital effects or shots or whatever. And on the Spiderman two website when all the dust settled you know it was one of those things where Sam and I were talking and I wrote about forty or fifty single spaced pages for that, which was great, glad to do it but then when it came time for Spiderman three to come out and Sam and I were kind of joking around and Sam said you know you should write the Spiderman three book you already did so much on the Spiderman two website you know just do it again but just in book form. And I was kind of joking and said yes but then it really started to sink in that I did have the unique opportunity as the producer who was there from day one to the final day um, you know usually the author of those books, I'm not knocking them at all we um, Mark did Spiderman one and two, making up books, did a phenomenal job but they simply do not have the access that I do to the movie um to write about and to um, to journal so we joked about it and I realized you know it is a unique opportunity, I would regret not doing it I'm going to jump into it I've got the support of Avi and Laura I've got Sony support and uh went from there.

COLE: Cool, yeah I was going to say, so were you were you journaling already before, I mean, like you said, I mean were you journaling before you started doing the book thing and then is that how you got picked to do the…

CURTIS: No, I was journaling on Spiderman two you know telling them giving them anecdotes telling them what we were doing. and then before Spiderman three started I had the book so I kind of had my camera and documented stuff from the very beginning.

COLE: Right, but I mean, it wasn't, I don't know I guess even before Spiderman two how do they pick you to be the person online to be the, I guess other than the fact that you were the producer was there any specific reason they said hey Grant should be the one that does this…

CURTIS: No I was just simply the one would, who could do it you know…

COLE: Yeah, so it was more of an arbitrary thing I guess?

CURTIS: I was ready and willing, I love to write, I love the interaction with the fans, I love that process so those things just kind of came together.

COLE: Um, just a couple more and then we'll um…so I guess we were talking about working with Sony, who was uh, is Sam doing this Drag Me to Hell is that more of just an independent production then?

CURTIS: The production is being financed by his production company Ghost House Pictures. Uh, it is a movie that Universal has bought, is going to distribute domestically, so technically it's a Ghost House Picture and a Universal Picture, so this one's actually not a Sony picture.

COLE: Yeah, um, well I guess did you guys go to the Comiccon? I know that's coming up again pretty soon, and in the past.

CURTIS: I guess, okay it's summer of 2008, so summer of 2007 would have been the last one, I don't think we went last year because the movie was already out but I know that we had a really big presence. I guess what would now be considered summer of 2006.

COLE: Right.

CURTIS: Yep.

COLE: So are you, um, I mean there's no plans I guess since the Spiderman four is in the future, and no real solid things are in the works, there's nothing planned for this year then right?

CURTIS: No, I don't think we're going to go this year um just don't have a reason.

COLE: A reason, yeah.

CURTIS: Because that's another venue where if you're going to go you want to go with a great presentation and a reason to be there you don't want to just go there to be there you know.

COLE: Yeah, that was one of the things maybe schedule a trip out and I didn't know if you guys were going to go to that this year that would be pretty cool thing to follow along and kind of witness what goes on with all that.

CURTIS: Yeah. If you've never been it's a fascinating thing to go to. It's crazy and fun and cool and geeky and all those things rolled into one.

COLE: (Laughs) Right. Yeah, well then with all the, with everybody in costume, well not everybody but a lot of people coming in costume it's kind of…

CURTIS: Oh yeah…

COLE: Um well I think that's pretty much it, do you have a, do you have a specific time in mind that would be good for me to come out and visit or…

CURTIS: You know it's just something that we'll have to play by ear so if you have a time that works for you call me up and we can try to plan something and see what we can work out.

COLE: Okay, do you just want me to call you directly or…

CURTIS: Oh yeah, that would be fine.

COLE: Okay.

CURTIS: No problem.

COLE: Alright, well, cool. I don’t want to take up, I know you’re busy, so, I don’t want to take up too much more of your time so…

CURTIS: Oh no problem, sorry it’s took a while but glad we could finally uh, um chat.

COLE: Yeah, thanks for cooperating with me and just um, like I said, I’ll be in touch I guess. I was kind of looking more towards like the first couple weeks of July actually. I don’t know if that would be too soon for you or….

CURTIS: It might be a little soon because we’re wrapping right at the end of June and we usually take a little brief pause and just kind of clear our heads and then come back.

COLE: Okay.

CURTIS: But you know, let me know keep me posted when you’re thinking.

COLE: Okay. Alright sounds good.

CURTIS: Okay.

COLE: And I’ll be in touch with you. And did you take me off your SPAM filter so I could the emails through?

CURTIS: Yeah, it should come through now.

COLE: Yeah, that way I don’t have to bug you by the phone all the time.

CURTIS: Oh no problem. If I don’t respond quick enough just holler at me.

COLE: Well thanks Grant for your time.

CURTIS: Oh yeah anytime, I’m glad to help.

COLE: I’ll be talking to you soon.

CURTIS: Alright have a great weekend.

COLE: Okay, you too.

CURTIS: Alright, bye.

COLE: Bye.

August 9, 2011
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Eric Gitter

COLE: Pretty exciting stuff, I don't know did you have time to look over, kind of, the potential questions that we might go over there?

GITTER: Yeah, I mean, sure, I don't have them in front of me, but I've seen them before.

COLE: Okay, okay. So basically I'm looking at the interaction between producers of films, and by producers I mean anyone involved in the creation of the film. And also then the audience or fan base of that film. Um, with Scott Pilgrim, that's one, I'm kind of taking a case study of these films that are based on pre-existing works, with Scott Pilgrim. I've talked to Christine Walker from American Splendor, and Grant Curtis and Stan Lee from Spiderman. So I've kind of been going with a comic book or graphic novel, people who are involved in producing those based on those because they have such a large and active fan base already. But whenever you were, how did you get involved with Scott Pilgrim?

GITTER: I have, I have uh, one of my productions companies, is a partner with Oni Press, who is the publisher.

COLE: Okay, wow.

GITTER: So I have a production company that actually I own, that essentially what we do is, we are the producing partner and sister company to the publishing entity.

COLE: Okay

GITTER: So part of our job on a daily basis is to, for lack of a better way to say it [is] the steward of the intellectual property.

COLE: Okay, that's interesting too, just all the ways that the creators of those initial, whether they are comic books

or graphic novels or whatever, how they are impacted by this too.

GITTER: You know, it's an interesting thing, it's especially with the convergence of the media, with the fan base I have, especially the traditional comic book movie fans, they're living online, they're living on their hand-held, you know, these are not worlds that are clashing anymore, these are worlds that have collided.

COLE: Right, could you speak to that a little? Is there a difference with the fans of Scott Pilgrim and then just a general audience? How did you approach that whole topic?

GITTER: Well, certainly, initially. I don't think I'm inventing the wheel telling you that there's the reach of having a feature film released by a major studio. Um, and the subsequent publicity and advertising that comes with that um, would certainly expand immeasurably.

COLE: Right.

GITTER: So, uh, you know at the end of the day, even books that have a huge fan base, you know, having a feature and having a movie done and released by a major studio, um, hopefully in a perfect world we expand on this base.

COLE: Did you have much interaction with the fan base yourself, or was that someone else?

GITTER: Well, yeah, no. Again, part of the unique nature of my producer-dom, for lack of a better way to put it, part of that is that I get to wear both hats. I get to be involved in the comic book side as well as on the feature side. So , you know, right down to, our company going to trade shows before the movie ever started and obviously being contacted and having interactions with fans, we had a Scott Pilgrim Facebook page long before, you know, the movie came out and certainly we were constantly hearing feedback and one of the things that I thought that was something that was really wonderful we were able to do with fans , and that was Edgar Wright, who directed the film, was literally blogging every day after we got done shooting, and you know we did that after pre-production and certainly during production, you know, giving little teases and making everybody feel like they were on set with us, which

I thought was really nice and fans seemed to really respond to.

COLE: right, that is really cool, and something I noticed too. I talked to the folks from Spiderman, Grant Curtis and those guys, and just talking about making them feel like they are a part of the film making process.

GITTER: They are a part of it! They are a part of it and should remain a part of it, and anybody who is making a film, and looks the other way and doesn't include them, in my opinion, is missing and making a grave mistake.

COLE: Maybe, could you, lets rewind a bit. Could you basically give me a description of, there's lots of different types of producers, could you give me just an overall general view, of I know it might be kind of big, but what you do on a daily basis or what you did during the film.

GITTER: I am a producer, that was my background, I [was] not only a comic book company before I got involved with them as a producer, knew the world, and had kind of gone through frustration with the somewhat dysfunctional relationship, at the time, between the Hollywood comic book world and in doing so, kind of came up with the idea, which was somewhat unique at the time, although I wasn't looking to invent the wheel. Uh, to partner with the comic book company, which I guess a lot of researchers hadn't done. Typically a producer, a film producer, will go out and go after a project on an individual basis, so another words, a new books is coming out or a project out there. You ultimately go and acquire the rights to that particular project and then package up the project with talent and set it up in the studio or something to that effect. Um, I just thought the timing was right to do it a little bit differently and, you know, be ahead of the curve and be more proactive and partner with a comic book company and subsequently and the guys at Oni were feeling the same way about Hollywood. They were seeing the future of the business and knew how important it was to have a presence down here but they felt they were best served not trying to be, you know, producers in Hollywood, but doing what they do best, which is create intellectual property content so they were looking for a partner in Hollywood at the same time I was looking to partner with a great comic company.

COLE: right, that’s pretty cool.

GITTER: Um, you know, in terms of what I do, in terms of what a producer does, It’s an impossible to answer question. My job is to make sure it gets done and makes sure it gets done right, makes sure it gets done well and makes sure it gets done profitably.

COLE: How about this? Maybe one or two of your most, what was one of the most important things you did during the films to make it a success, how about that?

GITTER: You know, I mean certainly the most important thing was actually setting it up at Universal Pictures. That was singularly the most; when I set it up, have you read the entire book series?

COLE: I have not read the entire book series.

GITTER: Ok, there’s the six book graphic novel series. When I set it up it was, the first book had just come out, in terms of fandom, it hadn’t even found its legs yet, was become something of a pop culture phenomenon, but when I set it up it was an unknown book. And you know, I assume you’ve seen the film?

COLE: Yeah, actually, that was my introduction to Scott Pilgrim and consequently gone back and read some of the graphic novels.

GITTER: It’s conceptually, it’s I mean, at its core, it feels like a John Hughes film at its core, it felt like a John Hughes film for the video game generation. You know, inherently when you go out and you pitch these things to studios, it could sound to the uninitiated a little bit out there. The most important thing was finding the right home and the right people for it. You know Edgar Wright, after we decided to go after Edgar Wright. Ed Wright came aboard, he’s a unique filmmaker with a unique voice, when we were able to attach Edgar to it that was key to, you know very few filmmakers that I think could’ve done what he did.

COLE: Um, was there, you mentioned working with Universal. What was that process like? How was that experience? Were you kind of like the liaison between Universal and Edgar and some of the other people on…

GITTER: You know it's, Edgar has a direct line, everyone has a direct line to the studio. So it was[n't] necessarily where they passed a message to us. You know, that's not quite how the grapevine works you know they certainly had a very direct line to Edgar in that respect. It was a matter of question, it's a matter of being able to all work together, you know there's a lot of cooks, there's a number of executives at universal, there were a number of people involved. Edgar has a producing partner, who was involved, who kind of knows his shorthand a little bit. So, there were a number of people who were actually involved in getting the movie there, I think everybody's job is to work together so that simultaneously were making the best film possible. You kind of as a producer, you do whatever you need to do to get the job done. It's a really difficult role to explain. It's a matter of, it comes right down to giving notes on the script, to notes on casting and everything in between.

Jason: Yeah, it's one of the reasons I'm so interested in this.

GITTER: It's a pretty all-encompassing thing. And know two films are exactly alike. Some films require you to treat them differently than others. And this particular one, Edgar's the kind of director who's also a producer and he's writing the script. So, you know, Edgar's not a guy who needs his hand held. He's a guy that, you know, that he's a business man and he's a producer in his own right, and so he's a guy that you just needed to, as the filmmaker, you need to just help support him the best as possible. Help give him whatever, you want to give that guy the best brushes and the best paint to create the best picture. That's what you want to do.

Jason. Right, um, you talked a little bit about the website and Facebook and all that stuff. On this film, who's in charge of all those kinds of things and aspects of the marketing?

GITTER: There's a number of them, there's a number of different stuff set up virally already before it was ever setup. Just the sheer nature of what the material was leant it to, Oni as a comic book company, was already setting some of that up and it was living virally already. And it was already starting to pick up momentum. I think Edgar picked up on that. He got his own blog, which has

become something of a destination fan site for kind of pop culture fans. You know Edgar used to do his own thing and then simultaneously we had stuff set up with Universal. One of the things we all did was coordinate. You know a big part of doing these things and doing these things successfully is making sure that everybody knows that everybody's coordinated with one another. If there was a teaser trailer coming out online, you know we all knew, we were all able to cover and cross-pollinate it and whatever needed to be done. I think the key was just making sure that everyone was working together.

Jason: We talked a little bit about the way Scott Pilgrim is influenced by video games and stuff. What kinds of tie-ins were done with that, with video games?

GITTER: You know the video game came out from Ubisoft. And it was actually their number one downloadable game for the second half of last year. It was a wildly successful game.

Jason: And who, as far as production was concerned, the storyline for all those things. Was Edgar involved in that?

GITTER: Well, uh, Ubisoft was the company and they do a straight license deal with Universal and us. And one of the things we make sure, um, during the case was that Bryan O'Malley was brought on as a consultant. He didn't want to write the thing, he was working on some other stuff, but he was brought on as a consultant. And he did a lot of work. And one of the things we did was to make sure that it stayed true to the vision of the books and simultaneously the movie itself.

Jason: What role did Bryan play in the film itself?

GITTER: Bryan was integral. And it's always nice to wear two hats, where simultaneously the producer of the film to get the film set up and get it made as best as possible. At the same time you simultaneously want to make sure that you are protecting the creators who trust their material to you. It was wonderful because Edgar embraced Bryan from day one and vice versa. So then Michael came out with the screenplay. You know the three of them would constantly work together, and we would constantly fly everyone around to each other so that they could work on the script, even to the point that Universal actually made sure that Bryan was a special consultant on the script. So that it was

something that Edgar and Michael wanted as well. You know a lot of it was based on what happened to Bryan, you know it's kind of a hyper reality that the books and the movie take place in, but a lot of it was Bryan's experiences. So everyone felt it was really important to make sure that he was involved in the actual writing of the script. And he was there on the set as well.

Jason: That's pretty interesting. Um….

GITTER: You know one of the things he did, I remember this, we were in preproduction with the actors, one of the things that Bryan did was wrote a little bio on each of the actors characters and only shared them with those actors so nobody else knew. And it was basically background for the characters that only Brian knew and he didn't share..like even to Michael Cera he didn't share, he gave him some information on Scott that no one else in the world had except Michael. And he did the same thing with Mary Elizabeth who played Ramona, and on down the line. And I think everybody really kind of, really felt that they knew their characters and really got into it. Because of some of that stuff.

Jason: Yeah, uh, yeah that's a really cool way to make a film. Um, so, as far as going to conventions and interacting with the fans and those kinds of things, where there specific strategies, other than the blog, where you said yeah we need to talk to these fans and how do we get their best interaction with us?

GITTER: Yeah, you know obviously we wanted to maintain, the comic book company Oni has always maintained a fairly strong presence at a lot of the larger trade shows, so not just Comic Con, but Wonder Con, C2, E2 and the like. Um, we were very present at Comic Con last year in a huge way. There was a huge interactive fan experience that was done down at Comic Con. We did massive screenings all over the country. So, there were a lot of things that were done to maintain the fan base. You know a lot of, not just the online stuff, but there were promotional items that were done specifically for individual moments and shows. A tremendous effort was made to interact with the fans.

Jason: Uh, looking at my questions here. Uh, so, that's kind of a redundant questions here. So, you, uh I assume

consider yourself to be kind of fan of Scott Pilgrim and Bryan O'Malley since….

GITTER: Yeah, tremendously so. It's nice to have the luxury to be both, but yeah.

Jason: And, uh, comic books in general, I guess we've talked about that too, what got you involved with those. Um, just looking through the list here. We've covered quite a few of these. Could you just paint a picture for me of the typical Scott Pilgrim Fan? Is there a typical…?

GITTER: You know, normally a lot of comic books I'd be able to do that. Scott Pilgrim's kind of unique animal in that it's kind of [indefinable]. It's skews pretty evenly male and female. I guess, if there is any, you know, it certainly speaks to a younger audience who lived through the video game generation; I'll give you that. But I like to think that we did the movie in the way that somebody who didn't necessarily grow up playing video games, who was maybe a generation before that could still watch it. You know while it might initially seem a little zany while it's going on. At its core it always seems like John Hughes film. I'll tell you this, the night before we started shooting, Edgar had everyone over to his place in Toronto and screened Ferris Bueller. As if, you know, this is what we are shooting for.

Jason: That's pretty cool. Uh, as far as producing, you mentioned earlier how important it was having the big studio presence behind it and marketing and all those things. Would a film like Scott Pilgrim have been as big of a success without the big studio behind it? Would have even been possible?

GITTER: No! It's different. Look, you know, I'm not gonna, you know, there's no way to sugar coat it, it's an expensive undertaking to make a film of that magnitude. And its, just, you know, without the backing of the studio or a major distributor, it would have probably been a different looking movie. Um, the luxury of having the resources that a studio provides you, it's hard to make a movie the scope of Pilgrim without having that. But simultaneously what was so wonderful about having Universal in this particular instance specifically was just that they, you know, they didn't micromanage it. They didn't try to change what the movie was. They didn't try and change it

from what the book was. They didn't' try and change Edgar's vision of it. They literally let us go out and make the movie and supported everyone's vision of it. That was what was so wonderful. And you know it's not the easiest thing in the world, because it's an expensive, expensive undertaking to make and market a film of that size. And, you know, especially one that is not named Spiderman or Batman. So you know it's a real leap of faith and a real belief in the material and the people making the film by the studio. And creatively I don't think that I have ever had or may ever have that kind of experience. The fact that they just let us go out and make that film and were as supportive as they were, I just can't say enough about Universal.

Jason: What was it like, bringing on some of the big names like Michael Cera and Jason Schwartzman…

GITTER: You know, it's just so funny that we… I always kind of tease Bryan O'Malley, because I'm sure you've heard all the horror stories about being stuck in development hell and trying to get a movie made. You know, it's literally the hardest thing in the world. We went to one director it was Edgar Wright, he came on board. We want to one writer it was Michael Bacall, he came on board. You know we went after one person for Scott Pilgrim, it was Michael Cera. Literally every single solitary person we went to said yes. And it was almost, you know from a creative standpoint, it was almost the most charmed thing I've ever seen. You know it was just maybe, it was just a young fresh cast, but everyone was unaffected. They were all friends with each other. It was just easy. I've been on sets that have not been as easy. This one was particular easy. And it was a long shoot. And especially these very long shoots, people are hating each other halfway in. But in this particular instance, people just got friendly. It was as much a pleasure to be on set on day, you know, 82 as it was on the first day. Um, for whatever reason, love for Edgar, love for Bryan, the material. Everybody got along, Everybody felt they were doing something special.

Jason: Um, going back to the fan interaction and those kind of things. You said there wasn't any one particular thing other than you coordinating, but there wasn't any specific strategies for maintaining engagement with fans.

GITTER: You know definitely between Edgar and Bryan O'Malley, we wanted to maintain a connection with the fans as organically as possible. You know, just doing, you know I think fans, especially fans of material like Pilgrim, they are very astute, they know what they like. They see through the bullshit. You know you have to respect them enough, you have to understand the fan and know what they are looking for as opposed to just coming up with this marketing campaign and kind of pandering to them. And I think that if felt very organic, the way we were able to work with the fans, in terms of like I said Bryan and Edgar. And fans actually having access to them. I think the fans felt like they had access to the set, they had to the film, they had access to the creator. And that's what I think we were always going for. To try and make it something that people, you know, we always felt like Scott, as fantastical as some of the moments in the film were, we always felt like these are relatable characters. You now there is a little bit of Scott or Ramona or Knives or whoever. And somebody's going to find someone to relate to. And you know we always wanted it to be that. We always wanted everybody to feel like we were relating to the fan and the fans were related to us. We wanted to give them a more organic, grassroots access to the creators and to the set and to the filmmakers. That was kind of the thought process.

Jason: So, for instance when I talked to grant Curtis about Spiderman, One of the things on, I think it was on Spiderman 2, where they had the "ask grant Curtis a question" thing on their website. I when I talked to Grant, it would actually be an executive from Sony or they would send out a representative to the set and ask him questions that they had selected from several hundred that had been submitted, they would pick certain ones that they wanted to respond to. Was there anything like that or…

GITTER: We kind of, rather than do it like that, and I understand the concept of doing it like that, we were lucky in that in both Edgar Wright and Brian O'Malley, we had people who did not mind personally interacting. And in certain instances you would have to do it in the way you are talking about. I guess Edgar Wright didn't sleep for seven or eight months. Because literally he would shoot the day on set, and then would go home and literally blog, put pictures on line from that day, you know, from the set, and tease fans with them. And they'd ask him questions and he'd respond. You know, we were basically letting fans, we

were giving fans access to the filmmaker and the creator. I think that everybody felt like they were, you know it was almost a friendlier type of situation. It almost felt like you were in the living room instead of an auditorium listening to somebody on the stage. You know, if I can put it in a different way. One of the things that we always wanted to do, we wanted to make the fans feel like they were making the movie with us.

Jason: At any point were there like suggestions from fans where you were like, that's a good…

GITTER: Oh man, every single day. Oh, god yes.

Jason: Any specific examples that you can think of?

GITTER: Every example you can think of. I think the biggest, and it was a guessing game because nobody knew where we going to go, it was Scott and because the book series had not wound up yet. The big questions, if there was one, was Scott going to end up with Knives or Ramona.

Jason: And you did the alternate endings…

GITTER: And you literally had, it was divided and people were vigilant. And every once in a while you'd get, there was a smaller but hard core group of fans that think that Scott should have blown them both off and ended up with Kim Pine. And then every once in a while it was Scott and Wallace should wind up together. Oh god, fans would argue with each other. It was hysterical. The truth be known, until toward the end, we didn't know. We didn't know where we were going to go. We knew where Bryan was going to go in the book and then Bryan was like, maybe I'm not going to go that way. Literally it was not until the end.

Jason: So I was going to say, was that the reason for shooting the alternate endings. And then did you screen those consequently with different audience and get different reactions…

GITTER: Um, yeah. And even that didn't' necessarily help. The reactions were, I think no matter what we would have done, the people who were predisposed to say that he should end up with Knives were always going to say that. And the people who were predisposed to say that he should end up with Ramona were always going to say that. And the people

who were predisposed to say that he should wind up with Kim were always going to say that. And, you know, you just try to come up with an ending that was at least, you know if it wasn't specifically what they were hoping was going to happen, was at least satisfying in a certain way. I think we accomplished that.

Jason: You mention earlier too about, since Oni was so involved in the production, was there demand from fans even before this became a film, oh this should be a movie? Or was this something that maybe Bryan come to you and said I'd like to see this as a movie.

GITTER: I think Bryan was happy to see it as a comic. I don't
think Bryan was ever, you know I tell this to anyone who is every going to write a comic book for us. If you are writing a comic book expecting it to become a movie, it's going to be a shitty comic book. You know, the best comic book movie, in my opinion, are when they are based on comic books that will stand-alone. Good comic books. And, you know, you never know, there's too many variables. You never know if a films going to get made or not going to get made. You always have to write the book to make the best book possible. And if it happens, the movie, great. I don't think Bryan had ever envisioned it becoming a film. I guess everyone envisions it to a certain extent, but I don't think that's why Bryan set out to write it. That being said, there were some very funny moments. I remember being up in Toronto and we were shooting at this great big castle, it's called Castle Loma, it's a great big landmark up there. And, uh, I remember Bryan telling me that he wrote the scene about a movie hero, do you remember the scene where he was shooting a movie {Jason "Yeah"}, with a young female actress? Well Bryan wrote the scene because he was walking home one day, and he lived not far from Castle Loma, and Universal was shooting a Hillary Duff movie there. And he saw all that stuff set up there and it stayed in his mind and he went home and started drawing it and that became the scene. And you know, who knows if it was ever in the wildest dreams in the back of his head. But he didn't' write the book to become a movie. I just think anytime anybody writes a book with the sole purpose of becoming a movie, fans are going to see right through that.

Jason: I was just kind of curious, who was the instigator of all this. Who said this is the one we're going with…as far as choosing that.

GITTER: You know to a certain extent it's my job to take the material from the company. I'll take the blame for that. My job is to take the material and try and turn it into features. That's what I do. I'm a producer. At the same time, you never know. There are so many variables. I've had movies, or pieces of material, or scripts, or books that I thought were slam-dunks, the most obvious films you'd ever see in your entire life and I'm still in development with them. But I've had others that were very difficult, like Pilgrim was; conceptually it took a real leap of faith from the studio to do that. I didn't think it was going to be as easy as it ultimately became in terms of getting it set up and the getting the right talent involved.

Jason: What kind, you talked about other comic book films, were there any that inspired you or the other filmmakers. Were there people on set who were like we don't' want to replicate this, or we like this about other comic book films. Just in terms of stylistically or like we don't want to make these same mistakes

GITTER: You know we never, far be it for me to say that nothing influenced. I guess everything to a certain extent influence what we all do. That being said, I like to think that Pilgrim is a fairly unique piece of material and a fairly unique movie. Phil Pope, who is the cinematographer, is an interesting guy. He shot the Spiderman movies and The Matrix. He's also the guy who shot Team America and Freaks and Geeks. You know, I think we always knew it was always kind of an eclectic mashup. And I think that if you look at Edgar's first two films, if you look at Shaun of the Dead and you look at Hot Fuzz, they're mashups. They're genre colliding movies that make kind of one unique type of thing. To say that there was one particular influence, I don't think so, I think it was kind of a mashup of a lot of influence.

Jason: Yeah, I guess I was thinking more along the lines of, as far as audience interaction, with Spiderman they had the controversy with the organic web shooters versus the mechanical.

GITTER: Yeah, you always, you know that's a big part of my job to make sure that you're not pissing off fans. You know, it's tough because sometimes they're very different mediums. Doing a film and doing a comic book, there are things you can do on the printed page you can't do in a film and vice versa. So, I think the key, for me at least and for most of the people on this, the key is the reverence and the reverence to the material and that you are paying homage to the material and you stay true to it. And that even if you veer off, which we did in certain instances, as long as you veer off in a way that feels organic to the material and feels like you're not bastardizing it, I think fans will, fans are astute enough to realize it. And I think they did in this particular instance. I don't think anyone who is a fan of the book watches this movie and goes oh, they fucked those books up.

Jason: Yeah, I mean, not having experience with the graphic novel and then watching the film, I was blown away stylistically just as far as a really cool integration…

GITTER: I tell you a lot of it. If you read the book, a lot of it, if you don't have them I'll have my office send you down the books. If you read the book, a lot of it's in there. Literally he had Bryan's pages and artwork up on set. And there were copies of the book series by every monitor by every station. There were literally shots that were right out of the book. The poster itself is the first image in the first book.

Jason: That's one of the cool things about graphic novels and comics, it's almost like, it's a storyboard.

GITTER: Yeah, it is a storyboard. No doubt about it. And by the way, there's even Bryan's art throughout the film. You know when Mary's doing the flashback with her with the exes. That's from Bryan's artwork.

Jason: Yeah, I was talking to Christine Walker, who worked on American Splendor, and uh…

GITTER: Another perfect example of a comic book film…

Jason: Yeah, just the way she was involved in another film Howl about Allen Ginsburg, one of the things she talked about was the animation that was in that film, during the test screenings some of the people complained "oh this

animation doest fit" "Ginsburg would never have approved of this". In actuality it was an artist that Ginsburg had worked with to create a graphic novel. So it would have been exactly what he would have chosen.

GITTER: Yeah, everybody thinks they know best. I've seen that happen. Do you know that that reminds me of?

Jason: What's that?

GITTER: Did you ever see the movie Back to School with Rodney Dangerfield? Sam Kennison plays the English lit teacher. And he has to a report on Vonnegut. And he hires Kurt Vonnegut to actually do the report on Vonnegut. He goes you plagiarized this. You didn't write this. I know you didn't write it. I'll tell you another thing, whoever did write it for you knows nothing about Kurt Vonnegut. And then he stops payment on Vonnegut's check. You know he had Vonnegut write the paper on Vonnegut and the professors telling him whoever wrote the paper knows nothing about Vonnegut. You're always going to have that.

Jason: You know it's an interesting thing just about fans in general, is that a lot of time that they have an authority over the material. I'm interested in that too.

GITTER: I think one of the things that everybody knew, all the fans knew this and all the fans respected this, was how close Bryan and Edgar had gotten and how close Bryan was to the project. Bryan was reflecting on everything. Even if there were, you know, look you can't please all the people all the time, not everyone was going to agree with this decision or that decision. Even when one of the decision people would go, you know I'm not so sure I like where they're going to go with that. But if Bryan says it's okay I'm gonna go with it, you know people would always feel like. So you know that fact that everybody knew, that everything was being done with the creator, the publisher was involved, the creator was involved. The fact that the team who created the book were all involved from day one, I think, everybody had a, you know, and we were very open about that. I think everyone had a real sigh of relief about that and I think everybody respected that.

Jason: Yeah that was one of the things, that was interesting too, that was how they solved the problem. They put a title card up that said that this, these

animations featured in this film were done with the cooperation with the artist who had done, and after that they never had another complaint about it. So it's interesting to hear you say that too. By, basically legitimizing it with the fans by saying we working with the creators on this so….

GITTER: Yeah , you know, you'd see on the chat boards, you'd see somebody go, I heard so and so's gonna play this or heard they're gonna go this direction with that. And you'd hear that's so totally wrong, O'Malley would never go for that. Then somebody else would go, uh, O'Malley already went for it and he's keen, and they're like, in that case.. And you'd see that all the time. I'd go on chatboards and fan sites. It was actually fun to watch. If they weren't talking I'd get nervous.

Jason: Yeah, and so that's really interesting. So that openness with the fans is pretty interesting too. I don't know if you're familiar with Douglas Rushkoff or if you read that kind of stuff. Just talking about inviting people to be a part of something and feel like an active participant.

GITTER: That was the key for us. That was the one thing we strove for from day one, is to make everyone feel like they were an active participant in the process. I think we accomplished it. I hope we accomplished it.

Jason: Yeah, it seemed pretty successful to me. So what are the other projects that you're working on now. Is there anything coming up?

GITTER: Geez, tons of stuff. We have a project, um, that is set up with Paramount that we just attached Duane Johnson to. And we'll hopefully start shooting beginning of next year, based on another comic book. We have dozen of things set up. We have a little TV season too. We have a TV deal with CBS that we just set up. We just set up a project based on one of our books called the Chasm. That David Hayter, who adapted, he did the movie adaptation of X-men, X-men 2 and Watchmen. And David's going to write this project that we set up with Showtime. We have two Roark comics that are set up as series on the Sci-Fi network. Couple at CBS, one about to go at Cinemax, a couple at CW. So a lot at TV right now. This is kind of high TV season. Um, we are going out to direct shortly on

another project they have at Universal is called The Last Call which is based upon a Milne book. So we've got a bunch of stuff going on.

COLE: That's another interesting thing to me is just how many productions are based on previous works and how talking to Grant they're working on another Wizard of Oz movie based on…

GITTER: Yeah there's like six of them, there's like six Wizard of Oz movies, twelve Snow Whites.

COLE: Well this one's actually, well I guess Wizard of Oz was actually a twelve book series so they're doing a, I can't remember which one out of that series, but there are so many, seems like so many production companies, that's why we see so many sequels, there's such a large fan base for it, how can we best build on something that already exists, we've taken a risk on something new, you know.

GITTER: Well, you know, that's accurate, that's a mistake you don't want to make, is doing it for the sake of doing it, you still have to do it right.

COLE: Right. Well I've kept you probably longer than you wanted to,

GITTER: That's all right.

COLE: But I just wanted to know if there are any follow up questions if I can contact you again.

GITTER: Absolutely, not a problem.
COLE: And then do you have any contacts with maybe Bryan or maybe Michael (de Paul ?), Edgar or anything like that? Could you put in a word for me if I contacted them?

GITTER: Absolutely.

COLE: That would be greatly appreciated. I would like to kind of stick to one or two films and this one struck me as one that is highly fan-interactive and those kind of things too.

GITTER: Not a problem.

COLE: And I'll talk to Bonnie about that and that would be great if I could get a copy of the series to look at.

GITTER: Yeah, and if not, what I have does Bonnie have your, if not, I'll have bonnie call you.

COLE: Ok.

GITTER: And if not I'll get your address and get you the books.
COLE: Ok and thank you so much, it's been great talking to you.

GITTER: Not a problem. It's my pleasure, glad to hear everything is ok with the family, too.

COLE: Ok, thank you so much, I'll give you a copy of this when I'm done with it, I'll send it to Bonnie too.

GITTER: Greatly appreciate it Jason. Thank you so much.
COLE: Thank you so much

GITTER: Take care, bye.

COLE: Bye.

September 19, 2011
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Ted Hope

COLE: Hi Ted. This is Jason Cole. Sorry I had a couple students walk in just as I sent that text to you. Talking about my dissertation, I sent you a review a long time ago about what I'm doing. I talked to Christine Walker about American Splendor because originally what I set out to look at was comic book films because they have a built in audience that they're working with and in my opinion it's such an easy target to work with. They can say, we've already got this fan base that loves this and we can just make a film about it. I started out with the Spiderman films because an alum from my school here, Grant Curtis, worked with Sam Ramey on the Spiderman films. Got some interviews with him. I was hitting some dead ends, so I expanded it to any kind of film really that dealt with comic books or graphic novels and things like that. I've talked to Eric Gitter from Scott Pilgrim and then I talked to Christine about American Splendor. She said the things

we were talking about were all right up your alley and that I really needed to talk to you. That's the long story of how I got in contact with you. Just looking at how the producers of films are in the kind of the redefinition of the producer really. I've seen that you have that kind of stuff on your blog. I watched a lot of your video and read a lot of your blog entries and things like that.

HOPE: Well, thank you. I hope it was helpful.

COLE: Yeah, it is. It's really interesting stuff. All the things you talk about are pretty much in agreement with kind of what I'm going along with. Interestingly enough, the producers that responded to me most rapidly are the independent film producers. I don't know if that's because…I don't really know the reason for that. I guess they'll give me the time of day, at least.

HOPE: I would say that it's more so unfocused that studio work has always been one of where your knowledge, your exclusive knowledge, is your power…who you know, what you control. It's all about control and as a result people are much more closed with information; whereas, with independent work you're dealing with smaller audiences. You're much more dependent on working together to get the word out and meet people and engage them on a deeper level. It's just a different mentality. One much more sharing than there is on the studio side.

COLE: Yeah, and I think that might be it, too, because even with Grant Curtis, that I have somewhat of a familiarity with, we've met before and things like that, as soon as I started poking into the areas of "Well, on your official websites, what kind of data are you collecting on visitors and those kinds of things?"

HOPE: Right.

COLE: I started to get shut down pretty quick.

HOPE: The funny thing is with everything, particularly in the film business; more important than the reality is the perception. People's income level is much more based in perception than hard facts and the ability to get improvement made is much more perception based than reality. Some say that was true of American Splendor and how it got off the ground. In that, Harvey was an idol of mine. Now

somebody who really had emotionally moved me like that. I just really loved what he was doing with his work. And I always thought, "Wow. Wouldn't it be great to make a movie about him and his work?" I had the good fortune of having a relationship with Dean Hatfield who is a graphic novelist and who is a huge fan of Harvey and who has gotten the opportunity to do a piece for Harvey. He told Joyce Brabner, Harvey's wife, of my interest. One day Joyce called me and we worked out a deal to collaborate to try get a movie made. I knew this to be a difficult uphill battle. Harvey wrote a script which I didn't think was producible, initially, and once I found Bob Pulcini and Shari Berman and I saw they were the right choice. I had also met the executive at HBO who ultimately made the film happen. I had the time to kind of put together a whole package. So one of the things that after she had met Bob and Shari, Maude Madler's executive producer, she met Maude and Shari and really loved them and loved their pitch. It was the subject matter that she wanted to deal with and also HBO had decided it was important for them to go to. Together we had to conspire on how to get it through the HBO system. She encouraged me and I went and put together a marketing book whose goal really was to produce three inches of material on Harvey's audience.

COLE: Right.

HOPE: Basically, it ranged from everything to alternative comic web site or fan site they could find to jazz music to Cleveland to working class. I put together a huge book, and kind of said these are all the different audiences Harvey has. I was three inches because we wanted to have a lot of paper so you could throw it down on somebody's desk and have it make a resounding sound. We did that, and Maude brought it in to HBO. Her passion, their prior knowledge of this a venue of something they wanted to explore story wise, and the sound that marketing book made was really the deciding factor. In HBO, part of their corporate environment, it that when they green light a project before they start shooting, they have a meeting of the heads of department to review all the different decisions. We weren't in Los Angeles. They had us through video conferencing. When we saw in the conference room in LA, sitting in front of the 33 participants was this marketing book that we had made, our cover had taken off and the HBO cover had been put down. But it was, again,

just the exception that we were able to show that it was a huge potential audience for Harvey.

COLE: Right

HOPE: The reality was that he was an underground comic book writer. You know, a top issue of American Splendor sold maybe four thousand copies. There's never been a huge audience for that kind of stuff. Nothing helped Harvey's audience grow as much as that movie did. That movie really kind of brought his life together. You have to kind of go past, HBO was a very artist friendly, film maker friendly environment. One of the many reasons why I think comic books and other cross class story telling methods have caught on in vogue. But I think none of them is as resonant or as core to the issue of the popularity of comics in the film as simple cover you're ass mentality. What is the film industry? The film industry is about people keeping their jobs. That's the main thing.

COLE: Right. The same thing with sequels, too.

HOPE: Yeah, as long as it is justifiable, as long as there is enough evidence to say this is a wise business decision, that's what people love. They're not falling in love with it because of the passion for the story, they're falling in love with it because they can say, "Look, it already worked in this one medium, so we can go ahead and do it in our medium." I think that's one of the main things, along with the fact that there is a rich culture. What they want is to more and more be able to visualize what the movie is. They ask filmmakers of fairly large renown to go and shoot stuff not as a screen test, but to really shoot scenes with the actors that they want to cast. They want them to do more and more of the work, and I think that's one of the reasons comic books have an appeal. It allows somebody to see what those images are.

COLE: Basically, story boards…

HOPE: Yes, exactly. As a sales tool, now, when I have a new project that has a pulp core to it, one of the things that we have a new process in mind is to rose out twelve pages of a graphic novel comic book pulled from the script. Maybe one day, we'll make a novel out of it. We already have a short story that it was made from, or novel that is actually a serialize collection that later became a novel.

Then we added to the novel pages because it just gives people that much more confidence about the potential of the film. I'm imagining tons of young executives using that as the reason for being. Hey, it worked as a comic book. And also, the fact is, executives have to read so many new properties every week. It's a lot easier to read a comic book than it is to read a script.

COLE: Right

HOPE: It reminds me just as an interesting side note, as I was starting out in the business, one of the jobs I had was as a script reader. Because my hair was spikey and my clothes were ripped, one company had me read all the punk rocker that came in. At the time, there were five or six competing Sid and Nancy scripts that were all trying to get made.

COLE: I remember I read your blog about that with the dwarf bowling.

HOPE: Yeah, yeah. That was a whole other issue, but absolutely. The thing that is interesting is with Sid and Nancy, the script that got made had four pages of comic book panels that he drew himself. Not storyboard, but really kind of comic book panels that captured the DIY punk rock spirit that the movie had a real feel for. As a script reader, out of all of the different projects, this one really popped because he had the comic book panels there.

COLE: Yes, that's something that really fascinates me. The A Team movies…all these things where they have a built in audience, where they say, "Oh, millions of people love this. It's going to a slam-dunk kind of a sell. I'm also interested in your opinion of the changing role of the producer. You've been involved in a lot of films over the years. I'm just kind of curious to see how your job has changed. Five, ten, fifteen years ago – what were you doing as compared to what you're doing now as far as audience interaction goes? What kind of things are you having to do with your audience?

HOPE: Well, there are many different ways to look at what an audience or a film is. As a producer, I look at what the stages of my audience are. In some ways, my first audience is the agency and the actor and how do I engage

them and convince them that this is the project that they want to participate in. To that degree, I try to make sure that all of my roles are cast-able and appealing which means I work on the script to make sure the characters have a good arc. They have scenes where you understand that transformation of character can take place. Sometimes you have to adapt the script so that information comes across in a clear fashion for the actor and the reader than it would otherwise. The screenwriter might feel it is more artistic to be subtle. I have to kind of push to make sure that information is conveyed on the page. Sometimes, you go as far, frankly, as exaggerating scenes and adding a little so that the actor will do it even though you don't ultimately think it will make it into the final movie. You have to exaggerate it. You know, sometimes the actor will take that and do even more with it so that it is in the movie. I wouldn't go so far as to call it deceitful, but like okay we are giving you the opportunity to do the best you can with this role. You can go beyond what we think will be in the final product, but here is your opportunity. Just as I do for the actor, I then have to do for the financier. Conceptualizing what the movie is, what your hopes are and help them see what it is. Sometimes, it is "how do I help them see this in a greater way?" Also as a producer, I have to take into account the potential market for the film. One of the things I am trying to do is demonstrate how large the audience is for my movie or demonstrate how large the audience is for the actors in the movie. So, a movie like Super, which I made, is not based on comic books but is a super hero film. t was very appealing to the financiers and the distributors that Rainn Wilson had over two million twitter followers. It indicated he had a very big following that he was engaged with. It was appealing to them that the director, who was not particularly well known, had engaged in things other than filmmaking. He had written blog posts that had over a million hits. He had done webisodes that had been watched a million times. All those hits and audience engagement were very helpful in getting the movie made and ultimately gave the movie seed. And then I have to do the same thing, even after we make the movie or as we're making the movie, to involve the audience early - you know, get some form of participation. With Super, we had a very active twitter group that the cast and the crew all participated in. That develops a large following. All of that is very much tracked by the industry contributors. This time last year, we had premiered Super at the Toronto Film Festival, and it

was the first film to sell. We sold it to North American Distributor for much more than we anticipated. I think some of it was because they all felt it was this large audience already within the story world that we were creating.

COLE: Right

HOPE: So, I'm doing that while I'm in production. At the same time, I worked really hard to develop my own audience. Fans are really film-centric, but I have my blog and based on my own desire to save the industry, I feel there is responsible behavior in what it is to be a producer. We have to give back to our community. We have to get people to conspire and look up to take responsibility for their work. That is the method, but it is also about gaining an audience.

COLE: I picked up a copy of the fans, friends and followers.

HOPE: Yeah, that is helpful. You know, it doesn't catch your eye, but I do think it does speak to new facets that we have to find. In a way, it helps me and my movies the fact that through twitter I have a broadcast network of 13,000 people now. It's not the two million that Rainn has, but in term of the sites that measure social media input on the subject of independent film. You know, I'm like the top ranked person these days. It gives me information not so much on my movies, but on the discussion of movies as a whole. That's a positive approach, something that I can bring to the table. I think as we adapt our world to one of super abundance, how do people engage in movies when so many each year are made. So many movies are available at any time. It's not who can tell the story the best, not who can put together the best cast and package, it's really all the different things that we can add to it. Producers who are more a marketer of movies than they are a creative generator of movies, I think will start to look at movies that bring their own audience to the equation. It is often how I describe the transformation of what a producer's job is. In the beginning, I was asked to make movies well. And then I was asked to have other movies – how could I become a consistent buyer. I had to have my own projects. I couldn't just have them brought out by other people. And then I was asked to really be able to package those projects in a full way, bringing the actors to it and the

directors to it. And then I was asked to bring my own material, package it well, produce it well, package it well, but also bring my own financing. Then I was asked to make predictions about how my movie would do well, you know with all of the financing. How much did I expect as a return on all the different levels. And then, I was asked to bring a level of distribution to the equation. As a producer, I had to find the material, produce it well, package it, bring the money to it, I had to bring the distribution. And now, I have to bring some of the audience to it as well. It's all of that. Unfortunately, it all occurs at the same time the downward economic pressure comes out. You have to do more, and make less for doing it, so there is less of a financial incentive for doing it. The difficulty is that people know that I make a movie for the love of that film so they offer less money because they think I'll do it.

COLE: It is interesting that you are doing that. I actually have in front of me on the screen here the blog entry you did titled, Producer of Marketing Distribution, pulled up.

HOPE: I don't actually like that title. I haven't met anyone that in this producer marketer distributor title that is worthy of the title of producer. I do think that somebody that does that work is a very necessary part of the scene now. For independent films, what becomes a big challenge is that we operate during this time of abundance and economic crisis and ever increasing pay for the multitude of jobs that we do. I have gained a lot of experience. I am at the top of my game in story telling, but at the same time, that's not where I am valued most by the industry anymore. They seem to not want me for the quality I can bring to the table, which is what I feel that I do. They want me for the quantity that I bring. They want me to keep delivering movies on a regular basis, but they don't care about the quality of what I do. It used to be, if you made a really good film really well, you would make more money. It's not the case anymore that I make more money for making a better movie. They just want me to keep delivering the movies on a regular basis.

COLE: Do you think part of your appeal is that you have the ability to reach a large audience? So do you think they think if they bring in Ted Hope, they're going to have a money making kind of thing?

HOPE: I wish. They first look for the movie that is truly interesting amongst all the other films….will they have to pay more money for that one? Then they get to all the films that they think are good movies and that there's a good audience for. They say, "We're only going to pay X dollars for it." When they come down to say they have four movies, and they can only acquire two for a low price. Everyone looks through a checklist to see what's the added value that each of these films has. If we supply a large group of movies, they say, "Oh, that's good. They have a large supply. Let's do it." Then you have to see if there's a hot actor or a hot producer that will do it. Then they say, "Does anyone bring an audience with them? Oh, yes, they do." So, it's more not dropping by the wayside, as opposed to you making it first to some of these scripts.

COLE: I was going to ask you too, something that Christine talked about, is working with HBO. But she said you'd had some experience with some of the larger studios. I looked but I didn't see any on the IMDB that credit the Hulk. Were you involved with the Incredible Hulk?

HOPE: It was my company that was involved with it, but it was getting made at the same time as we were making American Splendor. I felt much more connected to American Splendor on a personal level. If I was interested in doing the Hulk, the first thing that came out was I willing to sign a two year contract of exclusivity. That wasn't something I was willing to do for them. My business partner at the time, James Schamus, wrote the screenplay and produced the film.

COLE: I was interested in that one but I know there was a lot of fan controversy with that one. Especially details like his purple pants and those kinds of things, minute details that the fans can really influence the filmmakers with high levels of interactivity. You were talking about the Twittering. Talking to Eric Gitter about Edgar Wright and how he constantly is blogging and posting pictures from the set.

HOPE: He was really great about that. We took Super to Comicon last July. We were the only independent film, well I guess there were two independent films, but we were the only un-acquired independent film that was in the main halls of presentation. There was that movie "Skylight" that had already been bought by Universal. Because of all

the twitter and everything that was going on with Edgar, everyone thought that would be the best movie of his time, but it didn't connect with an audience outside of his floor base. Ultimately, it's not like Scott Pilgrim was known in the way super hero comics are known, but yet you look at the swift of it, Thor was one of the less successful titles for Marvel. Green Lantern was very successful for DC, and yet Thor far surpassed it. Maybe because of the superior storytelling? Even with that fan base on a studio project, at the end of the day, no marketing amount of muscle aside, it really kind of comes down to who makes the better movie.

COLE: So with your experience, not necessarily on just any film like even your more current films. Working with studios, I know you do more independent things. How has that changed over time working with studios?

HOPE: I haven't had that much. Even working with the corporate distributors, all of my movies have benefitted when I had studio involvement. All my experience shows, they only got involved when they knew they wanted to take a movie I was going to make. Ultimately, they wanted to direct these films. I might resent the kind of cover your ass risky behavior that comes with studio production, but because you're spending money to prevent problems before they occur. When you are successful in that experience you spend a lot of money and never have the problems. Whereas, with independent films I am totally confident that all my money is up on the screen. Now, I may have some problems that are difficult to deal with but I am not trying to prevent them and am not focused on preventative care. The fact is, other than that waste of money, well the studios are wasting money, the benefit is that you are in collaboration with somebody. Making a film independently, I have to do all the tasks. I don't have anyone to shoulder the load with me. Invariably, all my films are made at a price point below the budget. It is a number I can make movies for, and in order to get it made, we end up taking that money. The films that have more studio involvement means I have more people thinking about how to make it better. Really the job becomes more of protecting that original vision, the integrity of the story, in a way that I don't have to focus on in independent films. As a result of all the minds and cash that is pushed out on the studio side, we consider things we would not otherwise have considered. Certainly with the film American Splendor, we never would have achieved the vision of that film without

HBO behind us in every which way. HBO was willing for us to proceed without having all the clearance in place from David Letterman. HBO was willing for us to proceed with the animation that was in the film. HBO was willing for us to proceed regardless of the type of music we had in the film. They had the vision that when we delivered the cut and told them what we wanted to do for a title sequence, the animation, the footage that we couldn't clear, and the music sets we wanted in the film, they got the conditional funding to do that. How we produced that movie in a pure private independent equity kind of way, it never would have achieved the kind of resonance that it ultimately did. We benefitted. Now that feels like an independent film, but it only could have been made with the corporate cultural support that HBO gave us.

COLE: That's pretty fascinating.

HOPE: I unfortunately, Jason have to go to another meeting. Do you have one more quick question?

COLE: Could we follow up at another time?

HOPE: My next few weeks are crazy and I don't know what your deadline is.

COLE: I'd like to talk about the opportunity to do some writing for you. My last question might be something like, "Are you a dying breed with independent producers with independent film kind of waning. How does a person train to be something like what you are without the system like we used to have?

HOPE: Right. I think that the one thing to say about independent films, they have always been in constant flux. There are periods of stability that come along. Things keep changing. Part of the challenge is how to deliver good stories, good production value, on an ever decreasing budget. Along with recognizing that the promise that is there in those that have the ability to actually build communities, there's tremendous potential and value that will come from doing that. I've had my opportunity. One of the reasons I've been able to produce so many films, I came along at time that the industry changed and was unwilling to recognize that. Both technology and audiences evolve at a faster rate than industrial practice. As a result, for those that actually have their ear to the

ground and are looking at changes in technology and are willing to build toward that, they have a much stronger foundation for when the industry catches up to it. We are in that type of transition now where technology and audiences have evolved yet we're still making movies the same way. The Hollywood model of today is really exclusively toward ten fold and family films. That's what that business is with a huge focus on international potential. As a result, we will keep starving audiences for more sophisticated content that speaks to them in a more direct way. Producers with a focus on that niche audience that know how to move them from consumers to active participants in an engaged community, there's a real tremendous opportunity in front of them. Those that have that and build that, will be a supply of new content that forever grows in ambition and scale on a regular basis. We're just moving into that now.

COLE: Well, I'll let you go. I know you have a meeting. Thanks so much for your time.

HOPE: Yes, Jason. You're welcome. Good luck.

August 22, 2013
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Tim Kirk

KIRK: Hello

COLE: Hello, is this Tim?

KIRK: Yes it is

COLE: Hey this is Jason Cole

KIRK: Hey Jason How you doin'?

COLE: Good! You still got some time to talk today?

KIRK: I sure do!

COLE: Not sure if it was clear what I'm doing or not, but I'm trying to finish my Ph.D. in film and media studies at the University of Kansas, and my project I'm working on is looking at what it means an independent filmmaker in today's society. Or, at least give a better definition of

what that means to work independently in the film industry. Dealing with anything from financing, to anything inbetween.

KIRK: Got it

COLE: I enjoyed your film. Just wondering if you could tell me how you came to work on the film. What was the genesis of the whole project?

KIRK: The project started with something I read online about *the Shining* and I shared it with my friend Rodney who's the director. And we started talking about it and trying to flesh it out, we decided we'd make a feature out of it. So, we tried to pitch it around to a couple of companies who had expressed interest in working with one or the other of us. We were unable to get funding, so we just started doing it ourselves. We just did it out of pocket and kept it very low budget, for the period we working on it. Which is possible to do because we weren't shooting a lot, we were mostly repurposing the footage. And then, once we got into Sundance, I did a small Kickstarter for like five-thousand dollars to help us pay for some post production for the picture. Everyone else including composers and stuff worked on a percentage basis of the final film.

COLE: Cool. So, can you tell me more about the financing. Did you just wrack it up on credit cards?

KIRK: Yeah, well, it was just our own out of pocket. We're talking about, a very small amount of money. It was more about time. We bought a couple of mid-range audio recorders which we mail to our interviewees, with a prepaid Fedex box to send it back and then we would call them and do the interview over the telephone with them talking into the microphone. So, that cut down on the cost of having to fly to New York or Texas or Colorado or many of the other places these people were scattered all over the country. So, that was one cost. The rest was really just time. Rodney had a pretty good home editing system from other gigs that he'd done. And so, not until we were accepted to Sundance that's when some real hard costs started to kick in.

COLE: I wondered when watching if you'd shot video and then decided to use the audio to build suspense. But, you planned to use just the audio from the very start?

KIRK: Yeah, Rodney had done a short in the same style, which I really liked and was interested in using that process again, so that short is what made me think this project would be a good one for him. And when I was looking for projects, I was looking for stuff, I'm usually looking for things that are a little more mainstream that I can pitch. In this case I really went looking for something that could be done, that was a little more cutting edge and that could be done a little more cheaply. Outside of the sort of normal circuit.

COLE: Yeah, that's ingenious using all the footage from other films, it's still really high quality image, but a low cost on your end. I'm not sure how much all the licensing cost you but…

KIRK: Well, we did two things. First of all we were able to use most of the footage under fair use, are you familiar with that?

COLE: Is it that if you're clips are under a certain amount of time, like thirty seconds you can use them?

KIRK: That's part of it, it's a broader concept which is, if the footage or works of art that have entered into popular culture are controlled by the people who own them, then the owners can dictate whatever discussion that there's going to be about them on the public sphere. So, for example if we had to license all this footage from Warner Brothers they'd want to see a cut, they could decide they like our approach, they don't think this discussion should be had about their film, then that would be the end of our film. I'm just saying this is a common thing, fair use is a common… If it's a critical analysis of something or a parody of something that's entered our popular culture in a significant way, then it can be used under fair use, and you don't have to get permission from the owners of the footage.

COLE: Hmm, that's interesting, that would have been useful when I was teaching because I always had students who were trying to use clips of things in their work.

KIRK: There are two pioneers in this field if you're interested in following up on it. On the entertainment front it's a guy named Michael McDonald and he's written a number of books about it, he's really a big deal

entertainment lawyer here in Hollywood, and he was our lawyer on this film. And he worked with us on the cheaper side, because he felt like it was kind of a landmark film dealing with what he does. So that was great. The other guy is more on the bigger picture, Lawrence Lessig. Have you seen any of his Youtube or Vimeo videos where he talks about this kind of stuff?

COLE: I've read some of Lessig's work, I guess I never thought to look for videos…

KIRK: Yeah, these are presentations he does for his classes and then he puts them online.

COLE: I should have figured he'd have put out there… since he's one of the founders of the Creative Commons movement

KIRK: Yeah, Yeah

COLE: Don't let me forget, before we're done I want to ask you about your puppet making.

KIRK: Oh, cool, you like puppets?

COLE: I like animation, puppet animation. I call it puppet animation, everyone else calls it stop motion… Anyway, back on topic, you said you'd found these people discussing these theories in a forum online. Was this a place you'd stumbled upon, or did you have your own theories were discussing?

KIRK: Well, we found one theory which was the moon landing theory, and we thought maybe if we could find one or two more there might be a short here, and then we found tons and tons and at one point we thought we were going to be the compendium of everything out there, but that wasn't going to work. It was more interesting to let people talk for a while and let them develop their idea so we narrowed it down to the five people. One thing I wanted to say about the footage, some of it was used under fair use, but some of it we did have to license. So there are some clips in there that we could not use, for example Faust or the footage from the Italian film *Demons* that we used for the people in the movie theatre. That was all stuff we had to track down the owners and license.

COLE: You said you did a small Kickstarter? When did that take place? You said it was getting ready for Sundance, I'm guessing that was for enlargement or duplication?

KIRK: It was around December, because they let you know at the end of November. So I put that together, and that paid for the sound mix, and some post production work and also getting it onto the physical formats we needed to have it play and be digitally protected from duplication.

COLE: You said you are usually looking for projects that are more mainstream?

KIRK: Yeah, sometimes

COLE: So as far as the audience for this film, were you thinking when you were making it 'we've got all these people who like *the Shining*,' was that something you were consciously thinking about?

KIRK: Well, it was really in the case it was a project that we really wanted to do, and then as we were doing it we kept reassuring ourselves that oh, there's probably other people who'd be as passionate as we are about this. And in this case we turned out to be right.

COLE: As far as financially, were you able to make your money back? Were you financially successful?

KIRK: Yeah, we were because we were able to sell it. North American rights basically paid for us to finish the film and then the foreign sales pretty much all went to us. So, that's how we made a profit.

COLE: Would you reveal how much in total it's made, or generated?

KIRK: I can't really.

COLE: Oh, okay. One of the things I'm trying to figure out for independents if there's a line for profits or amount spent… What is it that makes a filmmaker independent?

KIRK: One thing that might be of interest to you is that the writer's guild and director's guild have their own definitions of what's called a low budget or independent film. So if you're an actress, and you're going to go work

on a Transformers movie, there's X amount that's your minimum daily rate, then if you an actress and you're going to shoot on a short for a film festival, then there's a smaller daily rate. That goes for writers, directors and for everybody else. So that might be kind of interesting to see where the unions in negotiation with the studios where they've drawn the line on independent on low budget etc. Then I would say in reality, it can be much less. Films can be made for a lot less money than you'd expect.

COLE: Some people feel like it's more the spirit, or the creative control over the final product…

KIRK: Yeah, I agree, I agree

COLE: As far as distribution goes, can you tell me more about that process? Once it was picked up, or even when you first started the film what were your hopes and dreams for distribution and then what actually happened and how did it get distributed?

KIRK: Yeah, our hopes and dreams were pretty small. We kind of thought it'd be great if it played a film festival, if not we could show it at local art house or whatever and invite all our friends. But we approached by a couple of sales people when we got into Sundance, and this guy Andrew Hurwitz that we went with was the most passionate when he watched our film. I mean, he really had some good ideas and he was really appreciative of the film he really understood it. So it was able to sell it at Sundance for North American rights and subsequently we went to Cannes and we sold to France and England there. And he's continued to work on it and sold it to Japan, Italy, and German and some TV rights… Spain and Australian TV. So that's how that process worked.

COLE: What about Netflix? Did he help set that up for you too?

KIRK: North American Netflix was part of our deal with IFC so they've done all that. But, we're playing on Netflix in the Netherlands, and he negotiated that deal. We're also on iTunes in North America, and that again is controlled by IFC, but then internationally we have those rights and we've been rolling those out.

COLE: Any other distribution? Any self distribution?

KIRK: In the territories we didn't sell, we're actually approaching that with Youtube. We haven't decided to do any self distribution on DVD or whatever. It's also playing a lot of film festivals, and its gotten a lot of press which has been able to generate a lot of sales without a lot of advertising, which wasn't a part of our model but it was a part of uhh, an important part of our sales of individual units.

COLE: You referred to Rodney as the director and you're listed as the producer. So, what kind of things were you responsible for handling as the producer of the film?

KIRK: Well, creatively we did research together, we discussed selecting films the year before we started making it. He would do the interviews, but I'd listen to them and then make notes with suggestions about stuff I thought was resonant and should be included in the film. I would listen to the early audio tests and then every stage from the start of pulling clips from the films. When we finally kind of created a rough cut, we spent a lot of time rearranging, them and rearranging them, and we had a test screening where we had some really good feedback and kind of restructured and cut a few things based on that. And you know I met with the musicians and the composer… and for the physical production I was often trying to find a studio to shoot something or work out a way to borrow a camera or rent something on the cheap. The second hand I went through every contract on everything, and worked very closely with the sales agent on every deal. When it came to delivery, which is giving each, each distributor needs various physical formats, but they also need a whole array of paperwork, licensing agreements, contracts with their people. And everybody wants a different thing, each country, each distributor. So, that was kind of kind of a drawn out process, working that out, trying to determine how much they wanted, how much I was willing to give, many compromises and then fulfilling for them what they need. That was a lot of the second half of my responsibilities on this thing.

COLE: How did you hook up with your sales rep?

KIRK: HEEeeee… Heeee… uhhh… he had a relationship with one of the programmers at Sundance and they knew what kind of stuff he liked and what he was drawn towards, and when this

film was announced they told him 'Andrew this might be something you'd be interested in.' So, he followed up with us and that's how we met him.

COLE: I was just curious because it sounded like he was a pretty big part of making this a success. But, it also sounds like you're pretty savvy as far as contracts and knowing the business side of Hollywood.

KIRK: I gotta say I learned a lot doing it. I just kind of jumped in and said, okay well I'm going to do it. And then I learned how to do it by doing it. One other thing that I think is cool about this project and a thing a I learned besides just jump in and do it, is that sometimes you go into a project and you don't have all the essential elements. Going in we didn't have a relationship with the composers that ended up doing the music, and the music is a huge part of what makes this film effective. And, we didn't have a sales agent, and all these different people; we didn't know the lawyer that we would need, we had a good idea that what we were doing was fair use but we didn't know a lawyer that we could go to that could really help us with this. But all these people kind of came into our lives at the right time and helped propel the project. So, that's kind of a take-away for me from this project, was just if you feel really passionate about something and you think it might reach an audience it's not a bad idea to just get started and the people you need might just show up.

COLE: It sounds like they found you too.

KIRK: Hey Jason, I'm really enjoying our conversation but I'm going to have to go, I have to pick up my daughter from school.

COLE: Ok, no problem.

KIRK: Are you in Lawrence?

COLE: I actually work in Topeka for Ogden Publicaitons. We publish Mother Earth News, Grit, a lot of rural titles, but we also do UTNE Reader. I do all the video work for us here.

KIRK: Oh, cool. So do you ever do much with the animation?

COLE: I've done some but it's been a while. I've been so focused on this project and my job and family.

KIRK: Man, that's a lot to be doing a dissertation, having a full time job and being a father… Umm, the puppet stuff I've done has always just been rod puppets and not animation.

COLE: Yeah, a lot of the puppet stuff is hard because of all the armature work, I'd like to do more with ball and socket armatures…

KIRK: Yeah, it's a lot of fun doing puppets. I'm looking forward to being able to work more with my daughter when she gets a little older, and we can maybe work on some puppet projects.

COLE: Do you use latex foam or what do you make the puppets from?

KIRK: I use mainly the type of clay you bake, and then build up the bodies with foam or fabric or whatever I have available.

COLE: Yeah. I had hooked up with some artists who were making foam injected puppets, and then painting them. So I learned how to make silicone molds really simply and cheaply by using 100% silicone caulk.

KIRK: Oh, wow, that's really cool…

COLE: Well, okay, I can let you go if you need to. Would it be okay if I need to, to contact you again?

KIRK: Oh, absolutely, that'd be awesome, no problem at all.

COLE: Great well, maybe we'll talk again.

KIRK: That'd be great, good luck with everything, I enjoyed talking to ya.

COLE: Yeah, you too. Thanks Tim.

KIRK: No problem, talk to you soon, bye.

COLE: Bye.

June 10, 2008
Interviewer: Jason Cole

Interviewee: Stan Lee

Thank you for calling POW! Entertainment if you know your party's ex-…[beep]

Mike: Stan Lee's office.

Jason: Hi, is this Mike?

Mike: This is.

Jason: Hi, this is Jason Cole from the University of Kansas.

Mike: Here to talk about Stan and his relationship with his fans. Okay, one moment.

Jason: Okay. Thank you.

Mike: And it's Jason, right?

Jason: That's correct.

Mike: One moment.

[Hold music playing]

LEE: Hey, Jason?

COLE: Hey! Is this Mr. Lee?

LEE: Yeah, tell me all about it!

COLE: Okay. Well, first um, I just want to say thanks for granting me this interview. And, um, I'm a little bit nervous talking to you it's kind of…

LEE: And well you should be! (Laughs)

COLE: (Laughs) Yeah, it's a real honor speaking with you Sir.

LEE: Thank you.

COLE: And um, as you know, I don't know if Mike told you or not, but I'm a doctoral student here at the University of Kansas and I'm working on my dissertation on the topic of how media producers are interacting with their fans.

LEE: I see.

COLE: And I know that you have had a long career of dealing with fans going back to the things of the Merry Marvel Marching Society and F.O.O.M.

LEE: Yeah, yeah.

COLE: And things like that, so you were somebody who I really wanted to talk to. And I guess first of all, what would you say, how would you, how have fans changed over the course of your career?

LEE: Well, they haven't changed and, except in the sense as far as Marvel is concerned. When we first started with Marvel in the sixties, they were very young. And as the years went by they got older and older and now most of Marvel's fans are adults. We still seem to be lucky enough to have young fans but we have just as many who are grown-up people, which is kind of nice. But as far as their enthusiasm or their love for the comics of these kind of stories and so forth, I don't see much change.

COLE: Right. Yeah, I'm especially interested in um, how fans have kind of moved along with different types of media. One of the, I'm looking at the Spiderman films, the series especially. But I'm interested in all fans. But that's where my main interest is. And I have a contact, I don't know if you know, Grant Curtis?

LEE: Oh yes. He's a producer.

COLE: Right, he's one of the producers for the films. And so I'm going to be, I have a, I've been in contact with him and trying to get a hold of him and…

LEE: Give him my regards when you talk to him.

COLE: I will. And um, so anyways, but I don't know one of the things with the, with the research and stuff on fans is it's not really clear what a fan is. Could you define what you think a fan is? Like what you think a fan…

LEE: Well, that's an interesting question. I never thought about it. I just took it for granted. There are some, some things you take for granted (laughs) without delving into

it but, so I'll have to think it through now. I would say that a fan is somebody who enjoys something very much. Whether it's a sport or a type of movie or a type of book or whatever and is enthusiastic about it, cares for it, and will try to see it or participate in it, whatever the thing may be, as often as he or she can.

COLE: Right. Um, so I guess…

LEE: Just call me Webster.

COLE: (Laughs) Okay, uh, thank you, Mr. Webster.

LEE: (Laughs)

COLE: I guess, so going from that, um, you said that you thought that maybe they participated. I know I'm aware of some of the fans who really participate a lot. Going back in history, like Roy Thomas, who became, who went from running a fanzine to becoming an employee of Marvel, but how common do you think it is for fans to work their way into employment?

LEE: Oh, not common at all. It happens very rarely because there are millions of fans and there are only a few dozen people being employed.

COLE: Right. Um, so you don't think that, see one of the things that I've been looking at too is like with the Internet being such an avenue for distribution and creativity and things like that, I didn't know…

LEE: Well, the Internet is going to change everything. It's going to open everything up. Now people who are fans of movies, lets say, they can practically shoot their own little movie and put it on the Internet. Suddenly, people who are fans of something can become the something that they're fans of or can produce something that they're fans of. Now it's a little bit difficult if you're the fan of a baseball team to translate that to the Internet I guess. But if you're a fan of movies, or comics, or television where that type of thing, then I would imagine. Well we know there are so many people already who photograph themselves, they go on YouTube, and they have their little, their little video running. So, yeah the Internet is making it a lot easier for people to be a part of whatever they care about, in many cases.

COLE: Right, do you think that in, um, in anyway, it like challenges the established like um, the big players in any way? I mean they're, in any way, I guess as far as like, do you think it's a threat to any of the, the established media companies that are out there?

LEE: I don't know that it's a threat. It's um, it may be a great farm system for those big companies to find, to discover talent and hire them. But um, I think that the kind, the person who watches some little video on YouTube, is still gonna want to go to the movies and see Iron Man or the Hulk or Spiderman when it's a big movie.

COLE: Right, yeah definitely. Um, what do you think about, I don't know, well I guess I'll go to this, since, as a producer of the films you know of Iron Man, and the Hulk, and Spiderman and all of those, what, um, what kind of things do you do exactly with the films? Are you there for creative support or how, what is your…

LEE: Well, I hate to, I hate to disillusion you but I have next to nothing to do with the movies.

COLE: Really?

LEE: I do my little cameo…

COLE: Right.

LEE: …which I love doing.

COLE: Right.

LEE: But, uh, these movies are done by the producers and the, I have the title exec., I'm one of the executive producers but…

COLE: Right.

LEE: …it's more of an honorary title. I really am not involved in the movie. I just, (Laughs) I'm lucky enough I get a lot of credit for them.

COLE: Right. Yeah, um, well with, with your current projects like with POW! Entertainment, things like that, um, I noticed on your site that even, even there you have a

separate section for, for fans and I guess it's really just an address that they can send you fan mail and things like that.

LEE: Yeah.

COLE: What's, what's the importance of cultivating a relationship with your fans?

LEE: Well, I've always done it. I, the big thing is, especially with Marvel years ago, I didn't want to seem as if we just part of a big, cold company. I tried to make the readers feel as though we're all sharing something together that we enjoy and it's kind of a fun thing and that's why I used to write a column called Stan's Soap Box and I used to write the Bull Pen Bulletins and I formed a club called the Merry Marvel Marching Society. I wanted it to be as though we're all getting together and we're enjoying something that that the outside world isn't even aware of… it's our own little private thing. Of course the private thing consisted of millions of readers. And uh, fans are very important because if you can get people interested and involved about the stories you're writing, or the movies you're making or whatever you're doing, then you've succeeded to an extent. But if you're a writer or an artist or an actor or whatever and you don't have any fans, there are no people who, who care about what you are offering to the public, then you haven't really made it yet.

COLE: So, with your fans, I know you probably get a lot of mail like with critiques and suggestions and things like that. How do you maintain, like I guess probably earlier in your career, and even I guess but now too with some of your ventures, how is it possible to maintain your creative authority while at the same time remaining responsive to those fans? You know…

LEE: Well, I've always maintained my creative authority because I've never written specially for fans. My, my theory has always been, I write stories that I feel I would enjoy reading. And you see, because I don't feel any writer can write something for somebody else. Like in, in television, they're always telling you, the network will say, 'Well, our demographics are the sixteen years olds or the twenty-four year olds, write me something for that.'Or the twenty year olds to the thirty three year olds.' I don't know how to do that. I just write something that I

would enjoy and I feel my case is not that unusual. So if it's something I would enjoy reading, there must be a lot of people who would enjoy reading it. And that's really my only guideline, do I think it's good? And if I do think it's good, then I figure, (Laughs) it must be good.

COLE: Right, um, let's see. I guess with-within your career, the fans owe you so much um, is there anything that you feel like you owe to them, other, anything than you haven't already given them?

LEE: You know I think, I don't know that anybody owes anything to anybody. I mean, the fans, um, don't owe me anything (Laughs) and I think the only thing I owe to the public or the fans or whatever you want to call them is the same thing that I owe to myself, and that is to do the best that I can. Because, if I'm not doing my best all the time, to get the fans, I'm not being fair to myself.

COLE: Right.

LEE: But I never forget the fans because it is the nicest feeling in the world when you get a fan letter from somebody who says he or she enjoys what you're doing or when you're walking down the street and somebody recognizes you and comes over and says I just want to thank you for all the enjoyment you've given me. And, I mean, that's a wonderful feeling.

COLE: Right, yeah, that's got to be a really good feeling. Um, I guess as far as so are, so with you personally, do you spend much time using the Internet yourself, personally?

LEE: Oh yes, but mostly for email and to Google things for information. I don't really have time to go to things like YouTube or Myspace or whatever those things are.

COLE: Right, do you ever visit any of like um, the messageboards or anything like that where fans are discussing …

LEE: Only if somebody says to me, 'Hey Stan, you ought to read this one or that one.' But what happens is there are so many of them that if I start going to them, before I turn around, I've spent two or three hours and I haven't done my own writing. (Laughs) See, I have so much writing

to do that I can't afford to do that. Even though it's fun and it's interesting, but I only do it if there's something specific that someone says I ought to look at.

COLE: Right, and one of the things I read, um, I got your biography, or your autobiography, and then also the biography that was written about you. But they mention that um, something about where you're talking about responding to fan letters and one of the things that they said was you always try to be courteous but never try to encourage, repeat like uh…

LEE: I never try to encourage what?

COLE: Never try to encourage like repeated correspondence with a fan or anything like that. You never wanted to have a personal relationship with them.

LEE: Well the only thing is, I would love to but there isn't time.

COLE: Right.

LEE: In fact, my biggest problem now, I-I'm kind of compulsive about responding to things and if somebody sends me an email letter, even if it's somebody I don't know, he's a fan and it's a fairly intelligent letter I feel I owe an answer so I try to send him a little answer. But what happens is, very often the guy figures, that now we're pen pals and I hear from him again…

COLE: Right.

LEE: …and I can't afford that so, it's very difficult. I don't not want, I don't want to not respond to people but I'm always afraid when I do respond then my response will get an answer and then that answer will get an answer. So, that's a big problem.

COLE: I guess along that same note, I mentioned to you that I, I have been in contact with Grant Curtis you know who is the producer with the films but um, I was wondering if you might have names of other producers or anyone who I might be able to talk to in case that connection falls through. Is there anyone in your organization who like you, who deals specifically with the fans or the Internet?

LEE: No, no, just me.

COLE: Just you, really, okay. That's one of the things that really impressed me about the things that I've read about you and the way that you dealt with your fans is that really personal approach so. Um, well, uh, I guess with your, the show, Who Wants to be a Superhero?

LEE: Oh yeah.

COLE: Um, how much of that did you attribute to like fan participation and how much was just…

LEE: Well the fans mostly were the ones who applied to be the superheroes. We had hundreds or maybe thousands of applications. It amazed me. And uh, a lot of the fans enjoyed it and a lot of the fans felt that they didn't enjoy it, you know, like everything else.

COLE: Um, I guess um, kind of another question would be that uh, what, I guess what is your, what are, what are your feelings about the fact that comic books have gone from kind of this low art form when it started out and now here I am now doing a doctoral dissertation about comic book fans and their movement…

LEE: Well I think that's great. I mean, this is something that I would have wanted, it's something I tried to do over the years to upgrade the readership and to make comics more respected in the community than they are now. Mostly the movies have helped uh, create that atmosphere for comics.

COLE: Right, so it's kind of a combination of comic books going into different mediums? Is that…

LEE: Yeah.

COLE: …do you think that helps?

LEE: Yeah, and um, also comic books have now attracted so many fine writers. There are television writers, and movie writers doing comics. That wasn't the case years ago.

COLE: Right.

LEE: Um, Jason I'm afraid I'm going to have to end this thing now. I've got a noon appointment and I'm keeping the guy waiting.

COLE: Okay, well, I appreciated your time very much and just to follow up, if I have any further questions after I talk with Grant, could I possibly contact you again?

LEE: Yeah, I guess so, but keep 'em short.

COLE: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Lee

LEE: Alright, good luck to ya.

COLE: Alright, bye.

LEE: Alright, bye.

October 15, 2011
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Marisa Miller Wolfson

COLE: Give me your name and spell it for me if you could.

MILLER WOLFSON: Sure. Marisa Miller Wolfson

COLE: Ok. Cool. Um, so tell me a little bit about Vegucated. I have a general idea, but just so I can have it for the record.

MILLER WOLFSON: Sure. Sure. So it's a documentary feature about three people who go vegan for 6 weeks and we track their process on tape. And they really had no idea about how farm animals, you know about farm animal industry, and this is where we kinda open their eyes and kinda blow their mind about what happens. And also how it affects the environment, how growing consumption of animal products is affecting public health and so forth all over the world. So they get to see this stuff first hand and so we get to see them responding to this information. And they also have all kinds of on hand experiences where we go to farms and go to different places and they also, you know, capture their own struggles in their vegan journey along the way.

COLE: How did you even begin the journey of wanting to make a film?

MILLER WOLFSON: Well, I used to….I went vegetarian and eventually vegan through film. It was film that actually inspired me to go down this path. I was so blown away by the information stuff that I learned that I thought, Well, we need to get the word out there." So I started doing grass roots screenings of other people's films all around the country… mostly the New York area, but all over the country…actually in Canada, too. And, I saw these people whose lives were changed by the films I showed, and I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to capture this process of you know going from total meat and cheese lover to someone that says, 'Oh my God, you know plant based living is really the best way to go.'?" Sitting in Super Size me in I don't know 2004, and I saw that Morgan Spurlock was detoxed from his experiment with McDonalds on a vegan diet. I thought, well, why do we… that's my template… we're going just have people go vegan for a limited amount of time and track their process just like Morgan tracked his, um, and then just watch the reverse happen where their health improves, etc.

COLE: Um. So what were the specific films that turned you towards vegetarianism then eventually veganism.

MILLER WOLFSON: Well, the one that got me on the road to vegetarian, while I was there picked up a pamphlet that got me to go vegan. But, the film was called We are All Noah. It's old, you wouldn't even see it anymore. It is by the philosopher and academic named Tom Regan, and he had clergy from different faith traditions talking about our moral and ethical responsibility to animals, and I watched it at my Unitarian Universalist Church during coffee hour one Sunday. Someone approached me, would you like to come see this movie called We are All Noah. And I thought, "Oh, that sounds beautiful. Yes, I love animals. I'll go see that. And it was totally not harmless; it was not beautiful. I mean the idea was beautiful, but what they do to animals was not. I remember sitting there and I was like, "I have to go vegetarian because I want no part in this."

COLE: Right. So yesterday you said some things that were really interesting to me about how you are distributing and how you are reaching your audience. Can you tell me about who your audience is and how you are interacting with them.

MILLER WOLFSON: Yeah. Well, we are going to rely largely on our core niche audience, which is the vegetarian and

vegan community. And even though they are niche, there are ten million of them in the US… at least. So, um, wait not 10, sorry...10 or 2? Not sure, anyway there are millions of them. So we're gonna rely on them to basically hold screenings in their communities and their living rooms and reach out to their friends and families cuz that's kinda why I made the film. I made a film that you can show to your friends and family that isn't going to scare them away, that they'll be able to sit through, and guess what, that they'll actually enjoy. They'll laugh, they'll cry, and they'll leave moved and having learned something. So this is the perfect film to show friends and family and we're going to launch this grass roots screening campaign in the new year, but until then we are doing a tour around the country. We don't see a traditional theatrical being a possibility for this film because it is lower budget and so forth, so we're just going to four-wall it. Four-walling it is, you rent out a theater for a night, you make an event of it, you have food, you have local, you know, leaders talk on a panel and get it done that way. But we also have a digital component to the distribution, which is, Film Buff is one of the largest digital entertainment providers in North America, and they found us. They said food docs are hot right now, actually, which is very cool. They are gonna work with us to get it on NetFlix, ITunes, Amazon Instant Watch and other digital portals. We are relying on a very digital savvy, internet really well connected, young demographic. We have a lot of analytics from our trailer showing that older folks are interested too, but it is the younger folks that are tech savvy enough to really spread the word. We raise money through a crowd funding site called KickStarter, and we originally set out to make $20,000 for our release and we ended up making $40,000 because it just spread like wildfire.

COLE: How did it spread?

MILLER WOLFSON: We did contests on Twitter and Facebook also. Repost this, like us on Facebook, repost us and tag us in a comment, and you'll be in a drawing to win a box of vegan sweets or whatever it was, and it worked well. It's cool. It's exciting, and we are kinda just riding this really fun wave. We're in the thick of it. We just had our US premier, and we're about to embark on this tour.

COLE: So your background wasn't really in film?

MILLER WOLFSON: Advocacy

COLE: I see. So how did you even figure out all this KickStarter and crowd sourcing and doing all these community events? Did you have someone helping you with that?

MILLER WOLFSON: I do have someone helping me with that. My co-producer Demetrius… he came on… let me backtrack. So I took this workshop called "Think Outside the Box Office" with John Reece. It is all about thinking outside the traditional box office where film makers have to play every role, like we were talking about, and they have to be very, very active in the marketing distribution way before you get to the marketing and distribution phase. That means connecting with your core group years and years and years in advance, which I have been doing cuz that's what I am – a vegan activist. I brought a co producer on board who's the head of the New York City Vegan Eatup which has 1,500 members. And he's connected to people all over the country. He's an event organizer. He, also, doesn't have experience in film, but I don't think you need experience in film. I think you need experience in marketing. I think you need experience in social networking. Just being tech savvy and plugged in.

COLE: If you could define your role… like, what all have you done? There are so many things….

MILLER WOLFSON: You need to ask me what I haven't done!

COLE: Summarize, like yesterday, you kinda spouted off a list….

MILLER WOLFSON: Yeah, yeah… When I say what I haven't done, I'm not trying to brag. In fact, it is not something to brag about. Usually most filmmakers have a whole team. I think I'm a horrible manager, and I think I'm a little bit of a control freak so I end up doing everything. But, um, yeah… so I write all of our newsletter's content, I wrote all our web content. Um, you know… I produced, co edited, starred in… I didn't shoot it, but I narrarated the film for the release. I'm the one who's going to every one of these tour stops and making stuff happen. I'm working on the t-shirt that Demetrius designed. I mean, Demetrius isn't even a designer. He's an event producer, but now he's a designer suddenly. You have to do everything. And

it's good and it's bad. The good part about being...having your hand in all these cookie jars is that: A- you have, you know, a little bit more control of it, and so you can have consistency across the board. Well, the bad, the bad thing is that you just get stretched so thin and you don't sleep. Like right, I'd say… if you're in the thick of releasing your film, you don't have a weekend or you don't have an evening for probably six months before and six months during a feature release…of this kind of film.

COLE: So, as far as other people… you mentioned Demetrius…ah…who else was involved in the actual production of the film as far as… are there any key entities…

MILLER WOLFSON: Yeah, there was Frank Mataska….I kinda am dividing the producers into….well, Frank was the producer for the pre-production and post, and Demetrius came on for the release. So…Frank was involved with lining up all the shoots and doing the pre-production because he actually had film experience and I didn't. But then he went to the Peace Corp. and then he went to nursing school, cuz mind you I've been working on this for seven years. So people have lives, you know. I didn't, but they did. I had a consulting editor on board who had worked on some oscar nominated films. I had an emmy award winning sound mixer. I had a…the biggest help that I had on this process was the members of the Film Shop which is a filmmakers collective that I belong to in Brooklyn. We meet once a week and we peer review each other's works. These are all kinds of film makers: they're shorts, they do TV, they do broadcast journalism for the web, they do documentaries and stuff. They've all gone to film school. I haven't, but they did. And, they ripped the film to shreds every time I showed parts of it, and thank goodness they did because they really made it so much better. I had another editor, Sarah. I had a great…I had a fantastic animation team…you know, animation and graphics team…and a composer.

COLE: Then, did you have a budget for your film?

MILLER WOLFSON: Initially, when we went into production, no. It was like, hardly anything…you'll see it. When you see the film, it was shot on a shoestring, but fortunately for documentary, if you have good sound that's the most important thing cuz people need to hear it. They have more patience for a crappy picture. We did get some seed money from grants initially and from individual donors… and, uh,

yeah, I've probably raised through grants, I don't know, maybe $12,000, and then through individual donors tens of thousands of dollars and then Kick Starter was $40,000.

COLE: Roughly 60, 75?

MILLER WOLFSON: Yeah, but that doesn't cover my salary… I mean any of my working on it. That's just rough cost to get it done.

COLE: So that's what I was wondering… the people who were working on, they were just volunteering because they were passionate about the subject matter…?

MILLER WOLFSON: Well, yeah. I paid the editor, consulting editor, you know, a few thousand. I paid my editor a little over a thousand, but she was between projects so she could really work on it. She didn't work on it…when I say my editor… she worked on it on and off, she couldn't devote her whole time to it. She helped me with the assembly cut, and then I had an intern who worked on me to get it to the next level. And then I worked with a consulting editor, and then I worked with Film Shop. So it was really people that came out of the woodwork. I mean we didn't pay people a lot of money. Our animators gave us maybe $15,000 worth of work for $5,000.

COLE: You talked a little bit about social networking. You said you came to the table with quite a few followers. How did you work all of the social network….

MILLER WOLFSON: I didn't come with a lot of followers. I mean, I love Facebook. I'm just addicted to it. Demetrius loves Twitter, and is addicted to it. So between the two of us, we've really been working that a lot. We've had our Facebook page up since probably the new year, and we have 5,600 followers now. People are on that more than anything else, way more than the web site. That is our main portal where we interact with people.

COLE: How did you take advantage of the pre existing groups of vegan/vegetarian thing? I am assuming you probably have some kind of connection with those groups.

MILLER WOLFSON: Yes, I've worked with all of them in some capacity. I organized a walk-a-thon for one, and I've done demos with the other. I've fundraised for the other. I've

just been involved with them for years and years and years, and so is my husband. He also does animal rights work. They all came out to support it. They helped us get people to our premier. They are sending out blasts to their members in every city where they have membership where we're having a screening. PETA in New York City sent out a blast to their membership and they sent out text messages to their membership about our premeier, so that's the main reason why we sold out cuz A: it's our hometown, but B: we had all these animal groups support reaching their own members.

COLE: Right. That sounds pretty important, like, teaming up with some of these key organizations.

MILLER WOLFSON: That's right. It's absolutely key. You have to team up with those organizations.

Stranger: We're going to have to interrupt…

MILLER WOLFSON: How dare you! haha

July 24, 2013
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Sarah Price

COLE: Thank you for meeting with me today!

PRICE: Yeah!

COLE: My dissertation is on having a conversation with several producers or people who are listed as producers on films. What does it mean to be a producer now? I talked to anyone from Grant Curtis, who is the guy that worked on SpiderMan, Ted Hope, Eric Gitter, who did Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, Marisa from Vegecated, so just a variety of people.

PRICE: Well, you probably heard people say that a producer is an umbrella term for different roles. It means different things depending on if you are in the independent film world or a producer in television. Executive producers are different. In the Indie film world, my experience is that executive producers are people who are the money or the link or the connections to the money. Our sales rep was given an executive producer credit.

COLE: I talked to Stan Lee about the SpiderMan films and asked him what he did as the executive producer. He said, "I just basically showed up for my cameo, and that was it."

PRICE: Yeah. Executive producer and other types of producers -- that credit can be currency. Credits are given as currency sometimes in lieu of money or just to show respect. Producer can mean different things for different capacities and different films.

COLE: When you say currency, what do you mean?

PRICE: An investor may say, "Here is my investment, and this is the deal I want. But, in lieu of a bigger backend, I will take an executive producer credit." So, it is currency that you want to reserve. The people that work on the film, you can offer to give them a credit in lieu of money payment or backend points.

COLE: So what does that title give them?

PRICE: If they want to become executive producers and buy their seat at the table, that's how they do it. People who have money and want to get into films, they have done other things, but have no idea what filmmaking is about, they want to go to Sundance with a film.

COLE: Some of these things I know, but I have to ask you to illicit your response. It seems like a lot of these titles build bridges from one thing to the next. They get a producer title on this, and that helps them produce other films, like what you were doing with television. Once I direct this episode, hopefully, that will open some doors.

PRICE: Well, I direct episodes to direct more episodes. In television it is very specific.

COLE: Right, but it is the same model.

PRICE: Sure. The difference with producers in the independent film world is the producers sometimes are the ones who are supposed to be initiating the projects. You're supposed to be the one to go find money, initiate the project, or a director comes to you to help get this thing made and look for business deals. You have business producers, and you also have creative producers who are people who don't necessarily deal with the business side as

much as they deal with the creative side, helping the director bring their vision. This is for the independent stuff. Hollywood, as you know, producers are the bosses that call the shots. They created the films and they hired directors as hired guns. They essentially execute the plan that is the producer's and the studio's vision.

COLE: Movies like American Movie, Yes Men, or Summer Camp, those were independent.

PRICE: Yeah, those were independent documentaries with very small crews. What does it mean to produce a documentary when there are just two of you? It kind of means that you created it, you made it happen. You were involved in every aspect of it. You were making it. You are making calls, you are helping to set up the business side of it. But, when it is that small of a production, it just sort of denotes that we did it together. American Movie is a film by both of us; we produced it. The logistics of trying to make something happen, and then you have the creative ideas, and that's pretty much it. Same thing with the Yes Men – it was back to the idea of a filmmaker filmed live in film school, and you were going to shoot and edit your movie and produce by default. You pretty much directed and produced by default. In our movies, they said, "A Film by Me," and that meant I did everything. Then you would credit people that did other things. Well, this person actually filmed it, too, and this person did that, too. But, then when you get to a film that has to go to Sundance, they want to know who directed…they want the credits broken out. We shared with a co-director for Summer Camp. We were hands on in every capacity: fund raising, logistics, creatively, everything. Director is like the creative decision making of the story.

COLE: So, you mentioned that you really like "a film by"… I have talked to my advisor about, this idea of, is the term producer for independent films a useful term?

PRICE: Absolutely. Ted Hope is the producer of independent films. It depends on the scale of independent films as well. The independent feature fiction film is very different from the kind of producer my partner and I did when it was just two of us producing a film. Ted Hope is dealing with budgets, crew, hiring and firing, the whole production. That term of "filmed by" in the studio system here in Hollywood is a director's credit. A "so and so" production

is a producer's credit. Those are very distinct and recognizable. In Hollywood, it is all broken down.

COLE: How about a Spike Lee joint? What would that credit be?

PRICE: Spike Lee would be a producer's credit. I don't know, maybe he would be producer and director. A Spike Lee film would be the director's credit, and if he wants to make it joint for him as production and as a film, that would be up to him.

COLE: One of the interesting things about distribution stuff, the fund raising -- the models are changing so quickly that I want to capture this moment in film history. It is so up in the air right now about what it means to a producer. Ted Hope posted in his blog once that it was a Sundance institute event like they were making fun of idea of what a producer is. Did you watch the new Arrested Development? One of the jokes is that Michael Bluth meets Ron Howard. Ron Howard want him to make a film about his family, and he gives him this box full of business cards that say, "Michael Bluth, Producer" on it. And he says, "What does that mean?" and he says, "Whatever you want it to mean."

PRICE: Exactly.

COLE: So, I just want to document what your feeling are, what you think about it.

PRICE: I think just the term producer means different things whether it is television, independent films, or Hollywood films. They mean different things.

COLE: I really started out looking at comic book films and the way those audiences are marketed to directly, utilized for fundraising, and all those things, too. Whenever you make films, do you consider your audience? I'm sure when you were making American Movie, you just felt passionate about it and didn't really think about how people were going to react to it. It was just something you felt you had to capture.

PRICE: Yeah, when we were filming it, we were just telling a story for ourselves. Also, with an eye towards making a film that would go to Sundance or do something like that.

But, the focus of the moment is telling the story and doing the story justice and covering what is happening before you. In the edit, that is when the film starts coming together and you start thinking more about the film festivals, the distribution, and the audience. You want the audience to experience the story as you experienced it; therefore, all the test screenings and spending a lot of time editing.

COLE: Do you think most filmmakers do films because they are passionate about the subject matter-- especially the feature stuff. It seems they have the markets figured out before they ever start making the film -- The Hollywood style. Do you think that is true of independents, too? Do they find a good place where they could make a film and make a bunch of money?

PRICE: No, I don't think anyone looks to the independent world for moneymakers. If you have a box office hit like Juno, it is something that is unexpected. You just try to make your movie, your story. I don't think anyone looks to the independent world for the type of business that people in Hollywood look for. That's why it is refreshing and you have people telling interesting stories and taking risks and casting crew wanting to work on those stories because they are not cut and dried blockbuster business films. But, once you have an independent film that you feel is good enough for a festival, you have to be thinking about the business side of it, in terms of how you will distribute this, the strategy for promotion and distribution. You've got to think about that. I've never thought about that until it is time to think about that, you know? I've never thought about that as I am filming something or in the editing stage. I don't think it does service to your film, as an independent film, when you start that. It can be very limiting. You can limit yourself and your creative ability to tell a story if you are thinking about who is going to like it, why would they like it. You are really making it for yourself to tell a story, and it is a question of, "If you build it, they will come."

COLE: So, if American Movie would not have been the success that it was, would you still be trying to find a way to make films and make movies?

PRICE: It is hard to say. At that time, that's what I wanted to do. Chris and I talked about it because we were in debt. He was mostly in debt, and the idea was what do

you do if it hadn't sold? We would have probably tried to put it out. I have friends, who at the time, put out self-distributed films. That would have been an option. And then freelancing to kind of get out of debt and make money is an option. I have friends putting films out that sell at that time and do fine, and then they made their next film. For me, at that time, the passion was there to continue to be a filmmaker.

COLE: Did you have a backup plan?

PRICE: Not really. There was not a backup plan as much as we had all our eggs in the basket. If there was a backup plan it was just, well that did not sell and we are in debt, and now we have to work it off.

COLE: Career wise, what would have happened?

PRICE: I don't know because we did not make this film with an eye towards a career. We were filmmakers making a film, and at the time we were also in graduate school. I was just following my heart at the time. I knew I wanted to be there and make that film. There was another film we were making and we just wanted to finish them and push them out to the world and see what happened. Just one step in front of the other -- it was not like I had a big idea about a career I was working towards. I was working towards the film and putting it out and seeing what that would be.

COLE: I have a hard time taking risks. I don't have many regrets. I had an opportunity to do an internship at Disney and passed it up. It's hard to take a path…

PRICE: Yeah, it works out and it doesn't work out and it is up and down in my path, too. You've got to be open to the unexpected. All I knew was that I was in Milwaukee making this film with my best friend and we felt like it was purposeful and that's it. But at the same time, my family thought I was crazy. "What are you doing in Milwaukee filming this? Why don't you go get a job?" You make your choices based on what you feel. I have made some bad choices, but that's as it goes. It is interesting, I think the one thing was not taught in the art film school where I was was that there was not a focus on business. There should be a focus on business because all artists need to know a little bit about business, a small degree of what the business world it, what it means to be an artist.

That should be incorporated into a lot of film schools. I am sure there are some programs that have that.

COLE: Overall, I think there is a lack. Part of why I chose this subject is, the more I looked, there is really not focus on what it means to be the person in charge and the financial decisions. I was the producer of this television show and I did pretty much everything. I scouted locations, picked up equipment, or wrote a script.

PRICE: You made it happen. If you had more money, you would put a budget together and hire people to do all that stuff, and then you would oversee it. Maybe you'd hire someone to be on set to keep the vision going and communicate back to me—that person could be the set producer who deals with the creative aspect. It is all different. And what is the difference between the producer, co-producer, and associate producer? The breakdown is different depending what you're working on.

COLE: Are you part of any of the guilds?

PRICE: I will be after I do this one show. I'll have to join. I'll be a DGA.

COLE: I interviewed somebody from the PGA.

PRICE: Is Ted Hope not a member?

COLE: He is. I need to talk to them more about how they define these things. They have information on their website that defines these things. How do they determine from the membership…

PRICE: Well, I don't know about the PGA, but the DGA, in order to join, you have to have three sponsors or directors that are already DGA. You have to be DGA eligible, meaning you have done projects, you've done film or television, you've done something in which you are dealing with a large company. There are requirements of a certain level of production that you can say, "I did this." For instance, I was co-director on Yes Men, and it got bought by United Artists. Because of that, because it is a larger distribution company, that made me DGA eligible. The film that I had done and co-directed, Summer Camp, we self-distributed that, which would not have made me DGA eligible. Even though I went to all the same festivals and it had a

great life, because it was not bought by a large distributor, it was not studio worthy. So, to be in the PGA, I am assuming you have to have a certain level of work that is recognized as field work. In the DGA, there is a lot about payments and health insurance and stuff.

COLE: It's like being in a club, I'd guess.

PRICE: Well, it is like any union. You can't join the director's guild if you're not a director. They are protecting your right to work and they are organizing and negotiating your pay scale and everything else. If you are going down that path, and you want to get into that, you have to start doing the work that lead to that. I don't know the requirements for the PGA. (Pause) Producing is great in the sense that it encompasses a lot of different things depending on the scale of the production. You have an eye towards the entire production; you're pulling it together from the business side and the creative side. Directors generally don't deal with the business side. They only deal with the creative side. So, that would be the main difference across the board. (Pause) So what does your dissertation get into?

COLE: It goes through the background of the Hollywood system of producers and what they used to do to produce. But, then it deals a lot with the new model of production where a lot of the people I talk to do everything. They are with the film from conception to distribution and all the steps in between.

PRICE: There's a difference between if you are hired to be a producer and they come to you to produce their project verses you initiating a project as a producer.

COLE: It was interesting to talk to Ted because he talked about American Splendor. He was focusing for a while on films or adaptations based on something else. Talking to him about him being a fan of Harvey Picard. He had actually collected comics and commissioned a script to be written. He put this whole marketing packet together with hundreds of pages of photocopies of the comics and background on this guy's life and everything it would take to have his meeting with HBO. He went in and met with these marketers, and he said there were multiple copies of this thing that he had made and they were, basically, using it as a template. It was a project of love for him, where

there are other projects he has taken on where he believes in them, but they are not his baby.

PRICE: You are a jack-of-all-trades when you are a producer.

COLE: When do you shoot your episode, or have you already shot it?

PRICE: No, that's in October.

COLE: Have you seen the show Farm Kings?

PRICE: No.

COLE: It is a reality show that follows the King family. They are all farmers it's on the Great American Country channel. I talked to the personal assistant for a guy that's on the show and asked how they got on GAC. Basically, they were on the cover of a local magazine on farming. Somebody saw it and thought, "We should do a pilot of those guys." The passed it around to a bunch of different networks and the GAC picked it up. My idea for the stock show kids….i was thinking about doing a five to ten minute piece on the girl that lives there. It would be interesting to follow five or six kids from around the country all coming together at a national tournament.

PRICE: Yeah, that'd be great. Would they compete?

COLE: Yes. But the thing that got me is that her dad was on our reality show we had called Tough Grit as a judge for the sheep-shearing contest we had. He was telling us about how she was showing these sheep and she had pigs as well. The pig was bit by a brown recluse three days before one of her big shows. It was this huge dramatic thing for them. I told my boss, "How awesome would that have been to have that whole sequence on film?" This girl had been raising this pig from a baby, spending hundreds of hours, and something like this happened.

PRICE: Did it die?

COLE: No, it got really sick, but they saved it.

PRICE: That's traumatic. That's a great idea. Someone many years ago filmed something about 4H, but it needed more

follow through. To just really be character driven, you have to be there to get those moments, but you never know when they are going to come up.

COLE: Well, I need to find sponsors for my ideas. Tractor Supply sponsored the Tough Grit show as a deal where they could feature a bunch of their products. They got into our business of the writing. We had to rewrite parts because they thought it might offend some of their customers. We had a joke about riding a tractor in the nude, and we had to rewrite and reshoot the scenes. (Pause) If you run across anyone wanting a show about farm animals, keep me in mind.

PRICE: Okay. That's the tough part when it comes to producing, hats off to the people that get creative with financing. Making those connections…. (Pause)

COLE: Thanks for talking with me.

PRICE: Yeah, well, thanks for the ride. I hope I answered the questions. What is a producer? Oh, boy! That's a lot!

July 11, 2013
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Jon Reiss

COLE: So mainly want to focus on Bomb It 2 because I need to keep the scope narrow but can you tell me how, you kind of came to work on Bomb It 2? I know you worked on Bomb It of course but what was the whole process of getting into a film like that?

REISS: Well, it's kind of interesting because for Bomb It we created a relationship with Babblegum who licensed the film and also paid us to create forty webisodes for their channel. So when I started traveling for my book, Think Outside the Box Office to be honest I was looking for ways to increase the, uh, to raise more money for the travel to make the travel more multipurpose, as opposed to just doing… So I approached them as far as, to continue doing webisodes in the cities I was visiting. I originally started off with Copenhagen and that's actually where I gave my first speech about Think Outside the Box Office. Then actually, also, MOS (Meaning of Style) Chicago was before that where we were actually screening Bomb It in conjunction with MOS. So I shot a fair amount of material

there, but that was really, I knew I had that extra material. Then Copenhagen, and then we just started talking about doing, you know, more. So I think around that time I was going to southeast Asia, and I posed that to them and then they said well let's do Bomb It 2 and why don't you do the Middle East. And the Australia came later. When I did Southeast Asia and the Middle East, when I went to Southeast Asia to teach at NYU Singapore. So, on the way I stopped in Bangkok and Jakarta and I was really expecting to find anyone in Singapore because of what I'd heard about Singapore. But then it turned out I found those two writers there, and then Hong Kong. And then when I went to what I did I coordinated the Mideast trip with going to Kong and my first like workshop in London and Amsterdam, so I did those first. And then went on to Israel and Palestine. So, that's how it started. And then to be honest, when Bomb It was doing well on Netflix I kind of figured, well let's turn Bomb It 2 into a feature and see if we can license it to Netflix, we actually submitted it a year ago but I never had time to release it so we kept on pushing back the release, so here we are. I frankly would have kept on pushing it except for New Video kept on saying 'well, when are we going to release this? We need a date." So I was like "Okay!" I did some research into timing situations and then that's why I decided on August 6th.

It's not the normal way you'd create a film, but what's interesting for filmmakers and instructive is how you create a long-term project and cultivate an audience over a long period of time in various permutations

COLE: I'm interested in the cultivation of the audience that builds up over time. Especially with things like Kickstarter, I know that's something Ted Hope mentions a lot on his blog, all those types of things. The changing role of having to find that niche audience you can cater to. So, as far as Bomb It, was the graffiti scene something you were just into beforehand or were you new to that?

REISS: That I've written about before and how that came about. But, essentially it started out as a research project for a narrative film. Someone suggested that I just kind of like try to focus on the issue of the battle over public space. And I was never really into the scene before that.

COLE: You're listed as producer of Bomb It and Bomb It 2, what exactly does that mean?

REISS: You know, it's everything from figuring out how to raise the money, how to figure out the logistics and make the filming work, to supervising postproduction to delivery. These days it means supervising the distribution and marketing of projects.

COLE: I see you also shot; did you do any editing of the films?

REISS: I'm involved because I'm always going to, I'm intensely involved in how the piece as a whole is crafted. I don't do the hands on, especially for Bomb It 2 I kind of left it open to the initial creativity of the editors.

COLE: Do you think that's something that's common with today's independent films, especially those smaller budget projects that are getting funded on Kickstarter. It seems like it's just kind of small teams of one or two people that are creating these things. Is that, how you kind of worked or did you have a larger team, or how exactly did that all shake down?

REISS: I had a larger team for Bomb It, but for Bomb It 2 I had a group of editors… but I produced it, I shot it, I directed it, I did the location sound. One of the things you might want to touch on is my concept of a producer of marketing and distribution. Some producers do all that work, but very few I find so I think it's too hard for producers to do all that work as well as produce the film. So, having someone who can kind of shepherd distribution and marketing process is really valuable.

COLE: So, do you think you're unique in that sense that you were doing a lot of the marketing and distribution yourself?

REISS: I think a lot of filmmakers do it themselves, I was basically training my previous assistant to do that job, and then he left right before the release so I had to start someone else all over again

COLE: What kind of things did you do for the marketing and distribution? How did you work that side of it?

REISS: Well, I hired a publicist and then basically, I kind of centered the marketing and distribution around the Kickstarter campaign. I used the Kickstarter campaign to kind of jump-start the marketing. We had always kept out Facebook presence for Bomb It, so when we started the Kickstarter we had like 16, 17 thousand likes on the Bomb It Facebook page already. So we amped that up, used more Facebook ads promoting our content. And then we used the social media aspect of the Kickstarter campaign to jumpstart the whole thing. I wished we'd done a little more with Instagram. As we move towards the DVD release we'll do more of that. So, combination of publicity, social media and using Kickstarter as an event to kind of create excitement around the release.

COLE: That's really interesting; I really want to talk about the Kickstarter campaign. And then if you could talk a little more about Instagram and how you used that…

REISS: Well, we didn't use it as effectively as we could have. That's just something we reviewed and I need to talk to my social media manager about. We ended up not using as much as I'd like to have. Hopefully that'll shift over time. What I wanted to do was overlay text messages, actually text over photos and promote those.

COLE: Right. The Kickstarter, how did that come about? Is that something you came up with, or did Netflix or somebody say 'maybe you could use this to help launch the campaign'. How did that come about?

REISS: Early on I realized the release was costing me more, and that I should raise the money, and use Kickstarter. I talked to them because we were getting close to the release, I was a little concerned that it wouldn't be as effective as earlier in the lifecycle of the film and they said 'no, lots of people are actually using them as prerelease launches now', Kickstarter campaigns. And so I said 'okay, fuck it, I'll just do it.' And, we were pretty successful.

COLE: Did you then utilize your other social media, your audience you had built for Bomb It, to be on board for Bomb It 2

REISS: Actually, truth is, most of my support came from my other brand, my filmmaker brand. That's where most of the support came from, which really didn't surprise me.

Audio File corrupt. Unintelligible.

July 17, 2013
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Ben Steinbauer

STEINBAUER: Hey this is Ben.

COLE: Hello Ben, this is Jason Cole.

STEINBAUER: Hey Jason how you doing?

COLE: Great, how are you?

STEINBAUER: Good, real good.

COLE: Sorry I'm a little late I was, I didn't get a hold of Brad this morning but I was on the phone with Jon Betz who, he did Real Dirt With Farmer John, Queen of the Sun, and they're working on a new one called Seed.

STEINBAUER: Oh, ok. Cool, I don't know him.

COLE: Yah, they work with a distribution company kind of called Collective Eyes. They're, I don't know if you've heard of that or not.

STEINBAUER: Ok. No, I haven't.

COLE: They focus on environment, kind of educational things, so…

STEINBAUER: Ok, cool.

COLE: Cool.

STEINBAUER: Well what can I help you with? You said you're writing a, is this your dissertation?

COLE: Yah, ugh. I'm trying to wrap up this dissertation deal.

STEINBAUER: And you're at UC?

COLE: I'm at KU.

STEINBAUER: Oh right, okay, sure.

Crosstalk about confusion

COLE: So what's your connection? Did you say you were an alum? Did you do your undergrad there?

STEINBAUER: I did yah, Oldfather Studios, baby! Yah see I was there with Matt Jacobsen. I had Ed Small. Before he passed away, I had, Chuck Berg. Who's the, oh I cannot remember his name…

COLE: Kevin Willmott?

STEINBAUER: Kevin Willmott, I actually never had a class with him. I met him lots of times, at film festivals and things like that. I heard he was the best professor there…

COLE: Yeah, He's great…

STEINBAUER: but I, we just never crossed paths when I was actually in school there. Who am I trying to think of? The guy who does the paintings…

COLE: Tibbets?

STEINBAUER: Tibbets. John Tibbets. Yes!

COLE: Yep, good ol' Dr. Tibbets.

STEINBAUER: That's right. So who's your advisor, like who do you work with?

COLE: Cathy Preston is who my advisor is for my diss. I don't know if you had her or not. What years were you there?

STEINBAUER: I was there, let's see, to ninety eight to two thousand one.

COLE: Yah, you were just before I was. I came in, started in two thousand four and then I finished all my coursework, and then I ended up taking a teaching job at the University of Central Missouri, and postponing in getting this dissertation done and now I'm like down to crunch time so anyway, that's a whole other story but I work for Ogden Publications. And we do mainly magazine stuff, Mother Earth

News, Grit Magazine, UTNE Reader, and I basically do all the video work for them.

STEINBAUER: Oh, cool. Okay! That sounds great. I know UTNE Reader for sure.

COLE: Mother Earth News is like our biggest title, environmentalism and sustainability and all that kind of stuff. Solar panels and…

STEINBAUER: Right. Ok cool. So what's your dissertation about?

COLE: And so, yah, it started out, I was looking at how fans or audiences were influencing filmmakers and producers. But over time it's kind of shifted opposite where I realized that there's not a lot about how producers feel about audiences and what it means to be a producer today, when we're facing things like crowd sourcing and all sorts of distribution models and all that kind of stuff, and how rapidly that's all changing. Really it's just looking at what it means to be a filmmaker in today's, especially an independent filmmaker in today's society, where you're dealing with a lot of different things and so, just interested in your process and maybe what you're currently working on and we can talk about Winnebago Man and how you, you made that film and then how you were able to distribute it and things like that.

STEINBAUER: Sure, okay, yah, cool. Do you have questions, or do you want me to just sort of ramble for a while?

COLE: I mean we can start out maybe you could, I know you taught at UT for a while, is that right? Or you still are?

STEINBAUER: No, I live in LA now, although my wife and I are getting ready to move back to Austin, because she got a job teaching creative writing there at UT. I made Winnebago Man when I was in graduate school at UT Austin. And we had to make a film, in your first year you make two films, two shorts, one documentary and one narrative. In your second year, it's a three-year program, in your second year you do your pre-thesis film, which is like one film but it's supposed to be like twenty minutes. And then your thesis film is supposed to be your sort of, what you've learned, a culmination of all your time there. And so I made Winnebago Man basically as my thesis film. I sort of stole Wes

Anderson's idea for what he did with Bottlerocket, which is to make a short film version of it and then on the strength of that short film, the producers basically use that to make a feature. And so I made like a thirty-five minute, forty minute cut of Winnebago Man. And it was only about, we only shot about half of the movie or less, and then I got a producer and a really great editor on board and I was able to raise a little bit of money from grants and from private donations. But mainly I funded the movie on credit cards and kind of shouldered most of the finances myself. And then we finished the movie and we didn't even try for Sundance, we didn't meet the deadline, and so we submitted to South by Southwest. It was their first film festival submission and we got in. And I had played a bunch of short films there before and I knew Janet Pearson and she loved it and programmed it in the spotlights category which is like thrown in there with like Spike Lee's new film and it was a much bigger reception than I anticipated. And so we were like in true indie fashion we were editing like right up to the deadline, and we didn't, even though I had a great producing team, who's really savvy, we were so concentrated on that edit and getting that right that things like getting a sales agent for South by Southwest for the premier just didn't happen in time. So we ended up premiering at South by this huge buzz and then it took like six months, maybe even a little bit longer than six months, to get all of the distributors to see it. And then decided whether or not they wanted to buy it. But I got a little off track there but that's how I started my thesis film.

COLE: Cool. What drew you to the subject, I mean how did you find him?

STEINBAUER: It just evolved, with every project I do I look for characters first. And I just had a sense that Jack Rebney was going to be an incredible character, and I love that clip, you know. Brad Beesley and I were roommates for three years when I moved to Austin. And a friend of ours who's in the movie, gave us a copy of that clip so we would watch it like every day, I mean that's not even an exaggeration. We would watch it every single day. And we got to the point where we could quote it and somebody would come over and they hadn't seen it and we'd make them watch it. I mean, it was just ridiculous. It was just like our favorite thing. Oh hey Jason can you hang on for just one second?

COLE: Sure, sure.

STEINBAUER: Sorry about that Jason are you still there?

COLE: Yah, I'm still here.

STEINBAUER: Cool. I'm back.

COLE: You were just saying that you would show somebody, kind of like I had Dancing Outlaw for a long time and no one had seen that.

STEINBAUER: Oh yah, that was one of the things that we loved too, you know, like this underground tape trading community. And you know I would like to say that I was a big part of that but I was just lucky enough to be friends with some cool people that were kind of in the know with that stuff. It was all pre-YouTube.

COLE: Were you at all involved with the guy that did the Found Footage stuff?

STEINBAUER: Well during Winnebago Man…

COLE: Right, I knew you were so, but I mean were those some of the guys you were hanging out with?

STEINBAUER: No, they were based out of New York at that time. And the sort of local version of that in Austin was a guy named Tony Sortello. And he's in Winnebago Man also, we interviewed him, he was a sidekick and they had a public access show called The Show With No Name. And it was like Mondays at midnight or something. And it was basically like a call in show and then they would show clips like that and Charlie is still kind of like the guy who like just has his finger on the pulse of like all the best stuff in terms of media and comedy. He runs the South by Southwest Comedy Festival now. The comedy section of that. And anyway, he is really the best key trader guy and he was friends with Beth and so we saw a lot of like, The Dancing Outlaw and like The Gassy Creature, the Jackass pilot and what else…he just had access to all that stuff before YouTube, you know? So that's how we saw it and it kind of started, it was such a favorite amongst our friends that I kind of said like, what happened to this guy and we would sort of brainstorm or rap about what he could be doing now or like wouldn't it be amazing to find him. And when Bill and I would do google

searches for him, like nothing would come up. Until one day and this was all kind of in the next first, ten or fifteen minutes of the movie, I found a post about him wanting to find a sailboat that he could live on. And basically, sail around the world and disappear. So this was like two thousand five, two thousand six, right as YouTube and things like ebaum's world and video sharing was becoming like a, you know, accessible thing. And the Star Wars kid clip was kind of happening and his parents were suing the other kids and suddenly this idea about cyber bullying was being bantered about and I just started thinking like, wow this is so interesting that this poor guy may have really been scarred by this thing. You know because it was the end of his career, he could be publicly humiliated. He could be trying to hide from the rest of the world. But this is something that brings my friends and I like legitimate joy. We weren't laughing at him because he was like a buffoon, it was like, the phrases he was using and the way he was saying the things, were endlessly quotable and it was, I know it sounds a little like hippy dippy but it was really done out of love, like a sincere place. I wanted him to understand that people really appreciated him. You know that it wasn't like a Mel Gibson rant or a Christian Bale knock out it was something like he was a unique person and it was cathartic the way he expressed his frustration. So based on all that stuff I just thought, there's got to be a great story here. And it's got a build for an audience and if I can find him this seems like a home run.

COLE: So is that something that you considered? That it has a kind of built in audience, did you consider…

STEINBAUER: Well see, to be honest, I can't give myself that much credit. It ended up in hindsight, I guess, that was part of the consideration, but really it just came from me just being a fan and being really curious. And I'd made three or four other short documentaries. At that point like similar characters, like people who were heroes in their own minds or who at first glance are like comedic and silly characters. And it's kind of my favorite thing in storytelling so I mean in general, take a character who you're seeing is easy to dismiss and kind of laughable. And then getting the audience to really care about that person, you know, explaining why they are the way they are and creating a really touching, human story, that's kind of about all of us. As high flouting as that sounds…

COLE: One of my favorites, I was totally geeked out because I got to interview Sarah Price, who was one of the co-directors for American Movie.

STEINBAUER: I know Sarah, yah, she and Bradley made a film together for a while, that I edited, Summercamp, so I got to know her fairly well.

COLE: Yah, so I love that kind of stuff so much. That's why I love Winnebago Man so much, just because it's so character driven and focused

STEINBAUER: That's really, that's the stuff I love. My experience in making these portraits is that it would play really well at film festivals, but then they wouldn't go anywhere else. And that's partly because they're short films, but also probably because they were about more regional, or specific people, that didn't necessarily have a big following so it wasn't like a reason necessarily for people to watch it, the film. If that makes sense? So it was a happy coincidence in the case of Winnebago man, that so many people know that source material. And I have since learned that, I think that this fits into your whole theme of how do you distribute and pay for, or get an audience for film, for independent films these days. I mean the answer is that you don't. I mean, you can put it up online for sale on your website and you can make it available on iTunes, and you can, unless you have an audien-, the audience can't work hard to find your movie. There's so much competition for them to watch them. And, so, it almost has to be a topic that is big enough and worthy enough to gain national interest. So you kind of have to have something that is on the cultural radar, because otherwise there are so many ethical battles already just getting your movie financed and made, to then fight that battle of getting people to watch it, it's just really, really difficult. And let me give you an example for me, like I'm a filmmaker, I'm a total documentary dork, you know I grew up, well I guess since college, at KU I really got turned on to documentaries and experimental films, and I had just not really ever thought about them before. But all those survey classes, like History of Documentary and History of Experimental Films, like having to watch all that stuff, gave me such an awesome grounding in what documentary films meant. I befriended this guy from Canada and he was kind of a film dork and would make me these National Film Board of Canada compilations. And then I got to be friends with Brad

and Sarah Price and all these other filmmakers who were making this great stuff. So I should be the guy who's rabidly searching out film. Like if I'm not going to the theatre, I don't know who is going to the theatre. I really want to see the new Nicole Hall Center movie, called 'Enough Said'. And it's like (??? 21:01) last movie, and it's got like (???) Keener and Julia Lewis Dreyfus, I mean it's got a lot of, like there's every reason in the world for me to go see that movie. I love her previous films, I'm a huge fan of Gandolfini's and it's his last movie, it's got ninety eight percent on Rotten Tomatoes, there is no excuse for me to not be first person in line at the box office to see that movie, and I'm not. I'm not. And I hope I'll go see it in the theatre, but to get me to go to the movie theatre, and I still go about once a week, but to get me to go to the theatre and pay sixteen dollars to go see that movie, I've got to hear a Fresh Air interview, I've got to read a positive review in the New Yorker, I mean so many things have to match up in order for me to go see a movie, and I'm in the high percentage of people going to see movies in the theatre. And the thing that's truly good with my Netflix queue, I have really good friends that have made movies that have played at Sundance, and have been laudded and have friends that have told me to watch these movies that I'm literally looking at my Apple TV right now, I could sit down on the couch and watch these movies, at the drop of a hat for free. And I still, I have like 300 movies in my Netflix queue. My point then, horribly delay, is like people are so busy and there's so much content now that, and I don't know, I just feel like if you are going for a large audience or trying to make money, that making an indie film is just not the way to do it. Obviously, living in L.A. for the last year, I've been working on TV shows and pitching TV shows and, I did some stuff with Funny or Die and I've been writing some comedy, so I've been trying to go toward the more descriptive side of me. The more I'm out here, the more I really understand that, and looking at film, it's a labor of love, it's like somebody who is a painter, or a poet, or somebody who's going to be in like an experimental band. Because there's just not an audience. I'm sorry, I don't want to go on record of saying that. The audience that there is, is very specific. And it's like a rabid, I mean people who go to film festivals and are on that circuit, you know are often people who make indie films themselves. They're the best fans in the world, you know, but there's a small group of

them. It's becoming more and more of a niche thing. I hope that's not horribly depressing for your dissertation.

COLE: No, it's actually, you're speaking the language because that's one of the things I talk about is the niche audience. But it's like the guy I was just talking to that did Queen of the Sun, where they do all these environmental films, and it's like you have to find that audience. And I think that's part of the reason that comic book films are so big is that they know that they have this audience that loves these comic books and they are passionate about a certain subject. And so then they say, 'Oh, we can make a film about that topic and then we've got at least a hundred thousand people here who are on this message board', and they look at the Facebook likes and all that kind of stuff and say, 'oh yah, we've got kind of a captive audience here, let's make a film for them.'

STEINBAUER: Totally, totally. And you know what's interesting to think about, I wonder if, I feel like at one point, like in the seventies, well in the sixties too, like Jonas Eikus (25:22) and Cassavettes and those guys, I wonder if in the sixties, seventies, eighties and maybe even, definitely in the nineties because that's was kind of the hay day, it was like independent film was it's own kind of, it was like you like experimental film in the same way that you like environmental film. And now I wonder, I mean I guess that distinction still exists, but it's so more, I don't know.

COLE: Well there's a lot more competition now too in that area.

STEINBAUER: Yeah, it's like not a novel or something you know what I mean? I mean it's so easy to classify it as a social issue or environmental film, you know what I mean. I mean you can very easily say, 'Oh that is about the environment and so that's what that is.' But with independent film, anymore, it's like, you have movies playing Sundance and South by Southwest that are like twenty million dollar Hollywood films. So even though they are called independent, it's like, you know Wes Anderson doesn't make independent films anymore. You know what I mean? Guys like that, but they are still kind of lumped in to that category.

COLE: And it's just because it's quirky or different, or outside the norm of whatever Hollywood, you know, whatever people expect the traditional Hollywood film…but Wes Anderson is totally one of my favorites.

STEINBAUER: Absolutely, yeah. No disrespect to him at all, I just mean like, that guy is at the top of his game with huge celebrities and massive budget. You can't compare, it seems unfair to compare something like that to say, Upstream Color, where that guy, to me, is like the embodiment of indie film right now where he's doing everything himself, distributing it himself, making like really noncommercial, challenging work that his critics and his peers really love. Did you see 'The Comedy'? Did you see that movie.

COLE: I haven't seen that one, no.

STEINBAUER: Oh man, you should watch that. Those two movies, to me, is like what's most exciting about independent film right now. Like, completely outside any kind of three act structure like sort of narrative convention. But they utilize quasi celebrity talent. But in this way, they're just their own thing. They're not going to find a commercial audience, but because they're so strong and strange, there is still sort of an art running, fan filming audience for those movies. Which I guess contradicts what I was kind of thinking about, maybe there's not that niche audience for independent films anymore, but maybe I'm wrong about that. Maybe it's just gotten smaller and more specific and rabid. You know what I mean?

COLE: I was interested in something that you said earlier with Winnebago Man. You kind of had a producing team that came on board with that, who was involved in that and what kind of things did they do for you?

STEINBAUER: Yeah, well I got super lucky because, let's see, not Dentler, who used to be the head of South by Southwest, who used to run the festival. He was interested in Winnebago Man at the beginning and was going to maybe come on board as an executive producer but that's didn't end up working out but he did introduce me to a guy named Joel Heller. And Joel was kind of like, he was sort of the driving force producer in a lot of ways for the movie. He had been an editor in Hollywood for a movie and was looking to get involved with films that had, kind of an inspiring

bent, like a social consciousness that was, you know, uplifting eventually. And Winnebago Man combined a lot of stuff that he was interested in, you know, technology and that kind of redemptive story and so Matt introduced us, and we kind of hit it off. And Joel had basically spent the last two and a half, three years writing a blog and doing interviews with all other doc filmmakers and he knew all like festival programmers and which sets were important to go to and he really helped me get the film out in the way that it has been. Like if there wasn't for Joel, then we wouldn't have been on the Tonight Show, we wouldn't have played all the festivals that we did, he really was kind of the savvy one. And Malcolm Polinger came on board as the editor. And he is from San Francisco and at the time was programming for Wholphin. Those short film DVD collections. Malcolm was curating those and so he had a really cool aesthetic sensibility and so knew a ton of film festival folks also from being involved with Wholphin and so those two guys together were like my team and I was so lucky to have met both of them because again, I know a lot of people, you know on the filmmaking side, but I don't know a lot of festival programmers and distributors and journalists and they were really clued in to that world. So the three of us kind of went on tour, really, for almost a year. We went to every film festival together and promoted the movie and they were amazing.

COLE: You mentioned you financed it all, basically on credit cards, what would you have done if Winnebago Man had been just sort of a mild success, or like what you said earlier, a local success and you had all this credit card debt. Do you think you would still be making films or trying to make films?

STEINBAUER: Yeah for sure. I mean the thing is, Winnebago Man, as far reach as it's had and that's who I've been making things out, I mean so many people have seen it and love it and appreciated it and it's gotten me managers and agents in LA and a lot of commercial work for a company as a result and basically given me kind of a credibility as a director. But for all its success, we haven't even broken even on the movie. And we probably never will. It's not as if that was like a financial success, but one of the things that I did really early on, that I'm really grateful for having done is that I stole Errol Morris' idea, I guess I've been saying that I steal a lot of people's ideas but,

I'm going to come across as a real thief in this dissertation but…

COLE: Nothing new under the sun.

STEINBAUER: Well when I first moved to Austin I got a job at a post production company that was editing commercials. And they did like really high end work, like Walmart and Southwest Airlines, and things like that, so very quickly, I got a glimpse of how much money is in the commercial filmmaking world and Errol Morris like one of my all-time favorite filmmakers and I learned, I didn't know this until then, but I learned that he is one of the highest paid commercial directors. And he's really proud of his commercials and they have a lot of sensibility that his films do and that's exclusively what allowed him to make weird movies like 'Fast, Cheap and Out of Control' and now that he's won an Oscar I'm sure he's probably getting financing from somewhere but I really quickly learned that, oh, if I'm going to make these sort of strange character portraits documentaries, then I better have an alternate source of income. You know, to keep the lights on. And when I was working at this post out, I got to become friends with these other indie folks and people who had production companies. And just kind of nurtured those relationships and stayed in touch. Then I went back to grad school like a year, year and a half later and when I did they were still calling me for like small edit jobs or if they needed me to come in and shoot something real quick. And I didn't ever want to say no to those calls but then realized that I was going to get busy and not be able to handle all these requests. So I teamed up with a friend of mine who was in grad school with me, who is still my business partner today and we have our production company The Bear. And we've been a company for like seven years now and it's our full-time source of income. It's kind of just branched into producing indie films. We helped David Gordon Green make his film 'Prince Avalanche', that had Paul Rudd in it and Mia Hursch??? So that was pretty cool. And then we just helped this friend of Darren's make a bit about Richard Linkletter. But mainly our money comes from doing like Popeye's commercials and web videos for these larger brands. Oh, Winnebago finances…sorry, I'm getting way off track here.

COLE: No, it's fascinating. I'd like to talk to you too about my situation in where I work. It's all tied in. But I'll wait for a little bit.

STEINBAUER: At the time that we were trying to finish 'Winnebago Man' I was fresh out of grad school. I was teaching at UT, but it was just really one class. So I was a lecturer, and basically it was the class that I had TA'd. And so I just stayed on and taught, and they gave me an office, and that's where we edited 'Winnebago Man' out of. But really we had a reoccurring job with JCPenney's at the time. And so every two weeks we would go and film these supplemental videos for their website and it was really good money, for not a ton of work and it went on for like, I think it was a three or four month gig. So suddenly I had like a nest egg and that's almost exclusively what funded 'Winnebago Man'. I think it was something like twenty-five, to thirty grand, all at once and that allowed me to go up and shoot those remaining quadrants with Jack, like the second and third visits.

COLE: Just out of my own personal curiosity of my own documentary filmmaking wants and desires, what kind of equipment did you use for 'Winnebago Man' and what are you using now? What is your preferred camera and set up?

STEINBAUER: Oh, well I've gotten super spoiled ever since because commercial stuff will do that to you. With 'Winnebago Man' we shot it on HVX's and on Panasonic cameras. And at the time that was kind of, this was two thousand six, two thousand five, something like that, and at the time that was the camera that like everyone was using. That was before 5D's. We were shooting that sixteen nine, oh we shot a bunch of sixteen millimeter film also. Which is something that Brad Beesley taught me, you'll have to ask him about, when he made 'Okie Noodling', he just shot a bunch of B roll basically on sixteen, and it gives such a high production value and if you just shoot just a couple of rolls, it's still a couple thousand dollars but it's not like, it doesn't break your bank. And it's such good looking stuff that it just immediately stands out as being better than just the whole thing full of video. So I got that idea from B-rad and anyway, I'm off topic here, sorry. So nowadays, if I shoot something, my preferred camera would be the Alexa for sure, that's the nicest camera on the market, in my opinion. And then when we do a lot of commercial stuff, we'll shoot like on the red or the C300 or whatever but if I were going to make a long form doc, again it would probably be the C300.

COLE: Yeah, that's what I've been looking at is the C300

STEINBAUER: Yeah, they're great. The latitude that they have is just unbeatable. That camera is so amazing, you almost don't need to light things, it's just so sensitive.

COLE: I'll side track off dissertation stuff for just a minute. One of the things I do here, the main goal is just of course is to make money, because I work for a corporation. So we have a partnership with Tractor Supply Company and so I'm getting ready to shoot a series of DIY videos for them for their website. So it's kind of a contract for hire, but it's one of those deals where I keep thinking to myself, because the contract is huge, and it's all just about connections, you know what I mean? I mean if I would have known how to get a hold of the right people at Tractor Supply Company, I could be doing these independently and making four or five times what I make in a year here. And instead I'm making it for this company. But establishing some sort of company or something like that, I guess we should, maybe I could contact you another time, we could have a whole other conversation about that.

STEINBAUER: Yeah for sure, but I mean, that is the thing, I mean if you control the money then that's where you make the money. When you have a production company, you charge a production fee on top of the actual cost of producing things. So there's so many ways to make a lot of money doing that, like having your own company.

COLE: Doing some commercial stuff, I'd be really interested in knowing what kind of current projects you've been working on too, with television.

STEINBAUER: Well I've kind of had a rough go ever since 'Winnebago Man' getting my next movie off the ground. I've had a lot of stuff fall apart. My most recent completed film was called 'Brute Force'. And it was a fifteen minute short film and we played South by and Silver Docs and Bad Summit and it definitely made the film festival rounds. But it was supposed to be a feature and it was a case of not being able to raise financing and when that ended up happening the storyline that we were following sort of fell apart. So that one kind of went by the wayside. And then my business partner in The Bear, and I, we're on this really great story about this French con man, his back story is

just amazing. And we contacted him and arranged to buy his exclusive rights and he conned us out of our advance.

COLE: That's awesome. I mean, it's not awesome.

STEINBAUER: I know! No, it's amazing and we were like this is like the greatest hook, way into the story. And so we had this whole elaborate theme, where we were going to go and basically like circle in on him and con him into being in our film. Almost like Catfish, like knock on the door with the cameras rolling. We actually had Rough House on board, David Gordon Green and Jody Hill and Tony McBride and those guys. And we had raised three hundred thousand dollars to do it. But the problem was basically that the con man had sold his life rights to multiple other companies and like, one of the other companies ended up making the film. And it's called 'The Imposter' and it came out last year. It premiered at Sundance and it's actually really well done, it's actually a really good movie. But they teamed up with A&E and the executive producer of 'Man on Wire' was involved. Basically it just came down to our lawyers saying everybody's going to get sued that's involved with this and we just can't accept that liability. So that ended up falling apart. And then I wrote a script with a friend who was produced by John Gaddens??? (45:34) who was the guy who wrote 'Flight' by Denzel Washington movie. And he was producing it and Bob Boydenton??? (45:46) who is an Austin indie film director, he and I co-wrote it and it just kind of fell flat, like we didn't get a whole lot of traction. That movie and then I tried to make a documentary about the owner of American Apparel. Bob Charney??? (46:09) and he, I had a production company on board, but he just wouldn't give it back to us. Wouldn't, you know, let us make the film essentially. I feel like there's one more that I'm forgetting about but I've had a lot of like, near misses. And so now what I've been doing is, I've been pitching, I created this TV show, with a good friend of mine. And we have that set up at FOX and we're actually taking it out in a couple weeks to try and throw that to a network and get paid to write a pilot for it. But that's been going for like a year and a half. That one's taking a while. And then in the meantime, I just directed a reality TV show and I'd never done that before. I had never really had any interest in doing that but I just directed a pilot for a company that, called Morning Star Entertainment, and they had this really cool treatment about this small TV station in Fargo, North Dakota. And then trying to revamp

their morning ratings, by bringing in a stand up comic to come in and help them re-imagine their morning show. So I was just up in Fargo, North Dakota all last month and then we just finished our rough cut edit of that, that we just sent to the Sundance Channel. Who sort of financed the, it's called the proof of concept, it's like with an ideal like that, you have to pay the celebrity. It's so much like the response to the person being there and being a fish out of water, before they incurred all that cost just to shoot a pilot, they wanted to do basically like a fifteen minute, what is called a soft pilot, which is a, here's our world, here's our characters. Is this worth all the extra expenses to get a celebrity involved? So that's a long version of what I've been up to and also directing commercials and doing things like that.

COLE: Yeah, so, that's kind of, one of the things that I got brought in here, that we were producing, they brought me in to help produce a reality TV show. It was on RFD-TV, which is like the rural…

STEINBAUER: Oh yeah!

COLE: It's way up in the channels, but it's called 'Tough Grit'. And it was supposed to be, I was a little disappointed because I came in and didn't get to help design the show much, I was really just more of the making sure talent was lined up and those types of duties. But it really could have been a lot better because we didn't really have any, it was focused more on tractor, again it was with Tractor Supply Company, and so it was focused on the managers and their knowledge, it was almost like an infomercial. I would have focused it more on the characters, the people, the actual contestants, had more of a tournament, elimination style kind of thing going on. But it was all just a bunch of like farm chores, that kind of stuff.

STEINBAUER: Farm chores, cool. Yeah, I mean, reality TV is like, I don't know who is watching it but somebody is watching it, and watching a lot of it because everybody, every network wants this to produce it because it's so cheap and I guess the ratings are so high for that stuff. I personally don't really watch it but the only one I've ever thought was any good was 'Small Town Security', I don't know if you've seen that one on ABC but all the rest just seem to be super-formulaic and low val.

COLE: Right.

STEINBAUER: A lot of my friends were documentary filmmakers, especially in Austin, they make a really good living doing reality TV on the side.

COLE: Yeah, it's interesting, I've got an idea for a show that's like, when we were doing the 'Tough Grit' TV show there was a girl there who raised national championship, she had sheep and they were like national champs and stuff like that. And so I thought it would be really interesting to take like a 'Spellbound' approach, where you follow five or six of these kids who are really into livestock shows. And show all the different stuff that they have to go through to get their animals ready. I guess the story that she told me that got me on the hook was she had this pig that she had raised from just a baby. And it was like a week before the state competition and it got bit by a brown recluse spider, and all that kind of stuff, so it's almost like, it's almost got a kind of natural climax, where the competition and all that stuff is built in.

STEINBAUER: Sure, yeah. I love 'Spellbound'. That's one of my all-time favorites.

COLE: Right, well I don't know. Finding ways to actually get the pilots to networks and all that kind of stuff, I really have no idea how to do that yet.

STEINBAUER: Well that's one of the things you should talk to Brad Beesley about because he, way more than me, has made like six featured docs or something. He's been super prolific. So he just got to this point where it was like, it doesn't make financial sense for me to keep making featured documentaries. Like one episode of a reality TV show is like more than the entire budget of the documentaries that I've made. So instead of making featured docs, he's making reality shows.

COLE: Yeah, I guess, 'Mud Cats' or whatever it was…

STEINBAUER: Yeah, totally. And it was kind of the same muscles, the same creative work as developing a doc storyline, to go out and shoot a sizzle reel and like characters and put together that kind of reality presentation. But financially it's just the easier way to

go, you know getting a grant from PBS and making an hour long cut of your feature and all that stuff that you used to have to do to make a doc.

COLE: I don’t know how much more time you have but…

STEINBAUER: Yeah, I should probably go in about ten minutes.

COLE: Okay, I won’t keep you that long but I was just going to say it’s like going back to ‘Winnebago Man’ what was, the feedback from audiences and those types of thing, what was, as you’re moving forward did you, how did you utilize that? Because I'm sure you got through the festivals and also since it’s such a well known clip online, you’re probably getting a lot of feedback and interaction from your audience, is that something that you took into account when you were doing the edits and stuff like that?

STEINBAUER: Yeah, absolutely. We did tons and tons of rough cut screenings of the movie, before we locked the picture. So that was invaluable, that was really, really helpful. Probably just like a dozen, if not more feedback screenings. And once you’re on the pencil circuit, the movie, it was just so gratifying to have the people laugh the entire movie and then cry at the end. And people would like come up and hug me afterward and that it reminded me of a grandparent that they really missed, of a cantankerous brother, or basically everybody had a character like Jack in their family that they wanted to talk with me about. And then when we would take Jack to film festivals, he would actually be there, it was like, it was like having a celebrity in the room, you know. People would stay, I mean, I remember we would screen the film and it went from here to New York and Michael Moore introduced it. There were like, we parked a Winnebago Man, I’m sorry, Winnebago out in front of the Sunset Theatre there on Carlson and we had like paparazzi photographers and we brought Jack out of the Winnebago and into the theatre and he did like this photo shoot with Michael Moore. And people stayed, I think it was like two hours after the screening to talk to Jack. Like they would line up and want to get his autograph and shake his hand, because he’s such like a magnetic character. He embodies something that I think is really evident in that clip which is that he’s very eloquent. He’s very well spoken. And the way that he can express his frustration, is something that I think a lot of people can relate to, in some strange way. And they all wanted to thank him, and

explain why they like the clip, or why they like him and it was almost like they wanted to do, with a celebrity, they wanted to like meet him in person. And just kind of validate why they liked the clip so much. It was really amazing to watch, it just struck a chord. And it's absolutely impacted the project that I've been involved with. I got really hooked on that experience of having a packed theatre laughing and loving the film. That's part of the reason why I've gone over to trying to make narrative comedy because I feel like I truly want. I've even got into doing stand up comedy out here in LA. Because that experience is just, talking about sort of painful, emotional things, with an audience that is receptive and in also a comedic way, it's just the greatest feeling, ever. And I hadn't really experienced that, to that extent, so I've been sort of chasing that dragon ever since. Like a drug addict.

COLE: Got that high.

STEINBAUER: That's right.

COLE: Well, I'll let you go for now. I don't know if my advisor will want me to do any follow up questions, but would you be open to that if I needed to follow up?

STEINBAUER: Yeah, yeah for sure. I'd love to help you out any way that I can. Oh, I'm sorry I need to jump on this call, Jason, but yeah, hit me up anytime.

COLE: Okay, talk to you later.

STEINBAUER: Okay, man, bye.

September 4, 2013
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Tracy Tragos

TRAGOS: Hey Jason!

COLE: Hey, how are ya?

TRAGOS: Good thanks. Let me put my earphones on, here one sec.

COLE: Yah, I have mine on too.

TRAGOS: Hey!

COLE: Hey.

TRAGOS: How you doing?

COLE: Pretty good. Just busy as always.

TRAGOS: Yeah.

COLE: You know how that is, right?

TRAGOS: Indeed! Indeed, indeed.

COLE: Exciting time since I've talked to you last. You've got Kickstarter funding and you went back to the Sundance Institute.

TRAGOS: Indeed! Indeed, it's been a, and yeah it's been, we've done Sundance two days ago.

COLE: Right.

TRAGOS: So yeah, a lot's going on.

COLE: So what I'm doing, I'm still trying to finish my Ph. D. And I don't know if I've ever told you the whole story about how, I had a defense, not last May, but it's been a little over a year. And I had an outside committee member who basically sandbagged me. And sabotaged my whole defense and it went really poorly. So I basically have to, I had to basically rework my whole thesis and so what I've been doing is talking to producers and filmmakers who I consider to be independent filmmakers. And kind of getting a definition of what it means, in your eyes, of what it means to be an independent filmmaker in today's world where we have things like Kickstarter and all these new models of distribution and all those kinds of things, so. Basically it's just a conversation about your films, your role in those films, and how you're getting the films made. Things that we already talked a lot about anyway.

TRAGOS: No, no, that sounds great!

COLE: Some of the things that I ask I already know, but I will have to ask just so I have them on the record here, which I'm recording by the way.

TRAGOS: Okay! Okay, uh oh! (Laughter) I'll try to sound smart.

COLE: I won't misquote you like some other people would.

TRAGOS: Oh god. It wasn't even a quote, but hear me! Anyway!

COLE: So tell me a little bit about your first film, how you became a filmmaker, if you can.

TRAGOS: Well I went to film school, and had a graduate degree, an MFA, from film school. And so that program, even though my concentration was screenwriting, the program, the two-year program, you got to learn editing, and production, and all that. So I did actually make a documentary in film school. And I was obviously interested before, but that's kind of, that's kind of where the seed was planted.

COLE: What school did you go to?

TRAGOS: I went to USC.

COLE: Did you? I didn't know you went to USC.

TRAGOS: Uh huh.

COLE: Cool. I am learning things! And so what was your thesis film on there?

TRAGOS: Well it wasn't a thesis film. I had a thesis script. And I had a thesis feature screenplay but as part of the curriculum, I made some shorts and so the documentary short that I was talking about was about a family that had lost their home in the Oakland fire, I think in 1992.

COLE: Cool. I actually just talked to Ben Steinbauer. I don't know if you know him, did 'Winnebago Man'.

TRAGOS: No, no.

COLE: Have you seen 'Winnebago Man'?

TRAGOS: No, I haven't seen it. I'd definitely like to.

COLE: Yeah, you definitely need to. If you liked, I like character driven docs, things like 'American Movie' and 'Winnebago Man'. So, 'Winnebago Man' is really funny. Anyway, he started that film, it was basically his master's thesis. His project was at UT Austin. Anyway, it's not really that important but, so then 'Be Good, Smile Pretty', how did that come about?

TRAGOS: Well there were some years between USC and 'Smile Pretty' but that came about because I was writing and I was doing research. And when I was taking a break from my writing. And I came across on account how my father was killed and I had been working not independently in a sense that, I mean I was writing things and trying to get on staff, so I was writing things on spec with the intention of being hired on a TV drama or the film stuff. Not making it on my own. And when I found this account on the Internet I just knew that number one, I wanted to capture the stories that were being told for the first time about my father, and I didn't want them to get lost. So I wanted a record of them and I knew that I had to do that with a camera. But it wasn't anyone else's story to tell so I certainly had to do it on my own. So that's how that came about.

COLE: And on that first film, how did you get funding, was it mainly through grants?

TRAGOS: Initially it was basically beg, borrow and stealing. I mean I put up my own money, put it on credit cards. There wasn't a lot of time to wait around for grant cycles. So I just went full steam ahead. I was able to call and savor, my husband was working at a production company at the time so I was able to borrow their equipment. And at first those shoots didn't go so well. I knew that I needed to get my own equipment and so I just charged it on a credit card. I got a lot of advice and a lot of help, and you know, family worked for free on it and it was just cobbled together through like airline miles and just all that. But I think that's often how it has to start. And then when I had some footage to share, I got KCPT involved, as a partner, with Kansas City Public Television Station. And we submitted to PBS, to their links program. And I think that's a really good in to them. And so the funding that comes through iPBS is actually not a grant, it's a license fee. So at that point that we got the license fee, we knew that we were going to have some kind of PBS Broadcast. But we didn't

know if it was going to be on Independent Lens or what. But that was where the remaining funding came in. And I also got one small grant from Women in Film but otherwise, and true donations, because I did have a, I started out with a fiscal sponsor and then I actually ended up forming my own non-profit. So we also got donations.

COLE: One of the other filmmakers that I talked to said that he also started a non-profit for one of his projects too.

TRAGOS: And they're tricky, I mean I'm glad that I did that, but at the same time it's a lot of work. I mean you have to have a board of directors, you have to have board meetings, you know, it's not, so unless you want to be involved in the work around your film for years to come, and I mean years to come, not just one year or two years, but ten years. It seems that it's tricky to go that route. But that's what I did. And with this film, I'm just going through a fiscal sponsor, because I knew that it was just so much overhead work. I mean to run a non-profit, it's a job in and of itself.

COLE: So for Rich Hill, who's your sponsor?

TRAGOS: IDA, which is the International Documentary Association.

COLE: Right. And how did you get that relationship? How did that build?

TRAGOS: Well I've been a member of IDA for years and they actually were a fiscal sponsor on 'Be Good, Smile Pretty' before I started my own non-profit. So I had a previous relationship with them and then submitted this. They saw the merit of it and were willing to be a fiscal sponsor.

COLE: So how did Rich Hill come about? I know that you have some family ties to that area, but other than that, how did it come about?

TRAGOS: Yeah, well that was my cousin Andrew and I who, he had a career in a large part as a cinematographer, but also a filmmaker in his own right. He was color timing a film that he worked on and had been staying at my house and we just got to talking about, imagine working together and it was really about Rich Hill. And I've always wanted to do

something on our Uncle Paul. I would always love to do something on him, and he said, yah, yah, I would love to do that. We should do that, we should work together on that! And that's how it started. And then we planned a special trip for him to come out and for us to actually like discuss what that would look like, and how we would do that. And to really dig deeper, was this just really a notion we had, or are we really going to do this? So that's how that came about.

COLE: When did it become real?

TRAGOS: When we decided again like we did with 'Be Good, Smile Pretty' and decided to put a camera on my credit card, good old credit cards, and we then scheduled a shoot. Our camera actually didn't come in time for that first shoot. So, again, I had to borrow a camera and somebody, a fellow parent from my daughter's nursery school is a cinematographer and has an amazing camera package so, loaned it to us for far, far, far below market. And that's what we did our first shoot on. You know and once you start to work together and see the footage and it goes well, and you realize that it's something you want to do, so I think our commitment to it was pretty fast, and pretty clear.

COLE: I guess that's one of the things that's really interesting to me, is that the subject manner of your films is really personal. Have you worked on other projects that aren't documentaries?

TRAGOS: I have. I mean I've worked on, well I've written scripts, well one was made, but that was a short. I haven't written any features that have been made into films. That's still on my to do list. As an undergrad I was a fiction writing major. I went to Northwestern and it was always drilled into us, in terms of what we were going to write for fiction, so we should draw on the personal, on what you know. You know you really have to think about, the story is that you particularly well positioned to tell. And if it's a story that you don't have particular access to, or an opinion about, or a connection to, it's harder to get those stories, well I think number one, it's harder to make yourself, no matter what to completing something. But number two, what is the thing that makes this story special? And often it's a distinct point of view, and it's a distinct access and I think we both felt that with the film in Rich Hill.

COLE: And I'll ask the questions, and you don't have to answer these if you don't want, but are you making a living off your filmmaking? Is that something that, do you make an income off that?

TRAGOS: It's a very good question and it's a very, very important question because sustainability in this profession is extremely difficult. And we have not, for 'Be Good, Smile Pretty' I never paid myself. I mean sometimes my expenses were paid if I were traveling or something like that, the food that I would eat or the bed that I would sleep in would ultimately fall in line with the project. But I put everything personal into that film. I put, my grandmother died in the place of that and left me a very small amount of money and I put that into the film and I won Best Documentary at the LA Film Festival and that was a twenty five thousand dollar cash prize and that went straight into the film. But there's little royalty fees that come in and around and that's not enough to live on. One of the things that we've done on this film and we haven't always is we've given ourselves a very small stipend, once we got a McArthur grant. Which is lower than, it's incredibly meager, but for Andrew who has student loans and who could be taking cinematography, it's the only way that he can do this and not take a cinematography gig. And for me, it's paid, directly to my childcare. So when I'm not with my kids, I'm paying for somebody else to be with them, and so then the stipend that I'm earning then goes towards the kids and their childcare. However, that's not sustainable, unless Andrew was living with me, he couldn't be doing that. He couldn't by on this. And the thing for me, if I didn't have a home, a family, I couldn't by on this. So, I think at some point, it really becomes important for filmmakers to value their work. The filmmaker salary is often the first to go. When you're looking at your budget and you're trying to make it come in at a certain number, or you're trying to get in ??? (17:56) at a certain number, so it's important so, even more and more, especially Sundance have been incredibly supportive about saying, 'You know, you guys need to think about sustainability, and think about your other films. And think about keeping a salary in there, and think about living expenses and all that and building it into the budget.' So that answers that question.

COLE: Yeah, I mean that's kind of one of the things where, that's kind of one of the things that's scared me away from just jumping into a lot of projects and things like that. It's that I've got these other jobs where I have some sort of stability, I guess.

TRAGOS: Yeah, it's not terribly stable and unless you have a slate of projects that you're working on, it each will give a small measure of a little bit here and a little bit there, and you can balance it with work for hire projects. It's hard to stay sustainable. And it's something Andrew and I are considering right now in terms of next projects and things because you want to have a certain standard of what you work on and that, I don't know, it's a big question. Just in terms of what sustainability is, it's hard.

COLE: Right, several of the guys that I've talked to, but Brad Beesley, I don't know if you know him, he did 'Okie Noodling' and 'Sweetheart to the Prison Rodeo' and some of those. And then Ben Steinbauer, Sarah Price who was one of the 'American Movie', they're all working, they've all got separate commercial products. So like Ben Steinbauer does national commercials for like Popeye's, and Beesley's doing some stuff with TV shows, doing some reality TV and he said, 'I'll go work two, three months out of the year doing reality TV, and it basically allows me then the leisure to go out and shoot these documentaries and these things that I really want to be working on.'

TRAGOS: Yeah, exactly. You have to balance it with something. It's just something that, how that absorbs your time and life, because then you just become the reality TV director, or can you still make a commitment to not doing that for twelve months out of the year, or ten months out of the year and giving your documentary work ten. So, yah, it's tricky.

COLE: With independent, how do you define what an independent film is versus like a studio film, or something that's not independent. What is, is there a line, or a budget number that is, magic number where you get to a point where you are no longer and independent do you think?

TRAGOS: No, I don't think it has anything to do with budget numbers, I think it only has to do with basically final cut and creative control. And so, I think if you're able to

make a film, you know the film that you want to make, it's not a work for hire, I mean, if your studio is involved and they're involved from the beginning, they're going to have a lot of opinions about the way that it's shaped, the way the story develops. If you keep creative control, and it's only yours, it's independent, you know. I mean you cobbled together the funding for it, and through that you keep control, then you're, I mean I think theoretically because you're cobbling the funding together, the budgets are always going to be smaller. But there are higher indie movies, higher budget indie movies and lower budget indie movies. And then there are low budget studio pictures and there might even be some overlap on those budget numbers so there's no magic number that makes it an indie film.

COLE: The spirit of the production or even not even the spirit, but the actual, you're saying creative control then?

TRAGOS: Yeah, total. And even just, even when you can just have it boil down to Final Cut, although I'm sure there are some directors that work on studio pictures and get Final Cut. But I even think just the influences, I mean how much you really are, self-motivated and not driven by any other forces that are telling you how to make your film.

COLE: So what about audiences then? How does that factor into your decisions? When you're creating your projects, do you think about them? Like when you started 'Rich Hill' were you thinking who are we going to market this thing to? Or did you just did you say this is a story that I feel I need to tell someone to make it, no matter who watches it?

TRAGOS: Well you think about it. I mean, I do write grant proposals and I do specify target audiences and I do imagine, wanting it to be seen by families like our subjects, but also general audiences. I mean we're making a lot of choices on this documentary to make it have a lot of narrative structure, and a narrative feel, in part so that it can be more universal and feel more like a movie and we're going to tell you a story and come with us on a story. And so, I think we think about our audiences all the time. Even how is this going to be experienced? Is this going to be confusing? Is this going to move people? Are we, so I think the audience is always being thought of. At the same time, you know that you're not, if we were making a Blockbuster film, and only interested in the hook and

reaching the most people possible, I'm sure that we would make different choices. We know that we're making an independent film, we know that it's about niche, you know, it's not going to be the easiest sell on some high concept. I mean, sci-fi film would be something. So we hope that it will reach a lot of people and you have ideas and plans for how to have it reach a lot of people. You know, part of that is how do we approach a festival strategy, and how do you approach your views, and all that sort of stuff. Can effect how many people see it or know about it.

COLE: What's your niche, do you think?

TRAGOS: Well we're very, what we do, number one, we're tied to a very cinematic film, so we hope that that niche, core, indie filmmaker audience will be drawn to it. And we hope we're going to get into a really good festival so just by the fact that we'll be in a Sundance, or South by Southwest Festival that we'll have a certain mark about people who know about films coming out of there will want to go see it, and will see it. But beyond that I think we're really, really hoping to reach an audience that doesn't see independent films. And that is an audience of certain low income, vulnerable families. And so we talked a lot about, what are the movies they have access to and can we bring this to them in some remote cinema experience, or want to target like Redbox and Walmart as outlets for the DVD and that kind of thing. I think that people who don't have film told very sensitively about their experience, and lives, and we feel that we've told a pretty beautiful story and celebrating them in many kinds of ways, so, this story will bring a lot of hope, perhaps, and inspiration. That's another audience that we're really excited about.

COLE: So as far as distribution, I guess you don't know exactly for this film. Maybe you could talk about some of your experiences too with 'Be Good, Smile Pretty' but so much of it's changed since that film came out, though. But what are some of your plans for 'Rich Hill' as far as distribution? How do you plan, do you know how you're going to get into those, Redbox and are you shooting for Netflix and all those types of things? How are you going to approach that?

TRAGOS: Yeah, well we don't fully know yet. I mean, we have an initial distribution plan but part of the idea is to go to a festival with all of the rights still available, to

work with a sales agent to help us chart out our various distribution windows and how we approach them. But we don't know, the biggest perk for documentary is, TV is the way most people will see them. Although I do feel Netflix is on the rise. Either distributors will come to us, once we have our festival release and we can kind of hash out our plans and priorities then. And any absence of distributors coming to us with, you know, good terms, things that make sense to us, we will self distribute. There's a lot of interesting opportunities for self distribution now. Theatrical, self distribution, and video on demand. We'll kind of have to take it step by step, but ideally, but I think an independent producer needs to be prepared to wear all those hats and in the absence of opportunities that really make sense, they need to continue to shepherd their film and care for it all the way through the various distribution windows. But if there are partners that you can bring on that know, educational, theatrical, or whatever it is, and that's their area of expertise, it's great to work with those partners. And of course they'll take a cut, and that's how they get paid to do that, but I always think it would be good to have those relationships versus doing absolutely everything on your own.

COLE: How much of this film, I know that you and Andrew are partners, but how much of this film do you feel you've, because you're probably listed as both director and producer, right?

TRAGOS: Yeah, do you mean how much is, what do you mean?

COLE: Can you kind of go through all the kinds of things that you've had to deal with? I know we've talked about distribution, but as far as the creative, and then several people that I've talked to about switching roles between the creative side like being the director, and then switching over to be the producer who has to think about things like audience and who has to think about ways to promote the film. I know that with your Kickstarter, that whole thing, that was probably a whole different situation for you too. What are some of the different skill sets that you have to bring as an independent filmmaker?

TRAGOS: That's the thing about an independent filmmaker, you've got to, you have to have a certain understanding, or ability or talent in just about every single area. And if you don't, have a partner that does. So I think with Andrew

and I's collaboration, he comes from a graphic design background, he's of course a cinematographer. I'm not a cinematographer, I mean I can shoot and I have shot but I'm not anywhere near as skilled at it as he is. I'm more skilled as a producer. I mean I'm also as a director, the one doing all the interviews and sort of, finding the subjects and nurturing the subjects and that sort of thing. And Andrew's behind the camera and getting these beautiful shots. But of course we would talk every night, and talk about our approach and talk about how we wanted to do it. And then come the day of, we do our separate roles on the film. So I think we're very well matched. At the same time we kind of know what the other person is doing and have an ability to take over if need be. But you really have to know, you have to know about grant writing, that's a whole other skill, and fundraising, you know and all the Kickstarter stuff, and distribution and networking and presenting the film to an audience because not every filmmaker is like a public speaker, so that's a whole other thing. To be able to do that, to be willing to do that.

COLE: Could you talk a little bit about the Kickstarter experience? At what point did you decide to do that and then what was the process of getting that…

TRAGOS: Well we were out of funds, to put a fine point on it. And we knew it, we could see because we have a monthly burn rate, especially with our editor being on board, and you know, you do have to pay for an editor. Unlike Andrew and me, who can be, lean, lean, lean. We had to pay for our editor, we have an office space, we have to pay rent on our office space. We have our DSL, we have to pay for our DSL. We have our parking, we have to pay for our parking. I mean, there's very specific, we have our burn rate and we could just see that come this date, we were going to be completely out of funds. So it was like, we would either have a grant come through, but we had sort of been through all our grants, or we would have to do a Kickstarter to keep going. We always knew we were going to do it, but then we kind of bumped it up a little, did it a little sooner when we could see that we were cutting things pretty darn close and we needed to get the traditional funding in to keep going. It was a big number that we raised, but it still is not enough to get us to the finish line, which is surprising. But that doesn't mean that we won't still get there. We'll figure it out, beg, borrow and stealing, we'll get it through!

COLE: What was the final amount you raised?

TRAGOS: I think it was sixty four thousand. Kickstarter and Amazon, you know, they take ten percent. And we wanted those, some money that came in was equity, which was interesting. They sort of called us off book and said, we'll do this, but we want our money back. So that was interesting. To deal with that. And then of course there's the process of the film as well, which is interesting, we hired one person to help us more, and she's really going to help us with outreach stuff also. So she was really starting to work with organizational partners. So we worked with her. We worked with someone who helped us design our Kickstarter poster. So there are some expenses also, tied to the film. We're going to do a special window where we have a streaming copied finish of the film done and we have to pay for like a six-year way of doing that. Serious expenses associated with doing a Kickstarter as well. So the end total that comes up is not actually what you see in your bank account in the end. I think everybody knows that, though.

COLE: So who's the equity person? What was that all about?

TRAGOS: His name is David Armelli. And he's somebody because of Kickstarter found out about the film, but he now, he also got a credit, he's also going to be a co-producer on the film.

COLE: Oh, ok. So he is one of the high end, Kickstarter guys there.

TRAGOS: Yeah, exactly.

COLE: So I guess if you could talk a little more about your future plans for the film. What is it that you're working on now? What are the next steps and I know you said you got it submitted to Sundance but that doesn't mean that you're necessarily going to be showing at Sundance.

TRAGOS: Yes. Yeah, exactly. Well the next steps are that, we keep editing. We continue to edit. Our goal right now is to lock picture on November eleventh. But it may be, we may go over on that. When you lock picture, I'm sure you know, when you say that, you've locked picture! So there's no more changes to the picture after that point. So that's

important and once you do the Sundance thing, we were here until wee hours and we would say, okay that we'll just save until we lock picture and we know we want to do that or we know we want to change that scene or we know we want to work on our ending, but we don't have enough time. We have this deadline, so we're going to get it in, it will be in lock step, but we know that we're going to work on that for lock picture. But for lock picture you've got to say, this is it, this is the film. So we had a deadline that we set for ourselves, but obviously if we don't feel confident with it, then it will have to go a couple more days. But then we are going to, we have a composer lined up and our composer is going to be working on our score. And we have a color house that's going to do our color corrections. And we are going to Skywalker Sound to do our sound editorial and sound mix. And they cut the deal through Sundance, so it's not their normal studio rate but it's still a pretty penny. And then we have to master the final DCP. So that's a whole other thing. And we have to do our titling and packaging and all of that. And the other things that we're pursuing is our rights, some of the music rights. Our subjects, some of them listen to Hank Williams, or sing Hank Williams. We have an end credit song and so we have to secure the rights to those songs, and pay the license fees. The other thing that we have, that's in a separate budget but we want to work with an outreach coordinator, hire somebody to support an effort that is ongoing, at least for a year, if not two years around the film. Which is beyond distribution, this is really about impact and outreach, and working with organizational partners and defining goals that can be measured. We want to put forward academic programs or whatever it is so we've got a whole plan around that as well. It would continue beyond just finishing the film.

COLE: What things drive you to create films? Would you be making films if you, it doesn't sound like you're making a large income off of it, so would you still be doing it…

TRAGOS: No, no. I would not be doing it for the money. If I were doing it for the money, I would babysit, which would pay a lot more! My babysitter makes a much higher hourly rate than I do! I think it's expression, it's creative expression, and it's how, telling stories that bring us all together and I think any artistic endeavor is the why. It's to be understood and to understand. In some way to make the world a better place, and bring people together and I think

that’s, I’m interested fundamentally universal stories about love and family. That’s what drives me. Just trying to understand that. I think there are themes that particularly resonate with me and I certainly found that in my first film, and I find that in this film and I find that in projects that really struck a chord with me and I’m wiling to go out on a limb and do.

COLE: And then kind of on a side note, what kinds of films inspire you, or what other films have you seen that, are they documentaries that drive you or do you watch a lot of other fiction films? What kind of things do you get inspired by?

TRAGOS: I do, not as much recently as I would like but they always, you know, I think one of the films early on that inspired me was ‘The Elephant Man’. And that just moved me beyond belief. Also films about Vietnam, when I was a kid, really, really struck a chord because it was a way to be closer to my father. And even the real heavy ones, ‘Deer Hunter’ and ‘Apocalypse Now’, they all were a way of connecting with my father, which is partly why deep down I am a filmmaker. In documentaries, I remember when ‘Salesman’ came out, I was so incredibly moved by that film and then, under the breath of it, and how documentaries could do things different than fiction. ‘Grey Gardens’, which is also another favorite of my documentaries. But there are many, many, many that I’m excited about and I’m so drawn to and are happy that are made and I also feel that I'm less critical as a filmmaker, because I make films and I know how hard it is. So half the time I’m just happily watching a movie and it’s like, and I'm not the biggest, harshest critic because I’m like, man somebody struggled to get this thing made, and what are they trying to say. And like right off the bat, I’m kind of like, you know, I’m happy that someone else made another movie. But then of course it’s, there are some that resonate more than others.

COLE: ‘Salesman’ is definitely, or not ‘Salesman’, ‘Grey Gardens’ is definitely one of my favorites. ‘Salesman’ too. ‘American Movie’, I love that. And that’s one of the things when I talked to Sarah Price, was real interesting. You were talking about building that narrative structure so that it seems a little more of the Hollywood structure. The setups of your scenes, because the traditional Hollywood structure of like an establishing shot and then a medium

shot with both characters and then cut into close ups and all that sort of stuff. And so, were you thinking about those things as you were shooting it too?

TRAGOS: Yes, yes. Although we were even then less traditionally shot kind of set up, we were thinking more in terms of scenes. Then like what was a scene and so just really wanting to think about scenes and amongst our interviews, where we would sit down and have conversations, it was also about being mindful to not get in the way of the scene that was happening, if that makes sense. And then the way that we approached it, in cutting it into a three-act structure, we've been very mindful of that. How we, approached an editorial from a very writerly narrative perspective. But I don't think we're doing anything particularly revolutionary because I think a lot of documentaries do that, more structured in a three-act kind of way.

COLE: I guess I'll have to spoil the film for myself, but what kind of, is there some sort of natural climax, or how did you, how are you structuring the climax of the film?

TRAGOS: Well it's kind of a crisis point for all of our subjects but then it's resolved, so. And it sort of nicely worked out, I mean, we're not, it's not totally script and technology but it doesn't really violate it so hugely either. I mean it's actually pretty true to what happened, it's just, I mean it is true to what happened, but the fact that all these events happened within one week of each other, when it was really about two months of each other. But in the film, one thing happens to one subject and another, but we're also not saying that they happened on the same day. No one would interpret that. But you order that altogether.

COLE: What was your shooting schedule? How many shoot days did you have?

TRAGOS: We had about ninety to a hundred. It's ninety. I mean we had some things where Andrew was doing a one man band kind of thing, like he would go to get, like there would be a sweetheart dance or something, and he would go to get, go on his own to get something specific or on Election Day, we thought it might be nice to have a selection from that, but we're not using that, so! It was like, at the time, he was living in Missouri. You know I'm

looking at the clock and I have to be a little bit mindful of the time but I'm so happy to continue this conversation even tomorrow at twelve if you want.

COLE: I think I'm about done with all the major questions I had, but if I have any other additional questions…

TRAGOS: No, if you want, I just, I have a call at one that I just need to get off at like five to one. So I have another like five minutes if you, but I just looked at my clock and I was like oh my. Okay!

COLE: I'm pretty much wrapped up anyways, I was just asking extra stuff now that I'm curious about anyways. You ended up shooting with the Red?

TRAGOS: Yes, we did.

COLE: I guess I should pick your guy's brain about this some other time but as far as the storage, it seems like at one point I saw a huge rack of hard drives, all on like some sort of rack of some type that you guys had there in your office.

TRAGOS: Yes, we've got two raids but we ended up backing up to tape. Because we actually don't have enough storage, we don't have enough hard drive storage for the footage. So tape is how we've done it and then we just use, we use offline, quick time of the footage. We have to render those quick time and then we edit the quick time. So we're not editing with the four K footage, and then the four K footage then is on tape, backed up to tape. Which was quite an investment, another area of like, but also we had to do it. Because often drives fail and the tapes are more stable and we could do it twice. So each four K was in storage twice. So it was on tape two times. And one batch of tapes is here in LA and one batch of tapes is in my mother's closet in San Francisco. Just in case because things happens, obviously.

COLE: I was just curious because that's something that I struggle with here, because I shoot on even when shooting digitally, I shoot on these thirty two, sixty gigabyte cards and then when you start dumping all that footage on your hard drive, it fills them up pretty quick.

TRAGOS: Yeah, totally.

COLE: Alright well, I won’t keep you any longer today but if I have any other questions, I assume it’s okay for me to give you a call back?

TRAGOS: Totally, totally, yah. In fact, I left you a message when I wasn’t sure if we were going to connect but if you want to even follow up at twelve tomorrow, that should be a good time as well. But whenever, you know, just send me a text. But I’d be more than happy, I think in part we’re a little backed up because we did have to go dark to do the Sundance submission and then we’re playing catch up a little bit here, so.

COLE: Well I don't know if there’s anything I can ever do for you all but let me know, and I think I pretty much have everything, at least this first round and what I have to do then is type all this up, give it to my advisor and she’ll say, oh you should have asked about this and so I may have to give you a call back and talk to you about whatever it is.

TRAGOS: Totally fine. I look forward to it.

Wrapping up

August 2, 2011
Interviewer: Jason Cole
Interviewee: Christine Walker

WALKER: Hello

COLE: Hi, may I speak with Christine

WALKER: This is she.

COLE: Hi, Christine, this is Jason Cole from KU. How are you?

WALKER: Hi Jason, how are you doing?

COLE: Good, good, um, I guess, so, are you, are you clear with what I’m working on here?

WALKER: (Laughter) Yes. What is, what is your dissertation called?

COLE: Well, that’s a good a question.

WALKER: (Laughter)

COLE: It doesn’t really have a, doesn’t have a title yet, but it’s um, basically dealing with the interaction, what I was really looking at, was the interaction between media producers, by my definition of producer I mean those involved in creating the film.

WALKER: Um, hm.

COLE: So, directors, writers, actual producers, even people within the corporate side of things. Putting together the marketing plans and those sort of things too. Um, then the interaction of those people and then their fan base. And just kind of, how, with time and especially in the age of the Internet, how that interaction has changed and how that’s impacting our filmmaking. And I’m especially interested in comic book films, or comic related films, because they’re such a, they have such a large existing fan base that’s moving over to films, a lot of times, so I’m just curious to see how that’s all negotiated. I know a lot of times with the, um, with the comic book films, there’s, uh, some contention between the films and the producers a lot of time. You know like the, the Spider-man films, the fans got all upset about the organic web shooters or the… In the Incredible Hulk they were upset the fact that originally, um, in the first Hulk film he didn’t have his purple pants in some of the initial trailers and things like that. So they were all upset about those kind of things so…

WALKER: That’s interesting. I mean, I don’t, have you talked to Ted yet?

COLE: I haven’t talked to Ted.

WALKER: Yeah, and see. Did you get, do you have his right email?

COLE: I don’t know if I do or not.

WALKER: I have it, double hope dot com.

COLE: Ted at, at, at, like the word double? D-o-u-b-l-e…

WALKER: Yes, Ted at double hope dot com.

COLE: Okay.

WALKER: Cause I think he's going to, I mean, I can certainly answer these questions as best as I can. A, uh, but I think he's going to be very helpful because he, this is an issue that he sort of, really, really interested in. He has a blog. You know… You know, he has a twitter. He's very involved in trying to, um, to create a discourse, uh, between, um, prim- between I'd say the audience and, and the filmmakers….

COLE: Right.

WALKER: …but very much within the film making community.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: So…

COLE: When I talk about the fans a lot of times, I'm just referring to, you know like, and that's one of the problems with the study, there's like, there's academic study of fanaticism and fandom, but really I have a friend who's in marketing. And really a lot of times all we're talking about, when you say fan, a lot of times you're just talking about audience or those kinds of things too.

WALKER: Right, right. It's, you know, it's just as an aside, it's something I've been thinking about quite, quite a lot. I mean, it's been a while since I've done American Splendor. And American Splendor was one of the earlier films in my career. And, um, but since then I've made other films and now I'm starting a new company and part of that company is we're incorporating this trans-media component. Which is, um, which is beyond kind of marketing but is, is, the focus is really trying to get back to, um, story architecture but using media, like, and using the technology, um, to, create iPhone apps, you know. Ways to sort of use, to take advantage of the audience, and, but also create new audience. But also, um, you know that aren't, both audiences may or may not be exactly related to the film itself.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: So, it's kind of a, really fascinating for me to think about, because I, I really come from sort of, you know, the, the art, you know the thing is the thing and… And I, and for a lot of the films that I've done, I haven't spent, I, I, think about audience when I'm trying to raise money and put together a marketing plan. Every film I've done we've done a marketing plan. But, but what really motivates me is really, making the film. And I'm probably horrible when it really comes to thinking about who the fans are other than myself. I've got to get better at that but, anyway!

COLE: So…

WALKER: Shut up from this side of American Splendor.

COLE: No, it's fine. This is all great stuff. I mean this is exactly what I need. Those questions that I had were kind of just a, a jumping off point.

WALKER: Yeah.

COLE: If we get stopped. I really just want to have a conversation with people about that kind of things so. Um, it's escaping me right now, the company that produced American Splendor, was there a larger production company?

WALKER: Yeah, it was Good Machine and maybe I could just start off by talking about how I got involved in that… Um, the company was Good Machine. And it was a company that I really admired. Um, they had done, you know, In the Bedroom, and, some small independent films that I really loved. Some of the earlier Ang Lee works too, sort of films to sort of, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. So I looked at that company as a, as a kind of role model for, for the kind of company that I wanted to either work for or build. And so I reached out to, and so I, um, reached out, yah, reached out to Ted Hope, one of the principals of the company, and started a dialogue with him. Just said, look I'm this new producer, I had just received the Mark Silverman Fellowship Award from the Sundance Institute, which is a mentoring program for new producers. And, um, and they sort of facilitated this meeting. Um, and I just said, 'Look guys, I love what you do, I want to stay in touch. I, you know, if there's anything that I can be involved in with you, or I could

send you projects that you might be interested in, I would love to keep that, keep that dialogue open.'

COLE: Right.

WALKER: Um, and so, when, um, after that I produced a couple of very small films. They were between five hundred thousand and a million dollars. And I kept Ted apprised with what had happened with those films. And they were kind of guerilla kind of filmmaking.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: We raised the money from private equity. We had to do a lot with very little resources. And in the process of making those two films, I, I realized that while it's important to, well I, I very much enjoyed being a creative producer, um, but I, I felt it was equally important to know how to manage the resources. How to do budgets, how to manage time, how to create shooting schedules and so forth. I kind of like learned how to do both of those things… on much bigger films those jobs are separate. You have someone who does the budget and the shooting schedule. And then somebody who produces, supervises that job. And on these two films I had kind of done both of those jobs. And so, um, when, so, uh, so anyway, so Ted kept saying to me, I live in Minneapolis, Ted kept saying to me, 'You know you can't really, I can't see how you can have a career if you're not in one of, not in Los Angeles or New York.' So I decided to, get an apartment in New York and spend some time there. One of the films that I had produced was financed by a New York based company and I was, you know, developing a couple projects with them. And so I called them up and said, 'Okay, I'm in New York.' It happened to be right after nine eleven. And actually, at the time of nine eleven. And it was literally, one, two days before nine eleven happened. I said, 'I'm moving to New York.'

COLE: Wow.

WALKER: And, and a week later, I flew there with three people on the plane because nobody else would fly at that time.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: Flew to New York and he said, 'I have a project. I'd like you to take a look at it.' And so I read American Splendor. It was the best script I've ever read. It felt to me like I had to do the film because it was so different and unique and it was, um, weirdly a film that spoke to me at this terrible time. And, um, and I just thought it was something that needed to be made and I needed to be a part of it. So I met with them, interviewed about the project and met with the directors and you know, they hired me, and a week later I was in Cleveland! So that's how I got involved and I think, now, the funny thing is, is Ted had raised money already but he had only raised about one and a half million dollars. And so he was looking for somebody who could, who would, not could, but was willing to say, 'Okay, I'm willing to make this work for one and a half million dollars.' And that seems like a lot of money to me, at the time, but it really wasn't. And what I learned, much later, is he had tried to hire somebody else to do the job but they refused because they said it wasn't possible to do with such limited money.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: And so that's how I kind of ended up, line producing the film. The other thing about it is, it was the first film that I had ever line-produced. And while, you know, a line-producer, what they do is, you know they do the budget, manage the resources and negotiate all the deals, they come up with the shooting schedule, they hire the crew, they do all those things and while I was very involved and integral in those roles for my other movies, I wasn't that person. I had other people who would, like a production manager, who would handle some of the other kinds of details, you know, would deal with some of the union rules that I knew nothing about. And so, to actually be in that position, was a big, it was a big wake up call and I was woefully not prepared for it. What I think I brought to the job I think was incredible enthusiasm, and a willingness to do whatever it took to make the film happen.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: And so there were, moments like you know, like for instance there was a location and our location manager couldn't secure the location. They had tried, everybody, the directors had gone and tried to get the owners to let us use the location, it's the restaurant scene where R.

Crumb and Harvey Pekar decide to start working together. And the directors really, really wanted that restaurant but the restaurant owners were like, 'We don't want to shut down our place, you guys don't have any money to pay us anyway, we have a large clientele and they count on being able to come here everyday.' And so I was willing to go in, everyday, for several weeks to the restaurant and eat, you know I went in everyday and ate breakfast there, and I begged them, 'Please let us shoot here. I'm not going to leave unless you let us shoot here.' And finally, I think they just got so sick of me that they said, 'Okay fine, we'll let you shoot here.' Or there were things, you know, there were resources, the camera equipment, the DP and I felt very strongly that we should shoot this film on 35 millimeter film even though we were budgeted for video.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: We felt that in order to maintain a seamless quality between the different, you know, aspects, the documentary stuff and what went in to the live action stuff, we had to shoot on 35 millimeter film. And we wanted to use this new camera package from Panasonic, I mean Panavision, I'm sorry, and he wanted to use it, sort of this new technology. And again, we didn't have the money for it but I called Panavision and I badgered them ad nauseum until they finally let us have this equipment. I think other people, you know I've worked on other films since then and there are other people who would just give up. But I was crazed, I guess… So crazed that I just couldn't and wouldn't and so, I was able to secure resources and make it work just because I was kind of this crazily enthusiastic.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: So those were my, what I really brought to the table. And you know, I'm proud of that and I think the film looks the way it does because of that.

COLE: Right. Yah, I think it's an incredible film. I was really blown away by it when it came out. I remember, I'm a big, well, I'm not a big fan of Crumb I guess but I really enjoyed, the Zwigoff documentary and those things.

WALKER: And Ghost World and…

COLE: Right. You said HBO was involved, were they, how heavily were they involved with the actual production of the film? Did they have executives who checked in with the production as it was going along, or once they gave the money did they pretty much give full trust over?

WALKER: Well what HBO did, the way it was set up was a negative pick up deal, which essentially is, and they did that, um, which is essentially, we're not picking up the film until, we're making no promises to pick up the film until you've made it. So we're willing to give you some money. And so it's kind of difficult for them because on one hand, they probably are more controlling on some of their other films, but on a negative pick up deal, they couldn't, by virtue of it's definition they have to have a hands-off role, that said, they, so I think their role was actually quite fine because they definitely were hands-off to the extent that they let these team do their work and they weren't, you know there were a couple of times maybe in the casting process where they wanted to assert their opinion but they didn't make their opinion be the last word. And so they, they really did give a lot of creative freedom to everyone. What I liked about their involvement was they would check in and if there was any way they could help, which was not very often, then they would provide that help, but they definitely provided that sort of support. And because this was a new job for me, I was able to use them as a professional resource, which I really appreciated.

COLE: Right. Yah, it's very interesting. I've been talking to, I've got some connections to some of the Spider-man, Sam Rami, Grant Curtis and some of those people that, just talking to them, pretty interesting to hear the differences between you know, kind of both small, like Ghost House Productions, with the Drag Me to Hell and those sort of things, versus working on a big production like Spider-man with just the influence so I could…

WALKER: Yah, I can't…I mean, it must be so, I don't know, every moment must be so dramatic. I don't even know how those movies turn out, quite frankly. But I don't have a lot of experience making those big movies. Interestingly again, Good Machine, at the time we were making American Splendor was also making The Incredible Hulk. And so, and I think Ted's perspective, even though I think he was much more hands-on, he was definitely more hands-on with American Splendor and his focus was pretty much that film

during the same time, he will have a unique perspective about, you know both…

COLE: Having a foot in both worlds, kind of?

WALKER: Yah, both kinds of worlds. Exactly. Now the only thing about, the other, the only thing about HBO to was, the biggest difference for me, was that, even though we had little money, no body believed that. And so, unlike my experience on other films where I could go to people and say, 'Look, we don't have any money and it's a low-budget' and they believed me, it was harder to say that. You know I would have people say, 'Well you know, you're AOL Time Warner, what are you talking about? This is an HBO movie, you guys have money.'

COLE: Right.

WALKER: But I, you know, that wasn't my, we didn't at the time. And the other difference I think in working with HBO is that after we finished shooting the film and they saw that it, it was, it could be, they saw the potential for it, then they were willing to put more money into post. And that's a difference from most of the independent films that we work on. We don't have a lot of money. Deep pockets to finance, you know a healthy post, even if the film is great. So that was good and I think that made a huge difference when it came to the music. I mean, they were willing to invest in the, in the score, which is, you know, makes, you know, huge part of the film. And, they, they invested in the color correction process, which just enhanced the film visually. Sound mix, and you know I think that, it made a discernable difference in the look of the film or to the final product. It's interesting that you were talking about, I mean, I know that they did put together marketing plan and I remember at the beginning of production we did have a meeting with the HBO team to talk about the different audiences for the film and you know, the jazz audience and the Harvey Pekar's fan base and about the way they might sell the film. But during the production, other than say an EPK, we didn't really do a lot and have much, there didn't seem to be a lot of organized activity when it came to addressing the fans. You know, now people set up websites before the film is even in production.

COLE: Well, did you see the thing with the Batman, the new Dark Knight Rising?

WALKER: Nuh uh.

COLE: Yah, they had the crazy thing where they had the, they set up a website and when you went, it was just a completely black screen but there was an audio track that played this almost Gregorian chant, like, I mean it was undecipherable, you couldn't tell what they were saying, or anything.

WALKER: Really?

COLE: And so, the fans of Batman, one of them took it into an audio-editing program, and was trying to play it backwards, and forward, and playing with it and trying to figure out what it was. And he looked at the wave form of the audio, and the wave form for the audio actually spelt- it had a hashtag for a twitter account, or no, a twitter account, an at…

WALKER: Oh my God.

COLE: And so the, the wave form actually led the fans to a Twitter account for At the Dark Knight Rising, and there were instructions there that gave instructions on how you could share this hashtag and then you could get updates, if you followed this Twitter account you would get updates about the film and things. And once, and it promised that once you reach a certain number of followers, that people had re-tweeted this hashtag enough they would reveal a secret about the film. So eventually they met the number and then, they released a picture of the new Batman, the Bane villain that's going to be in the film. But it was made up of all the profile pictures of all the people who had posted the hashtags.

WALKER: Oh my God!

COLE: So it was like a mosaic picture. And so I mean they're really pushing the envelope with like, fan interaction and like, just because that film's not even due out until late next summer I guess, and so, they're already starting this social networking buzz and getting the fans, that's what really interests me too is the idea of getting the audience to work for you as a film maker too. I don't know if you're familiar with the terms, crowd sourcing and those kinds of things.

WALKER: Yup, yah.

COLE: Like kickstarter and some of those kinds of places, where you can actually go and post a project and people will get behind you, before you even start, so you have an audience who is supporting you before you even start.

WALKER: I know. It's pretty amazing. I just actually, some acquaintances of mine, they just raised one hundred thousand dollars for a kickstarter, on the kickstarter campaign. Which is just kind of phenomenal. And then they got someone to match that one hundred thousand. I know, it's pretty incredible and what I would say is the American Splendor, I don't, and again, Ted will probably be able to speak more to this, but I don't know how, we were pretty, you know, it was much simpler back then, the expectations of what, the ability or the technology was such that we didn't expect to be able to do much. But you know, I definitely, think it is kind of interesting that because I feel that American Splendor definitely raised the fan base for Harvey's other work, you know, for new work to be done.

COLE: Right. Is there any other kind of, do you have any statistical data showing that after the film come out, was there a spike in purchases and all those kinds of things, in all his previous work? I assume there probably would be but…

WALKER: There would be, again, Ted, Ted may have that or, I remember looking at some of that stuff because we were setting up a marketing plan for another film that I did called Howl. But I think he would have that. I think he, Ted followed that pretty closely. I mean we would get emails from Ted saying that, oh, this many books were sold or, he kind of, I mean, he was pretty close to Harvey.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: And so, all of that, more carefully than I did.

COLE: I guess, keep moving through questions here. Just let me know if you're running short on time.

WALKER: Sure.

COLE: As far as like, the people who were involved with the production of the film, question number three if you've got that list, but just basically what was kind of the hierarchy, like who reported, was there an ultimate person who made all of like, if there was a decision, who did you go to? Was that Ted or was that somebody…

WALKER: Yah, well I reported directly to Ted. And he, you know, I mean on most films there are kind of the creative team and the producers often included in that creative team of course, and, but they also serve as kind of the liaison between the producing, you know between the creative team and also the kind of, the management team of the film. And, which is, as the line-producer I sort of oversaw that, the technical hiring of crew and you know, they overlap a bit, but I think that Ted was really the head of that. That said, you know, it's hard to say who is really the head because the directors are often considered the, they're definitely the creative leaders of the team. And in this situation I think unlike on most films that I've done, they were both, they both equally started out as the driving force. Why? Because Ted was really the one who wanted to make this film about Harvey Pekar. He was a huge fan of his. He actually hired other people to work on the script, at one time there was a script written by Harvey and Joyce, and apparently that didn't work out. And then he had another director working on the project, but that director didn't get along with Harvey and Joyce. And so, he really was the one who wanted to make this film. And then of course when Bob and Shari became involved they made it their own. They brought their own take to the story and it was almost like they were made to be the directors for this film because it apparently it didn't take them that long to write the script, that we ultimately shot. So, yah, so that was really the management structure. We all reported to Ted, but creatively Bob and Shari were really the ultimately the leaders as it were.

COLE: Ted was kind of the hub though between the creative, like the directors, technical side of it with you and probably, also the other side of it, the business side.

WALKER: He was the liaison with, you know, he was a primary liaison to the studio, to the HBO. He was really at the center of bringing all these teams together.

COLE: So, where there, you talked a little bit about, the differences in opinion and things like that. How did, I guess, Bob, I don't know how to say Bob's last name, Puchini?

WALKER: Bob Pulchini, uh huh.

COLE: And Shari Berman, how did they, do you know more about the story about how they became involved other than…

WALKER: They had made this, they had made a couple of really fun, lovely documentaries and I think they, you know, I don't know, I think Ted just reached out to them and said, I have this story and would you be interested in writing a script for it? That's what I know, they might be able to speak more to that story.

COLE: Yah, I'll just have to see if I can get a hold of them. I see they also did Cinema Verite which is the, that looks really interesting, we don't have HBO though.

WALKER: They're working on a new film called Emma Jean, which I think they're going into production pretty soon. It would probably be interesting to see what they kind of, you know, their take on it.

COLE: Yah, because I'm kind of curious about too, even like if there were differences in opinion and things like that, being kind of a green horn to all that, the actual, you know I've never been on set other than for a few weekends I was on the set of Election up in Omaha.

WALKER: Oh wow!

COLE: But the, but really understanding the way that, the whole, I don't know what the right terminology is…

WALKER: Negotiating the creative…

COLE: Negotiating the, yah. The whole negotiating, I mean if the cinematographer says, 'Well I really think we should be using this color stock' and then how, does he go then to the director and say, 'This is what we should be doing.' And then if they disagree…

WALKER: They're the final say creatively.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: You know, they, the cinematographer will make suggestions but the way it worked on American Splendor, and this isn't the case on every movie but the way it worked with American Splendor is first of all, I don't think we changed anything in the script. There might have been disagreements, and actually, there might have been some notes that Ted provided before, we had a final script. But once I got involved in the process, the script that they sent me was the script we shot, which is very unusual. I don't think I've ever worked on a film where there weren't some changes. You know, while during, in other words, you're making the film and then location changes and they have to re-write that. Or an actor comes in and they want to fiddle around with the dialogue and so there's a lot of re-writing going on. In this case, nobody changed anything, we shot, you know, we shot everything, which was kind of a miracle when I look back. So there, so differences in opinion in regard to the script, there weren't any. I don't remember any. The only differences that happened were really about, how to manage, how to film the scenes with the resources we had. You know, it's like if the scene writes it's snowing, and we don't have snow, which happened with us, then how are we going to do that? And so it's really about, it becomes more about problem-solving. And then differences in opinion, but the way it worked really was just, those guys were just very open collaborators. They trusted the people we hired. You know, Therese DePrez, who was the production designer, who did a brilliant, brilliant job, they trusted her and her experience in what she brought to the look at the film. And so I didn't, of course, there's always the final say. She'll bring them photographs and she'll show them different locations of what she likes and then they'll say yes or no. And I, you know, I don't recall them, you know, anyone ever putting anything, 'You know we disagree about this but we're going to do it your way anyway.' But usually, but usually, it goes, you know everybody pretty much differs always to Bob and Shari's opinion. Fortunately they were collaborative and they were open to good ideas.

COLE: So how does that work exactly when it's team-directed? Was Shari more the lead director, are they a film-making team? It looks like they've worked on several other things together so…

WALKER: Well this was the first narrative feature film, well if you can even call it that, but it was the first narrative feature film that they had done together. And my experience with them is that, there were times when they would disagree and we would just have to wait until they came into an agreement and then, you know, and then they would com-, you know communicate what their, what, you know, one opinion. You know, if we, it would have been impossible to work with them, and I know that they would have differences of opinion, but no one ever acted on those differences, we had to wait until they came to a compromise or a collective decision. Otherwise it would have been impossible and sometimes that slowed things down. And be like, you know, unless we're both agreeing, we're not moving forward. So, um, and I think it's not, it doesn't necessarily mean, that they're choosing to work that way but we, but we as a team, you know, production team has to work that way so we just, you know, we just wait until they come to a decision. Rather than moving forward. And some people did move forward and I did not allow that.

COLE: Right. I guess we've kind of talked about that already but as far as, you said it was mainly Ted was kind of the driving force behind this whole thing. I guess maybe he would have more insight on that, but did he, was he, did he get more involved with the fans, does he go to conventions and things like that where he interacts with people. Did he have any sense of audience expectations for the, like representing Harvey's work or any of those kind of things?

WALKER: I think that yah, that's definitely asking him. From my experience with him, I saw him, he's a fan. He's probably the biggest fan of anyone. And so I felt that he was saying, I'm making this movie for me, because I'm a fan. And he trusted that no one could be more of a fan of Harvey Pekar's work than him. And so, whatever he was doing would be, you know, in the right, right for the fans. I mean, that was my experience. He may see it differently but I definitely, always, you know, when we had questions about Harvey, how to deal with Harvey or there were questions about comic books, we would always, oftentimes people would go to Ted. Because he knew about it more than most people.

COLE: And it's interesting too that Harvey was so involved with the film. I mean you had that documentary aspect of the film too so that, I mean I've interviewed Stan Lee

about the Spider-man thing, and talking with him, he's listed as executive producer, so that leads people to think, oh, he leads this big part in it. But he literally admitted to me, you know, I showed up, did my cameo appearance and that's, that's the only thing I did with these films at all. That just kind of blows me away too, so to me that kind of explains maybe some of the success that you had, with the, you know, being well received with the fans. I mean, did you have any, were you aware of anyone who came out after the film and said, oh that's not how this should have been or disagree?

WALKER: You know, no. And, in fact, I do think it helped that Harvey was there. It helped, I think again, Ted really laid the groundwork with Harvey and Joyce because he involved them in the process of developing the script. Even, he even got them to agree that they weren't the people to write the script. You know, it's just pretty remarkable. And, you know, we were all nervous about having Harvey and Joyce around, because while we wanted them to creatively support the project, we didn't want them to interfere. You know, because, once it's started, once they said, you know, we support this script, then it really became the director's film. And so we were slightly, I know certainly from my part, I was concerned that, and based on everything I had heard about Harvey, I felt that it was my job to protect the directors. And to protect their creative process. And yet, they, you know, they were, um, and there were sometimes when for instance, Joyce would want to come on set and it just, we tried to discourage her because I think she may, there were times when she might have been more vocal about stuff. And you can't come on set and say you want to change stuff because the stuff that we're shooting, has been weeks in the planning. In the making. Um, Harvey, and their presence also effected the actors, Paul Giamatti loved it when Harvey was around. He sort of liked hanging out with him because it helped him in his process.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: Hope Davis didn't like hanging around with Joyce. Because for her, that disrupted her process. She didn't want to, she wanted to sort of create this character on her own and she didn't want to always kind of have the character sort of, the real person there. It threw her off.

COLE: Yeah, I guess I could see that. It would be almost like you were trying to imitate them almost.

WALKER: Right, and you would want it to be an authentic performance. So they had different processes. But nonetheless, the fact that these two were involved in the project and were very supportive all along, you know, throughout, made, I think, made all the difference. Of course they're [the fans] not going to come out and say, 'Oh, I hated this film.' And you know, Harvey was, they were very excited about promoting the film and they were at most of the film festivals and so, I think, any concerns, you know, it would have been hard for his fans to complain.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: You know, this is an aside but I did a film called Factotum and it was written by, you know, based on the novel by Charles Bukowski and we had a kind of similar concern about his fans.

COLE: Right, I was going to say, and with Howl too, I mean…

WALKER: Yah, yah! And, um, so you know, when we made Factotum, we very much involved Charles Bukowski's widow and she wasn't, she hated Barfly and she was very vocal about not liking it. And Charles Bukowski didn't like Barfly and we didn't want that to happen with our film and so, Linda was involved and we were very much relieved when she said she loved it.

COLE: Right.

WALKER: You know. So it was nice having them involved. And consequently, like with Factotum, you know we changed a lot of, we changed the film. We shot it in Minnesota and it was set in California. And so we thought, oh my gosh, all the fans are going to kill us, but because I think Linda was very vocal about her appreciation for the film, that helped. And we didn't, and we heard very few criticisms.

COLE: Yah, I'm a big Wes Anderson fan. I don't know if you like him or not, but…

WALKER: Oh yah, I love him.

COLE: But um, yah when Fantastic Mr. Fox came out, I kind of followed that pretty closely about how he, his whole process of going to Rhoad Dahl's writing, you know, his hut and all those kind of things.

WALKER: Oh really?

COLE: Yah and he actually got the permission of, I can't remember Rhoad's wife's name but, basically again, the same thing, he got permission from her, and she actually let him into his studio and he got to look at through Dahl's notebooks and those kind of things. And a lot of the props and things are based off of the, the home, Rowe Dahl's home and studio and things like that. A lot of that was really interesting to me to find out how he incorporated those things into, made the people comfortable with what he was doing, and kind of adaptation of…

WALKER: I mean for them I'm sure that's part of his, what makes it so much fun to do the film. You know, to get to know the writer and, um, yah, so that is very cool.

COLE: Yah, so, what you're saying, similar thing with Ted. When you respect someone, you're almost a fan of what they do, and then you're trying to create something based off that.

WALKER: Yah, absolutely. You're, yah. We had an experience with Howl, in that, of course Allen Ginsberg has a lot of fans, people who were, you know, when we were shooting in New York, tons of people would come up. Unlike in Cleveland, there weren't that many, I was surprised at how many, a few people knew about Harvey Pekar, or how few of the people that we encountered knew of Harvey Pekar, even though he lived in Cleveland. But, on the Allen Ginsberg film, of course, everyone and their dog had some story to tell about Allen Ginsberg. And so there's this component, there's this animation component to the film and then live action and some documentary, similar to American Splendor. And, um, when we first screened the film a few times, people, we got, you know, and we had some test screenings and we handed out comment cards. And some people said, you know, the animation, I don't like the animation; Allen Ginsberg would never have been, have liked this animation and you're not doing justice to him doing this kind of animation. Well, it was like, ironically, not ironically, that animation and animator was a person Allen Ginsberg had worked with. And

he created a graphic novel, or collaborated with this other writer, or I'm sorry, collaborated with an artist on this graphic novel and those, the artwork from that graphic novel inspired our animation. And we used the same animator. So, then, in order to sort of address that, we put a card in the beginning of the film saying, animation was really, you know, taken from a book, written by Allen Ginsberg, and you know, I can't remember what the exact language was but we reference the fact that this was sort of inspired by his work on the book. And then it stopped, no one ever complained about that again and we didn't get it in any of the, the, um, reviews. The later reviews. Kind of interesting. It makes a difference, I guess.

COLE: Right. Just legitimizing yourself with the fans.

WALKER: Exactly.

COLE: Because a lot of times they know more about it than anybody. You know what I mean? Even the creators and things like that. And that's one of the interesting things to me too, they talk about the power of the fan and the power of the audience, being able to take this object that's been put out there and being able to change it and make it their own. And do all these interesting things with it. I don't know, do you have any experiences with that? I don't know, finding if people have taken…

WALKER: The fans or the artist?

COLE: The fans themselves will take, oh you know, with like Star Trek and even some of those bigger ones, there's a lot of examples in Star Wars where they make the fan films, where they write a fan fiction based on the character based on the universe that is in the film and those kind of things, so, just talk about a lot of the authors, what I say is kind of a romanticizing of the fans themselves where, they claim they have this power over the media, ultimately, in a way they are creating a film for the audience. In my opinion, anyways, it seems like to me, that no matter what the fans do the power really lies with the filmmaker to me, I don't know if you agree or not.

WALKER: That's really interesting. I definitely agree. You know I tried to, I mean obviously you need fans to come see your films, I guess. But maybe they don't even need to be fans to see it, you know, I don't know. But I do think that

if you allow, um, the fans to dictate the, even though there is an important relationship there, I think if you allow the fans to dictate the work, right? Then I'm not, you know, I think what you're creating is, I guess, popular culture. I definitely don't think you're creating something that's necessarily new and the goal is to create new work.

COLE: Well even with the Star Wars films, I don't know anybody who wasn't disappointed with the prequels, you know.

WALKER: Right.

COLE: That's an instance there, where, perhaps they could have done a better job if they would have listened more to the fan base, there. At the same time, there's kind of a line too where there are filmmakers who are strictly in it to make money and there are other filmmakers who are in it for art, for art sake, I guess you want to say it that way. But the people, like I feel like Wes Anderson and some of those people who are kind of the auteur, who are kind of almost what they're called, but to me it seems like they're the real, artist. They've got a vision in their mind of what they want to create and if the audience likes it, that's great and if they don't, well that's okay too. As long as they get to create their vision, I guess.

WALKER: Right. Well that's a really interesting topic to think about. I can see where you can get a whole dissertation out of this, right?

COLE: Yah, I mean that's what I'm going for, is just sort of like, and too, in a lot of the fan literature is what I'm working towards, there's this, like I said, kind of romanticizing the fan of, where they say they have all this power and then they paint, the producer as like all controlling, they don't let the fans have any control over it. And that's kind of changed over time, where now we're seeing producers encourage that kind of lively interaction between the creative team and the audience and those kind of things. For a long time it was this whole binary of the good fan versus the corporate producers, and what I'm trying to go for, you know, like with our real world it seems that there's lots of shades of gray. We have these artistic directors who are working, trying to express their vision and kind of, also at the same time, earn a living for their families and those kind of things too.

WALKER: Right, I mean, also, and it's I think never more than now are we aware of the fans. Because of the technology, because I think, and question today is their ability to tweet, or as soon as they see the film. And so I think, even myself I've had to, I've had to be much more concerned about audience, fans, you know the fans of James Franco and what they're going to say when they see, or John Hamm, or I don't know who, I mean, what they're going to say when they see the film. And if it's in keeping with their expectations or not and what the consequences of that will be. And I think, you know, for me, I'm, I try not to think too hard about it because again, I'm trying to create original work. And provocative work. And if I'm too beholden to the fans, then I might as well, they might as well re-release the old movie, or… I just, that's my opinion. I'm an independent filmmaker, the films I do are not mainstream. That's why Ted, Ted, although I find him to be a very independent filmmaking thinker, um, he has a, he can give a great perspective given that he was involved in The Incredible Hulk and American Splendor, both at the same time. You know, I don't, and just in my limited experience in working with, you know, true Hollywood movies, I think you have a different mindset as a producer. You know, you're trying to satisfy a mass audience. You're trying to satisfy the business interests of the company. And you, and you're, and unless you do that, you don't survive. Where, as an independent filmmaker, certainly you have to satisfy business interest, but if you don't create something original, then you also can't continue to make work.

COLE: Right. Yah, it's a fine line you have to walk.

WALKER: It is. So for me, that's why the trans-media part of it, or the label is so intriguing for me. And probably is to the same end. But the idea of creating, you know, a new story, and bringing an artist in to create new stories, that maybe inspired by a certain film, or is, is very fascinating.

COLE: Yah the interactivity of it too is interesting to me just the whole, like you said, building applications and what was the, I've got a four-year-old daughter, so what is it, Rio, how they built the whole, they built video game levels for Angry Birds, you know and so trying to pull people in that way.

WALKER: Yah, you know, exactly. And then on the other side of it, you know, I had a friend, and this was a few years ago and I was trying to kind of figure out what to do, you know, with a company that I had founded, and he was, he worked for Disney. And he said to me every single show, you will see on Nickelodeon, or whatever that is, every single show is about marketing. So we bring the marketing team in even before, sometimes, the creative team. And the toys the kids are playing with, are all toys that we've got a commercial for somewhere during the program. All of those decisions are made by the marketing team. And it's just like, ok, you know, I just can't, then you're just creating more, you know, consumer products I guess. So there's a fine line, I think that everyone has to think about. And I don't think the producer is the big bad guy here.

COLE: Right and I think that's, like I was a big Star Wars nerd growing up. But even with like Lucas, that's something that intrigued me about him, is that originally he was the real independent spirit, where he wanted to break away from the studios, that's why, it's ironic to me that it's kind of turned around, that he's like this huge, Lucas Films has got their own, I mean they are a huge studio themselves. I think at first he had these good intentions and then the whole marketing aspect of like, oh, we can sell these action figures and make a ton of money off those too and those kind of things too. And I guess it's okay too, if that's what you're in it for.

WALKER: Well it's so funny because, like they have, he has Skywalker Ranch, we've done our sound mixes there in a couple films. Skywalker Ranch is this gigantic, gorgeous place where they have these studios set up to do sound, right? And you walk, you go there, and it feels like Disneyland because everything is so perfect. You know, like the fake houses and the fake bridge and the fake, I mean, it feels perfect and fake. And I'm like, there's nothing original about this place here. It's, it's created, all the building, and they were saying, he actually designed everything. He's the one who said, 'Ok, I want this bridge here, or I want this building there.' Of course the building is filled with real Norman Rockwell paintings. It's like, Skywalker Ranch is out of a Rockwell painting! And it's like, it's trying, it's replicating and trying to create this world which is about nothing, is the opposite of being creative and new and innovative. Just really kind of fascinating to me. I mean, it's a lovely place and you

definitely want to go there and, you can play baseball on the baseball diamond, work all day and then go play baseball. It's crazy. But I think, wow, this is George Lucas. This is what he built out of all this. Really amazing. And this is what, and it's not just, ok, his money bought it, he himself, has a hand in all of those things. That's what they said was kind of unique, is just that he's the one who, who drew the bridge and he's kind of weirdly involved in everything on the ground.

COLE: And my brother, my oldest brother and I like to debate film stuff about that a lot too and it shouldn't be a conversation about George Lucas I guess but like as far as the film, I argued that I wish he would have listened to the fans more on the prequels and my brothers said that he thought that, to him it seemed that, it was one of those kind of things where he was that auteur, where he had this vision that this Jar Jar Binks character is going to be great. And like he didn't care if people liked it or not, if people thought it was goofy or whatever, it was his idea and that was the end of it. And so, I don't know, another topic for another day I guess but, one of those kind of things, I don't know what his feelings are on that. So as far as your production company, what kind of things, just out of curiosity, what are you working on and…

WALKER: Well, mine are more, um, the last company that I had, and I'm still involved in the company, I just, um, and I still produce, I co-founded the company and you know, with a partner. And so I'm still involved but I'm starting this other company. And this other company, I want to focus more on projects that, um, are, have more diversity. I'm half Hawaiian and I really, I have two Hawaiian projects that I really want to do. And, um, there's a Native American project. And so, it's more that, you know, there's still independent films, maybe a little bit bigger budget. Still, you know, I feel it's important to have stars. You know, in the last film that I did was with my other company, was a Lawrence Kasdan film with Diane Keaton and Kevin Kline, which is coming out, we just finished it and it's coming out. And I, and while I loved making that film, it's not necessarily the kind of films I'm making with this new company. They're more. I don't think we'd be making a comic book film. You know, stories about different cultures.

COLE: Are you familiar with Kevin Wilmott? Who did CSA, Confederate States of America?

WALKER: He did what?

COLE: Confederate States of America.

WALKER: Who wrote that book? No, I mean, I know the name. I just…

COLE: He did the, he did the film. It was on IFC picked it up but, he's one of the professor's over at KU but he did kind of a mockumentary based on what would have happened if the South would have won the Civil War.

WALKER: Oh wow.

COLE: It was pretty interesting.

WALKER: I'll have to look that up.

COLE: It just reminded me, you were talking about, these, Battle of Bunker Hill, The Only Good Indian is another one that he did.

WALKER: Oh wow, wow! I will definitely have to look it up.

COLE: Yah, when you were talking about it, it just reminded me of, sounded like some of the stuff that he's doing, might fit well with what you're doing.

WALKER: Yah and I think there might be at length, there's this one film project that I'm doing called The Bankage, written by the director, or the writer of House of Sand and Fog. And it's set in the Native American, in a town near a Native American reservation that also owns a casino. And it has to do, it's a thriller but it has to do with a sort of institutional racism within the banking industry. And so, even though, you know, this guy's an institutional banker and he has to, he has to befriend, kind of a visionary Native American leader in order to find out information about a bank that they're building. And, you know, it's kind of a bit like Grand Torino a bit, but by befriending him and getting to know him better he, he becomes more aware of his racism and the impact that has had on the communities. And of course he changes. Um, but even then there might be some interesting trans-media projects here that have to do with the banking industry or…

COLE: I was going to say even connecting to like those people, you know, the Native Americans and those kind of things.

WALKER: Yah, absolutely.

COLE: It seems like there could be some interesting connections there. Which is, in Lawrence, Kansas, which is where KU is, there's Haskell University, it's like one of the only, if the only, I think, university totally for Native Americans and so, the TOGI is what they call it for short, but The Only Good Indian was all about, um, basically a bounty hunter who was Native American who tracked down his own, his own people when they escaped, you know, when they escaped from these schools, kind of a, um, treason, or not treason officer, truant officer kind of thing. Yah, kind of interesting.

WALKER: Oh wow, that sounds really, like a, yah I'll have to look that up. Sounds like it would be something right up my alley!

COLE: Yah, that's what it sounded like.

WALKER: Hopefully that's, now that's where we need to find fans!

COLE: Right!

WALKER: Right, but I don't think we're going to find, it's harder to find that kind of fan base.

COLE: And that's one of the things that's kind of interesting to me too is about filmmaking because I have inspirations to do some short, independent type films too. Like, I like traditional animation, and hand-drawn and stop motion I guess, but I also like documentary I guess too. That's another reason why I want to stick in the Midwest too because with documentary, and short animations and things like that, I feel like I can work on those with a pretty small crew.

WALKER: Absolutely, you're actually based, your research, you might be more valuable than everybody! After you're done. I mean, you're learning a lot. The kind of research you're conducting right now is the kind of research that I'm doing. Not necessarily because I want to do comic book

films, but because I want to apply those concepts and those ideas to those kind of films that I'm doing.

COLE: For me that's just what's really interesting too, is just how, how does all of this translate and work for independent filmmakers. How can we, how can we utilize all this information about social networking, and all these cross-platform video games and applications, how are there ways that we can utilize those too to build an interest in independent films.

WALKER: Exactly! Get that done right away! We need you! We need that to be done right away.

COLE: Right. So, is there any way, you've mentioned Ted several times, is there any way that you have regular connection with him still?

WALKER: Yah, yes. I could, if you want, I could send him an email and cc you and said, and let him know that we've spoke, and that he should call you. He will love to talk to you. He loves this stuff. I'm sure he'll spend a lot of time.

COLE: Right. I mean ironically I was telling my friend that I've contacted all these, I've picked out several films, like American Splendor, Ghost World, and then I happened to have connections, Grant Curtis went to school in Warrensburg, where I teach, and so I contacted him and I was able to get a hold of Stan Lee but, really, I've had more success with independent filmmakers, like yourself, as opposed to big corporate types. You know, those involved in the big studio blockbusters and things like that. And I don't know if it's a fear of letting a trade secret out or, you know, I don't know.

WALKER: They should call you back because you're finding out a lot of information that will be useful to them.

COLE: Right and I don't know if they're worried that I'm going to take something they say and then share it with everybody, that it's their top secret thing or what but…

WALKER: You know that might be true. What also might be true is the departments and the thinking is so disconnected that they, you know, like me, like I'm saying, I only have a little piece of the story. And so, and who, and the only

person at Disney, for instance, who has a big piece of the story is the head of Disney. So they might, they might feel like they don't have much to contribute, but, which is not the truth I'm sure. Or maybe they're afraid, I don't know.

COLE: But I don't know, yah, it's just one of those. Whatever it is that they call it in the academic world, they call it studying up, looking at a lot of times these ethnographies, interview things is looking at, is done with people who are more readily accessible, with your everyday, like people who work in a factory or people who watch the movies. It's real easy to do a fan study with the fans themselves. You can go to a comic book convention and set up a little booth and get fifty people to line up and talk to you about their favorite comic book. But it's, if you're trying to talk to the people who are creating these things, it's a little more difficult to get access to them.

WALKER: Are you interested in Smurfs? I know the filmmaker who did that.

COLE: Yah! I mean that's…

WALKER: Well I'll send you that contact information.

COLE: Anybody who you could help me because getting my foot in the door and like, I really have enjoyed talking to you today, it's been a good conversation.

WALKER: Well I hope it's been helpful.

COLE: Yah, it is.

WALKER: Well why don't I, I'll send an email to you and Ted, put the two of you in touch. And then I can send you, um, the contact info for the Smurfs people. The guy who produced that, Jordan Kerner, I think he teaches at the University of North Carolina and he loves talking about himself I'm sure. And he appreciates academics. He's one who will probably call you back.

COLE: Yah that's one of my worries too, that people will see, oh that's an academic study, this guy doesn't know anything about what we do. I have all my other hangups about…

WALKER: Yah, I understand.

COLE: Because there’s kind of that preconception about the college boy, you know. You know who thinks he knows it all.

WALKER: They’re just jealous!

COLE: Right. I’m sure that’s what it is.

WALKER: They’re scared that you’ll uncover their ignorance and unmask them.

COLE: Yah, I’m sure that’s what it is! Well it really has been great talking to you.

WALKER: You too! Good luck and please, and when you get done, I would love to read it!

COLE: Sure, and if I have any follow-up questions, can I contact you back again?

WALKER: Absolutely, feel free.

COLE: Thank you so much for your time and have a good rest of your day.

WALKER: You too and it’s my pleasure.

COLE: Bye bye.

WALKER: Bye bye.