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SCRIPTING THE DOCUFICTION:  
COMBINING THE NARRATIVE AND DOCUMENTARY MODES  
IN A SOCIAL ISSUE FILM

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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By

Joseph V. Brown

November 2010

Advisor: Diane Waldman, PhD

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Author: Joseph V. Brown

Title: SCRIPTING THE DOCUFICATION: COMBINING THE NARRATIVE AND DOCUMENTARY MODES IN A SOCIAL ISSUE FILM

Advisor: Diane Waldman, PhD

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis combines creative and academic efforts in an examination of the “hybrid” film. The question asked: *in what ways can fiction be combined with non-fiction to engage with issues of social importance*, is answered in analysis, and through practice. Traditional analysis is focused on films that blur the line between the documentary and the narrative— the “hybrid film” or “docufiction.” Analysis through practice is presented in an original feature length script that moves back and forth between the documentary and fiction film. This feature length script— entitled *Rigged*, develops a fictional story while examining the issue of corruption in the higher education finance and student loan systems. A final report returns to the thesis question and offers an assessment of the script’s strengths and weaknesses.

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Professor Waldman, Professor Schroeder, and Professor Buxton, for supporting me in this project. I am especially thankful for my committee's willingness to work with my scheduling requirements. Thank you all.

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bell hooks, a prominent cultural critic and university professor, openly admits that students learn more “[...] about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature [...]” (2) she assigns in her classes. She goes on to claim that “movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourse about race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues” (2). Significantly, hooks notes that: “whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people” (2). It is film's pedagogical potential— its ability to stir debate— that I am most interested in.

The film genre or mode that I feel has best demonstrated the potential for critical engagement with society is the documentary mode. From the social problem films of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to Michael Moore's recent treatment of contemporary issues, documentary film has sought to educate, influence, and expose. Historically, documentary was thought to have succeeded in these goals; the documentary form was even held up as the cinematic mode most capable of approaching the “real.” Now, the proliferation of the form has led many to think of documentary as a medium tantamount to other types of “spin,” and the postmodern challenge to *Truth* (especially as presented in a mediated form) has rendered the documentary less authoritative. This “demeaning” of documentary produces questions about the critical potential of social issue

documentary<sup>1</sup> in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It causes me to ask: *Is anyone paying social documentary any sustained attention? Has the 24-hour news-cycle diminished the ability of audiences to engage social documentary? And ultimately: do social documentaries still have critical or pedagogical potential?*

I can only answer these questions generally, or maybe even only for myself, but the truth is I now wonder about the contemporary social issue documentary film's potential to affect broad audiences. I know many people who refuse to see a Michael Moore film, no matter the topic. I ask myself what this outright refusal means for documentarians of the future. Specifically, I ask myself what this refusal means for a filmmaker such as myself, a filmmaker whose main goal is to make films on issues of economic inequality, classism, and the unethical nature of capitalism in the United States. I admit that this refusal is a rejection of the way I think about the world, as well as a negation of the way I have previously sought to address issues of social importance through documentary. I'm in need of a new approach, and I am lucky that film— in constantly reinventing itself— offers me the opportunity to develop one.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “social issue documentary” is both straightforward and ambiguous. The term “social” conjures up recollections of the early days of documentary. During this time the term “social” was applied to the films of Pare Lorenz, the British Documentary Movement, and the films of governments. My conception of the “social” documentary is different. When I use the term “social issue” documentary I have a very specific type of film in mind. The “social issue documentary” I am concerned with is akin to films grouped under the heading “activist documentary.” The “social issue” or “activist” documentary I am concerned with also belongs to a particular place in time— a period starting in the late 1980s and running up to the present (referred to as the “3<sup>rd</sup> wave” of activist filmmaking). The “social issue documentaries” I am interested in are best exhibited by the filmmakers Barbara Kopple and Michael Moore. They are films that argue a point, and do so overtly. Contemporary films that fit into this category include films like Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me*, and Colin Beavan’s *No Impact Man*. In *The Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* scholar Angela J. Aguayo claims that these more recent social issue documentaries employ strategies that will place them “[...] in major distribution houses for the maximum audience without compromising activist content” (9). This type of social documentary, the type that seeks to influence large groups of people, is that which I am referring to when I use the term “social documentary.” It is, again, the type of documentary that I believe faces many reception related challenges in a postmodern environment.

My questioning of the relevance of social documentary film, my recent study of the modes of documentary production, and my consideration of film's potential to defy genre conventions has led me to conceive of the social issue film in a different way. If audiences hesitate to watch documentaries on “heavy” social issues then these issues must be presented in more subtle or palatable ways. If I am unwilling to give up on the educational potential of documentary film, then I must incorporate documentary film into a more congenial format. I now suspect that the full impact of a social issue film can be best developed through the mingling of documentary and fiction, or in the form of a hybrid film.

My thesis, then, will explore the following general inquiry: *in what ways can fiction be combined with non-fiction to engage with issues of social importance?* To answer this question I will explore contemporary developments in fiction / non-fiction hybrid film while also writing a script for a “docufiction” that investigates the problems of student loan debt, rising education costs, and the unholy marriage of student loan companies to university financial aid departments.

### **Multiple Purposes**

The self-generated theoretical considerations outlined above have motivated me to write a script that explores a social issue through the combination of documentary and narrative film forms. My objectives in writing this script are multiple. They involve 1.) learning how to write a script; 2.) examining a social issue that I believe is important to

society; and 3.) broadening the way I think about documentary by exploring the line between fiction and non-fiction film.

My first objective stems from my inexperience in writing scripts. This inexperience guarantees that I will “learn by doing.” I expect that I will write, re-write, and write again. Designating my thesis project as a script will afford me the opportunity to focus on this task in a concentrated way, “workshop” my script with my thesis committee, and become accustomed to thinking about stories in a formalistic way (encompassing three acts, featuring dynamic and developing characters, including multiple conflicts, turning points, etc). A significant objective in writing this script is simply to learn the process; larger goals include teaching myself to think “narratively” and providing myself with the opportunity to assess fictional film's potential for social critique. A less significant goal is to produce a script that I can shoot in an independent fashion.

My second major objective in writing this script is to explore and address a social issue that is significant to both myself personally and society as a whole. This issue—the rising cost of higher education and the mounting student debt that matches this rise—presents huge problems for the millions of students who are about to graduate and take leadership roles in our society. The exponential increase in tuition costs combined with the dwindling amount of government funding for higher education has introduced the perfect financial storm into the lives of many young people. Sadly, the “education bubble” has burdened new graduates with unprecedented amounts of debt while also providing those involved in the student loan industry with windfall profits. The fact that

some of these profits grow out of the unholy marriage of aggressive student loan companies and the interests of college financial aid departments only serves to underscore the severity of the problem. Significant, for this project, is that the current ways in which student loan products are packaged, marketed, and sold is so corrupt that a scriptwriter has much material to draw from when outlining a story's conflict, characters (especially antagonists), and plot lines.

My third objective in writing this script addresses the difficulties I alluded to in this proposal's introduction. In an attempt to breathe life into the worn out social issue documentary I will work to broaden my idea of documentary by combining the non-fiction and fiction forms in one film. To create this hybrid film I will construct a narrative screenplay that utilizes documentary in a unique way. *Faux* documentary film scenes on the topic of the student loan racket will be scripted and inserted into a larger narrative film about the disappearance of the filmmaker responsible for these scenes. Audiences will be treated to the suspense of a white crime detective picture while also being exposed to the issues through skillfully interwoven faux documentary segments that contain clues to the larger mystery at hand. Through this combination of fiction and scripted non-fiction I hope to write an entertaining screenplay that introduces audiences to an important issue without beating viewers over the head with the documentary format. Whether this script is capable of commercial success or not, the objective of broadening my own conception of documentary and reinvigorating my own interest in the social issue film will be met in the simple act of writing it.

## **The Problem**

Over the past 15 years the United States economy has experienced some major ups and downs. A couple of recessions, the bursting of the tech and housing bubbles, and a large period of job losses in the late 2000s has left the “average Joe” anxious about the future. Now, to make matters worse, is the new problem of mounting student debt. The statistics detailing this new crisis are concerning; the “commentariat” is sounding the alarm. They claim that another financial reckoning is at hand.

A May 2009 article in *The Week* entitled “Bursting the Higher Ed Bubble” claims that “over the past quarter-century, the average cost of higher education has risen at a rate four times faster than inflation— twice as fast as the cost of health care” (Bursting). Unfortunately, student financial aid funding has not kept pace with the increase in tuition costs. Amy Kamenetz, a prominent political blogger and author, points out that “in 1976, the maximum Pell [grant] covered 72 percent of costs at the average four-year public school; in 2004 it paid for just 36 percent of a much bigger bill” (26). Today, the typical college student graduates with more than twenty thousand dollars in loans, and the average graduate student with just over forty-two thousand in debt (Collinge 32). These figures do not include the two thousand dollar average credit card debt load undergrads often hold (Kamenetz 5) or the eight thousand dollar average Visa balance of graduate students (Kamenetz 49).

There are many factors that have contributed to the exponential increase in college tuition, but one factor— that *college is big business*— is often left unconsidered. With government aid now covering less in tuition than any time in the last 40 years

students are turning to private lenders to make up the portion of their tuition and living expenses they cannot pay for themselves. Private lenders Sallie Mae, Chase, and others, have been more than happy to offer students large sums of loaned money from which they can extract high interest rates, fees, and penalties. In fact, student loan agencies have become so tuned into the money making potential of the educational dream that they have begun partnering with university financial aid offices in an effort to sell their highly profitable loan instruments to inexperienced students.

Student loan companies have managed to set up so called “preferred lender” agreements with universities that offer the school financial rewards or kickbacks for steering students towards select lenders. With this arrangement in place schools make additional money on their students, money made over and above tuition charges (Collinge 6). In early 2007 thirty-five colleges admitted to cultivating such relationships and paid some restitution to students (Basken & Field “Student Loan”). Amongst the colleges and universities involved were Johns Hopkins University, Syracuse University, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Southern California, the University of Texas at Austin, Columbia University, Emerson University, Drexel University, Widener University, Capella University, Lasell College, and Saint Anslem College (Basken, Field, Keller). Financial aid administrators who were found to have personally benefited from such relationships include Ellen Frishberg of Johns Hopkins, David Charlow of Columbia, and Lawrence Burt of the University of Texas. Each either received stock, consulting fees, or some other benefit from their relationship

with their preferred lender. Frishberg received over \$155,000 in stock and other benefits from a few select lenders (Collinge 34).

Making matters worse is the fact that student loan companies can make more money on defaulted loans than on loans that are in good standing. Alan Michael Collinge, in his book *The Student Loan Scam: The Most Oppressive Debt in U.S. History— and How We Can Fight Back*, reveals that:

Albert Lord, chief executive officer of Sallie Mae, the most dominant student loan company in the United States, reported to shareholders in 2003 that the company's record profits were attributable to penalties and fees collected from defaulted loans. Indeed, Sallie Mae's fee income increased by 228 percent (from \$280 million to \$920 million) between 2000 and 2005, while its managed loan portfolio increased by only 82 percent (from \$67 billion to \$122 billion) during the same time period. Prior to the sub-prime mortgage credit crisis of 2007 to 2008, the company's stock has shot up by more than 1,600 percent between 1995 and 2005— an average annual rise of about 160 percent (5).

Given these earnings it is no wonder that Sallie Mae was deemed the second most profitable company by *Fortune Magazine* in 2005 (Collinge 23).

When this is all added up the perversity of the situation is overwhelming. And unfortunately, it only intensifies. Student loan companies such as Sallie Mae have

implemented unscrupulous practices in an attempt to make more money in the already lucrative student loan business. In 2001 the Office of the Inspector General found that Sallie Mae had been defaulting loans and submitting them for government payments when no effort had been made to collect the debt from the borrowers (Collinge 39). In 2005 students of the Lehigh Valley College (LVC) filed charges against the school for marketing private non-guaranteed loans as federal loans (Hess 82). Joseph Leal, president of U.S. Recoveries Worldwide, “a small debt-collection company that until recently had been under contract to collect debt for Premiere Credit U.S. Recovery [...] alleged that his employees had been trained to misrepresent themselves as employees of the U.S. Department of Education” (Collinge 45). Finally, and to underscore the attitude of those making money in this business, is the fact that one defaulted student loan debt collection agency installed a four-thousand gallon shark tank in its lobby to remind its debt collectors that sharks have “qualities that Premiere Credit of North America nurtures as part of its corporate culture” (45).

How this debt trap will affect current and future college students may not yet be completely understood. But indicators do show that a college education is becoming less attainable than at any time in the last forty years. Today, close to one-third of Americans in their twenties are college dropouts, compared with one-fifth in the late 1960s (Kamenetz 6). Many students are finding— after they have started college— that the debt load is just not worth it. They leave school before finishing the degree and as a result have less earning potential with which to approach their previously attained loans. These students are amongst those most likely to default. And they are defaulting in huge

numbers— there are now more than five million defaulted loans on record with the U.S. Department of Education (Collinge 18). What is worse is that nearly half of those who have sought out these expensive loans are moderate to low-income students (Hess 89). Ultimately, the educational baseline of our entire population is at stake. The promise of a highly educated society has been sold for the prospect of lucrative stock options.

Some are also now beginning to claim that our economy as a whole will suffer. Those who have accrued large amounts of student debt are less likely to contribute to the economy in other measurable ways. The American Council on Higher Education (ACE) found that one-third of students receiving their bachelor's degrees in the 1990s faced “debt burdens” above the generally accepted rate of 7 percent of their monthly income (129). Nellie Mae, in a follow up to this aforementioned study, found that home ownership rates decreased by 1 percent for every \$5,000 in student loans (130). The point that mounting student debt obligations are delaying life decisions such as getting married, buying a home, and having children is still— somehow— being debated. The one thing that is clear is that if tuition keeps rising, and private loans continue to play a role in the college finance plans of students, those who take loans out against the promise of their own social mobility may end up sorely disappointed.

With this disappointment will come other casualties such as hope and optimism. Amy Kamenetz opens her widely read book *Generation Debt: Why Now is a Terrible Time to be Young* with the following question: “What would you do if you grew up and realized that everything America has always promised its children no longer holds true for you” (ix)? She goes on to validate the millions of young people who just don't

understand why they can't get ahead: “born into a century of unimaginable prosperity, in the richest country in the world, those of us between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five have somehow been cheated out of our inheritance” (ix). And by this she means the “national inheritance,” or the promise of a brighter American future that has now become quite dim in the eyes of those who were promised so much.

### **A Word About the “Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010”**

In March of 2010 the “Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act (Pub.L. 111-152) was signed into law. This act— known more commonly as the “Health Care Bill”— also included important new regulations for the student loan industry. Amongst this bill's most important changes are provisions that cut the “middle men” out of the student loan industry (by increasing the availability of “direct” government-to-student loans), increase the amount of Pell Grants available to needy students, and lessen the monthly debt obligation of those now struggling to pay on their loans. The passage of the bill is considered a victory for students and will ameliorate some of the problems discussed earlier in this document. Unfortunately, or despite this “victory,” the student loan overhaul was watered down before its passing. It is not yet clear how well this bill's provisions will be in addressing the burgeoning problem of student loan debt.

Early analysis suggests that the bill will help students, but not to the extent that was once thought. There will be an increase in the number of Pell Grants available but the amount of money offered through the Pell Grant system will rise insignificantly— from \$5,550 in the 2010-2011 year to \$5,900 in the 2019-2020 year (“Q&A”)— while

college tuition rates continue to soar.<sup>2</sup> The bill's reduction of student loan repayment obligations from 15% of a debtor's monthly income to 10% after 2014 (Herszenhorn and Lewis) may make repayments more manageable for some but does not set the rate at or below the 7% recommended maximum debt burden espoused by economists. And although private banks will see a severe reduction in their share of the student loan market they will still be offered loan servicing contracts on government initiated loans ("Q&A"). This arrangement will continue to afford Sallie Mae and other companies a significant presence on college campuses where they can advertise, promote, and sell their most lucrative private loan instruments (NOW).

The bottom line, as it relates to my proposed project, is that this reform can be seen as the first step in a long journey to "righting" the student loan and higher education systems. Government intervention in the industry may well cut down on predatory lending, but it will not stop these practices completely. Nor will the government intervention that stems from this bill address the exponential tuition increases at colleges across the country.

While writing my script I will monitor changes in both the student loan and higher education worlds. By watching for, and assessing new developments, I will be able to

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<sup>2</sup> Along with the increase in college tuition rates is the increase in students seeking a college education. Although an increase in the availability and amount of Pell Grants is a good first step, Paul Basken of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that: "it remains unclear just how far the budget increases will go toward achieving the broad goal of expanding access to college. The need for the aid is growing rapidly, as more students enroll in college and more people become eligible for the grants in a struggling economy. In the 2008-9 academic year, the government spent \$18.3-billion delivering Pell Grants to about 6.2 million students. By the 2010-11 academic year, it expects to spend nearly twice that much, \$32-billion, on 8.4 million students. At the same time, more than a third of the Pell Grant money in the bill will be used to cover past shortfalls in appropriations for the program, rather than to pay for future increases" (Basken 5/19/2010).

adjust my script in such a way as to prevent it from coming off as if it is out of touch with the realities of the issue.

### **The Hybrid Film**

The term “hybrid-film” is a relatively new one. Though fiction films have mixed genres more frequently, documentary and fiction have been thought to exist at the far ends of the cinematic spectrum. Since my project will focus on the melding of documentary and fiction my analysis of the hybrid film will concentrate most closely on those films that blend fiction and non-fiction cinema and not genre blenders of other sorts.

Gary D. Rhodes, in his text *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*, offers an historical perspective on the fact-fiction divide in filmmaking. Rhodes points out that non-fiction film was more prevalent than fiction film in the early days of the cinema and that the subsequent success of narrative filmmaking produced the fiction / non-fiction dichotomy. According to Rhodes the “the distinction between the fictional narrative film and the documentary was vigorously maintained throughout most of the twentieth century by filmmakers, critics, and viewers alike” (3). The result of this dichotomy can be seen in the categorization of filmic traditions; some film historians still differentiate between the “Hollywood tradition” and the “documentary tradition.” Rhodes goes on to assert that it was not until the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that a serious questioning of this rigid categorization began (3).

Other thinkers argue against this point. They allow the assertion that a serious questioning of the fact-fiction divide is a recent development but also suggest that the blurring of the narrative / documentary line has existed since the early days of filmmaking. Jean-Pierre Candeloro argues that the fact-fiction divide was compromised in documentary since at least Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) (37). Another critic, Kent Jones, notes that films like *Paisa* and *Fires Were Started* blurred the line in the 1940s, and that Andy Warhol's films stretched the boundaries in the 1960s (31). The public may have been slow in recognizing the tenuous grip cinema held on the truth, but filmmakers have always understood the interplay between fiction and non-fiction. Jones believes that this last point is extremely important. He drives his argument home by claiming that: "Any documentary filmmaker worth the name, from the Lumieres to Frederick Wiseman, sees the poetry, the metaphors, and the narrative contained in the material they catch/search for/cultivate. Likewise, any respectable fiction filmmaker moves away from artifice and toward simplicity" (31). For Jones "reality is always magic" whether it is represented through documentary or narrative conventions.

Whether the fiction / non-fiction hybrid— or "docufiction"— is a new genre or an overlooked form, a limited amount of interesting scholarship on the topic has recently emerged. Amongst the most useful of this scholarly examination is Stephen N. Lipkin, Derek Paget, and Jane Roscoe's attempt to define and categorize the new hybrid-documentaries that have come to the fore. Lipkin et al's book chapter "Docudrama and Mock-Documentary: Defining Terms, Proposing Canons," (in Rhodes) breaks down hybrid documentaries into four major categories: the somewhat traditional drama-

documentary (a.k.a. “dramadoc” or “docudrama”), the documentary drama, the faction, and the mock-documentary. Lipkin et al claim that these forms are partially defined by their function; most documentary-fiction hybrids “re-tell events from national/international histories, either reviewing or celebrating these events,” “re-present the careers of significant national/international histories,” and “portray issues of concern [...] in order to provoke discussion about them” (Rhodes 14). Mock-documentary functions somewhat differently and is considered more intertextual and subversive. The mock-documentary form is less relevant to this project's concerns.

Beyond the form's functions are the individual descriptions of these categories. Lipkin et al describe the drama-documentary as coming from the tradition of investigative journalism. For Lipkin et al the drama-documentary incorporates both an historical sequence of events and historical figures into a typical narrative drama. When documentary conventions are utilized they are minimized so as not to interrupt the historical narrative (15). One example of the drama-documentary cited by Lipkin et al is the made for television ABC movie *The Missiles of October*, a film which represented the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. *The Missiles of October* stands in as a good representative of the drama-documentary by providing an example of a film that recreates the past, or draws upon *documented* history, while appearing like a narrative film. Ultimately, the drama-documentary is intended to offer a succinct education on the historical event being represented.

On the other hand is the documentary drama. Lipkin et al define this fiction / non-fiction hybrid as a film that uses completely invented sequences and fictional characters

to examine actual or predicted occurrences (15). Documentary dramas may or may not conform to typical narrative structures and often insert documentary elements that disrupt the narrative (direct address, inter-titles, etc). The classic example here is Peter Watkins' *The War Game* in which an imagined nuclear attack strikes England. *The War Game* provides a good example of the documentary drama in that it presents documentary scenes in a rather obvious “what if” way. When a scene begins, narration, or inter-titles, proclaim: “this is what the last 3 minutes before a nuclear attack would look like.” The audience cannot miss the fact that they are watching a dramatization. And though other documentary dramas are less obvious, most viewers eventually catch on to the fact that they are watching some sort of dramatized version of a doc. Significant is the fact that Lipkin et al hold the idea that the documentary drama is more closely aligned to the “pure” documentary than the drama-documentary.

The final fiction / nonfiction or hybrid category relevant to this discussion is the “faction.” According to Lipkin et al the faction is a film that utilizes a series of real world events “[...] to create a fiction that runs in parallel to a set of known circumstances” (16). Factions rely on an audiences' knowledge of real world or historical occurrences and do not spend much time catching the audience up on the facts of the event. Factions are also considered to be more like a dramatic or narrative film. The classic example offered by the authors is the film *Washington Behind Closed Doors* in which the circumstances of the Watergate scandal are represented through the actions of an imaginary president. A more appropriate example, in this author’s mind, is the film *Medium Cool*. *Medium Cool* attains the status of “faction” by telling the fictional story of an arrogant news journalist

whose life is set against the backdrop of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. As *Medium Cool*'s story unfolds actors move in and out of actual protest areas. The viewer cannot miss the significance of the film's setting, or the real world events that track alongside the narrative.

Lipkin et al's categorization is useful when trying to think about the ways fiction and non-fiction can be combined in one film. But these categories do not offer a place for the film I have conceived. Like the drama-documentary my script will have an investigative type feel, but it will leave out representations of prominent historical figures. Like the faction, my script will run parallel to real world events by featuring the back-room deals that undoubtedly characterize the relationship between student loan companies and college financial aid administrators, but it will also strike out on its own fictional path. Despite feeling as if my script is most like a faction, my film will not treat real world events that are part of some sort of collective understanding— most people don't know much about the scandals tied to the student loan racket. Instead, my conceptualization stands apart as part drama-documentary, part faction, and part “something else.” My script will involve the natural insertion of documentary footage into a film with a traditional narrative arc. The inserted footage will support the story's development by functioning as evidence important to the mystery. My hope is to refrain from disrupting the narrative in the way that Lipkin et al suggest that documentary dramas do. My side-by-side use of fiction and non-fiction will, hopefully, be seamless.

The fact that Lipkin et al's categorization does not offer a place for my conception to fit reveals that this docufictional taxonomy leaves something to be desired for. Few, if

any, filmmakers set out to make a film that adheres to some previously conceived category. And the finished work of filmmakers that “participates” in a particular category— say the category of documentary drama— may also include elements of another category— say the fiction. Attempts to categorize film, or for that matter any artwork, usually fall short. The problem with categorization is that the real world is much more “messy” than the rational among us would like to admit.

Ultimately, Lipkin et al’s categorization is useful for academic analysis, and “less useful” for creative purposes. It does not offer a blueprint for filmmakers interested in writing treatments for hybrid films. Instead, it offers a series of examples that contemporary filmmakers can set themselves against. Indeed, in conceiving my project I repeatedly noted that my film would not take on the characteristics of a documentary drama, or a mockumentary, and that my conception became clearer when I thought of it as being separate from this particular categorization. When things are defined in opposition to what they are not a way forward can emerge. Lipkin et al’s categorization might cause an artist’s head to spin, or seem reductionist, but it was helpful in helping me to define what my film would *not* look like.

Other authors have resisted the temptation to categorize the fiction / non-fiction hybrid. Ohad Landesman in his article “In and out of this world: digital video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary” pays particular attention to the way audiences engage with the hybrid film as well as the effect new technology has had on the development of the hybrid form. Landesman, who is less interested in how fiction and nonfiction can be combined than the effect of this combination, argues that the

documentary “facet” incorporated into the hybrid film “[...] becomes less of a clear genre indicator and more an *aesthetic strategy* by which a filmmaker can choose to indicate familiar notions of authenticity or solicit the viewer to embrace a documentary mode of engagement” (41). Considering the film *No Lies*, and V. Sobchack's analysis of that film, Landesman asserts that the categorization “documentary” suggests a certain *experience* and not so much an objective mode of cinema. For both Landesman and Sobchack “fiction films and documentaries are never to be taken as discrete objects of fixed categories.” Instead, “a fiction can be experienced as a home movie or documentary, a documentary as a home movie or a fiction...” (41). Filmmakers who want to help viewers along, or exert some sort of control over how the viewer engages with the film, utilize documentary like aesthetics to invoke a sense of reality. These aesthetics are most closely tied to developments in camera technology— from the stationary camera to the portable camera, from the film camera to the digital camera— and are now recognized as aesthetics that connote the real.

Landesman's discussion is instructive. It prompts me to think about how I want an audience to engage with the script / film I am writing. My goal is to encourage viewers to engage with my fiction / non-fiction hybrid *as if* it were real. We already know that similar events occurred— that student loan companies and financial aid administrators worked together to increase profits at the expense of students. Now viewers must simply imagine what might have happened had those involved been threatened with the possibility of exposure. Keeping with Landesman's argument I will utilize documentary conventions— the shaky camera and other cinema verite type techniques— to suggest the

audience engage with the film *as if* it were a “true” recording of actual events. I hope to suggest that my audience *experience* the documentary aspects of my film as fictions that come uncomfortably close to a possible reality. Landesman's article prompts me to think about more than just the ways fiction and non-fiction can be combined and more about the ways these two modes can be utilized in an attempt to solicit certain reactions.

A final relevant discussion of the fact-fiction hybrid film is presented by Keith Beattie in his book chapter “The Fact/Fiction Divide: Drama-Documentary and Documentary Drama.” Beattie, like Landesman, is more interested in how hybrid films are experienced by viewers than the ways in which a filmmaker might execute a fact-fiction combination. He diverges from Landesman in his treatment of the controversy surrounding the hybrid film. Whereas Landesman points out the potential for the hybrid film to engage audiences in a non-traditional way, Beattie concentrates on the reality that some viewers are made uncomfortable by the fiction / non-fiction hybrid. Citing three British television docudramas— The “Scotland Yard” programmes of the late 1950s, *Cathy Come Home*, and *Death of a Princess* (1980)— he demonstrates that many audiences still adhere to highly structured ways of thinking about “truth” in film. Beattie reminds us that after the release of each of these docudramas a myriad of critics, newspaper columnists, and politicians argued that the blending of fiction and non-fiction was “extremely dangerous and misleading” and that “viewers have the right to know whether what they are being offered is real or invented” (151). To further highlight the way in which fiction / non-fiction hybrids make viewers uncomfortable Beattie also considers the case of Peter Watkin's *The War Game*. *The War Game*, which was made in

1965 but subsequently banned for 20 years, details the fallout of an imagined nuclear attack on Britain. The film was so alarming, so close to an imagined and dreaded future, that Beattie claims it was “too close” to the truth (153). Whether the film was censored for fears of its potential to incite panic, or for other political reasons (probably for its critique of Britain's nuclear arms policies), Beattie claims that *The War Game* is the perfect example of the docudrama's potential to ruffle feathers.

Although my intention in writing a script that blends fiction and non-fiction has little to do with reflexive questions about truth, or the documentary's ability to capture reality, I am aware of the controversy surrounding the validity of documentary in a postmodern environment. My task will be to combine the fiction / non-fiction genres in a way that forces viewers to contemplate the representations of this very real issue. Like Beattie I believe that “the power of the documentary lies in its capacity to show us not that certain events occurred (the headlines can do that) or even, perhaps, why they occurred... but *how* they occurred (or how they could have occurred): how recognizable human beings rule, fight, judge, meet, negotiate, suppress and overthrow” (153). Despite any criticism that might be leveled at my attempt to combine fiction and non-fiction I firmly believe that the experience of engaging with imagined scenarios— no matter their content— can aid us in the process of imagining a better world.

### **Film Review**

The primary purpose of this film review is to examine hybrid type films that provide examples of the effective combination of fact and fiction. However, since my

script is issue based, I must also consider the few student loan issue films that now exist. These two films are traditional documentaries; they provide some of the factual information that will be presented in my script. A discussion of hybrid films follows.

### *The Student Loan Sinkhole*

*The Student Loan Sinkhole* is a 2009 production of PBS's *Now*. Narrated by David Brancaccio, the piece adopts an investigative documentary feel. *The Student Loan Sinkhole* is significant in that it is amongst the first full news reports, documentaries, or films, to take on the issue of mounting student debt. The film presents the personal story of "Gina Moss," a single mother who earned both a master's degree in social work and fifty thousand dollars in student loans. Through personal interviews, narration, and back-and-forth dialogue between Brancaccio and Gina, viewers are introduced to the idea that upstanding and well-educated young adults are facing huge financial difficulties that begin with their college debt. The piece is particularly good at presenting the relevant information—the cost of higher education is rising, the number of defaults is also rising, and does a reasonably good job of illustrating the human struggles folks like Gina are going through. The fact that Gina and her daughter are evicted from their apartment at the end of the segment only serves to strengthen the point that things are not right with the current system of student loan finance. *The Student Loan Sinkhole* is significant in its validation of the facts I have outlined in the "problem" section of this document and in its validation of my ability to see the significance of this problem.

### Default: The Student Loan Documentary

Another student debt film worth mentioning is Serge Bakalian and Aurora Meneghello's *Default: The Student Loan Documentary*. At the time of my writing this proposal *Default* is in post-production, but portions of the film are already available online. Partially funded by the San Francisco Film Society, *Default* is being billed as “a feature-length documentary chronicling the stories of borrowers from different backgrounds affected by the student lending industry and their struggles to change the system” (*Default* website). Sneak previews of the film available on both the film's website and a variety of online video platforms (YouTube, Vimeo) suggest that the film will take a pretty straightforward documentary approach. Sit down interviews with "experts" interspersed with segments of the students affected by this issue both relay the relevant educational material while also adding a personal touch. Although *Default* is not finished, it does seem as if its straightforward documentary treatment of the problem will provide me with a good model of the types of scenes I could write into my piece when I set to constructing the documentary sections of my hybrid film.

### **Good examples of the hybrid film**

The films I have chosen to look at as good examples of the hybrid film are films that also focus on social issues. Lighter hybrid films such as *The Blair Witch Project*, *Open Water*, and more recently *Paper Heart*, provide good examples of fiction / non-fiction blenders but do not utilize their factual aspects in a pedagogical way. Similarly,

experimental hybrids such as *Tropical Malady*, *Blissfully Yours*, and *The Mysterious Object at Noon* utilize factual content in a different and more theoretical way than the films I have chosen to look at here. Although none of the films discussed below treat my topic— corruption in the higher education finance system—through the combination of fact and fiction, they do offer examples of how to approach social issues through a non-traditional hybrid form.

Keeping with my general question: *in what ways can fiction be combined with non-fiction to engage with issues of social importance*, I look to the following “social issue hybrid films” for the “instruction” these films can afford writers, producers, and directors interested in this format. Particular attention is paid to how each of these films has influenced my thinking on the fact-fiction hybrid as well as the way each of these films may influence my script. Since Lipkin et al's taxonomy of the docufiction is the most developed heuristic for talking about these types of films a brief analysis of each film's “docufictional” characteristics is included. This analysis is helpful in drawing out the similarities and differences between each film; it also allows the reader to identify historical and artistic trends developed within the realm of the docufiction. The assigning of labels— drama documentary, documentary drama, faction, etc.— to each of these films is subjective. Reevaluation is always possible.

## **Drama Documentary**

### *The Missiles of October*

William Devane's 1973 *The Missiles of October* is an ambitious two and a half hour made for TV movie that details nearly every aspect of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The film is partially based on Robert Kennedy's book "Thirteen Days" and builds a narrative from historical fact. Much like a play, *The Missiles of October* is broken down into scenes that treat each of the conflict's 13 days. The film relies solely on dialogue and emotion while occasionally incorporating documentary footage of nuclear test blasts in the south Pacific. *The Missiles of October* is quite different from today's modern fact-fiction blenders but attains hybrid status through its elaborate reenactment of historical circumstances. As a film that "incorporates both an historical sequence of events and historical figures into a typical narrative drama" (Rhodes 15) *The Missiles of October* conforms to Lipkin et al's definition of a drama documentary. Significant, or potentially influential for my project, is the film's success in tracking with written history. My script will include some embellishment, but it will also attempt to authentically represent what is known about the corrupt interplay between loan companies and universities. *The Missiles of October* will serve as my reminder that it is possible to construct scenes that accurately reproduce the events of the past, whether they are represented through narrative or documentary devices.

## Documentary Drama

### *The War Game*

Considered a documentary drama that treats a fictionalized event (Beattie 149) Peter Watkin's 1965 *The War Game* has been called “the most important film ever made.”<sup>3</sup> In the film the consequences of an imagined nuclear attack on Britain are played out. Voice over narration, inter-titles, faux newscasts, and scripted observational documentary footage are all strung together in such a way as to showcase what might happen in the wake of such an attack. Part indictment of Britain's own policies of proliferation and unpreparedness in the area of nuclear deterrence Watkin's *The War Game* was so poignant in its critique that it was banned from British television for 20 years.

Watkin's *The War Game* utilizes voice over and inter-titles to make sense of a constructed documentary story that continually reminds its viewers: “This is what the last three minutes of peace in Britain would look like” and “Starvation, disease, and psychological turmoil would set in within days of a blast that were to strike Britain.” The film's heavy documentary style combined with fictional treatments of predicted occurrences garner it the title documentary drama. Again, Lipkin et al consider *The War Game* to be the classic— if not early— example of a documentary drama. Documentary dramas that come after *The War Game* are markedly different in that they blend fact and fiction more subtly.

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<sup>3</sup> Statement made by Kenneth Tynan of the UK Observer— taken from back cover of *The War Game* DVD.

*The War Game* is important to my process in that it shows another possible approach by which I could attack issues of corruption in the system of higher education finance. Those interested in producing films on social problems can learn much from this direct— face your worst nightmares— approach. I can imagine writing a script in which a future dystopia characterized by growing class distinctions and a “dumbing down” of education is presented as the result of the “corporatization” of higher education. If I were to introduce such dystopian elements into my film I would use them sparingly. Still, Watkin's *The War Game* challenges me to think about the possible subplots I could introduce into my own work while also providing evidence of another successful coupling of fact and fiction.

### *In this World*

Michael Winterbottom's 2002 *In this World* is what I would consider a more modern example of the documentary drama. The film is a documentary style travelogue that details the journey of two Afghani refugees as they make their way across Asia to Greece, and eventually to London. Those unfamiliar with Winterbottom's work, and unaware of the film's intentions, could easily mistake much of the film for a documentary. Shot in a verite style, the film offers a supremely realistic depiction of what overland immigration must look like to refugees tasked with the feat of traversing continents and oceans.

*In this World* is more about the documentary as experience than the documentary as objective report. The film's attempt to realistically present the hardships of a journey

that many have actually taken succeeds emotionally by forcing the viewer to contemplate how they would hold up under the circumstances. Although Winterbottom invents sequences, the components of these sequences— border crossings, deportations, etc.— are the types of difficulties the viewer imagines an immigrant would have to surmount. Ultimately, these fictional sequences take on the air of the real. When they are combined with Winterbottom's use of documentary conventions such as the shaky camera, voiceover, and computer generated graphics, the film is transformed into a strange kind of documentary narrative that participates in the characteristics of Lipkin et al's documentary drama— it invents sequences, examines actual or predicted occurrences, inserts documentary elements, and still conforms to a narrative structure.

*In this World's* seamless blending of documentary and fiction makes me wonder how my script could also blur the line. Although my conception in writing this proposal involves a film that presents an interweaving of narrative and documentary through a kind of juxtaposition I now wonder to what extent I need to separate the two modes, and also how I can combine modes or at least facilitate transitions with highly stylized devices.

### *The Road to Guantanamo*

*The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) is a film that might be considered the natural extension of Michael Winterbottom's 2002 *In This World*. In *The Road to Guantanamo* Winterbottom offers viewers a glimpse into what it might have been like to be a detainee imprisoned at Guantanamo. *The Road to Guantanamo* tells the true story of three British

Muslims— the “Tipton Three” who get caught up in Afghanistan at the wrong time. The film is shot in the documentary style and includes interviews with the now released “Tipton Three.” Winterbottom's goal with *The Road to Guantanamo* seems to be two-fold: to offer viewers an experience of how things probably were at Guantanamo and to offer a fervid critique of the treatment of detainees.

Like *In This World* Winterbottom's *Guantanamo* prompts the viewer to engage in the film *as if* they were part of the action or a detainee themselves. The film differs from *In this World* in that it drops the use of voiceover narration and inter-titles but introduces documentary style interviews in their place. Invented sequences of how the “Tipton Three” remember their time at Guantanamo may or may not be chronologically or factually accurate, but the film's mingling of documentary conventions with a narrative arc place it in close proximity with Lipkin et al's conception of the documentary drama.

*The Road to Guantanamo* is both terrifying and infuriating. No amount of news reporting— words on a page or pictures in a paper, can approach Winterbottom's depiction of the torture techniques and mistreatment the “Tipton Three” endured. *The Road to Guantanamo* convinces me that exposing viewers to injustice through the combination of fact and fiction can have a profound effect on the way people think about large and seemingly unalterable problems. *The Road to Guantanamo*'s development of an observational style also proves that many modern hybrid films do not just juxtapose the modes but actually combine them. The ultimate effect of this combination is a film that gets about as close to presenting a story that is both a documentary and a narrative at the same time. However the viewer interprets it, *The Road to Guantanamo* proves that the

documentary drama is fit for more than just the history classroom and that well executed reenactments can approach the reality of actually having been there.

## **Faction**

### *Memories of Underdevelopment*

Thomas Gutierrez Alea's 1968 *Memories of Underdevelopment* chronicles the life of Cuban bourgeois Sergio Carmona Mendoyo as he comes to grips with the realities of revolutionary Cuba and what it means to live in a country that suffers from perpetual underdevelopment. The film works much like human memory, jumps around, and fixates obsessively on a few single points. Sergio's remembering of personal relationships forces him to rehash his own life while we, as the audience, recall that the past is never dead—that it can always be reworked in our minds. A recurrent theme in the film is Sergio's own alienation. As a successful landlord whose family has fled to the United States Sergio is—to some extent—an example of those the Revolution attempted to tear down. Sergio, who seems to think he is the only person in the country who is fully developed psychologically, preys on those below him by taking their rents, and in one case, a young girl's virginity. His own selfishness leads him to a profound loneliness.

*Memories of Underdevelopment* adheres to a modernist narrative structure while also including documentary footage of Cuba in the early 1960s. Through the insertion of this footage, and the use of many still photographs, the film takes on a documentary feel. The film also provides a good example of a work that assumes a certain amount of historical knowledge while developing another storyline—Lipkin et al's definition of a

faction. Sergio's own story offers us a look at the problems of the individual living in underdevelopment while backgrounding the tyranny of the myriad political ideologies that would have their way with Cuba.

*Memories of Underdevelopment* does not offer a picture of a hero confronting a problematic social phenomena (the problems of Cuba are much too big for that). Instead it offers an oblique look at the indifference politics has for the individual. Sergio's ambiguous role prompts me to reconsider the ways in which I could write my protagonist. A crusading antihero, a victim of unbridled greed, or even an individual who is part perpetrator himself, could be written into my story as a way to display the complexities of modern thinking on issues of social importance— including the mechanisms of finance in higher education.

### *Medium Cool*

Haskell Wexler's 1969 *Medium Cool* is a strange but effective combination of fact, fiction, and metaphor. The film tells the story of Chicago news cameraman John Cassellis as he grapples with the implications of being a media-maker. Shot against the backdrop of the 1968 Democratic National Convention the film deals with questions of race, class, and media ethics. Significant is the fact that Wexler combines documentary clips with fictionalized footage while sometimes shooting scripted scenes amongst real life riots. The climax of the film comes when John Cassellis' new love interest Eileen gets caught up in the riots while looking for her lost son. During this scene one gets the overwhelming sense that there is more at stake than just Eileen's son, but also that the

entire country has lost its way. In the end *Medium Cool* drops much of the narrative it had previously built up to feature the “in the streets” or “participant’s” view of the '68 convention protests. Whether this turn in the narrative is effective or not can be debated; Wexler's innovation in the combination of fiction and non-fiction cannot be.

Like *Memories of Underdevelopment*, *Medium Cool* develops a story that runs parallel to real world events most have some familiarity with. Like other fictions— and Lipkin et al's characterization of this mode— *Medium Cool* follows a narrative structure. Its use of historical footage and live backgrounds may push *Medium Cool* beyond the confines of a traditional fiction and towards the realm of the documentary, but the film's lack of other documentary devices such as sit down interviews and inter-titles force the viewer to engage its documentary like footage as if it were a very personal narrative account of being at the convention and part of the national debate.

While watching *Medium Cool* I couldn't help but associate it with other films in this review, especially *In This World* and *The Road to Guantanamo*. Although I have categorized these films differently I have found that each examines the fiction non-fiction divide through a scripted but observational type documentary approach. The effectiveness of this approach is noteworthy, especially for writers / producers shooting on a tight budget. Ultimately, *Medium Cool* influences the way I think about my work by illustrating how it is that a fiction film can be wrapped around documentary footage, and also how documentary like observational sequences can be written into narrative films (a fact that might help me— a novice scriptwriter— concentrate on “showing” rather than “telling”).

### *Man of Marble and Man of Iron*

*Man of Marble* (1976) and *Man of Iron* (1981) make up Andrzej Wajda's epic two-part series on the formation of Poland's Solidarity movement in the decades before communism's collapse. Both films feature protagonists on the trail of a story that requires much archival research. By combining a present day narrative with fully developed flashbacks and supporting documentary footage each film effectively tells a number of stories.

In *Man of Marble* the protagonist— Agnieszka— is a film student obsessed with uncovering the hidden story of the working class bricklayer “Birkut” who was made a socialist hero in the 1950s. Birkut, who became the poster child for Poland's industrial capabilities, disappeared, quite strangely, after enjoying some success in politics.

Agnieszka's detective work eventually uncovers a series of propagandistic films depicting Birkut, and these films lead her to the filmmaker responsible for their making. This filmmaker offers Agnieszka some guidance, but each lead she follows seems to end up blocked. Ultimately, Agnieszka's attempts to identify the reason for Birkut's disappearance falls short and her film school support is pulled out from under her. In the film's final scene Agnieszka locates Maciek— the son of Birkut, and he informs her of his father's death. Agnieszka returns to her film school with Maciek hoping that she can convince the school to let her continue her film with Maciek standing in for Birkut. The school again denies Agnieszka and the film closes in a rather anticlimactic way. But *Man of Marble* is not about a climax, or drama in general. Instead, the film acts as a metaphor. Agnieszka's inability to uncover the truth in her story can be said to symbolize the real

life difficulty Poles experienced when trying to make sense of anything in communist Poland.

*Man of Iron* continues telling the story of Solidarity's development in Poland. Agnieszka is dropped as the protagonist, and Winkel— a washed up alcoholic of a radio journalist— is introduced as the character tasked with uncovering Maciek's (son of Birkut's) history and involvement in Solidarity's buildup. Winkel's original assignment is to infiltrate the Gdansk shipyards and find a way to discredit Maciek and his attempts to agitate for mass protests. Through the study of documentary footage representing Poland's post-WWII protest history and a number of conversations (that lead to flashbacks) with friends of Maciek and his father Birkut, Winkel becomes convinced that he too should support the fight for a new Poland. At the film's conclusion Winkel has sworn off the assignment to slander Maciek but also finds himself unable to fully join the progressive fight. Winkel, like many Poles of the time, is caught somewhere between the old and the new.

Both *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* adeptly combine a detective like narrative with flashbacks and documentary evidence. The films utilize fictional characters that are loosely based on prominent Polish counter-revolutionaries while weaving imaginary narratives into historical situations. It is unclear, at times, whether the documentary footage being shown is authentic or replicated (it would seem as if *both* real and faux doc footage is utilized), but the majority of the footage does have an authentic feel. Interestingly, these films seem to combine all of Lipkin et al's “docufictional” modes. The fact that real life revolutionaries are loosely depicted places these films tenuously in

the category drama documentary. Yet each film's documentary like structure and effort to showcase how things might have been align these films with Lipkin et al's documentary drama category. Finally, the way in which each film develops a somewhat fictional narrative alongside real life occurrences affords each film a “factional” quality. Indeed, like the films Lipkin et al identify as fictions, Wajda's films track with the actual course of history and assume much knowledge of the events being represented. Although an argument that one or both of the films *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* are more drama documentary like, or documentary drama like, could be made, Lipkin et al's “factional” elements seem to stand out most strikingly.

The issues treated in Wajda's films are quite different from the issue of white-collar crime that I am investigating. Still, or despite these differences, the similarities between the original conception I have for my script and the execution of these films is uncanny. My original conception involves the disappearance of a documentary filmmaker and a separate protagonist's attempts to piece together the story the filmmaker was constructing from a stockpile of unedited footage. *Man of Marble* features a documentary filmmaker trying to get to the bottom of a folk hero's disappearance that is partially explained by the never released footage of an unfinished film. My script idea is partially informed by a desire to explore a social issue in a nontraditional way. *Man of Iron's* main purposes is to explore the issues surrounding the Solidarity movement while also developing a series of stories one wants to see through to the end— the stories of Maciek and Winkel. Significant is the fact that the form and execution of Wajda's films

represents the success of the “docufictional” mode and a possible framework from which I can take technical guidance.

*Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* are also important to my process for the ways in which they have influenced my thinking on the stories I will incorporate into my own script. Before watching these films my focus was on the development of my main protagonist and the delivery of documentary facts through the intercut footage of the missing documentarian. After watching Wajda's films I wonder what secondary story could be inserted into the footage that I originally considered as purely evidential. If I am able to develop a secondary story, or a subplot, and introduce it into the evidential footage I will— hopefully— have added another “hook” for the film. My hopes have been to write a script that causes the audience to care about the protagonist's struggle while also engaging the audience in the consideration of a social problem. I now see that I may have another opportunity to introduce a secondary story that will, if written properly, serve to increase my script's appeal.

### Ten

*Ten* (2002) is a film by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami. The film takes place in modern Tehran. It offers viewers a glimpse into Iranian culture, and the contradictions it produces. The entirety of *Ten* unfolds in a small car that is driving around Tehran. A camera mounted on the dashboard offers us two shots— one of the driver and one of the passenger. The story develops through the dialogue each passenger has with the driver (and there are ten conversations, hence the name). The film is part improvisation and part

script, but one might think the film was a straight up documentary (whether or not the passengers are aware of the camera is unclear— the film is presented as an under cover doc or a narrative in which the actors are very good at ignoring the camera). The fact that the film is scripted but shot in documentary format is that which renders it a hybrid.

*Ten* is not any easy film to force into one of Lipkin et al's categories. The film looks like a documentary but unfolds like a narrative. *Ten* is not like a drama documentary— it does not treat historical events or people, and it is not like a documentary drama— it is a narrative that uses the documentary look and no other documentary devices. To further confuse things is the “narrative feeling” that *Ten* produces; it showcases a good amount of character development (a transformation really), offers a number of conflicts, and culminates in a subtle resolution. In fact, one might not even consider *Ten* a hybrid film if it were not for the film's observational style, and its careful treatment of Iranian cultural realities. Interestingly, the way that *Ten* attains hybrid status (in my mind) is through its backgrounding of daily Iranian life in the thoughts, emotions, and struggles of *Ten's* passengers. My categorization of *Ten* as a fiction is due in part to the difficulty inherent to categorizing *Ten*, as well as the idea that the car driving around in *Ten* presents a story that runs parallel to the actualities of modern Iranian life.

Another way that *Ten* participates in the questions of a divide between fact and fiction is by examining the fictions that color Iranian reality. By focusing on the role of women in modern day Tehran the film questions the validity of fictions that have attained the weight of fact— that women are meant to serve men, that life is dictated by fate, and

that passionate love is the most important thing in a woman's life. *Ten* is much like *Bright Leaves* (discussed later in this review) in that it wants to question the cultural stories people tell to justify the way things are. *Bright Leaves* questions the story that big business is good for communities (amongst other things), while *Ten* openly questions the stories Iranian women construct about love, fate, faith, and marriage. *Ten* even questions the way the protagonist— a recent divorcee— constructs stories about her own “liberation.”

*Ten* does not combine footage that is recognizable as either fact or fiction based. It forces the viewer to decide if they are watching these interactions through some sort of window, or if they are being directed by a frame. *Ten* shows me that my project could also blur fact and fiction to the point that one cannot tell what he/she is watching. It also suggests that one can script a film but present it in a format that is unmistakably documentary like. Finally, *Ten* makes me contemplate how one could “write” the undercover camera into a fictionalized documentary.

### **Docufiction**

The following films resist attempts to be categorized as a drama documentary, documentary drama, or faction. Still, they are important to my review for the way they blend fact and fiction while treating issues of social importance. I label these films “docufictions” to highlight the ambiguity of this classification.

## Camera Buff

*Camera Buff* (1979) is a Polish film by director Krzysztof Kieslowski. The film tells a fairly simple story of an everyday factory worker in a small Polish town who ends up developing an obsession with filmmaking. Filip, the protagonist, purchases a 8mm camera with which to record his newly born daughter's first years. Somehow the communist leader at the factory gets word of Filip's purchase and convinces Filip to make a film about the factory's upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Filip shoots the film and is surprised when it achieves some success at a local film festival. Eventually Filip's ambition overtakes him and he neglects his family. By the end of the film Filip's wife has left him and he has managed to jeopardize both his and his friends' positions at work. The only thing left for Filip to do is turn the camera on himself in a highly symbolic final scene.

*Camera Buff* does not initially come across as a film about a societal issue, and it is not nearly as socially oriented as the other films in this review. Still, *Camera Buff* offers a subtle critique of communist Poland and the workings of factory bosses. As Filip films around the factory it becomes clear that many of the communist party's promises have remained unfilled— or as Filip's boss claims: that “public life cannot always stand the light of day.” While *Camera Buff* probably misses the social issue film “bull’s-eye” for those unfamiliar with Polish history, it does succeed in offering a highly reflexive look at the life of a filmmaker, albeit an amateur one. When the film is not concentrating on the workings of Filip's factory it is focusing on film's dual ability to build up and destroy, and the effects this contradiction has upon the filmmaker himself. Filip's films were meant to build up and celebrate his factory and his friends, but in the end they serve

to hamstring both. Filip is left to clean up the mess his art has produced. He seems to wonder how his art has built his life up while also tearing it down.

*Camera Buff* is the one film that most closely resembles a traditional narrative in this review. There is a well-developed story that does not take a back seat to issues of social importance or the filmmaker's attempt to blend forms. This said, there *is* a good amount of “hybridization” that takes place in *Camera Buff*. Every time Filip shoots his footage is displayed in the film. When he edits the viewer sees the results. In fact, Filip's films are seen again and again as they show up on TV, in festivals, etc. Though the film might be said to be somewhat like Lipkin et al's conception of a faction— it does track along with the concerns of everyday life in communist Poland— *Camera Buff* strikes out on its own as a narrative that incorporates documentary footage. In the end it is a film that cannot be easily classified.

*Camera Buff* is important for its success in intercutting documentary footage into a narrative film without reducing the overall story's impact. The film highlights the trouble filmmakers can get into when practicing their art. This is that which bears the most influence upon my scriptwriting process. *Camera Buff*, like *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, suggests that I develop the problems of each of my characters fully.

### *The Thin Blue Line*

Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is considered to be amongst the first documentary films that overtly questioned the divide between fact and fiction. The film

focuses on the competing stories of two inmates who were said to have been involved in the shooting of a Dallas police officer. Alternating testimonies as to what really happened at the crime scene are reenacted over and over again in what seems like an attempt to uncover the real truth behind the murder. Interestingly, the reenactments only serve to further confuse the facts and viewers of the film are overwhelmed with the frustration that comes in realizing that the fact pattern of the case could have played out in any of the reenacted ways. In the end *The Thin Blue Line* successfully exposes the incompetence of those involved in the investigation while also drawing attention to the fleeting nature of the truth.

*The Thin Blue Line* provides an example of a film that treats both fact and fiction simultaneously and successfully. The film might be seen, stylistically, as the non-fiction opposite of my planned script. Where *The Thin Blue Line* inserts fictionalized reenactments that provide clues to a documentary puzzle, my film will insert documentary footage that reveals hints about a narrative mystery. My script will offer a critique of the financial apparatus that joins universities with predatory loan companies in a way that is similar to Morris's critique of the Dallas investigative team's corruption. Although I am less interested in exploring the question of a documentary film's ability to get at "truth" I am, like Morris, keenly interested in how people justify acts of crime and corruption.

*Bright Leaves*

Ross McElwee's *Bright Leaves* (2003) is an overtly reflexive hybrid film that examines the line between fact and fiction, the fictionalization of family histories, and the documentary potential of narrative film. *Bright Leaves* is McElwee's personal investigation into the life of his tobacco baron great grandfather and the feud his relatives supposedly had with the prominent North Carolinian Duke family. When McElwee learns that the life of his great grandfather is seemingly portrayed in the 1950 Hollywood film *Bright Leaf* he begins to lose track of the reality of his family's history.

*Bright Leaves* is a complex film that weaves footage from the narrative film *Bright Leaf* together with its own investigation of memory, the tobacco industry, and the process of filmmaking. Conversations with film theorists about the intersection of documentary and fiction are introduced into the film, as are questions about “documentary moments” in narrative film. McElwee's study of *Bright Leaf* eventually leads him to actress Patricia Neal and a conversation about her involvement in the film. The question; “does a look back at your career as a narrative actor offer you a documentary history of your life,” is largely lost on Neal but again emphasizes the point that people remember their lives in the ways they most want to. A final conversation with the widow of the author of *Bright Leaf* the novel convinces McElwee that the resemblance between his great grandfather and *Bright Leaf's* protagonist is at best coincidental, and at worst a product of some sort of character combination that melds McElwee's great grandfather with his rival James Buchanan Duke. The take home message of *Bright Leaves* seems to be that the boundaries between fact and fiction are

fluid, especially in memory, and that narrative films based on “true stories” are rarely completely true.

Another important aspect of McElwee's *Bright Leaves* is its critique of the way North Carolinians fictionalize their state's history. The story that “Big Tobacco” creates jobs, the claim that “the history of tobacco is the history of the United States,” and some film participants' assertion that smoking has an insignificant impact on personal health, come together and present a history that is somewhere between fact and fiction. *Bright Leaves* does not offer an outright critique of the tobacco industry but chooses, instead, to highlight its absurdity. *Bright Leaves*' successful use of this type of subtle critique, and its ability to highlight the absurdities of personal truths, is that which will be most influential in my process of writing a script that examines the problem I have chosen to attack.

### **Story Outline**

My particular script will function like other docufictions are said to function by Lipkin et al. It will “re-tell events” (in a partially fictionalized way), and “portray issues of concern [...] in order to provide discussion about them” (Rhodes 14) In writing my script I am not aiming to adhere to a particular form— drama documentary, etc.— but will instead draw from each “docufictional” mode's possibilities and the examples provided to me by the films I have included in my review. The following outline details my script's proposed plot points, action, and subplots.

Basic Characters:

**Jim:** Protagonist— a young man who gets caught up in the mystery of the missing documentarian.

**Nate:** Jim's confidante— a detective film aficionado who works at the video store that Jim used to work at.

**Jeanne:** Antagonist— the head of financial aid at the university. Jeanne has been running a racket with the student loan sharks.

**Richard:** Antagonist— head of the student loan sharks. Works with Jeanne to make money off of student loans. Unscrupulous— the one who had Guy, the documentarian, knocked off.

**Larry:** Richard's main lackey— a “suit.”

**Kim:** Jim's love interest— a beautiful young woman who works as the head of academic advising at the university. She is the daughter of Jeanne, but she doesn't seem to know of Jeanne's dealing with the student loan sharks.

**Guy:** The documentarian who goes missing. Also a university professor.

**Alex:** Guy's sometimes soundman. Older and cantankerous; a former investigative journalist.

**Hank:** University Chancellor.

**Denise:** Dean of Arts and Sciences who befriends Jim.

## Act 1

Working class student JIM is studying at a well-known private school (not a Harvard but a DU). After the first year Jim is struggling financially— his job at the video store just doesn't cut it (plus the video store seems to be on its last legs— a victim of Netflix). Jim lands a job answering phones at the school's financial aid office. He is happy that he has found a job and hopes for tuition remission. Unfortunately, he is hired on as a student worker and is not eligible for this benefit.

While Jim is working in the office he becomes acquainted with KIM— a beautiful young woman who runs the academic advising office next door. Kim visits Jim's office a couple times a day— the two begin dating. Around the same time a 40 something year old man starts making a lot of visits to the financial aid office. This is the Documentarian— GUY— who is trying to investigate issues of higher ed finance. JIM schedules GUY to meet with the director of financial aid— JEANNE, and later watches through an office window as Guy interviews Jeanne in a typical documentary format.

A few days later Guy is scheduled for what is supposed to be a last interview, but before it can take place RICHARD and another “suit,” LARRY, come into the office. Richard and Jeanne get into a huge argument in her office— Jim can hear the yelling but can't make out the details. When Guy arrives for the interview Jeanne is shaken. She won't come out of her office. Richard and Larry confront Guy claiming that they are on the college's board of trustees. Richard tells Guy that the interviews are not going to continue and demands the tapes. Guy refuses to give them the tapes. Richard tells Guy that he'll see him in court. Richard and Larry leave— Jeanne still won't come out of her

office. Jim, who has been sitting in the office lobby while all this goes down, apologizes to Guy, and Guy tells Jim it's not his fault. Guy looks a bit shaken. Guy turns around to leave. A mini-dv tape falls out of his bag. Neither he nor Jim notice but Jim finds the tape when he is leaving for the day. Jim pockets the tape, thinking he better get it to Guy.

Jim has Guy's card—he calls but doesn't get an answer. He goes to the address listed on the card but Guy is not there. Jim heads to the old video store he used to work at to see his friend Nate. Nate is watching the news. Jim and Nate start chatting. In the background a story comes on the TV about the mysterious murder of a local documentarian. Jim is caught by surprise. Jim shares his story about Guy with Nate. They decide to look at the tape but neither of them have the proper equipment. Still, Jim vows he is going to find a way to look at the tape and get to the bottom of all this.

## Act 2

The second act focuses on Jim trying to solve the mystery. Jim will also continue to develop personally in this act. He will become more confident in dealing with his highly educated peers while also becoming skeptical about the higher education system in general.

In this act Jim gets his hands on the equipment necessary to watch Guy's tapes. He slowly obtains more of the footage Guy had been shooting from a variety of sources. Jim then watches the footage and starts to get a sense of what Guy was doing—investigating the misconduct of the financial aid folks in Jim's office. This is also where the film will start to switch back and forth between fiction and non-fiction through the

juxtaposition of narrative and documentary footage. As Jim learns about the racket Jeanne and Richard are running he begins to understand that this problem is bigger than he is. He talks with his friend Nate and details how he thinks he should just leave it alone. Nate, a video store clerk and detective film aficionado, convinces Jim to keep at it. After all, Jim works in the office and can do some snooping.

At this point the subplot concerning the developing relationship between Jim and Kim intensifies. A few “date” scenes serve to show Jim's development and also the class difference between him and Kim (Jim does not tell Kim about his investigation, on his friend Nate's warning). Eventually Kim invites Jim to a party thrown by the university's chancellor. At the party Jim speaks with some university administrators who are talking about higher ed. finance. Jim argues some points he has lifted from Guy's documentary footage. The university folks take notice; Jim befriends the Dean of Arts and Sciences—DENISE—who will later provide Jim with some evidence. Jim also gets the attention of the Chancellor—HANK—who invites Jim to his home for lunch one day. Jim's leaping onto the stage here will upset Kim. Before Jim is able to tell Kim what he is onto she breaks it off with him claiming he used her to get himself noticed by the university higher ups.

After the party scene and throughout the rest of this act additional video tape is leaked to Jim (in a typical detective movie kind of way— it just shows up when someone wants to tip him off. The leaked tape will come from Denise—the Dean of Arts and Sciences, and Alex— Guy's sometimes sound man). Each new videotape offers a new clue and gets Jim closer to solving the mystery. The clues embedded in the film are

discussed by Nate and Jim— this helps Jim keep things straight. At this point the “leaked” videotape is continually incorporated into the narrative film. This intercutting is the primary mechanism from which the hybrid form of this film will arise. Important is that fact that the leaked film also contains info on the student loan scam that I have discovered in researching this problem.

When Jim is close to figuring out the details of the racket Jeanne and Richard have been running he'll have lunch with the chancellor at the chancellor's home (he was invited at the party). This scene will be used to develop some more dialogue that explores the issue at hand. Jim does not mention anything about the racket he is investigating, or the missing documentarian, but he does impress the chancellor with his knowledge of the workings of higher ed. admin. The chancellor, in turn, tells Jim why he thinks the cost of higher education has been skyrocketing.

This is also the act where Jim is presented with a number of obstacles. As Jim gets closer and closer to the truth things get more dangerous. He is tailed, his apartment is broken into, he is beat up, etc. Finally, this act builds to a large crisis where Jim finds he is a wanted man. In a SLAM that closes the second act and propels the script into the third is a major turn of events. Richard and the “suit” Larry kidnap Kim. Richard demands the tapes he knows Jim has and threatens to hurt Kim if he doesn't get them. Jeanne then comes around and asks for Jim's help in saving Kim.

### Act 3

This is the act in which the climax and resolution are played out. Jim and Jeanne team up, but not before Jim gets all the info about the racket out of Jeanne (in a typical detective-tells-the-criminal-how-it-was-done scene). Jim and Jeanne make arrangements to trade the tapes for Kim. A showdown between Jim and Richard ensues. The dialogue here is intense and poignant. Richard goes on about how powerless Jim is, how money makes the world go round, and how higher education is a big business. In a strange plot twist Kim gets loose and attacks Richard and Larry. She gets a hold of Larry's gun and shoots them both dead. Kim then turns on Jim, ties him up, and takes the tapes from him. Hank the chancellor enters into the scene and is revealed as the mastermind behind all of this. Jeanne quickly sides with her daughter Kim and the chancellor. The chancellor picks up where Richard left off— his lecture reveals more about the true workings of higher ed. While the chancellor lectures, Jim is slapped around by Kim— “I'm afraid the interest on your loan has come due, Jim. We let you get away with this for too long. You've got a debt to pay.” Finally, Jim disappears just like Guy did. The status quo is maintained.

### Conclusion

I have sought to combine many disparate ideas in this proposal. My main question; *in what ways can fiction be combined with non-fiction to engage with issues of social importance?* has been partially answered in looking at that which has come before. Now, to answer this question fully, I must script my own combination of fact and fiction while remaining mindful of my pedagogical intent. I must also think more deeply about

the specific impact I want my script to have, and the audience that this script might be best suited for.

Although my goal in writing this thesis will be to learn how best to combine fact, fiction, and a social issue, my hopes are that this script will turn out to be something I can produce independently. The aims of this potential production will vary somewhat from the goals of my thesis, but will remain pedagogical in nature. My main hope is that those who read this script, or watch its filmic equivalent, will learn something about the state of higher education that they had not known previously. I also hope that this film's overt questioning of the "corporatization" of higher education will contribute to the theorizing of a better educational system. If my film entertains and infuriates viewers I will know it has succeeded. If my film causes viewers to ask "have such crimes really been committed," "what can we do to right the system of higher education finance," and "how can we make college accessible to all without burdening the least fortunate with such debt" I will know my film has had the impact I intended it to.

Still, an impact cannot be had without an audience. And social issue films do not ordinarily set records at the box office. To get this script or its cinematic expression out there I will use all available means. I will not limit myself to particular demographics or tastes, for I believe that social issues films garner the attention of people from many spectrums (social issue films tap into a certain societal *concern* more than a pop-cultural *appeal*; those who are concerned can come from all walks of life). This said, I realize my most expansive audience will not be the 13-16 year old group of mega-plex movie attendees but rather those who are already interested in social issues. To avoid preaching

to the choir I will attempt to market this film as something mystery or detective film fans might enjoy while also targeting those that I think have the most to gain in learning about this issue— college aged young adults and their parents. Since the goal is to raise awareness no avenue for promotion will be overlooked. Scriptwriting competitions, film festivals, online delivery platforms, blogs, and even university screening series could be utilized. The end goal here is not to define a particular audience, but to reach as large of an audience as possible.

Finally, this proposal began with a discussion of what I believe is a crisis in social documentary filmmaking. My questioning the critical potential of documentary film has led me to search for a new way forward. I expect that my combination of narrative and documentary forms in a film about a social issue will prove to be fruitful. Whether my script only serves to meet the requirements of my thesis, or is turned into a smash hit, I have already learned much about the potential “docufictions” have for engaging social issues.

"RIGGED"

A SCRIPT

BY JOE BROWN

MAIN CHARACTERS

JIM - PROTAGONIST

NATE - JIM'S HOUSEMATE

BETH - JIM'S LOVE INTEREST ("KIM" IN THESIS PROPOSAL)

JEANNE - HEAD OF FINANCIAL AID

HANK - UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT- A.K.A. "PRESIDENT WHITE"

GUY - DOCUMENTARIAN

RICHARD - PRESIDENT OF STUDENT LOAN XPRESS

VICTORIA - LIBRARIAN

LARRY - RICHARD'S HENCHMAN

TINA - CHANNEL 9 NEWSCASTER

FADE IN

INT. - A LARGE DANK BASEMENT

GUY PETERSON, 42, blood-stained and barely conscious, is propped up and tied to a chair. Around him sits half-covered antique furniture. LARRY, 38, a slab of beef wearing a suit, straddles a piano bench. Larry sits behind a professional style movie camera; he struggles to get it to work.

LARRY  
(to himself)  
Never did understand technology.

Guy's head rolls on his limp neck. He's oblivious to Larry.

LARRY  
Hey! How's this fucking thing  
work?

Guy does not respond.

LARRY  
You hear me, boy!? I don't like  
bein' ignored!

Still, Guy does not respond.

LARRY  
Fuck it!

Larry smashes the camera on the ground. CRASH- it pops off the tripod and bounces along the concrete floor landing near Guy's feet. Guy looks up and:

CRACK! Larry clobbers Guy with a swinging tripod.

Guy's chair falls. He goes with it. We see his head hit the ground. It's a regular mob style shakedown.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN

EXT. - UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - MORNING

A SWARM OF PEOPLE fill a courtyard surrounded by stately buildings. Many hold picket signs. POLICE in full SWAT gear stand between the crowd and a stage with podium. HANK WHITE, university president, approaches the podium.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Good afternoon. Students, faculty, community members; I stand before you today with what will undoubtedly be an unpopular announcement.

ANONYMOUS

(a loud voice from the crowd)  
Fuck your announcement! Cut your salary, cut the sports program, raise tuition again and we'll riot!

The crowd begins to ROAR. JEANNE BALLAST, head of financial aid, and RICHARD SHARP, student loan representative, stand uncomfortably behind President White.

CROWD

(chanting)  
No hike! No hike! No hike!

EXT. - MEDIA STAND BEHIND PROTEST AREA - CONTINUOUS

JOURNALISTS, REPORTERS, and CAMERAMEN share a few small but elevated media stands. We catch a look

at one camera's viewfinder. A young male reporter stands in the frame, the protesting crowd writhing behind him.

MALE REPORTER

I'm here at the scene of the most recent Palo Verde University protest. This protest, the 8<sup>th</sup> in 3 months, has attracted more students than any thus far.

The Reporter steps aside as if to present the growing crowd to the camera. It's like the '60s.

EXT. - UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - CONTINUOUS

JIM STANWOOD, 20, smart- but not too smart, anxiously makes his way through the crowd.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(more loudly into the mic)

The economic difficulties presented by this great recession have caused the state much financial trouble. The university has no choice but to again raise tuition.

CROWD

What do we want, tuition cuts,  
when do we want em, NOW!

Jim joins the chant. He pumps his arms furiously. A protestor at the front of the crowd throws a bike helmet at the podium. President White ducks. Police tackle the instigator. The crowd ROARS. Bike helmets shower down as cops drag protesters to a police van. A FULL BLOWN RIOT STARTS.

POLICE

(through mega-phone)

Move back! Move back!

Police in swat gear rush the crowd. Protestors push back. Books, shoes, and helmets fly through the air. People are almost trampled as the crowd tries to disperse. Jim turns to run and knocks over BETH— a 20 something woman in a punk type outfit.

JIM

Oh my God, I'm sorry!

Jim pulls Beth to her feet.

BETH

Don't be sorry! Run!

Jim stares stupidly at her. She smirks and yanks him by the arm. They RUN!

POLICE

(mega-phone droning in background)

Stand down! Stand down!

Beth is grabbed by a Cop. She tumbles to the ground. Jim quickly turns and confronts the cop.

JIM

Leave her be!

Beth sprints away.

WHACK! Jim is hit with a club.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN

INT. - TV STUDIO

A newscast is in progress. An anonymous TV NEWS ANCHOR labors through the day's news.

NEWS ANCHOR

In other news is the story of the mysterious disappearance of local documentarian Guy Peterson.

An image of Guy appears on the screen.

NEWS ANCHOR (CON)

Peterson, who was expected to present a previously finished film on economic class in America, failed to appear at his own screening Thursday night. Authorities, who have been asked to search for Peterson, found his home broken into and his video equipment smashed. (beat) Channel 7 News will continue to follow the story.

INT. - POLICE WAGON

Jim sits amongst 5 OTHERS, handcuffed, back against the wall. A large welt is swelling on his forehead. VICTORIA JAYROE, about 50, sticking out in her business casual attire, sits next to him.

VICTORIA

They got you pretty good, huh?  
It's bullshit...

Jim barely manages to look at Victoria.

VICTORIA

(shouting at cops)  
You nearly killed this one,  
boys! This won't stand...

The police wagon doors SLAM shut. Shadows engulf those inside.

VICTORIA  
Kid, kid... listen to me. Try  
not to pass out. Talk to me!

Jim looks at Victoria, confused.

JIM  
My head is splitting.

VICTORIA  
Yeah, these cops are barbarians.

CUT TO:

INT. - LARGE AUDITORIUM - DAY - CONTINUOUS

A CREW OF MEN move speakers onto a stage. NATE HENKE, 20, wearing "Dickies" shorts and a "wife-beater," directs men hanging microphones from the rafters. Nate's cellphone RINGS.

NATE  
"On A String Rigging," this is  
Nate.

INT. - POLICE STATION HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Jim holds a pay phone receiver to his ear.

JIM  
Nate, it's Jim. I've got a  
problem. You gotta help me out.

INT. - LARGE AUDITORIUM - CONTINUOUS

Nate is visibly annoyed. He directs his crew with exaggerated pointing.

NATE  
Dude, I'm at work. There's a big  
show tonight and I'm doing the  
riffin...

JIM (V.O.)  
I'm in jail, I need you to bail  
me out.

Jim is greeted by what seems like an eternity of  
silence.

NATE  
(disgustedly)  
Are you serious?!

JIM (V.O.)  
I wouldn't kid about this.  
(beat) Help me out. I can't call  
my dad.

NATE  
Jesus Christ, man! I can't  
believe you. What the fuck  
happened?

JIM (V.O.)  
Protest at schoo...

NATE  
Oh God! More of your  
revolutionist bullshit.

Jim does not respond. More silence.

NATE (CON)  
What cop shop you at?

INT. - POLICE STATION HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

A POLICE OFFICER stands next to Jim.

JIM  
5<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. Bring 500  
bucks. (beat) And thanks, I owe  
you.

Jim hangs up the phone and is escorted into a cell with the other protestors. Victoria crouches, leaning against a wall.

VICTORIA  
You get through to your roommate?

JIM  
Yeah. (beat) He's pissed.

TWO COPS walk hurriedly by the cell. Victoria and Jim fall silent.

COP 1  
I'm telling you one of those guys hit me. You can't let 'em go.

Jim shoots a worried look at Victoria.

COP 2  
We've got 700 kids in here or on the way. We can't get 'em all...

COP 1  
(from around a corner and fading)  
You can get this one.

COP 2  
(barely audible)  
Not this tim...

Victoria nods at Jim.

VICTORIA  
Will he help you out?

JIM  
Yeah.

Jim looks to the floor. Despondent.

JIM

You got a way out?

VICTORIA

Yeah, I'll pay my way out of here as soon as I'm sure these cops aren't harassing any more guys like you.

JIM

This ain't your first time here, huh?

VICTORIA

No, I've been here three times in three months... for the protests.

JIM

But you're not a student.

VICTORIA

No, my student days are 20 years behind me. I'm a librarian at the university. (beat) The media librarian.

JIM

No shit? A "radical" librarian.

VICTORIA

Yeah, funny I guess...

The cell door opens with a loud CLANK! A COP stands at the door.

COP 3

Stanwood, what's the verdict on your call? Somebody coming to get you?

JIM

Yes sir. Somebody's coming now.

COP 3

Come with me then. We don't got  
room for you all.

VICTORIA

Take care of yourself, kid.  
Don't give up the fight.

JIM

Thanks. You neither...

Jim follows the officer out of the cell.

INT. - NATE'S TRUCK - EVENING

Nate drives along. He grips the steering wheel  
tightly and stares out the windshield.

NATE

This is fucking ridiculous! What  
the fuck did you do?

JIM

I told you, I got caught up in a  
protest at scho...

NATE

God, you've turned into such an  
ass. You go to school and you  
think you're Che fucking Guevara  
or something. Tell me, what is  
that English degree gonna do for  
you anyhow?

Jim looks out the passenger window. He doesn't  
want to be there.

JIM

Dude, it's not my fault. I got  
caught up...

NATE

(getting louder)

All right, all right, all right!  
But I don't get it. All this  
school shit is just getting you  
into debt, thrown in jail, and  
you never even have the money  
for the rent.

JIM

It's my path. I gotta graduate.  
Why do you have to keep putting  
it down?

NATE

Cuz now you owe me another 500  
bucks. And I'm not putting it  
down, I just don't see its use.  
Why don't you quit that school  
shit and do what I do?

Jim spins round to look at Nate. Nate still  
stares out the windshield.

JIM

Oh come on, man! That's not for  
me. Making sails in a factory?

NATE

I don't just make sails. I've  
got the rigging company I'm  
starting. I make 50k.

JIM

(softly)

I'm not gonna punch grommet  
holes in a sheet fifty hours a  
week to make a decent living.

NATE

I don't give a shit what you do,  
you just better pay me back.

Nate and Jim pull up to their apartment. Nate gets out of the car and SLAMS the door. Jim stays seated, head down. A minute passes, he follows Nate into their place.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jim walks through a sparsely decorated living room to the kitchen, grabs a stack of mail from the table, and heads down the hall to his room.

INT. - JIM'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

He sits at his desk, turns on his computer, and throws his legs up. The stack of mail sits in his lap. He fingers an envelope. The return address reads "Student Loan Xpress." He sighs, slaps the envelope on his knee, and drops it back in his lap. He leans over, types his password into the computer. Half the letters fall from his lap.

JIM

Dammit!

He picks up the letters. Another's return address reads "Chase." He looks at it, shuffles it to the back of the pile. He grabs a letter opener from his desk and rips into them- THE FUN BEGINS! He breaths out heavily and tosses the opener on the ground. He unfolds the first letter, looks at the ceiling, and then down at the letter again.

INSERT:

THIS LETTER IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR HARDSHIP DEFERMENT WILL END ON MAY 31ST. YOUR ACCOUNT WILL COME DUE AT THAT TIME.

INSERT:

CURRENT BALANCE: \$12,432.23

Disgusted, Jim throws the letter in a box overflowing with similar notices. He opens another letter.

INSERT:

THIS NOTICE IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SCHOOL HAS CONFIRMED YOUR FULL TIME STUDENT STATUS AND THAT YOUR LOAN WILL REMAIN IN DEFERMENT UNTIL JUNE 30TH 2012.

INSERT:

CURRENT BALANCE: \$7,582.56.

This letter is tossed into the box.

Jim opens the letter from Chase.

INSERT:

MONTHLY STATEMENT: MINIMUM PAYMENT DUE: \$94.98

REVOLVING BALANCE: \$3,612.07

Jim's hand falls by his side, the letter drops. He slinks out of his chair to a futon mattress on the ground. He lays there, HOPELESS. A book lies nearby: *HOW TO WIPE OUT YOUR STUDENT LOANS AND BE DEBT FREE.*

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

EXT. - STATELY UNIVERSITY BUILDING - MORNING

A sign reads: UNIVERSITY HALL: REGISTRAR, FINANCIAL AID, BURSAR.

INT. - SMALL OFFICE CUBICLE

Jim sits across from JANE, mid 30s, plump. Jane pours over figures on her computer screen.

JANE

Well Jim, when advising students who are having financial difficulties we always try to help students find a way to stay the course. I know it may seem hard now, but if you leave you may find it more difficult to come back.

JIM

I know, but a guy's gotta eat. And I need to find a job. I'll get back at it once I have one.

Jane raises her eyebrows. She really wants Jim to think on this, but he believes what he's saying.

JANE

O.k. then, If you've made up your mind you'll need to read over this leave of absence form and sign it.

EXT. - UNIVERSITY HALL - CONTINUOUS

Jim exits the building. He walks amongst the manicured landscaping, lights up a cigarette, and pops a squat on a wall. A BELL RINGS; classes are out. Doors of nearly every nearby building fly open. STUDENTS pour out. ERROL, 20, walks by Jim and stops.

ERROL

Jim, hey! What a protest yesterday! I can't believe they're increasing tuition again. It's bullshit!

JIM

(disgustedly)  
I'll say.

ERROL

We're gonna storm the  
president's office at 6pm. Did  
you hear? We need everyone we  
can get. Be there!

Errol runs off.

EXT. - ANOTHER STATELY BUILDING - AFTERNOON

A sign reads: BARKLEY HALL - UNIVERSITY CLUB,  
PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, ALUMNI RELATIONS.

HUNDREDS OF STUDENTS mill about. A clock tower  
reads 5:35 pm. Jim stands in the background.

BETH (FROM BEHIND)

I didn't expect to see you again  
so soon.

Jim spins around to find Beth standing there.

BETH

Well, are you gonna say hello,  
or are you gonna pull that quiet  
and mysterious revolutionary  
thing?

JIM

(too fast, too anxious)  
You're like the second person  
who called me a revolutionary in  
the last 24 hours and all I did  
was get caught up in that  
fucking protest. It's been one  
bit of bad news after another  
since then.

BETH

(smiling)  
But you bumped into me again, so  
that's good news; right?

JIM

Ah, yeah! Sorry. I'm just in a bad place.

BETH

Can I give you a hint?

JIM

Sure, go 'head.

BETH

Don't tell a cute girl "I'm in a bad place" when you first meet her.

JIM

Oh, yeah. Sorry.

A voice booms over a mega-phone.

POLICE

Clear the area! Clear the area!

Jim and Beth spin round to see a group of POLICE in swat gear inching towards the gathering crowd of students. Some students rush the doors of Barkley Hall.

ANONYMOUS

(yelling)

Which side are you on, boys? You telling me you can afford to pay these tuition hikes for your kids? On a cop's salary?

POLICE

(through mega-phone)

Move away from the doors!

A water canon opens fire on the students. Protestors fall to the ground. Another class ensues. Jim stands well back, in awe.

BETH

Come on, let's get outta here.

Jim and Beth run in the opposite direction of the struggling crowd.

EXT. - CITY ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Jim and Beth come around a corner into an alley. Beth runs ahead of Jim, turns around, and motions him to follow. She climbs atop a dumpster, pulls herself up on a window ledge, and grasps the bottom rung of a ladder that leads upward to a billboard catwalk.

EXT. - BILLBOARD CATWALK - CONTINUOUS

Beth walks out on to a billboard catwalk. Jim follows awkwardly.

JIM

What the hell is this?

BETH

Just my little get-away-from-it all spot!

JIM

Up here, on a billboard platform?

BETH

Look at the view.

Jim steadies himself and looks out.

JIM

Wow, yeah, you can see the whole campus from here.

BETH

Looks peaceful, huh?

JIM  
(looking out)  
Yeah, (beat) kinda.

A mega-phone can be heard in the distance.

BETH  
Funny thing is there's a big cop  
shop a block down that way. The  
view gets spoiled by all the  
damned sirens.

JIM  
Or mega-phones.

BETH  
That's just lately.

Beth sits down, back against the billboard. She pulls an elaborate silver cigarette case from her bag, opens it, and lights one. She pats the space next to her signaling that Jim should sit down.

BETH  
So do you have a revolutionary  
name?

Jim is still standing.

JIM  
I'm not a revolutionary but...  
my name's Jim. What's yours?

BETH  
(giggling)  
Beth. (beat) Sit with me.

Jim sits and helps himself to a cigarette.

BETH (CON)  
Billboards are for advertising  
messages; what's your message,  
Jim?

JIM

What? Ah, I mean. (beat) I don't know if I have a message. I'm just trying to get through school, but...

BETH

But what?

JIM

But I took a leave of absence today. I'm broke.

Jim lights the smoke and takes a slow drag.

BETH

Shit, I'm sorry. (beat) You know what my message is?

JIM

Why would I? I don't know you. (beat) I don't even know why I'm up here with you.

Beth springs to her feet, looks out over the campus, and screams:

BETH

AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!

JIM

What the hell?

Beth spins back towards Jim.

BETH

That's my message Jim! RAGE, rage at all this bullshit! Come on, try it with me.

Beth grabs Jim's hand, he springs up next to her.

BETH

(screaming)

AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!

Jim flicks his cigarette into the air and joins in.

JIM

AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

They look out over the campus, the sun is setting. Beth clasps Jim's hand. A tender moment. Beth twirls around and rifles through her bag. She grabs a bottle of whiskey.

BETH

Come on, Jim, knock one back with me!

Beth takes a swig from the bottle, extends her arm and plants the bottle on Jim's chest. Jim, reluctant, takes a swig too.

BETH

What are you gonna do now that you dropped out, "revolutionary Jim"?

JIM

(wiping his mouth)

Fuck if I know. I need a job. I gotta get through school. I wanna write.

BETH

A writer, huh? Sexy. (beat) Jobs are easy to come by, writing gigs aren't.

Beth takes another swig of whiskey and prances dangerously, but like a ballerina, along the billboard catwalk. She leaps in the air twisting around to face Jim again.

JIM

Jesus, be caref...

BETH

You just gotta know the right people.

JIM

What? Oh yeah, just be careful there, huh?

Beth glides back towards the billboard and sits. Another swig of whiskey.

BETH

(giggling)

I can get you a job that will get you through school, "rebel Jim."

JIM

You're drunk!

BETH

Not yet! And so what if I was, I'm the one with the job in financial aid.

JIM

What? O.k., I just don't believe you- "rebel Beth."

Jim pops a squat next to Beth, again.

BETH

Fine. Don't. And I won't invite you to the president's party tomorrow night.

JIM

Oh come on, you are so full of shit. (beat) Little whiskey punk Beth-y Boo here is going to get me a job at the university. And not only that, she's also gonna bring me to an admin party.

Beth leans over and kisses Jim gently.

BETH  
(smiling coyly)  
Yep.

The camera catches a wide shot of Beth and Jim. Silhouettes against the billboard. The billboard features a student in cap and gown and reads PALO VERDE UNIVERSITY: YOU'VE GOT PROMISE.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN

INT. - PRESIDENT'S MANSION - NIGHT

A CROWD OF 50 SOMETHINGS chat in disparate groups. A moneyed party. People congregate near the bar. CAITLIN, a business school professor chats with other university profs RICK and DAVID. RICHARD SHARP, student loan rep stands by awkwardly.

DAVID  
I had to pick up an extra class this semester, and now they want me to teach two over the summer.

RICK  
They keep raising tuition, but I haven't seen a raise. I don't blame these kids for protesting.

CAITLIN  
I do. College is not a right. We had reason to protest when we were in school- equal rights, the war in Vietnam.

Richard enters the conversation.

RICHARD  
Excuse me, I couldn't help but overhear your conversation, and I have to say I agree with the

lady here. Kids these days seem to think college is a four-year party. Sometimes a five-year party.

DAVID

My students don't seem to think that. (beat) I'm David; I don't think I caught your name.

David extends his hand. Richard grabs it and shakes it vigorously.

RICHARD

Yes, excuse me; I'm Richard- a friend of the president's.

Richard gestures in the direction of the president who stands in another circle.

RICK

Really; and how do you two know each other?

RICHARD

Oh, well, let's just say I'm a financial advisor.

David, Rick, and Caitlin look at Richard quizzically.

INT. - MANSION SIDE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jim and Beth work their way around a table of highly ornate prepared food. Jim looks uncomfortable in his dressed up clothes. Beth has shed all semblance of her punk persona and wears a nice dress. She's been to parties like this before.

BETH

You can't sit in here and pick at appetizers all night. I

brought you here to TALK to people.

JIM

I don't know how to talk to people like... like THIS.

BETH

Oh come on, they're just people. And it's all about networking.

Jim picks up some sort of fancy appetizer and eyes it like he doesn't know what it is.

JIM

What do I say?

BETH

I don't know, talk about stock options. People like this love talking about stock options.

Jim pops the unidentified appetizer into his mouth and chews, slowly. He grimaces and swallows.

JIM

I'd rather talk about the tuition increase.

BETH

(giggling, delighted)  
Do it, I dare you.

Beth goes to exit the side room.

BETH

You're on your own!

Jim watches through a stained glass window as Beth seamlessly inserts herself into a conversation.

JIM  
(under his breath)  
This is stupid.

INT. - PRESIDENT'S MANSION - CONTINUOUS

Jim weaves through the crowd towards the bar in the corner. He keeps his eye on Beth, who's chatting it up. The BARTENDER watches Jim approach.

BARTENDER  
Good evening, sir. Would you care for something to drink?

JIM  
What do you have for beer?  
Miller High Life? PBR?

BARTENDER  
No sir, I'm sorry. Your choices are Stella, Chimay, and ...

VICTORIA (INTERUPPTING)  
He'll try the Chimay.

Jim turns to see Victoria, from the protest.

BARTENDER  
Very well, one Chimay.

JIM  
Hey I know yo...

VICTORIA  
(leaning in)  
Sure you do, but let's pretend you don't. (beat) I'm Victoria, it's good to meet you.

Jim extends his hand to shake.

JIM

Jim. Good to meet you too.  
Snooty beer tastes around here.

VICTORIA

Quite true. Are you a student?

The Bartender produces Jim's Chimay.

BARTENDER

Your Chimay, sir.

JIM

Thanks.

Victoria and Jim move from the bar and station themselves next to a bookshelf and sculpture - the bust of John Dewey.

VICTORIA

I never really feel like I fit in at these things but my boss, the dean of the library, suggests we all make an effort to come.

JIM

YOU don't feel like YOU fit in?

VICTORIA

Yeah, funny I guess. How'd you end up here?

JIM

Met some girl. I guess she's got connections.

Jim gestures towards Beth.

VICTORIA

Hmm. (beat) Everything work out with your roommate?

JIM

I guess, but he's not so happy with me.

VICTORIA

You were doing the right thing. You've got to protest this shit.

JIM

Yeah, I guess. But protesting isn't going to get me back in school.

VICTORIA

What do you mean?

Jim pauses, he looks at the statue of John Dewey.

JIM

I had to take a leave of absence. I'm broke.

VICTORIA

Oh, I'm sorry.

JIM

Thanks. Ya know what, the thing that bothers me is that these tuition hikes are just so ridiculous. I mean, where's the money going? Why's school so expensive?

VICTORIA

I wonder myself.

JIM

I've been reading a bit about this. Apparently government support for higher ed is at its lowest point in 50 years, and the rise in higher education costs has risen twice the rate of health care.

VICTORIA  
(surprised)  
You're like a walking  
encyclopedia!

Jim's face turns to stone. He's embarrassed-  
exposed. He's let his mouth run again.

JIM  
Yeah, sorry. I'm a bit of a nerd  
I guess.

VICTORIA  
You're talking to a librarian.  
*It's o.k...*

Beth returns and inserts herself into the  
conversation.

BETH  
Jim, I'd like to introduce you  
to my boss Jeanne, the head of  
financial aid. (beat) Oh excuse  
me, I don't mean to interrupt.

VICTORIA  
No problem. We're just getting  
to know each other.

Beth pulls Jim away. Victoria saunters along  
after them. They approach another circle. JEANNE  
BALLAST, head of financial aid, Hank White,  
university president, and Richard Sharp,  
"financial advisor" stand there.

BETH  
Excuse me, Jeanne, I'd like you  
to meet my friend Jim. He's a  
real whiz with finance.

Jim shoots Beth a confused and angry look.

JEANNE  
Hi Jim, very nice to meet you.  
Any friend of Beth's is a friend

of mine.

(to all)

Beth started as a work-study in my office and now manages all our biggest loans.

JIM

It's very nice to meet you as well. You're right about Beth, she sure is something.

Jim looks skeptically at Beth.

JEANNE

Do you know president White?

President White extends his hand to Jim, they shake.

PRESIDENT WHITE

It's good to meet you, Jim. I always like meeting students. Especially those from our business school.

Jim suddenly looks confused, but quickly hides this.

JIM

Business school? Yes, yes... a good program. It's nice to meet you as well.

BETH

And this is Richard Sharp, president of Student Loan Xpress.

More handshakes.

RICHARD

Nice to meet you, Jim.

JIM

Yes, A pleasure! (beat) Do you all know Victoria? She's a librarian on campus.

Jim signals Victoria, who had been standing an arm's length away, to join in.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Of course! Victoria, good to see you again.

VICTORIA

President White, Dr. Ballast. Nice to see you as well. (beat) You know Jim here has an interesting perspective on the current financial crisis in higher ed.

Jim shoots a "WTF" glance at Victoria.

JIM

(hesitant)

Oh no, not really. I don't really know much about it.

PRESIDENT WHITE

I'd love to hear what a student thinks of all this. Really, these days students just want to throw bike helmets at me.

All laugh.

VICTORIA

Jim was just telling me he reads a lot about this. What was it Jim, the cost of higher education has risen twice as fast as health care...

JIM

Well, that's what I've been reading. I also heard that in

the 1970s a Pell Grant covered almost 75% of a four-year education at a public school, but now it only covers about a quarter. Then there's that...

BETH

Excuse me; I'll be right back.

Beth slips away from the circle. Jim barely seems to notice. He seems to have found his stride.

JIM (CON)

... whole "tuition has risen at twice the cost of health care" thing.

PRESIDENT WHITE

My goodness Jim, you are well informed. Those figures do seem accurate. This is why we lobby the state for more funds.

JIM

I wish they'd listen.

PRESIDENT WHITE

We do too, Jim, we do too.

VICTORIA

How much longer do you think the hiring freeze will go on, President White?

PRESIDENT WHITE

Well, it's hard to say. I think that...

A LOUD VOICE

(through a microphone)

Could I have everyone's attention please. Thank you all for being here at the President's annual faculty

party. We're going to start the toast. President White, could you report to the front?

PRESIDENT WHITE (CON)

Oh, well... excuse me. Dean Allen is calling me. You see how they tell me what to do? It was good to chat with you all...

The president breaks away from the circle. Jeanne and Richard turn to watch the toast. Victoria pulls Jim away.

VICTORIA

Time for another Chimay.

They walk towards the bar.

JIM

Talk about putting me on the spot.

VICTORIA

You did well. I can't say that stuff to them.

Jim stands on his tippy-toes and scans the crowd.

JIM

This whole night's crazy. Where's Beth?

Beth is nowhere to be found.

VICTORIA

No clue. But look, you seem like a smart kid. And you know where I stand on the issues. I want you to take this and look at it.

Victoria reaches into her purse and pulls out a DVD.

JIM

What is it?

VICTORIA

Just watch it. You'll see. And you know where to find me.

Victoria turns away and slips down a back hallway. Suddenly, Jim stands alone. He meanders through the crowd looking for Beth. The toast goes on. Unable to find her, he exits out the front door.

EXT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jim walks up the path to his house. He's met by the sound of a DOOR SLAMMING and HIGH HEELS RUNNING ON PAVEMENT. TINA, 23, tall and highly made up, comes flying around a corner almost knocking Jim over. Jim catches her in his arms.

TINA

Jesus Christ! Jim, you scared the shit out of me!

JIM

Sorry! I was just...

Jim looks at Tina— she's crying. Her makeup is smeared all over her face.

JIM (CON)

Tina, ah... are you all right?

Tina pulls back from Jim and wipes the tears from her eyes, further smudging her make up.

TINA

Yeah, ... yeah. I'm fine. (beat)  
Nate and I broke up. He, he...  
he said I was dumb as a weather girl.

Tina busts out crying again. She runs off before Jim can respond. Jim lets her go and heads in expecting to find Nate on a tirade.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nate sits on a worn out sofa in the living room watching "Ultimate Fighting Championship." Beer bottles stand empty on the coffee table. Jim enters with a DVD sleeve in his hand.

NATE

(slurring his speech)  
I was wondering when you'd get home. I need your advice.

Jim heads to the kitchen.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Jim starts sorting through the mail on the table. Nate has followed him in.

JIM

Advice? On what, women? I just saw Tina running from the house bawling. What'd you do?

NATE

Nothing. Girl's a ditz.

Jim continues to sort the mail.

JIM

You don't get to be a TV news anchor for Channel 9 news at 23 by being a ditz.

NATE

(still slurring his speech)  
Whatever, she's the 4 am news anchor. Nobody watches her superficial ass at 4 am.

JIM

Maybe so, but you want my real advice?

NATE

Yeah, I want your real advice on what type of motorcycle I should buy tomorrow. Should I get a fat boy or a speed bike?

Jim finishes sorting the mail and again looks at the DVD Victoria gave him. Nate's changing the subject visibly irritates him— he shoots a "WTF" glance at Nate.

JIM

I wouldn't make that decision when you're drunk.

NATE

Oh come on man, congratulate me! I just got a promotion at work. I'm floor manager now. Don't even need to work on the rigging stuff anymore.

JIM

Congratulations. (beat) I wanna watch a DVD. Are you watching that?

Nate turns and stares at the TV in the living room. He seems confused. He stands swaying in the kitchen.

NATE

If you just quit school and came to work with me you could have a motorcycle too. Mrrrrrrmmmm, mrrrrrrmm, mmmrrrrrrmm!

Nate pretends like he is riding a motorcycle around the kitchen.

JIM  
I don't want a motorcycle.

Jim moves back to the living room.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jim loads the DVD in the player and takes a seat on the sofa. Nate "drives" in and sits next to him. He cracks another beer.

NATE  
Whatcha got?

JIM  
Something somebody gave me.

The DVD loads, the HISS OF RAW AUDIO permeates the room, Jim stares at the screen. The image bounces on the screen like a home movie. It seems as if a crew is setting up.

INT. - JEANNE BALLAST'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

JEANNE BALLAST (O.S.)  
(softly)  
I've only got 20 minutes today.

The camera stabilizes as if it has been put on a tripod. The picture comes into focus. Jeanne Ballast, financial aid director sits as an interviewee.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
No problem, I won't take long.  
Just a couple of questions  
today.

Guy- back to the camera- moves into frame and towards Jeanne. The CAMERA MAN is affixing a lapel mic on Jeanne.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
(noticeably louder)  
Let me just get this on here.

Jeanne tilts her head a bit. She seems accustomed to this. The cameraman backs out of the frame. His face is not seen.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
I really appreciate your meeting with me again.

JEANNE  
(audio fluctuating)  
It's fine. (beat) Besides, I have to. With all the trouble lately the university is pushing this transparency thing. I'd probably get fired if I decli... That's not recording is it?

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
(off screen, fluctuating)  
Not yet.

JEANNE  
(audio fluctuating)  
O.k., good. I really only have 20 minutes.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
Alright, audio's good. I'll jump right in. I've got some tough questions today.

JEANNE  
Fine.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
Well, I'm sure you're aware of the case the Chronicle of Higher Ed has been following. A lot of financial aid administrators have been found to be cultivating relationships— let's

call them unethical relationships— with preferred loan companies. I'd be curious to know your opinion on this.

JEANNE

Ah, I don't have much of an opinion on this. Well, other than those folks should not have been setting up such a relationship. What do they say; every bushel's got a couple bad apples?

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Can I ask you to repeat the question when you start your answer?

JEANNE

Oh yeah, right. Like last time.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Thanks. (beat) What would these preferred lender agreements look like in practice?

Jeanne begins playing with a silver cross that hangs from her neck.

JEANNE

Preferred lender agreements... well I guess I wouldn't really know. We don't have such arrangements here.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

I read that preferred lender agreements offer certain loan companies exclusive access to students, even when their loan packages aren't the greatest for students— high interest and stuff. Is that how you

understood the details, and the investigation?

JEANNE

I suppose so. But I don't really know how it would work.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Apparently the head of financial aid at Johns Hopkins got some huge kickbacks from the loan companies.

A DOOR IS HEARD OPENING. The camera remains on Jeanne. She lets go of her necklace.

RICHARD SHARPE (O.S.)

(off screen)

What is going on here, Jeanne? You know media clearances are necessary.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Let me introduce myself, I'm Guy Peterson.

Jeanne's eyes follow Guy who is moving off screen. Jeanne stands; the camera cuts her off at the chest.

JEANNE

Richard, you can't just barge...

RICHARD (OFF SCREEN)

Mr. Peterson, I'm Richard Sharp, university trustee. You haven't obtained the proper permissions.

JEANNE

Richard! (beat) Guy, could you please wait outside for a minute?

GUY

Yeah. Sure.

The frame is jostled, the camera pans down to the floor, the image is dark but the audio remains on. We HEAR A DOOR CLOSE.

JEANNE (AUDIO ONLY)

What do you think you are doing, Richard?

RICHARD (AUDIO ONLY)

Nevermind what I'm doing, you're going to blow it.

JEANNE (AUDIO ONLY)

I'm not the one claiming to be a trus...

RICHARD (AUDIO ONLY)

Hold on, that camera's not off. There's a red lig...

The camera is bumped again. The SOUND OF SOMEONE ROUGHLY HANDLING IT comes through— the AUDIO PEAKS with the bumps. The camera shuts off.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nate and Jim sit on the sofa staring at the now blank screen.

NATE

(slurring)

Dude, what the fuck is this? Can we watch the fight now?

JIM

Holy shit! Do you see what's going on here, man? This is big, this is huge!

NATE

What the fuck are you talking about?

JIM

This is crazy! I just met some of these people. Something's going on.

NATE

Yeah, the fight is going on! And I'm missing it!

Jim turns and gives a "why are you such an ass" look.

JIM

Watch your damned fight then!

He grabs the DVD from the player and heads towards the door.

NATE

(yelling)  
Where you going?

The DOOR SLAMS.

EXT. - DARK CITY STREETS- NIGHT

Jim furiously pedals a bike through the city. PEOPLE sit on stoops. A late spring night.

JIM

(breathing heavily)  
DamN, which alley is it?

Jim races by a Palo Verde University sign. He careens his neck around looking for something. An alley appears on his left. He cycles into it, the billboard ladder is in front of him. Jim jumps off his bike, locks it, and performs a gymnast like move up the dumpster and onto the ladder.

EXT. - BILLBOARD CATWALK - CONTINUOUS

Jim tops the ladder and attains the catwalk. Beth sits there, wearing her party dress, drunk.

BETH

Go away!

JIM

What, why? Where'd you disappear to?

BETH

(sobbing now)

You used me!

JIM

What? You've got some problems, girl.

BETH

"Rebel Jim" - star of the party. Gonna come in and tell the president and head of financial aid what's wrong with our finance system. You used me just to get buddy-buddy with them.

JIM

You invited me! You told me to do it! Used you?

Beth runs down the catwalk smashing into Jim. He braces and holds her. She pounds on his chest.

BETH

I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! Those stupid people are fake. They have no idea. (beat) I just need a way out.

JIM

(calming her)

From what?

BETH  
From this bullshit debt cycle.

JIM  
What?

BETH  
I'm 60k in debt to this  
pretentious school.

Beth flaps her arms in disgust.

JIM  
What? Why didn't you tell me...  
the other night? I'm in debt  
too.

They slump down onto the catwalk. Beth grabs her  
backpack— more whiskey.

JIM  
We gotta keep protesting. And  
you gotta see this.

Jim pulls the DVD out of his pants cargo pocket.

BETH  
(yelling)  
I don't want to talk about  
protests. I don't want to hear  
any of it!

JIM  
No, you gotta hear this...

BETH  
(yelling)  
I said I don't want to hear  
anything!

She takes a swig of whiskey, turns, and kisses  
Jim. Their lips separate as quickly as they  
touched. Beth stares into Jim's eyes, leans back,  
another swig of whiskey. She looks out over the

horizon. Jim grabs the bottle, takes a big gulp, and stares out too.

BETH

I'll get you that job, Jim. You impressed Jeanne. But then you'll see how much of a business this school really is.

Jim doesn't know what to say. He hesitates but says:

JIM

O.k. (beat) Thanks.

The camera pulls away. Jim and Beth are again framed against the billboard's slogan: PALO VERDE UNIVERSITY: YOU'VE GOT PROMISE.

INT. - UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - MORNING

Jim walks around the library looking confused. He makes his way to the circulation desk where a YOUNG MAN sits.

JIM

Excuse me; I'm looking for Victoria.

YOUNG MAN

Victoria who?

JIM

Ah, she's a librarian here. I think. She works with the DVDs.

YOUNG MAN

Oh yeah, head down there. You'll find her.

Jim walks in the direction the Young Man pointed.

INT. - LIBRARY MEDIA AREA - CONTINUOUS

Jim rounds a corner and finds a large quiet room stocked with DVDs. Victoria sits at a desk towards the center.

VICTORIA

Jim, hey! Good to see you.

JIM

(whispering)

Victoria. (beat) I came about that DVD you lent me.

VICTORIA

You don't have to whisper. It's a library, not a monastery.

(beat) Actually, follow me...

Victoria leads Jim to the back of the room. They head through a side door with a frosted glass window.

INT. - LIBRARY SCREENING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

JIM

Whoa, what's this? It's like a little movie theater.

VICTORIA

Yeah, well... you know these California schools. (beat)  
What'd you think of that DVD?

JIM

Jesus! What's going on? It's kind of creepy. I mean I just met Jeanne and them and then you show me that DVD. Did you help shoot that?

VICTORIA

No, but I know who did. Here,  
take a seat. I've got some more  
footage.

Victoria gestures towards any of the empty  
seats.

JIM

What if someone comes?

VICTORIA

(looking out towards her desk)  
Nobody's coming. I spent the  
last 10 years building this  
media collection, and now  
everybody streams everything.  
Probably lose my job any minute  
no...

Victoria starts sorting through a stack of DVDs  
and mini-dv tapes. Jim finds a seat.

VICTORIA (CON)

So, there's a documentarian who  
had been working here on campus.  
Both a professor of film and  
someone investigating the  
school's financial dealings.

JIM

And this is his footage?

VICTORIA

Yeah. We provide duplication  
services and back up storage for  
profs here. I've been keeping  
his footage organized.

JIM

And he's investigating our  
financial aid office?

Victoria stops sorting and looks at Jim  
deadpan.

VICTORIA

Well, yes and no. I guess... I haven't seen all of his footage. But I do know he was filmming here, and in a bunch of other places. Talking to finance and loan experts I guess.

JIM

I'm surprised he wasn't filmming at the protests; was he?

VICTORIA

That's the thing. I was surprised too. I guess the whole thing is, he's gone.

JIM

Gone? What do you mean, gone?

VICTORIA

I mean gone, disappeared, and strangely too. I had got used to him coming in with footage, and had kinda been getting friendly with him. Then he stopped coming round. A few days later I walked over to his building with some of the dupes he wanted and the department head said he got a letter from Guy— his name's Guy Peterson— saying he had to resign. It was super sudden.

JIM

Weird. I mean I've left crap ass jobs on a minute's notice, but who leaves a professional job that way?

Victoria starts sorting through the DVDs again.

VICTORIA  
I know; it's strange.

JIM  
When was all this?

Victoria continues to sort through DVDs and tapes. She is becoming frustrated.

VICTORIA  
About 5 days ago— at least that's when I went looking for him. And here's all this footage. (beat) Ah, this is what I want you to see.

She cues up a DVD. An image appears on the screen. Again, an interview is being set up

INT. - PRESIDENT HANK WHITE'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

An empty chair fills the screen. The camera bumps about. A tall man in a suit enters. He sits and affixes a lapel mic to his suit jacket. It's President Hank White.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
Thanks for taking the time to meet with me today.

President White just waives his hand.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
I really appreciate it.

PRESIDENT WHITE  
I gotta keep my enemies close ya know.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
Excuse me, am I your enemy?

PRESIDENT WHITE

(looking slightly above the camera)

No, you're not my enemy. I'm just happy to have you talking to me rather than some no good self-proclaimed "expert" on higher ed finance.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Yes sir, I'd rather hear it from you, too.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(leaning forward)

Some other schools have been caught up in this mess, but that doesn't mean we're concealing something.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

So that means you don't mind chatting about what happened at those schools?

PRESIDENT WHITE

(leaning back in his chair)

No. I don't mind. But I can only comment about what I've heard.  
(beat) And it does seem as if the incident was isolated. Higher education is not run by loan companies.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

An isolated incident? Really?  
(beat). Let me just update you on the latest. The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that financial aid administrators at many schools have been found to be receiving large bonuses from loan companies. Let's just check out this list.

The SOUND OF RUSTLING PAPER.

Johns Hopkins, The University of  
Texas at Austin, Emerson...

President White shifts anxiously in his chair.

...Columbia, the University of  
Southern California, the  
University of Pennsylvania,  
Syracuse University...

PRESIDENT WHITE

(angrily)

All right, Mr. Peterson, you've  
proved your point! Now what is  
it that you want to ask me,  
specifically?

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Well, President White, I guess  
there's only a few questions.  
First, has Palo Verde University  
done any business with lenders  
that were found to be defaulting  
loans before attempting to even  
collect them?

PRESIDENT WHITE

No. Most definitely not.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Could you repeat the question  
when answeri...

PRESIDENT WHITE

(angrily)

Palo Verde University has NOT  
done business with any  
companies— whether they be  
initiators of loans or  
collectors— that have been found  
to be defaulting loans before  
attempting to collect them.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

O.k., o.k... You know I'm not trying to anger you.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Sure, Guy. Sure...

GUY PETERSON(O.S.)

One last question; what consolation can you offer students who walk out of college with the average twenty-thousand in debt? And those grad students who rack up close to one-hundred thousand in debt?

President White leaps up out of his chair pulling the lapel mic with him. He rushes straight up to the camera, his stomach almost bumping into it.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(audio slightly muffled)

I'd tell them they should have gone into finance... This interview is over! You're nothing but an instigator and this two-bit production won't go anywhere. Half the media outlet heads in this town are trustees. They'll know this is bullshit. PACK UP YOUR THINGS AND LEAVE!

A loud THUD— the sound of a mic hitting the ground— thumps through the speakers. President White's figure moves from the screen.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN:

INT. - LIBRARY SCREENING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Suddenly the screen goes dark, lights come up, and Jim realizes he is in the library screening room.

VICTORIA  
Pretty messed up, huh?

Jim turns around in his seat, his eyes wide.

JIM  
I can't believe it.

VICTORIA  
Believe it.

JIM  
He's a madman!

VICTORIA  
Yeah! He's both a madman and  
careless. He's also arrogant.

JIM  
Could this footage hurt him?

VICTORIA  
It could hurt his image, but  
there's nothing criminal yet.  
And who's going to challenge the  
president? He'd sue for libel or  
slander or some such bullshit.

Jim nods, he looks perplexed.

JIM  
So what happens next?

VICTORIA  
I don't know.

They stare at each other not saying anything.  
Finally, Jim breaks the silence:

JIM  
Can I go through the footage?

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jim sits amongst a pile of DVDs and tapes. A specialized tape deck with a Palo Verde University label sits connected to his TV. A well-composed INTERVIEWEE shot plays on the screen. The audio is low. Jim seems to be organizing material and labeling it. Nate walks in.

NATE  
What's this mess?

JIM  
Documentary footage. I'm sortin'  
through it...

Jim continues stacking tapes and DVDs.

NATE  
You're a documentarian now? Hah!  
Hope it's a paying gig. Rent's  
almost due, and I'm not floating  
your ass any longer.

JIM  
You don't need to. I got a job  
working in University Financial  
Aid.

Nate looks surprised, he takes a seat on the  
sofa.

NATE  
Really?

JIM  
Yeah dude! I'll be able to pay  
you back and buy my own  
motorcycle soon.

NATE  
(surprised)  
Wow!

JIM  
I'm sorry I've been relying on  
you.

NATE  
Wow. I can't believe it. You  
drop out of school and get a job  
at school. Brilliant.

Jim suddenly stops sorting and turns to stare at  
Nate.

JIM  
Save the sarcasm.

NATE  
I'm not being sarcastic. I'm  
just kinda shocked that you seem  
to be getting your shit  
together.

JIM  
It's not that shocking.

NATE  
No, I guess not.

Nate gets up and grabs two beers from the fridge.  
He returns and hands one to Jim.

NATE  
So what's this documentary shit  
then?

JIM

Oh, it's just some stuff. (beat)  
I'm kind of embarrassed by it.

Jim quickly starts piling tapes, DVDs, and books -- "The Student Loan Scam," "Tuition Rising," "Generation Debt"-- into a box. He runs into his room. Nate just watches, wide-eyed and perplexed.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

INT. - LARGE HOTEL CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Jim and Beth sit amongst a crowd of people in a hotel conference area-- generic as they come. They look bored out of their minds.

JIM

I don't know if I should thank you or curse you.

BETH

All real jobs require training and professional development. If you don't like it you can go back to being unemployed.

JIM

No, it's fine. I just thought I would have an easy day getting to know my way around the office and everything. Like where the mailboxes are. I didn't know they were shipping us across town for this snooze fest.

Beth's face shifts from a disapproving grimace to an upbeat smile.

BETH

At least lunch is free. And the next speaker seems like they'll be good.

JIM

But these damned workshops this afternoon. I hate shit like this. I mean look at this...

Jim points to a workshop session title in the program.

JIM (CON)

...“Emotional Intelligence: Understanding the Borrower's Fears.” Sounds terrible...

ANONYMOUS VOICE

Excuse me, if I could please have your attention. We're going to get going again.

Jim and Beth turn their attention towards the SPEAKER at the front of the room.

SPEAKER

We've got a lot to do before lunch. First is an update of some developments financial aid administrators and their workers should know about. Second we have...

JIM

(to Beth)

I gotta hit the head...

INT. - HOTEL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Jim walks out of the men's bathroom. He walks slowly- hesitatingly- back towards the conference room. The place is huge. He reads signs on each conference room door. “Getting to Yes” Workshop,

"Meeting of the Southern CA Business Roundtable".  
The third reads "Nelnet Stockholders Meeting."  
Jim stops and does a double take. Curious, he  
peeks in.

INT. - CONFERENCE ROOM / NELNET STOCKHOLDERS

A large well decorated conference room filled  
with BUSINESS TYPES "lunching." Each of the 20 or  
so round tables is surrounded by 8 chairs. Tables  
are released to an elaborate buffet like at a  
wedding. There's even a carving station and  
ATTENDENTS. At the far end of the room stands a  
podium and screen. The afternoon's schedule is  
highlighted in a Power Point.

11:30 AM - 1:00 PM: LUNCH AND NETWORKING

1:00 PM: NELTNET'S 5 YEAR PROSPECTS OR WHY YOU  
SHOULD INVEST!

2:00 PM: CURRENT LEGISLATION AND THE LOAN MARKET

2:45 PM: COFFEE BREAK

3:15 PM: THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER ED REPORTS:  
ADDRESSING SOME CONCERNS

4:00 PM: ADJOURN

Jim closes the door and heads back to his own  
conference room.

INT. - LARGE HOTEL CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jim quietly slips back in and sits next to Beth  
who- somehow- seems rapt by the speaker's points.

JIM

Hey...

BETH

Shhh!

JIM  
(quietly)  
Don't shush me. I can't believe  
you... there's a Nelnet  
Stockholders' meeting going on  
next door.

Beth abruptly turns towards Jim.

BETH  
You're kidding me.

JIM  
No, I'm serious. I'm gonna sneak  
back over there in a bit.  
They're having lunch...

BETH  
I'll come. (beat) We shouldn't  
cut out... Jeanne will want to  
know about the sessions. But...

JIM  
But we can bluff, can't we?

We see Jim and Beth get up and leave the session.

INT. - CONFERENCE ROOM / NELNET STOCKHOLDERS -  
CONTINUOUS

Jim and Beth enter the room casually. People are  
milling about, having coffee, chatting. The lunch  
buffet is being cleared. Cake, tea, and coffee  
sit where the roast was.

BETH  
Let's get some coffee.

Beth adopts her usual take-charge stance. Jim  
follows her to the coffee station and tries to  
look like he belongs.

JIM

You were really serious in there.

BETH

So... I take my job seriously. Jeanne's trying to get me a staff position. Work-study positions don't come with tuition benefits.

JIM

Right.

BETH

But this is where it's at. I'm gonna play the market when I finish school. Maybe I can make enough to pay back my loans.

JIM

Really? I don't like the stock market. Just don't trust people who are so... so calculating.

BETH

You don't have to trust them; you just have to know how to out-calculate them. Or the market rather...

Beth gives Jim a self-assured smile.

JIM

I guess. But I've been doing a lot of reading. I don't think everything's right with this mark...

Beth's smile turns to lemons— she's changeable.

BETH

Don't start your "President's Party Speech" with me. You know it doesn't impress me.

Jim stops mid-sentence. She sure can shut him down. He lifts his coffee cup and sips, raises his eyebrows, and backs away. He stations himself by the door. Beth remains by the coffee station. No one is bothered by their presence. People begin taking their seats, a MAN IN A SUIT addresses the crowd from the podium.

MAN AT PODIUM

Well I hope everyone enjoyed their lunch. (beat) We're going to be getting started with the 1:00 session: NELTNET'S 5 YEAR PROSPECTS OR WHY YOU SHOULD INVEST, momentarily. Nelnet's own Frederick Silver is here to tell you about Nelnet's promise.

PEOPLE continue to take their seats. FREDIRICK SILVER, mid 50s, tall and in a well-pressed suit, approaches the podium. He wears a tie designed to look like a sheet of bills.

MAN AT PODIUM

Ladies and gentlemen; Frederick Silver.

The Man at the podium shakes Frederick's hand, the audience applauds.

FREDERICK

Thank you. Thank you.

The applause continues. It's as if the president of the whole country just took the stage.

FREDERICK

Thank you. Thank you.

Applause dying down.

FREDERICK

Wow! I don't think I have ever received that much applause.

A second wave begins to start up.

FREDERICK

O.k., o.k., wow! I guess we have been doing pretty well; haven't we?!

A couple hoots, more applause.

FREDERICK

O.k., let's get to business. I do thank you!

The applause dies down.

FREDERICK

Well, like I said, we've been doing pretty good! As you know, Fortune Magazine named us the 3<sup>rd</sup> most profitable company in 2009.

Another burst of applause— this is getting ridiculous.

FREDERICK

Thank you! Really, thank you.

The applause finally comes to an end.

FREDERICK

The funny thing is we owe this all to you. I mean, I look out over the crowd here and what do I see? I see a group of highly educated and motivated people who have college aged children. (beat) You all know that demand for education is high— hell we baby boomers did have a lot of kids— and that quality education does not come cheaply. Nelnet provides students with the means necessary to get through these expensive college years, graduate, and secure a good job.

You all are smart enough to be riding the wave.

Frederick pauses, reaches for a water bottle set out next to him on a small table, and continues.

FREDERICK (CON)

Now, I want to talk a little bit about where Nelnet is heading. I know some of you in this room wonder if now is the time to get out, now that we have seemingly hit a high point, and that those of you who have yet to get in wonder if it's even worth it at this point in time. You probably wonder if Nelnet is going to see continued growth.

We see the audience listening attentively. People nod their heads: *how can you make us more money Frederick?*

FREDERICK

What I want to tell you now is a little known secret. Our managed loan portfolio has grown very fast, and it is slowing down a bit, this I admit. But our loan-servicing sector is growing by leaps and bounds.

Beth saunters over to Jim, who is obviously annoyed by her.

BETH

Boring! Let's go.

JIM

Give me a second. I'm listening.

Beth crosses her arms and leans against the wall by Jim.

FREDERICK

The federal government has been changing the rules of the game, with these new regulations and all, but as loan servicers we are getting more and more access to students.

Beth is visibly impatient. She yawns and tugs at Jim's sleeve.

JIM

God! What's with you? Now the other session is more interesting? (beat) I'LL MEET YOU.

Beth gives Jim a stern look, pivots on one foot, and exits the room.

FREDERICK (CON)

And with increased access to students we can't help but see an increase in business. Especially since this recession is causing so many to return to graduate school. (beat) There's also the collections division. And though it's not popular, we are seeing steady profits from that side of things.

Jim continues to listen, sipping his coffee, at the back of the room. TWO OLDER MEN at the table in front of him begin chuckling. They are passing notes back and forth. One of the men writes— in big letters— an equation on his steno-pad: STUDENTS + NAIVETE + LATE FEES = PROFIT FOR ME! Jim's eyes focus on the steno pad, the men chuckle loudly, and Frederick drones on. After a second Jim gets it, his eyes widen, his jaw drops, he spills his coffee. Hurriedly, Jim exits the room.

INT. - UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The library is full of students studying and surfing the web. Jim enters through the doors and walks quickly towards the media area. He rounds the corner and finds TWO YOUNG MEN packing DVDs into boxes.

YOUNG MAN #1

Can I help you?

JIM

Ah, yeah, I was looking for Victoria. The librarian.

YOUNG MAN #1

Oh, ah... Victoria doesn't work here anymore.

JIM

What?! Doesn't work here anymore?! She was here yesterday!

Jim looks distraught. His eyes dart to the screening room door.

YOUNG MAN #1

That may be true, I don't know. I was just told that she was gone, and to box up this collection.

JIM

Are you serious? The library's just boxing this stuff up?

YOUNG MAN #2

Look man, we're just work-studies. We were told to tell anyone who asked that Victoria was gone, and that this collection was being moved. If you got more questions I suggest you go to management.

JIM

Ah, yeah... sorry! I'm just a little shocked. (beat) Victoria recommends a lot of good films, ya know.

YOUNG MAN #2

Yeah, sure. (beat) We got to get back to work now.

JIM

Sure... sure, I understand.

Jim goes to leave, his eyes linger on the screening room door. Lost in thought, he walks towards the library's exit. The library's hours are posted by the door— Library Hours: 8 am - 10 pm. The clock on the wall reads 4:45 pm. Jim heads back into the library lobby, mounts the stairs to the book stacks, finds a secluded study area and waits.

LIBRARY STACKS - CONTINUOUS

Jim pulls a book from his backpack— "*The Student Loan Scam*." He tries to read but is visibly anxious.

MONTAGE of Jim reading, checking his phone clock, pacing the isles, waiting, tapping pencil on desk, a phone clock, reading, waiting, etc. MONTAGE ENDS with Jim— looking exhausted— checking his phone clock— 9:48 pm.

INTERCOM

The library will close in 10 minutes. Please bring your books to the checkout area now.

Jim ignores the intercom and continues reading. A minute passes. He gets up and walks through the stacks— it's a maze. He finds a small stairway that leads to the next level. Under the stairway is a small crawl space. It's filled with crumpled

paper, empty soda bottles, etc. He crams himself in.

INTERCOM

The library will close in 5 minutes. Please bring your books to the checkout area now.

Jim sits cross-legged under the stairs. He pushes the soda bottles away from him. Some STUDENTS pass. He overhears their conversation.

STUDENT # 1

(voice moving away)

Why can't this damned library stay open past ten? I pay enough, don't I?

STUDENT # 2

(less audible)

No kiddin...

Jim remains under the stairs. He's in for the long haul.

INTERCOM

The library is closed. Please exit the building.

Suddenly the lights in the stacks go out. Only a few exit signs illuminate the floor. Jim waits. A minute passes. The sound of keys JINGLE a few rows away— seemingly along the perimeter of the floor.

ANONYMOUS VOICE

Anybody up here? Library's closed.

A radio BEEPS.

ANONYMOUS VOICE

Second floor's clear.

ANONYMOUS VOICE # 2  
(through radio)  
Roger that!

The sound of JINGLING KEYS fades off into the distance. Jim sits patiently. He stretches out a bit.

INT. - LIBRARY SCREENING ROOM - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Light filters in through the door's frosted glass window. Jim sorts through tapes and DVDs. He loads a bunch into his backpack. Seemingly satisfied, he creeps out of the screening room.

INT. - UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - CONTINUOUS

Jim creeps quietly along. Suddenly a series of lights come on. He stops, frozen in his tracks. A JANITOR rounds the corner wearing a vacuum backpack set up. The Janitor stops, stares at Jim. He bolts for a nearby emergency exit. He busts through the door. ALARMS SOUND, but Jim is already gone.

EXT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nate pulls up in front of the house on his new motorcycle. He turns the engine off, dismounts, and leans the bike on its stand. Immensely satisfied with himself, he tosses his keys up and catches them. He heads up the walk, unlocks the apartment door and enters.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

WHACK, Nate opens the door and he is met with a concrete block like fist. He reels in shock while TWO MASKED MEN work him over. Suddenly Nate's arms are behind him— MASKED MAN # 2 holds him while MASKED MAN # 1 uses him as a punching bag.

MASKED MAN # 1

Alright Stanwood, you've been sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong.

Nate is gasping for breath. He tries to cry out, to explain he is not Jim Stanwood, but his cry is silenced by another fist to the ribs.

MASKED MAN # 2

This is your warning. You don't want to disappear like your library friend, do you?

Masked Man # 2 continues to wail on Nate. Nate goes limp, Masked Man # 1 lets him go. Nate hits the ground with a THUD. The Masked Men are out the door. Nate's on the floor rolling around in pain.

EXT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Jim cruises down the street on his bike. He's half a block from home. A car, parked but running, sits outside his place. Jim watches as TWO MASKED MEN sprint down the lawn. They kick over Nate's new motorcycle and dive into the car. Confused, Jim pedals faster. The car peels out-it's gone. Jim throws the bike down on the lawn and dashes towards his apartment, his heavy backpack bouncing along. He blasts through the open door.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT- CONTINUOUS

Nate is crawling on the ground.

JIM

Jesus! Nate, Nate! I'm here!

Jim kneels next to Nate. He rolls him on his back. Blood streams from his nose.

JIM

Nate! God! What happened? I'm calling 911.

NATE

Don't...

JIM

What? That's ridiculous. I'm calling...

Nate slowly gets up. He leans against the kitchen counter.

NATE

I'm fine. I've been jumped worse than that before. Just get some peroxide.

Jim stares in disbelief.

JIM

Who were those guys?

NATE

How should I know? They called me Stanwood.

JIM

What? They were looking for... me?

NATE

Last time I checked you were Stanwood. (beat) Will you get me some fucking peroxide now?

JIM

Yeah... of course. (beat) Sorry.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nate stands shirtless in front of the bathroom mirror. He applies peroxide to his face and

cleans blood from under his eye. He instructs Jim in wrapping an ace bandage around his ribs.

JIM

Let's just go to the hospital, man. You might have broken ribs.

NATE

I'm fine. I hate hospitals.

JIM

Cut the shit. I'm making the call. Let's go.

NATE

(raising his voice)

No! You're not calling the shots, you're the reason this happened. (beat) And my insurance sucks. A trip to the hospital will cost me 2 grand.

Jim stares at Nate in the mirror, confused.

JIM

But I thought you got a promotion.

NATE

I did. Insurance still sucks. (beat) Now you mind telling me what this is about?

JIM

I... I don't know.

NATE

What about those tapes you were watching the other night?

JIM

No.

Jim shakes his head instinctively.

JIM (CON)

Yeah. You're right. Something's going down. But who knows I have them, and how?

NATE

Well I suggest you figure it out. And I guess we better find another place to sleep tonight. It's not safe here.

JIM

Yeah, you're right.

EXT - BETH'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jim and Nate stand outside Beth's door. They wear backpacks. Jim knocks, but there is no answer.

JIM

I don't understand where she could be. It's 1:30 in the morning; she has to work at 8 a.m.

NATE

(sarcastically)  
Maybe she's asleep?

JIM

I called her cell 4 times. You think that would wake her up.

NATE

Well dude, from what you've told me about this chick I'm not surprised. She sounds like a lunatic.

JIM

No more crazy than you, or me.  
(beat) Come on; you still got those sleeping bags in your truck?

NATE

Yeah.

JIM

Well, it's a nice night. I know a place we can camp.

EXT. - BILLBOARD CATWALK - NIGHT

Jim and Nate lay curled up in mummy-style sleeping bags on the billboard catwalk. They look out over the darkened university.

NATE

Why do I get involved with you? A place to camp; we're on a frickin' billboard. I'd rather sleep in the Walmart Parking lot.

JIM

Sorry dude. This is where Beth and I hang out. I thought she might be here. She comes here to collect her thoughts.

NATE

In the middle of the night?

JIM

Sometimes.

NATE

Alright "mysteriouso," how 'bout you stop holding out on me and tell me what's really going on—why those guys were looking for you, and why this chick Beth is so weird.

JIM

I'm not hiding anything, Nate.

NATE

Then tell me.

JIM

(hesitatingly)

It's those tapes, man. And school. It's messed up. (beat) I think I'm on to a racket.

NATE

A racket that people want to beat the shit out of you over?

Jim turns and strains to look at Nate through the opening of his mummy bag.

JIM

Apparently.

NATE

Well go on then...

JIM

You know about the protests, and the tuition hikes, right?

NATE

Yeah, I do read the paper.

JIM

Alright, sorry. You just mostly talk about motorcycles.

NATE

Cut it out. (beat) I want to know what you're on to.

JIM

Well I'm telling you. So shut up and listen.

Nate shifts uncomfortably in his sleeping bag. He pulls his arms out of the mummy hood and props himself up. Jim follows suit.

NATE

Well I guess there's no use in sleeping.

JIM

So there's the protests, and the tuition hikes. But there's more than that. I think folks in the financial aid office— like the head of it— are working with loan companies to make extra money off of students. And then there was this documentarian.

NATE

So your new boss is involved, and the tapes and DVDs come from the documentarian?

JIM

CAME FROM. But he's disappeared. And so has this woman who gave me the DVDs to begin with.

Nate's whole head pivots as he rolls his eyes.

NATE

And then guys come looking for you and get me... Holy shit!

Jim stares out over the campus.

NATE (CON)

What does Beth know?

JIM

Nothing. Well, maybe something. (beat) I don't know. I tried to tell her but...

NATE

But what?

JIM

But well, like you said, she's a bit off.

NATE

Yeah! I'd say. Not home at 2 in the morning, and she likes to perch on billboards all night long.

JIM

Funny... Let's get some sleep. I'm going to look for her in the morning.

NATE

I don't know if you should tell her. I mean, she's been working in the office with the people you suspect. And they're obviously trying to scare you off the trail.

Jim turns to Nate as if he's made a really good point.

JIM

Ya. (beat) I'll think on it. Let's get some sleep.

NATE

Alright.

JIM

And Nate, I'm sorry.

NATE

Fuck sorry! If you're really on to something you got to find a way to expose it.

JIM

I know. But I don't know how.

The camera pulls away to reveal the silhouettes of Jim and Nate, caterpillar like, against the bottom of the billboard. The billboard sign is again apparent, but graffiti now obscures the slogan. It reads PALO VERDE UNIVERSITY: ~~YOU'VE GOT~~ PROMISES **YOU DEBT.**

INT. - FINANCIAL AID OFFICE - MORNING

Jim reports to work in the financial aid office. He walks by the RECEPTIONIST to a cubicle in the back. He looks exhausted. He sits for a minute, catches a look at himself in a small mirror, and abruptly springs out of his chair. He heads to the break area in the back, wets his hair down in the sink, and pours himself a cup of coffee. He takes his first sip when Jeanne walks in.

JEANNE

Morning Jim! How was the workshop yesterday? I know it was your first day and all, but I hope you learned something.

JIM

I did! Yeah. It was really interesting. Especially the part about emotional intelligence. I guess I didn't think about how nerve wracking college loans can be.

Jim attempts to smooth his hair out some more.

JEANNE

Yeah, you always have to be aware of the fact that loans make people nervous. Most people don't understand their terms. That's where people get into trouble.

Jim shoots Jeanne a distrustful look but quickly contorts his face into a perplexed, almost thoughtful grimace.

JEANNE

Well Beth's out sick today. And I was going to have her train you.

Jim stares into his coffee cup. He is visibly confused.

JEANNE (CON)

I think we'll just have you fill out your paperwork today.

Avoiding eye contact.

JIM

Sure, sure. I brought in my identification and the other forms you asked me to.

JEANNE

I also thought that you might like to join me for lunch with the president. You really impressed him at the party the other night and he told me I should bring you by sometime.

Jim suddenly looks up from his coffee.

JIM

Really?

JEANNE

Yeah, really. Besides, with Beth out there's only me, you, and Becky. And Becky can't train you cuz she's got to cover the calls.

Jim attempts to straighten up and look natural, he spills a little coffee from his cup but ignores it.

JIM

O.k... Sounds good. I'd like to have lunch with you two.

JEANNE

Great! We'll walk over at noon. Take care of your paperwork and start reading the loan procedures manual. That should tie up your morning.

JIM

O.k....

JEANNE

See you at noon.

Jeanne heads off towards her office and Jim tops off his coffee. He leans against the counter stirring it, despite not adding cream or sugar. He's lost in thought.

INT. - PRESIDENT'S MANSION - DINING ROOM

Jim, Jeanne, Hank- the president, and Richard Sharp sit around a large table. RAUL- the waiter- serves them. Jim is visibly uncomfortable; he tries to control his nerves.

PRESIDENT HANK WHITE

Well Jim, I'm really glad you could make it today. You're a real interesting young man. Few students your age are so up on current events.

JIM

Thanks, President White.

Raul places a bowl of soup in front of Jim.

RAUL

Lobster Bisque, sir. Your salad and main course will be out shortly. Is there anything else I can get you?

Jim turns awkwardly in his chair. He doesn't know what to say.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Thank you Raul, we'll let you know if we need anything else.

Raul offers a slight bow in response and backs away from the table. The president looks at Jim as if he's sizing him up. He smiles. All are silent.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Jim, I'm going to cut right to the chase. (beat) What was the nature of your relationship with Victoria, the librarian?

Jim suddenly freezes. He is caught completely off guard.

JIM

Ah... excuse me sir, the nature of our relationship?

PRESIDENT HANK WHITE

Yes Jim, the "nature of your relationship."

JIM

I'm not sure I understand. She's old enough to be my mother.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Yes... but that's not quite what I mean. Victoria's been found to be involved in a smear campaign against the university.

JIM  
A smear campaign?

Richard butts in.

RICHARD  
Alright kid, don't play dumb  
with us. We know about the  
tapes, the documentary, and...

PRESIDENT WHITE  
(angrily)  
That's enough Richard!

RICHARD  
Ahh, oh... yes.

Jim shoots a confused look around the table and settles his gaze on Jeanne. She returns only a cold stare.

PRESIDENT WHITE  
We're going to handle this in a  
civilized manner... for now.

Jim suddenly looks very alone. Sweat begins to bead up on his forehead. He rubs the back of his neck.

PRESIDENT WHITE  
Jim, we know what's going on.  
And believe me, you don't want  
to get caught up in this. (beat)  
We just want a little  
information on the things  
Victoria told you.

JIM  
President White, with all due  
respect... I'm not really sure  
what you're talking about.

PRESIDENT HANK WHITE  
Alright, Jim. Alright. I believe  
you.

President White looks quickly at his watch.

PRESIDENT WHITE (CON)

You'll all have to excuse me. I have an important meeting.  
(beat) Jeanne, will you be sure to see Jim back? And Jim, you know how to contact me if there is anything you want to tell me.

JIM

Yes sir. I do. And I'm sorry for any confusion.

President White smiles, stands, buttons his suit coat, and nods towards Richard. Richard immediately gets up, folds his napkin, and follows President White out. Jim's eyes follow them out then return to the table, where Jeanne sits staring at him.

JEANNE

Jim, I'm sorry. I should have warned you. But when the President asks me to do something, I just do it.

JIM

It's o.k.. I'm just really confused.

JEANNE

Rightfully so. There's a lot going on now. (beat) And Jim, I don't want you to think this will affect your job.

JIM

(nervously)  
Oh... yeah. Right. Thanks.

Jeanne sits slowly eating her soup. She stirs her spoon through it, and stares into the bowl. She seems to be mulling something over.

JEANNE

Jim, there's one other thing.

JIM

Uh huh.

JEANNE

Well, it's about Beth. I didn't want to tell you before lunch.  
(beat) But well, it seems as if she has been having problems with addiction.

Jim, who can't look much more stunned than he already is, stiffens in his chair.

JIM

Oh?

Jeanne looks up from her soup.

JEANNE

I'm afraid that she's not doing so well... she's a bit unstable.

Jeanne begins taking up spoonfuls of soup and pouring them back into the bowl— slowly.

JEANNE

Last night she almost overdosed.

Jim just sits and listens. He swallows loudly.

JEANNE

It'd be a shame if her next attempt was... how shall we say it... successful?

Jim tenses up and drops his spoon into the soup. A loud CLANK. Red colored soup splatters out onto the table.

JEANNE

(in a stern tone)

Deliver me the tapes Jim. And don't say a word about this. (beat). Beth's a ticking time bomb— her obit will be like all the rest. A lonely isolated woman studying at Palo Verde University died last night of a drug overdose. University officials are conducting an investigation.

Jim stares into his soup bowl. He cannot seem to muster up the conviction to speak. What would he say? He knows he's beat.

JEANNE (CON)

This university controls its image, Jim. It's very good at covering up blemishes...

JIM

I, I... I need 36 hours. The tapes aren't close.

Jeanne, seemingly surprised that Jim has spoken, glares at him. Her eyes hold on his for what seems like forever.

JEANNE

Fine Jim. Fine. I'll be here tomorrow night. Bring the tapes then.

Jeanne wipes her mouth with her napkin. She gets up from the table. Jim suddenly speaks out:

JIM

You'll let her go if I bring you the tapes?

Jeanne stands arms akimbo. She chews her lip: is this kid really that naïve?

JEANNE  
We're careerists, Jim, not  
barbarians.

She smiles. Jim knits his eyebrows.

JEANNE (CON)  
I'll see you out, Jim.

EXT. - SAIL FACTORY - AFTERNOON

The camera slowly pulls away from Jim's worried eye to reveal him standing in a parking lot. He holds his bike by his side. A WHISTLE BLOWS. WORKMEN start streaming out of the factory and into their cars. They joke, linger by their cars smoking, and rev their engines around Jim. It's a regular end of the working day celebration. Jim trains his eyes on the factory door. Finally, Nate appears and walks towards Jim.

NATE  
Jim, what are you doing here?

JIM  
Ahh... I was just worried about  
you. You feeling o.k.?

NATE  
Yeah. I'm o.k.. More tired than  
hurt.

JIM  
Oh. Right. Well good. (beat) I'm  
glad you aren't too bruised up.

NATE  
Dude, what's wrong?

Jim looks down at his feet.

JIM  
I'm that obvious?

He looks back up at Nate, hoping for a reply. He seems alone in the world. Nate looks at him expectantly.

JIM

You wanna get a beer?

NATE

Sure. Throw your bike in the back of the truck.

INT. - SMALL BAR

Jim and Nate sit at a small wooden table in a long and narrow shotgun type bar. A couple of empty bottles of Miller High Life stand next to full ones. The bar is mostly empty. A FEW MEN who look like they own their barstools hang about. Two hipsters with architect style glasses sit at the far end of the bar. Statues of Jesus and Mary dot the wall. An eclectic place.

NATE

So what are you gonna do?

Jim stares at a figurine of Jesus on the wall.

JIM

I guess I got to bring them the tapes.

NATE

But isn't there a way you can expose them?

Jim continues staring at the statue of Jesus.

JIM

(mumbling to himself)  
Money changers...

NATE

What?

Jim suddenly snaps to and looks at Nate.

JIM

Money changers. In the temple.  
That's what they are. Education  
shouldn't be a business. They  
live off the dreams of others.

NATE

O.k., I don't get all your  
religiouso-philosophical  
bullshit. But whatever you need  
man, I'll help.

Jim gives Nate a look that lies somewhere between  
skepticism and hope. He gets up suddenly from the  
table.

JIM

I gotta piss...

Jim heads to the bathroom. He seems a bit  
disoriented- buzzed.

INT. - BAR BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jim shuffles up to the urinal. He stands there,  
relieving himself. His eyes close.

JIM

(mumbling to himself)  
Money changers. Money grubbers.  
People'll do anything...

He almost loses his balance, swaying to the  
right. His eyes start to open. The wall in front  
of him is plastered with advertisements and  
highlights from the day's sports page.

JIM

(to himself)  
I got to get it together.

Jim's eyes focus on an advertisement. His jaw slowly drops. The advertisement shows a billboard with a stylized picture of a projector casting a movie image on its side. It reads: CITYSCAPE FILMS- TAKING BACK OUR URBAN SPACES. FRIDAY JUNE 10<sup>th</sup>, EL CAMINO LOUNGE ROOFTOP. ADMISSION \$5.00. He quickly zips up and darts out of the bathroom.

INT. - SMALL BAR - CONTINUOUS

Jim tears down the length of the bar running towards Nate. He gets to the table and almost knocks it over.

NATE

Whoa there cowboy! What's got you all revved up suddenly?

JIM

I got it! I know how we're going to bring 'em down. Come on, we gotta go.

Nate is taken back by Jim's sudden burst of energy. Jim spins and hollers at the BARTENDER.

JIM

Tab please!

The Bartender looks at Jim. He throws some bills on the bar and whirls back towards Nate. Nate stands there, a quizzical look on his face.

JIM

You still in contact with Tina, the news girl?

NATE

Tina? That didn't end well.

JIM

I remember. But will she do you a favor?

NATE

Oh man I don't know.

JIM

Here's what I want you to do.

Jim puts his arm around Nate and they start for the door.

JIM

You know the billboard I took you to.

NATE

Yeah...

JIM

O.k., get Tina and tell her...

Suddenly Jim stops at the end of the bar. He looks up at the Jesus figure. Nate stops with him; he looks at Jim. Jim just stares at the figure.

JIM

The tables are about to get turned.

Nate looks from Jim to the figure of Jesus. He's confused. Jim pulls Nate along and continues explaining.

INT. - LARGE DANK BASEMENT

SMACK! Victoria the librarian is getting worked over by Larry, the slab of beef in a suit. Guy Peterson remains tied to a nearby chair. His blood stained face hides some of the bruising.

LARRY

So I hear you two are best friends. A book nerd and a movie nerd. How cute.

Guy sits slumped in the chair he is tied to. He tries to look over at Victoria but his neck won't support his head.

VICTORIA

You won't get away with this.  
Imbeciles like you always get caught.

Larry walks toward a row of old bookshelves half covered in sheets. He pulls a sheet down and carefully selects the largest book— it's as big as the OED.

LARRY

We haven't been caught yet. And believe me, the boss isn't stupid.

Larry spins around and launches the book at Victoria. His aim is good; it hits her square in the chest. She gasps for air.

LARRY (CON)

I never had much use for books.

The CREAK of a door opening. FOOTSTEPS. In walks Richard Sharp.

RICHARD

Well, well, well, what do we have here? Victoria, our little bibliophile. You know Victoria, sometimes being informed gets you in trouble.

Victoria wheezes. The flying book really knocked the wind out of her.

RICHARD

And the fact that we've got the informer and the informed here means no one else is going to hear about this.

Victoria looks up at Richard. She opens her mouth to say something, but stops.

RICHARD

What's the matter, Victoria?  
Nothing to say?

She just stares. Richard meets her gaze, after a minute he turns to Larry.

RICHARD

Make sure our two guests are comfortable. (beat) We'll be having some new visitors soon enough.

INT. - JIM AND NATE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jim comes through the door with Nate following.

JIM

We don't got a lot of time. I want to look at these tap...

Jim stops in his tracks. Nate looks over his shoulder. The apartment is trashed. The TV busted, magazine and papers all over the floor, smashed CDs and DVDs. A note sits on the coffee table. Hesitating, Jim picks it up. It reads: BRING US THE REST OF THE TAPES. Jim drops the note, looks around the apartment, and looks at Nate. He offers a grimace in return. Jim swings his backpack off his shoulders and round in front of him.

JIM

It's o.k., I've got a lot of tapes in my pack.

NATE

Well I guess everything hasn't gone wrong.

JIM

No, just most everything. (beat)  
Let's get some rest. They're not  
coming back here. What for? And  
you gotta get up early.

INT. - JIM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jim empties his backpack of tapes and a laptop.  
He fiddles with a specialized video tape deck  
labeled PROPERTY OF PALO VERDE UNIVERSITY and  
connects it to his laptop.

JIM

Come on. Please!

He puts a tape in the player and stares at the  
screen. Suddenly an image appears.

JIM

Yes!

Jim turns and frantically goes through his pack:  
a set of headphones. He plugs them in.

EXT. - PALO VERDE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - DAY -  
CONTINUOUS

A camera bumps along in the brightness of  
daylight. The frame is overexposed. Slowly the  
Palo Verde campus comes into proper exposure and  
focus. A few students stand around looking into  
the camera. A student- SANDRA WELLINGTON- stands  
in the foreground.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

O.k., so who wants to share  
their story?

A young female student walks towards the camera.

SANDRA

I will.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

O.k., state and spell your name please. And if you could also mention that you grant permission for me to use this footage it would be great.

The girl looks back towards her friends, who stand in the background.

SANDRA

I'm Sandra Wellington. S-A-N-D-R-A ... W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N. And I give you permission to use my interview in your film.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Thanks Sandra. Just a formality. But I appreciate it. (beat) So tell me what your current loan situation is. And try to repeat my question in your answer, like "my current loan situation is"...

Sandra looks down at her feet and stands there. She doesn't say anything for a good 5 seconds. She shuffles from side to side and looks up. Expectantly she says:

SANDRA

Is it rolling?

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Yeah. Go ahead when you're ready.

SANDRA

My current loan situation is frightening. I graduated in December but I am still working my student job on campus. My grace period is about over, I've got to start paying.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Do you mind telling us how much you have taken out in loans?

SANDRA

I have about 40k in school debt right now. Then there's my credit card debt of 7k.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Do you have a lot of friends who also have debt?

SANDRA

I have some friends who have more debt, and some friends who have less. Tuition is a lot, but it's having to support yourself that's the hardest. You can't do real well in school while working. So you gotta take out loans to live.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Do you live austerely? Do your friends?

SANDRA

Yeah. And it's tough cuz my friends with rich parents are studying abroad, flying away for spring break, and all this stuff. When I was in school, racking up all this debt, I just hung tight. I had fun. But I didn't spend my summers in Prague.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Are you going to be able to pay back your loans easily?

SANDRA

Not on my current salary— I shouldn't even call it a salary. I'm looking for a job but I can't find one. I thought about grad school, but that'd be more debt.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

So what are you going to do?

SANDRA

I don't know. (beat) I'm tired.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

Tired?

SANDRA

Yeah.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

But you're young.

Sandra looks away from the camera for a moment. She seems to be remembering something. She slowly turns back to the camera. The camera snaps to an extreme close up of her face— Guy sees something coming.

SANDRA

It's like this. I once had a professor use this analogy. People like me— kids of working class folks who actually get to college, well we have to struggle to get through. It's like life is a series of doors, and the doors represent opportunities. If you come from a well-to-do family you just walk right up to those doors and walk through them. The admission door is open to you cuz your parents paid for you to take SAT

courses or whatever. The study  
abroad door is open to you cause  
your parents will pay for it.  
And it goes on and on. But when  
you don't come from much, when  
you do it on your own, well then  
those same doors are closed to  
you. You can get through them  
for sure, but you got to find  
the key, or more likely, bust  
them down. I busted down a lot  
of doors to get where I am.  
(beat) I'm tired.

Sandra looks away from the camera. She stares out  
towards something off screen— the horizon maybe.  
The camera holds on her. After a long 10 seconds  
she looks back at the camera.

SANDRA

I don't have much else to say.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

That's fine Sandra. Thank you.  
Let me give you my card so you  
can watch my website for  
updates. And can I get your  
email?

The screen goes blank.

INT. - JIM'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jim sits there in front of the laptop. His eyes  
move from the screen to a blank wall. He stares.

INT. - NATE'S BEDROOM- NIGHT

BEEP, BEEP, BEEP. Nate is startled out of bed by  
his alarm clock. He leaps toward the bureau where  
it sits to turn it off and trips over a basket of  
laundry. SLAM, he's on the floor.

NATE

What the...

The red letters of his alarm clock light the room with an ominous red glow- 4:15 am.

NATE

You gotta be kidding me.

He gets up and turns the alarm off. He flips on a light, pulls on some pants and a hoodie. He stumbles out the door.

EXT. - CHANNEL 9 NEWS STATION - DARK OF MORNING

Nate sits in his truck drinking a 7-11 coffee. He looks at his cell phone clock- 5:07 am. He peers out the windshield towards the Channel 9 lobby. A YOUNG WOMAN exits and walks towards the lot. Nate jumps out of his truck and hurries towards her- it's TINA, the girl who fled his house the other night.

NATE

Tina, Tina! Hold on a minute.

Tina stops, startled. Recognizing Nate she throws her hands in the air.

TINA

Jesus man! What are you doing here? I don't have anything to say to you.

NATE

Hold on! Please. Just hear me out.

TINA

(quietly, almost to herself)  
I don't know why I don't have security walk me out.

Tina keeps walking. Nate chases after her.

NATE

Tina, just hold on!

TINA

Give me one good reason to, Nate. You think you can treat me like shit and make it all better by showing up here at five in the...

NATE

Tina, I got a story for you. It's huge. You don't have to like me; you don't even have to see me ever again.

Tina stops and turns to Nate.

NATE (CON)

It's for Jim. He's on to something...

Tina crosses her arms, a Louis Vuitton purse swings from her arm.

TINA

On to something?

NATE

Yeah! He's got himself tied up with some stuff at the university. Fraud, embezzlement, or something, I don't know what to call it.

TINA

Are you serious?

Nate stands there in the parking lot, hands out to his side as if he is showing the cops he's not armed, a parking lamp shines down on him.

NATE

I'm serious Tina, just listen!

TINA

Go on then...

EXT. - ALL NIGHT DINER- SUNRISE - CONTINUOUS

From outside the window we see: Nate and Tina sit in a window booth drinking coffee. Nate gestures wildly with his hands, Tina looks on deadpan. She can't believe what he's saying. Nate goes on gesturing, stops, and nods his head at Tina. A broad smile comes across her face, she claps excitedly, and extends her hand to Nate. They shake. The WAITER arrives with their food.

EXT. - PRESIDENT'S MANSION - EVENING

Jim makes his way up the driveway. He's pushing his bike, his backpack slung over his shoulder. He parks his bike and rings the doorbell. Jeanne answers.

JEANNE

Jim. Good to see you. I guess you're beginning to see things our way.

JIM

Let's not play games, Jeanne. I've got the tapes, now let Beth go.

JEANNE

Oh I see; you're getting assertive now. (beat) The president wants to clarify some things. Come in.

Jeanne steps out of the entryway and gestures with a wide swoop of her hand. Jim stands there, reluctant. He pads from one foot to the other

before entering. President White is there to meet him.

INT. - PRESIDENT'S MANSION HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

PRESIDENT WHITE

Jim, I'm glad you're here.  
There's a lot of things we want  
to explain to you. (beat) Shall  
we put your backpack up? In the  
closet?

JIM

I wanna see Beth.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Fine Jim, I understand. Follow  
along now, we'll bring you to  
Beth.

The president turns and walks down a long hallway. Jeanne and Jim follow.

INT. - PRESIDENT'S MANSION LIBRARY - CONTINUOUS

They enter a room that looks much like a library—full bookshelves along the walls. The president walks towards one bookshelf and swings it out like a door. A HIDDEN STAIRWAY is revealed.

PRESIDENT WHITE

After you, Jim.

Jim glares at the president, shifts his backpack around in front of him as if he is traveling in a third-world country, and enters the stairway.

INT. - LARGE DANK BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Jim descends a steep wooden staircase. The walls around him are lit dimly, crumbly, and old. Jim can see RICHARD AND LARRY, backs to him, sitting on a piano bench. He moves around some covered

furniture and sees Beth, Victoria, and an unfamiliar man (GUY?) tied to chairs. A television, on a large rolling cart, sits next to them.

BETH

(screaming)

Jim! Get out of here! You don't know what these people will do.

Richard and Larry rise and nod at Jim. Beth's eyes dart back and forth between them.

RICHARD

I guess the show can begin.

Jim ignores Richard, his eyes trained on Beth and Victoria. He looks at the unfamiliar man. Bruises obscure his face. Still, Jim recognizes him from the footage he has been watching— it's Guy Peterson. President White approaches Jim from behind, laying his hand on his shoulder.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Jim, you're in over your head. Give us the tapes now.

JIM

What about these other two? Are you going to let them go?

Suddenly Beth springs from her chair. She draws a pistol and charges towards Jim. Jim, instinctively, throws his hands in the air.

JIM

Beth! What?

BETH

(in a mocking tone)

Let them go? Let them go? Are you serious, Jim? You really think we're going to let them go?

Richard and Jeanne laugh in the background.

JIM

Beth. I thought... I was here  
to...

BETH

You thought what, Jim? You  
thought we were going to fight  
the powers that be?

Jim just stares at Beth in shock, the gun in his  
face.

BETH (CON)

Tie him up.

Richard grabs the backpack from Jim. It comes  
easily out of his hands. Jim tries to snatch it  
back but is met with the mass that is Larry, who  
has no trouble restraining Jim. He is placed in  
Beth's chair and tied up in no time. Beth paces  
in front of him. Jeanne, President White, and  
Richard have uncovered some of the old furniture  
and sit, watching, amused. Richard goes through  
the tapes and DVDs in Jim's pack, carefully  
reading the labels and sorting them by his own  
logic. Jim mumbles a few words:

JIM

What about your debt, Beth?

Beth stops pacing and gives Jim a "you are so  
stupid" look.

BETH

What about it, Jim?

JIM

I can't believe you're in on  
this. What are you getting out  
of it?

BETH

What am I getting out of it?  
What am I getting out of it? I'm  
getting ahead, Jim, that's what  
I'm getting. I'm getting ahead.

Jim stares blankly at Beth.

BETH

What did you think, Jim? Did you  
think these protests were going  
to change something? Did you  
think the revolution was at  
hand?

Jim looks away from Beth, turning his head  
towards Victoria, and then the ground.

BETH

This is about self-preservation,  
Jim. I'm not into the struggle;  
I'm not going to suffer my whole  
life waiting for change.

JIM

(still looking down)  
So you joined the other side?

BETH

These protesters are being led  
by the blind. They don't know  
what they're up against.

The sound of clapping fills the room. President  
White approaches Beth, applauding slowly.

EXT. - BILLBOARD - NIGHT

RAPID CUTS OF: TWO MASKED MEN, wearing all black,  
heaving a large rolled up canvas onto the  
billboard catwalk. A THIRD MAN stands on the  
catwalk securing the canvas. The men work  
swiftly. A wide shot shows the blank canvas as it

rolls out over the billboard, obscuring the Palo Verde University sign and leaving a blank slate.

INT. - LARGE DANK BASEMENT

President White stands between Jim and Beth clapping. Beth turns, disgusted, and walks away.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Bravo! Bravo! You two really are adorable.

A scream fills the room. Larry dumps a bucket of ice water on Guy- he's finally alert.

JIM

(yelling)

Enough! He's had enough. You got your tapes, now let us go.

President White saunters over to Guy. He grabs his chin and leans in close to his face.

PRESIDENT WHITE

You see what all your snooping got you? Huh? Now these others get to share in your misery.

Guy, who is more alert now, still does not respond. His teeth chatter. The president lets go of his chin and his head sags back down into his chest. Richard is seen in the background fiddling with the TV.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Play the tape, Richard. I want to explain something to these guys.

Suddenly the TV comes to life. The hiss of raw audio permeates the room, the image bounces on the screen like a home movie. It seems as if a crew is setting up. WE'VE SEEN THIS BEFORE.

JEANNE BALLAST (O.S.)  
(softly)  
I've only got 20 minutes today.

The camera stabilizes as if it has been put on a tripod. The picture comes into focus. Jeanne Ballast, financial aid director sits as an interviewee.

OFF SCREEN MALE VOICE (GUY)  
No problem, I won't take long.  
Just a couple of questions  
today.

Off screen Guy stirs in his chair, the sound of his own voice, his project, quickens him.

On screen a figure moves into the frame and towards Jeanne. Guy is affixing a lapel mic on Jeanne.

Richard Sharp's voice butts in from off screen.

RICHARD  
Oh, isn't this cute? Look how  
careful he is with the mic.  
Careful now, don't touch her  
boob!

Richard and Jeanne laugh.

On screen:

CAMERA MAN (GUY)  
(noticeably louder)  
Let me just get this on here.

Jeanne tilts her head a bit. She seems accustomed to this. The CAMERAMAN- GUY- backs out of the frame. His face is not seen.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)  
I really appreciate your meeting  
with me again.

JEANNE

(audio fluctuating)

It's fine. (beat) Besides, I have to. With all the trouble lately the university is pushing this transparency thing. I'd probably get fired if I decli... That's not recording is it?

OFFSCREEN: President White's laugh permeates the room.

PRESIDENT WHITE (O.S.)

Pause it, Richard.

President White turns towards Jeanne who smiles, knowingly.

PRESIDENT WHITE

That's hilarious, Jeanne! Transparency! Ha! Maybe you should pursue an acting career.

The president abruptly spins round to face his captives.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(shouting)

We've been on to you since the beginning. We let you get as close as we had to, and then you decided to push it.

Victoria, Jim, and Guy remain silent. They sit listening to the president. Victoria looks away.

PRESIDENT WHITE

What you don't understand is that we're doing this community, this country, this world, a huge service. We are Palo Verde goddamned University!

President White paces back in forth in front of the three captives. Jim and Guy follow him with their eyes. Victoria looks to the ground.

PRESIDENT WHITE

People all over the world dream of the type of education our universities provide. People in this country grow up thinking, "hey, everyone deserves a shot at bettering themselves, a shot at college." The thing is guys, this dream does not come cheap!

VICTORIA

And you provide students with the means to achieve the dream, isn't that right, Hank?

President White spins around on his heel. He's pissed!

PRESIDENT WHITE

That's right Victoria! That's right! Do you think it's easy to move all these students through here? Huh? To provide them with the "best four years" of their lives? To give them a shot?

VICTORIA

Save it! You don't see what you're really doing.

President White slowly approaches Victoria. He gets right up in her face, spittle flies from his lips.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Oh no Victoria, I DO KNOW what I'm doing. And so do Richard, and Jeanne, and half the financial aid administrators across this country. (beat)

We're setting up opportunity for others, and we're taking a little opportunity for ourselves.

JIM

Bullshit!

President White tears away from Victoria and storms over to Jim. A madman!

JIM

You're all raising tuition to make money for yourselves. Every time tuition goes up students have to take out more loans, and who benefits from these loans? Moneygrubbers like Richard. Moneygrubbers who have you in their pocket.

Richard laughs and starts up from his chair by the TV. He signals to Larry. President White makes an abrupt "quit it" motion. Richard sits back down, smiling.

JIM

You all make money off of servicing these loans, off of defaults, and off of the dreams of kids who think they can better the world by learning how to think in philosophy classes, in history classes, and in English classes.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(in Jim's face, shaking)

And these kids DO better the world, Jim. But nothing's free! (beat) 50 years ago only 8% of the US population had bachelors degrees. Now, with our help, nearly 30% does.

VICTORIA

And that's supposed to be impressive?

President White is off at Victoria again.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(smiling coyly)

Yes Victoria, it IS impressive. You can't get a chicken into everyone's pot and a car in every garage overnight.

The president turns away. His voice becomes lower.

PRESIDENT WHITE (CON)

And there are those who don't deserve it. Those who don't work for their dreams.

JIM

Not like you Hank; right? A self made man!

President White spins violently towards Jim.

PRESIDENT WHITE

That's right! *Not like me!* I worked my way up. I out competed and out smarted the rest. I earned my spot ahead of that 30%.

JIM

The same way you earned your inheritance, Hank? Huh?

PRESIDENT WHITE

(practically frothing at the mouth)

I helped myself, Jim, and now I am helping other people.

JIM

You were helped by the system!  
You just think you made your  
way. And now you think you're  
the savior. If you want to talk  
about statistics let's talk  
about your head start, huh?  
Let's talk about the fact that  
over 50% of the wealth in the  
U.S. is inherited. How much of  
yours is? Fuck your meritocracy!

WHOMP! In a fit of rage the president kicks Jim  
in the chest. Jim and his chair go toppling over  
backward. We see his head hit the ground.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN:

EXT. - CITY STREETS BELOW THE BILLBOARD - NIGHT

RAPID CUTS OF: A small group of people gathering  
in the street as a few men try to project an  
image onto the billboard from an adjacent  
building. The out-of-focus image bounces up and  
down as the men level the projector. A Channel 9  
news van pulls up; two cameramen jump out of the  
van.

INT. - LARGE DANK BASEMENT

President White sits on the piano bench. He  
smokes a cigarette quietly. Larry rights Jim in  
his chair. No one says anything. Jim struggles  
for his breath.

PRESIDENT WHITE

O.k., I'm afraid things got a  
little out of hand. You  
shouldn't instigate like that,

Jim. You know nothing of my background.

JIM

(coughing)

You think... you think (cough), you think you can become the president of a university and keep your background private? You're just like all the other people in power— you think you earned your spot.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Alright, Jim. You've had your say. But the simple fact is I've grown tired of this game.

President White turns towards Larry and nods. KA-CLICK, the sound of a gun cocking echoes through the room.

Guy, Victoria, and Jim's eyes dart toward Larry. The gun is aimed at Jim, and Larry looks like he knows how to use it.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Jeanne, Beth, you're no longer needed.

Jeanne and Beth start towards the stairs. Beth trails behind Jeanne. She stops, turns, and looks back at Jim. Jim meets her gaze, she turns suddenly and mounts the stairs. President White paces back in forth next to Larry. He's careful not to walk in front of the gun.

GUY PETERSON

Wait! These two had nothing to do with this.

SHOCKED, President White spins around to face Guy.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Suddenly you have something to say?

GUY PETERSON

This was my project. I'm the one you want.

PRESIDENT WHITE

And what do you propose we do, Guy? Just forget all this happened? I'm afraid you all know too much.

Victoria and Jim stare at Guy in disbelief.

GUY PETERSON

All I know is that Richard Sharp and his crony Larry here are criminals. (beat) They've been running this racket behind your back. A university president can't keep his finger on everyone under him. Can he?

Richard charges towards Guy.

RICHARD SHARP

What da you think you're doing?

President White's laugh again fills the room. He quickly turns, pulling a tiny silver pistol out of his suit pocket. Richard is in his sights.

Larry immediately pulls his gun on President White. A no win situation.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Go ahead, Larry! Do it. Pull the trigger. I'll pull mine and you'll be the only one left. And you can be sure our friends Beth and Jeanne will back you. Right?! I mean a thug like you,

a dead university president and loan company exec, and all these folks tied to chairs. You're stuck, Larry.

Larry keeps his gun on President White, who still has his gun on Richard. Larry is panicked. He looks to Richard for assurance.

RICHARD SHARP

Hank!... Come on! Be reasonable.

PRESIDENT WHITE

(sharply)

I'm being reasonable. And Guy's got the most reasonable suggestion I've heard.

RICHARD SHARP

Reasonable? Reasonable? What are you talking about? We had a deal! Your stock options, your bonuses, it's all traceable. You think you can escape this.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Maybe it is, Richard, maybe it is. But here's the thing. Guy's really onto something. If I let these guys go, turn you in, and ask for amnesty, I can turn myself into a hero. Loan execs are bigger fish in the white-collar crime pond than university presidents.

RICHARD SHARP

You won't get amnesty! They'll turn you in!

President White slowly backs up while keeping his gun on Richard. He grabs a stool and makes himself comfortable. Larry twitches nervously.

PRESIDENT WHITE

That's true, they might. So I guess we all have some more talking to do after all.

EXT. - CITY STREETS BELOW THE BILLBOARD

The streets are full of people now. Tina- Channel 9 News reporter- stands with a microphone in front of a camera. The camera has Tina and the billboard, with images projecting on its face like a drive in movie, within its frame.

TINA

Good evening! I'm Tina Marcuse and I am at the scene of a breaking story. A group of men have rigged up a movie type screen and are projecting lost documentary footage that details corruption in the highest ranks of the Palo Verde University finance system.

Images of President White, Jeanne Ballast, and Richard Sharp flash across the screen. The film settles on Richard Sharpe. The newscast focuses on that which is on the screen:

EXT. - BILLBOARD MOVIE SCREEN - CONTINUOUS

RICHARD SHARPE

Do you really think that some higher ideal about human progress or enlightenment guides this university? Maybe the faculty believe that, but the administration is on to other things. They're pedaling dreams, and people spend big on their dreams.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

And you provide the loans that allow people to pursue their dreams?

RICHARD SHARPE

Exactly. Student Loan Xpress brings dreams within the reach of millions. It doesn't matter who runs the university, who the president is; we pull the strings. They couldn't do it without us.

GUY PETERSON (O.S.)

I doubt President White would agree.

RICHARD SHARPE

President White can think what he likes. But the truth is he's in our back pocket.

EXT. - CITY STREETS BELOW THE BILLBOARD -  
CONTINUOUS

Suddenly a chant starts up amongst the crowd and the camera cuts back to Tina, standing in front of the crowd and billboard.

CROWD

What do we want? Tuition cuts!  
When do we want 'em? Now!

TINA

Strong words from Student Loan Xpress president Richard Sharp projected here on this billboard screen. And if our billboard filmmakers are right there's going to be a huge investigation into the accusations that President White is at the head of a racket designed to make

extra money off of every student who takes out a loan for their education.

CROWD

(growing louder)

What do we want? Tuition cuts!  
When do we want 'em? Now!

TINA

The crowd is growing ever larger here at this billboard movie next to the Palo Verde campus. Our informants tell us that the FBI has been notified, and that they reviewed the footage this afternoon... Tina Marcuse reporting for Channel 9 News. Stay tuned for further developments.

INT. - LARGE DANK BASEMENT

The three men— President White, Richard, and Larry remain locked in their ring of assured mutual destruction. Jim, Guy, and Victoria look on. No one speaks. President White remains on his stool staring at Richard, as if he sees through him. He's thinking, scheming. He gets up slowly and walks towards Richard, keeping his gun on Larry but looking at Jim.

PRESIDENT WHITE

Well gentlemen. This has been fun. Real eye opening actually. Debating statistics with you was the highlight, Jim. The thing is your points don't matter. Meritocracy or not, I'm at the top, and you aren't.

Jim does not respond. He watches Larry nervously. President White turns back to Richard.

PRESIDENT WHITE (CON)  
And Richard, this pissing match we're having is cute and all, but the simple truth is I just know more people than you do. I know the mayor, the governor, our senators, I even know the god damned secretary of education. They would love to take down your racket, and that's how...

SMASH! The door is kicked open. 6 FBI AGENTS armed to the teeth rush down the steps. President White, Richard, and Larry spin around. Larry points his gun at the First Agent.

AGENT 1  
(screaming)  
On the ground, on the fucking ground!

AGENT 2  
Don't even try it, buddy!

Larry throws his pistol across the room and hits the ground. President White drops his gun and, confused, follows Richard's lead by slowly putting his hands above his head. He and Richard drop to their knees.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

INT. - CHANNEL 9 TELEVISION STUDIO - MORNING

Tina Marcuse sits at a newscaster's desk as studio cameras move about in front of her.

TINA

Good morning, I'm Tina Marcuse. Channel 9 News has been following a story that began last night with a self-styled urban movie screening of lost documentary film footage on a billboard near Palo Verde University.

INSERT: VIDEO FROM NEWSCAST

A newsfeed of images showing President Hank White being escorted out of his home in handcuffs switches on.

TINA (V.O.)

The documentary footage provided evidence about an elaborate racket tied to the university's financial aid department. The footage proves that President White and much of his staff were making money off of students by allowing lending partner Student Loan Xpress to charge students illegal fees and penalties.

The footage quickly cuts to images of President White's university mansion basement. Three chairs draped with rope sit there.

TINA (V.O.)

The documentary footage was shot by filmmaker Guy Peterson. Peterson, who went missing nearly two weeks ago, was found with two colleagues, tied up in the basement of the President's quarters.

The footage cuts to images of Jeanne Ballast, Richard Sharp, Beth, and Larry being loaded into police cruisers.

TINA (V.O.)

Amongst those arrested with President Hank White were Jeanne Ballast- the director of financial aid, Richard Sharp of Student Loan Xpress, a student aid worker, and a thug hired to silence documentarian Guy Peterson.

The newscast cuts to the Palo Verde University campus. Thousands of students swarm on the campus green. A few Palo Verde University vehicles sit overturned near the edges of the crowd. The students carry signs reading: WE WANT OUR MONEY BACK and HIGHER EDUCATION IS A PUBLIC GOOD. Police in swat gear stand on the sidelines.

TINA (V.O.)

Police have made numerous attempts to contain riots on the university campus. The national guard has now been called in.

The footage cuts back to Tina's face.

TINA

Channel 9 News will continue to follow this story throughout the morning. For now, a quick commercial break.

INT. - UNIVERSITY LIBRARY MEDIA AREA - 2 DAYS LATER

Victoria, Jim, and Guy unpack DVDs from boxes and lay them out on a table.

VICTORIA

I can't believe they were boxing up the entire collection.

GUY

They were trying to make sure they got everything. Probably

thought you were hiding footage amongst all these DVDs.

VICTORIA

Yeah! That's pretty smart. I was, until I met Jim.

JIM

Then I took most of it home, where they found it anyway.

NATE (O.S.)

But they didn't get all of it.

Victoria, Jim, and Guy turn abruptly to face Nate, who snuck in unnoticed.

JIM

Nate! I'm glad to see you! I want to introduce you to these guys... Victoria, Guy, this is Nate. He's the one who rigged up the billboard screen.

Nate extends his hand, smiles, and projects an extremely self-satisfied look. Guy grabs his hand and shakes it vigorously.

GUY

Nate, nice to meet you! I can't thank you enough. That whole billboard thing was brilliant.

NATE

Well, Jim deserves the credit for the idea; I just executed it.

Victoria extends her hand to shake Nate's.

VICTORIA

You guys sure did wait till the last minute, but we do appreciate your saving us and all.

Nate looks at Jim, they chuckle.

JIM

Well, what are you doing here man? I thought you hated college campuses.

NATE

Yeah, well... I've been doing some thinking. You're right about the sail factory. (beat) I'm gonna go full bore with the rigging business. That's why I'm here— there's a small business development office on campus. (beat) And I figured you might be around.

A broad smile comes across Jim's face.

JIM

No shit?

NATE

Yeah! Maybe you'll come work for me, make enough to get back into school?

JIM

I doubt that.

NATE

What? Why?

JIM

Well I'm going to go to work for Guy here. He, Victoria and I are going to start a production company. Kind of an investigative sort of news group or something. (beat) Guess I'm kinda turned off by the whole school thing now.

Nate throws his arm around Jim.

NATE

Spoken like a true revolutionary  
Jim. Like a true revolutionary.

FADE TO BLACK

**THE END**

## **Thesis Report**

The script “Rigged” grew out of the context of my current life. I am in an overwhelming amount of student debt. This situation informed my interest in the topics of rising education costs and corruption within the higher education finance system. I am also a media maker plagued with ambivalence about the role of media in society. My recent involvement with an issue based film festival that struggles with attendance has caused me to wonder about the critical potential of documentary. Yet, at the same time, I am a media maker oriented towards activism. I hold a continued belief that film has great pedagogical potential. The convergence of my own financial problems, philosophical ambivalence, and belief system kept me motivated while working on this project.

My main goal in writing “Rigged” was to raise awareness about the specter of college related debt that is now hanging over our country's young adults. My stated objectives in writing this script were to: 1.) learn how to write a script; 2.) examine a social issue that I believe is important to society; and 3.) broaden the way I think about documentary by exploring the line between fiction and non-fiction film. My thesis question asked: *in what ways can fiction be combined with non-fiction to engage with issues of social importance?*

In completing “Rigged” I have honed my scriptwriting skills, successfully

examined and presented a seldom talked about social issue, and broadened the way I think about documentary. This report details how I believe I met these objectives or goals, answers the question of *how fiction and non-fiction can be combined to engage with issues of social importance* (while also presenting another question), and discusses the various concerns, troubles, and successes I experienced when writing “Rigged.”

## **The Evolution of “Rigged”**

### **Beginnings**

“Rigged” is the culmination of a project that had been floating around in the back of my mind for some time. In trying to recall the formation of the idea that became “Rigged” I am surprised to note that the germination of this conception predates my filmmaking career, as well as my struggles with student debt. The catalyst for the story that became “Rigged” can be found in the Broadway musical *Urinetown*, a production I saw in New York in 2003. The finished version of “Rigged” is an amalgamation of my interest in *Urinetown's* comedic approach to social inequalities, the economic and political events of the 2000s, and the context of my life when writing “Rigged” in 2010.

*Urinetown* is a musical about a dystopian future in which water resources are scarce. The play hinges on the conflict between those who can afford water, and those who cannot. In *Urinetown* those who cannot afford to have water in their homes must pay to use the “public utility” when they are in need of restroom facilities. Those who cannot afford to pay for the public utility are rounded up by the local authorities and sent to

“Urinetown.” The unfortunate souls who are sent to Urinetown never come back, they simply disappear.

*Urinetown's* metaphorical critique can be read in many ways. It can be read as a warning of coming environmental issues, as a critique of the wealthy's selfishness, or— as I chose to read it— as a comical examination of the relationship between the “haves and have nots.” After I saw *Urinetown* I wondered what my fellow theatergoers thought of its humorous but biting critique. I wondered if they understood, like me, that America's “classless” status was a myth, and that the gap between the “haves and have nots” was a major problem.

By 2005 I had forgotten about *Urinetown's* message. I was racking up a sizable tuition related debt at the University of Colorado in Boulder and paying a lot of attention to current events. I was dismayed by the direction the country was taking, and discouraged about my financial and educational future. I wondered if I could put myself through college, what I would do afterwards, and how I would pay back all my loans. Tuition seemed to rise each semester and I ignored the debt I was accruing— I just couldn't handle thinking about it.

Around this same time I got wind of President George Bush's plan to change the bankruptcy laws. As the child of a single mother who was forced into bankruptcy after running up credit cards to buy groceries I began to worry for others who had struggled like my family. I also began to wonder how George Bush's proposed plans would change the way credit card companies did business. *Then I started to speculate.* I figured credit card companies would begin extending more credit to “unworthy” borrowers knowing

that there was “no way out.” I guessed that consumers who got themselves in trouble would see their interest rates skyrocket. I reasoned that George Bush was trying to enslave the country in debt, and though I am not much of a conspiracy theorist, I became pretty convinced that this was happening.

At this point my mind turned back to *Urinetown*. I thought about the antagonistic relationship between those who could afford to pay for bare-bones services and those who could not. I thought about the way those who could not pay were disposed of in *Urinetown* and suddenly it hit me—I would write a story (or a script) about the reintroduction of the “debtor's prison” and the wealthy's parasitical relationship to the poor. Unfortunately, or despite this realization, I did not write that story. I got caught up with other things and began working on other projects. I even tried my hand at producing a social issue documentary.

Between 2005 and 2008 I continued to think about issues of economic inequality, but story-writing plans were far from my mind. I was pleased that the Bush years had come to an end and that Barack Obama was elected. I still believed that the US suffered from deep class divisions but I had to admit, things were looking up! If I had thought about my debtor's prison story then I probably would have thought it unnecessary.

By 2009 Barack Obama's administration was working to pass legislation on credit card reform, health care, and a myriad of other things. I had confidence that these initiatives would bring about some much-needed change, but I couldn't ignore the problem everyone was talking about—the “great recession.” My portion of the debt problem also began to creep back into my mind. I was about to finish graduate school at a

private university and I was facing one hundred thousand dollars of debt. I was terrified, I was angry, but most of all, I was embarrassed.

After pushing the problem back out of my mind for a while (I was planning to go on in the academy while deferring my loans a bit longer) I found that it kept creeping back in. I asked myself: How could I have been so stupid? Were other students more rational than I? Why did I pick such an expensive school? Then my embarrassment turned to rage! I began to feel as if I had been duped. I pursued the promise of American education and what had it got me? When the rage subsided I remembered the one thing that has always helped me through difficult situations— one is never alone in his/her problems. I reasoned that there might be other students burdened with the same type of debt I was facing and I started “Googleing.” Much to my relief, and my dismay, I confirmed the fact that I was not alone. Many students were in the same boat. I was beginning to see just how large this problem really was. Suddenly, my “debtor's prison” idea returned and began to morph. I would write a script that would address this issue in an entertaining (if not comedic) way, I would throw out the idea of the debtor's prison itself, and I would concentrate on the problem of college related debt. My interest in documentary film, and my experience as a documentarian, would inform the story. But I would stay true to *Urinetown's* approach— I would feature at least one disappearance, and I would try to be informative without being didactic. The seed that was planted long ago had sprouted and matured, it was simply time to pick the fruit.

## **Multiple Iterations**

Scripts are not written, they are rewritten. Or so the saying goes. “Rigged” went through multiple iterations before the final version emerged from the page.

### *An Early Attempt*

The first paper version of “Rigged” was penned in Professor Sheila Schroeder's “Scriptwriting” class in the spring quarter of 2010. After struggling to outline a completely different short script for the first 6 weeks of the quarter I ditched my initial efforts and forced my early conceptions for “Rigged” into a 12 page action-packed short with many of the same characters. Although this short was quite different from the full version of “Rigged”— it detailed Richard's henchmen’s attempts to chase down Jim and recover a lost mini-dv tape, this first attempt allowed me to familiarize myself with the characters and scenarios that would later influence my full script. This early version of “Rigged” is entitled “The Tape” and is included at the end of this document in the Appendix.

### *Time Constraints*

Very rigid time constraints dictated the speed at which I wrote the full version of “Rigged.” While writing I was preparing to move out of state and start an MFA program in Documentary Filmmaking at the University of North Texas (UNT). When starting out I was not sure I would be able to get the script done before my move, and I worried that I would let this thesis fall by the wayside once I began classes at UNT. A strong urge to

finish what I had started motivated me to set strict deadlines. I looked at the time available to me and broke down the various acts, rewrites, and edits of my proposed script into regular “assignments.” I figured that setting a “due date” for act one, followed soon after by a “due date” for act two, etc, would force me to keep on task. Once I set these self-imposed “due-dates” I was able to start writing and, surprisingly, I found that I was able to get ahead of my anticipated schedule. Getting ahead of schedule provided me with enough time to put the script aside for a few days in late June, and again in the middle of July. Having a few days away from the script enabled me to come back with “fresh eyes.”

### *The First Draft*

When I first sat down to begin the full version of “Rigged” I expected to spend a week or so outlining. I thought back to the short-scriptwriting class I had just completed with Professor Schroeder and returned to the writing text we had utilized in that class—Linda J. Cowgill's *Writing Short Films*. I also began working through Syd Field's “step-by-step” text *The Screenwriter's Work Book*. I took what I could from Cowgill's book and applied it to the task of writing a longer script while also considering Field's take on the process. I was surprised to find that both Cowgill and Field offered similar guidance and I started to feel very skeptical about scriptwriting books.

Both Cowgill and Field's books offer similar instruction on how to write a script and, importantly, *what should be in a script*. When Cowgill and Field speak of *what should be in a script* they do not talk about content per se, but instead about narrative or

dramatic devices. Discussion about plot outlines, character bios, inciting incidents (a.k.a. “catalysts”), conflict, character goals, dramatic problems, setbacks, obstacles, midpoints, turning points, and dénouement go on ad-nauseum. One almost gets the impression that scriptwriting is like a mathematic equation; that as long as dramatic elements A, B, and C are included and “multiplied” by the requisite number of twists, turns, and obstacles, a fairly decent script will emerge. The problem I had with this formulaic approach was that I considered scriptwriting *an art*, not some sort of exercise in deductive logic.

Furthermore, my understanding of *art* was informed by my belief that art was the result of passionate outpourings, not reasoned calculations. Rather than give in to suggestions that scriptwriting was like logic I simply dove right in.

I wrote the outline for my script in one day, despite having allocated a good week for it. Feeling as if the outline was adequate, I began writing from point A to B and then to C. My initial goal was to get the first act done. I had some plot points in my mind and I was just trying to connect the dots between each of them. When I was close to completing the first act I picked up Syd Field's book again. I read through a couple sections on “The First Ten Pages” and “Structuring Act I.” I was appalled to find that Field suggested Act I consist of no more than 14 scenes; I mean did Field think that the creative process could be reduced and explained so exactly? Convinced that I had a good rough draft of a first act I set out to disprove Field. I read through my draft carefully, noting each scene and marking the breaks in my script. When I had marked off each scene I was disgusted to find that my first act consisted of 16 sections, two or three of which I considered “bits” (very short interludes that show character or reveal some

important point). If I didn't count the “bits” as scenes (and many would not) the first draft of my first act was 13 or 14 scenes long! Field's pompous statement “fourteen [scenes] just works [...], if you don't believe me try it and see what happens” (153) had infuriated me when I read it, but now, now that I found it to be true, I had nothing to say.

This was the point at which I realized I had been completely wrong about scriptwriting. Scriptwriting was not an art, nor was it an act in deductive reasoning; it was a combination of the two. Scriptwriting was a *craft*— something that required inspiration, passion, reasoning, experimentation, *and* careful planning. I began to realize that scriptwriting, like painting, requires copious amounts of preparation. Before painting one must prepare the canvas— stretch it, prime it, etc. I reasoned that most crafts were like this. I then considered glass blowing, and noted that it also required a set series of steps. In glass blowing one cannot introduce pigmentation to the glass before it is heated up and prepared. Why did I think scriptwriting would be different? Wasn't there a set series of steps one must take in writing a script? Didn't a scriptwriter need to set up the dramatic problem before the true colors of a character could be revealed? Although I did not want to admit it I had come to realize that scriptwriting was much different than I ever imagined it to be. Scriptwriting is not an art, nor a science; it is a combination of the two.

This realization made I continued writing my script. I prompted myself to be open to the advice of Syd Field and Linda Cowgill. I forced myself to accept that what they had to offer in instruction might be useful, but I also held true to one of the few things I have always known about myself— the fact that I am fiercely independent and that what works for other people does not always work as well for me. With a new understanding

and openness I began a “brain dump” and found that Acts II and III formed quickly, without much planning. *Syd Field might be worth listening to, but I still had my own process.*

At this point the entire rough draft was done and I distanced myself from the script. I planned to return to it after a few days of contemplation. I figured that when I did return to the script I would inspect each scene, make sure that there was a direct line of action, sufficient dramatic tension, and, hopefully, some kind of arc.

### *Towards a Second Draft*

When I did return to the first draft of my script I was both surprised by its general quality and concerned with some of its content. The script was highly readable, and the first ten pages were quite gripping, but I wasn't sure I was comfortable with the way my script represented the world. I was writing a script about white-collar crime, class conflict, and greed, but did I really need to write in the violence I had? Why had I included a kidnapping? Mob-style shake down scenes? And as someone who is ardently opposed to guns; why was I writing them in so frequently? Did the script I wrote represent the world as I saw it, or was I just trying to write a suspenseful story that was both entertaining and informative?

I'm still wrestling with these questions, and I treat them more fully in the “Evaluating the Weaknesses” section of this document, but at the time of my first cold reading I resolved to push these worries aside and move on. I guess I figured I still had time to address the problem of violence in the successive drafts I knew I would be

producing. Then it hit me— there were more problems with my script than the use of violence; there was also my less than fair representation of women.

By the end of my first cold reading I began to think that the women I depicted in my script were rather weak, and that the one woman with any semblance of strength was also a criminal. The fact that I had written violence into my script surprised me, but the fact that I represented women so poorly really took me off guard. I consider myself as someone who is observant and sensitive to stereotyping, but more significant is the fact that I do not see myself as someone who holds a particularly masculine view of the world. Though I am sure I meet the world with some sort of “male gaze,” I am a male who grew up in a gynocentric household. My father left when I was quite young, and I was raised by my single mother, grandmother, and aunts. I have an older brother, but neither of us had much of a masculine influence in our lives. What is more is that I never really kept a lot of male friends. Throughout much of my life I was always closer to my female friends than my male ones. Given my background, and my awareness of gender issues, I was surprised I had represented women this way.

Again, I am still wrestling with and disturbed by the world I represented in my script. When writing the script I noted my concerns, contemplated them, and eventually put them aside. I knew I had to continue moving forward and I again figured that I could address these issues as I rewrote the script. I made intellectual peace with my self by recognizing that I had identified these problems and that I was not so stupid as to send my script out into the world without at least being aware of the more problematic representations I had constructed.

After this rather unsettling hang up I returned to Syd Field's book. I read and re-read the chapter he had devoted to "The Rewrite" and found some sound advice. Field breaks the writing process down into three major efforts (post-outline, post-character sketch, etc.). He calls the first writing effort the "words on paper" draft, the second effort the "mechanical draft," and the third effort the process of creating a "polish draft." I figured I had just completed my "words on paper" draft and proceeded to look at the mechanics of the script identifying that which I thought worked and that which didn't. I spent some time cleaning up the few logistical problems that made my story a bit confusing or unbelievable and upon completing this I conducted an exercise many screenwriters implement at an earlier stage—I broke down my scenes on index cards.

In breaking my script down into scenes I ended up with 46 cards, about 15 scenes per act. Some scenes were quite long, others rather short. I reasoned that Field's statement about the first act's length—approximately 14 scenes—should probably apply to the other acts as well. Again, I was surprised by his ability to parse out each act so exactly. By Field's standards I was making structural progress, and I did think the script read well, I just wasn't sure how "visual" my story was, or if my dialogue was any good. Determined to turn my script into a compelling read I set the cards aside and resolved to start two separate rewrites, one that concentrated on adding and strengthening my scene descriptions, and one that focused on sharpening the dialogue.

When I set out to begin my "scene description" edit the non-linear nature of this process hit me. Suddenly, I was obsessed with the ordering of my scenes and wanted to return to the cards. My plan of designating separate edits that concentrated on scene

descriptions and dialogue seemed like a good one, but I had gotten ahead of myself. I posted all 46 of these cards on a corkboard and sat staring at it for quite some time. I examined each act and noted where the inciting incident was, where each obstacle surfaced, where my turning points were, and where important “reveals” were. I even spent some time reordering the cards. I didn't want to preclude the idea that the script might flow better if I ordered the acts differently, and I began to notice that changing the order of the acts opened up new possibilities. With these possibilities in mind I began yet another full read.

I read the first page and I got bogged down. I hated the opening. I was attempting to hook the reader with an action packed scene depicting my kidnapped documentarian but the dialogue was terrible, and the “henchman-beats-on-the-captive” scene too clichéd. I noted this and read on; this read was supposed to be about new possibilities, not reworking scenes. I plowed through the script and again thought it was pretty good. I got hung up here and there, and considered different ways of ordering the scenes, but mostly I found I had major issues with the script's final scenes (and yes, I was forgetting about the scene cards again).

The conclusion I had written was decent, but it was a lot different than what I had envisioned when writing the rough outline in my thesis proposal. In my proposal outline I ended the script in a very negative way. I wrote my initial outline thinking I wanted Jim— the “good guy”— to fail. I wanted to emphasize the point that the system was “rigged” (even before I came up with the title) and that the status quo always seemed to be maintained. In an attempt to highlight this point I planned to have Jim “disappear”

along with Guy. That way the reader would learn about the issue and be struck by the fact that the situation was not “righted.” This original conception was very pessimistic, but I felt it was a more accurate portrayal of how this imagined but extreme situation would be resolved. I was also partially influenced by the fact that few, if any, of those involved in the various housing bubble related mishaps (I'd call them crimes) of the late 2000s were truly being punished. Sure, Bear Sterns was allowed to fail, and some new legislation was enacted to better regulate the stock market, but the truth was that all those CEOs who had continued to get bonuses while everyone else struggled were never held truly accountable. The truth, in the real world, is that our economic system produces greed, crime, and inequality, and that we have not yet been able to imagine (or enact) a better system.

After remembering that my first conceptualization of the script's ending was meant to project this pessimism I wondered how I ended up with this completely different “hero-outsmarts-the-villain” resolution. Had I suddenly come to think that the problem of student debt and corruption in the higher education finance system would be easily resolved? In trying to answer this question I came to realize that no, I was not any more optimistic than I had been, it was just that my script took on a life of its own when I was writing it. I had not spent a lot of time outlining my script in the thesis proposal as I had reasoned that doing so would be tantamount to actually starting the script; it was completely acceptable to have written something that diverged from my initial proposal. I may have wanted to end the script pessimistically, but I now saw that an optimistic ending could work. I also noted that an optimistic ending might be more saleable, and

that if I was smart, I could “pepper” the ending with some serious doubt— hence the National Guard being called in to break up the campus riots in the final scenes.

Once I had decided that an optimistic ending was acceptable I reworked the dialogue and returned to the script's start. I read this section over and over. Most of it worked. I just needed to find a way to sharpen the very first page. If I was going to use a “henchman-beats-on-the-captive” type hook then I had to introduce something novel into the scene. Since my script involved a documentarian, and documentary footage, I decided the scene might benefit from the presence of a camera. I thought; what if Guy got clobbered with a camera (or a tripod)? I hadn't seen that before, and I kind of like the fact that the whole film aspect of the script could be introduced right up front if I wrote the scene this way. My “henchman-beats-on-the-captive” scene might draw on a million other scenes we have all seen, but at least this new conception was unique in its effect and tied into the theme of my script.

With the beginning and end of my script in better shape I decided to move on. I tacked on an extra documentary footage scene— the scene featuring student Sandra Wellington's personal narrative about her debt— and was surprised at how much this scene added. Finally, I considered the ordering of each scene one more time and concluded that, at this point, I still liked the original ordering best and that it was finally time to work on strengthening my scene descriptions and dialogue.

*And the Third...*

After I had finished considering the sequencing of my scenes and reworked the few I had major issues with I decided that I had fully completed what Syd Field was calling the “mechanical,” or second edit, and took up the task of polishing what I had. This was, perhaps, the easiest task I completed when writing “Rigged.” It involved the two separate read throughs I had planned previously— one for the scene descriptions and one for the dialogue. The process of sharpening the dialogue was quite easy, at least at this initial stage. It involved adding more slang, making contractions out of the dialogue that seemed too literal, and cutting out unnecessary lines. The scene description polish was a little more difficult, but still moved along quickly. To strengthen the visuals of my story I simply looked for big blocks of dialogue with no visual accompaniment. If I found much more than 3 or 4 bits of dialogue without some sort of visual description I scratched a big “visuals?” cue in the margin. Once this was complete I went back through the script adding the appropriate visuals, even if some of these new visuals seemed insignificant.

Upon completing this process I decided I had a pretty decent script that I could present to others. I also decided I needed a break. I was simply too close to the script; I couldn't see where I needed to go at this point. Keeping this in mind I sent my script out to my thesis advisor Diane Waldman, a number of friends who said they were interested, and my wife. In an attempt to “get away” from my script I hit the road to Texas. I had to get away from the computer, not to mention find a place to live.

## “Workshopping”

While on the road in Texas my workshop team— thesis advisor and friends— read through my script. I anxiously awaited their response and spent many hours contemplating my work (driving to TX and back affords one much opportunity for sustained thought). I was really glad to have a break, but I was becoming increasingly convinced that my script *sucked*. I continued reading Syd Field's book in the evenings and was relieved when Syd— scientific master of scriptwriting— summed up my emotions and offered some advice:

As you're reading [your] screenplay you'll notice you are on a roller coaster of emotion. You'll read a scene and think to yourself how bad it really is, how could anybody write such drivel; or, this is the worst thing I've ever read; or, the incidents and events of the story are so unbelievable and so predictable, nobody will believe it. *You'll feel totally depressed* [emphasis added]. Just keep reading. Then, you'll read a scene you've written and think it's not too bad, and then you'll find another scene that works really well. Certain scenes you'll see are way too long and talky, but they can always be cut and trimmed. You'll be swinging on a pendulum of emotion, shifting between elation and despair. Just ride the roller coaster and don't get too plugged into your emotional response, whether it's despair, depression, or suicide [...] just ride it out (269).

I wasn't actively reading my script (I was driving), but I was obsessing about it, and the pendulum was swinging furiously. Syd's sage wisdom came at just the right time.

Waiting to hear what my readers thought was killing me, but I realized that this was exactly how it was supposed to be.

It took a few more days for the feedback to start rolling in. In those few days I planned how I would go about my next rewrite. Yes, I had completed the “words on paper” draft, and the “mechanical draft,” and even the “polish draft,” but I knew I could do more, I knew I could make my script even better. To make my script better, and to get out of my own head, I decided I would read the script version of films I considered to be a good example of white collar crime thrillers while looking for ways to strengthen my script. I turned to the database “American Film Scripts Online” and dug up the shooting script for Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* and the lesser-known Tim Robbins film *Antitrust*. I hadn't ever read a feature length Hollywood script and I figured I was way past due. I reasoned that reading these scripts at this stage would help me identify what I was doing differently but not interfere with my original conception (I had thought about reading these scripts earlier but had decided I did not want to get caught up trying to emulate a Hollywood film). I hoped that I could examine these successful scripts and take something from them that would further sharpen my dialogue and my scene descriptions in another set of edits.

I watched both *Wall Street* and *Antitrust* before I read the scripts they were based on. I chose *Wall Street* for its treatment of white-collar crime and was pleased to see that the film succeeded in both critiquing Wall Street and entertaining the viewer. My selection of *Antitrust* stemmed from the film's synopsis— *Antitrust* features an examination of corruption at the highest ranks of the software industry and really gets

moving when a significant character “disappears.” Much to my relief was the fact that *Antitrust* did not dwell on the missing character as it was established early on that this character had been murdered.

I continued watching *Antitrust* believing that my script still possessed a bit of originality. Then, around the time the third act got started, *Antitrust* took a turn I had seen before. Whereas I had used billboards and a “rogue” film screening on these billboards to expose the crimes of “Palo Verde University” to the world, *Antitrust* used a similar, albeit more sophisticated, means of exposure. In *Antitrust* the protagonist reveals the crimes and corruptions of “NURV” (basically Microsoft) by broadcasting incriminating movie clips of NURV head Gary Winston (Tim Robbins) via a worldwide satellite system. Though there is a huge difference between projecting documentary footage on a billboard and sending out damaging video clips via a space based satellite system the concept, exposing corruption by putting it out there for everyone to see, was the same.

This discovery seemed, at first, to be a major set back. I wanted my script to retain a shred of originality and here was *Antitrust*, a film that used an uncannily similar dramatic device. What was worse was the fact that I had only watched two films before I ran into this issue. Sure, I had identified these films as possible models, but I hadn't watched fifty films before finding such a similarity. I simply couldn't believe it. I hadn't even got to reading the films' scripts and I was completely discouraged.

Luckily, at this point, my workshop crew started returning comments and feedback to me. The response I got was, for the most part, positive. The first of my friends who responded said the script was “pretty good” (but also admitted he didn't

know much about scriptwriting), my wife liked it, and my thesis advisor had emailed saying she thought the script was good (though I had yet to meet with her). All and all, things were looking up. My script was not that original, but at least people read the whole thing and kinda liked it. Or did they?

After this first bout of approval I quickly settled into another period of doubt. I kept wondering if my friends were just being polite. The first of my readers said it was “pretty good” and little more. My wife liked it, but of course she would. My thesis advisor seemed to hint that it was o.k., but I hadn't met face to face with her to discuss it yet. Perhaps she was just waiting to tell me my script was terrible? Unable to make peace with myself I broke down and decided to send my script off to my best friend. This friend, who has been highly critical and often times competitive with me, is a real movie buff and has written scripts of his own before (though I can't say they were that good). I had hesitated in sending him the script for a variety of reasons, but knowing he would be straight with me, I sent the script out hoping for an honest critique. I just hoped he wouldn't take this opportunity to offer me feedback as a chance to criticize me too harshly.

I was prepared for the worst, and I really expected my friend to offer a very negative review. When he called and praised my script I didn't know exactly what to think. The fact that he overwhelmingly endorsed my script threw me off. His comments, that my script “reminded him of a 1970s political thriller like *Medium Cool*, *Network*, and *All the President's Men*” blew me away. His assertion that my script was like “reading the most entertaining Newsweek article ever” proved that I had succeeded in my goal of

writing an entertaining and informative script (even if I thought little of Newsweek myself). His quip “I didn't know you had it in you” (referring to the fact that he thought I was a “dry” documentarian incapable of true creativity) initially annoyed me, but once digested, answered questions I had previously had about my own creative writing capabilities.

Turns out I did have it in me after all.

These endorsements elevated me to a new level. Whereas I had previously been unsure about my script, I was starting to feel “o.k.” about it. I knew that the support of a few of my friends didn't mean my script would become a blockbuster, but their support helped me accept that I hadn't done too badly. When I actually met with my thesis advisor and got more positive feedback I felt like I was really on a roll. I even got the crazy idea that— with some additional work— I might be able to get my script recognized at a writing contest. I didn't want to become too arrogant, but I did reason that there are a lot of bad films out there. Maybe my script had a place somewhere.

My “workshopping session” was a bit unorthodox but it had helped. I was finally ready to read through *Wall Street* and *Antitrust*. I reasoned that my script might be somewhat similar to *Antitrust*, but I had written my whole story out before seeing it, and as such I could let these similarities slide. It was time to fine-tune my script.

## **Finalization**

The fine-tuning of my script went quickly. After reading through the scripts for *Wall Street* and *Antitrust* I did one more pass through “Rigged.” Again, I thought that the

examples provided by these other scripts would help me tighten up my dialogue, and sharpen my scene descriptions. I took notes on some of the more common conventions in these scripts— such as the cue “we see” this or that, and the utilization of phrases like “quick cuts” in visually important scene descriptions, and added some of these shortcuts to my script. I feel that reading through these other stories “got me in the mood” for writing and allowed me, on my last pass through, to construct more natural sequences of dialogue, etc.

Other changes and / or considerations I made when fine-tuning my script included the changing of the librarian character from Tom to Victoria, the continued reconsideration of “Rigged’s” conclusion, and a failed attempt to push up the story’s “inciting incident.”

When reconsidering the final scenes of “Rigged” I again began wondering if the conclusion was too positive. A few of my “workshop” friends had mentioned that they thought Jim, or one of his buddies, were going to be murdered in the end. With all the guns flying around, and tempers flaring, it seemed as if a murder, or fatal accident, was warranted. The interesting thing was that my friends both assumed, and hoped, that this would happen when they were reading “Rigged.” Their conceptions were very much in line with today’s blockbusters, but my conceptions were different. I concluded I had already written in enough violence, and that I would keep things as they were.

The final issue I grappled with while fine-tuning my script was the question of whether or not my inciting incident should be moved to an earlier place within the script. This dilemma presented itself to me when, well into my final pass through, I decided to

take a break and flip through the pages of *The Screenwriter's & Playwright's Market*.

What I found when flipping through this text was a screenwriting competition that requested writers only send in the first 20 pages of their script. I immediately realized that this presented a big problem. My inciting incident— the point at which Victoria gives Jim the first bit of footage— comes around page 30, but this contest only wanted the first 20 pages of the script. If I were to send my script in to this competition the judges wouldn't even get to this very important point.

Wondering if I should push my inciting incident up I tried to rework the first thirty pages of "Rigged." I figured something might be able to be pushed back, or taken out all together. The difficulty was that many of my earlier scenes introduce characters, establish a mood, and insert information that is necessary to the rest of the script (like the fact that Nate works in a sail shop and is a "rigging" specialist). Not sure of where to cut, or how to bump my inciting incident forward, I returned to *Wall Street* and *Antitrust*. I knew what I thought each film's inciting incident was and I scanned the first 20 pages of each script for these scenes. Ultimately, I found that neither script included the inciting incident in the first 20 pages. Although the requirements of that one screenplay competition were stringent, I had come to realize that the 20 page sample length had more to do with the judges' lack of time than some expected script structure. I reasoned that judges could determine if a script was well written in the first 20 pages of a script, or if they actually wanted to read more, and that this must be the true reason for the 20 page requirement.

Finally, or after this panic attack, I felt that I had reached the end of my process. I had considered each scene carefully; done the best I could with the dialogue, and grappled with the ideological implications of my script's varying content. I figured that letting my script sit for six months before returning to it might be beneficial, but I also thought that "Rigged" was good enough to present as a "first feature length script."

### **Strengths of the Script**

With "Rigged" finished I can honestly say I am pleased with the outcome. I understand that "Rigged" is my first feature length-script, and that I have much to learn, but I am happy with its overall quality. There are a few aspects of "Rigged" that I believe are particularly strong. These strengths are discussed below.

First, I seem to have succeeded in writing a script that is entertaining, and informative, without being too preachy. Most of my "workshop" crew thought I did a good job of balancing the story with the fact based information I wanted to relay. Significantly, I presented the points necessary to understanding the issue of corruption in the higher education finance system in a few short documentary scenes. Whereas this topic could be presented in a pure documentary that informed the viewer about every aspect of the issue, I chose to present the issue in a less detail-oriented but more intense format. If the idea is to use film as a starting point for discussion (and let's face it, documentary is usually only a starting point for debate or action), than I believe my script has the same potential to stir debate as a full on documentary. As a film that will appeal to more than just documentary fans or those who are issue oriented "Rigged" may

actually possess more audience potential than a straight up documentary on the topic (that is if “Rigged” ever gets made).

Second, I believe that I successfully combined the narrative and documentary formats while learning more about the various ways such combinations can be made (I speak to what I learned about combining the formats in my “Combination of Fact and Fiction” section later in this document). My documentary segments may be scripted, but they are based in research, and showcase a possible reality. They represent what I believe the raw footage of production materials would look like if I were making this documentary (that is if you could actually get access to the real life versions of my characters). The documentary scenes are also guided by the types of questions I would want to ask my subjects if I was making this documentary. The act of imagining how such a documentary would unfold allowed me to write in these questions; it also allowed me to dream up a few “money scenes.” The faux documentary scene featuring student “Sandra Wellington” provides the perfect case in point. Any documentarian filming such a confession would, in my mind, be thinking they had hit the jackpot as the “tape rolled.” Most documentarians would only hope they had the wisdom to allow Sandra to reveal her struggles without interfering. When Sandra shows us the burden she is carrying by looking out into the distance for a full ten seconds I, as a documentarian, would probably break the scene by trying to comfort Sandra. I would miss the most powerful part of the scene— Sandra's prolonged look of vulnerability and worry. Having had the chance to write what I would consider to be the near perfect documentary scene on this topic was really eye opening. This scene, and the ease with which my narrative and faux

documentary sequences transition back and forth prove to me that such combinations can be hugely effective, and that I must have done something right while drafting “Rigged.”

There are a few other scenes in “Rigged” that I am particularly proud of. These scenes, collectively, represent the third major strength of my script. Amongst the scenes I feel are really strong is the scene that features “Nelnet” president Frederick Silver's speech about “Nelnet's Promise.” Though the scene is not highly visual it is, in my mind, impactful. The scene begins with the stockholders applauding Frederick with a near religious zeal. The “cult of business” loves Frederick; after all, he is making them money. Frederick's speech comes next. It subtly points out what I believe is a problematic aspect of the investor's psyche— the fact that many think it is o.k. to seize upon opportunities that might not be as beneficial to society as a whole as they are to them as individuals. Frederick's speech also reveals another similar perversity inherent to the stock market. In pointing out that the “collections division may not be the most popular” but that it is a moneymaker Frederick reveals that a large percentage of our society is willing to make money off of the misfortune of others. This point is strengthened (perhaps too much) in the close of the Nelnet Stockholder's Conference scene when Jim witnesses two men joking that “Students + Late Fees + Naïveté = Profit for Me.” When the scene comes to this end Jim is struck by the absurdity of it all. People will really do anything for money.

Another similar scene that I am quite proud of comes near the end of the script when President Hank White tries to convince his captives that he has done more to help society than harm it. President White's proclamation that *it is not easy to push all these*

*kids through school, provide them with the “best four years of their lives,” and that this all costs money* is, to some extent, the *Wall Street* style “Greed is Good Speech” of “Rigged.” When President White goes on and on about how much Palo Verde University has done for the world it is almost as if he is channeling *Wall Street* the film's “Gordon Gecko” (Michael Douglas) in his polemic about the miracles of unfettered capitalism and the benefits of trickle down economics. Ultimately this scene changes course when Jim decides to challenge President White's own sense of accomplishment, and whether or not this change in direction works, it prompts the reader to contemplate the notion that no one makes it very far without help, or in the case of Nelnet stockholders, without taking from someone else.

A final unrelated and sequentially earlier scene that I am equally pleased with, though in a different way, comes when Jim and Nate visit an eclectic bar filled with statuettes of Jesus and Mary. This scene, which is much more visual than the previous scenes I explore, was inspired by Denver's own 17<sup>th</sup> Street based bar “The Thin Man.” The scene highlights the hopelessness Jim is experiencing, and Nate's inability to help him come up with a plan. It features a drunk Jim who is fixated on the bar's strange religious paraphernalia. The bar's various religious icons prompt Jim to reflect on the old biblical story of Jesus and the Money Changers. The scene is subtle, and may be very obvious to some, but it drives another important point home— even Jesus thought usury to be a crime, and Jim has to “turn the tables.”

“Rigged” also exhibits a few structural strengths. These types of strengths are probably more difficult to produce than well-written scenes (it doesn't matter if a scene is

well written if it doesn't fit or advance the plot). The most significant structural strengths of “Rigged” are its strong opening (the first 10 or so pages), and the script's various twists and turns that emerge towards the story's resolution. Most of my readers have told me that the script's first 10-15 pages had them hooked, and that the various twists in the story's final stages were unexpected— Beth's turning on Jim, President White's sudden change of heart, etc. Collectively, “Rigged's” informative but entertaining style, successful combination of narrative and faux documentary scenes, “Greed is Good” type speeches, and reasonably workable structure are that which make me proud of this, my first feature length script.

### **Difficulties with the Script / Weaknesses**

A few of “Rigged's” weaknesses have already been alluded to. Some are content based— such as the use of violence or the weak portrayal of women, others are structural or tied to problems in the telling of “Rigged's” story.

The problem of violence in “Rigged” was the first to hit me. I am not a person who values violence, and I would rather not be exposed to violence in the media I chose to engage with. The fact that violence played a prominent role in “Rigged” perplexes me. It's not as if I didn't know what I was doing when I was writing violence into my script, it's just that I'm not sure if these violent ideas were impressed upon me by the media or society, or if they are somehow, inside me. Put more succinctly, my having written violence into “Rigged” has altered the way I think about violence and the media.

Generally, I believe that violence in the media is reflected in society. I feel that children who consume violent media are more likely to act out in violent ways than those who avoid violent media. Studying Mass Communications at the University of Denver I was exposed to the idea that this may not be the case. The debate over media and violence has ranged from those theorists who believe media has a direct affect on audiences, to those who believe audiences interpret mediated messages in their own way. There is violence in society, and there is violence in the media, what remains unclear is whether the violence in our society reflects the violence in our media, or vice versa. It's the old *does art imitate life? Or does life imitate art?* problem.

This problem's answer became more unclear to me as I wrote "Rigged." An argument that the violence in "Rigged" has its origins in the media I have consumed as a member of our entertainment based society can be made, but the opposite argument, that the world is a violent place, that I just feel that people will act violent if they don't get their way, can be offered as a rebuttal. Perhaps there lurks, in the darker recesses of my mind, a tendency towards violence? Perhaps my blaming the media's influence is just a cop out?

Or perhaps I am such a good rhetorician that I have managed to trick my own self. This last possibility seems the most likely. It aligns with the feelings I had when reading the various theories and "studies" that sought to disprove the claim that violent media negatively affected our society. For when I read about the various media funded studies that asserted there was no evidence that violent media negatively affected children I had to wonder about the validity of these studies. Was it really true that violent media were

benign, or were those social scientists that forwarded this view simply set on *making the weaker argument the stronger*, like the sophists of ancient Greece?

I have my inclinations.

I wrote violence into “Rigged” and was so shaken by my own ability to write violence that I faltered in my beliefs. Violence does not always stem from the media, and some of the violence that appears in the media might be said to *reflect* the violence in society, but my writing “stick-em-ups” and “fist-a-cuffs” into “Rigged” stemmed from what I know as a member of this entertainment based society— Hollywood films. As a first time feature writer who has no desire to break into the Hollywood scene I was still influenced by my conception of what a typical 21<sup>st</sup> Century film looks like. I might have been writing outside the Hollywood tradition by writing a non-traditional film that blended genres, but I was unable to stray too far from the normal detective or action film. While writing I needed to look at my film and think that it was different but still recognizable as a film-like thing. Otherwise I would have thought that I had failed. Writing violence into “Rigged” caused me to reconsider my view of the world, but my reconsideration only led me back to my initial belief— I wrote violence into the media I was producing because I was mimicking that which I knew.

The second content-based problem I identified in “Rigged” was its tendency to depict women as morally weak characters. The final draft of “Rigged” features the major female characters “Beth,” “Victoria,” and “Jeanne.” Victoria, who is a strong professional woman set on doing the right thing was initially written as a male named

Tom. Before I made the switch and turned Tom into a crusading female librarian the major female characters in my script were all criminals.

This realization disturbed me nearly as much as the fact that I had written violence into “Rigged.” When the problem donned upon me I tried to argue it away. I admitted that the character of Beth was a bit volatile, but I thought Jeanne's professional accomplishments (she was a PhD after all) made up for both characters' duplicity. I wondered if the fact that I had written morally weak female characters could be explained away in the same way that I had explained my writing of violence away. Mainstream media has not historically presented many strong female characters, so I figured I could hide behind such an argument, but somehow I just didn't feel comfortable with this.

When I began to think more deeply on the situation I couldn't help but recall that my life had been marked by a lack of masculine guidance. I never had much of a father, and I was never exposed to any sort of male frustration towards women— the kind I imagine men voice when drinking beer with their buddies in their garages. Nor was I exposed to the views of those supremely masculine men who tore women down. I knew heroes in films were more often masculine, but I decided that my writing male heroes and weak female characters into “Rigged” stemmed more from my own “male-type-gaze” than from representations of women in the media. My own male-type-gaze (and I distinguish my “male gaze” from other sexually charged masculine ways of looking at the world) has its basis in the simple fact that I am male, and that I am still at the stage where I am best at writing what I know. I really don't think I am currently capable of writing a good feminine character; I am just too stuck in my masculine brain.

After thinking on this issue for some time I shared my concerns with my wife. I was relieved when she validated my feelings. If I had written morally weak female characters it was unintentional. I may have grown up in a gynocentric household, but I held a masculine view of the world. My main character was, to some extent, a version of myself. Nate, Jim's roommate, was in some sense, a model of my best male friend. And the character of Tom, who later became Victoria, was based on a former co-worker of mine. I had been worrying that my mind was full of violence, and misogynistic thoughts, but I had come to understand that I was just over thinking the whole situation. I now admit that I possess more of a masculine worldview than I had once thought I did, but I am relieved that I have now noticed this, thought about it, and made efforts to address it in my script.

The more structural or storytelling based weaknesses I have identified as existing in “Rigged” produce fewer philosophical conundrums than the content based problems but are still significant in their own way. Amongst these structural problems are the problems of insufficient character development, unresolved issues or “loose ends,” and the possibility that the story contained within “Rigged” overpowers the issue that prompted me to write the script in the first place.

I have stated or implied that “Rigged” became more of a narrative than I expected it to be, and that the final film included fewer documentary scenes than I had once envisioned, but I still do hold that “Rigged” is about introducing an issue based concept to audiences, and not the process of revealing its characters' inner struggles. Much of the energy I put into “Rigged” involved researching the student loan racket and conducting

brainstorming sessions that would lead to a workable story (even despite the existence of my early *Urinetown* based ideas). I didn't feel as if there was enough time or space in "Rigged" to write complex characters. When I had that "light bulb" moment and saw how the film might come together I immediately started writing. I admit that I made the mistake of glossing over my character bios. Any film can be made stronger by complex characters and though I wouldn't call the characters in "Rigged" flat, I am not sure the depth each character possesses in my own mind shines through when others read the script.

The more developed characters in "Rigged" are my main character Jim and his housemate Nate. Both Jim and Nate undergo a personal transformation in "Rigged." Jim starts the film as a naïve young college student invested in the dream of a great "American education." By the end of the film he has become a somewhat cynical and distrusting young man more interested in personal fulfillment than formal degrees. Nate starts off rather critical of Jim but eventually comes to respect Jim for the work he is doing with the documentary footage. Nate also goes from being a character who seems to be pretty sure about his blue collar career path to a character who admits that it is better to follow personal dreams, even if all they involve is running a small business. Whether the struggles Jim and Nate go through in making their transformations are apparent enough is difficult for me to say as I am unable to see these characters with a neutral eye. No one in my "workshop" crew commented on the development of these characters, but I suspect that this is an area where I could build the script up.

Another structural problem that I see with “Rigged” is the fact that it leaves a few important issues unresolved. A good portion of any film's resolution relies on assumptions, and though “Rigged” is no different in this regard, there are two loose ends I would have liked to have tied up more tightly. The first is marked by the fact that one of Jim's major problems— his debt— is left unsettled at the film's conclusion. The second is characterized by the generic separation of Jim and Beth in the film's final scenes.

In writing “Rigged” I had spent a good deal of time highlighting the fact that Jim was struggling with a difficult financial burden. I wanted to show how the student debt problem was affecting real people. I also thought that by including this “back-story” I was providing the reader / viewer with an understanding of Jim's motivation. The problem is that at the end of “Rigged” Jim still struggles with this burden, and there is little inclination that the ordeal he has suffered will lead him to some sort of financial security. I could have written in some sort of deus-ex-machina ending where Jim finds that he is relieved of his debts; that he somehow makes a bargain with President White, or Richard, or whatever, but I felt that this type of ending would be too “clean.” I had already written Jim in as the hero of the day; I didn't think everything needed to turn out “hunky-dory.” And in truth, the fact that Jim had helped expose the racket would not garner him forgiveness for his school debt in the real world. Readers of “Rigged” might want Jim to win big, but it just wouldn't be realistic if he did.

Jim and Beth's generic parting of ways is similarly concerning. The fact that Beth turns on Jim is one of my big twists, and I would not try to reverse it again for the sake of romance, but it does seem as if their final words could be a bit more authentic, or

heartfelt. Long before Beth turns on Jim she warms to him and opens up about her own struggles with debt. The way “Rigged” is currently written one is almost forced to believe that it was all a set up (though Beth does take a liking to Jim before Jim even gets involved with Victoria), and that Beth had no real feelings for Jim. I could have written the final basement conversation between Beth and Jim differently by including a bit more dialogue about the romance that was seemingly growing between them, but I felt as if this type of conversation would have been awkward in front of President White, Jeanne, and the others who were standing guard or being held captive. The fact that this scene seemed like the wrong time for a more heart felt goodbye, and that I didn't see another place where such a conversation could fit, led me to conclude that Jim and Beth's relationship had to come to a close without a hint of the more touching sentiment we saw developing between them previously.

The final structural problem in “Rigged” is a bit difficult to dissect. It involves the possibility that “Rigged's” issue based nature overshadows its storyline, or even the opposite, that the story overshadows the issue. This was a problem I worried about since the first days of writing “Rigged” and which I have seen in a lot of different issue based narrative films. Although it is difficult for me to tell, while being so close to “Rigged,” whether I struck the proper balance or whether I overpowered one aspect of the script with another, a few films from my “*unofficial*” literature review— *Lone Star* and *Chinatown*— provide good examples of one aspect dominating the other.

When I was first articulating my idea for “Rigged” I was turned on to John Sayles' *Lone Star*. *Lone Star* is a Western style detective film that revolves around a young

sheriff's attempts to solve the case of a missing person. The film takes place in the far south of Texas and makes a concerted effort to point out the nature of race relations in a locale where the first and third world meet. The film unfolds as you would expect, with clues popping up here and there, but gives way to scenes that seem to be written for the sole purpose of examining prejudice. When the film finally comes to a close the mystery is solved quite easily, and it is almost impossible to miss the point of the film's more political digressions—conceptions of a race's superiority overlook the fact that human relations are messy, and often times *mixed*. Although *Lone Star* does a great job of exposing the hypocrisies of race politics it falters in the story department and causes one to wonder if the film's full critical impact could have been heightened by more focused storytelling.

On the other side of the spectrum is *Chinatown*, a 1970s film noir classic set against the corruption of early Southern California water politics. I watched *Chinatown* exceedingly early on in the process of generating ideas for my thesis. I was particularly interested in its dark mood and stylizations, but the fact that *Chinatown* also dealt with the conflict-ridden issue of water in the west was not lost upon me. The unfortunate thing is that the film's strong storyline and impressive actor driven performances overshadow the dirty dealings of water engineers and politicians exposed in the story. *Chinatown* is remembered for many things, but I suspect few look at it for its interpretation of the West's early water wars, or the despoilment of California's Owen's Valley. I expect even fewer consider *Chinatown's* issue based context when assessing the problems inherent to California's current water issues.

Ultimately *Lone Star* and *Chinatown* provide examples of films that deal with social issues in different ways. Both films are strong and the fact that each film's individual viewers will interpret what they see in different ways makes it difficult to claim that one film's approach is more effective than the other's. Still, the varied approaches presented by these films informed my writing of "Rigged"— I tried to walk a fine line between relaying information about the issue without short-changing the story or building up the story to the point of losing the issue.

If I were to identify any point in "Rigged" where I failed to maintain this balance it would be during those scenes where Jim starts spouting off statistic-laden dialogue. The first instance of this type of dialogue comes when Jim is attending the president's party and engages in conversation with the librarian Victoria. Other scenes with this type of dialogue follow, and at these times it is obvious that Jim's character is acting as my personal mouthpiece and not as a fictional, but independent character, reacting to a series of difficult situations. I may have been able to develop Jim's character in other ways if I had written these portions of dialogue differently, and during these scenes I probably approach the status of "brow beater," but I hold fast to the original purpose of this film: using film as a tool to educate and expose.

## **Comparison of Proposal and Finished Product**

Having examined the various strengths and weaknesses of “Rigged” I still feel it necessary to speak to the way my finished script has diverged from my original conception.

When I set out to write “Rigged” I believed that the finished version would be roughly 50% narrative and 50% faux documentary. As a documentarian I wanted to experiment with the form and relay information without beating the viewer over the head with too many dry facts or overwhelming statements about the severity of the student debt problem. The final ratio of narrative-to-faux documentary footage in “Rigged” is, obviously, not 50/50. In fact, “Rigged” is much more of a straight up narrative than I ever expected it to be. My original conception for “Rigged” was quite different, but I am happy with the outcome. I've also come to understand that the combination of modes in a film like “Rigged” requires much careful planning. One cannot just jump back and forth between the different modes without developing the story between each transition (or at least I couldn't write the film to jump back and forth more quickly).

The finished version of “Rigged” also differed from my initial plan in that it turned out to be more of a thriller, or drama, than the mystery I thought it would be. At the start I thought I would write “Rigged” as a detective like film about a missing documentarian whose disappearance was detailed in successive bits of uncovered footage. Each bit of “found” footage was supposed to feature information about the student loan racket *and* reveal a clue that would help Jim figure out what happened to

Guy. The fact that the final version of “Rigged” does not advance in this way is probably due to the reversal that occurred when I was writing the script. Initially I thought I would write out all the documentary segments, load them with info on the student loan racket, and drop at least a few clues about Guy's disappearance before going back and writing the narrative portion in between each faux documentary segment. When I actually tried doing this I found that it just didn't work. I couldn't write “around” pre-constructed documentary scenes, I had to write “to” and “from” them. The narrative had to be “ready” for the transition to the documentary mode, it couldn't be forced. Whether the transitions feel forced to readers of “Rigged” or not, I did my best to “feel” out the narrative and place the faux documentary footage where it fit most “naturally.”

Other ways the finished version of “Rigged” diverges from my expectations are less significant but still worth a brief mention. I have mentioned that I had once wanted “Rigged” to end on a dark note, rather than in the positive way that it does. What I have not mentioned is that, early on, I had planned to infuse “Rigged” with a film noir type quality. I had wanted the world to seem like a dark and foreboding place, a place where people would do anything for money; a place where the “have nots” were constantly being cheated or worrying about being ripped off. For whatever reason, and I'm really not quite sure why, I refrained from loading “Rigged” with the cues of film noir. Perhaps the idea faded away as “Rigged” became more of a thriller than a mystery, or perhaps I just didn't know how to write in the style of film noir. Whatever the case, I am comfortable with “Rigged's” more modern feel and can no longer envision what I have produced in the noir style.

## **The Combination of Fact and Fiction: Answering My Thesis Question**

I have already stated that the idea for a work like “Rigged” existed in the back of my mind for some time. Initially, I wanted to write a story that highlighted issues of classism in an entertaining way while also examining an issue like debt. The process of turning my idea for “Rigged” into a thesis project added much to my original conception. The most significant addition that emerged when considering “Rigged” for a thesis project was my desire to explore the very contemporary notion of the “hybrid film.” In thinking about socially oriented films and the hybrid format I began to wonder: *in what ways can fiction be combined with non-fiction to engage with issues of social importance?* The process of researching and writing “Rigged” was my attempt to actually work this question out, and it produced some interesting answers.

The first answer that presented itself came when I read Lipkin et al's analysis of the more common types of docufiction— the drama documentary, the documentary drama, the faction, and the mockumentary, and the accompanying analysis of the way these docufictions combined fact and fiction (see my proposal). The second answer emerged when I began to write “Rigged” and found, as I had first suspected, that my script didn't neatly fit into any of Lipkin et al's categories. Lipkin et al's taxonomy of the docufiction provided a useful framework for thinking about the hybrid film, but it left a bit out. Lipkin et al treated the use of faux documentary footage in their analysis, but they only considered faux footage appropriate to the mockumentary.

My film is different. It is a narrative film that utilizes faux documentary footage, but it is not meant to lampoon or ridicule like the mockumentary is. The difficulty of assigning my film to a category recalls the problem of working with taxonomies that I stated in my proposal— taxonomies are reductive, not creative, devices. I created a narrative film with bits and pieces of faux documentary inside it, but who's to say that a “documentary” film couldn't be written to contain a narrative within it? This particular type of film might be labeled a “mockumentary”— Herzog's *Incident at Loch Ness* might provide a good example— but such a film need not always be satirical or comical in nature. In fact, the recent film *Paper Heart* provides an example of film that starts out as if it was a documentary and then slowly morphs into a narrative film. *Paper Heart* is decidedly not a mockumentary, nor is “Rigged.” Some films are simply unclassifiable.

Ultimately, these unclassifiable films prove that *fiction and non-fiction can be combined in unlimited ways*. One cannot write out a procedures manual, nor can one articulate a series of rules that posit only certain combinations of fiction and non-fiction will be successful. After spending all this time thinking on the various ways the narrative and documentary modes can be combined, I have come to realize that my thesis question was *all wrong*, or at least misguided. The interesting question is not how fiction and non-fiction can be combined, for as I said, the potential combinations are limitless; the interesting question is *how do we experience films that combine fiction and non-fiction?* The experience of watching a documentary has long been thought to be different than the experience of watching a fiction-based film. The experience of the hybrid film is different; it has not yet been fully considered.

In early 2010 I was treated to a real world experience that proved just this point. I attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual “Thin Line Documentary Film Festival” in Denton, TX (home of the University of North Texas, where I will be pursuing my MFA in documentary filmmaking) and was struck by the fact that the festival sought to explore the “Thin Line” between fact and fiction. Indeed, “Thin Line's” organizers stated that they were most interested in film[s] that blurred the line between fact and fiction or that pushed the boundaries of the documentary genre” (2010 Festival Website). Mockumentaries, docufictions, docudramas, or whatever else one might call a hybrid film were all welcomed at “Thin Line.”

The problem for “Thin Line” was that a few of those people most excited about “Thin Line's” documentary focus did not welcome the changes in the documentary form the festival was celebrating. The morning of the “Thin Line's” opening Denton's hometown newspaper “The Denton Record Chronicle” ran an op-ed entitled “We don't need no stinking facts.” The article was published with no credit to its author; its hostility to the hybrid form so poignant I quote a good portion of it here:

We were happily skipping through a front-page article about the Thin Line Film Fest when we fell into a pothole. We are not completely out of it yet, and the experience has us musing about truth, art and what — if anything — words mean anymore. We are big fans of documentary movies — Ken Burns is God in our little cubicle — and the success of Denton's Thin Line Film Fest has been gratifying to us, both as a documentary film fan and as

an appreciative observer of Denton's lively and innovative arts scene. [The festival's director has said that] three films being screened at the festival were more fiction than fact. [The director] seemed perfectly comfortable — even a little smug — with the fact that audiences at the festival will be viewing made-up “documentary” films. We are less so. We realize we have just outed ourselves as an outdated, reactionary stick-in-the-mud, but, like Luther, here we stand; we can do no other. We are in the word business —admittedly in the Sally League of belles lettres but still in the ballpark — and one of the basic tenets of that business is that words have meanings and that they cannot — or at least should not — be twisted so grievously as to pervert their meaning. A 'documentary' film, by any standard we are aware of, is one that deals with real people or real events and tells the literal truth about them. [...] if we see any of these movies [Thin Line's director mentions as being hybrids] we're not sure what we will think, or what we're supposed to think. They may be great movies — they may be art — but unless their creators are up front with their audiences and point out which parts are true and which parts are not, they are not 'documentaries.' They are something much less. They are self-indulgent lies.

Self indulgent lies? Really? Documentary is changing for sure, but the truth is documentary never really represented the world as it was. We might have once thought

that it did, but most of us have since learned that film is a manipulative medium, even if some purport that it is not.

This is the point that our op-ed writer seems to be hung up on. This writer still *experiences* the documentary as an *authentic representation of reality*. He/she enters into the theater thinking he/she will be offered a privileged and accurate view of a world he/she is unfamiliar with; he/she does not consider that the director of the documentary might be manipulating them like a narrative filmmaker would manipulate an audience. Our op-ed writer still turns to the documentary for the “(T)ruth” it offers. He/she may understand that the world is made up of many competing “(t)ruths,” no matter the issue, he/she just seems to be holding on to the idea that the documentary represents reality.

I experience documentary differently. I differentiate between the “realities” documentaries represent. Some documentaries set out to examine and share personal realities (*Tarnation* might be a good example here), others try to represent the reality of a historical situation (say *Harlan County U.S.A.*), while another group of documentaries attempt to represent certain political “truths” or “realities” (Michael Moore’s films might fall into this last category). Each kind of documentary represents, or approaches a representation, that I would call a *qualified reality*. Documentaries that represent personal realities do so with the qualification that they represent one individual’s personal reality. Documentaries that represent historical situations do so with the qualification that they grow out of a certain perspective, with certain information, and for a certain set of purposes (educational, commemorative, etc). Documentaries that represent political arguments often times try to shirk their “disclosure statement,” but can only be

understood when one considers that the arguments they contain are validated by the qualification that you agree with their starting points. Each of these documentary types can represent a certain reality, but there is almost always a qualification the viewer needs to understand or feel comfortable with.

The fact that our op-ed writer considers documentary the filmic mode most capable of representing an unqualified reality is also that which makes “Rigged” so powerful. Indeed, “Rigged” plays with the notion that documentary can represent reality by asking viewers (or in this case “readers”) to experience certain segments of the film as if they were real. In doing so “Rigged,” like *In This World* and *Road to Guantanamo* rests— at least partially— upon the idea that documentary can in fact represent reality. Our op-ed writer’s belief that documentary represents reality is problematic when this belief becomes authoritative, or leaves out the appropriate qualifications, but it is also indicative of a mindset filmmakers can manipulate. By pushing certain experiential buttons filmmakers can get audiences to engage in different ways.

The pushing of such buttons is what I have now claimed to be interested in. I have learned that pushing the fiction button causes the viewer to have a certain experience, and that pushing the documentary button causes the viewer to have another. I have also noticed that switching back and forth between the modes produces a whole different experience. This realization leads me to my next point: I have gone on and on about our op-ed writer’s problematic conception, “qualified realities,” and a whole host of other things, but *I am still* leaving something out. The power of films like “Rigged,” *In This*

*World*, and *Road to Guantanamo* lies in their ability to engage audiences in such and such a way, *and this proves that there still is something different about documentary.*

The very fact that a viewer experiences the representation of war differently in a documentary and a Hollywood film strengthens this point. Most viewers think nothing of watching a soldier get shot in a film like *Saving Private Ryan*, but similar images in a film like *Restrepo* are unnerving to most. I claim that the documentary can only offer a qualified representation of reality but my own use of the form contradicts my claim. This contradiction highlights documentary's complexity. Documentaries may only be able to offer a qualified representation of reality, but this qualified view may be the best we can get, or put another way, the most we can hope for. Documentary evidence is all the FBI needs (or could hope for) when it indicts President White at the conclusion of "Rigged." Pure documentary may always rise out of some context, but it is still the filmic mode most capable of representing reality. Despite my postmodern criticisms, I have to admit that hybrids also rely on the documentary trope.

Hybrid films can be experienced as films that stretch the truth, or as films that present fact based information in a playful way. Hybrid films can be chastised for their inability to "tell the whole truth," as our op-ed writer points out, or celebrated for the way in which they present information without underscoring a bottom line. "Rigged" offers a unique story that viewers will experience as a fiction; its full affect comes when those who view the film later ask; "was any of that true?" Or; "is stuff like this really happening?" The power of a hybrid film like "Rigged" is that it is palatable; that it will be experienced as a possible representation of the world— a representation no one will

get hung up on proving or disproving (for it is neither complete fiction nor complete fact). The question *in what ways can the narrative and documentary modes be combined to engage with issues of social importance* has led me to ask the more important question of how the hybrid film is experienced. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I have come full circle. I started with a question and now end with a question. Luckily, I've already got a jump on the research necessary to answering this new one.

### **Next Steps**

I have spent a decent amount of this report detailing the successes I had in writing and sharing my script "Rigged." I may have even written this report in such a way as to blow my success in finishing "Rigged" out of proportion. I have not signed a contract to sell my script, nor have I won a contest. The feeling that "Rigged" is still not visual enough and that I am too literal of a person to succeed as a creative scriptwriter haunts me. Still, or despite all these doubts, I give myself a good amount of credit for writing "Rigged" in such a short time frame, and for doing a halfway decent job of it— at least when you consider it as a first time thing.

With "Rigged" finished I figure I should at least "test the waters." I will apply for a copyright for "Rigged" and then start sending the script out. I do not plan on banging on the doors of many Hollywood executives, but will instead take my chances with the many screenwriting competitions that now present themselves as an "in." I have purchased the current edition of *The Screenwriter's & Playwright's Market* and have identified a good

ten competitions I might have the slightest chance of being noticed at. I reason that some sort of recognition, whether it be monetary or honorary, will at least help me pad my C.V.. And I keep thinking about all the “trash” that filters through our movie theaters. If *Antitrust* got made, surely “Rigged” has some chance too.

More significant than any possible commercial success is the fact that the process of writing “Rigged” has opened me up to the idea that I might actually be able to become a halfway decent screenwriter. A number of additional ideas have popped into my head while contemplating “Rigged.” Most of these ideas have come in the expected, “hey, that would make a great screenplay” type moments, but this does not diminish the potential of these ideas. *And I am keeping a list.* If I don't win any contests, or get picked up by an agent, I'll at least derive pleasure from the fact that I am writing (and that I may even be able to produce these scripts on my own). This may be the most surprising revelation that the process of writing “Rigged” has afforded me. Maybe I'm not just a documentarian; maybe I'm also a screenwriter and director of narrative films.

The process of writing “Rigged” has also changed the way I think about myself as an artist. In “Rigged,” and in much of my previous work, I have tried to balance the worlds of art, activism, and cultural comment. This balancing act assumes that these ideas should be set in relation to each other; that art should be related to a message, that culture requires critique, and that activism can be advanced through art. What my attempt to balance art, activism, and critique leaves out is the possibility of art for art's sake. I have been so concerned with producing work that is both critical and pedagogical that I have set myself squarely between the tension of art and commerce without thinking that there

might be another way. I have not, until now, considered that there might be another place to position myself in.

As I move forward as an artist the question of where I position myself is becoming more and more important. I have claimed that my goal as an artist is to publicize a critical view. Yet, at the same time, my goal of reaching as many people as possible has prompted me to “water down” my criticism. In “Rigged” I hoped to couch a controversial political subject in a palatable form. This “palatable” form took on the look and feel of a somewhat typical Hollywood movie (violence, traditional dramatic structure, etc.). I did not, at any point, stop and think that I should just say what it was that I wanted to say.

The tension between art and commerce— my desire to remain independent but also have my work screened as close to the mainstream as possible, has put me in an awkward position. I have tried to avoid creating a work that might be marginalized as “radical,” and also to make my work more accessible to those outside the typical “liberal choir,” but I have, to some extent, compromised myself as an artist. I am not sure how I would have scripted “Rigged” if I had not been aiming to produce a work with the broadest possible appeal, but I am certain that if I had set concerns of reception aside that I would have offered a much more biting critique of the higher education finance system and capitalism in general.

My struggle to find a middle ground also introduces questions of ethics. First, there is the question of what I like to call “personal ethics;” am I being true to myself, or am I exhibiting some sort of “bad faith” when I try to simultaneously enter and keep a

distance from the world of mainstream cinema? Second is the question of whether or not audiences can tell what I— a producer of a “hybrid” type film— am actually doing in my work. If audiences cannot tell what is fact or fiction I might actually be doing a disservice to them by confounding the issue.

The question of whether I am compromising my own views or not in writing scripts or producing films that offer subtle critique while also trying to entertain is one I will continue to struggle with. My personal conviction that social issues must be talked about will probably keep me on the track I have now set myself on. I may, from time to time, produce works without worrying about their commercial appeal. But I imagine these works will be more for my own personal enjoyment and of lesser stature than the politically oriented works I am now planning. Producing art for art’s sake is a luxury of those who are less politically minded than myself.

I will also continue to struggle with the question of whether or not my “hybrid” work will confuse audiences. I understand the power media makers possess, but I also place a good amount of critical responsibility upon audiences. I expect audiences of a presentation like “Rigged” to do the intellectual work necessary and figure out what in the film stems from reality and what is inserted for entertainment. If I were to spell things out more clearly the film would become didactic and the whole exercise of producing a social issue film with more popular potential than a traditional issue doc would be for naught. If I am ever fortunate enough to be able to produce “Rigged” or another work like it I will be sure to incorporate stylistic cues that suggest certain parts of my work are an amalgamation of “fact” and fiction.

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Appendix

"THE TAPE"

BY:

JOSEPH BROWN

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763-360-8340

FADE IN

EXT. - UNIVERSITY BUILDINGS - AFTERNOON

Stately buildings dominate the skyline. A sign reads: University Hall.

INT. - FINANCIAL AID OFFICE - MAIN LOBBY - AFTERNOON

A busy university office. People come and go, phones ring. JIM STEELE, 20, fresh faced but aware works behind a desk. He shuffles some envelopes. KYLE, 20, stands behind Jim putting letters in mailbox slots.

JIM

When you off?

KYLE

As soon as I'm done sortin' these here letters.

JIM

Lucky bastard.

Kyle gets to the bottom of his mail stack and throws the last letter in the box.

KYLE

That's it. Don't let the boss lady catch you reading on the job. Especially on your 2<sup>nd</sup> day.

The camera focuses on Jim's desk. Magazines are strewn about- Moviemaker, Documentary, Indie Slate, etc. Kyle heads out the office door. JEANNE BOWERS, 50s, the head of university financial aid, dressed professionally, but with a stick up her ass, enter simultaneously.

JEANNE

Make sure to read the new loan procedure manual Jim; next week

we get slammed with applications.

JIM

Yes Dr. Bowers.

Jeanne heads into her office. The main office door swings open and in walks GUY PETERSON- documentarian- 40s, carrying a camera bag and tripod.

JIM

Can I help you?

GUY

Yeah, I'm Guy Peterson. I've been working with Dr. Bowers on a documentary I'm shooting. We're supposed to have our last interview now.

JIM

How cool! What's the documentary about?

GUY

Um, well... it's about university politics. Finance stuff, I guess.

JIM

Oh. Don't know much about that, but I do know how to set up a shot.

GUY

Yeah, you've got some experience?

JIM

I've been taking some courses in production (beat). I could show you. I could set up the lighting for your interview.

GUY

Ahh... that's a nice offer and  
all but I think I got it.  
Actually, I'm not using lighting  
today.

Jim looks disappointed.

GUY

Tell you what, I've got a  
screening tonight. You should  
come.

Guy scribbles the theater info and time on the  
back of his card and gives it to Jim.

JIM

Thanks man! I will. (beat) Let  
me show you in. And just holler  
if you need any help. I'll be  
sitting right out here.

INT. - JEANNE'S OFFICE

JIM

Dr. Bowers, Guy Peterson is here  
to see you.

JEANNE

Wonderful, we'll see what type  
of trouble this gets me in.

JIM

What?

JEANNE

Guy; how are you? Come on in.  
I'm short on time today.

GUY

I'll set up quickly...

JIM

You sure you don't need any help?

GUY

No, I'm cool! I'll call you if I do.

INT. - FINANCIAL AID OFFICE MAIN LOBBY

Jim sits at his desk processing paperwork. He's distracted by the interview next door. RICHARD, 55, wearing a grey suit and sniffing for money, comes hurrying in, looks at Jim, and storms into Jeanne's office. Two men wearing suits follow him in.

JIM

You can't...

INT. - JEAN'S OFFICE

JEANNE

Richard, you can't just...

RICHARD

Guy Peterson? This interview is over! You haven't obtained the proper permissions.

GUY

(extending his hand)  
Let me explain myself. Jeanne assured me this was alright. Tell me what I need to do; Mr. err, ah...

RICHARD

Mr. Sharp, University Trustee.

JEANNE

Richard, this is part of my job.

Guy turns the camera towards the floor. A little red light continues to blink.

GUY

I'll just step outside while you two work this out.

Richard shoots Guy an angry look. Guy steps out.

RICHARD

Are you trying to blow everything? You're talking to a documentarian?!

JEANNE

And you're a trustee now? (beat) This university is all about "transparency." I'm forced to grant interviews. Besides, he's way off target.

RICHARD

You better hope so. And your little bonuses better be opaque. Otherwise this arrangement is off.

JEANNE

Don't think you're the only one in this business. I'm sure Nelnet or Student Loan Xpress would be happy to have such access to our students.

Richard's eyes turn to daggers. The men in suits tower behind him.

RICHARD

Just don't blow it.

Richard and the suits march out of Jeanne's office.

INT. - FINANCIAL AID OFFICE MAIN LOBBY

Guy stands near Jim's desk wearing headphones. He seems to be straining to hear something.

JIM

What's going on in there?

GUY

Ah, I'm not sure... Guess they don't like me.

Richard and the suits enter. Guy rips his headphones off.

RICHARD

Pack up your things, interview's over.

GUY

What, can't we work this...

RICHARD

This is a private university Mr. Peterson. We don't have to allow this interview.

GUY

No (beat) but allowing it is in your interest.

RICHARD

Don't threaten me. (beat) This is over! We're going to need all your tapes.

GUY

What... ah... I don't have them here. I thought...

RICHARD

We'll see you in court then.

Richard and the suits pass by Guy, one suit bumps him a bit, and they're out the door. Guy stands stunned. Jeanne comes to her office door.

JEANNE

I don't control everything  
around here Guy. I'm sorry.

Jeanne turns and returns to her desk. Guy follows.

INT. - JEAN'S OFFICE

Guy gathers up his gear.

GUY

This isn't going to look good  
Jeanne.

JEANNE

It couldn't look any worse.  
(beat) Goodbye Guy.

Guy exits Jeanne's office.

INT. - FINANCIAL AID OFFICE MAIN LOBBY

GUY

See ya kid. Come by that  
screening tonight.

JIM

I'll be there.

Guy opens the door to exit. A tape falls from his bag. No one notices. Jim sits, confused by what he has just seen. A clock reads 5 pm- quitting time. Jim gathers up his things.

JIM

(loudly)

I'll see you tomorrow Dr.  
Bowers.

Jim goes to leave. He sees the tape by the door, picks it up, pockets it, and quickly exits. Jeanne watches from her office.

JEANNE

(yelling)

What is that Jim? Hold on!

She runs to the door and opens it. Jim and the tape are gone.

DISSOLVE TO

EXT. - DARK CITY STREET - NIGHT

Jim walks along looking at house numbers; Guy's card and tape in his hand. He knocks at the appropriate door. No answer. He turns the card over. It reads: SCREENING TONIGHT- 7:00 pm- THE ORIENTAL THEATER- 7200 44<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Jim looks at his watch- 6:43 pm. A VOICE FROM BEHIND. Jim turns; two masked men in suits stand there.

HENCHMAN # 1

Hey there little worker bee.  
You've got something we want.

JIM

What? Who are you?

HENCHMAN # 2

Nevermind that. Just give us the tape.

JIM

Must be a pretty important tape, huh?

Jim extends his hand to give them the tape. Henchman # 1 put his hand out- palm up. Jim turns and sprints away. The Henchmen grab for his coat but miss. The chase begins. Jim runs down darkly

lit streets, alleys. He can't shake them. He comes upon a busy street, stops for the traffic, but then darts out into it. Nearly hit, he drops the tape in the road and stumbles to the other side. Cars rush around the tape. It's almost crushed. The Henchmen are blocked by the traffic. Jim darts back into the onslaught of cars, grabs the tape and runs. The henchmen follow.

More dark streets. The men are gaining.

Jim runs up brightly lit steps to a building with a police badge on the window. The lights inside are out. He pounds on the door. No answer. A sign on the door reads— COMMUNITY COP SHOP UNDER CONSTRUCTION: SEE TEMPORARY OFFICE AT 2900 WELTON. Jim spins around; the henchmen have him backed up to the door.

HENCHMAN # 2

Alright kid, give us that tape.  
This isn't some college game.

A train whistle blows loudly and startles the group. Jim leaps downstairs into the men— everyone TUMBLES. Jim escapes and runs towards the passenger train. The train stops. He jumps on. He waits anxiously for the doors to close. The henchmen run towards the train, the doors begin closing. A "good samaritan" holds the doors. The henchmen get on the opposite end. They make their way towards Jim.

HENCHMAN # 1

Give us that damned tape kid!  
Don't make us get serious.

Jim hits a big red "Emergency" button.

HENCHMAN # 2

That's not going to help you  
kid. Give us that tape!

A train security guard starts running down the car. Gun in his hand.

TRAIN SECURITY OFFICER  
Everyone stay where you are.  
You, at the end of the train...

JIM  
(pointing at the henchmen)  
It's these guys. These guys are  
threatening me.

HENCHMAN # 1  
What? No, this kid's got stolen  
property.

JIM  
Stolen property? I'm just trying  
to get to a film premiere.

TRAIN SECURITY OFFICER  
I don't care whose doing what.  
You're all impeding the  
operation of this train. The  
police are waiting at the next  
stop.

The henchmen turn. The security officer— visibly  
nervous— points his gun at them.

TRAIN SECURITY OFFICER  
I said the police have been  
notified...

HENCHMAN #2  
(to Train Security)  
Now you've done it.

The henchmen— still wearing masks— pull guns too.  
The security guard is shocked. The train stops.  
Screaming passengers force the doors open. A  
stare down between the security officer and the  
henchmen ensues.

HENCHMAN # 2  
What's it gonna be hero?

The security guard shakes nervously. He keeps his gun on the men. The henchmen are focused on him. Jim slips out the door. A GUNSHOT rings through the night. Jim sprints a number of blocks, and ducks into an alley.

INT. - ART HOUSE MOVIE THEATER LOBBY - NIGHT

Guy Peterson stands in the lobby talking with the popcorn concessionaire.

GUY:

20 minutes to the Q&A (beat). I can't ever watch my own films; you got any beer back there?

Jim busts through the doors, breathing heavily.

GUY:

Hey, you're the kid from the offi...

JIM:

Your tape (catching breath)... guys tried to kill...

The henchmen bust through the doors shooting the alcohol containers behind the bar. Jim, Guy, the Concessionaire, duck for cover. The Henchmen are pissed.

HENCHMAN # 1

We told you this wasn't no fucking school project kid. Do as you're told and give us that frickin tape!

INT. - DARKENED THEATER

A crowd of people scramble about. Most run toward the fire exits.

THEATER GOER # 1  
What the... were those gunshots?

THEATER GOER # 2  
In the lobby. Run! Out the back!

INT. - THEATER LOBBY

Jim, Guy, and the Concessionaire crouch behind the counter.

GUY:  
(to Jim)  
What the hell is going on?

The Henchmen move towards the counter. Henchman # 2 shoots another bottle.

HENCHMAN # 1  
Stop hiding kid! The tape, now!

Broken glass showers down on Jim and crew.

JIM  
You dropped your tape, they want it...

GUY  
Yeah, got that part... Give it to em!

Suddenly the tape comes flying out from behind the counter. It nearly hits Henchman # 2, bounces on the ground, and comes to a rest on the carpet.

HENCHMAN # 2  
(to Henchman # 1)  
Quick, grab it.

Henchman # 1 grabs the tape.

HENCHMAN # 2  
(to HENCHMAN # 1)  
Get the tape to the boss. I'll  
clean up here.

Henchman # 1 runs out the door.

Jim, Guy, and the Concessionaire crouch behind  
the bar covered in alcohol and glass.

HENCHMAN # 2  
Alright gentlemen, you've gotten  
yourself in way over your heads.  
And you know way too much.

Henchman # 2 steps around the bar.

CONCESSIONAIRE  
Holy shit! I'm gonna die while  
serving popcorn!

Henchman # 2 points his gun at Guy.

Suddenly, the Train Security Officer— gripping  
his blood stained arm— and 4 police officers rush  
in.

POLICE OFFICER # 1  
Don't move. You're under arrest!

Henchman # 2 stands frozen. 4 guns are on him. He  
drops his weapon.

EXT. - ART HOUSE THEATER - NIGHT

The police search Henchman # 2. They remove his  
mask— it's one of the guys Jim saw in Jeanne's  
office. Jim, Guy, and the Concessionaire stand by  
a parked police car.

POLICE OFFICER # 2

We're going to need statements from you all. Just stay right there.

Police officer # 2 goes to assist the other police with a struggling Henchman # 2.

JIM

(to Guy)

They've still got the tape. Why'd you give it to em?

GUY

The tape's blank man!

JIM

What? What do you mean it's blank? Then why'd they try to kill me?

GUY

Tape is old school. I record digital.

Guy pulls a small drive from his breast pocket.

GUY

Must have been an old tape left in a pocket of my bag or something.

JIM

Are you serious? I almost got killed for a blank tape!

GUY

Sorry. I guess they know I'm on to their racket.

JIM

The loan one?

GUY

How'd you know?

JIM

I heard a bit of the argument  
Jeanne and that guy had. He's  
not on the board of trustees.

GUY

You got that right.

JIM

They'll be back when they find  
out the tape is blank.

GUY

They won't be back.

JIM

What, why?

GUY

I got the sound when Jeanne and  
Richard were arguing. They  
thought the camera was off. I  
knew Jeanne was getting  
kickbacks from those loan guys  
on every loan they sold to you  
students. That argument between  
the loan guy and Jeanne was all  
I needed- her "little bonuses."  
I got the recording to the cops  
a few hours ago.

JIM

As long as those guys are behind  
bars...

Jim, exhausted, pops a squat on the ground.

CONCESSIONAIRE

Is this all going to be in a  
film? I could be an expert  
witness!

INT. - JEAN'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Jeanne, Richard, and Henchman # 1 sit in front of a TV. Henchman # 1 plays with the tape machine. A "play" signal / arrow appears. The screen remains BLUE.

HENCHMAN #1

Is this the right kinda deck?

JEANNE

I got it from the college media office. They said it would work. Just fiddle with it...

Jeanne's door BUSTS open! A group of COPS in full swat gear rush in.

COP # 3

On the ground!

A video crew shadows the swat team. Guy works the camera. Jim holds a mic and boom pole.

FADE TO BLACK

**END**