IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to separate sociability from inquiry at the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT) at Cornell University. Friendships and conversations form on the first day and continue long after the sojourn in Ithaca ends. They begin in a classroom or a large lecture auditorium, but soon find themselves taken up amid the cacophony of a local bar, at a reception of endless food and wine, at an intimate restaurant in The Commons, on a stunning hiking trail through the hills of Ithaca, at a picturesque swimming hole near a gorge, or within the halls of Cascadilla. It is no wonder that attendees frequently refer to SCT as “theory camp” – a site for critical inquiry and a getaway from our everyday lives during the summer months. At SCT, knowledge production is a social event, not an autodidactic endeavor.

I imagined, as I arrived in Ithaca, an entirely different set of social and intellectual relations for the proceeding six-weeks. I doubted that anything more than superficial connections could form in such a short period of time: faculty would impart their sage knowledge at a decorous distance; lectures and seminars would take the form of a spectacle with fixed sightlines and specially prepared questions and ideas; my fellow participants would retreat to their apartments alone in the evenings.
for something like monastic contemplation. Coming from Los Angeles, I imagined the sweltering heat of the Ithacan summer would only allow for a sedate and sober lifestyle. I had prepared for a quiet, low-key, bookish vacation—a pleasure that was gladly denied me. By the last day of SCT, I found myself dancing to Lady Gaga at Pixel, a local bar, alongside Timothy Murray, who taught my six-week seminar, surrounded by my fellow participants, wishing the experience of SCT would never end. Over the course of six-weeks, I realized, faculty had become friends as well as participants, helping to cultivate a generous intellectual environment.

In our multimedia seminar, entitled “Digital Discourse: Theory, Art, Archive,” Tim set the tone for social and critical inquiry. At the beginning of each class, we discussed our engagements with a broad array of new media art from Cornell’s Rose Goldsen Archive. Doing so had the effect of creating a shared experience from which we could draw for class discussion, by combining the technesexual with Lyotard, cyborg feminism with Heidegger, and a cave automatic virtual environment with Mark Hansen. Such pedagogy also moved toward praxis, as it insisted that engagements with new media did not necessarily mark a complete break from analogous procedures of cinematic shared experience. In the ensuing conversations, Tim employed the first person, not as an unreliable narrator, nor even as a simple, congratulatory “I,” but rather as a powerful heuristic, an antidote to objective accounts of our engagements with technology. As a result, each participant, including Tim, brought particular (and sometimes personal) instances and experiences to our discussions, which opened up (rather than closed down) our understanding of the always social entailments with others.

These broad and deep conversations gave way to broad and deep friendships. Over the course of six-weeks, I formed friendships with scholars from around the world, including China, Australia, Romania, Denmark, Germany, Turkey, and France, and from a wide variety of disciplines, including film studies, history, rhetoric, performance studies, musicology, and architecture, to name only a few. Each participant brought a unique perspective, eclectic tastes, and rigorous thoughts. The convergence of such diverse backgrounds and nationalities helped to create an active and galvanizing event, which offered us new ways of seeing, new connections, and new questions. SCT was not at all the spectacle I had imagined, but a kind of global and dynamic rialto of common lending, borrowing, indebtedness, and exchange. I will never forget the time I spent there, among my best experiences in graduate school.

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