

Just a story:

Framing trauma

within screenwriting practice

ABSTRACT

This article will look at the evolution of a screenplay and short film that developed as a creative response to a traumatic encounter with a child, and how the initial trauma resonated through the entire development process. This autoethnographic account will frame the initial encounter, the creative translation of that encounter into a screenplay, and the subsequent life and ramifications of that screenplay and the relationships surrounding it. Moving beyond the encounter that spawned the screenplay, I intend to explore a directly related event that produced a similar response in me. The recognition and admission of this repeated response provided an insight in terms of my own awareness and responses to conflict and provides the foundations for my argument. That is, to consider and evaluate ideas surrounding the perceived or romanticized therapeutic value of creative practice. What I argue is that communication of an event is all that can be offered at the point of creativity. The deeper work of unpacking and processing events and responses is not in my experience inherent to the creative practice process.

INTRODUCTION

For Winnicott: ‘Trauma means the breaking of the continuity of the line of the individual’s existence.’ (Winnicott 1986: 22) Revisiting trauma to examine that line, to attempt to repair it through creative therapies are commonplace. Art therapies, drama therapies and narrative therapies offer conduits for examination, reflection, and healing. Screenwriting is potentially no less a medium to explore and reexamine difficult and unresolved trauma. However, creative practices and creative therapies are distinct entities which can unfortunately be conflated. Langley (2006) recognizes this conceit and clarifies the distinctions suggesting it ‘is the awareness of the intent by client and therapist that affirms the difference between dramatherapy and drama.’ (Langley 2006: 2). In contrast Brooks (2017) takes the more romantic notion that trauma, pain and suffering are latent generators of art that can be harnessed, suggesting ‘We venture to shape hard life into beautiful art.’ (Brooks 2017: 8). The inference is that art can control or manipulate trauma or can at least ‘shape’ it. The assumption is that creative artists can resolve trauma merely through the creative process. I will argue the case against in this article. Trauma can obviously be the site and inspiration for creativity however, the point to make is that the creating or screenwriting specifically does not necessarily directly facilitate healing. It is not uncommon for creatives to consider instances of trauma within their own or other’s lives as a source of compelling narrative. The point to reiterate is that the telling or recounting of traumatic stories does not mean that one has addressed or resolved the trauma. I do not wish to ‘deliver a sentimental view of trauma’s aftermath or feed us undercooked platitudes about hard won wisdom, post-traumatic growth, characters formed in adversity’ as Ashworth (2021: 12) cautions against.

This article will discuss two distinct but connected traumatic experiences that coalesced around a screenwriting project. I will examine how I responded to these separate encounters in similar patterns and reflect whether the process of screenwriting enabled me to recognize and redress my behaviour. In the early nineteen nineties on a sunny Saturday afternoon in the

city of Nottingham ‘given the derogatory title ‘Shottingham’, reinforced by local media.’ (Robinson 2019: 11). At age nineteen on a quiet road, I reproached a child of about 10 years old who was attempting to break into a car. Instead of reacting with fear or respect as I had anticipated, the child squared up to me and threatened physical violence. Not anticipating this fearless attempt at intimidation, I froze momentarily before ultimately backing down and leaving him to continue with his intended crime. I carried on walking away from the encounter, reeling and traumatized. Caruth (1995) suggests that ‘The adult traumatic state is initiated by the recognition of inevitable danger, and the surrendering to it.’ (Caruth 1995: 80) I believe I experienced both of those states. The encounter occurred in the infamous St. Anns area, where I also lived, and was always alert to potential danger. I had not however, anticipated I would feel threatened by a child and experienced what Lifton (1991) terms ‘psychic closing off’ (Lifton 1991: 33) where adults in particular remove themselves emotionally from a situation as a form of defence. I will return to this feeling and response in a second encounter later in the article.

I would also like to establish some clear ethical considerations. The recollections and accounts partially centre around the creative collaborations with individuals I no longer work with. For this reason, no permissions were sought and neither the project itself nor the director with whom I collaborated with will be cited by name. The film director will be referred to as the *Director* and the film as the *Short Film Project (2006)*. The film is now close to twenty years old and so distance, both physical and emotional may offer some further perspective. This analysis and reflection come caveated as with all autoethnographic accounts, with the limited perspective I can provide. The aim is to reflect upon any potential therapeutic benefit there was to translating trauma into creative practice from my experience. Whether it offered personal reflection, correction, healing or just a story to shape into a screenplay. Screenwriting is a collaborative endeavour with creative support, input and

revisions baked into the process from multiple stakeholders, directly or indirectly. In my screenwriting practice this notion of collective creative endeavour is challenging and energising. However, as LaFrance (2022) attests specifically within the sphere of literary collaboration, but no less relevant here, there is still a ‘continued preference for the concept of the romantic author with respect to dramatic works’ (2022: 422). This of course is terribly flattering to any individual who may be credited and celebrated for their singular vision. The director and auteur theory described by Truffaut (1954) still pervades perceptions of the directorial role even if it has been debunked in some spheres. It is clearly a difficult notion to shift as even writing teams have showrunners with a clear hierarchy, so the romantic notion of the singular author perpetuates. I do not wish to disavow or decry this status as it serves the singular writer just as well. The point to make here is that the director still holds more creative capitol than the writer, at least within short film productions and during the time of my creative collaborations in 2005 and early 2006. My role in the development of the *Short Film Project* (2006) was as screenwriter. The other creative collaborator in the relationship held the joint role of writer/director. This article will take an autoethnographic approach, to discuss the project from the inception of the idea, through the development process and legacy of the *Short Film Project* (2006) to examine the key moments of trauma, how they resonated at the time and what perspectives I can offer in reflection.

METHODOLOGY

As a practice-based researcher, or ‘Practitioner academic’ as Price (2017: 319) terms it, I am comfortable in the space of exploring research questions through practice, as a form to test reflect and consider. In this study however, the artefacts have long been developed, drafted, and screened and reviewed. For this reason, an autoethnographic approach has been chosen

as it centres the individual, and effectively straddles the negotiated space between practitioner and academic as Spry (2001) offers ‘autoethnographic text is a story reflecting the research artist’s collaboration with people, culture, and time. It is generated in the liminal spaces between experience and language,’ (Spry 2001: 726). As an autoethnographic exploration of events in my professional and personal working practice, I am keen to remain as objective as is possible whilst acknowledging the obvious tensions this presents as Adams, Jones & Ellis (2014) suggest, the autoethnographer is tasked with ‘Connecting personal (insider) experience, insights, and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts and conventions.’ (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2014: 25). It is also important to qualify my subjective memory not as ‘Objective reality but as an indication of what holds meaning for us about the topic we are exploring.’ (Cooper, Lilyea 2022: 200). The data for this article is drawn from script development documents, email exchanges and recollections as well as my contemporary reflections on the key events as I see them. The research question reflects the focus of this study which is to discuss the trauma that initiated the development of a ‘screen idea’, as Parker (1999) defines it. How I then processed the trauma through my screenwriting practice, and then consider my response to the subsequent encounter with the director. The fact that this later encounter resulted a repetition of the same pattern behaviour to the first traumatic encounter forms the basis of my discussion. The reflection will consider whether I was able to address the traumatic events, process them and move forward through my creative practice? Before I move towards exploring the traumas related to the screenwriting project it will be useful to offer some definitions of trauma that relate to my own experiences and understandings.

IDENTIFYING TRAUMA

Traumatic events possess a locality to time and space, a birth, a death, a marked event. They often hold a specificity, chronology and supporting narrative that situates them within defined measurable parameters, however they can persist and reverberate beyond those events. In Freudian psychoanalysis, as Bainbridge and Yates explain:

the concept of trauma involves two moments: the first refers to the moment of trauma itself (repressed memories of the primal scene): the second involves the memory, or rather the perception of that event.

(Bainbridge, Yates 2005: 302)

This framework of interconnected events resonates with my own experiences in that the responses to both moments I identify as traumatic are related in terms of ‘over stimuli’ in Freudian (2001) terms. One event was physically traumatic and the other psychological which I will discuss in turn. As McMillan & Ramirez (2016) suggest ‘Trauma is a colliding force constituting of many pieces that take greater or lesser significance depending on the person.’ (McMillan & Ramirez 2016: 448). The traumatic events required significant unpacking and rethinking as time passed and have only recently been recognized by me as such, given that they were not directly physically impactful. Keiser (1967) recognizes this in considering what is trauma and suggests:

Neither the intensity nor the quality of a stimulus can by itself determine whether a traumatic state will be produced: an apparently benign incident may be a powerful stimulus for a specific individual.

(Keiser 1967: 785)

Offered within these more fluid notions of trauma is a space to consider events that have impacted upon me and to reflect upon my responses.

EMOTIONAL CONTEXTS

Prior to the encounter with the child in Nottingham I was not unfamiliar with physical confrontations having grown up in a culturally hypermasculine working-class town in Northwest England. As Bowker articulates ‘In cultures of masculinity, the demonstrated willingness to fight and the capacity for combat are measures of worth and self-worth.’ (Bowker 1998: 170). The point to make here is that it was not the threat of violence that paralysed my response in the encounter with the child. In the past I had been in altercations where I had to defend myself. This is not to dismiss or ignore my fears during the encounter. Fear, adrenaline, and anxiety were always present in any confrontation. The previous fights I had been involved in however, were all with similarly matched individuals in age, gender, and build, and therefore a parity of sorts was always acknowledged by both parties involved as Ellis (2017) suggests ‘Men’s violence is often constructed around notions of a ‘fair’ fight,’ (Ellis, 2017: 108). I believe I did not fear the child physically in the confrontation. The situation with the aggressive child presented a challenge, in that there was no obvious choice in how to respond appropriately and the physical imbalance only amplified this dilemma. The only responsible action available was to walk away. Whilst my response was correct from my personal perspective, unpacking the decision and reflecting upon it took time to process. As McMillan & Ramirez (2016) posit, an ‘Autoethnographic methodology allows for a deeper, more meaningful, and holistic exploration of a traumatic event.’ (McMillan & Ramirez 2016: 454). What resonated from this was an acknowledgement that as an adult, self-control and restraint were now fundamental to all potential threatening encounters.

Although children are schooled in the expectation of restraint, lapses in behaviour are accounted for. No such account is afforded adults, and the clash of these conflicting parameters is what I wanted to explore as it disrupts the accepted power dynamic. The central choice for the father character throughout was the temptation and desire to lash out balanced against the maturity and responsibility of restraint. In discussing the parent child dynamic, psychoanalyst Benjamin (1998) offers the following assessment of the psychology at play ‘The parent must feel separate and secure enough to tolerate the thwarted child’s anger without giving in. Otherwise, the parent is destroyed in the child’s eyes.’ (Benjamin 1998: 71). Here, the ‘parent’ can usefully be substituted for ‘adult’ in terms of the dynamic, however the assessment holds true. The power dynamic is maintained through restraint, and loss of restraint undermines the hierarchy.

The creative screenwriting process offers opportunities to recount, recollect and dramatize experiences, although there is always an inherent tension between the dramatic imperatives of the form versus the authenticity of the lived experiences. As Lee (2013) offers ‘It is important when writing to not stick too closely to real-life events that we cannot divorce ourselves from reality.’ (Lee 2013: 20). Narratives drawn from direct experiences complicate the process as negotiation between recounted facts and narrative conventions occur in the search for some sense of authenticity however elusive that may be. As a professional screenwriter I am very sensitive to tensions between perceived truths as experienced and constructed narratives of truths. I wished to capture the messiness of the event as Ellis (2007) offers ‘Real violence, as opposed to its mass-marketed sanitized Hollywood variant, is ugly, often clumsy, desperate and brutal.’ (Ellis, 2017: 102). What I was interested in exploring was the emotional turmoil of the encounter. I wanted to express how I felt and what emotions were coursing through me. The trauma of the encounter with the child was not just a bruising of my ego and masculinity but something deeper as Bainbridge and Yates acknowledge, suggesting:

The unbearability of what lies beneath the masquerade of masculinity sets off a desire to deflect and cover up the losses, and in doing so, the subject becomes endlessly and hysterically trapped in that first moment of trauma.

(Bainbridge, Yates 2005: 303)

My reluctance to engage in a confrontation aggressively or otherwise with a pre-teen minor, marked a recognition that I was no longer within his world and stage in life. It was a moment where I could identify myself consequentially as an adult, and in direct contrast to the boy as a child. I had marked my eighteenth birthday and had celebrated a superficial emergence into adulthood without any perceivable, tangible, or psychological impact. In the aggressive encounter with the child, the magnitude of my responsibilities and expectations as an adult, both societal and individual were brought into sharp focus. The adrenalin filled encounter with the child, was not in reflection as deep or profound as the trauma of recognising I was no longer an irresponsible child with all the freedoms that affords. By the time I began to develop the idea as a scripted story ten years later, the gulf between the irresponsibility of childhood and responsibility of adulthood had only increased. As a new father with all the responsibilities that brought, the amplified threat of the irresponsible colliding with the responsible was a dynamic I wanted to explore. Especially given the received assumption that children should respect and fear their elders. In terms of addressing masculinity, I was also growing tired of hypermasculine narratives celebrating physical dominance and aggression in any number of action or revenge narratives. I wanted to explore more realistic approaches to navigating male conflict. Violent acts on screen can be emblematic of trauma but they may not represent or speak to the trauma in a wider sphere. They are often the catalyst for much more resonant trauma that narratives afford the time to explore. An example of this might be

Tony Grisoni's *Southcliffe* (2013) that explores the foundations and aftershock of a seemingly unmotivated mass shooting. There is visible and violent trauma on screen, however a wider societal trauma is the thematic focus that resonates throughout all the characters their stories and arguably the audience's response and reception. Locating the trauma from a narrative standpoint then should consider not just a traumatic event or action that presents itself superficially in a visual and aural sense within a script or on screen, but the deeper resonances and trauma that it may uncover or speak to not only for the audience but the screenwriter as well.

INDUSTRIAL CONTEXTS

Prior to embarking on writing the *Short Film Project* (2006) I had been hired to write a feature film biopic project for a producer based in the UK and US. The project contract had been established though my agent at the time. This project however ultimately stalled due to contractual issues, so when an opportunity to collaborate with a friend, the *Director* arose, I decided to keep it as a side project without my agent becoming involved. This in hindsight was clearly a mistake and left me wholly exposed and vulnerable to being exploited. I just did not consider this as a scenario from a then trusted friend. The idea was mooted to the *Director*, who liked it a lot and we agreed to develop it together. The *Director* had begun to establish himself as a successful director of short films. This was an exciting opportunity to develop or creative collaboration on a joint project that would be developed as a feature film. Through regional film funding, secured by his producer we set out a schedule to develop and deliver a feature film screenplay in late 2004. The *Director* and I would meet up for weekends in Nottingham and work on the project in the day and then consume films in the evenings. This was always a productive and rewarding process as we are both hypercritical

and share a similar creative sensibility. We trusted each other and would work on the documents without becoming precious or defensive. The project reached several drafts of treatment and step outline all supported by funding. The *Director* also workshopped constructed narrative scenarios with actors which I wrote to help with casting and the story possibilities. At no point in this positive collaborative stage did I fear or suspect betrayal or possessiveness of ideas or elements that would constitute the collaborative whole. As stated earlier the development of the idea was based upon an adult being confronted by a minor and recognising that they now had responsibilities and must consider consequences for their actions. This was the focus of the story centred around the father, which I had also just recently become. The father was the protagonist for the story, my own perspective essentially. It would explore how he felt emasculated before a child and had to wrestle with the impulses of being irresponsible versus the expectations and responsibilities of being a father and acting responsibly as an adult. To amplify these frustrations in the father and for clarity, the teenage son was introduced to the story, still uninhibited by adult responsibilities, and as counterpoint to the responsible position the father would occupy. The original story of the *Short Film Project* (2006) was pitched and developed as a feature film where the focus would lie upon all aspects of the father, his relationships, his responsibilities, and societal standing. The feature film would develop the characters of the father and son focusing on their fears of emasculation and bullying inflicted upon them by a local youth. The father would reluctantly become involved in an altercation with a youth and in failing to respond physically or aggressively the story would progress and complicate. The excerpt below is from the original treatment I cowrote with the *Director*. For reference Dean is the son, Robert the father, and Nathan is the bully:

Dean gets into a scrap with one of the boys, popping him one in the ear. Robert tries to break it up and Nathan pulls him away, popping nearly all of his shirt buttons to reveal his unthreatening paunch. One of the boys is filming the whole thing on his mobile phone. Nathan offers Robert out for a fight, shoving him and telling him to fuck off before he kicks off. Robert has no idea how to handle the situation and Dean can see it. Robert pulls Dean away and the mob jeer and spit at their retreat. Robert is silent and shaking.

(*Director & Mathews* 2004: 3)

From this initial altercation the father character of Robert was to be further bullied by the teenager, Nathan. The story developed as a feature film focused specifically on the father and son negotiating the landscape of responsibility and conduct. This was set in direct conflict with the teenager Nathan, who could operate largely with impunity. The process of ascribing or acknowledging credit was initially not an issue. All early development documents for the project were credited as written by the *Director* and Phil Mathews. The creative relationship was challenging enjoyable and ambitious. We worked intensely and effectively on the project together, however all was not as synergistic or magnanimous as I had assumed as I will recount.

A GENTLE REJECTION

The *Director* had experienced several successes across international film festivals up to this point and was in the running to apply the UK Film Council's Cinema Extreme Scheme. This scheme offered £50,000 to directors or writer/directors to produce a short film as a springboard to direct feature films. For the *Director* this was an opportunity not to miss as it was a substantial uplift to the budgets he was used to dealing with and gave both of us the

potential to launch the project as a feature film as intended. In early 2006 I had become a father and moved to a new city for an expanded academic post, so I was stretched. I was still travelling up to Nottingham to collaborate with the *Director* as we aimed for a deadline of summer that year for the feature film screenplay. In 2006 on a visit to Nottingham and in an almost passing comment, the *Director* stated that the cinema extreme opportunity was going to happen however he had no script and there was no time to write something new. The *Director* suggested he would use the first act of the feature film as the story for the submission. The *Director* said it would be an opportunity to test out the project and would benefit us both in gaining exposure and momentum for the feature film version of the story. I asked if I could be involved, however the *Director* said the scheme was set up to support singular writer/directors. He claimed there was no opportunity for collaboration or co-authorship. Back to the familiar creative trope of favouring a 'Continued preference for the concept of romantic author' (LaFrance 2022: 442). Given my longstanding relationship of over ten years with the *Director* by that time, I had no reason to dismiss or argue against his position and can recall that I did not. I felt stunned and isolated, a return to Lifton's 'psychic closing off' (Lifton 1991: 33). I don't remember challenging the *Director* or the producer further as we were all keen to build our careers and the producer was in support of the *Director*. They were a formidable partnership with a plan that now excluded my input. I had also regrettably developed the project away from my agent in hope of avoiding potential contractual entanglements. Silly me, the lone writer isolated and vulnerable as Conor recognizes 'Screenwriters have always and continue to be inherently individualized and atomized in the experiences of their working lives.' (Conor 2010: 37). I was left with the trauma of betrayal. Not the trauma of violence or threat, just a matter-of-fact concession that I was now superfluous to needs. No room creatively for my involvement in the project. In

identifying this event, the following assertion by McMillan & Ramirez (2016) resonates ‘Is trauma not the outcome of some presence of inequality?’ (McMillan, Ramirez 2016: 448).

EMPTY SUCCESS

Late into the summer of 2006, the director moved through the directing of the *Short Film Project* (2006) and then immediately into his first feature film with an original screenplay secured by his producer. The feature film bombed financially and critically; however, the *Short Film Project* (2006) went from strength to strength. It was nominated won no less than thirty-eight highly prestigious international prizes. I did not receive a writer’s credit on the project or any mention at all. Peter Bradshaw of the Guardian wrote ‘The film was not merely about violence but about something deeper, darker, more unsayable: a fear of our children, and older people’s fear and hatred of the young.’ (Bradshaw *The Guardian* 2007). Here Bradshaw recognizes the deeper theme located beyond the immediate violence depicted on screen. Bradshaw suggests that it is about fear and hatred of the young which is only partially accurate. The fear is not irrational or based on age per se as much as it is based upon the inverse power dynamic that responsible adults recognize as they leave irresponsible childhood behind. The perceived hierarchies of power that adults hold over children in terms of size, strength and authority becomes more liminal through teenage years, but it is not just about physical dominance whether literal or implied. The theme that resonated for me was in the recognition of responsibility, both on an individual and a societal level. As an individual I would argue that my own moral or ethical compass was the marker that inhibited me from using physical strength to enact anything beyond defence in a situation of threat or violence. Integrating into society as a responsible adult is what the story was grappling with. In my subjective opinion, the *Short Film Project* (2006) is an affecting film, well directed and edited, also by the *Director*, that captures the intentions we had to manifest those fears and

tensions between aggression, restraint and responsibility. For me the character dilemma was about adulthood requiring restraint versus childhood facilitating impunity. As an alumni of Parker's (1999) UK based Masters in screenwriting programme I was an advocate of the aspiration that:

Screenwriting like all forms of creativity, is about communicating with other human beings and with yourself. In order for this process to work and be sustained, there has to be something to communicate, and you need to know what it is to make the screenplay work.

(Parker 1999: 213)

Parker's (1999) point here resonates for me in the form of creative communication. For screenwriters clearly the screenplay is the form, and the recognition of leaving my childhood behind brought into focus by the confrontation with the child, was effectively framed and contextualized through a screen idea that I developed in response. My own and vicariously the character of the father's inability to retaliate physically was the central theme that occupied me creatively. The expression of this anxiety in turn resonated with audiences through the *Short Film Project* (2006). Although in the short film version a shortened resolution was formulated by way of the son character enacting violence in retaliation to violence. This ending suited the form in resolving the tension and narrative succinctly. Within the feature film version of the story the intention was to explore and push the father character to react and enact violence, but ultimately to resist. It would have been a difficult and emotionally mature response, my response, but perhaps anticlimactic and against the norm of narratives that opt for revenge in response to antisocial behaviour. This is still the prevalent norm with the John Wick series (2014 – 2023) being just one of many examples.

With the success of the *Short Film Project* (2006) internationally, the feature film version of the project was now according to the *Director* not viable, as it risked being seen as a rehash. In that one sentence the end of the project's life was delivered as obvious and inevitable. The result I had to process, and bear was a comprehensive creative career crash, without consolation and without creative recognition. What then occurred over time, was a growing frustration, a niggle, an itch. As time moved on, I was unable to. Unable to resolve or reconcile my frustrations with my perceived injustice. However, the fact remained I had backed down to the pre-teen and I had backed down to my friend and creative collaborator. Communicating a traumatic event was not sufficient to address my response to it in terms of healing or therapeutic effect. My initial response had been repeated in a less confrontational situation however, the ramifications were far more devastating in hindsight.

CONFRONTING THE BETRAYAL

One evening a few years later after an amicable creative phone conversation about another project the *Director* wanted help on, I fretted for a few hours and then determined to ring him back and confront the betrayal. This was around one a.m. I could not settle, and I knew he would be up. I composed myself as best I could and asked why he had never thought to credit me on the *Short Film Project* (2006) or to involve me in the project in any way after the commission? He stated that he did not believe it was the same project, without expanding upon this assertion, so I persisted. The same title, the same theme, the same story, the same genre, the same scenes the same everything apart from the form. The project we had written together was a feature film and the *Short Film Project* (2006) was not, but it was to all intents and purposes a straight lift of the first act. The *Director* did not agree. He had created it, he had written and directed it. The argument that cinema extreme was exclusively for

writer/directors was also false as I had since discovered that a writer director team were commissioned for the scheme in the same year. He claimed he did not know about that but had nothing further to say. He did then question why I had not raised any of this earlier? I had to admit that I did not want to confront the fact that he had betrayed me, betrayed our creative partnership, and betrayed our friendship. His tone was conciliatory however, he was adamant that he had not betrayed me. Not responsible for any of those things I had accused him of. There was not much more to say. I had finally mustered the courage to challenge him four years after the fact, and he had flatly and calmly denied any wrongdoing. The conversation ended cordially but nothing was truthfully resolved. Not long after the *Director* sent me an upbeat email in expectation of developing a new project with him as follows:

looking through our old treatment, there was so much good stuff in there. either way, let us know when you've read this so we can devise a plan of some sort, then lets write the best story in the world.

(Director, 2010 E-mail to Phil Mathews, 21 April)

I can't remember now if I simply stopped responding or claimed I was too busy. I never worked with him again. In many ways this is the epicentre of the emotional and residual impact for me. The loss of a creative partnership that was ambitious and challenging. The *Director* still to this day contacts me with new projects he would like to collaborate on, to which I politely decline. I also take little comfort in the fact his career never ascended to such recognition or accolades after our collaborations ended. It is now enshrined in history that the *Short Film Project* (2006) is exclusively his idea. As part of the response to my own loss of credit and in wishing to avoid my students experiencing the same frustrations, I commissioned a literary agent to draft a screenwriter's contract agreement that could be used

by students in any collaborations with directors. This document is still used to this day. This speaks directly to the writer director relationship with a view to addressing tensions and poor practices. These measures and my personal account are of course precautionary and not emblematic of most creative collaborations. Creative collaboration can be one of the true unbounded joys of screenwriting.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the question of whether I was able to process and resolve trauma through creative practice? I do not believe so. Cooper & Lilyea, (2022) caution against simple resolutions offering that ‘Sometimes it is in that tension where the most important meanings can be found.’. (Cooper, Lilyea 2022: 202). Revisiting and framing traumatic experiences firstly through creative practice and now through autoethnography, has afforded me the opportunity to communicate the experiences and reflect further. If the screenplay was a creative response to the traumatic encounter with the child, then this article is a creative response to the traumatic encounter with the *Director*. The process of bringing an autoethnographic approach to the understanding of what transpired has been challenging, illuminating and the closest I have come to recognition of my responses. I still cannot lay claim to any psychological healing or catharsis. In both situations I employed Lifton’s (1991) ‘psychic closing off.’. Therefore, it can be argued in my experience that revisiting a traumatic event through creative practice did nothing to directly manifest change in my behaviour. When presented with a different encounter, yet one that essentially echoed the former my reaction was the same. The implication is that nothing had been understood sufficiently to be corrected. It is often the case that a screenwriter produces work located around similar or consistent themes. Charlie Kaufman’s work which often focuses on characters who desire

control and struggle to let go. The character of Joel in *The eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* (2004) and the character of Caden in *Synecdoche New York* (2008). Here then is a potential fillip to the creative struggles of grappling with trauma in screenwriting and hoping to find some catharsis. An answer may be that this is not the point. The creative process and the communication of those experiences through screenwriting is to offer stories and perspectives and no more. The harder work of addressing trauma, and processing patterns of behaviour is rightly beyond the scope of screenwriting practice. The work of Dalley (1984), Jennings (1994) and Langley (2006) take great pains to separate the assumed symbiosis of creativity and therapy. However, with that said, if the practice of screenwriting offers up a tool or artefact for further examination should one wish, then perhaps that is enough. It is then on final reflection acceptable for creative practice and research to be embraced as part of a wider healing process. Just a very tiny part.

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