Drama is Conflict.
Every filmmaker knows this truism well. Most films revolve around a conflict situation.

Those of us that teach screen production in academia are also aware that conflict in student projects is often based on some personal trauma.

How are we to deal with these traumatic narratives as supervisors?

In this paper we offer three perspectives on this question along with one detailed example.

1. For some students trauma provides the very reason for the story. Filmmakers that belong to marginal social groups are a good case in point. Trauma associated with marginal social existence is most often the driving force for stories in this genre. Students in this group come to us as a gale force wind and may well leave us feeling that there is little we can do for them as supervisors except to behold the unfolding of their stories. Such students tend to be rare in academia.

2. For most students, trauma is the reason why a story cannot be told. We recognize these students in our workshops by their blockages, silences and avoidance of narratives. They often present themselves in scriptwriting classes as having little to say even when the trauma in question is evident to all. It is tempting to think that, as supervisors, we can unlock these personal blockages and uncover the underlying writing potential. In this perspective scriptwriting classes could be considered as therapeutical sessions which bring healing and comfort to the suffering scriptwriter-to-be. The only problem with this scenario is that screen production supervisors are generally not analysts and, for many good reasons, should not act as if they are analysts.

3. There is yet another group of students for whom the urge to speak their personal trauma is as evident as their attempts to generalise it. We recognized these students, by their need to tell their story, on the one hand, and by their tendency to find trauma everywhere, on the other hand. Students in this category present us with stories that contain most imaginative and creative transformations around some personal trauma invoking negations/ inversions, double negations, displacements and symbolic transformations.
Any transformation of their personal trauma will be embraced as will any other trauma. So much so that life itself could be considered as personal trauma.

The notion that life itself is a trauma – implicitly or explicitly – is a most interesting proposition that rings true on many levels. The mystery of death has been an unceasing source of human anguish. Death has always been our primary definition of loss and of trauma associated with it – as is evident in our burial ceremonies, temples and pyramids. Trauma of this fundamental type can be considered as the empty centre of every language – the absence that forever seeks ways and means of expressing itself. Trauma in this perspective is beyond the language and to an extent beyond representation. This however has never stopped us talking about death or trauma – endlessly.

Sentiments of this kind find a theoretical resonance in the existential notion of “Nothingness” as well as in the existential notion that death underpins all our meaning. Freud’s Nirvana Principle, or Death Principle (Thanatos), which will be invoked in this paper, is yet another interesting theoretical scheme that places trauma as the primary dynamo of human development.

Trauma, in this perspective, is a positive term. It forms the core of storyteller’s creativity. Personal trauma becomes a stepping-stone to a more interesting understanding of trauma that is both creative and enlightening. Trauma sufferers may undergo a transformation and discover themselves afresh. The personal trauma becomes a trigger to something new rather than something that needs to be buried and forgotten.

Students in this category do not come to their supervisors to be healed but to be given a theoretical springboard for their creativity. An example of one such student-supervisor engagement is outline below.

In the following re-enactment the authors of this paper perform an actual case of supervision involving a series of traumas within a psychoanalytic tradition. J (Jay) is the supervisor while Owen performs as O – the student under Jay’s supervision.
SESSION 1: DREADLOCKS

O: Hey Jay.

J: Hi O! It is good to see you again. Do come in. (Jocular)
Just let me get my scissors while you sit down and we can then cut the dreadlocks from
this dog tail beard of yours!

O: No! I need to keep it for the time being.

J: It is good to have you back in the program again.

O: It is good to be here again. It has been a while.

J: More than 10 years! It only seems like yesterday. You did some impressive work then. I
still recall it vividly: Buyers of Benetton, Terminal Sorrow ...the pregnant women
dancing. How can one forget!

How are the children – G, N? N must be 11 like M?

O: They are really good. G is an amazing actor and N is my travel buddy. I see them
regularly. There were some problems for a while ... And with you? How is M?

J: M is great. He lives in Canberra with his mum now but I get to see him every holiday...
And you; you have been teaching for a while now. Do you still retain your links with
technology?

O: No not really.

J: I thought we had lost you to technology for a while. You had the market for Casablanca
non-linear editors cornered it seemed. We called you Mr Casablanca and we were going
to give you an honorary degree of some sort for some generous endowment from you.
We could have called it the Casablanca Endowment. I thought it would be a most fitting
title for a film school endowment.... But then you disappeared.
O: Yeah. That is all pretty much over.

J: Do you still keep in touch with your old editing partner R? He seems to be very busy these days from what I hear.

O: I see him now and then, but I have been pretty much out of circulation. Life’s been pretty weird, Jay.

J: Well now that we’ve got you back let us find some worthwhile project for you to work on. Your knowledge of technology and computers is most fortuitous as computer generated effects and IT are all the rage. So let us find you some spectacular IT challenge and get you going on your program. What do you say?

O: Jay, I think I am over that stage of my life, if I ever was really in it. My engagement with technology was really just a means to an end. I’m actually interested in doing something closer to human beings and human values.

J: I am happy to hear that and share your sentiments. I usually start off with students by reminding them of prevailing fashions and intrinsic strengths... or perceived strength it seems in this case. What kind of human-interest story did you have in mind?

O: I don’t know exactly but I think I want to explore something to do with Muslims. We’ve demonised them so much, especially Indonesians, but I often find them to be people of real joy and happiness. It is certainly not what I see in our own culture.

J: This is indeed an interesting topic. The newspapers are full of it. I cannot believe what we are doing in Iraq. But how and where exactly are you hoping to anchor your search for a story?

O: Well, I was hoping to do something in South East Asia; Indonesia, Sumatra. Perhaps I could go there to make a film.

J: Indonesia a great place. As you know I took a group of students to Indonesia in 1991. What story would you like to work on?
O: I am not sure yet. I was hoping to find an angle by talking about it with you. Something I could write about in academic terms.

J: Do you speak Bahasa?

O: No, I don’t. Not at all. I think I just want to connect with ordinary people and language may not be such a great problem.

J: Is there someone you are going to team up with?

O: I have some friends up there but I wasn’t really planning to team up with them.

J: Is there a topic you wish to pursue or someone authoritative on the topic of your choice? Ideally someone that is living in the area you wish to investigate.

O: Not specifically. It is a broad kind of interest. It could be about their family lifestyle and culture.

J: Have you been reading about their history and culture?

O: Not really, I find that these things don’t matter all that much in personal interactions.

J: What can I say to this? What topic should we look for here? His journey seems like a simple displacement to another time and another place. Displacing what? Something, or some problem? Forgetting about it or taking it somewhere where the problem is unrecognisable? What problem? We need to find out the dynamo of this displacement if this story is to move.

J: OK Owen, it seems to me that the best thing to do is for you to jot down a number of topics that may be of interest to you and then we can talk again. Write as much as you wish but I would recommend that you begin with one script idea you wish to do here in the culture that you know well. We need to identify your thematic interest in-depth and we can best do that with the circumstances you know best. We can then see how the Indonesia topic and Islam fits in.
J. The Islamic family script seems like an antidote to all that has happened to him. This may not be surprising following the breakdown of his relationship. He speaks softly but one wonders if there is anger behind this. If so, how can we deal with it in a script?

If this is the cause behind his journey to Sumatra where does this displacement lead him? Forward or backward in time? Forward to confront the problem he has encountered and to find a solution for it? Or backward in time and in this way avoid the confrontation with the problem if the problem is insurmountable? If this is so I should look for a displacement backward in time towards some safe place, to the careless nostalgia of the childhood Imaginary to start with.

This again brings me to my tried and true thesis for artists and creative writers. But the theory will have to be given piecemeal and at the right time. Next time?

SESSION 2: CASABLANCA

THE PARK

O: Life was very difficult for me post marriage. Suicide was not an option because I had to be here for my children, whom I dearly loved. I found myself considering the appeal of life on the streets. The idea presented the temptation to retreat to a no paperwork, no responsibility community of like minded people who had surrendered a certain kind of struggle. It was strangely enticing, but once again, this would not help my children.

In 2003 my kids and I began having lunch on a weekly basis with people who inhabit the streets of North Perth. It was here that I escaped the pain of ‘real life’. Our weekly gathering grew into quite a community and created a sense of personal reconciliation with some Indigenous Australians as well as a building of friendship with Middle Eastern Muslim refugees. I have enjoyed the company of many different people and shared many stories of struggle and mateship.
These barbecues became the most peaceful and relaxing part of my week for quite some time. By engaging in an open, sincere and caring manner, with people I should culturally be at odds with; a situation has been created where I could confidently walk through Hyde Park at any time of day or night and someone would come to my rescue if I were to come into any kind of trouble. I may not have been able to reconcile with my ex wife, but at least I had reconciled with someone, and besides, I felt safe and appreciated.

J: Owen, I read the writing you sent me and we should now try to find a focus in it that we could develop further. We can develop the homeless and refugees story. What do we want to say about them? Or rather what would you like to say about them? There is a slightly religious tone when you speak of these situations in which case it could be something with a Salvation Army appeal.

O: Let me try and explain. I want to communicate how important my family was to me and how lost I felt when my family disintegrated. I was desperate. I needed something to replace the human bonds that family gave me previously. This is what I found in the park. I used to go there and talk to these people that no one wanted to talk to, only to find out how interesting they were. It is not to say that they were simply interesting or simply good. They had their good days and bad days like the rest of us. But it was interesting to discover that it was just that! Good days and bad days…like anyone else. Sure, in some cases their bad days had to do with excesses of drinks, drugs, or petty theft. But soon these judgments disappeared as I got to know them and they got to know me.
These people became family. I was interested in their problems and they were interested in my problems as I might be with someone in my own family. My kids embraced them too and often it would be N or G who, at the ages of 7 and 12, would approach a mob sitting under a tree and ask if they wanted to join us for lunch.

J: (jocular) Is that when you started putting dreadlocks in your beard? Keeping up with the local fashions?

OK let us think about this. There are two ways of approaching this. Either we focus on your story or on their story. It seems to me at the moment that your script concept has more to do with your needs and your search for a family. This would be a more authentic way of approaching your script concept in the first instance, rather than think about Sumatra or homeless friends. Maybe we should explore this further over a coffee.

J. Over a coffee he told me his story again. She was his soul mate, his song mate. I recall that she had a past of her own. We worked together on this in Blossom. I had assumed that they were both saved; that they had saved one another, but it must have all unravelled. It seems this unravelling had to do with more dramatic stories that led back to her childhood; more trauma and complications. It was the usual stuff, enough to put her off men. But it seems that he was the one left alone in the wash. There was now another woman with her, he said. He felt diminished in the eyes of his children, he said. For a while, G pushed him away. He felt hurt and powerless. But slowly this too is now getting resolved. N was always by his side.

Is this what his homeless people story is all about?

He seems direct and spontaneous. Is anything hidden here? So, why the journey and displacement? Why Sumatra?

J: Owen, when is the first time you went to the tropics? In reality or in your imagination?
O: The first time I went to the tropics was when I was born. My father was a teacher on an island off the south coast of New Guinea and the whole family lived there. These were happy times.

J: So this story does go backward, as I hypothesized. Backward towards ground zero, toward the childhood Imaginary to start with. Is this his core melody? His song? Is this where the resolution to his script problems lie – in the enchantment of images that speak outside words, music rhythm, rhyme enchantment, intoxication soothing the pain that is in his life?

J: This is an interesting story. Can you make sure you write it down and send it to me before we meet again?

J: How useful is this move backward to the point where memory stops and dissolves? I am approaching his Imaginary nostalgia as something that illuminates his problem but in my thesis this is the “solution” that all of us embrace. We all need our daily opium of images.

DID I MENTION ACEH?

O: You know, I’ve been working on a film I shot during my last trip to Indonesia. It was after the Boxing Day tsunami hit Aceh. Can I show it to you?

J: His words came unexpectedly and as a complete surprise. It was like a turning point in a script when everything that has happened until then stops and has to be considered anew. It left me unguarded and incredulous except to note that it was his second connection to the SE Asia.

J: Of course I would like to see it. What were you doing in Aceh?

O: I went there to help. A friend from Indonesia called me on my mobile after the tsunami. I still remember the moment. I was standing alone in a shopping centre during the festive season, surrounded by happy shoppers and holiday makers. I wondered what I was even doing there when I received a call from my Indonesian friend T. She told me about
some orphans in a town called Meulaboh and asked me if there was anything I could do. That question messed with me. Of course there was something I could do – I live in the wealthy West. I couldn’t answer ‘no’ with any kind of authenticity or integrity. I would get there, or I would die trying. I bought tickets which took me to Jakarta and then made my way to Aceh. I got there without speaking a word of Bahasa.

In many ways it was an exercise in vulnerability, since I didn’t speak their language and they didn’t speak mine. I was completely at their mercy and they looked after me at every step along the way, showing me great hospitality and care.

I’m now going to use this film to raise awareness of some of the needs in Meulaboh and to raise money for bikes to help some kids get to school.

J. He showed me his short 15 minute film. It starts with a Digital Globe image of Banda Aceh before the Boxing Day devastation, which is then dissolved quickly over the image of Banda Aceh after the devastation. The images then slowly move into close ups of bloated human flotsam as the Jingle Bell song washes over all of these gruesome images of death. The contrast was crushing and unbearably poignant, almost obscene – death and destruction of lives, families and communities accompanied by the Jingle Bells tune – an anthem of family happiness. Whose family? His or theirs? Both? It does not take much analysis to work out the dynamo of this cathartic combination that compelled him to travel to Sumatra.

If he carried a family catastrophe within him then here in Aceh he could see a family catastrophe staring him in the face like a mirror. Here was a visible manifestation of everything he had until then endured taken to its devastating limit.
The symmetry of internal and external anguish must have been in place already on Boxing Day when he could see the biggest catastrophe that the human family has endured in our living memory splashed on screens all around him accompanied by the sounds of Christmas. All that was needed for this inside and outside anguish to fuse together was a single call he received in the shopping centre. He may not have recognized at that time that these images of grief could also be an expression of his own life, but I have no doubt that he must have felt it. Sharing grief is visceral. You don’t have to think about it. You just feel it and it is this feeling that moves us to tears. These feelings are evident in his production; in the small inconsistencies and slippage which draw one’s attention. The early images of death and devastation were followed by prolonged images of a journey across Indonesia. These travelling shots from a vehicle were accompanied by an ambiguous solo tune creating almost a musical video clip effect: His characteristic musical signature.

The words were undecipherable but following the earlier images of death this musical interlude had a slightly jarring feeling as if the journey itself was becoming a story. And yet, this journey was his journey and this Aceh story was his story.

I wondered if other viewers would recognize clearly, if they did not know any of his personal details, his voice which was all too clear to me. By all accounts he found it difficult to deal with the unhappiness in his own life and this external catastrophe was tangible. Something could be done about it. He rushed to help. Action. Nothing was going to stop him. He observed the people in Aceh overcome their grief. Compassion. He observed their life begin anew. Hope. He observed the children play and laugh again. Healing. He made a film after many years of grief. Renewal. He then returned here to resume his studies. Creativity.
He said he wanted to give the people of Aceh a voice and had made an effort to silence his own. I said his was the only voice I could hear and that the film mirrored his own journey. I asked him to write as much as he could about the journey he had been on and the production process to date.

J: Owen we now also need to start framing your scriptwriting with some theoretical reading. I would like you to start reading about Jacques Lacan. He is considered by most as writing in psychoanalytic traditions. This is not to suggest that this tradition is a correct one or the only one worth pursuing, but Lacan does give us an interesting toolbox by which to approach images and the way we relate to image. In the first instances Lacan tells us that images in the exteriority are connected to who we are. He would say that in certain circumstances we are the image. I would like you to read about the early stages of development he describes as the Order of the Imaginary. He may give us an angle of how to deal with your Sumatra Journey, which in your case may also be your New Guinea journey.

O: He spoke in fairly abstract concepts about some of the theoretical aspects that I should start to consider. He also did numerous sketches. It all made some sense at the time, but I’m not sure I really understood what he was saying.
Lacan says “the words [we] use mean more than [we] mean in using them” (Leader, D. Groves, J., 2005, p. 59), and I think this was very evident from time to time. I misunderstood him and he misunderstood me. These misunderstandings were familiar territory though, and I had confidence that we would eventually come to a point of mutual understanding.

Besides suggesting I read Lacan, he mentioned something about my vulnerability in Aceh being not unlike a rebirth, in that I was not only dependent on those around me but was even without language to a large extent. He also suggested I watch a TV program that was showing soon, on altruism, because it was about people who went to the tsunami affected areas to help. He was right about rebirth; there was a profound sense of a new life being kick started, and I came across the idea of rebirth in a number of my readings later in the program.

The Kindness of Strangers (Skirving, 2006) was also interesting and I spent a few weeks looking into altruist theory. It was really helpful at a personal level, but perhaps a little tangential.

I started reading Lacan. Meanwhile, during December and January, with my son, N, I once again headed for Aceh, this time equipped with my laptop and a backpack loaded with books. N and I delivered about 270 bikes to kids in Meulaboh on Boxing Day 2006 – the second anniversary of the tsunami, the mother of all traumas – in my lifetime at least. This brought a sense of personal closure for me. This had been a deeply satisfying adventure.

We then took time in Lake Toba where I was able to focus on my reading. From there we moved on to Cambodia, where I shot a documentary for an organization that works with vulnerable women and kids. Finally, we settled into a seaside town called Kampong Saom. N swam and played with street kids while I drank coconut juice and read Lacan.
I found the reading really hard going, having to read it over and over, taking copious amounts of notes. It had been over a decade since I had even heard of Lacan and it was slow sinking in. The friendly people and beautiful places helped ease my re-entry to the world of academia.

**SESSION 3: LETTER TO EROS**

O: **REFLECTING ON LACAN  The Mirror Phase (or Stage)**

Lacan’s mirror phase refers to a “particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt” (Lacan, 1977, p. 4). According to Lacan, the mirror phase happens somewhere between six and eighteen months of age; at a time when a child is uncoordinated, vulnerable and insufficient. During the mirror phase the infant finds coherence in the image of itself, or of others it identifies with. This identification could be seen as an example of captation; “a process in which an object in the external world (most frequently another person) so ‘captivates’ the subject that it becomes a component in that subject’s self image” (Zuern, 1998).

The mirror phase is a time of empowerment; as the infant sees others doing things, it learns by imitation. My own mother recounts the story of my brother’s first steps. As soon as he saw his twin sister stand up and walk, he did also. The mirror phase is also a time of alienation, as the world around us dictates who we become. It could also be useful in understanding empathy and vicarious trauma, since “if I am in the place of another child, when he’s struck, I will cry. If he wants something, I’ll want it too” (Leader, 2005, p. 22).
This identification with an other happens in what Lacan calls the imaginary register, “emphasizing the importance of the visual” (Leader, D. Groves, J., 2005, p. 22). To see Lacan’s infant as analogous with the cinema spectator is reasonably straightforward, and subsequently the mirror phase became “widely adopted by theorists in order to explain the psychological experience of film spectators who ‘lose’ themselves in narrative film” (Kronberger, 2000, p. 21). Jay had used Lacan’s Imaginary Order to draw links between cinematic experience and indigenous trance practices:

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A \text{ child in an Imaginary relationship with the world [existing] neither here nor there but as a conflation of both – as a synthesis of here and there. One could describe this Imaginary symbiosis (in which the child has limited control) as possession of a kind. Perhaps one could even say that the child is in a trance (Petkovic, 1994, p. 15).}
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O: When I went to see Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers (Jackson, 2002) the cinema was jam-packed. I found myself sitting front row centre. Here awaited my portal to another world; as the big screen engulfed me I was completely lost; as were my real world problems, traumas, challenges, forms to fill in, schedules, relationships. Here, the “dissolving of the distinction between here and there, audience/screen, actuality/fiction” was most complete (Petkovic, 1994). Three hours later, I was spat back into the real world, but the experience of another existence came with me. I felt revived. Since then, I have often chosen the front row, simply for the all consuming experience, the escape, that cinema offers.

O: We identify with characters in films in a ‘mirror phase kind of way’ all the time. Characters like Travis in Paris Texas (Wenders , 1984), Karol in Three Colours White (Kieslowski, 1994), and Parry in The Fisher King (Gilliam, 1991) come to mind. As I look back, I realize they all lost their wives – in very different ways – and also experienced a real sense of rebirth and renewal.
I came back to Perth feeling like I was beginning to understand a portion of Lacan. I had found him very challenging in many ways but had connected aspects of my own journey with the mirror phase. The mirror phase seemed to explain my identification with various on-screen characters as well as the tsunami victims I had seen on television.

J: Owen, until now we have used Lacan to tell us how images outside ourselves tell us something about what we feel inside. We have talked about how this informs our viewing of cinema and how we identify with those we see on the screen. We should also note that Lacan attributed this type of mirror development to the early stages of childhood and that subsequently we abandon this way of relating with the world and use words instead. We think in words, we plan with words, we love and aspire in words, we define ourselves in words as rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, man or woman etc. But the sense of Imaginary unity remains dormant within us nevertheless and according to me it is evidently present within artists and visual artists in particular.

If we abandon words then the Imaginary realm unfolds for us and in the first instance this realm will lead us backward towards the intense imagery of the childhood. This movement back in time need not stop here with the Imaginary realm. According to an obscure and controversial theory of Freud each individual’s consciousness has a pathway that leads us backward in time to non-existence. He called this pathway drive Thanatos – the death instinct. The mechanism that he used to explains all this is trauma. Trauma always encapsulates a memory of what existed before we encountered trauma and it is this return to time before trauma that defines the backward move for Freud. In your story it is possible to see a whole series of traumas. These are in fact your most intense memories.

So let us do some time travelling. Can you write something about these memories that encapsulate your primary traumas. Can you also find out all about the Nirvana Principle that is Freud’s Death Instinct, Thanatos.
SESSION 4: HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

O: SETTING THE SCENE – Beginning in Papua New Guinea

I was born on a small, tropical Island called Daru, off the south coast of Papua New Guinea, in 1964. I don’t remember it, as we moved to Port Moresby when I was very young. I do, however, remember much of my seven years in Port Moresby as a paradise of tropical weather; mangoes, pawpaws and bananas, playing in the rain, swimming in warm water, catching fish, exploring the neighbourhood and living a life free of worry. Somewhat adventurous, I was oblivious to what the rest of my family was doing, but I knew I was dearly loved and cared for and I never felt unsafe. One day, I hope to take a runabout from far north Queensland to revisit Daru and retrace my mother’s walk from the house to the hospital to give birth.

Since coming to Australia in 1972, I have always wanted to return to Papua New Guinea, but have not had the opportunity. As a twelve-year-old boy, I saw film footage of the surf and village at Lugundri Bay, Nias – a mysterious island off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia. Something inside of me jumped; here was a place that I could play in the rain again, and enjoy the fruit and freedom of tropical, coastal life. I haven’t been there, yet. As a teenager and in my early twenties I pursued an idealistic life of music, surf and travel. Designing wetsuits facilitated travel to great waves in Victoria and California. I think I pretty much always cared, and as part of the surf culture I would pick up grommets (young surfers) who had left home at a young age to live by the sea and give them a good feed once a week. Playing music opened up further opportunities to travel and to have something of a voice concerning what I saw in the world around me. During my BA years at Murdoch University, I found a place of empowerment in video production, being able to produce music videos as further expression of my frustration and questioning of the world around me.

*Buyers of Benetton* was my first real video production, questioning the racist, exploitative, capitalist ideologies dominant in my world.
In 1990 I married, and in 1991 we had our first beautiful baby – a girl we named G Holliday. In 1996 we had N Jimmy and began to raise a fairytale family.

Then somewhere along the line my world ended. It was as if all atomic bombs went off at once and destroyed the entire world.

There’s no point trying to describe it in words. I can only circle around it, describe it by degrees, by comparison. I will try.

Eleven years ago, on a morning like any other, a close friend of mine took to his family with a screwdriver and hammer. He hurt them. Alarm was raised and when he heard police sirens, he jumped into his car and led them on a high-speed chase. The chase took them from Geelong to the Great Ocean Road, where he pulled over beside the ocean and drank a bottle of battery acid. He died, roadside, at one of his favourite surf spots, clutching a photo of him and his wife on their wedding day. I was his best man.

Ten years ago, a close friend came down with a Leukaemia that pretty much no one survives. I went to Melbourne to say goodbye and shortly after I left the doctors gave him an hour or two to live. He didn’t die. Today he tours the world playing music, on a walking stick, with bags for his bowels and bladder, and about 30% vision remaining after the damage the cancer has done.

Around the same time, my sister was also diagnosed with advanced Melanoma. She died nine months later, after an incredibly painful and somehow hopeless fight. As I arrived on my bicycle for my morning visit, my mother ran out crying, “come and say goodbye to your sister”. I kissed her goodbye and she died.
Six years ago, my wife drove down the driveway to be with her lesbian lover. This was ten times more painful than kissing my sister goodbye. I loved my wife dearly and had persevered eleven years hoping certain things would blow over; they didn’t blow over, they blew away. My children were devastated, and I tried to rebuild a new life for them. I took on teaching so I could be with them in holidays, moved house and did all I could to care for them. This was literally the end of my world as I loved it – to nearly quote Michael Stype of REM fame (Stype, 1987).

Three and a half years ago, my father had strange stomach pains. He soon died from Pancreatic Cancer after an agonizing struggle. I had struck up a relationship with a woman at this time and was deeply infatuated with her. She had recently gone to Tasmania to study and couldn’t take me ‘needing’ her at the time of my dad’s death, so hung up on me during a long-distance telephone call the day he died, never to speak with me again.

Three years ago, I was diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and tried various therapies which helped or didn’t help in varying degrees.

O: **INTRODUCING THANATOS**

In a phrase, Thanatos, otherwise known as the Death drive, is a drive to return to a previous state. Its name can be somewhat misleading, in that it conjures images of destruction, aggression and suicide. THANATOS does include aggressive impulses, but these are generally associated with self-preservation, so may in fact be considered conservative by nature. The theory, being based on the idea that we have a drive or desire to return to a previous state, when taken to its logical conclusion, means reverting to a state of non-life, or death – hence the name ‘Death Drive’.

Opposite to Thanatos is Eros, the drive for life and pleasure, which through sex results in the perpetuation of our species. While Eros would seek adventure and excitement, the conservative Thanatos may err on the side of safety and retreat, hence contributing to the survival of our species though self-protection.
Thanatos has been discounted as un-Darwinian - misunderstood as a drive towards death, which would eliminate a species. Freud’s Thanatos, however, is based in evolution. He suggests that the human baby encapsulates the entirety of its evolution. Just as humans have evolved from a single cell over billions of years, the nine months from conception to birth is a retelling of that story (Sulloway, 1979, pp. 393-412). Genetically it’s reasonable to say that my make-up is that of my parents, combined, who were a result of their parents, and so on. My existence is testimony to the events and struggles, traumas and recoveries, threats and survivals of a genetic line that dates back millennia and beyond.

According to Freud, “only by the concurrent or mutually opposing action of the two primal instincts – Eros and the death-instinct –, never by one or the other alone, can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life” (Freud, 1937, p. 243). On the one hand, I crave adventure; on the other, I yearn for the safety of what once was. In a state of post-trauma, I desire to go back. Back to my marriage and the nuclear family I once had. Back to PNG, Daru, or the carefree tropics. Back to a place of freedom, peace, safety, nurture. Back to my childhood.

O: In 2005, I decided to go to Bali. Government travel warnings were at a maximum but being post-suicidal you really don’t care too much about that stuff. The plane was all but empty – as were the streets of Bali devoid of Australians. Ironically, during this first trip, the subway bombs went off in London. The moment I stepped off the plane I felt like I had arrived home. I spent time surfing, hanging out with locals, eating great food and drinking cheap beer.

During my time in Bali I became friendly with a disenchanted Muslim journalist named T. Her biggest hero in life was Mother Theresa, who inspired her to join a humanitarian Non Government Organisation (NGO) working in Meulaboh, Aceh. As soon as I returned to Perth, I bought another plane ticket back to Bali.

SESSION 5: SCHEHERAZADE
J.  Owen, I want you to read Bruno Bettelheim. He gives us an interesting angle on approaching narratives – all narratives. He describes the superficial and manifest level of the story – in your case it could be your journey to Sumatra and your homeless friends. He then also indicates how this surface story is only a resolution of some more interesting and latent problems. In your case we could possibly relate this to the breakdown of your family life or some element of it – if we wanted to do this in the script. The deeper level is the dynamo and the core of the story. Bettelheim also gives a procedure by which one comes to deal with the core story and to that extent come to terms with the problem that it encapsulates. The framing story Scheherazade is particularly illuminating.

TELLING STORIES WITH BRUNO BETTLEHEIM

O: Bruno Bettelheim suggests that fairytales help us deal with various challenges in life by representing our unconscious issues in their storyline and characters and offering solutions to those problems. He elaborates on how Cinderella helps us deal with sibling rivalry, Fairy Godmothers and Wicked Witches help us cope with the fact that our mothers have positive and negative sides, and Jack and the Beanstalk is about becoming independent.

Through the process of transference, “the displacement of one’s unresolved conflicts, dependencies, and aggressions onto a substitute object” (Felluga, 2006) we are able to externalize our subliminal conflicts and struggles, and resolution for our fairytale, or on-screen, protagonist becomes metaphoric or symbolic resolution of our own issues. Susan Lien Whigham suggests that “individuals who suffer from [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] often communicate using metaphors...” and that “we can help individuals recover from trauma by learning to communicate with them using metaphorical language” (Whigham, 2006). So it seems that listening to stories or watching films could help us deal with deep, subconscious problems and challenges, including healing from damage caused by the greatest of traumas. Bettelheim suggests “we must somehow distance ourselves from the content of our unconscious and see it as something external to ourselves, to gain any sort of mastery over it” (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 55). As we return time and time again to revisit the trauma in yet another film, each time the ‘anxiety level’ is reduced a little.

1001 ARABIAN NIGHTS – THE FRAMING STORY
O: In short, the King of Samarkand had caught his wife in bed with one of his slaves. After having her executed, in a state of trauma and grief, he went to visit his brother, the King of Bukhara. While there, he discovered his brother’s wives were all having sex with his slaves. As much as this gave the king of Samarkand some sense of consolation (his situation was somewhat less tragic that his brother’s) this all lead to a great mistrust of all women. The king of Samarkand decided to sleep with a different virgin every night and then have her killed the following morning, since they were not to be trusted.

When all but two virgins, Scheherazade and her younger sister, had been killed, it was time for Scheherazade to be with the King. Before they were to sleep together, Scheherazade asked the King if she could see her younger sister one last time, as she knew her own destiny. The King allowed it, and Scheherazade, in front of the King, began telling her sister an enthralling story. She didn’t finish the story and the King decided he needed to hear the ending, so he allowed Scheherazade to live one more day. The next night, Scheherazade finished the story and began another. She was allowed to live one more day.

This continued, and after three years (1001 nights) of hearing the stories the King had not only fallen in love, but was healed of his anger at woman.

This story begins with great trauma; discovering his wife had cheated on him. The King’s journey takes him to a place of real despair, and he becomes bitter, cynical and filled with hatred. However, in great wisdom, through her storytelling;

_Scheherazade draws ever narrower circles around the trauma her husband has suffered, first with variations on the theme, and then feeling her way closer and closer to the fiery core of his misery, that which drove him to “craziness and insanity”... he awoke, cured from his intoxication, and said: ‘By God, this story is my story, and this tale is my tale; I was full of rage and fury until you guided me back to rightfulness!’ And he once more took command of his reason, cleansed his heart and came to his senses._ (Ammann, 2006)
This wonderful example of the healing power of storytelling is somewhat replicated in how a child will cling to a certain story, wanting to hear it over and over. Bettelheim suggests that, as a certain fairy tale strikes a chord with where a child is at developmentally, emotionally, or in regards to challenges they may be facing, they need it repeated many times in order to really take on the healing, hope or guidance contained in the story. Once the particular story has done its job, and the child has mastered the issues they were faced with, they move on to other stories (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 58).

In developing theory on Thanatos, Freud considered trauma and the tendency of trauma victims to repeat or reenact unpleasant experiences. They displayed such “neurotic symptoms as involving fixations to, and compulsive repetitions of, traumatic events” (Sulloway, 1979, p. 396). This return to traumatic events is about reducing, by degrees, the anxiety that such traumatic events produce – a zero response being the ultimate goal. Regarding film, it could be suggested that we all have had traumas in our lives and by repeatedly visiting trauma through film, we gain consolation and reduce the impact of real-life trauma.

O: Thanatos, repetition and externalization now complement the mirror phase in illuminating my journey and production. By externalizing, or projecting, my own trauma onto the victims of the tsunami, I then went and did something to help. In doing so, I was bringing healing to my own trauma – metaphorically. I was also, once again revisiting trauma; this time one much bigger than my own, which helped reduce my own level of anxiety.
SESSION 6:(Persona)

O: There is now a sense of theory incorporated in my journey and my film, but the challenge remains to make it accessible to an uninformed audience. At this stage I have completed one version of the film, which I have used to raise money and awareness and it stands as it is, but there are so many other issues that I now need to bring to an audience’s attention.

J: Owen, have you seen Bergma’s Persona?

O: Yes, a couple of times, but not recently.

J: Watch it again. You’ll find it relevant to where you’re at with your own film. Pay close attention to the opening sequence. Also have a look at Helen Kronberger’s Honours thesis on Bergman?

O: OK. Actually I helped Helen out with editing snippets of Persona for her thesis. It’ll be good to read her paper.

O: Kronberger’s paper on Persona had a strong focus on Lacan’s mirror phase. It was useful in reinforcing my understanding of its relevance to film theory. What I found really useful in terms of further developing my film, though, was Bergman’s opening sequence (Bergman, 1966).

New ideas were starting to fall into place so I had a clearer idea of where I could take the film. I wasn’t sure quite how the experimental stuff would tie with the documentary as such, but set about working on it. I did a number of cuts, with varying use of the Jingle Bell Rock and audio samples referencing other films to help create a sense of narrative and trauma in particular. I also worked with a number of images and sequences, some from my previous films and others of folks in the park, to highlight the theoretical underpinnings of the production as well as the personal journey.

Here, in a state of death, a phone-call triggers re-conception and rebirth. A new life of images and music. A new journey begins in a tropical paradise with very few spoken words. With the opening sequence pointing to theory and setting the scene for the rest of the film, I finally completed An Other Voice from Aceh, two years after receiving a call for help.

WRAPPING IT UP

O: My time in the Honours Program could be seen as somewhat cathartic. I saw my own trauma outside of myself when the images of the tsunami were splashed on the television screen. I could do something about this external trauma, so set about to solve my own problem – delivering bicycles to children in Meulaboh. This saw a return to study and a rebirth of creative expression through film, which led to opportunities in Cambodia to contribute to the lives of more trauma victims through creative works. As was King of Samarkand, I have been surrounded by stories of trauma, which are my own story.
As I type these final sentences, I glance across to the newspaper rack in a small cafe on the riverfront in Phnom Penh. The headline is *Understanding Trauma in Cambodia*. It’s a good read. I hope to move here long term in the next year or so; I’ve become comfortable amongst so many other real-life trauma stories. The newspaper article states an irony; that trauma victims can “find that their losses have produced valuable gains” (Witzel, 2007).

According to Nietzsche “All writing is useless that does not contain a stimulus to activity” (Gane L. &., 2005, p. 10).

I hope to make films here and to train locals, in order to give them voice.

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**BLUEBEARD**

Dear Jay,

I have been doing some finishing touches on my dissertation and will email you something in the next day or two.

You may remember me telling you about a fourteen-year-old Cambodian street kid being the only person to ever recognize the connection between my marriage breakdown and my beard length? Well, *You* will be pleased to know that I have shaved my beard after not trimming it for six years. I have saved the dreadlocks and will frame them. *I* am pleased that the reason for shaving was for a woman.

This afternoon I’m going to start shooting a short film for an organization that’s working with vulnerable young people. I’ll interview a couple of women who are supporting their family who live at the rubbish tip. The film will be used to inspire people to help.

I promise I’ll get the dissertation finished!

Cheers,

O
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