Anecdotes and Antidotes – Stories as Balms, Storytelling as Healing

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Author’s Note:

The following article refers to a performed presentation, from the Double Dialogues Conference, Art & Pain, at The University of Melbourne, May 10, 2003. The presentation involved an audio-visual configuration in which I was speaking whilst simultaneously vision-mixing ‘live’ images from a camera and images from a pre-recorded videotape. The pre-recorded images were from the creative video practice at the centre of my higher degree research. The ‘live’ mixing was projected on a video screen. A separate video camera recorded the images that act as parentheses to the following text. The images that accompany the text are from the performed presentation.

This presentation re-visits a series of ‘dialogues’ that occurred during the video practice of my recently completed doctoral research project. The result of the creative practice was a video postcard entitled Lorne Story. As a video-specific postcard, it became a hybrid form that mixed elements of a video notebook with an epistolary correspondence. The dialogues within the overall research practice could also be considered as a series of correspondences that took place between the video-making and writing, the sounds and images, remembering and forgetting, the recalled and the imaginary, enactment and re-enactment, disclosure and concealment, the practice and the exegesis, and between self-address and the address to a distant other. This presentation will concentrate primarily on the relationship between disclosure and concealment, with regard to notions of pain, release and healing.

Pain of scar

One of the initial triggers of the research project was the attempt to re-consider the pain and confusion associated with the acquisition of a scar. The scar was a signifier of an almost remembered event. It became an historical marker of a time when, as an adolescent, I attempted to stand up for myself, on a surfboard. As the source of the
research orientation, it also functioned as a central character and distinctive representational marker of personal identity.

The desire to return to Lorne was initially based on an impulse to re-address a site of unresolved issues (perhaps, even an un-edited memory) in order to reconsider and re-edit what was, for me, a hazy memory-image of how I acquired a souvenir scar. I was also hoping to inhabit a landscape and re-enter a world I had not fully explored. This would be a narrative world in which video would function as a mediating presence.

Because I could barely recall the event, after years of faded recollection, the strategy involved the return to the site of the accident, and the use of a video camera as a form of memory detector – a device for excavating and generating narratives.

As soon as I started to re-enact the surfing scar story in the presence of video, different versions of the story were generated. I became aware of the ways in which the story was being inflected by the storytelling. There were also the differences between what I initially thought I could recollect, and what I was able (and not able) to recollect of the story. I was particularly aware of the ways in which ‘the story’ was unfolding as a series of narrative possibilities and imaginings.

At the time, and on location, I wrote the following in my Director’s Notebook:

As I sat on the beach, next to the Clubhouse, where both of the previous re-enactments were depicted, I realized that I was stroking my chin and inadvertently stroking my scar, as if rubbing Aladdin’s lamp – trying to coax a genie out – trying to make sense of the different versions. It was as if I was stroking my scar, in an attempt to re-kindle lost memories and submerged feelings about the accident. Perhaps I was hoping that the scar might shed some light as to what happened. (…)

I realized that I was no longer re-enacting or making what I thought was the initial story. Instead, I was part of a process that was trying to juggle and make sense of the multiple versions and representations of the story. Irrespective of which camera was used, all I ever saw was a representation. The more time I spent reflecting on the re-enactments, the more uncertain I became, as to what was part of the initial story, and what was either concealed or revealed through the process of re-enactment. (…).
All the while, the scar itself was taking on the shape of other associative images: the parting of the waves; the surfboard; the needle; a horizon; a rainbow; the wooden archway; and the wave that dumped me. The scar had become a tattoo and a personal historical marker. (…)

In the final section of Lorne Story, the voice-over concludes:

Every scar has a story; every story is a scar – a marking on the face of the landscape.

Whilst Lorne became the site for anecdotes surrounding various historical landmarks, the scar became a personal benchmark. Like a pencil mark on a doorjamb indicating growth across time, the scar became a personal embodied landmark and a visible representation of a painful event.

During Lorne Story, I returned to scan both the historical and personal landscape for clues as to what might have occurred and what might still be occurring. I speculated that each recording and re-enactment was not only a different version of the initial events, but that I had been in the process of re-writing the original events into a story, each time I returned to inhabit the location. The different versions also produced new annotations and new memories based on each of these versions. Each return, and each attempt at re-presentation was like a wave, using the previous wave as an undertow, to generate the next.

Each narrative version, like each wave, seemed to build and rise, only to collapse and stumble forward till its drive dissipated. Then, with a counteracting movement, the narrative wave would retract in a gesture of sweeping erasure. By continuously returning to the landscape, I came to recognize that not only my memories, but also my narrative enactments were caught in the shallows – between disclosure and concealment. In the relentless shoreline tug-of-war between the final breaking wave and
the shifting sands, my memories and stories were in a constant process of formation, exposure and erosion.

The returns to specific locations, also signified the way in which memory was not chronological, but a circulatory, evolving process, in which the pressure of present contexts influenced perceptions of the past. Between the time remembered and the time of the remembering, recollections transformed towards representational sounds and images in which the events, locations and characters became fictionalised through narrative speculation. Memories, as imaginings, seemed to only exist in the time of the remembering – as a form of re-writing. What once were memories became a series of fictionalised stories and conjured inventions. The fictive video re-enactments were neither untrue nor deceitful, but as representations they became a form of quotation and a re-writing of something imagined. What was eventually produced was a mix in which memories were constructed as narratives through the process of re-enactment, testimony, and invention.

Pain of disclosure: the video confessional

The research project was initially concerned with the pain and impact of a scar that bears witness to an adolescent surfing fiasco. By attempting to re-visit the location, re-enact the events, and recall the memories, it was as if my body was, once again, opened up for scrutiny. By making Lorne Story, I was able to re-enter, through the cut on my chin, a world of memory and recollection that had been denied, locked away and stitched up. At the time of the recording, the declarations, revelations and reflections seemed to emerge from inside a form of video witness box, where parts of the story and different narrators were under cross-examination, in some courtroom drama. In the voice-over narration, I stated:

My scar is the only record of the event – the only evidence, and the only witness. (…)
But as the only witness, my scar seems unable to fully testify to the story. It’s as if the story is still buried and locked away, inside my body; stitched up, inside my chin. (…)

For however much I attempted to enter into its space, its mysteries remained concealed. Where once the black nylon stitches were visible prison bars, only the raised scar itself remained – a mute witness to the voluntary incarceration that results from self-censoring reticence.

Through the desire to render an account for my actions and my conduct, the making of Lorne Story became a form of video confessional. This was a way in which I could attest, both orally and visually, to what once were somewhat private feelings. Previously, these feelings and memories were so dormant and undeveloped, I had scarcely admitted them to myself. In the video confessional, I could provide a narrative accounting to myself, before an imagined, listening presence.

However, presenting myself as if on the operating table, in the witness box and in the confessional, produced a further dose of pain and discomfort. Initially there was the pain associated with the scar; now there was the supplementary pain of confessional disclosure. The pain of the scar was momentary; the pain of disclosure – continuous. This was not merely the painful indignity of performing, but the indecency of
performing within the realm of autobiographical confessional disclosure. Specifically, there was a constant tension between the desire to narrate and the fear of narrating. The autobiographical narration was at the painful edge, balancing between disclosure and concealment, vacillating between the desire to reveal whilst needing to remain discrete.

Since Saint Augustine, autobiographical self-disclosure has emerged from its religious traditions of admission, repentance, and a sense of reverence before a higher authority. Rousseau’s *Confessions* mark a movement towards individualism, subjectivity and an assertion of non-conformity. The subjective status of autobiographical disclosure continues with Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy as a form of autobiographical declaration.

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of – namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography (1923: 10).

To enter the realm of public utterance, and to engage in the activity of storytelling, disclosure of one sort or another is not only necessary but inevitable. In the process of developing and narrating a philosophical position, a narrator is always revealing aspects of themselves through performative gestures. And although a narrator performs with an ensemble of other narrative agents, these performative gestures invoke some element of autobiographical disclosure. As a series of autobiographical speculations and reflections, *Lorne Story* continued within this trajectory by transforming previously dormant ideas and undeveloped feelings, into a narration that constructed possible imaginings.

If communicative utterances and interactions are forms of self-revelatory confessional disclosure, perhaps all private or public performative narration is inevitably autobiographical and confessional. As Foucault observes, confession is seemingly omni-present as a daily ritual of speculative admission:

> We confess in justice, medicine, education, family relationship, love relations, and in everyday affairs, one confesses one’s thoughts and desires (1980: 59).

In the blurred terrain between private and public disclosure, *Lorne Story* was more personal than private in its orientation. And rather than any concern with the confidential character of the (self-) revelatory reflections, I was always orientated towards developing a video-specific experiment. By engaging in a performative mix of subjective forms such as the video monologue, memoir, and notebook, the project developed a hybrid form of epistolary video postcard. The desire was to engage with the possibilities of mixing an internally directed video notebook with an externally oriented video postcard. The result was a mediated communication – between peers, across distances, beyond differences.

In order to investigate the ways in which video mediated autobiographical storytelling, *Lorne Story* became a form of video confessional in which the processes of autobiographical disclosure became the reflexive subject matter. As a project, *Lorne Story* started as an attempt to document some of the processes associated with autobiographical video storytelling. I initially undertook the research journey to try to show and tell a story. After a few turns on the road, the emphasis moved towards the
ways in which one story generated another, and the ways in which those stories begat annotations, re-interpretations and reflections. By documenting this generative process, the video production developed a reflexive mode for integrating the stories and the meta-narrative reflections with the making of the stories. In this respect, self-disclosure interacted with a sense of reflexive self-critique. I became interested in how the process of video production might impact on myself (and my stories) whilst on the story-making trail. As *Lorne Story* evolved and changed its character, the process of autobiographical self-disclosure also inevitably altered me. As Foucault suggests, confession is a ritual, in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises salvation (1980: 61-62).

During the production process I felt neither constrained nor motivated by the sense that I was might be enacting a form of therapeutic confessional. However, at a reflective distance, there are aspects of the project that now appear to fulfil this purging need for unburdening and release. Whilst immersed in the video-making process, it was possible to experience and document the video-specific ways in which autobiographical self-disclosures metamorphose from memory, testimony, and re-enactment, into narratives and meta-narratives.

Whilst *Lorne Story* was ostensibly directed towards an other, as an epistolary form of communication, I was not seeking either judgement or absolution, but inviting a sense of collaborative involvement and exchange. The narration was more of an act of confiding, whilst driving around the coastline, telling a story or two to a fellow traveller and confidant. During *Lorne Story*, there were two specific fellow travellers: the absent addressee and the ever-present camera. The presence of the camera was a reminder of the absence of the other.

As a video-specific postcard, *Lorne Story* was an invitation to a shared journey, in which the narration was addressed (via a camera and microphone) to a virtual travel companion. This sense of an imagined conversation directed towards a specific addressee, who was both absent and (virtually) present, was doubled again, with the recognition that I was also addressing myself and taking myself for a ride.

The mysteries surrounding the acquisition of my surfing scar provided the motivation for embarking on the Great Ocean Road. Whilst driving myself around the bend, I realized that I was also impelled to tell my version of *Lorne Story* because I had never done so before. As a video practice, *Lorne Story* generated a series of personal anecdotes that functioned as narrative antidotes. The need to integrate personal reflections with subjective video practices was a response to what was previously a self-censoring discretion towards narrativity, autobiographical self-disclosure and the possibility of constructing multiple video subjectivities.

Whilst on the narrative road, I recognized that I was both unable to reveal anything other than a narrativized sense of subjectivity. This was because all that could be shown was a video self. The video self was but one of the multiplicity of narrators produced by the video process. As parallel autobiographical narrators, both the camera and the self-in-the-video were subjectivities constructed by the narration. At various intervals, each of the narrative agents performed as fictive characters, taking turns to contribute fragments to the floating narrative.

What was produced within *Lorne Story* was not merely a subject or a self in the video, but an ensemble of subjectivities produced by the video and through the video practice. These subjective practices included personal storytelling, the use of direct address (to the camera), and the structuring of both the story and the storytelling via reflexive meta-narrativity. The autobiographical voice was merely one element within a continuous repertoire of subjective video narration. The first-person autobiographical
narration was as evident in the subjective voice-over as in the use of a point-of-view camera for the performative, handheld enactments. The music, sound effects, graphics and video effects also produced layers of narration. All of these narrators functioned as characters, and during the editing they combined to produce a multi-layered collaborative narration.

Throughout autobiographical disclosure, there is not only the juggling between what is revealed and how it is revealed, there is also the unavoidable subterfuge that cloaks concealment. As with striptease, lifting one veil, reveals another concealed.

As with the sweeping hand of the magician, the act of revealing also draws attention away from what is simultaneously concealed. Similarly, the performance of autobiographical narration provides a series of measured distractions to draw the eye towards what is revealed and away from the act of concealment.

Because different narrative elements are fragmentary, and a camera is only ever monocular in its attempt at providing perspective, autobiographical disclosure is inevitably selective and partial. And yet, it is the quotidian colour and incline of this partiality that provides a distinct signature. As such, a research practice inevitably carries the signature of the researcher. In autobiographical forms such as the memoir or self-portrait, this is further accentuated when what is signed is, itself, a form of expanded signature. As an autobiographical research practice, Lorne Story became a form of video signature. As a reflexive storytelling process, it was in the act of signing where it became possible, and necessary, to develop the grain of inscription, as an antidote against the debilitating self-doubts associated with the pain of disclosure.

Doctorate, heal thyself

After completing the project, it is now possible to re-consider the differences between the pain associated with the initial surfing scenario, the pain associated with the enactment of events as a video narrative, and the general discomfort associated with autobiographical disclosure.

As a research project, Lorne Story enabled a re-consideration of a half-remembered surfing scenario and the ways in which memory, re-enactment and autobiographical storytelling can open old wounds. When these metaphoric wounds were re-opened, and new re-enactments became entangled with memories of the original events, I was continuously caught in the confusing crossfire between hazy recollections and the all-too-visible clarity of the video re-enactments. At every staging and re-enactment, the recorded sounds and images performed as surrogates, where once memories resided. Compared with the indistinct memories, the images produced were impossibly concrete, sharp and well-defined. Even the voice-over narration was consistently too concrete and unambiguous in comparison with the uncertain memories and speculative interpretations.

For both the initial events and the subsequent narrativization of these events, it was necessary to develop a curative balm to aid the healing process. Whilst the initial surfing incident may have produced a trickle of blood and a measure of pain, and whilst the subsequent revelatory disclosures produced a narrativized sense of pain (fused with the anxieties of performing a public form of confessional), it now seems...
evident that the enacted storytelling was a form of ritual exorcism – a purging that produced narratives of restoration and re-growth. It was not necessarily the story told, as the shamanistic ritual of performative storytelling that acted as a soothing ointment to salve the wounds. Whilst the scar generated a multiplicity of versions as to what might have been the sequence of events, it was the video storytelling process that healed the scar, by exposing it and giving it an airing. Although the scar had been in the process of healing since the stitches were in place, by making *Lorne Story*, the pain associated with the original scar was aerated through the process of autobiographical disclosure. In turn, these painful disclosures became part of a practice that placed its faith in the way performative re-enactment and video narrativity can generated multiple narrative possibilities and imaginings.

In the latter part of *Lorne Story*, whilst walking in the forest, the voice-over narration states:

I just met a Girl Guide, taking some schoolchildren on what we used to call a ‘nature studies excursion’. We talked about how Koori kids might’ve bathed here years ago. We also talked of the recent bushfires and the big 1983 Ash Wednesday fires. "I didn’t think it would ever grow back (again)," she said. "Neither did I," I said, agreeing with her. "Neither did I," I said again to myself, under my breath. "I never thought I’d grow back again, either." Renewal; re-growth; it’s seasonal. Like the forest, this scar has healed. (…)

Healing is a hopeful process: it attempts to bring together and fuse the gaps between things. A cut to the skin creates two edges. And in the shivering space between two edges, a new third thing is created. As with the editing process, 1+1=3. In my case, the scar is this new third, produced by bringing two edges of flesh together. In the teasing gap between showing and concealing, a scar is a commemorative sign, a personal signpost and a marker of something created by bringing two things together.

From inception to completion, it was necessary to confront and examine the ways in which video presented and represented personal narratives. As a narrator, it was painful and often debilitating to watch and listen to what was disclosed, the way I brought things together, and the differences between intentions and representations. Self-representation and self-revelation was continuously excruciating and toe-curlingly embarrassing. As a genre, the autobiographical memoir is inevitably intimate and painful: it is an arena of disclosure and revelation that challenges the modesty of good
taste and decorum. And whilst the project was initially situated within the confusing and doubtful terrain of blurred recollections and tentative subjectivities, eventually by embracing the possibilities afforded by performative re-enactment, imaginative conjecture and communicative correspondence, the practice provided a sense of release and relief.

By admitting to the possibility that communion might develop from communication and the exchange of ideas, Lorne Story moved between reflections from a director’s video notebook and a reflexive video postcard. The processes of storytelling and reflection became recuperative and communicative – especially when the storytelling became directed towards a specific and sympathetic addressee.

The camera (and microphone) also provided a sympathetic albeit mediating presence. As mediating technologies, the camera and microphone simultaneously produce a narration, narrator and (delayed) narratee. Although an on-camera narrator performs as if a biology were present and presentable, as ever, it only seems as if an autobiographical biological entity speaks. The 'I' that speaks, from both behind and in front of the camera, performs multiple roles and continues to multiply – as I speak and shift positions. It is a mix of a biographical self, a self-in-the-video and a series of subjectivities produced by video. In the mix, the fragments dissolve, from one to another, to form a mosaic, composed from biographical and reflexive autobiographical performances – constantly in the process of being made.

Lorne Story was not a formal confession in terms of disclosing what once were secretive faults and sins. Confiding with others (and with myself) confirmed the value of personal reflection and its impact on the role of the researcher as a reflective practitioner. The airing of these reflections, and the attempt to spell things out, was an acknowledgment that declaration and representation inevitably exists as a public spectacle. In this respect, an exegesis, or any self-reflective discourse on a practice, is often a form of autobiographical confessional disclosure, in which it is possible to reveal to others, and recognize for oneself, the workings in the margins. (By design, Lorne Story was not conceived as a public performance or a ‘live’ video broadcast. And yet, the narration was devised, recorded and edited to be presented as two continuous video monologues. As the first audience, I was bemused by what I was able to reveal to myself; subsequently, after some shaping and selection, these disclosures were revealed to others.)

As a reflexive technology, video provides the continuous possibility of self-reflection through direct electronic monitoring. Whilst performing in front of the camera, utilizing a small video screen to monitor my progress, I was able to monitor and assess my own performance. By working alone, as a solo practitioner, video functioned as a form of electronic confessional in which it was possible to act as both confessant and confidant. When listening to my disclosures and watching my performance, it was
difficult not to interrupt with either a stern admonishment or a sympathetic nod of consolation. Self-scrutiny continued during the writing of the exegesis, where I was able to witness my own writing, and reflexively report on its relationship to the video practice.

As a video-specific practice, Lorne Story enacted some of the ineffable aspects associated with the autobiographical enterprise. By foregrounding the processes of construction, I was able to document the ways in which I was often caught unawares by what was revealed and what was concealed. The process of autobiographical disclosure oscillated like an intense beam of light intermittently shining from a lighthouse: it revealed whilst it concealed – illuminating and obscuring conscious and unconscious desires.

![Lighthouse](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

From half-remembered recollections and performative re-enactments, Lorne Story generated an autobiographical video narration in which anecdotes came to function as antidotes. The process of storytelling became a reflexive course of treatment for the initial pain and suffering surrounding the fall from grace and the subsequent acquisition of a scar. Although I could hardly remember the initial pain, and how much (or little) blood was lost, I sensed that my memories and stories had congealed inside the cicatrized cocoon of the scar. I re-entered the scar by re-enacting the surfing scenario and re-tracing the steps I took.

By experiencing the re-enactments through the camera, with my eye aligned to the lens, video functioned as an anaesthetic against the spread of infectious self-consciousness. In a video trance, it was possible to imagine and release possible scenarios by enacting possible versions. Opening the scar was a form of ritual exorcism, in which disclosure released previously unexamined and unconsidered meanings. Entering the scar did not produce a singular coherent story; it generated a multiplicity of stories, storytellers and storytellings. I became fascinated and mesmerized by the differences between what I thought I remembered of the original events, and what was produced.

The performative re-enactments were not recuperative but generative. In this respect, re-enactment is something of a misnomer, as all we can ever perform is an improvised creative enactment. The performative enactments produced a series of paradoxical versions. Comparing these contrasting and ambiguous versions generated a continuous stream of annotations and reflections. These anecdotal reflections made fluid what once was congealed, and served as an antidote to the self-censoring doubts and the debilitating stasis produced by an overly-judgemental self-consciousness.

The process of performative enactment provides an allegory for the creative research process and the way in which narrative disclosure is seasoned by the flux and uncertainty of personal memory. Lorne Story constructed an imaginary embodied landscape continuously mediated by the fictionalising spirit of video representation. If the imagined landscape appeared more like a fragmentary jig-saw puzzle with missing pieces, these absences were not due to wilful evasion. The sense of incompleteness was a consequence of the ways in which our stories and our memories seem to appear and disappear in a constant process of editing and re-editing.
In the realm of autobiographical video narration, the remembered and the forgotten mix with the invented and the imagined. In *Lorne Story*, if I could not quite remember, I imagined that I remembered. Whenever I imagined that I remembered, I was also in the presence of something forgotten. If we remember (at all), it is through selective editing; in the same way, often, we forget.

Autobiographical video narration is not, and (thankfully) can never be, a tell-all genre. Each revelation is but a partial disclosure within the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't process of editing. This selective editing can appear as a form of concealment, when often it is merely the inability to present more than one thing at a time. In order to say one thing, we restrain ourselves from saying everything.

Autobiographical video is a self-generating practice that re-invents an ensemble of subjectivities as much as it re-invigorates the genre. This occurs whether the disclosures are partial, fragmentary or more like editorial annotations in the margins. The treatment within this general practice promotes a restorative sense of healing because it is self-prescribed and self-administered. The prescription recommends equal doses of penitent atonement, speculative reflection and cautious modesty. In the playful hide-and-seek game of performative autobiographical narrativity, and for our own survival, we move necessarily between disclosure, conjecture and discretion.

REFERENCES


