

A Story About A Story About Me

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My ex boyfriend made a film about our relationship and posted it on facebook. It's called Keith and Nicole are falling, even though my name is Abby and his name is Josh. He calls it "A piece of fiction with close ties to my experience." And they are close ties. Most of it was filmed on the very same bench where we had one of our last conversations while dating.

"You wanna, just, come inside and watch me eat a burrito?"

"No. I think I'm just gonna head back to my room."

"Come on, you're really going to head back to your room?"

"Did you read the article that I sent you?"

"Yeah, it's us."

We had a real fight that started with Josh asking "do you wanna just come inside and watch me eat a burrito?" The snacks they eat, the tv shows they watch, the dorms they live in, and the words they say are all cut from our real lives and pasted into the film. And some of it's really personal. The article Nicole references was this sort of tragic last ditch article we read about co-dependent relationships.

Josh and I are friends now - he weighed in on this audio story. I know making a story about this film is a messy undertaking. Maybe Josh and I will end up in an endless cycle of art dialogue. But here we go: this is my story about his story about us.

We dated for about two years. But eventually there was this gulf between us, we couldn't understand each other enough anymore. The breakup felt like a slow motion avalanche: Neither of us wanted the relationship to collapse, but there it went. A few months later Josh wrote the script for Keith and the Nicole are Falling. Then he cast students actors and got his friend to compose a score. The film is 5 minutes long, in black and white. Josh has described the feeling he was trying to evoke as "Love and tenderness meeting dysfunction and pain."

I knew he was making it. He sent me the screenplay as a PDF. Later I got a link and a vimeo password. And it was intriguing. I've probably watched the film 50 times, because it's sort of fascinating to be a fly on the wall to his side of an experience we shared. But the accuracy and detail of the film make me uncomfortable. Nicole sits where I sat and says what I said. It's unsettling to see parts of my life recreated as black and white art.

But I'm conflicted, because I'm also frustrated by each way the film alters me. Nicole is played by a blonde who doesn't look like me and frowns a lot. The screenplay describes her as "rarely present." Meanwhile Keith is kind and level-headed as he reasons through their alienation.

"I know that I love you and I know you love me. Right?"

"Do you know or don't you know?"

"No I do. Seriously."

This isn't how I experienced our breakup, but it's not inherently wrong of Josh to portray it this way. Nicole is close to me, but not actually me. She's me, distorted. Me, but written by a man. The first thing my best friend said about the film was "It's so masculine." I asked Josh what he thought about the ways the content and process for his film might be gendered. He said "It is gendered, but I'm always going to be a cis man making films, so...."

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A few months after he made the film, he posted it on facebook without warning. I found out when a friend texted me about it. It was stunning to have it up in my own community. This was not an anonymous public.

I called him and asked him to take it down. He basically said "no, this is my film, I made this." So I just watched facebook while my friends watched the film and liked it, and commented. Someone complimented him on the authentic feeling of the burrito line. Meanwhile, for the first time since we'd met, Josh and I completely stopped talking. The film stayed up. It's still up today.

I didn't understand why he'd made the film this way. So I asked to interview him.

"Ok cool."

"Ok, we're here."

"Do you want to introduce yourself?"

"My name is josh?"

I tried to tease out Josh's guidelines for representing someone, and understand his reasoning. He had a lot of explanations.

Me: You knew you were writing about yourself and about me

Josh: Yeah

Me: Did you think about asking me?

Josh: Asking you about what?

Me: If you could write me?

Josh: Um..I did not think about asking you if I could write you. You have drastically affected who I am, so even when I make a film that's not about you, it's about you in other ways.

Me: Did you expect that I would react negatively?

Josh: No. Totally blindsided me. And I talked to some friends right after and I was like "I'm a bad person. I made a mistake." And I don't think that anymore. But I think part of the reason that I was blindsided by it was because I felt through the production like I sort of had your thumbs up, and I didn't. But you know I sent you the script before I made the movie and I sent you the movie after I made it. So then, when you called me, I hadn't even thought about from that angle. I honestly think that if I sent you the script or sent

you the film, actually I do know that if I sent you one of those and you were like “this is super fucked up, this is not cool.” I don’t think I would have continued with it.

Me: Do you think the artist owes something to someone they’re representing?

Josh: I think it depends

Me: On what?

Josh: I think if your - if the character’s name in the film was Abby. I think if I mentioned my breakup in the post. I think those things would be reason to take it down if you saw the project and asked me to.

Me: But I did see the project and ask you to.

Josh: Yes.

Me: Why didn’t you take it down?

Josh: I didn’t take it down because I didn’t think I did anything wrong. But I did hurt you. I think you can do something that’s not wrong and hurt someone that you care about.

It was maddening to be told I was *so close* to having the power to impact the project. Josh was saying that if the name had just been different, or if I’d just voiced my nonconsent earlier in the project, *then* I’d be entitled to veto power. But I can’t get this one taken down. These after-the-fact claims were tantalizing and frustrating and felt arbitrary. It was like I was supposed to play a game with rules I’d never been told.

I finally realized that I would never get Josh to articulate a set of guidelines for representing people, because he doesn’t have them. He sees all of these decisions as conditional, made on a case by case basis. That makes sense. But in the case of Keith and Nicole, it broke down.

Josh: I don’t know where the line is. It’s clear we see line as being in different places, That’s for damn certain.

Me: Yeah and that’s a huge problem! That’s a huge problem because then it comes down to who has the power. Do I have the power to veto this, or not? Do you have the power just to represent whatever falls on the side of your personal ethical line or not. You know if one person is not ok with a project, is the project ok? Is it?

Josh: It just depends. I don’t know. I can see situations in which it goes both ways.

This is our fundamental disagreement about the project. Where are the lines, who gets to decide?

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Those questions aren’t limited to Keith and Nicole. As I’ve talked to people about the film, I’ve been surprised by how much they relate. People tell me about their song lyrics, their plays, their theses. They nudge me towards novels, films, personal essays, even court cases that enact or address the same issues. This felt like a one-of-a-kind experience, but it wasn’t.

And yet despite all this, the interview and the film itself are laced with a sense of mutual understanding, a strange intimacy.

You're doing that thing with your eyebrows. They're wiggling a little bit. Like you're afraid or something.
I'm not afraid.

But I was disarmed by how coherently Josh could articulate how he made me feel.

Josh: I think you felt like...naked. Like naked to the world without your consent. Which would be a terrifying feeling.

This intimacy is what made the film possible, but it's also what made me feel particularly betrayed by the project. This was made by the person who knew me best. And I imagine him directing it and telling the actress "oh, this is how Abby frowns, this is how she sits." It kind of makes me feel nauseous.

So it's affected our lives, too. Josh and I talked frankly about the damage the project did to our tentative post breakup truce.

I felt like we were rebuilding something and then I put the video on Facebook and it all went to shit and shit and shit and shit. It made like releasing the film part of the story of us in a weird way. I'm not like proud of that but it's weird to have a piece of art become, like, I was about to say a plot point.

"What else do you want to talk about?"

What has this done?

It's made me, I think see that gulf of empathy again. We knew it was there. We broke up. We didn't try and do long distance. But this had sort of a stunning clarity to me. That you were making some choices about how to represent me and even the fact that you wanted to, about refusing to take it down, sort of prioritizing this 5 minute movie over me just asking that you not – that helped me see that – or forced me to see that gulf again. And that gulf is synonymous with heartbreak to me, so....

At this point in the interview, Josh started crying. I turned off the tape for a while because it felt like we'd crossed some intuited border between publishable and private. The same border Keith and Nicole crossed.

And here's where I got particularly confused, as I try not to recreate exactly what I'm critiquing. Josh was concerned about the power of my editorial hand.

Josh: I thought about the moment which is going to come where I log on to facebook and I see a Now Here This and I listen to it and it's my voice and you've edited it. And the unknowns of that are terrifying. It's like, when you use my name and you use my voice and you use my words that I've said, it's *me* but you're editing it. And that's exactly how you feel-

Me: -But it was me anyway. Nicole was me anyway. Those were my words and you edited them too.

Josh: Yeah.

Me: In some ways, it's like we're having the exact same experience. We're just on different sides of your film.

People joke that Josh will release an interpretive dance in response to this audio story. But I want to cut my story from different cloth. I wrote nonfiction, made sure Josh knew where it would be published, and gave him veto power over all his quotes. But Josh had his whole own set of justifications for Keith and Nicole, which he sees as equally legitimate. Who can say, definitively, that my story isn't just as arbitrary and self serving as Josh's film?

So I'm left with flimsy conclusions. I know that folks will use their experiences to make art, and I like to think that's a good thing. But I'm not sure when Nicole would be a character instead of a representation. I don't know how much I should feel entitled to veto other's versions of me. I don't even know whether Josh did something wrong. If the breakup itself didn't make this clear, the experience of this film sure did: there are two sides to the story.

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