

Comics On Violence

Visual Communication Project 2

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IIT Bombay, 2006

Project 2

Comics on Violence

by Hemant Kumar

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Submitted in the partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Design in Visual Communication.

Industrial Design Centre
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay
Powai, Mumbai.

2006

The Visual Communication Project 2 entitled:

Comics on Violence

by Hemant Kumar, Roll no. 05625808 is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Masters of Design Degree in Visual Communication.

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are extended to the following for their kind support in course of this project.

Prof. Anirudha Joshi for his able guidance.

Prof. Shilpa Ranade for her kind help.

Fatema, Vaibhav, Mandar, Susheel, Girish, Hari and Harsh for being there and their timely intervention in this extended affair.

Hemant Kumar

December 2006

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Introduction

Everyone has experienced violence at one time or the other in life. While for some it may be just an incident and for others it can be a life altering event. And then there are those who live in its shadow every second of their lives. Even now when I am writing there are people all over the world being subjected to violence this very moment. It is deeply rooted in human society and poses the biggest challenge in front of the so called modern world.

With the advent of technology and modern warfare the mode and occurrence of violence has completely transformed. In a split second cities can be destroyed with a push of a button. A man can now easily be killed with a small piece of metal. And with a magazine full of bullets, many at the same time. With the ease of killing and a life at ones disposal, a great divide exists between those who perform and those who suffer.

But this is not all that changed. With communication and information revolution a new class of people emerged, those who view the performer and the sufferer sitting in their living room watching television or reading newspaper. Those who are being sucked into the black hole of violence without even knowing it. Those who consider themselves distant but yet are no less involved than a physical presence.

Apart from various other reasons that are fueling violence all around the world, the ignorance that builds up due to false or misleading views towards such sensitive issues are often dangerous, as they might lead up to false perspectives. In wake of wrong notions of such criticalities, acts of unaccountable consequences are formidable possibilities.

This project is aimed towards addressing the issue of violence that is changing many lives voluntarily or involuntarily. It is an attempt to understand the concerns and effects of violence and communicate the same through a medium often criticized of glorifying it; Comics (defined by Scott McCloud as, *“Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”*)^[1].

Despite the great potential that the medium of comics offers in communicating ideas and storytelling, its application has been quite limited in popular culture. Comics have been criticized of promoting and selling violent contents to kids. Still there is a lot more to comics than popular culture. The project seeks to provide a view to the notions of violence and its existence in a society through exploring the medium of comics. Through the project I aim to build an outlook of things as they are and as they should be in a world so restless and impatient to resort to violence for all that is unfair and unjust.

Understanding Violence

Defining Violence

Violence as a definition has always been a loose concept. What can be considered as violence has been a topic of debate. Since defining a problem always help in determining its cause and effects, it is argued that one should do so.

'Violence can be referred to as acts of aggression and abuse which causes or intends to cause injury or harm to others or oneself, and animals and property. The term "violence" also suggests an aggressive tendency to act out destructive behaviours.'^[2]

WHO defines violence in the 2002 World Report on Violence and Health as, 'The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.'^[3]

It is however important to note that an act of killing or infliction of harm to others in self defence is not considered as an act of violence. This aspect is questionable as some consider act of harming others in self defence equally violent as the very act causing it.

For this project i will be questioning the outcome of violent acts whether in offence or defence.

The Context of Violence

Violence is often seen as an inevitable part of the human condition – a fact of life to respond to, rather than to prevent. ^[4]The violent history of world supported with documented accounts of great wars and genocides, it is taken that violence is an intrinsic part of human existence. Anger and discontent being intrinsic to human nature, it is however possible to prevent them being transformed into violent behaviour. Such kind of utopia is not entirely supported on the hope of creating consciousness in people but also on adoption of strategies by the governments, to tackle violent outbursts and their roots. *Awareness remains the key factor here.*

Notions of what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of behaviour, and what constitutes harm, are culturally influenced and constantly under review as values and social norms evolve. For example; not long ago scolding of children as a corrective measure in British schools was not considered as an act of violence. Which is now completely unacceptable and punishable under law, because of continuing efforts of various Human Rights Conservation agencies. ^[5] Similarly a majority of Indian households adopt fear of physical punishment as a means to control child behaviour as opposed to certain Western Societies which are highly intolerant to such acts.

Violence in most cases is used as a tool to show disagreement.^[6] It has come to an understanding that to convey your discontent over a dispute and often hostile situation, taking the path of violence is an effective way of bring about change and get yourself heard. This is quite common in youth since they are more receptive to the idea of 'an eye for an eye' and possess the bent to indulge in such activities. And since it is human tendency to disagree (since we share diverse context), more and more polarization of ideas is inevitable. Not to mention Political and economic interest of the few because of which thousands of people are manipulated and forced to polarize.

This brings us to another concept of 'Justified Violence.' An act of violence done to support the greater good and probably the only solution to the problem. When a violent act is justified for the larger interests of an individual or a community. A violent act of Self-defence can also be considered justified. The counter view to this is provided by Mahatma Gandhi. "I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent." In yet bigger context varied acts of so called justified violence create an unpleasant picture.

Even at micro level of an individual a single act of violence leaves a disfigured reference to the past if the possibility of a future still exist.

Complacency is a barrier to tackling violence.^[7] Complacency greatly encourages violence and is a formidable obstacle in responding to it. Surrendering to a violent oppression is ethically as grave as the act of oppression itself. Giving in only encourages the oppressor and fortifies one's belief in violence as the road to attain power.

This however is the most critical and difficult situation. With the complexities of modern day lives and other responsibilities to handle, the most practical solution appears is to be ignorant. But this can often lead to lives full of fear and frustration. And with the growing hatred a violent act of retaliation can have serious repercussions. It is in the interest of the society to take up necessary action in time to avoid dire consequences. Needless to say that such a remark points towards a major social change - A society well aware of its rights and responsibilities. Ethically strong in not being submissive to oppression and at the same time not resorting to violence to defend itself.

Creating awareness can be of great assist in fighting complacency and achieving such moralistic aspirations.

Typology of Violence

On the basis of the characteristics of those committing the acts of violence, The World report on Violence and Health suggests the categorisation as:

- Self-directed violence;
- Interpersonal violence;
- Collective violence.

Self-directed being aimed at an individual himself or herself, Interpersonal involving small group of individuals, and collective involving fairly large group of people such as states, religious fundamentalists and terrorist organizations.^[8]

Another classification done on the basis of nature of violent acts can be:

- physical;
- sexual;
- psychological;
- involving deprivation or neglect.

Regardless of such broad categorization an act of violence can still be categorised into two or more of the above mentioned typology. A violent act can be random or coordinated on the basis of nature of occurrence.

Its important to notice than no categorization is suggested or perhaps conceivable on the basis of intent of a violent act.

For this project the focus is on interpersonal violence.

Roots of Violence

Violence is a very sensitive and complex issue. No single factor can give an insight as to why some people and communities are prone to violence and some are not. Violence is deeply rooted in many of factors acting simultaneously, namely- biological, social, cultural, economic and political.

Taking a look at the factors affecting interpersonal violence, a number of commonalities exist. Be it psychological and behavioural characteristics involving low self esteem, behavioural problems and personality disorders or experiential factors involving exposure to violent behaviour, family separation, substance abuse like alcohol and drugs, economic disparity, gender inequality and other community and social factors.^[9]

Suicides and self- directed violence are often results of hardships and long term frustration and depression due to unhappy events in life. Suicide are considered a social stigma in majority of the social setups and is often taboo to discuss since it reveals a lot about personal and private life of the family concerned. Roots of such self- destructive behaviours are often, economic and social instability, forced inequality, hostile family and social conditions, isolation and emotional and psychological factors.^[10]

Collective violence perhaps receives maximum attention by media and public. Collective acts of violence are wide spread all over world with events involving war between nations and religious fundamentalist groups, gang conflicts, mass murders, group terrorism and community riots. In India acts of collective violence are primarily due to religious and caste based conflicts. Regionalism is yet another important aspect.

Dr. Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and Violence* argues that much violence in present hostile scenario is because of a false perception of singular identity. The illusion that a person possesses an absolute identity of a caste or religion creates a great divide among people who might be sharing a lot more of common aspects constituting a multifaceted identity. In shadow of false public opinion and vested interest of few, majority of people overlook their own traits of personality in a blind race to attain singular distinction. As he explains, "Central to leading a human life, therefore, are the responsibilities and choice of reasoning. In contrast, violence is prompted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique- often belligerent- identity that we are supposed to have and which apparently makes excessive demands on us (sometimes of a most disagreeable kind)".^[11]

The above discussion is important from the point of view of this project since identity is an important concern in adolescence.



Image from the video game 'Bloodrayne'.

Violence in Media

Violence; for quite sometime now has been the central theme in Movies, Television shows, Games, Music and Comics. But its not new as means of entertainment. History of man are full of references of sports and competitions of bloodshed and killing for the entertainment of crowd. But as the social structures have changed over the years; so have the norms of what can be considered as entertainment and what should it contain.

Not only entertainment but the overall content of media today is dominated by Graphic depiction of violence, sexually explicit content and sadistic humour. The reasons as to why it is popular among people are varied and producers of such content are exploiting this to earn greater viewership and profits. Even channels and web sites related to news and information are also featuring events of violence and crime to sensationalize and earn their share of profit.

With the globalization of media, a violent content created within a particular context is not confined to that region of the world itself. American action movies and games have equal impact on a child in India coming in contact with it. This can in some cases lead to a false perspective about situations and context in the mind of the viewer incapable of distinguishing between the two sects of the world.



Still from the movie 'Ichi The Killer'.

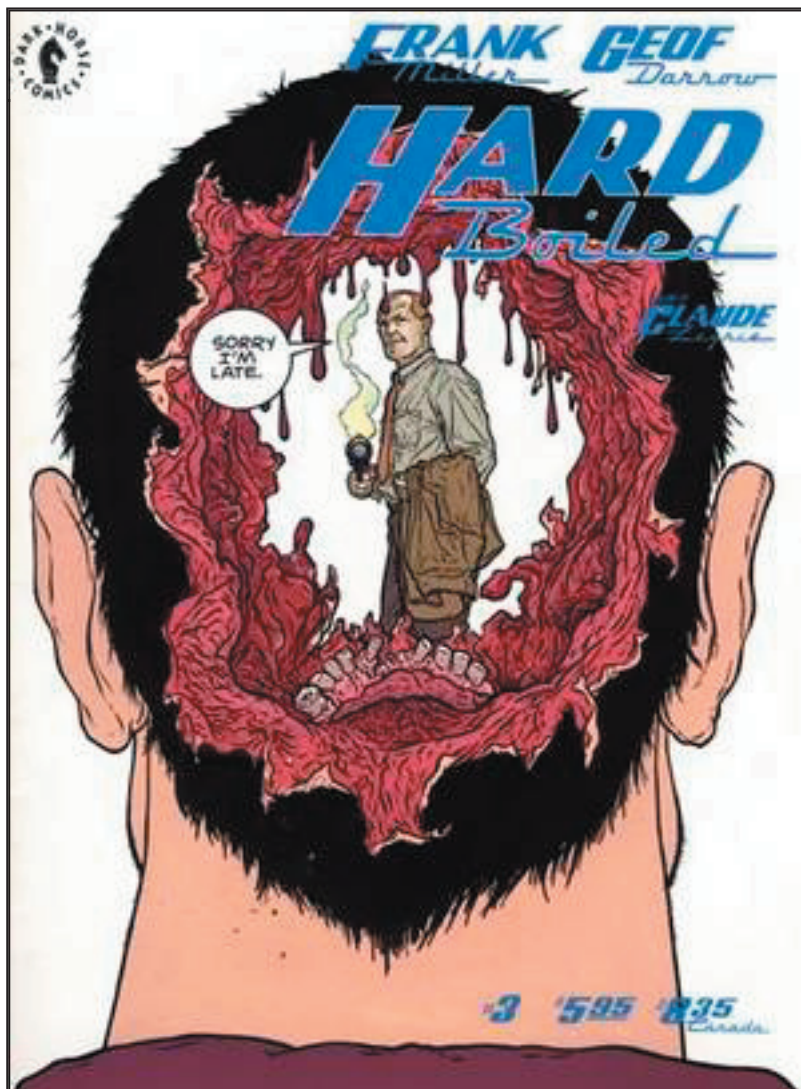


World Wrestling Entertainment

As violence is dominant in the world, so is its depiction in media. The imagery relating to expression of violence are dynamic and visually moving. Often realism and detailed depiction of an act of violence creates a sensational picture. In cinema in particular use of violent images have also been used as subversion.

But the implications of depiction of violence are not restricted to expression only. Excessive and often forced situations involving violence have created wrong notions regarding the nature of its existence. Children being exposed to such depiction get misguided to understand that use of force is necessary to cope up with difficult situations. This raises serious questions regarding depiction of violence without consequences of moral judgement.^[12] In most cases violence is presented as justified, natural and inevitable and most obvious way to solve problems.

With adolescence being a critical stage in development, moral and ethical issues that concerns a person largely decides the traits of his/her personality as an adult. Researchers claim that prolonged exposure to violence in media have adverse effects on children psychologically. Claims have been made to show children being more receptive to violent situations, desensitisation towards real life occurrence of violence, and often induced fear. These claims are however largely supported by short term results and long term claims remain ambiguous.^[13]



'Hard Boiled', a comic book by Frank Miller and Geof Darrow.

As opposed to claims of bad influences of violence in media, there are those who claim that these kind of violent depictions actually help youngsters in coping with their everyday stress and anxiety. Certain claims suggest that violent games, movies and other media provide an outlet for youngsters for their frustration and rage which actually helps them to maintain calm and be normal in real life. These mediums are suggested as escape for the wild side of human nature to maintain balance in reality. As quoted by one of the researchers, Dr. Melanie Moore, "Children need violent entertainment in order to explore the inescapable feelings that they've been taught to deny, and to re-integrate those feelings into a more whole, more complex, more resilient self hood."^[14]

Rage and Anger are inevitable human emotions. Ignorance as well as suppression can result into one's uncontrollable behaviour. Amidst the fog of uncertainty of influences and causes for violent behaviour it is important to take measure to direct these emotions into one's self development rather than destruction.

The project is a step in the direction to raise questions with violence and sense of judgement among adolescent readers.

The Medium of Comics

Defining Comics

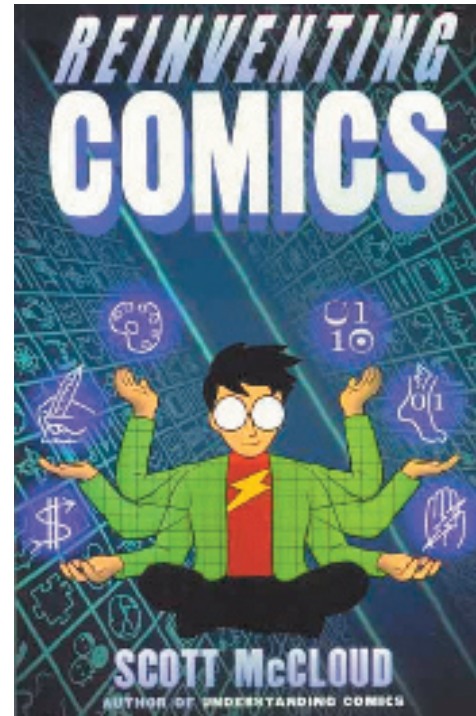
Comic book artist Will Eisner defined comics as 'Sequential art.' Which was countered as an animation is also sequential art and that such a definition of comics is too loose.^[15]

Scott McCloud described comics in his book *Understanding Comics* as, "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."

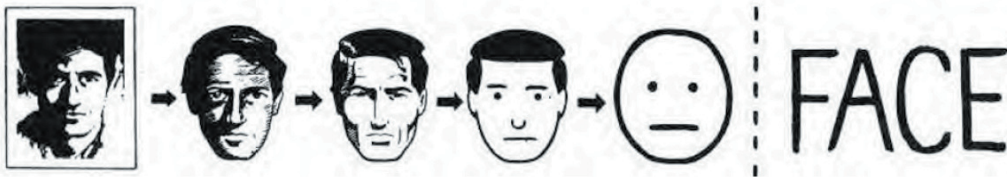
The basic difference between animation and comics is that animation is sequential in time and not as juxtaposed in space like comics. Unlike the fixed frame rate at which an animation runs, comics are subjective in time.

No definition till the date has been stated with regard to content, theme and genre or the technique of production of comics. Although some authors like to call their work as a 'Graphic Novel' in context or mature theme and literary work than what is generally associated with comics, but it is largely publishers jargon for marketing content for certain target audience.

The word 'Comics' is wide open for interpretation and understanding.



Comprehensive theory on comics by Scott McCloud.



Transition of representation from Realism to Iconic and eventually Language.

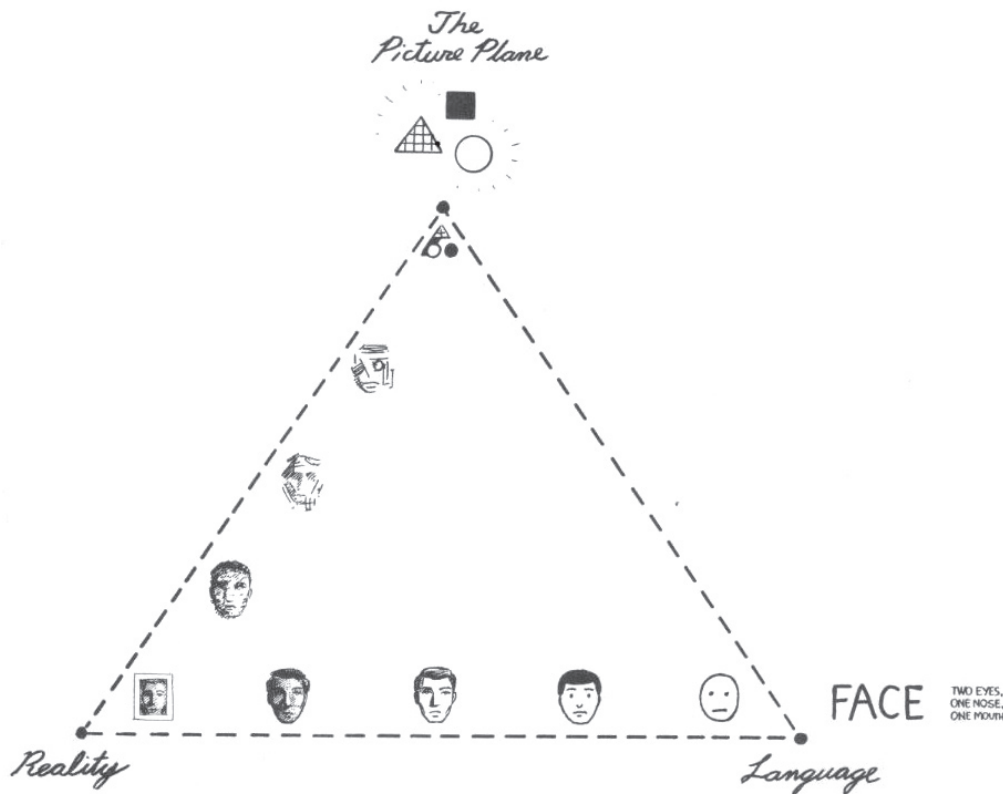
Communication through Comics

Scott McCloud in his books *Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics* has provided the most comprehensive theory on comics. Using the medium of comics to explain itself he has shown that how over several of centuries a unique vocabulary has evolved through use of text and image to create a wide range of visual symbols.

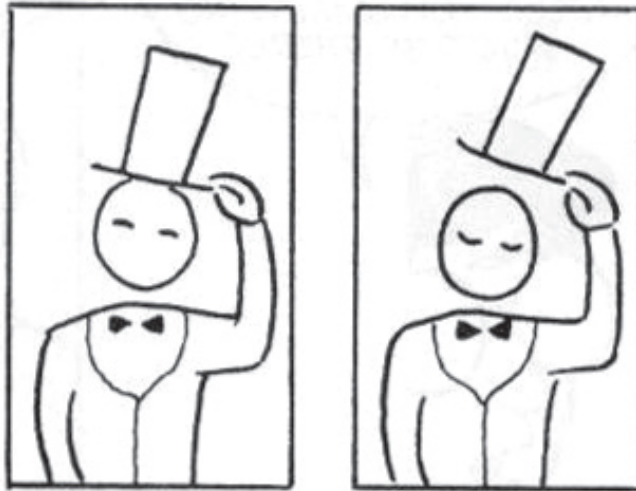
Since the idea behind the communication has been too limited in its use in popular culture it is necessary to separate *Form* from *Content* to understand its potential.

Comics rely heavily on symbols and derive the vocabulary from a large no. of visual icons. Communication is done by the assumption that the creator as well as the reader share the same context. As a universal visual language is being formed by sharing of contexts through imagery and experience, society is deriving new icons and so are the content creators and artists.

The choice of iconic representation also communicates a lot. Realism in representation suggests the beauty of nature emphasized by the artist. Abstract iconic representation suggest beauty of art and cartoon like representation for emphasizing beauty of idea. However, the choice of representation style might not always correspond to the nature of content.



Representational Triangle suggested by Scott McCloud.



Simple idea working behind Comics.



Application of the principle of 'Closure'.

Comics are based on the simple idea of placing panels side by side to show events in time. It is the space between the two panels where the crux of the idea lies. Because it is in this space reader assumes and creates mental picture to imagine movement and transition. The transition that happens can be classified into many ways namely moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene and so on. This can be quantified and even measured but how a reader constructs this transition in his mind and becomes an active participants in constructing the narrative is mystically beautiful.

This phenomena is referred to as 'Closure', which suggests that things do not seize to exist when you don't look at them. Construction and understanding of whole is done through joining fragments of it in our mind. Reality is as it exist in our imagination.



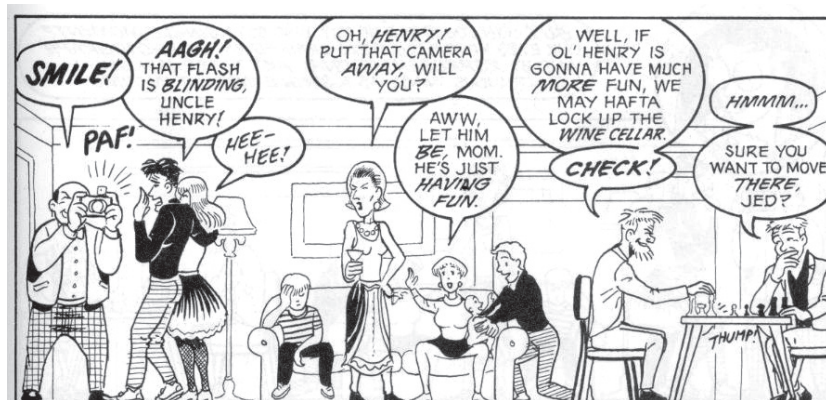
Passage of time shown by spacing out panels.



Passage of time shown by increasing the Δt between panels.



Passage of time shown by altering width of the panel.



Passage of time shown within a single panel by time taken for reading.

Another important concept explored brilliantly in the realm of comics is related with the passage of time. Unlike moving picture where depiction of passage of time is dependent on events occurring one after the other (i.e. of temporal nature itself), in comics visual sequence are shown by replacing time with space. Here to convey the passage of time, two events are shown simultaneously but by using visual vocabulary, communication is achieved. Even the amount of time lapsed can also be communicated effectively.

As pointed out by Scott McCloud, panels play very important role here. Panels not only provide space to hold the contents which can tell passage of time but also the shape and placement can suggest a reading experience with respect to time.

One of the major difference cited between comics and other media is with regards to past, present and future (considering the current frame or panel as present and the one before it as past and the next to come as future), is that unlike other media where past exist as a memory and future as an anticipation, in comics past present and future exist together at the same time, all around. Where ever you focus your eyes becomes the present. But still this unique and potential quality inherent to comics has hardly been explored and offers vast possibilities in story telling.

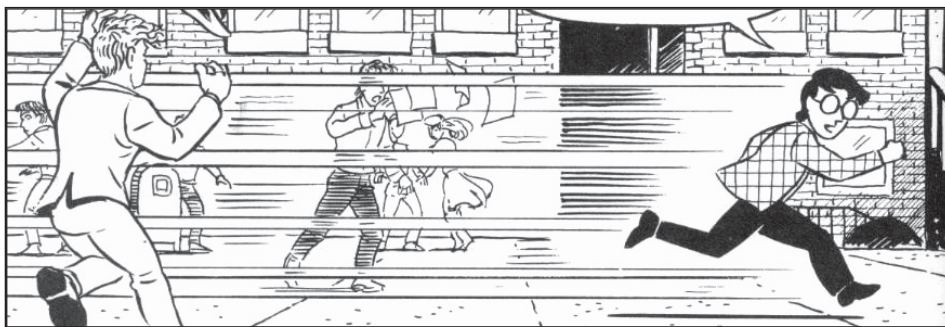
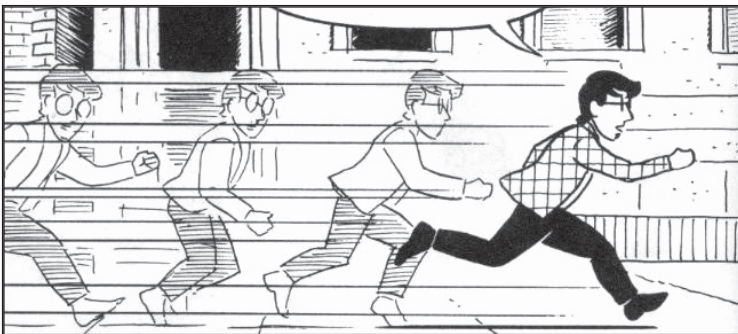
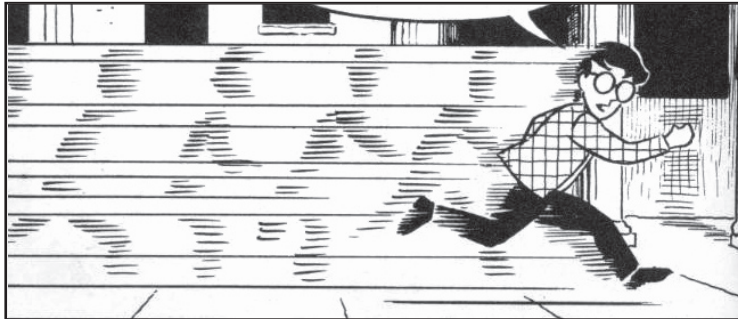
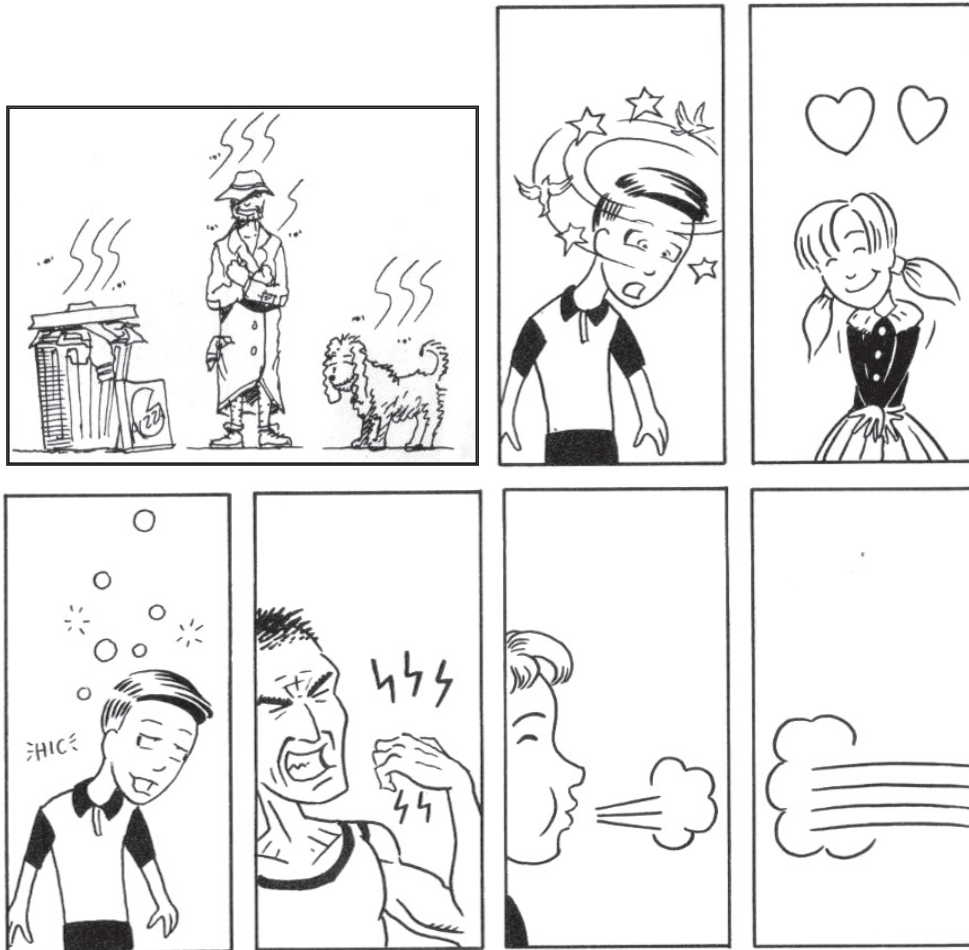


Fig 8,9,10. Few techniques of depicting motion.

Over the years modern comic books have devised a lot of techniques to depict motion in representing the physical world. The most obvious way has been to show motion from frame to frame i.e. suggesting motion by changing the subject in front of a background.

In depicting motion within a frame, methods have been adopted from techniques in photography like motion blur and panning of camera following the subject. A great deal of credit goes to the Futurist painters of Italy and Marcel Duchamp in France who experimented with depicting motion in a single image on canvas. The concept of 'Motion lines' has been derived from Duchamp's concern of idea of motion rather than its sensation.

The depiction of motion in the beginning was restricted to random lines to suggest path of motion. It grew more refined with more systematic and diagrammatic approach. Comic book artists like Jack Kirby and Bill Everett gave a whole new definition to these motion lines in their dynamic illustrations. Another artist who contributed considerably was Gene Colan who experimented a lot with the techniques used in photography like streaking and motion blur. Contributions from Manga came in form of 'Subjective motion' where the motion was shown from the point of view of the subject in motion.



Symbols suggesting invisible concerns like pain, love, smell, etc.

Expression in comics is not limited to the emotions as portrayed by the subject. Artists have always found ways to layer emotions, moods and feelings onto the visuals to communicate on various levels. Scott McCloud refer to comics as Synaesthetic medium i.e. which unites the senses. Comics does so by representing invisible concerns like emotions, ideas and aura in a visual form.

Lines carry a lot of meaning. Artists over the years have exploited this aspect to capture the underlying idea behind a story and often responding to the age and context of the reader. Here a lot more than just visible emotions get conveyed e.g. representing calmness, introspection through lines by Charles Schulz in comic strip 'Peanuts'.

Lots of acquired symbols and icons have been added in vocabulary of comics which have come to be recognised as emotions and invisible entities, e.g. shabby lines and flies around an object or person suggests foul smell. Also sweat beads from forehead can suggest fear and exhaustion. The longer any medium exist the more symbols get added to its library.



Emotions and sounds expressed through shapes of word balloons and lettering style.

Backgrounds are another important factor in bringing out the invisible concerns. Especially to reflect emotions background can be effectively used. With or without distortion in characters, expressionist backgrounds can reflect inner feeling and psychological state of the character. For example Japanese romance comics have devised backgrounds for depicting a wide array of emotions.

However these kind of characterization is most effectively used to map characters state of mind and readers relate them with the character and not themselves. Backgrounds can be the landscape of characters mind. At times deliberate distortion and effects in backgrounds need clarification either through other panels or by words.

Words themselves can be very well used as tools for expression and so can be their containers. By doing so the realm of sound also gets depicted visually. How the words are being said? With what emotion and intensity? What is the quality of sound? Artists have been able to answer these questions quite convincingly over the years. Variations in the lettering style has been of great help in achieving the desired.

Words and pictures have done wonders together in the world of comics.



*The Amazing Spiderman #96 (May 1971)
This was a tale which Stan Lee had written on Drug
abuse portraying it as dangerous and unglamorous.*

Intervention as a Designer

There is no doubt about the fact that violence is a menace to nations and societies worldwide. As much as there is need for taking steps to resist it, its necessary to have a fair and unbiased opinion in people's mind. Most of the violence in the world is not because of evil but because people fail to understand nature of violent behaviour and its context.

Similarly media can not entirely be blamed for propagation of violence in society in regard of the freedom of speech and expression and since it is a responsibility of people to take a conscious effort in judging the content before accepting it. But media can surely help in doing so.

Content creators can help trigger such questioning attitude by providing counter views and opinions with regard to violence. Violence can still be the focus of such content but with emphasis on context and its relevance. Programs, games, comics can be created that not alone entertain by creating thrills by showing violent images but also poses a moral questions in front of viewer as to why should violence exist can it really solve problems.

This defines the undercurrent idea behind the Design Problem to be solved.

Problem Statement

Aim

The aim of the project is to create awareness about violence, from a point of view that use of force it is not a solution to problems even as it may seem like.

Target

The project is aimed to communicate to readers in their adolescence (14-18 years).

Focus

The focus of the project is on commenting upon interpersonal violence. The underlying message to be communicated is, 'Irrespective of intentions and causes; violence leads to destruction'.

Concerns

The design solution should address issue of false picture regarding violence due to ignorance.

Promote questioning nature with the notion of right and wrong. To put forward the idea of violence as a serious issue rather than a gimmick for selling content.

Output

The output of the project is in form of a printed comic book.



Approach 1

Tale of a Hero

Outline

Creation of an archetypal heroic character inspired by the historical figures. To present the already existent thought with regards to violence. Incidents and plots inspired by real references.

Plot

The story is set in future. A time where society has grown indifferent to violence due to prolonged exposure. The complacency of people has led to a complete chaos in which one does not bother what goes on outside their homes and work places. Violence is so common that it's no big deal watching people dying in streets. The world has progressed backwards and few people have gained power over state by supporting violence in the streets and making society weaker. The protagonist, a common man realizes the importance of non violence and sets out to make people realize what they have grown ignorant of.

This approach is aimed to provide counter views regarding violence in the genre of heroic tales. To show that violence used by heroes to do justice in the popular culture can be the other way round in which a protagonist makes a difference by stopping violent behaviour.

However, this approach is directed more towards creating a convincing scenario. Probably suited for serialization. Moreover there is always a possibility of getting trapped in the character itself.

Approach 2

Comic Strip



Explorations in Comic strips

Outline

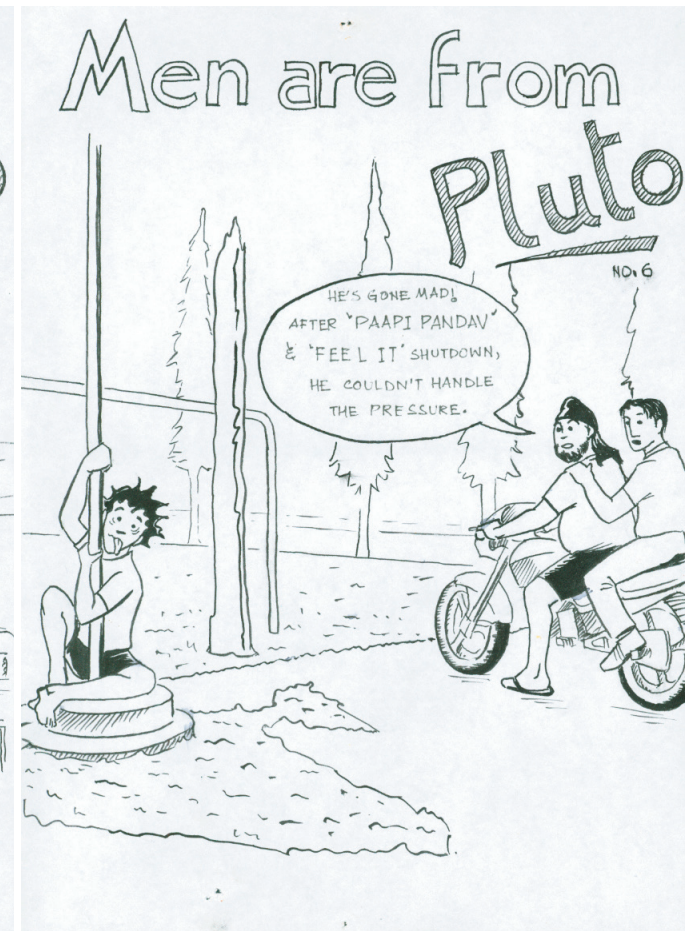
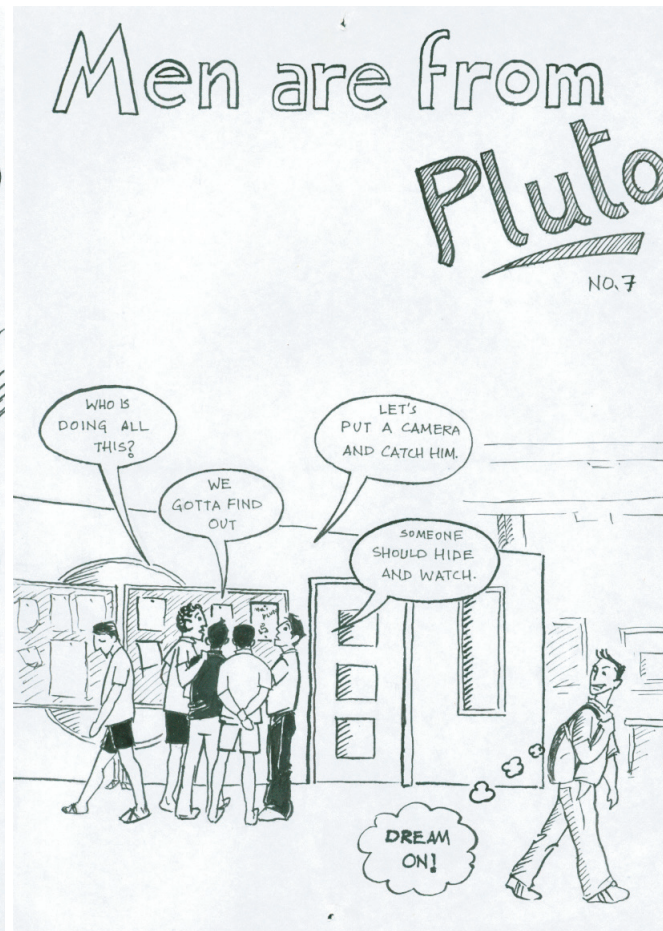
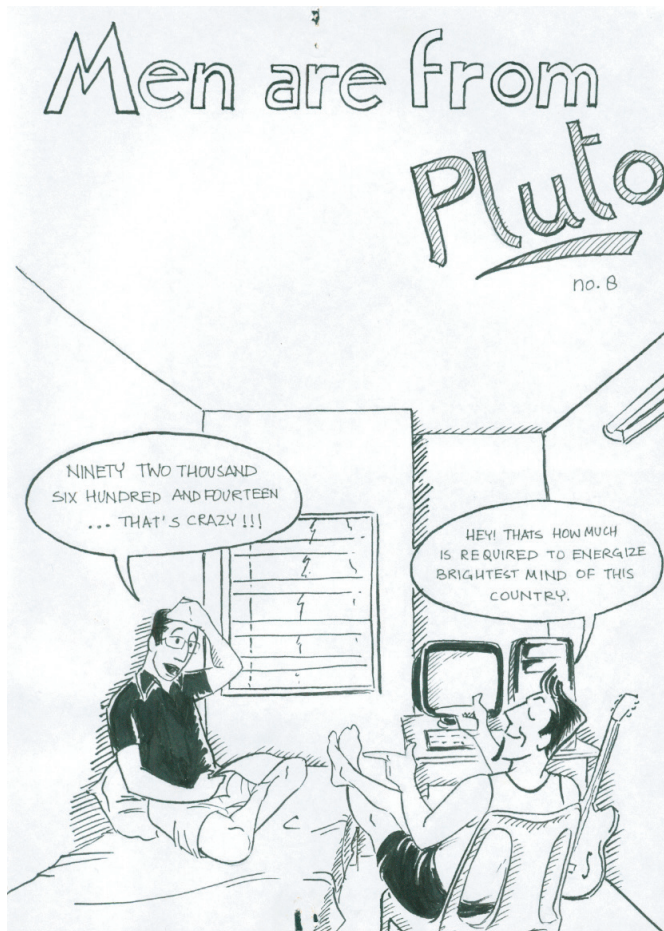
The approach is taking a comic or satirical stand on day to day life and violence. It was aimed at showing how violent incidents and behaviour has penetrated a normal lifestyle. The output can be a form of a daily comic strip.

Plot

The concept revolves around a family. How every member of the family in their own way come across violence in their daily life and how they react to such situation will throw light on violence and public life. A commentary on ignorant behaviour of people with issues of that importance.

It can also provide an opportunity to examine major and minor current events around the world in the shadow of violence. Issues like violence in media and how it benefits from selling it can also be communicated.

This approach highly depends upon daily events and trends. As far as a project is concerned, this approach is too loose to be tied up and requires a great deal of intuition and wit of the creator than the defined boundaries of a problem definition.



Explorations done through a daily comic strip on issues concerning IITB students



Approach 3

The Domino Effect

Outline

The approach is to raise questions in familiar settings and situations faced by teenagers. By showing harsh side of reality and unaccountable acts violence and their unforeseen outcomes.

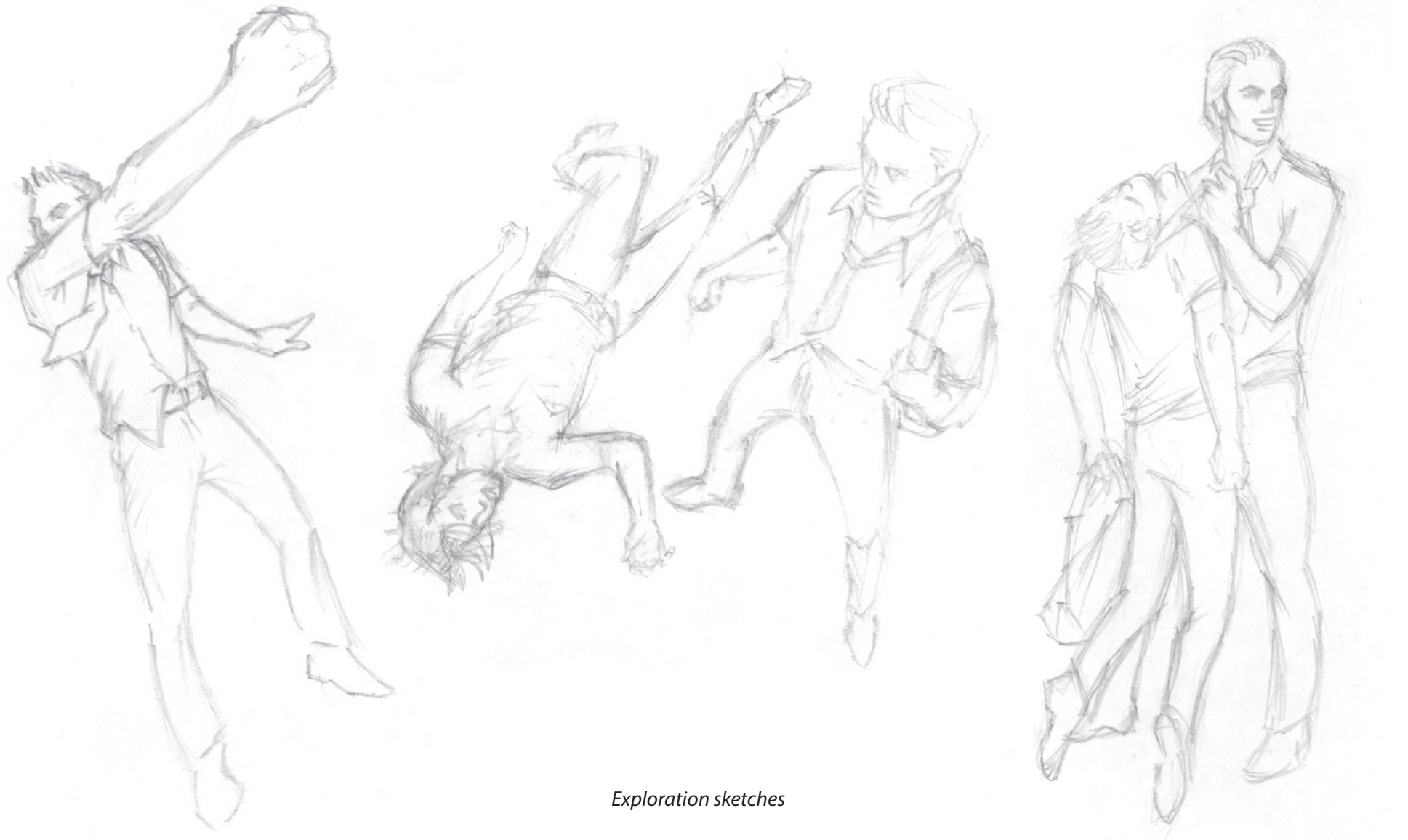
Plot

A tale of a young boy influenced by false imagery and provoked by his peers, sets out to take revenge from a bully at school. He does not take in consideration its outcomes and in order to teach a lesson to the bully, he ends up in physical fight. The brawl gets nasty and due to a mishap, the bully dies. This transforms his life completely as all the good intentions are overshadowed by his mistake. In panic he flees away only to spend his life in misery. Realizing life's worth and facing harsh reality of the streets he decides to go back home. But the city that he had left is under a communal riot initiated by the killing of a school boy for which he was responsible. What started off as an act of righteousness ended up in a disaster due to intolerance.

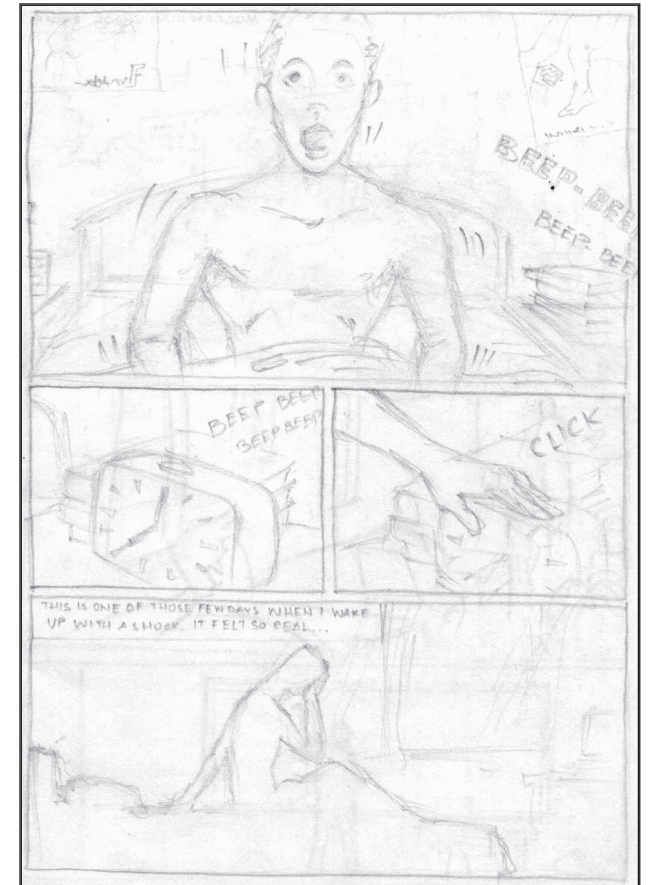
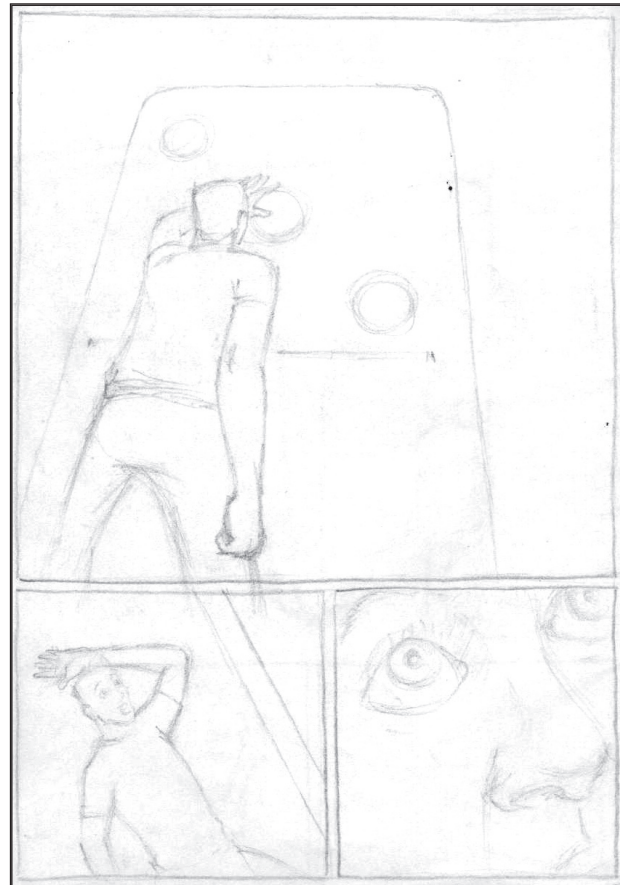
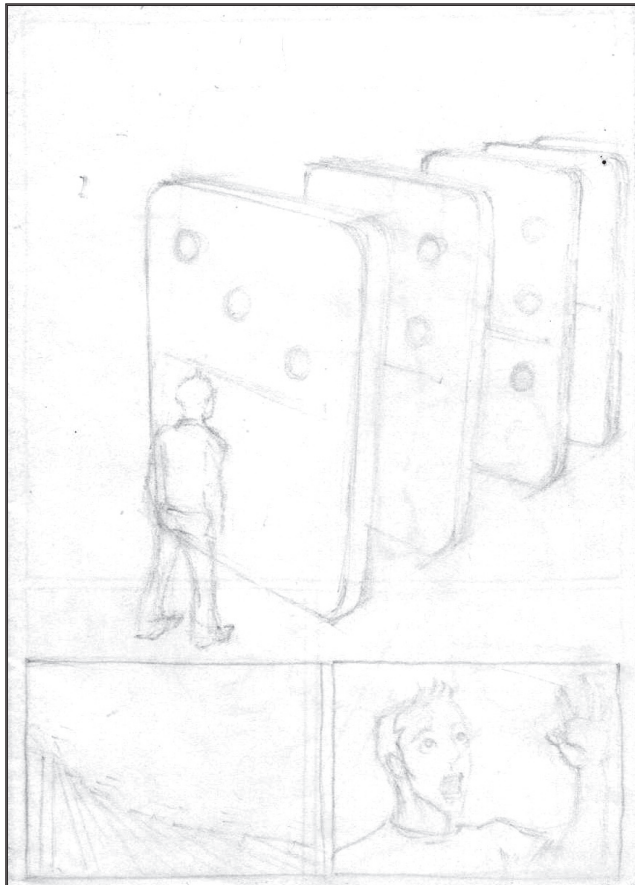
This approach gives opportunity for creating believable scenario. Familiarity of setting makes reader relate better with characters. Creates a link between thought before action and owing up to your responsibilities.

There are better possibilities for characterisation in intense situations and depiction of mental transformation.

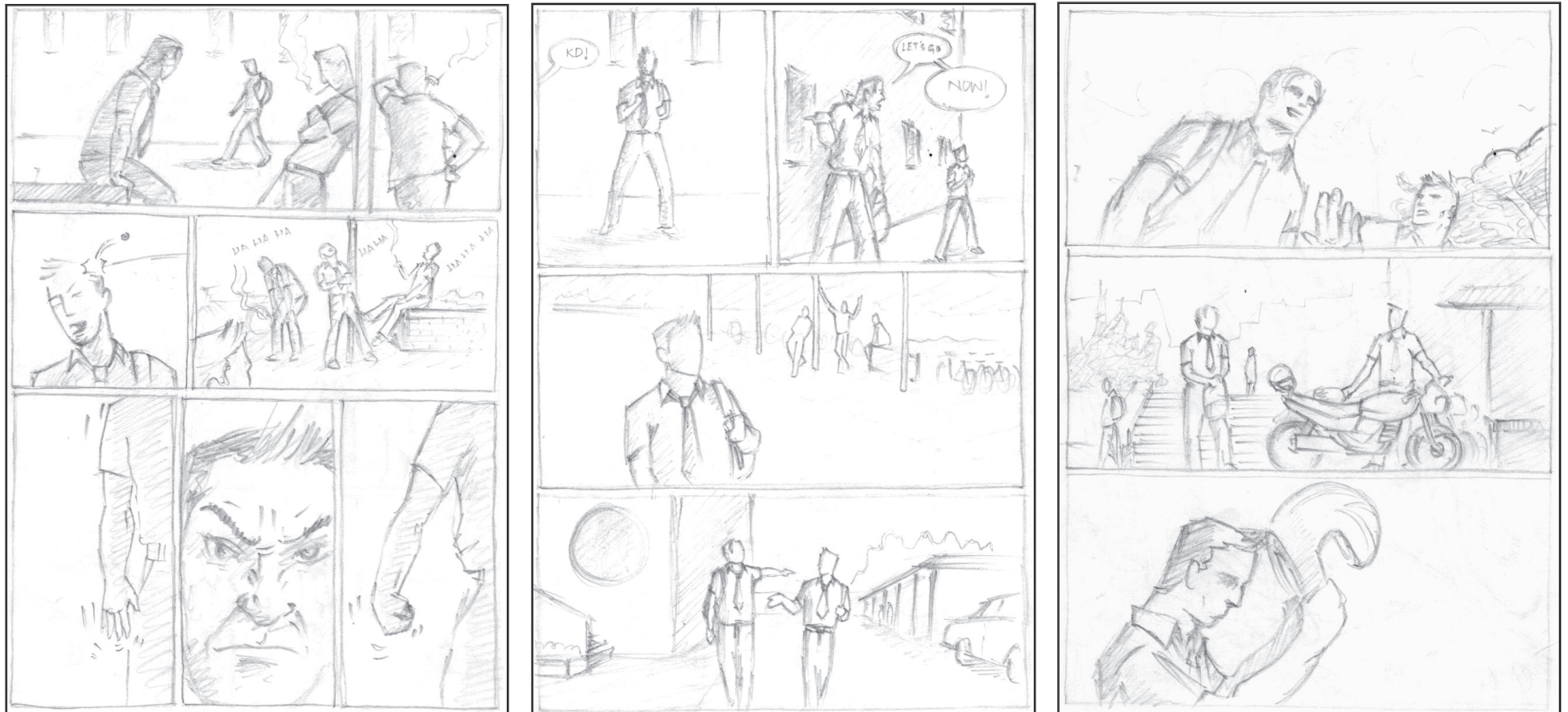
The approach has a certain shock value too.



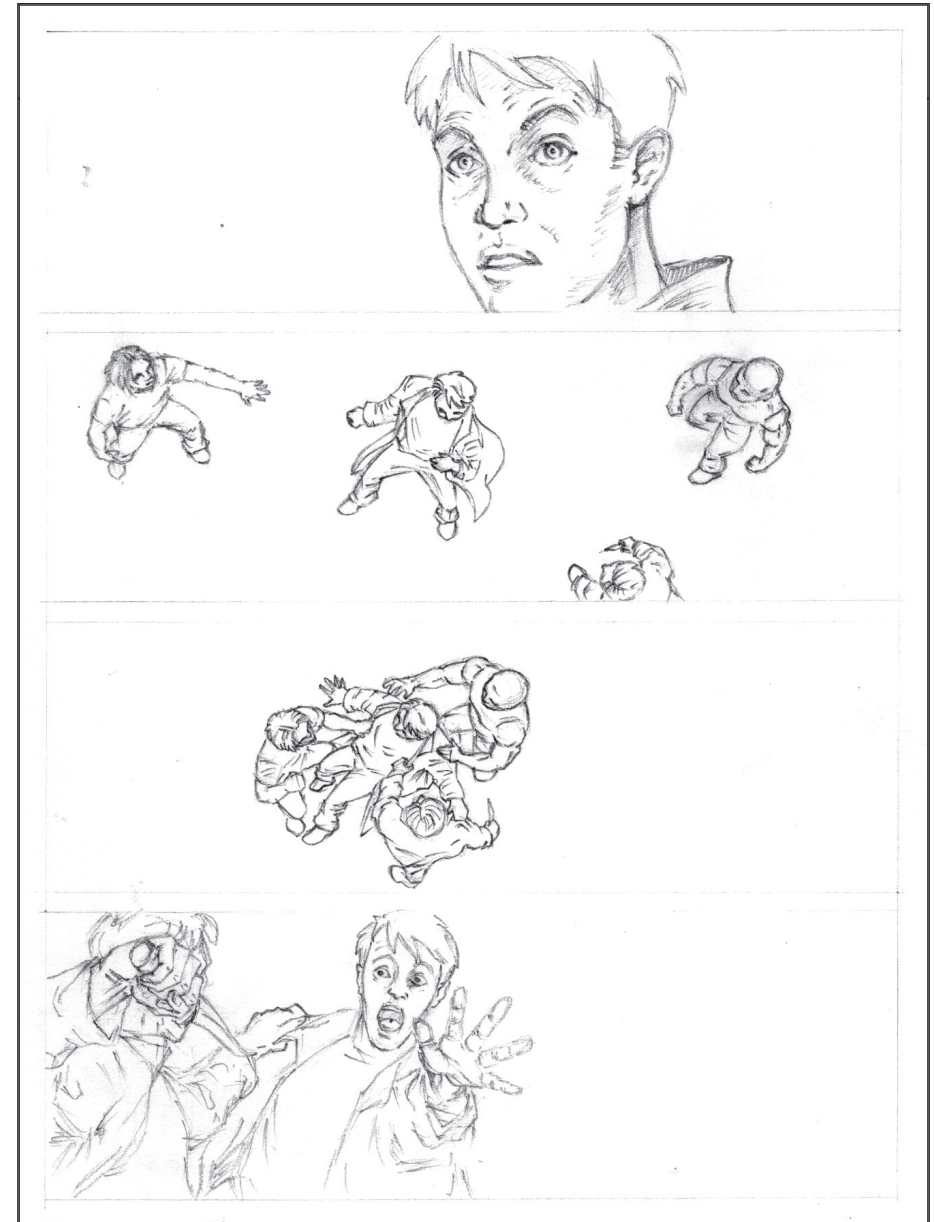
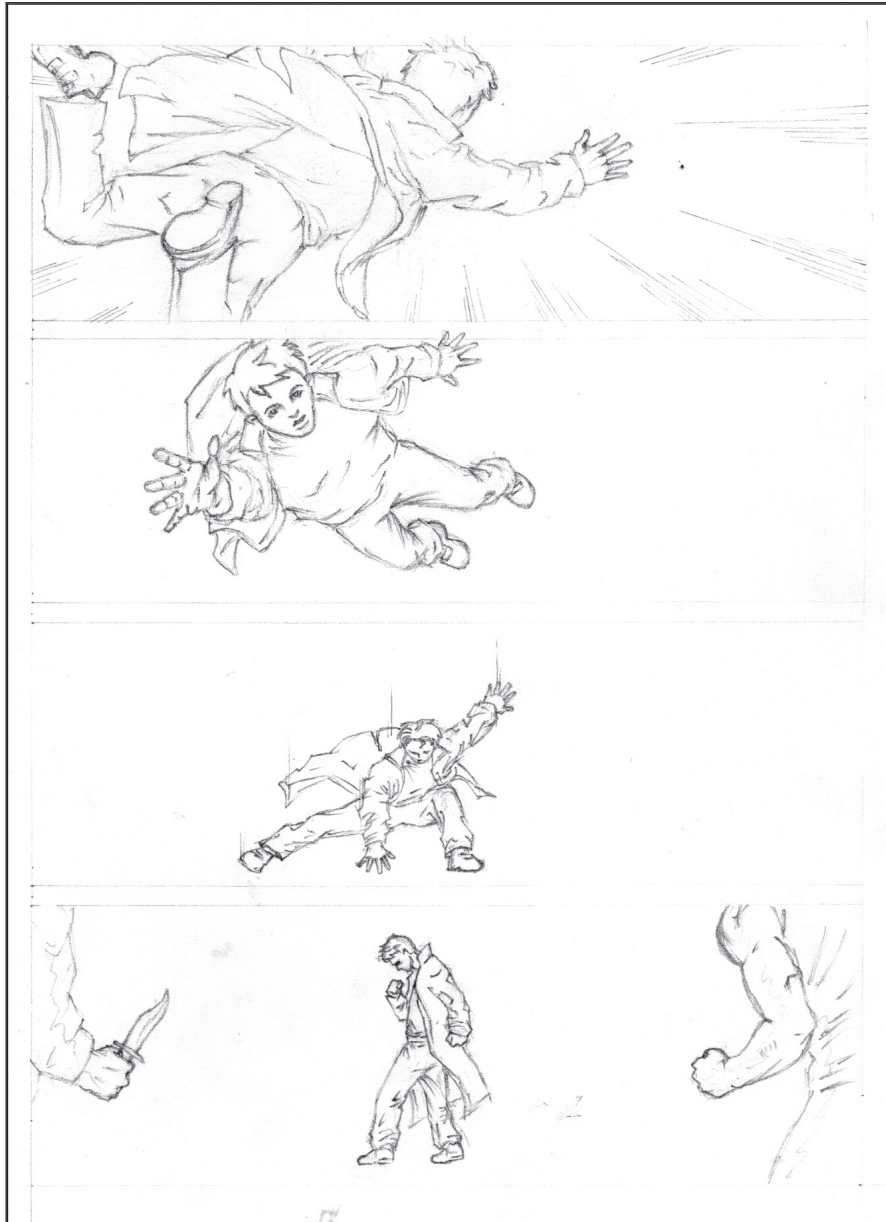
Exploration sketches



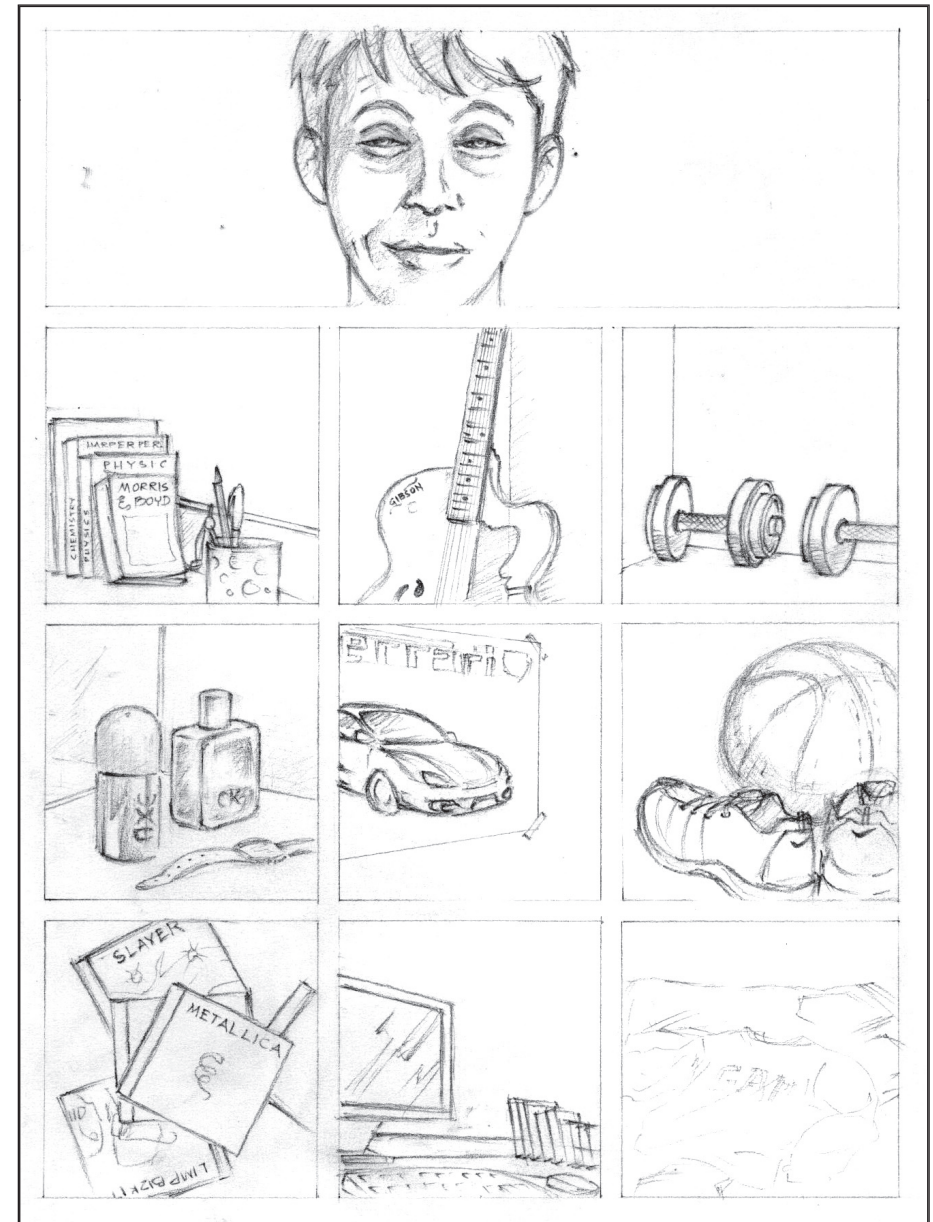
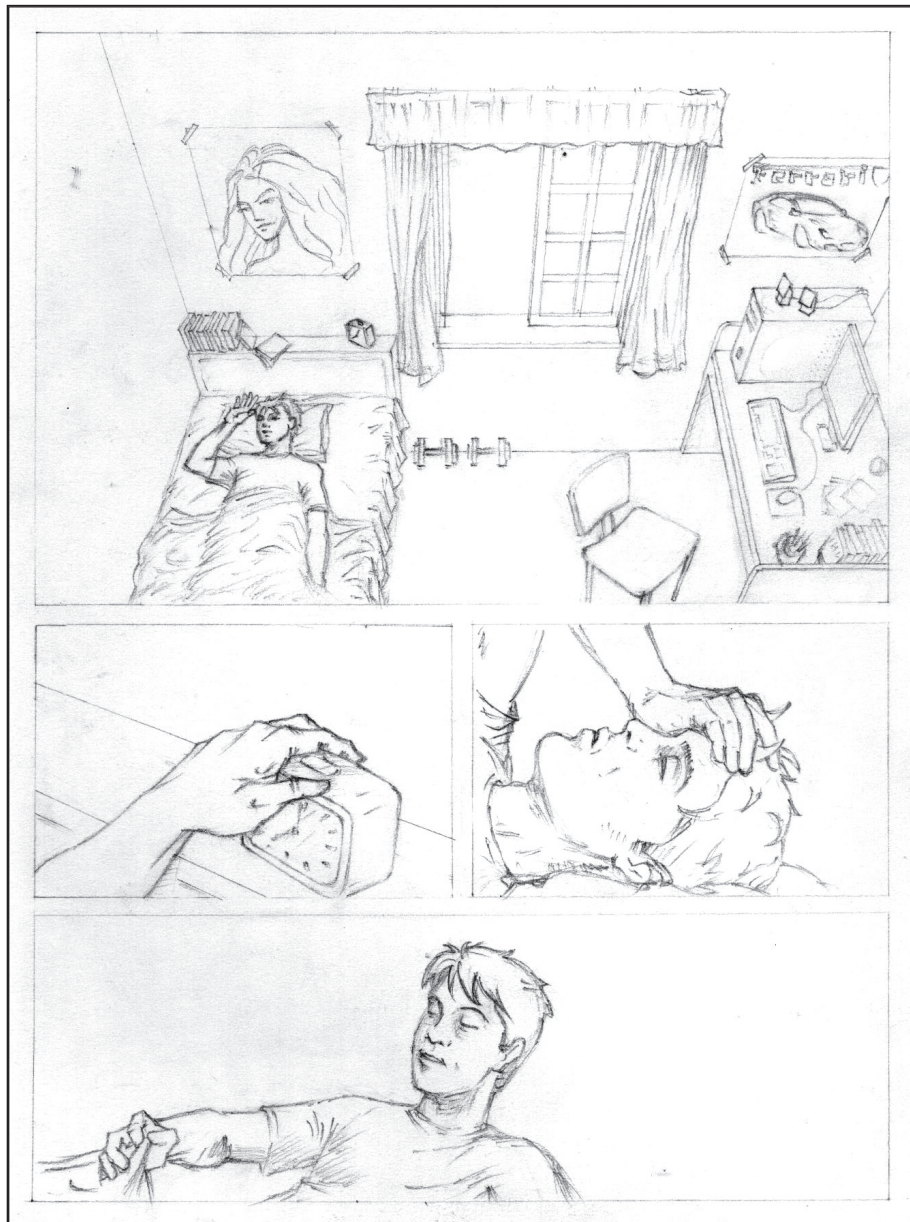
Explorations done through storyboarding



Explorations done through storyboarding



Explorations done through storyboarding



Explorations done through storyboarding



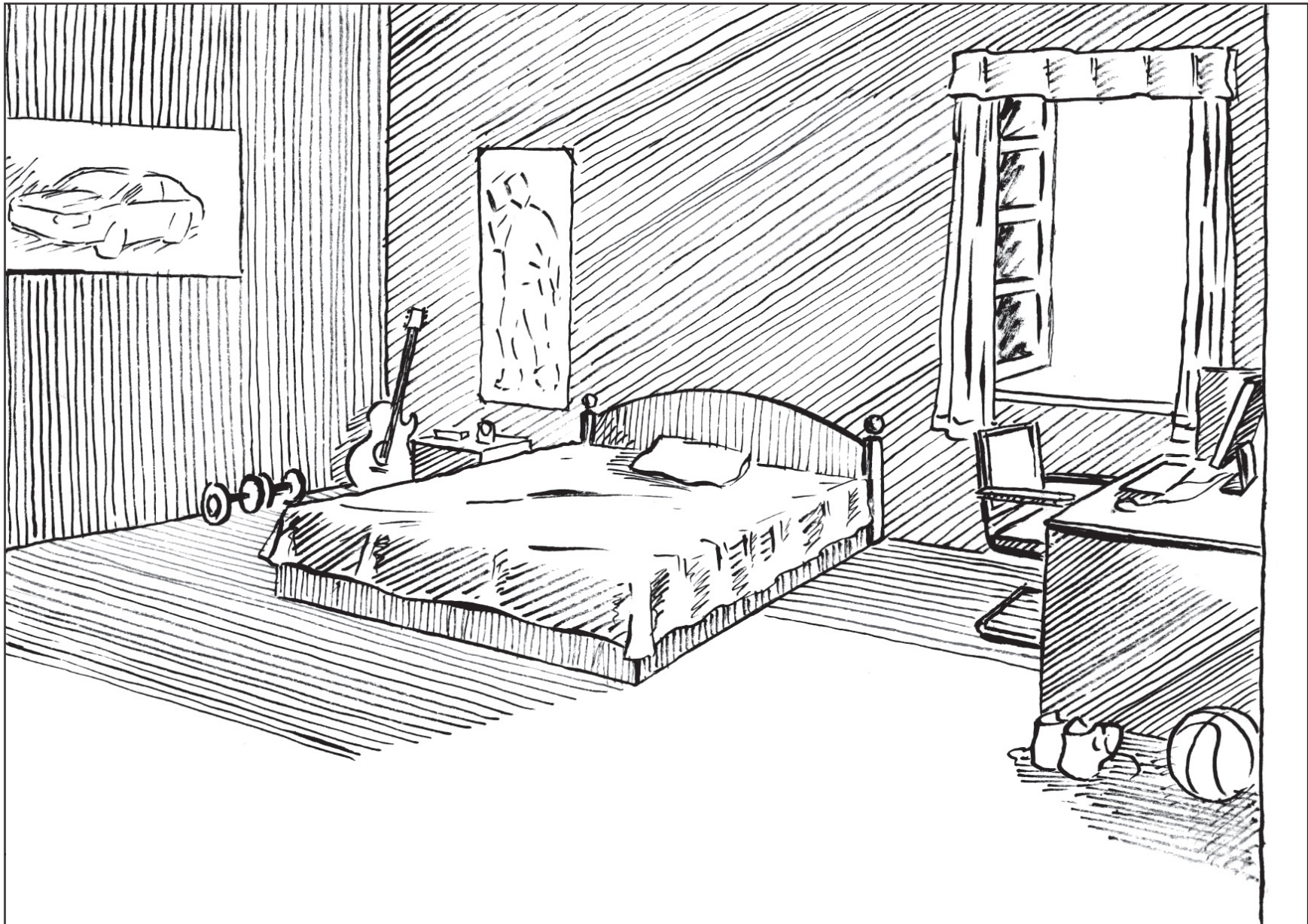
Explorations in style of representation



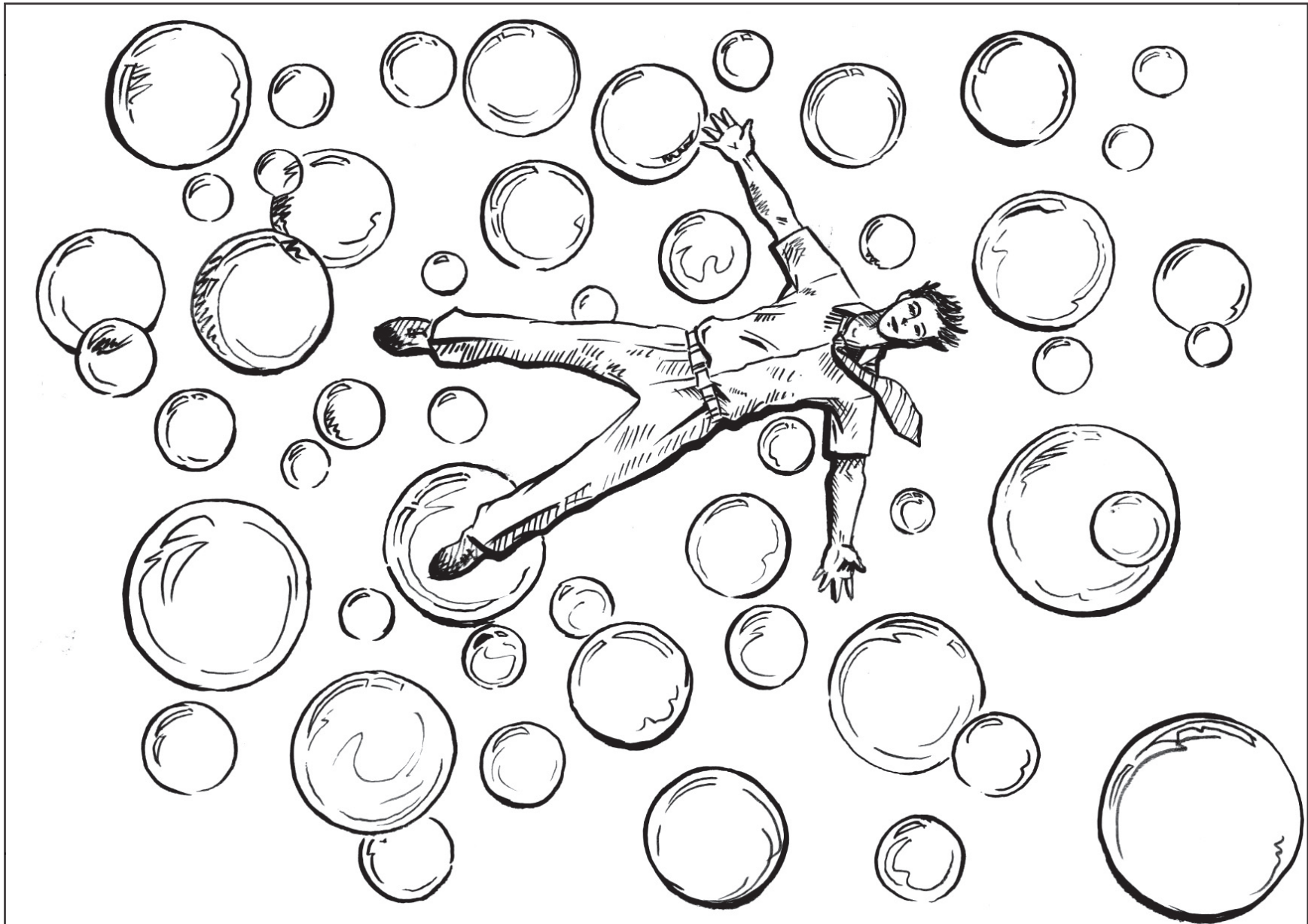
Explorations in style of representation



Explorations in style of representation



Final Artwork



Final Artwork



Final Artwork



Final Artwork



Final Artwork



Final Artwork

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