Lights Out / The Box

Two Stories

An Illustrative Consideration of the Uncanny

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Abstract

Lights Out / The Box: Two Stories is a collection of short comics situated within the horror genre. My thesis and exegesis explore the challenges of conveying horror in the comics medium, with a specific focus on eliciting a particular atmosphere, sense of mystery and the uncanny, through the combination of illustration, text and design.

Exegesis:

An Illustrative Consideration of the Uncanny

Introduction

This exegesis will first contextualise my research, covering key texts and influences, including comics, film and literature, that informed my stories. This is followed by a discussion and reflection on the development of my comics, including the techniques utilised and the successes and difficulties involved with their implementation. Techniques covered include composition and pacing, storyboarding and scripting.

Motivation

This project came into being after years of interest in the horror genre and practice as an illustrator and painter. In 2013, I created a graphic novel for an Honours in Art and Design, *Apt. 41*, which was an exploration of the genre of 'weird fiction', focusing on authors such as H.P. Lovecraft and Algernon Blackwood.

The story was told through silent, realistically rendered black and white watercolours, and followed a small scale story about a man encountering a hidden history embedded in the walls of his flat. *Apt. 41* contained a detached, dreamlike atmosphere. Combined with the sequential illustrations were diary fragments, an element evoking the meta-narrative styling of Lovecraft.

I have also explored narrative through illustration and painting, with a focus on evoking a sense of mystery and underlying menace in otherwise static, quiet images. Using mediums include pencil drawing, watercolour, acrylic and oil painting, I have approached portraiture, landscapes and constructed scenes within the constraints of the single image.

Compelled to return to the comics medium, I intend to explore the genre but with clearer character based narratives, with a basis in personal experience to ground the stories, and further develop my visual storytelling techniques.I want to utilise the power of sequential art to convey ideas and emotions visually with the dynamic sense of time and space the artform allows.

Review of contextual Knowledge

Horror, the Fantastic and the Uncanny

The horror genre is broad and comprised of many sub-genres including weird fiction, strange stories, apocalyptic fiction, psychological horror and body horror.

I am particularly interested in stories that sit on the edge between horror, fantasy, social realist and mystery/thrillers. Often involving a central enigmatic mystery that may or may or not be solved. Bringing the mysterious out of the everyday, as opposed to overtly supernatural events, such as those that defy natural laws. Some common elements I am drawn to include a central enigmatic mystery, and the repercussions of said mystery, rather than the solving of the mystery itself, and the suggestion of the supernatural over spectacle.

Sitting on the borders of horror and mystery/thrillers lie works that defy easy categorisation. Literary editor Alberto Manguel l touches on this quality in the introduction to his anthology, *Black Water: The Book of Fantastic Literature* (1984), containing stories which make "use of our everyday world as a facade through which the undefinable appears, hinting at the half-forgotten dreams of our imagination. Unlike tales of fantasy, fantastic literature deals with what can be best defined as the impossible seeping into the possible, what Wallace Stevens calls black water breaking into reality. Fantastic literature never really explains everything, it thrives on surprise, on the unexpected logic that is born from its own rules."

Another concept integral to this area of subtle horror storytelling is the evocation of the uncanny*,* the "seemingly supernatural," (Sandor, 2015). Marjorie Sandor describes the term, in her essay *Uncanny: a Brief history of the Disturbed Word* (2015)*,* as "an anxiety about the stability of those persons, places, and things in which we have placed our deepest trust, and our own sense of identity and belonging, that which we hold most private, from style to

perception to the most hidden un homelike subjects locked away in our private selves." (p. 1)

The Haunting of Hill House (1959), by Shirley Jackson, utilises the uncanny by giving life to the house at the centre of the story, which can be interpreted either as being caused supernatural or psychological suggestion. Another example is the film *Spirit of the Beehive* (1973)*, by spanish director Victor Erice, where a young child, unaware of the true realities of post-civil war spain, finds a monster, and the seemingly fantastic, in the form of an escaped rebel soldier hiding in her village.

Other literary horror authors who evoke the uncanny in their work include Kobo Abe, Robert Aickman, Julio Cortazar and Daphne Du Muir. Du Muir's story *Don't Look Now* (1971), and the film adaptation by Nicolas Roeg, evoke the uncanny through repeated sightings of a figure that appears to be the protagonist's long dead daughter.

Horror in Comics and Graphic Novels

Within the comics medium, works in the horror genre often focus on the more macabre and visceral end of the spectrum, due to the imagistic nature of the artform, such as the hugely successful *Walking Dead* and *Locke and Key* series. While they may lack the visceral immediacy and immersion of horror films and interactive media, comics can still use the power of images and text to leave a haunting, eerie impression on the reader. Particular works in the horror genre that have informed my writing are *Uzumaki* (2007) by Junji Ito, *Cinema Panopticon* (2005) by Thomas Ott, *Domu* (2001) by Otomo Katsuhiro and *The Black Project* (2013) by Gareth Brookes.

Uzumaki is a body-horror manga set in a Japanese village infected by supernatural spirals. *Domu* (fig 1.1*)* is a smaller scale, eerie version of Otomo's later epic '*Akira*', sharing the sci-fi concepts, but in the form of a telekinetic serial killer terrorising an apartment block. Like *Uzumaki, Domu* is illustrated in highly detailed, realistically proportioned ink lineart. The horror themes may not bleed into the artwork, but the ordinary, realistic settings, and how they are rendered, further ground the supernatural elements in tangible, physical spaces.

Gareth Brooke's *The Black Project* explores the diaries of a young boy who constructs girlfriends out of found objects, while struggling to fit in at school and home. The artwork is a mixture of stark woodcut prints and embroidery, which imbues it with a handmade texture, building on the morally ambiguous subject matter. (Fig 1.3)

Cinema Panopticum is an anthology style series of short Twilight Zone-esque stories, illustrated in a stark noir- like scratchboard style by Ott. Other key texts include *Black Hole* (2005) by Charles Burns, Emily Carroll's *Through the Woods* (2014) and Ben Catmull's *Ghosts and Ruins* (2013). It is the specific combination of atmosphere, real-world settings, restraint and experimental illustration techniques that I want to draw from these author/illustrators in the creation of my comics.

Wider Artistic Influences

Other comics creators who have influenced my approach to artwork and visual storytelling, include Taiyo Matsumoto, Sam Alden and Shaun Tan. Matsumoto and Sam Alden's work explore short 'slice of life' narratives with particularly expressive and naturalistic black and white artwork.

Mangaka (Japanese comic creator) Taiyo Matsumoto's series *Sunny* (2013), a collection of connected vignettes set within a Japanese orphanage, heavily influenced my approach to my stories' settings. His loose energetic illustrations, also informed the freeing up of my style away from hyperrealism and the experimental use of texture. (Fig 1.2)

Sam Alden's short story collection, *New Construction* (2015), contains personal and mysterious narratives that are told in disconnected fragments and are illustrated in expressive loose pencil. Shaun Tan's work, in particular the graphic novel/picture book *The Arrival* (2007), influenced my approach to atmospheric pencil illustrations for sequential artwork. While stylised and expressive, his illustrations are still economical and clear enough in their rendering of key details to help readers identify and empathise with his characters. (Fig 1.4)

Other artists that have influenced my approach to atmospheric illustrations, are the quiet desaturated portraits of Vilhelm Hammershoi, the lighting and composition of Edward Hopper's paintings (Fig 1.5), the noir-style use of negative space and stark shadows of Frank Miller's graphic novels (Fig 1.6) and the graphic minimalism of Mangaka Seiichi Hayashi.

I was also drawn to interactive media within the horror genre, especially games from the early console eras, where horror scenarios were depicted under significant technological

constraints. In some of the most well regarded works, such as first two games in the *Silent Hill* (2001) series, developed in Japan, the technical limitations informed their art style and graphics. This includes the use of fog effects to mask low detail distances and the application of simple textures and geometry to characters and environments, further increasing the atmosphere and mystery in the process. Creatures in the games are not highly rendered and their true forms can only exist within the player's imagination due to the lack of coherent, identifiable details. There is power in the lack of perfect clarity, and this approach to horror further influenced my use of minimal, pared back illustrations that could leave room for the imagination to interpret the spaces and characters contained within the panels of my stories. (Fig 1.7)

Filmmakers that have influenced my approach to narrative include Michael Haneke, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Peter Weir and Victor Erice. Haneke's dramas combine mystery/thriller and horror elements within everyday social realist settings. In the case of his film *Hidden*, anonymous videotapes sent to the central character's house uncover a buried guilty past, revealed in fragments in an unconventional and graphic way, with a central enigma that remains unsolved. (Fig 1.8-1.10)

Japanese director Kiyoshi Kurosawa's films have a particular uncanny, fragmented style that keeps much of the mystery and key events occurring just offscreen. When he does depict the supernatural or violent moments, it's with a detached, unflinchingly objective camera. He approaches a scene of violence in the same way he would a conversation at the dinner table, emphasising its place as being integral to the human condition (Kurosawa, 2012), not an entertaining departure, as it is usually depicted in, for example, an action film. His horror film *Cure* (1997), follows a detective solving murders that may have been caused by hypnotic suggestion and its ability to unearth hidden, violent urges that individuals keep buried within themselves.

Discussion / Analysis

Illustration Process

Each story was built up from an initial outline, script or rough storyboard. Drafts took the form of both scripts and storyboards, and the alternation between them, with an occasional return to the initial outlines to better grasp the overall plot structures. They were then storyboarded in more detail, alongside development of the settings and character designs.

The concept illustrations were rendered with pencil, the same medium as the final artwork, which allowed me to touch on the atmosphere and lighting in the early phases of the writing process. The final drafts of the storyboards were then used as reference for the final page lineart, which was then transferred and cleaned up in the final renderings, using a variety of soft pencils to achieve a combination of tones and textures. (Fig 1.11-1.13)

Very little photo reference was used for the drawings, as I wanted the spaces and characters to be a drawn from memory where I could intuitively add detail. I wanted to portray a sense of physical, lived in spaces, but not ground them too specifically in real-world locations. The school setting is sparse, clean and ordered, reflecting the way the students are strictly controlled. The household setting is more eclectic, with mismatched furniture, assorted objects and collected artworks. It is a more readily inviting, comfortable environment, which further contrasts with the reality of the situation.

Visual Language

The language I have used to tell my stories is a combination of illustration and text which is intended to be simultaneously clear and atmospheric. I have used economical details, simple textured pencil, and the use of negative space to give depth and atmosphere to scenes, while still giving physical shape to the characters and their interactions with each other and their environment.

I chose to limit the tones available to me to only three values and forbid myself to render any gradients or subtle value changes within the panels. This limitation forced me to focus on the most important aspects of each scene, and how the eye could be drawn to them and better serve the moments in question.

In choosing to use tone over line, the entire world is defined by shadows and rough textures of pencil, rather than the slicker, clear linework of traditional ink. The lack of detail and specificity is deliberate and is intended to reflect my approach to the stories. Not all events are depicted, many questions remain unanswered. The illustration style is not 'complete', and the use of limited detail and negative space creates room for the reader to provide their own closure and interpretation of the scenes and details.

For the text, I have chosen not to use graphic text bubbles or boxes and have let the words float freely with only a simple line to suggest the speaker, in an attempt to let the text combine more naturally within the panels. Improvements could be made by, first, lettering the text in the same medium as the illustrations (pencil), and second, improving the composition of some of the more text heavy panels to allow for more clarity and reduce tension between the two elements.

Composition / Framing

The framing of the panels and choices of the shots, are specifically based on the cinematography of Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Michael Haneke, of using a majority of long or medium shots, rather than close-ups and inserts. I wanted to frame each scene distantly, almost like an objective camera on a wall, as opposed to a more subjective, naturalistic point of view. This did lead to a lack of dynamism in some of the panels, and, due to the images being composed together on a single page, can give a flat, awkward feeling of repetition, that isn't so prevalent in a film where the element of time changes what is being shown at any given moment on a single surface.

The Box includes a few more close-ups, and mid shots in an attempt to provide a slightly more claustrophobic mood, while Lights Out is mostly long shots, with very rare close-ups. However, this does mean the protagonist occasionally gets lost in the scenery and amongst the other uniformed characters.

For the panel layout, I used a simple grid of three rows, where panels could be re sized and shaped during the storyboarding process. The panels would simply be larger or smaller depending on the amount of detail involved, the style of shot, or the significance of the moment being depicted. Instead of a wildly experimental panel layout for each page, and each scene, I wanted to have a standardised layout that would become invisible to the reader after they've immersed themselves within the story, rather than a stylistic distraction. This was also influenced by the nature of film and how it is projected onto a single space that remains unchanging throughout its duration. Like Kiyoshi Kurosawa's restrained approach to scenes of violence and horror, I did not want to suddenly expand to full page illustrations for dramatic effect. The occasional panels that take up entire rows serve as a

dynamic enough change from the more regular panels, which I have used sparingly where necessary to convey a sense of scale.

Story Overview

The two stories I have developed, Lights Out and The box, depict encounters with certain power dynamics in two very different settings. Lights Out is set in a boarding school, and follows a fifteen year old encountering a number of mysterious rules set up in the institution. The Box takes place in an everyday, middle class Auckland household, where two children hide a secret from their visiting step-father.

Neither story contains anything overtly supernatural, horrific or graphic, and in some aspects the evocation and threat of violence is intended to be the primary emotion conveyed, and the confusion and fear evoked by this threat. In this regard, The Box succeeds more as a horror story, as its underlying sense of danger, the threat of violence, is clearer, something readers can be more readily affected by.

In both stories the elements of tension and suspense were difficult to achieve. Due to the constraints of the medium, the stories would benefit from a slower build-up, and without the immediacy and sound design that aids film and interactive media in its development of suspense, I am left to explore alternate ways of leaving a lasting impression.

The stories are dominated by shadows. The places and people are mostly defined not by lines - which mean clarity, simple black and white, solid separate forms, etc - but by shadows - which leads to objects blending into one another, clarity remaining elusive, and a sense of uncertainty and unease in the reader.

The same is true of the stories: they begin with ordinary (sunlit) life, and scenes that should suggest safety and nurturing (a school, a childhood home), and then focus on the shadows

that really define these situations: the abuse of power, fear, confusion in the face of unspoken threats and complex adult behaviours. The protagonists (Grant, Finn and Lili) are left struggling to understand what is going on in those shadows, and to some extent so is the reader, as the narrative approaches constantly shift away from spelling things out explicitly, and instead imply, suggest, allude.

The primary thing I wanted to evoke in the reader was a sense of unease - that there's something dark and abnormal going on behind the sunlit surface of normality. The term "horror" tends to suggest a visceral reaction to a direct encounter with horrifying things or events. Instead, what I'm interested in is something more like "dread" or "unease" - which are less explicit and clear. So the stories adopted numerous strategies (drawing style, narrative techniques) to unsettle the reader, and frustrate their attempts to find clarity and simplicity in the stories.

Lights Out

Lights Out's central mystery, that remains mostly ambiguous and unexplained by the end, revolves around a number of oddly named punishments students at a boarding school are subjected to. It is hinted that students were never seen again, possibly facing death or imprisonment. The protagonist of the story, Grant, gets his school dorm in trouble, leading to one of them, Leon, being 'gated'.

Leon's fate is unknown for most of the story, until Grant finds him hanging upside down in the locker room. The enigma of the punishments and what Grant witnesses throughout the story is intended to evoke the uncanny and the unsettling border between the mundane and something sinister underlying this unfamiliar place.

This is suggested to be a form of torture as the location had previously been established as a place of punishment (one of the many 'walls' that are the source of the students' fears). In an attempt to free him, the protagonist tells his housemaster that his dorm mate Jasper had also been up on the evening of his misdeed, and that he had just been helping him. His fear for Leon has led him to put Jasper in even more danger.

The punishments are intended to be vague, and the reader should question if they are merely reasonable punishments, or in reality cruel, torturous or deadly. Grant's encounter with Leon at the end suggests Jasper may never return or was simply expelled.

The foundation of the story is the fear of the unknown when entering a new institution, a place that may or may not have your personal well-being at heart. From personal experience, the fear of these punishments was usually much worse than the reality of them,

but it was this fear that could make a strong psychological impact on someone in the midst of their adolescent education.

Lights Out, for its horrors to be more successful, would need more time situated within the everyday life of the boarding school setting, and for the mysterious elements given more space to be built up. Communicating the fear of punishments in a boarding school as being more than an everyday detention needs further development. I also aimed to indicate the passing of time, the sense of routine and the blending of days through the use of repeated shots (with subtle changes), revisiting locations and characters. This element could be improved with more space for immersion in the self-contained universe of the school.

The lead character is not very engaged with events, and does not yet hold any strong opinions on the school he has recently arrived at. I intended for him to be observant, confused and ultimately a puppet for those who run the school, staff who barely need to lift a finger to get the students to speak up. He ends the story with many unanswered questions, that the reader should also ponder. How guilty should he feel? Is the threat real or just imagined?

The Box

The Box explores the tensions and power dynamics in a family home and the underlying

threat of violence. I chose to not explicitly depict any violence towards the children in the

story, as the aspect I was interested in conveying is the tension and anxiety involved with

encountering someone, or a situation, that could explode at any moment.

The central mystery in The Box centers around a visit from a father (or stepfather) and his

interaction with the two children, and what they are trying to hide from him. A problem I

encountered in telling this story, was choosing whether or not to reveal the fact that

someone was hiding in the chest in the living room, and allow for the tension to revolve

around that. I chose to leave it to be revealed at the end, when the father finds hair hanging

from the chest and decides to lock the chest before leaving with the children.

The children, Finn and Lili, are tasked with not giving away the fact their mother has been

hidden within the chest, so their interactions with the father are awkward and forced. They

play hide and seek, and as they hide, the father makes it clear he really is going to search

for her. For the reader, the fact he is searching for someone is intended to be subtle, and

the exact situation, including why she is in the box and what has occurred in family's past,

are left to the reader's imagination.

His choice to lock her in the chest and leave with the children is horrific and this is the

closest I've come to true horror in this collection. I have left it open, with his dialogue

suggesting that he may return to speak to her. The children in the situation are intended to

be brave, confused and struggling, with their limited ability, to stand up to father figure who has abused his power.

The uncanny shows itself in this story in the form of the tension between the children and father, his hidden intentions, and the reveal underlying the seemingly inconsequential detail present from the very beginning of the story in the form of the chest.

Key Themes

Both stories are like traps. Light's Out is intended to be confusing, almost maze like. Grant enters the school, feeling lost. He tries to find his way into this labyrinth of strange behaviours and rules, but is blocked, confused and frustrated. Every effort to escape punishment only leads him deeper into the trap. At the end, he finally leaves the school, stepping out into the bright sunshine (focused on in the last two pages of artwork). But rather than being an escape from the trap, we realise he's been fully co-opted, by becoming part of its system of punishment and betrayal. He can't escape from what he's done.

The Box also contains a trap: the box itself, which starts out as a refuge, a means for the mother to escape from the father, ends up becoming the trap that ensnares her. The kids also enter into a kind of game with their father: hiding around the house while he searches, then sneaking around trying to outmaneuver him, to lead him astray. Instead they end up lost in his labyrinth, and led to where he traps them in the car, unable to help their mother or escape from him.

In short, feeling trapped - struggling to see the trap, to understand it, and find a way to escape it (but failing, because the trap is too big, too powerful) - is central to both stories.

Another concept present in both stories, is complicity: Grant becomes complicit in maintaining the trap and locking himself into it. The kids become complicit in their mother being locked in the box (after all, they put her there). The moral implications of all this is an important part of the horror of these stories: that it's not just what is done to us that's horrifying - but also what we end up doing to others. The greatest horror of these hugely unbalanced power relationships (school-student, parent-child) is the way they force the powerless to become morally compromised, and maintain their own cages.

Conclusion

In the process of developing these stories, I began with a survey of horror comics, novels, films, and a desire to evoke the uncanny. As the project progressed, I found that what I was most interested in exploring, was the sense of unease and tension that underlies everyday life, especially anxiety produced by certain power dynamics.

Eventually I returned, full circle, to my initial aims, by grounding the stories in my own personal experiences of the uncanny, of the familiar becoming possessed with the threatening unknown. My techniques used in the stories, narrative and illustrative, were a way to explore that through suggestion and inference.

Rather than simply replicating the conventions of the horror genre, using tropes such as haunted ancient spaces and shadowy figures, I attempted to draw fear from ordinary places, moments in broad daylight and from my memories. As much as I wanted to revel in the more fantastic and alluring qualities of the genre, I wanted the moments to spring naturally from my settings, situations and characters.

I encountered limitations of these techniques, but also how effective they can aid in telling small scale, personal horror stories. I hope to further develop these stories, alongside the various techniques employed for future explorations of narrative.

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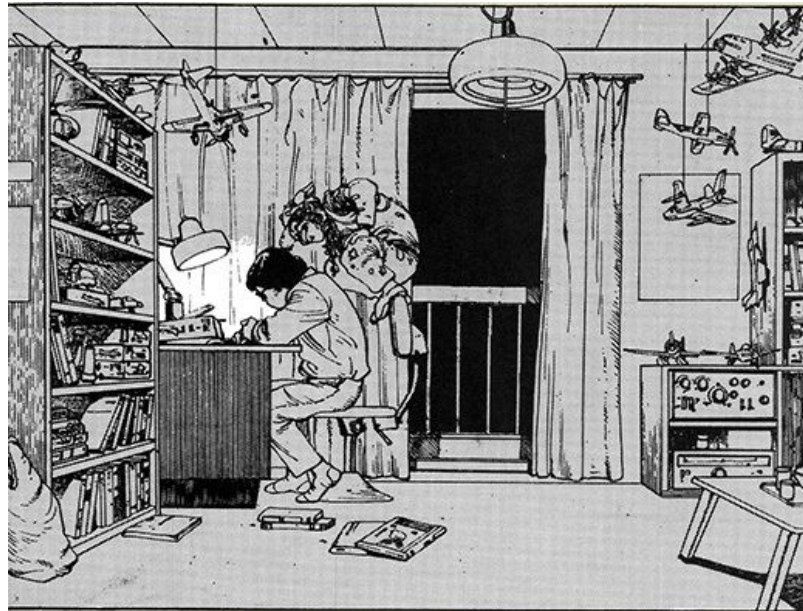Tsuboyama, M., & Hatakeda, N. (2001)). Silent Hill 2 [Computer software].

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Fig 1.1, *Domu*, Otomo. K. 2001

but not the same woods where I had buried Jessica and Melissa, I knew some different woods by the canal.
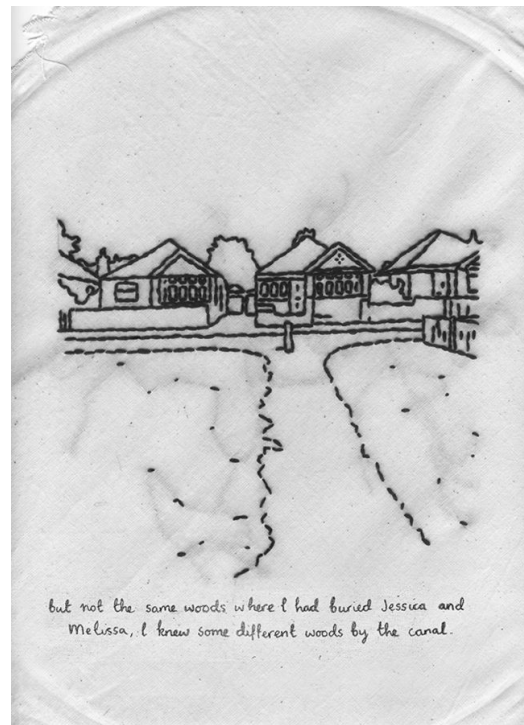
Fig 1.3, *The black project.* Brookes, G. 2013

Fig. 1.5 *Night Windows.* Hopper. E. 1928

NOTHING. NOT A SOUND. NO SIGN OF LIFE.

THE PLACE IS A MESS. BOOKS, PAPERS SCATTERED EVERYWHERE.

Fig 1.6 *Sin City.* Miller, F. 1991

Fig 1.7. *Silent Hill*. Konami. 2001

Fig 1.8 *Spirit of the Beehive.* Erice, V. 1973

Fig 1.9 *Cure.* Kurosawa, K. 1997
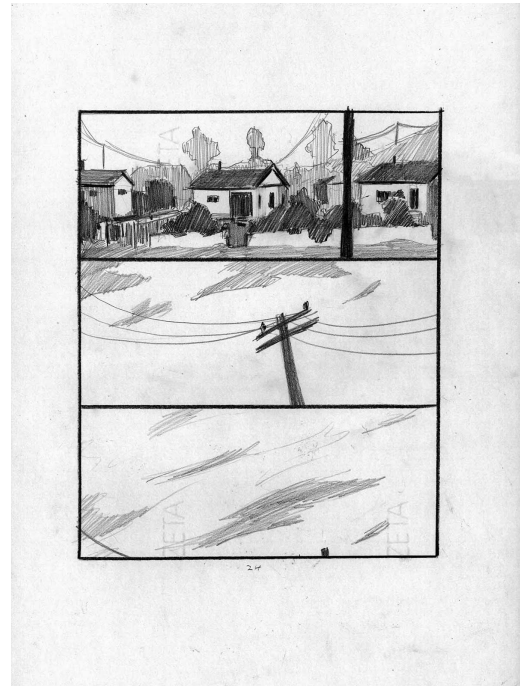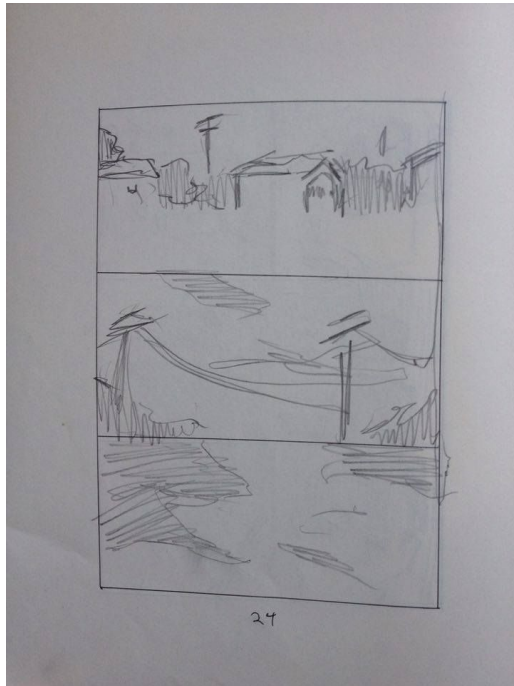

Fig 1.10 *Hidden*, Haneke, M. 2005

Fig 1.11-13, *Storyboard to final artwork.* Quy, M. 2016