

DEGREE PROJECT

TITLE: Children and War

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Design, Animation

By

S.Gnana Selvam
(156340006)

Guide:
Prof. Phani Tetali



Animation and Film Design

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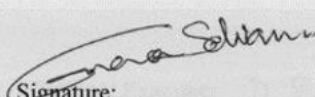
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Signature:
Name: S.GnanaSelvam
Roll No.: 156340006
Date: 14/06/17

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During my second semester in IDC, I was asked to create an animatic for a short film with any theme in mind. I took the theme of refugee crisis and explored the crisis of the past and the present and during this time I came across the story of Aylan Kurdi, the boy who washed up on the shore. This sparked an immediate response to give all those lost souls a voice. Thus the idea for a short named Zullu was conceived. Zullu was a story of Ahmed, a 9 year old boy who becomes a refugee during a civil war and talks about what pushes him to leave his innocence and childhood behind. This is what I would call my initial step towards my project, and I saw this as an opportunity to contemplate my thoughts on war and its aftermath. I tried to understand and reflect upon such a massive subject and finally wanted to make a statement on war. Even though I suspended the idea of making Zullu in the near future, but the theme, “Loss of childhood” stuck with me. This theme evolved and widened into becoming my project topic “Children & War”. I knew that I wanted to address, the effects of war on children.

I am proud of my army heritage. My ancestors did everything they thought was just. They might have been right, they might have been wrong but what is certain is that they are past. So are we going to do the same things they did? Can we imagine a world without war? It may be idealistic, but what's the harm in imagining, After all isn't this who we are?

**"The Earth is closing on us pushing us through the last passage
And we tear off our limbs to pass through.
Where should we go after the last frontiers?
Where should the birds fly after the last sky?"
-Mahmoud Darwish**

*“Vidai Kodu Engal Naadae
Kadal Vaasal Thelikkum Veedae
Pana Mara Kaadae, Paravaigal Koodae
Marumurai Oru Murai Paarpoma?
Uthattil Punnagai Puthaithom
Uyirai Udambukkul Puthaithom
Verum Koodugal Mattum Oorvalam Pogindrom”
- Vairamuthu(Kannathil Muthamittal)*

-

When you grow up in a family where your great grandfather has served the second World War, your grandfather had fought both the Indo-Pak and the Indo-Sino wars and your father himself has fought the Kargil war, you tend to develop a strong notion of nation and its greatness. The flipside of this is that you overlook the war as a necessary evil. Sometimes you may even glorify it. But all this changed when my parents took me to Mani Ratnam's "Kannathil Muthamittal" during my later childhood. I exited the hall that day with all the foundations of my beliefs shattered and I was left confused, unable to comprehend what had just happened. The line between good and bad seemed blurry. This created an inner turmoil, which eventually with time, faded into the background, or so I believed. It resurfaced every now and then rendering me clueless as to what could be done.

CHILDREN AND WAR

Gone are the days when most wars were fought between countries' armies on a remote battlefield. The vast majority of modern conflicts take place within countries, not among them. While civilians were once far removed from the fighting, they're now routinely targeted and make up 90% of the casualties.

In many conflict zones children account for the majority of the casualties. Most die not from the weapons, but from preventable diseases that aren't prevented or treated because the health systems and infrastructure have been destroyed.

Physical effects of war on children.

What grabs the headlines is children being killed and maimed by the bombs and bullets of war. But some are recruited to become soldiers themselves and are placed directly in the firing line. When the heat of battle is over, landmines and unexploded ordinance can leave a deadly legacy for years. Rape and sexual violence are increasingly being used as a weapon of war. Many girls and young women have babies as a result, or are injured in such a way that they cannot have children in the future.

Many more children die or become gravely ill from the indirect physical effects of war. Hospitals and health centres are destroyed. Doctors and nurses are killed or they flee. Children are most vulnerable to diseases like diarrhoea, malaria and cholera. Treatment is simple and cheap, yet thousands of children have died due to lack of it.

Psychological effects of war on children.

The psychological and emotional trauma caused by war has been widely studied in recent years. Whereas soldiers in the First World War received little sympathy for suffering from 'shell shock', more is now understood about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

It adversely affects adults, who are sent to fight in conflicts, and the effects on vulnerable and impressionable children can be worse, particularly because many don't understand what the conflict is about or why it is happening. It can affect their ability to forge healthy relationships with adults or with their peers. Some turn to alcohol or drug abuse as a coping mechanism – a behaviour particularly common among street children and child soldiers

Economic effects of war on children.

One of the gravest effects of war is the way it disrupts and destroys children's education. Yet education is the best weapon against poverty and conflict. War destroys industries, jobs and infrastructure. It can put a huge strain on families – and conflict is usually taking place in the poorest countries in the first place. Parents often can't afford to look after their children and may be forced to keep them at home to look after siblings, to work instead of going to school, or the children may even end up on the streets in the most acute cases of poverty. It's at this economic level where the damage is really done as it fuels the conflict-poverty cycle that has caused countless deaths and blighted lives across huge swathes of sub-Saharan Africa in particular.

Resilience.

Yet it's also worth pointing out that children are often incredibly resilient. Given the right environment and protection they can remarkably thrive and recover from a really tough start in life.

INFLUENCES

Films

As mentioned earlier, my original influence was Mani Ratnam. I was exposed to mainstream cinema and was conditioned to the extravagance of it, until I came across relatively thought provoking films such as Blood Diamond, Schindler's List etc. Then again in IDC I was bombarded with a lot of thought provoking imagery, ideas and films. Prof. Mazhar Kamran introduced me to the world of Neo-realism in cinema. I can't talk enough about how De Sica's Bicycle Thieves that enamored me to the world of Neo-realistic cinema. Yet another influence on me from this movement was Abbas Kiarostami. As I started out my secondary research by revisiting Kannathil Muthamittal. It made me realize what I was looking for to say, "All war is bad". From there I took the direction of Anti-war films, starting out with Saving Private Ryan and its realistic and disturbing portrayal of the D-Day during the WWII. Miyazaki's films such as princess Mononoke made me empathize with the so-called villains. This opened up a whole new perspective to the world and made me realize, how gray the world can be. Kubrick's "Dr. Strange Love", satirically showed me the absurdity of war.

Then I moved towards the films, which portrayed war and its effect on children. A classic film of this category is Grave of the fireflies. The film showcases the ordeal of two children who are orphaned by WWII and are left to fend for themselves. Their struggle for survival and ultimate failure in doing so was heart wrenching and unsettling. This film reinforced my vision of showing war chiefly from a civilian's point of view. I understood the character evolution and character arc from the film "Beasts of No Nation", which exhibits two distinctive character arcs of Commandant and the child called Agu. The Commandant transforms from Savior to criminal while Agu evolves from being a mischievous child to becoming a cold-blooded killer.

"The boy in Striped Pajamas" and "Children of Heaven", depicted innocence and the ability of children to bring hope, which stood in stark contrast with idea of children's ability to heinous atrocities painted by films like "Lord of the Flies" and "City of God". These conflicting ideas provided

the room for better understanding of children's psychology and the effects of their environment on their growth. Blood Diamond's depiction of children's induction into rebel/government forces using various tactics and the toll it takes on their personality and growth is noteworthy.

Books

I was constantly switching between books and films; this helped me absorb how both the mediums tackled the same issue in such different ways. Among the books I read, "Mornings in Jenin" written by Susan Abulhawa, was the one which impacted me massively. The content and narrative is so intriguing that it compelled me to care for the character, who were but ordinary people going through extraordinary ordeals for survival. This put me in a position where the protagonist Amal's struggles, joys and loss were mine as well.

My subsequent watch of "Waltz with Bashir", which was directed at me from a Retd. Israeli soldier's point of view, who tries to recall his memories of Israel-Palestine conflict and his place in it. This offered me Israel's take on Shatila Massacre while "Mornings in Jenin", takes from the Palestinian point of view. This clash in ideas and perspectives made me realize that there is never a single story but multiple versions of the same story.

Yet another powerful read was "A thousand Splendid Suns", by Khaled Hosseini. It reinforced my thought on war, as it accurately portrayed the disruption and destruction caused to civilian life in a period of war. Loss of future, education, innocence and most of all fragility of dreams and hope in a warzone were the predominant theme in the book.

Other reads were "the arrival", which used symbolism as a tool to represent war and "Habibi", which talked about the hardships orphans had to endure.

SYRIAN CRISIS

Now that the books and film had prepped me for the journey I had embarked upon to understand the real world crisis in the status quo, I had a conflict in mind which I had to address. It was the Syrian Conflict. It was Syria right from the inception of my project, right from the moment I found out the story of Aylan Kurdi. I started reading on the Arab spring and how that affected and destabilized Syria, the story of its polarization and the eventual outbreak of civil war, which lead to the greatest refugee crisis since WWII.

It was during this period of time, I swayed between hope and despair, as the stories which emerged from it strongly carried one of the two. So I finally decided to portray Hope as I think it is what is most needed in the current scenario to keep the humanity going.

I read about the *Syrian Civil Defense (SCD)*, also known as the *White Helmets*, a volunteer civil defense organization that operates in rebel-controlled Syria . As of October 2016, the White helmets have rescued over 60,000 people from the effects of the civil war, since they began to keep count in 2014. According to *The Economist*, approximately one in six *SCD* have been killed or badly wounded, many by “double-tap” Russian and Syrian airstrikes on the same site as they search for bodies. The White helmets were nominated for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize.

From there I was taken to the story of Abu Ward, whose name means “father of the flowers”. He nurtured and tended to the plants that flourished under his care even as the city and its inhabitants continued to die around them. Abu ward is no more. He was killed in a bombing.

“Those who enjoy the beauty of flowers enjoy the beauty of the world created by God and when you smell them they nourish the heart and soul”.

-Abu Ward

This act of rebellion in the face of tyranny had inspired me in shaping my protagonist. And after this article, I zeroed onto the location, from where I could draw inspiration for my story. This place was Aleppo.

Aleppo, once a thriving city rich in historical significance and cultural heritage, has now become the heart of Syrian conflict where the rebel forces, Assad's Regime and Extremist Islamic forces are clawing at one another to get hold of the strategically crucial Aleppo. So I started looking for more stories from Aleppo. This is when I came across the “Toy smuggler of Aleppo” and the story of “Syria's secret library” located in rebel occupied area of Aleppo.

“The toy smuggler bringing bags of joy to children”.

Rami Adham knows exactly what brings the biggest smiles to the faces of Syrian children. The Finnish-Syrian father-of-six has become known as the "Aleppo toy smuggler". He says the feeling of handing out toys to children living through a war that is older than many of them is "indescribable".

“Syria's secret library”.

When a place has been besieged for years and hunger stalks the streets, you might have thought that people would have little interest in books. But enthusiasts have stocked an underground library in Syria with volumes rescued from bombed buildings - and users dodge shells and bullets to reach it.

CONVERSATION WITH HAZEM

By now Aleppo and its state was all over my mind and fortunately during this period, there was talk in VMCC by Mr. Vijay Prasad on Syria: Death of a nation. After the interesting talk I tried to approach Mr. Vijay Prasad with questions, only to find a few Middle eastern exchange students talking to him. Among them was a Syrian named Hazem. I approached Hazem and introduced myself and talked to him about my project. Hazem hailed from Aleppo, and was happy to share his experience and opinions on the conflict. Later that week, we had a conversation about the situation in Syria and how it has affected the lives of civilians. He mentioned to me his nephew who was five years old and has seen nothing but war. We discussed about the Regime, the rebel forces, the ISIS, and their impact on Syrian landscape. As the conversation progressed, Hazem mentioned, how the uneducated Syrians were easily brainwashed by the extremist groups to join their ranks and how the lack of education and prevalence of ignorance was solely responsible for the current state of Syria.

CHAPTER 2: PRE-PRODUCTION

EVOLUTION OF STORY

Idea

As I bid farewell, the thought of education playing a crucial role in solving conflicts in the longer run, a whole generation of Syria's future not being able to attend schools, and the inaccessibility to books unsettled me. I was convinced to reflect upon this thought. Later the thought of importance of education and awareness, amalgamated with the article on Syria's secret library which i read sometimes back, gave birth to the initial idea of the film;

"The story of a kid who rescues books and other essential materials from war torn buildings".

I juxtaposed this idea with another piece of information from Mary Engel's Paper on Children and War which stated that the jewish children who took active part in aiding and assisting their elders in the Six day war were less affected by PTSD than children who were locked away in bunkers. Thus the final story started taking shape.

"The story is about a 12 year old war orphan who ventures into war zone to retrieve and rescue books and other essential materials that might be needed to sustain not only him but also a small group of War orphans. He tries to provide them safety and shelter from all the evils of war".

KID

Character Development

I took inspiration for my character from various places, chief among them was, Amjad, a 14 year old Librarian of Syria's secret library in Aleppo. White helmets inspired the brave characteristics of my character when he dares to risk his own life for the benefits of his fellows on a daily basis. And defiance of the character was inspired from the flower seller of Aleppo. The core values of altruism, bravery, intelligence, defiance and compassion define the protagonist of my short film.

Character Background

For the sake of discussion, let me call my protagonist as “Kid”. Kid was a mischievous and ever playful child, who asked a lot of questions and the answers hardly were able to quench his curiosity. He loved stories. His father, an elementary school history teacher, read to him vast amount of stories- from the Stories of Alexander the great to the stories of Gautam Buddha. During playtime he would enact the stories his father had read to him. Slowly he started reading books, and spent a lot of time playing in the field and reading books. He was an outstanding student who excelled in academics as well extracurricular activities.

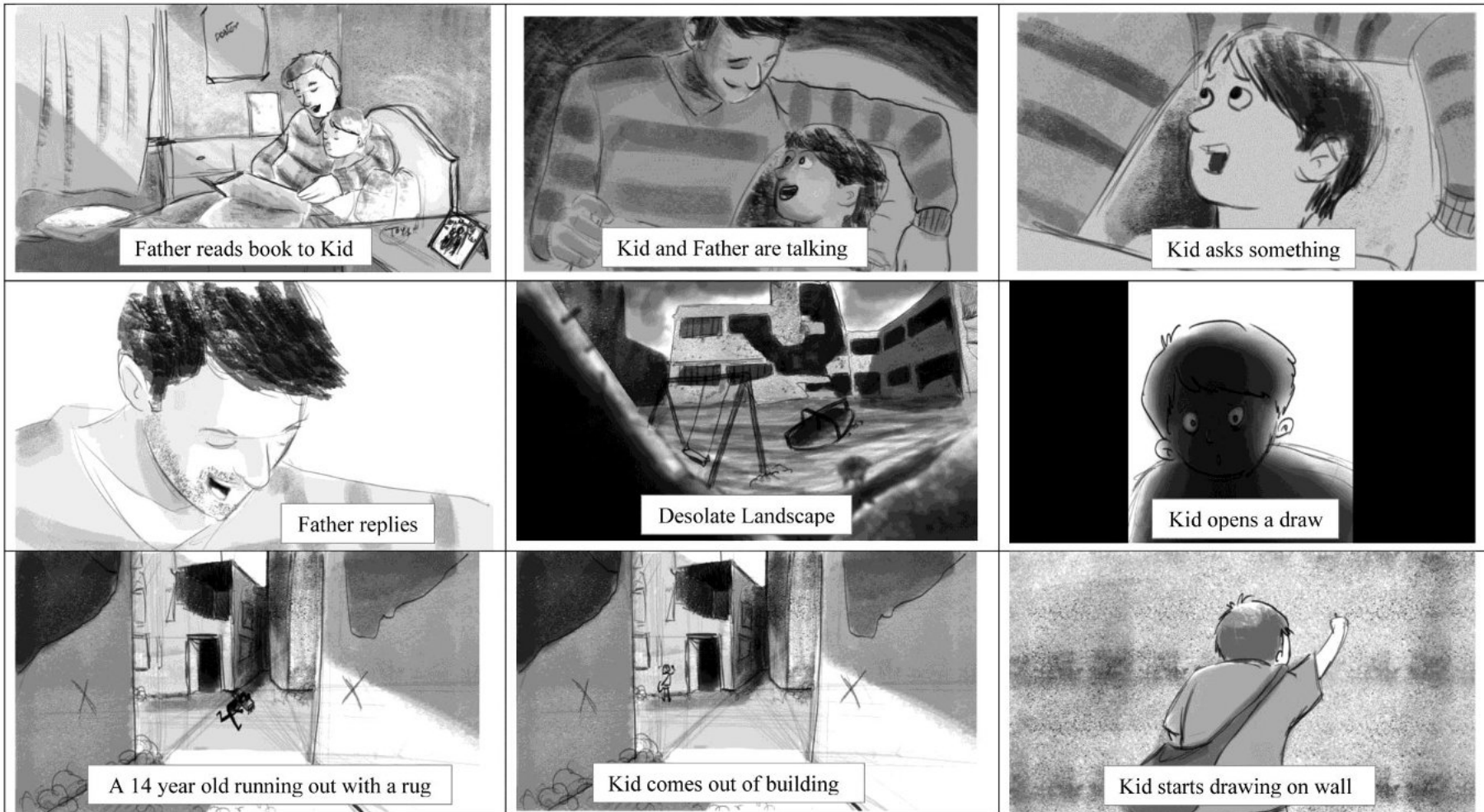
But soon a civil war broke out. Lots of his friends, neighbours and many people he knew fled the city, but his father who stood against Tyranny decided to not leave the country but teach in the school, nevertheless. Soon schools became target for the battle forces and the school buildings were destroyed by bombings. His father still took classes for children at his home; this made him a prime target. And one day when the family was having dinner, his father sensed a distant chopper approaching their residence. He quickly asked his mother to take Kid out of the building while he hurried to get his baby sister. He barely made it out of the building and the bomb was dropped, bringing the whole building down on this family. The last memory of his mother Kid has is of her screaming as the buildings collapsed on her right in front of his eyes.

He still wakes up frightened to his mother’s screams. Kid was in a state of shock, when Pagun, another orphan of war found him and took him under his wing. Pagun was a survivor who brought Kid out of his grief and taught him how to survive the warzone while Kid told stories to Pagun. By the next year a major part of the city was destroyed. Pagun and Kid rescued other orphans of war and took them under their wings. They created a sanctuary for these children outside the warzone. One day Pagun was shot dead by a sniper on their way into the warzone. Kid then took over the sanctuary and slowly started collecting books to keep the children occupied. Older children helped Kid in taking care of the younger ones and gathering water and some supplies.

CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATIONS

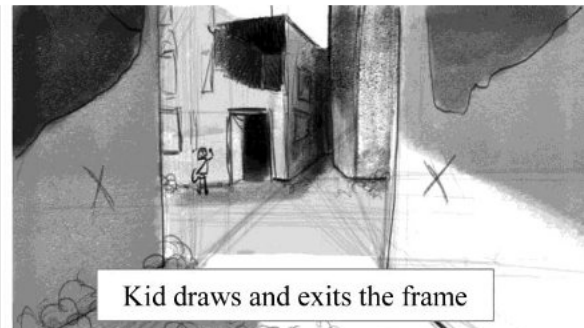


STORY BOARDS

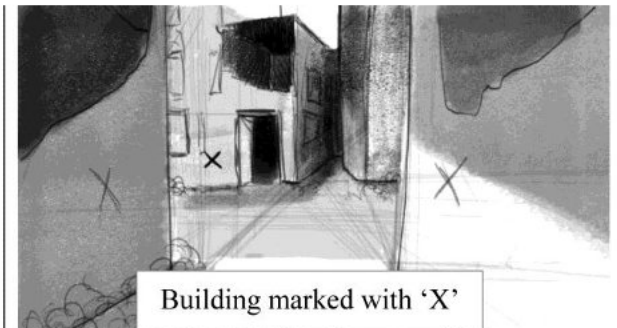




Kid looks out



Kid draws and exits the frame



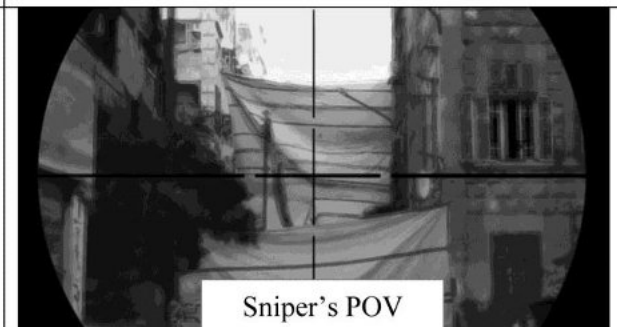
Building marked with 'X'



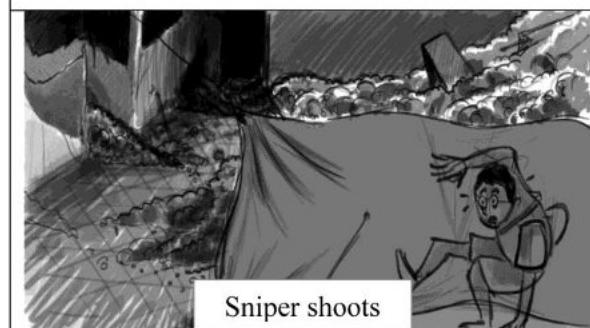
Enters the frame and hides



Looks at a pathway



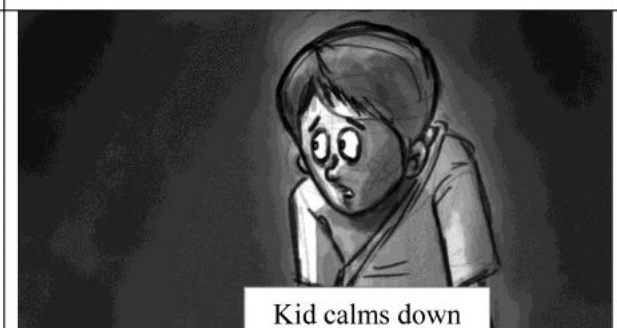
Sniper's POV



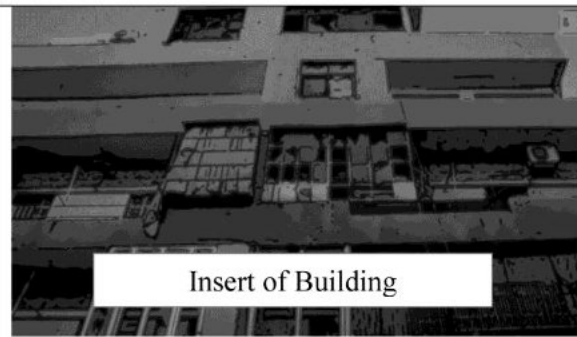
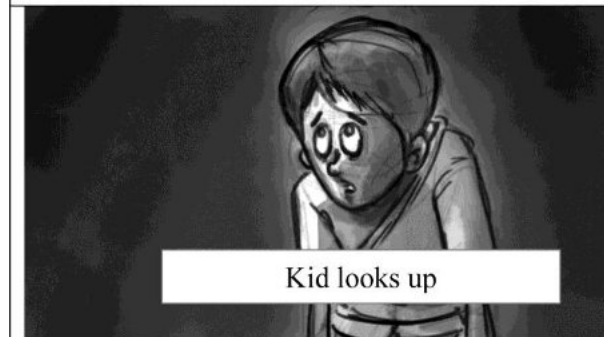
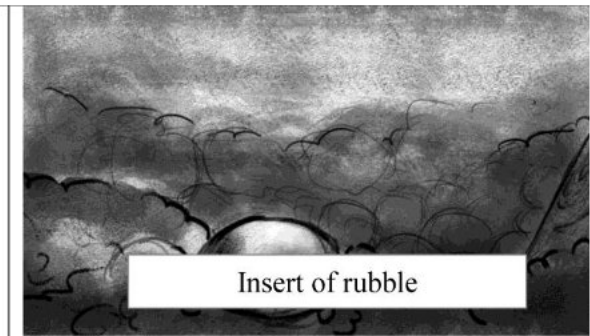
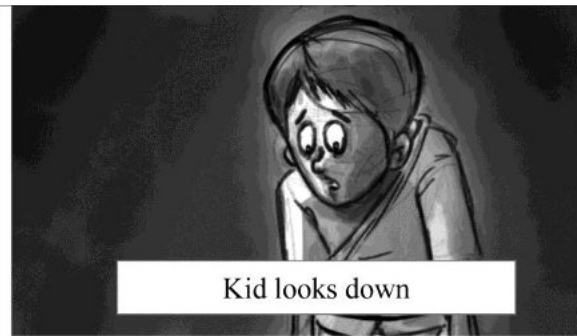
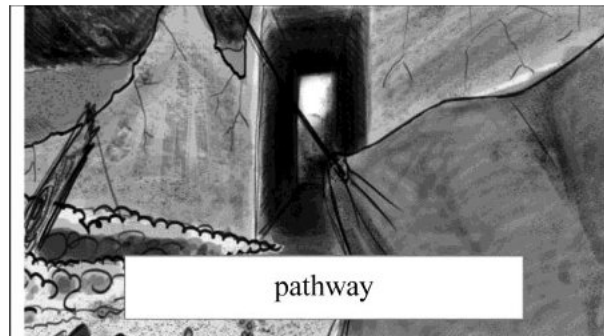
Sniper shoots

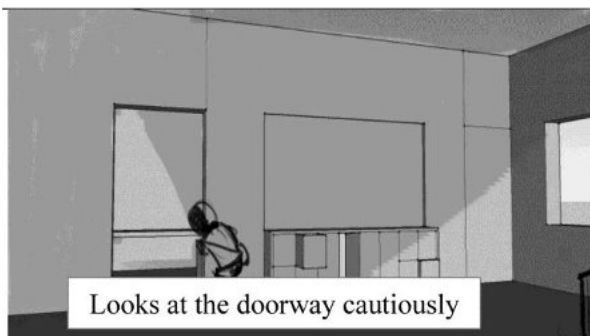
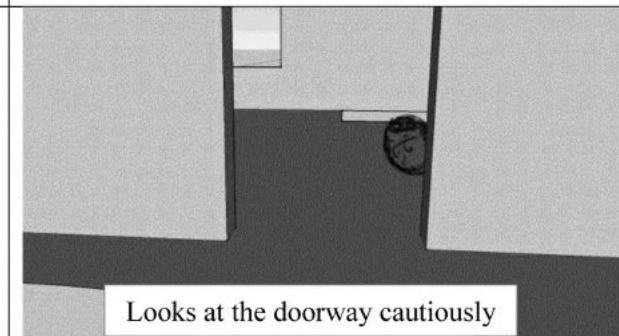
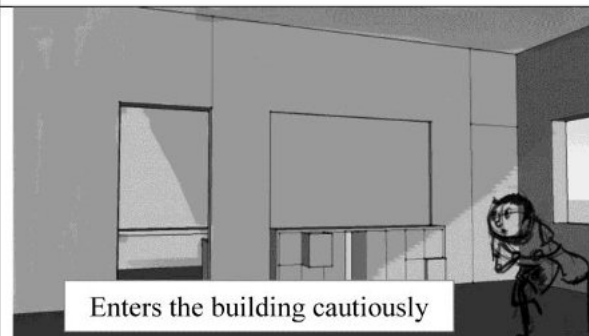
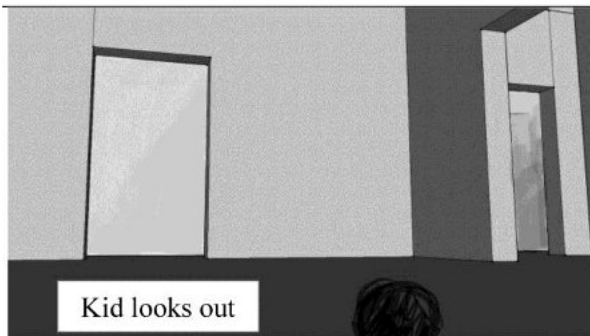
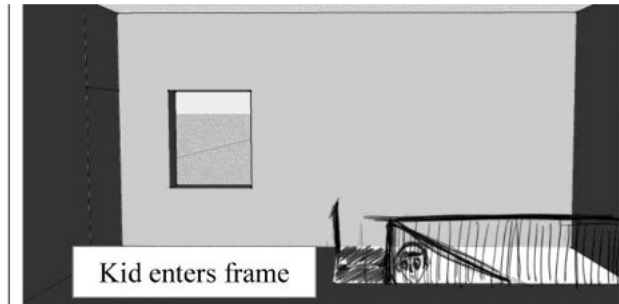
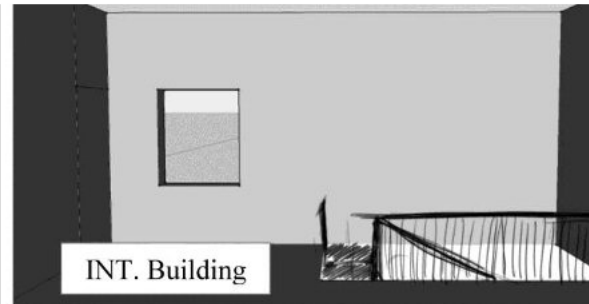


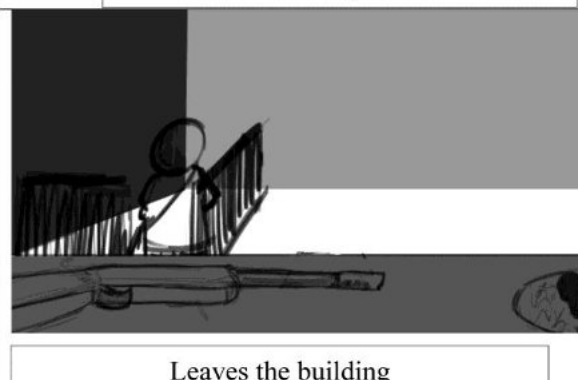
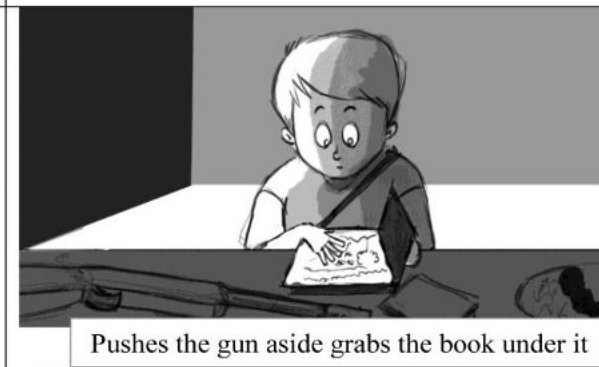
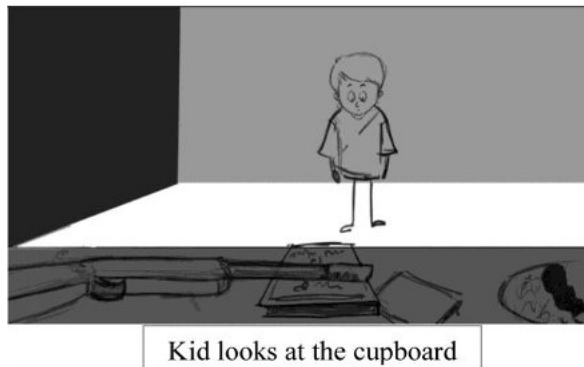
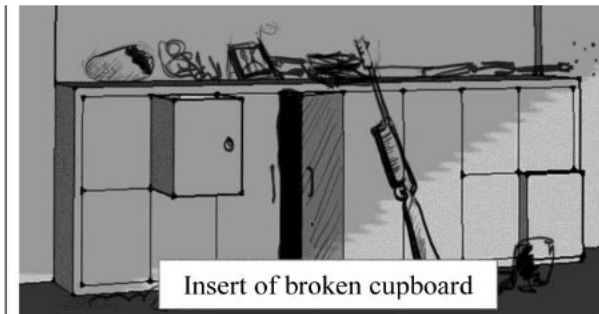
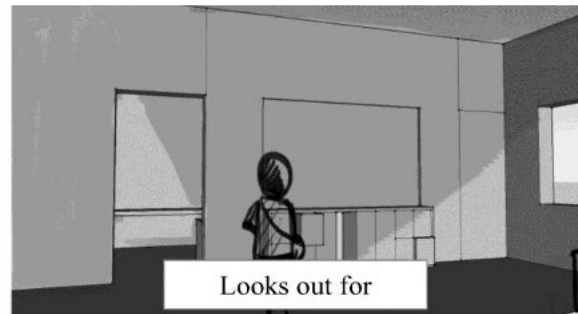
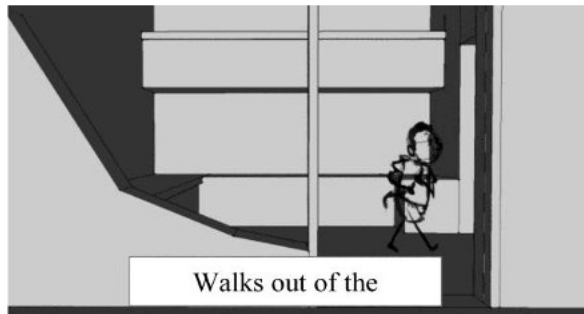
Kid manages to escape



Kid calms down









Kid takes a long breath



Kid digs in his bag



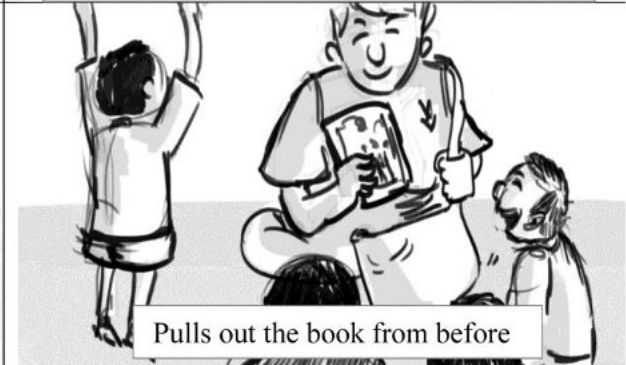
Pulls up toys and distributes among children



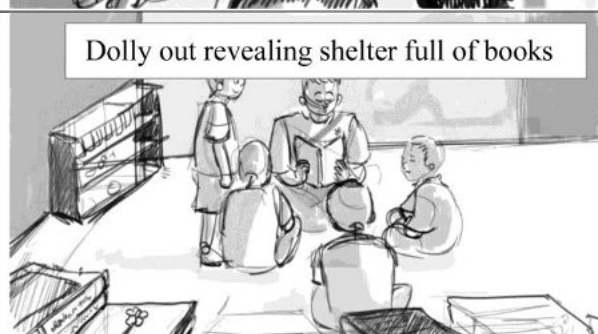
Children run away with joy



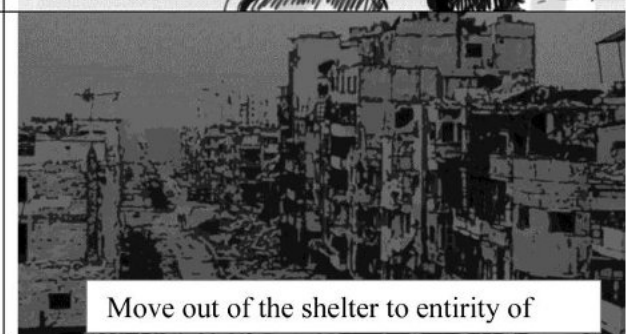
Kid digs in his bag again



Pulls out the book from before



Dolly out revealing shelter full of books



Move out of the shelter to entirety of

POINT OF REFERENCE: ALEPPO





VISUAL DEVELOPMENT: INSPIRATIONS

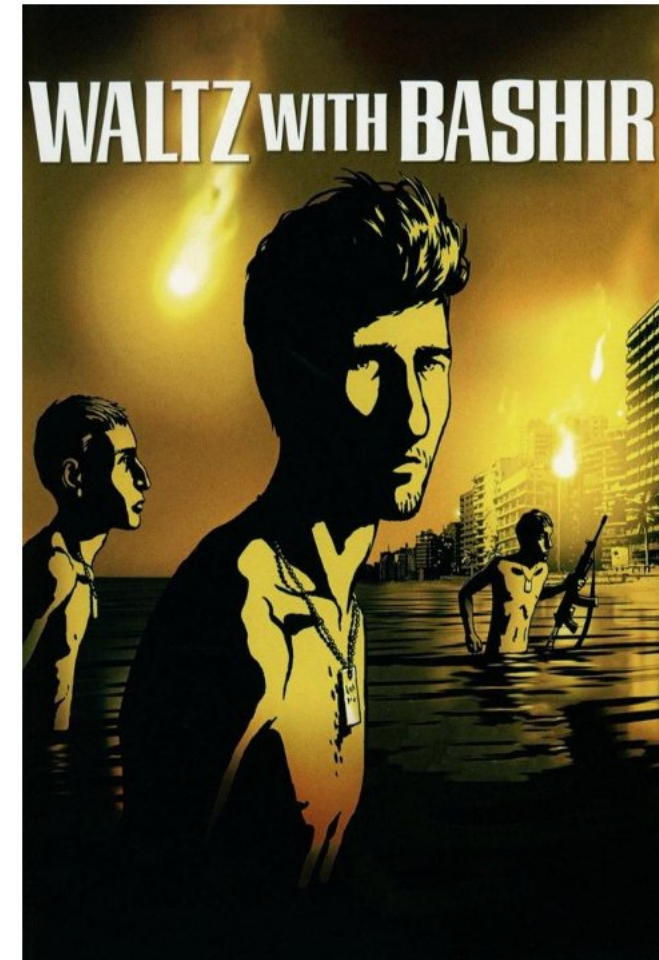


Ernest and Celestine

The finesse in water colour themed Animation style of “Ernest and Celestine” has left me wondering, how can one achieve such control over a fluid medium? And this thought helps me to push boundaries of my own imagination.

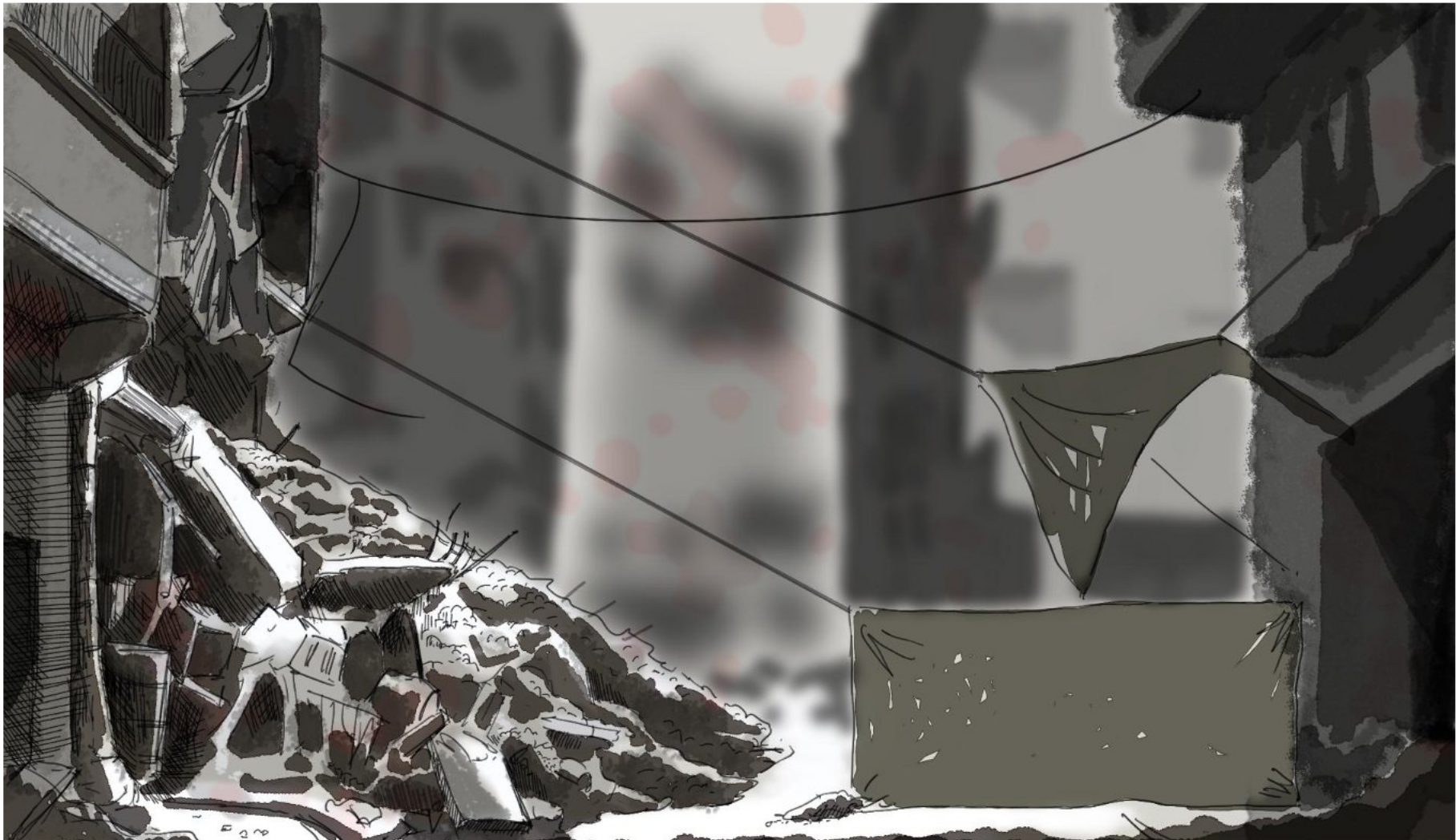
While I also feel that the gritty colour scheme and realistic portrayal of war in “Waltz with Bashir” is also equally inspiring.

Waltz with Bashir



EXPLORATIONS









CHAPTER 3: PRODUCTION

VISUAL DEVELOPMENT: PROCESS

STEP I

A 3-Dimensional model of the set is designed using google 3D sketch up.

For this I took models of broken building, rubbles, etc of various war torn looking building and created a lanscape. And within this landscape, I created certain pocket spaces which could framed be according to the shots. Every landscape that I created with the help of my friends was that of one particular sequence. The example we have taken here was that of the establishing sequence.

STEP II

Once the shot was framed, it was then imported to Adobe Photoshop. Then this image was manipulated to achieve an intial watercolour look.





VISUAL DEVELOPMENT: PROCESS

STEP III

Using watercolour texture brushes, I painted over the image



STEP IV

I added details to the background and used texturizer to get a feel of water colour paper.



The final look and feel of the film.



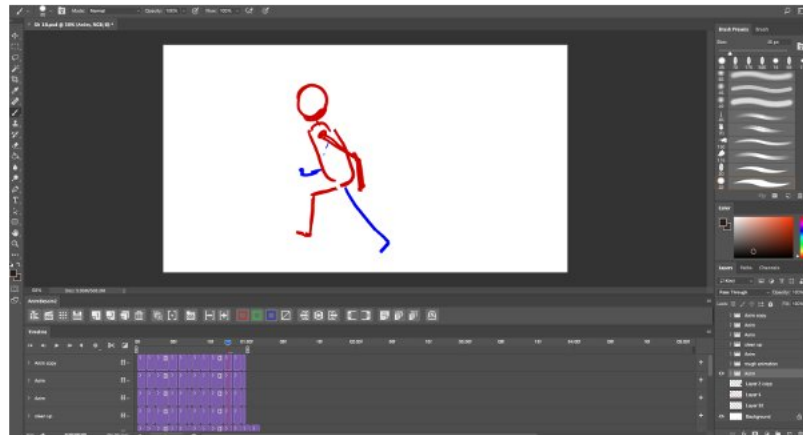






SKETCH UP MODELS





ANIMATION PROCESS

I animated the film using a photoshop plugin called Anim dessin. It's a free and easy to use plugin designed by a french software engineer.

STEP I

Firstly, I drew a few quick key gesture of the action using stick figure to understand the action little better. And put then line tested them.

STEP II

Once preliminary line test was done, I started superimposing my character onto the keys.



VISUAL DEVELOPMENT : PROCESS

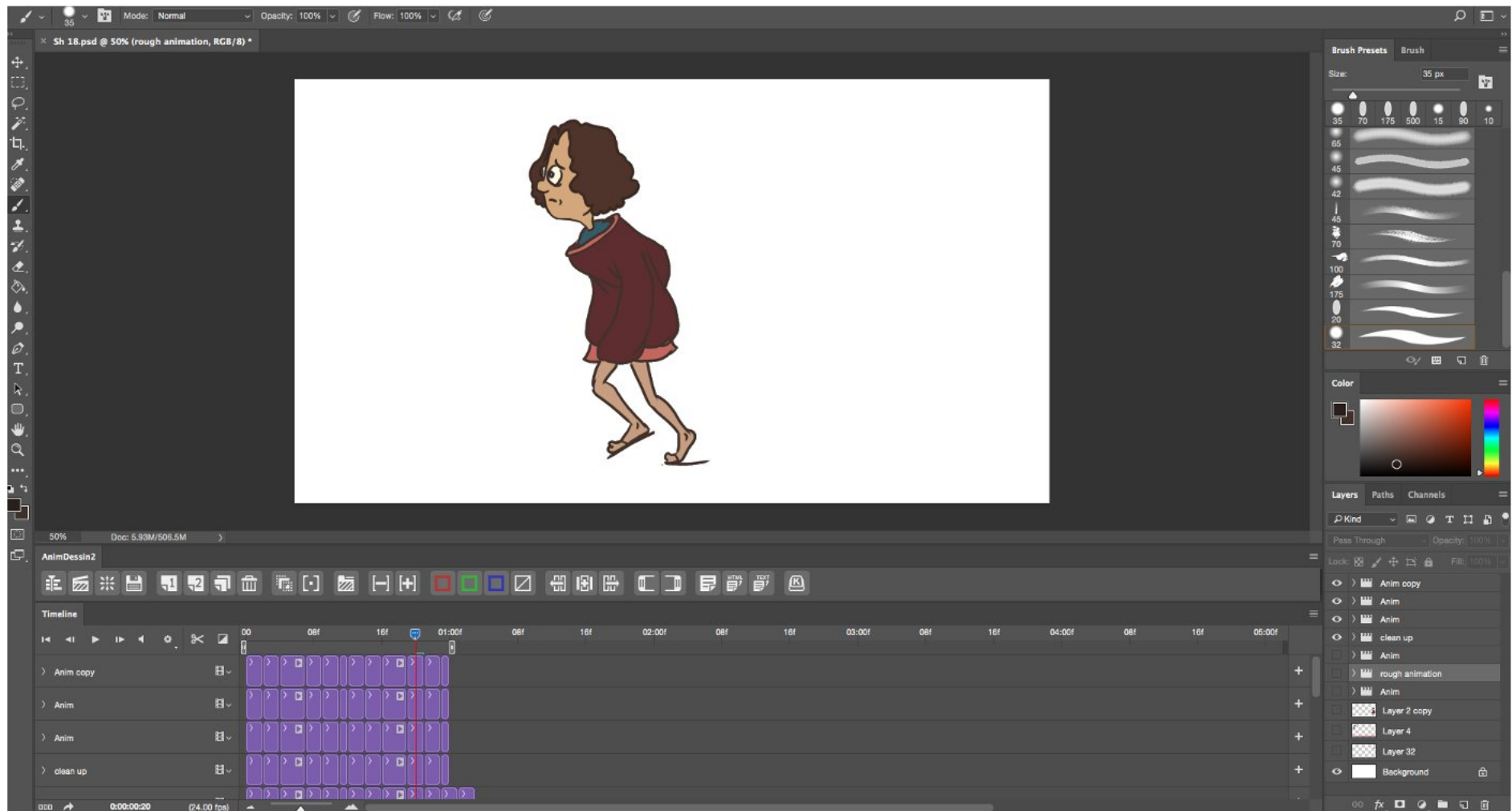
STEP III

I fine tuned the animation by adding anticipation and follow through. And I did a final tweaking in timing and spacing of animation at this stage.

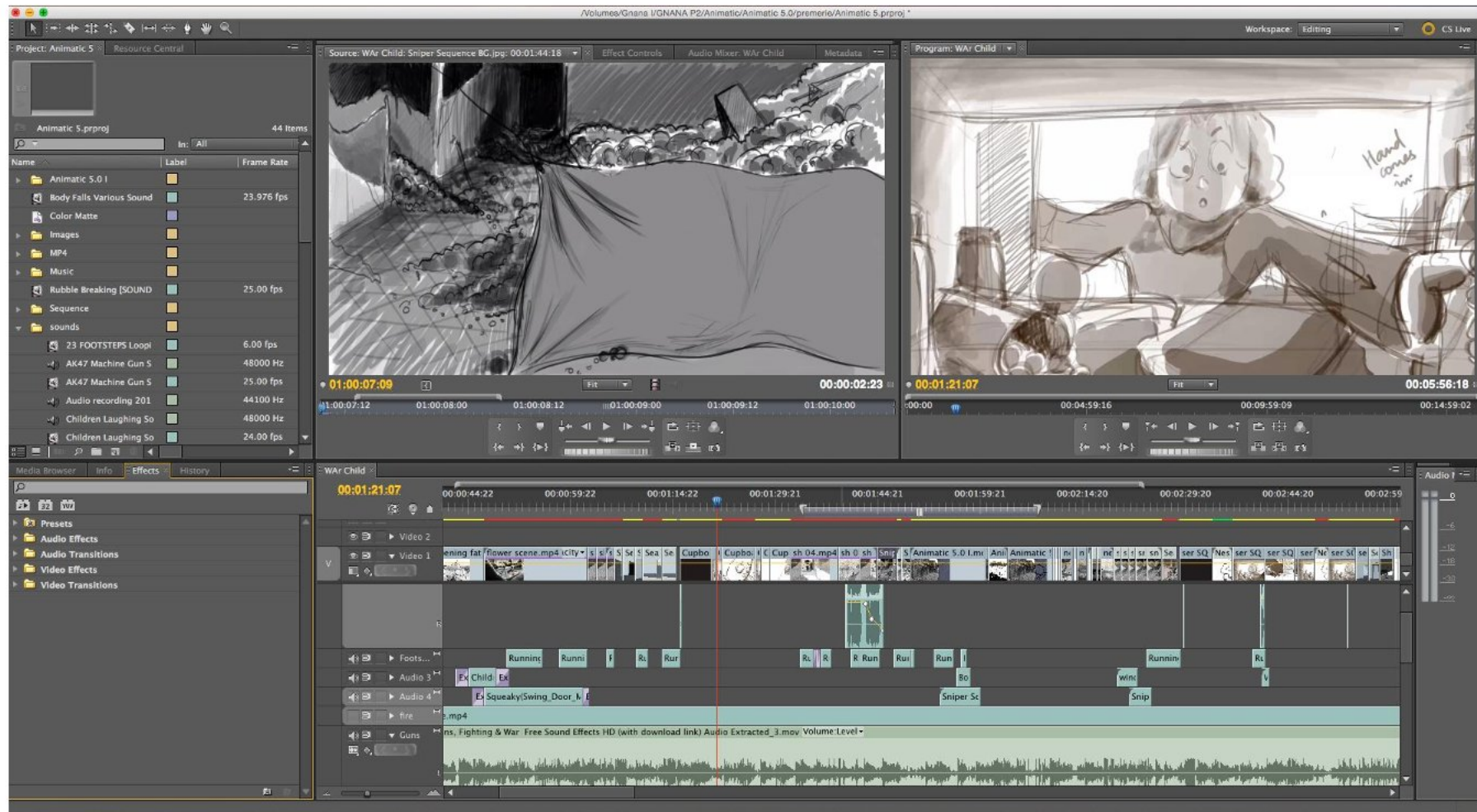


STEP IV

I cleaned up the rough animation and filled flat colours it to get the final stage of character animation.



COMPOSITING



SOUND DESIGN

“Sound and sound design has always been very important to my approach to film, because it is a more subversive and allusive aspect of the medium”.

- Larry Fessenden

To keep the sound subtle and subversive, I have tried to use a single track which represented the memories of the relationship between father and the Kid. I have tried and repeated the music in three instances, firstly in the establishing scene of father and the Kid, the instant when the Kid discovers the book and finally when he starts reading it to the other orphans of war.

CHALLENGES and LEARNING

There were many challenges or one could even depressing times during the production of the film. Initial challenge was to condense all the ideas that sprouted in me during the early research phase and channelise them into something tangible. Thus from one such idea generated from Syria's secret library I created a rough storyline.

Once this phase passed came the major task of translating the story onto the screen. Since I was new to filmmaking, this was arduous. I made various iterations to the storyboards and finally after 5 failed Animatics, I made a working animatic.

This was strenuous for one more reason, I imposed some challenges that I set on myself before beginning;

- 1) No use of dialogues to help the plot move forward.
- 2) Show, Do not tell.
- 3) Refrain from using excess music to manipulate audience.

These challenges that I placed on me made think around the boundaries to deliver payload to the audience and helped me learn visual storytelling. This doesn't imply that film is a visual medium, but for beginner this process helped me think visually. And that was a personal choice.

The biggest challenge which drove me to the brink of depression was the visual development phase. To maintain consistency and also finding a style that does justice to the topic was hard to achieve. Iteration after iterations for around one and a half and still going no further than day one made me question myself. This ordeal was not just that of finding the right style for the film, but keeping at it even after so many failures. And pushing yourselves for one more day. One more iteration. One more line on the paper. That I think is what this film taught me.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Even though I had derived all my inspiration from the Syrian conflict and from the city of Aleppo, I had one more step to cover: Universality. War and its consequences are universal. And this was a prevalent thought in my mind right from the inception of the project.

Time and again, once you place a story and character in a particular place, the story starts belonging to that place. And as a viewer I felt that I could be apathetic if it was someone else's struggle or someone else's story. What if it was my neighbourhood? What if it was someone I knew? Would I be reacting to the film in the same way? And that is the very nature of war and conflict, thus I wanted to illustrate that war as a universal problem which transcends time and boundaries.

A final word of caution: Film is a very powerful medium. It has the ability to take you into the world and shoes of another, it has the ability to kindle our innermost human emotions and it has the ability to create and destroy. And even though I feel film is a medium of self-expression, we should be cautious about what we are showing to the audience; if we are communicating a false idea intentionally or unintentionally, it is equally condemnable.

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