Thesis Report 2020

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Flight or Float

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Index

Keywords:

Abstract:

My thesis project explores the concept of escapism which is basically running away and distracting yourself from the depressing and stressful aspects of your life through different means. This could be through anything, even the most mundane actions of your daily life such as sleeping and eating. It was the most common coping mechanism during The Great Depression that occured in 1930 where people lived in utter misery and desired a life of glamor. These desires were projected in Hollywood films which the population flocked to see.

 This project seeks to answer one question: how can I bring the element of relatability through the presentation of my own attempt to escape? I hope to answer this by going through my own journal and flip through the entries. It's an amalgamation of my own poetry and writings in which I project my emotions. They are a reflection of my state of mind over the years with my experiences of this short life described in metaphorical ways; unpacking it all might result in different points of views depending on the viewer or they could even heavily relate to it as they might have experienced life in a similar manner. The essence of this project is exploring the concept of escape and intermingling it with real life experiences and emotions through the visualization of my personal writings in the form of symbols and metaphors giving one room to find meaning of their own.

Passion:

The topic arose from the idea of emotions and we as humans are controlled by them yet we don't fully know how to handle them. Growing up I've always been a highly emotional individual but still struggled to deal with them at times. The past year and a half has been the hardest of my life and during then I realized how powerful a person's emotions can be in terms of their sanity.

I lost my dearest friend to overdriven emotions and as a result it put mine to a bit of an overdrive too. Handling them was like handling a horse during rodeo. Either you make it till the very end or you get trampled by a three thousand pound horse.

My biggest concern was seeing how everyone else around me was reacting to this tragedy. Some went numb while the rest were going berserk and most of us adapted different forms of escapism to either forget or distract ourselves from the trauma that we experienced. There was no control over emotions and that's understandable but the main issue rose when nobody was really opening up which was leading up to unhealthy coping mechanisms and attempts to escape. My friend didn't open up, now the others aren't either.

Why? If I can try to portray my emotions and be open to the world maybe then it'll inspire others to do the same.

Project scope:

I want people to be able to sort of relate to my work and what I'm trying to portray and be inspired to be a bit more open about their emotions because we're all in this together. They're not alone. In the light of recent events revolving around the COVID19 pandemic, the whole world has been put to a halt and almost everyone is performing self isolation, cutting out social

interaction from their friends, and family. This is causing a lot of emotional disruption and rehashing a lot of older anxieties, feelings of suffocation and hopelessness giving my thesis project a bit more importance as it is all about being expressive.

Design Statement:

For my thesis, generative design was my medium of choice where text is translated into a set of three dimensional animations. It encompasses the idea of human emotions and psychology and the way we interact with our own feelings. As a visual communication designer, I'm doing my best to take my own emotions and thoughts from my attempts of escape into consideration and visualize them for the viewer to digest and assimilate. I want to communicate with the viewer on a personal level through my design without actually talking to one another verbally. It could help viewers of my project to understand the inner workings of their own minds and find meaning of their own.

To do this, I'll be extracting emotions and thought processes that are documented in my journals over the years and translate them into thematic series of animations that play with the idea of semiotics and talk about the subject matter in a metaphorical sense. This gives the viewer room to either read between the lines or take it in as they please and connect the dots themselves.

I do not have a specific target audience, but I aim to reach out to those struggling with their emotions or lack of understanding of them. Hopefully they'll realize that their forms of escape can also be positive instead of being self destructive leading up to self sabotage.

The visual breakdown of the animations is appended to the study and can be found on pages 21 to 24.

Chap2

Research questions:

1- How can I bring the element of relatability through the attempts of my own escape?

2- How does one's relationship with themselves alter their relationship with others in their lives?

Theoretical framework:

After this extensive research one thing that stood out was the effort to actively read between the lines in order to create meaning out of the certain situations and scenarios of escape. This is called semiotics. It is basically the study of meaning making which creates clarity during communication. Studying the way one escapes and practices escapism includes understanding the signs, the signified and the signifier and processing the connotations behind the emotions/actions portrayed through these attempts of escape. This makes it easier to understand the thought processes/purpose of said signifier in a much better manner. In order to understand one's own attempts of running away from certain aspects of life or to even identify another person trying to escape, understanding semiotics and putting the puzzle pieces together to form that clear line of communication is an important step to learning to face reality once again.

To further understand the semiotics of emotions, Trip glazer states how just a photograph of his dog is not an expression of him.[1] He can perceive his dog in person and even in his mind but he cannot perceive joy or sadness without an expression or a sign. "What is expressed can only be manifested in the expression". With this, he tries to explain that semiotics plays an important role into expressing emotions and understanding them. Emotions have a wide spectrum and each of them can be expressed and perceived in

1-Glazer, Trip. "The Semiotics of Emotional Expression." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy, p3-12*

multiple ways. Every person has their own way of doing it. It could be through art, writing, looking at art, reading. "Artistic expressions always enable the aspect perception of emotion and never enable the object perception of emotion. A song expresses sadness if and only if it sounds sad to observers; a painting expresses awe if and only if it looks awesome to observers." This is when the viewer/listeners/readers ability to relate comes into play. Certain things that express a certain kind of emotion might appeal to a crowd who specifically feel that way or can empathise in some way or the other

Literature review:

As time went on and further research was conducted, my thesis went through an extensive evolutionary process where it kept branching out to the point where I finally locked down my final concepts and ideas.

The turning point for my thesis research was when I started to look upon the concept of nostalgia. Nostalgia, according to Jeanette Leardi for the Huffpost, is the sentimentality for the past. It could be a certain period of your life, a specific place,scent, person(s) or anything really[2]. They are generally happy associations and often a coping mechanism for many. This concept was used in marketing strategies to gain a younger audience. It reminded the vieweres how things used to be so great, making them completely overlook the current anxieties and problems of life. Used in ads like the one for Adobe Photoshop where they recreated a Bob Ross painting tutorial but instead of an easel and paints he used an ipad and made a digital painting[3].

Brands and companies used this concept to create a rose tinted filter. Even the biggest corporations like coca cola, pepsi, shell, and twitter aim at generation z and millennials the same way according to Pinar Ayetkin in

2-Leardi , Jeanette. "How A Dose Of Nostalgia Could Boost Your Self-Esteem.

3-The joy of sketching with adobe photoshop sketch: ep 1 | adobe creative cloud, 2016

4- Aytekin, Pinar. "Nostalgia In Advertising: A Semiotical Analysis Of Nostalgia-Themed And Non-Nostalgia-Themed Print Ads." Journal of International Social Research, vol. 11, no. 59, 2018

his detailed essay 'Nostalgia in advertising'[4]. It's to make them forget about the crippling economy and the mess being left behind for them for generations to come. People of the new generations were using nostalgia as a form of *escape*.

Further branching the research topic out, I started to focus solely on the idea of escapism but first studying the relation between nostalgia and escapism. 'Nostalgia in the of escapism' by Asher Isbrucker is a short film which is a compilation of pictures and home footages of middle class families from the mid decades of the 20th century[5]. Asher explains how even though they weren't even born during that time, watching those clips and going to the content made them feel quite nostalgic. A feeling that didn't make sense since it isn't their life they're looking at but the fact they could relive those faux moments of his past made him realize that it was a way of forgetting about his present life and reliving good, wholesome memories through somebody else's memories. It was a form of escape.

5-Isbrucker, Asher. "Past Futures: Nostalgia in the Age of Escapism." *Medium*, Medium, 21 Nov. 2018

Cindy Herrman for her bachelors had written an essay titled 'Escapism and Nostalgia in the Film Musical : The Case of "Mamma Mia!'''' where she answers the question whether or not the movie Mamma Mia is a result of nostalgic feelings linked with the popular band Abba and that it was used as an escape through the art form of a musical.[6]

6- Past futures: nostalgia in the age of escapism, 2017, Cindy Herrmann

Most of the songs were hit chart toppers of the band and this makes even more sense when one finds out that the two former members of the band itself were co-producing the musical. Looking back at their musical careers they did rehash certain emotions by incorporating their own original songs into the musical. According to Cindy, the musical was a result of the former band members wanting to escape the fact that the band was no longer functioning and making new music with the portrayal of glamor and buzz

within the show itself so they projected through this musical.

 In her essay "What are you running away from?(Dealing with escapism)", Celine Chua explains escapism as the avoidance of certain aspects of daily life that are anxiety inducing, depressing, unpleasant or triggers trauma. It could be through even normal activities like eating too much, overworking, sleeping or heavily exercising[7]. One can even go to lengths such as migrating to a new country to start afresh. She states that this could also lead to life threatening situations such as drug addiction and behavioral problems. In relationships, when couples break up they look for escape through a rebound love to get the feeling of being loved and being emotionally dependent to deal with the pain of their breakup. It may seem like the person has escaped from their pain of the break up but it's still very much present, throbbing and suppressed until at one point it will resurface in some form or the other.

7-Chua, Celestine. "What Are You Running Away From? (Dealing with Escapism), August 2018

Some may escape the feeling of failing what their passion really is by choosing to work in a passionless job and staying safe.

Procrastination has been highly linked with avoiding work, escaping from stressful situations just as tainting your image through bad grades. It's almost the same as running away from yourself.

 Mia Shaw in "Escaping yourself" writes how growing up she'd avoid social interaction and avoid people by putting up a shy front and being introverted. She'd escape from challenges by not indulging in them eventually leading up to missed golden opportunities[8]. She'd dismiss her emotions and find an escape by doing the opposite of what deemed as challenging and out of the box.

8-Shaw, Mia. "Escaping from Yourself." *The Daily Californian*, 27 June 2012

 Loryn Lyn Simsonsen explains in "You can't escape yourself" how one can never escape themselves by going away to far off places, try to start anew, leave behind everything but at the end of the day they're still with themselves[9]. Their emotions, trauma, anxieties are still with them. Wanting

9-Simonsen, Loryn Lyn. "You Can't Escape Yourself." *Medium*, The Ascent, 5 Dec. 2017,

and trying to run away from oneself is a sign of lack of discipline. It wants to find solace in behaviors that avoid confrontation and completely dismiss any form of interaction that involves dealing with their own demons. A part of them vibrates at a consciousness level with shame and guilt. This behaviour itself hinders the growth of a person as the individual avoids any sort of challenges or tough situations that involve critical thinking and learning from those experiences.

Escapism had played a great role during the time of the Great Depression (1930). This is when the world economy had collapsed and unemployment was at its peak. People were miserable. Paul Whitington explains how the Great Depression inspired Hollywood's golden era[10]. During this time of misery people fled to the cinema to escape from their depressing lives. Hollywood cashed from the sentiments of people's desire to live a grand life and brought glamor and glitz on screen. It was a projection of people's desires of living a life of excitement and riches during that glum time. Many popular movies arose during this bleak era which also includes Disney animation movies. Some classic examples are The Wizard of Oz, Snow White, 42nd Street, and Gone with the Wind. This was also the time when comedies were greatly popular which includes big names like the one and only Charlie Chaplin.

World renowned author J.R.R Tolkien, was against the negative connotations connected to the term escapism and was the one who started the Escapism movement in Oxford to give it a positive light. He stated "Escape is of the Prisoner, not Flight of the Deserter[11]". He believed escaping was not equal to running away from your problems and leaving your loved ones to suffer. It was more like a prisoner escaping from jail to get back to his loved ones so one could do their best to protect and look after them.

In "The Reality of Escape in Fantasy" Abbigail Mazour further explains

10-Whitington, Paul. "How the Great Depression Inspired Hollywood's Golden Age." Independent, Independent.ie, 26 Nov.

11-Shaffer, Mary. "In Defense of Escapism: Tolkien's Principles of Fantasy #1." *M.C. Shaffer*, M.C. Shaffer, 23 Nov. 2016

11

this quote and talks in reference to even some of his books[12]. She describes Tolkien's books "Lord of the Rings" as one of the best escapist reads which had an effect ure and still a major part of popular culture. Escaping from a certain situation which may lead to an individual demise is seen as cowardly and selfish. Tolkien found this as a harmful way of seeing it because in reference to fantasy based books and even real life, sometimes escaping a dangerous situation means that you're saving yourself now making it possible for you to be available for your loved ones and friends later on in life or in later even worse events. This idea of escape is quite commonly seen in his book "The Lord of the Rings" where characters escape certain dangerous situations only to move on to even more dangerous ones. With each escape, the characters come out stronger and eventually at the end when it's time to defeat the villain(s), they are successful. Why? Because the effort they put in to escape those dangerous situations were stepping stones for the characters to develop and grow stronger, sharper and be more aware. They did not let anyone down, in fact quite the opposite.

The Red Balloon (1956) directed by Albert Lamorisse is a French silent movie about a little french boy and a sentient red balloon he found and soon befriend.s The balloon seems to have a personality and quickie gains popularity and attention amongst the townspeople and children. At the end there's a scene where it's the skyline of the city and lots of other red balloons merge and unite together and float away as a "pack" The end represents the same energy being projected in the cluster of balloons and unity. The possible belief is that the balloon represents and is a metaphor for loneliness, childish innocence and hope and the movie itself being a commentary on the imagination of the child.
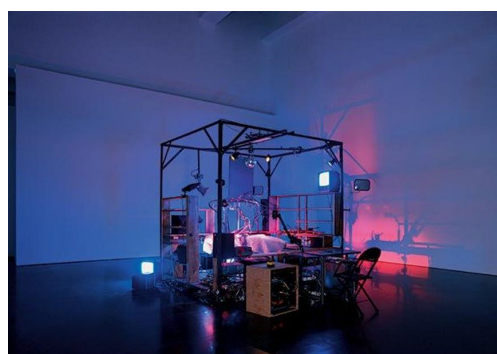
Visual research

Escape
By Aidar Bekchintaev
2018
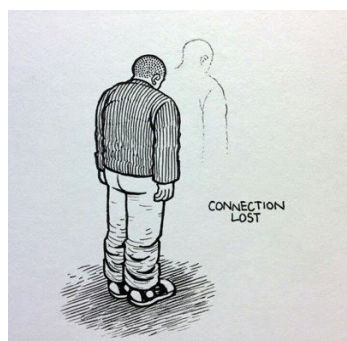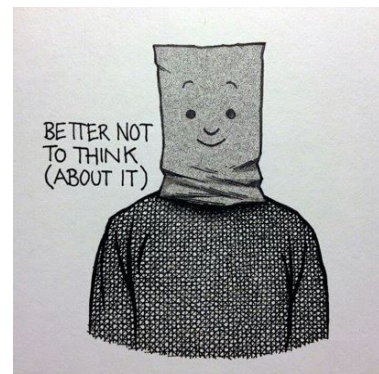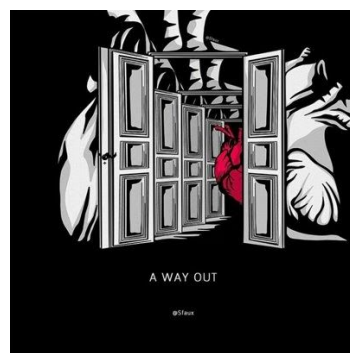
Oyvind Lauvdahl
@lauvdahl on instagram

Janet Cardiff &
George Bures Miller,
 The Killing Machine

The Red Balloon, 1956
Albert Lamorisse

Myeangbeom Kim
2016

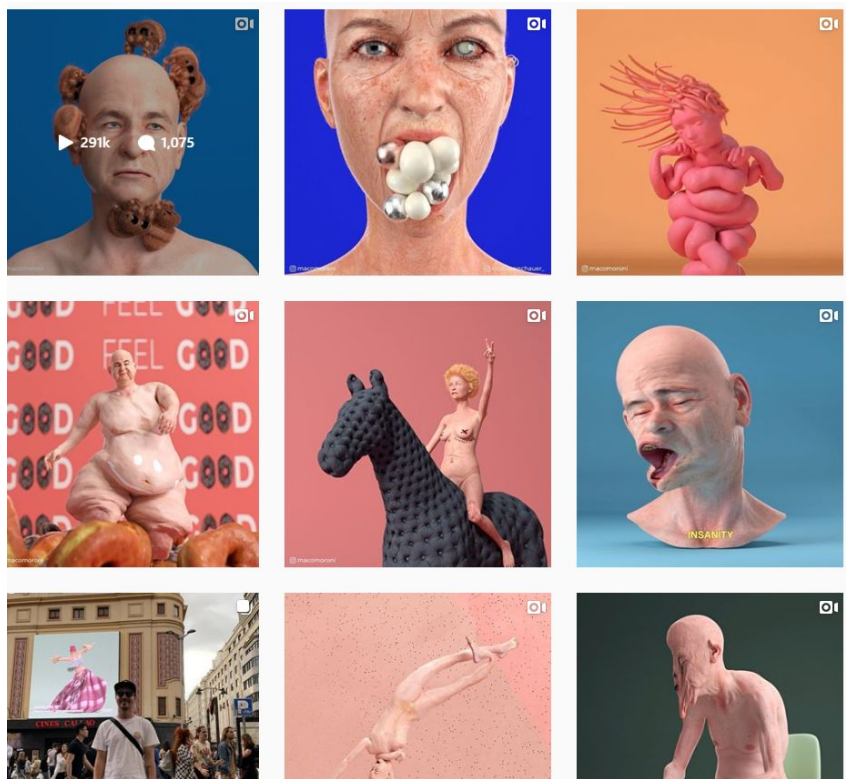

Cheryl Pop, "Up against", 2017

Dorota Buckowska
2014

Jacob Sutton,
2012

Banksy
2001

Tadaocern,"Black Balloons" , 2016

Marco Mori

Research Questions Explained:

1- The animations are visuals translations of my own journal entries that I wrote while trying to feel less or attempting to escape from the troubles of then. I took the core emotions and feelings from the writings and visually represented them in a way that they were easily coherent and include certain symbols and connotations that one can easily pinpoint while also being able to relate with the emotions being projected. I'm putting the concept of semiotics into play as each of my animations portray a certain emotion or feeling which can be perceived as such or something along the same lines. Each element and symbol used in them are playing a big role in acting as signifiers.

2- Upon research, it was clear as day that when one tries to escape from their lives, from confrontation and adapt destructive behaviors or behaviors that are rather deemed selfish such as neglecting somebody or their own responsibilities, it creates rifts and tends to cause strains in the relationships that one forms in their lives. If one does not have a healthy relationship with themselves, their emotions and have no control over their lives, it tends to drive people away.

But if you look at Tolkien's perspective of things, sometimes it's best for a person to escape from a certain situation so they can learn more about their strengths and capabilities so they can be the best versions of themselves while being there for their loved ones. Some time away from things and responsibilities can help one sort out their emotions and return with a fresh state of mind. This could be beneficial in the long run.

Research Methodology + Data sources

For my research I mainly opted for qualitative research where I asked people on campus the ways in which they would escape. Some I had verbal conversations with which I noted down and some others who were not comfortable talking about it verbally had it written down on paper. These conversations were quite personal and heartfelt as some were struggling from a lot of issues or once were and were embarrassed to really talk about them. This whole process was emotionally taxing as it got quite in depth and it felt like walking on thin ice as this was a sensitive topic so I had to word myself carefully and try to listen instead of making it seem like an interrogation. From this data collected I found the common themes and listed the most common ways of peoples' forms of escape.Overall the data collection was in a mixed form but this method is mainly backed up with desktop research and comes under secondary research. It includes gathering information from essays, articles, academic reviews, books, movies, videos and even shows with in depth analysis and understanding of each.

Chapter 4

Medium of presentation + Pre production

For my project I've chosen to make a series of three dimensional animations using the software Cinema 4D. Before getting to the digital animation, I first had to physically sketch out storyboards for the animations as a way of mapping them out and making it easier for the making process. Each animated video has a different scenario that's being represented but to keep it cohesive the lighting and the general mood of all of them was kept almost the same. The biggest inspiration of the animations was the poem "Balloons" that I wrote in my journal.

Pop!
I felt it again
Something isn't right
Can nobody else see
How close I am
To losing my last
Balloon?

Diary entry date : 16th August 2016

It talks about balloons as vessels for emotions, hopes and dreams. So I combined the human physicality with balloons as I see both as fragile emotional vessels. The main subject of each animation is a model of a very biologically accurate heart which also happens to be a balloon. It represents the self.
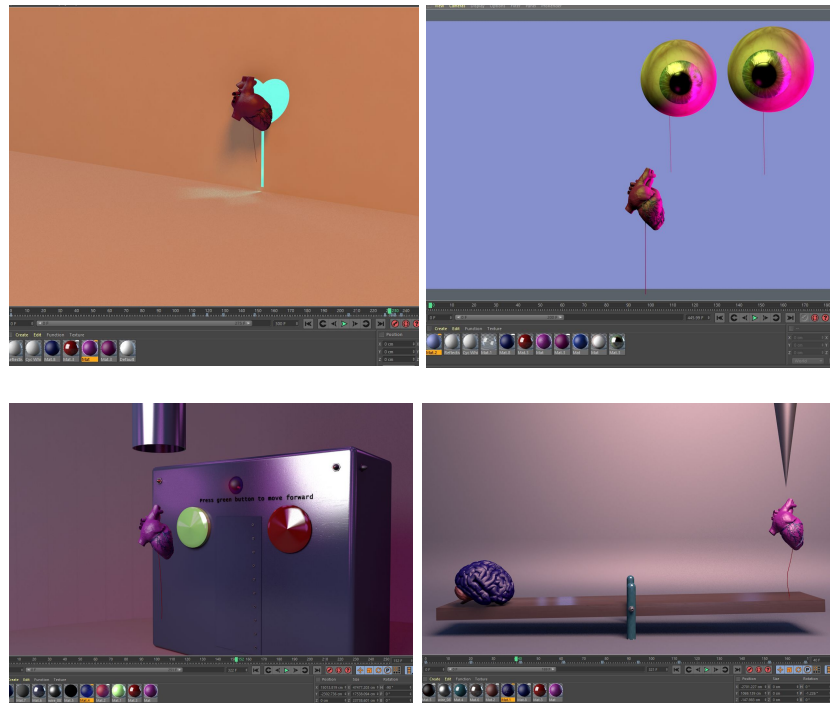
Process shots

The animation frames are first rendered in cinema 4D then compiled in After Effects to form the animation video in AVI format then converted to mp4 via Adobe Media Encoder..

The biggest challenge of producing the animations was getting the lighting right and having each of the videos look as cohesive as possible which was to be achieved through mostly lighting. To achieve a crisp lighting scenario, I had installed a plugin for cinema 4D called Greyscalegorilla Light kit Pro which significantly made the lighting process much easier while also giving a very fruitful result.
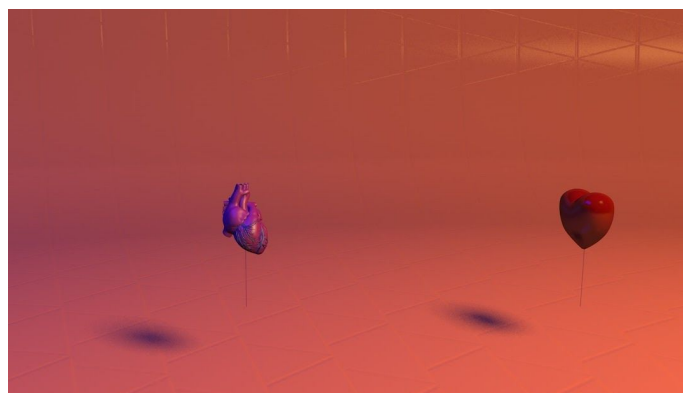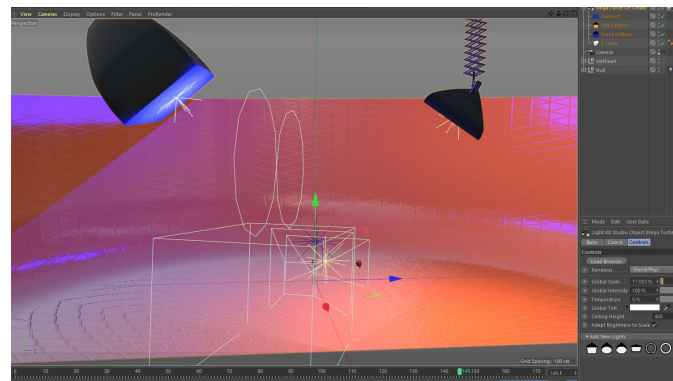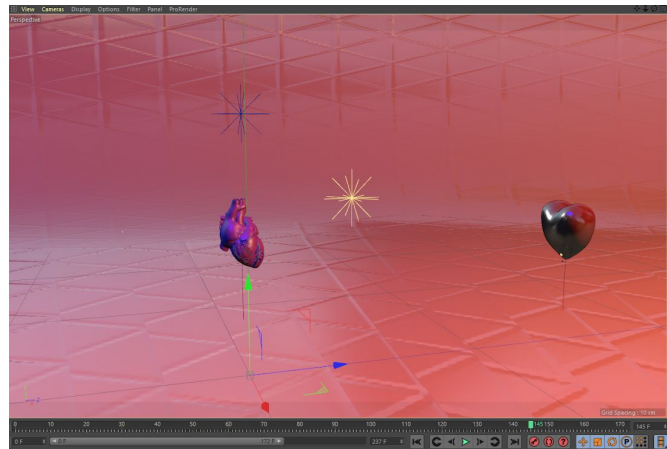
Greyscalegorilla in the works

Initially when I began working on C4D in semester 7, my 3D animating skills were still at beginner level but over time that changed as I worked on it more, looked at other animators' works, consulted my thesis advisors and briefly watched tutorials on YouTube. I have improved exponentially over time but there's still yet a lot to learn.
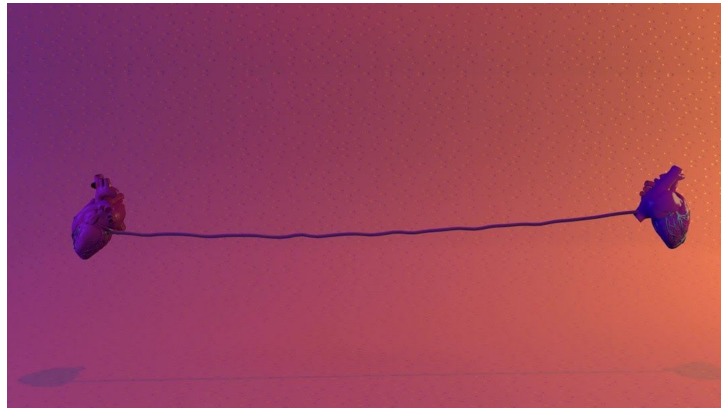
Brief visual breakdown of the animations:
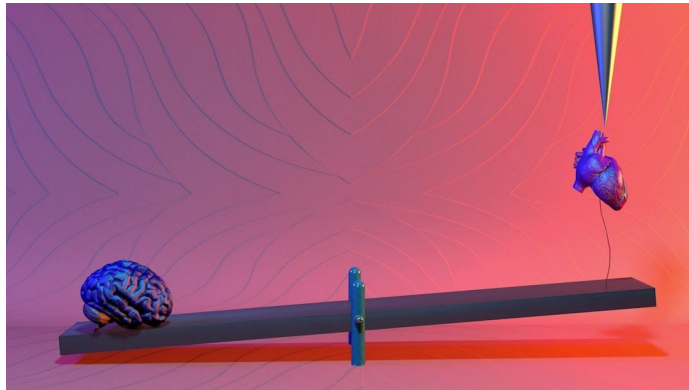
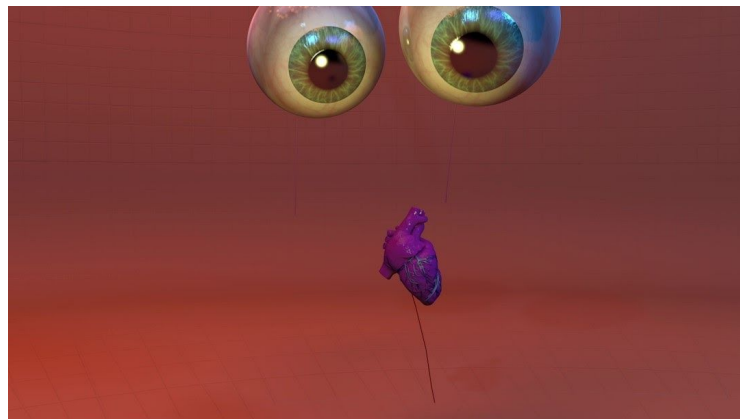1- The "seasawing" imbalance between the brain and the heart balloon.
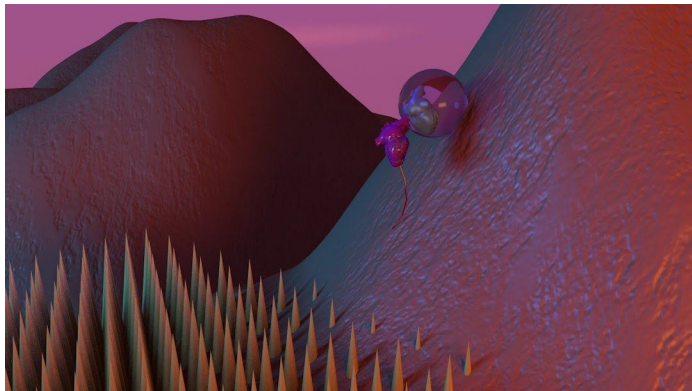
2- One balloon supporting and rolling another up a steep mountain while trying not to fall into a pit of spikes,
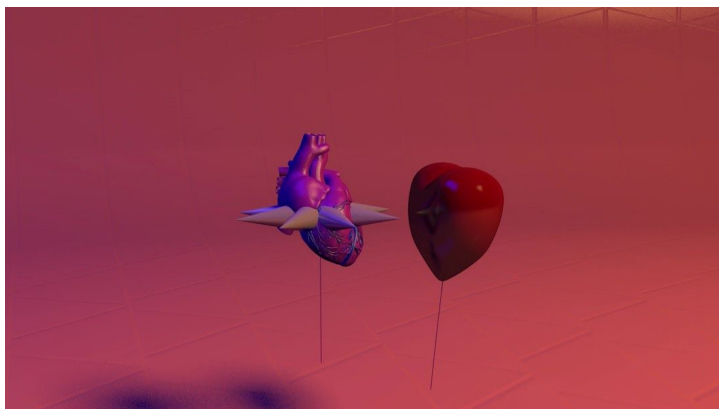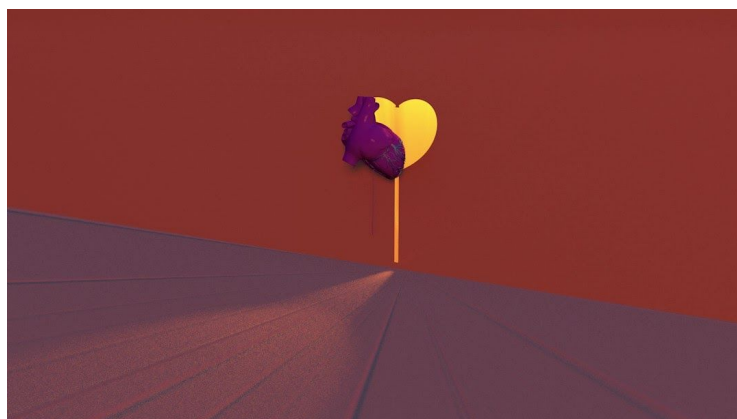

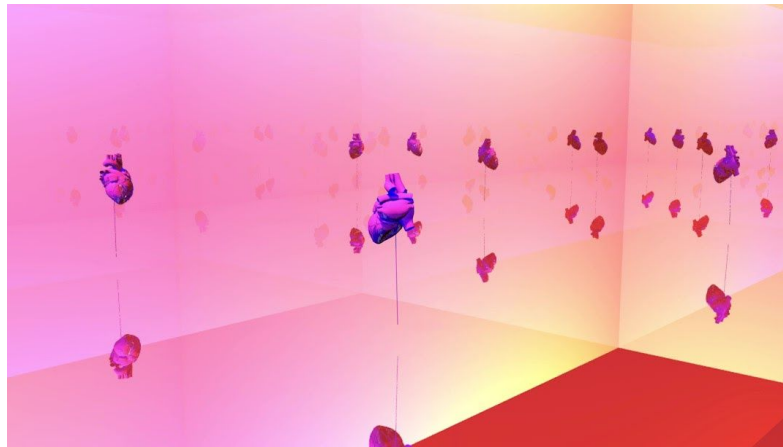3- Spikes protruding from one balloon can be seen threatening another.

4- Two hearts are constrained due to being tied together while trying to go in opposite directions.

5- A pair of giant eye balloons follow the heart in the direction it goes.
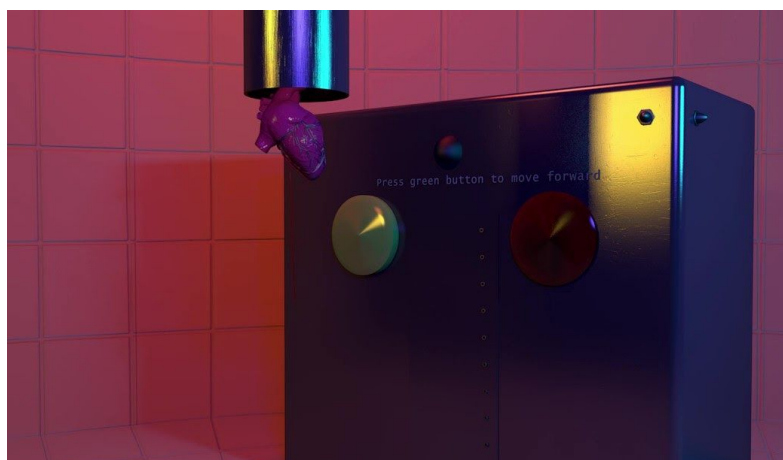

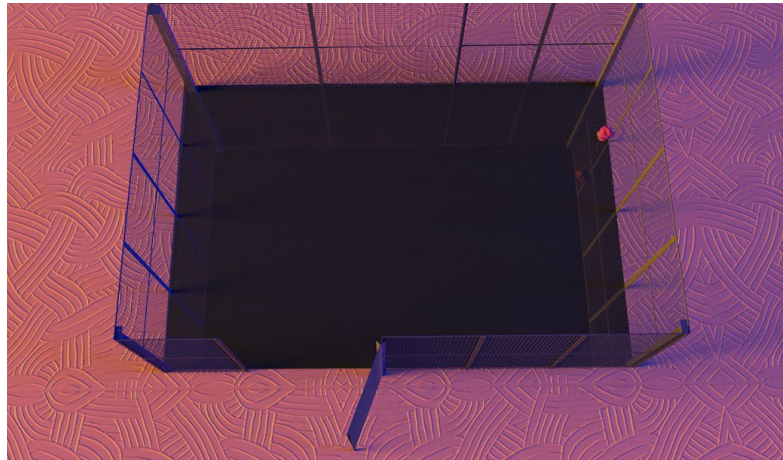6- Struggle to fit through a hole that is not the same shape and size.

7- A confusing room of reflections of the same heart balloon

8- Balloon warping through a long tunnel with light at the end

9- Balloon being sucked through a suction tube

10- Balloon is inside a cage and the door is open.

Chapter 5

Production

The animations were presented in the form projection mapping on solid forms including walls in a way that when one would walk through the room it would look like a string of events. The center had an almost rectangular structure with panels on the side walls.

The central structure was a stack of two boxes of different measurements. One was 5x2x4 and the other which was on top measures at 4x2x2.
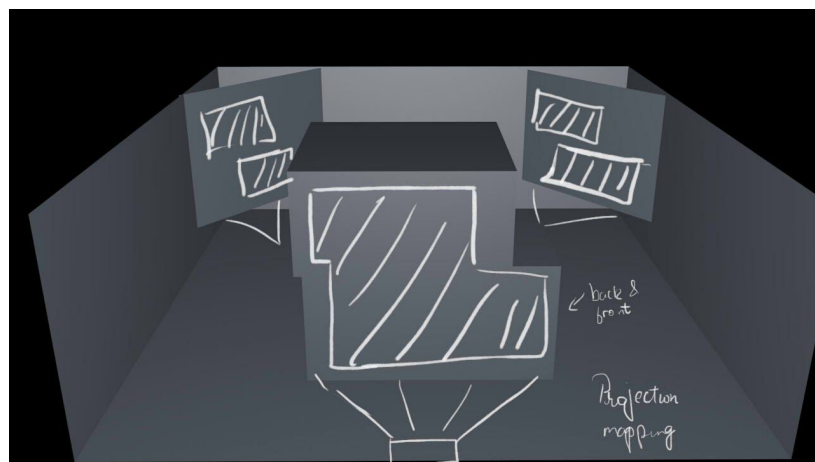
Projection sites includes walls on both sides

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This journey that's called thesis was more than just an academic formality to attain my degree after four years of non stop hard work, it's been an experience that can't be relived again. An experience that I did not think would be this enlightening and to say the least, fun. The start of thesis year I felt a little scared but as I started digging deeper into the research part and fully immersed myself into my related topic, there was no going back.

I gained new information, learned how to implement it not only in my own works but in my life. The research journey began on a very ambiguous note but as the branching out process started to occur, the precedent for my thesis project was getting clearer and clearer as how a camera lens would slowly start to focus. My topic and field of research is linked closely to human psychology and my own life so of course learning about escapism and looking back at my own life experiences while putting in all my effort as a visual communication designer to translate all that in the series of animations is more than just a learning experience. This project can serve as a road map to recognizing how design plays an important role in the translation and communication of something as instinctual and primal as human emotions.

As I write this, we are all self isolating due to the COIVD19 pandemic and will be displaying my thesis virtually. That itself taught me that it doesn't matter where I am, what the situation is or how limited the resources are as long as I'm sincere about my work as a true designer.

This is how I sign off as a student of this institute,with a successful thesis. One that could've been impossible without my teachers starting from first year until today with special thanks to Omair Faizullah, Zainab Barlas, Aarish Sardaar and Zain Naqvi.

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