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Integrative Project Thesis

I started reading political cartoons when I was growing up in an attempt to lighten the mood set by the War on Terror. There was solace to be found in their caricatures and power in their messages. These cartoons instilled in me an appreciation for satire, exaggeration, and criticism, but more importantly they taught me to scrutinize society. Social commentary and illustration have since become an integral part of my creative work, so it is appropriate that I should return to these methods for my project. My piece, entitled *New Skin*, is a thirty-page comic that explores questions of morality associated with vigilantism and rape culture. While not a political cartoon in the traditional sense, it is an illustrated critique of "justice".

The story takes place in a hotel room at an anime convention where a washed up voice actor named Vince Michaelson is attempting to seduce a younger female fan. An argument over alcohol exposes both characters' insecurities about the lack of control in their lives. As the two become more intimate, Vince is strangled to death by a mysterious figure. It is revealed that the young fan was being used as bait by her vigilante mother who hunts alleged sex offenders. The comic then shifts to show the strained relationship between the mother and daughter. As they leave the crime scene, the reader is left to pity the daughter who is torn between her sympathy for their victims and her duty to her mother.

The story was inspired by a rumor I heard while working at an anime convention that one of the guest voice actors had an interest in teenage girls. This kind of stranger

danger is often a concern at conventions due to the predominantly young fan base present there; a situation I inverted in the narrative by having a mother who voluntarily places her child in danger. This created a situation where I had to rationalize irrational behavior and the grey morality that accompanied it. I was forced to look at the characters as people as opposed to plot devices to make their actions believable. To do this, I spent time developing the narrative as a short story told from the perspective of the daughter. As the pivotal character of the story, it was important to nail down her take on the situation first.

Symbolically the three characters are supposed to interchangeably represent the victim, the victimizer, and the law. In one reading the mother could be considered the law, who enforces herself upon the victimizer (Vince), and is empowered by the victim (the daughter). Another reading may place the daughter as the law, passing judgment on the victimizer (the mother) who has killed the victim (Vince). Over the course of the narrative, I desired to balance sympathy and disgust across the three characters evenly without choosing a "right" side.

I chose to tell my story as a comic because I felt cartoon forms would downplay the shock value of the situation and the pacing of pages would allow for a more sustained story than a short form animation. As a medium, "[Cartoons] are considered, at best, a diversion for the masses, at worst a product of crass commercialism" (*Understanding, 140*). They are representative of real things but clearly removed from reality, and as such aren't taken as seriously as film. As such, having my story play out on dough-eyed cartoon characters would lighten the gritty tone of the narrative and focus the story on the human interactions driving it. Additionally, it is easier to produce a long comic than it is a

long animation or film, which allows for the slower pacing necessary for deeper characterization.

When creating my comic I often switched between physical and digital methods. Working both by hand and on a tablet, I went through many drafts of the page layouts before tracing the final drawing for inking with a lime-green pencil. Once scanned, I digitally removed the green marks with a filter, leaving behind the unblemished ink lines. Finally, I digitally added the dialog using a font created from my own handwriting and fixed any errors in the line work using a tablet.
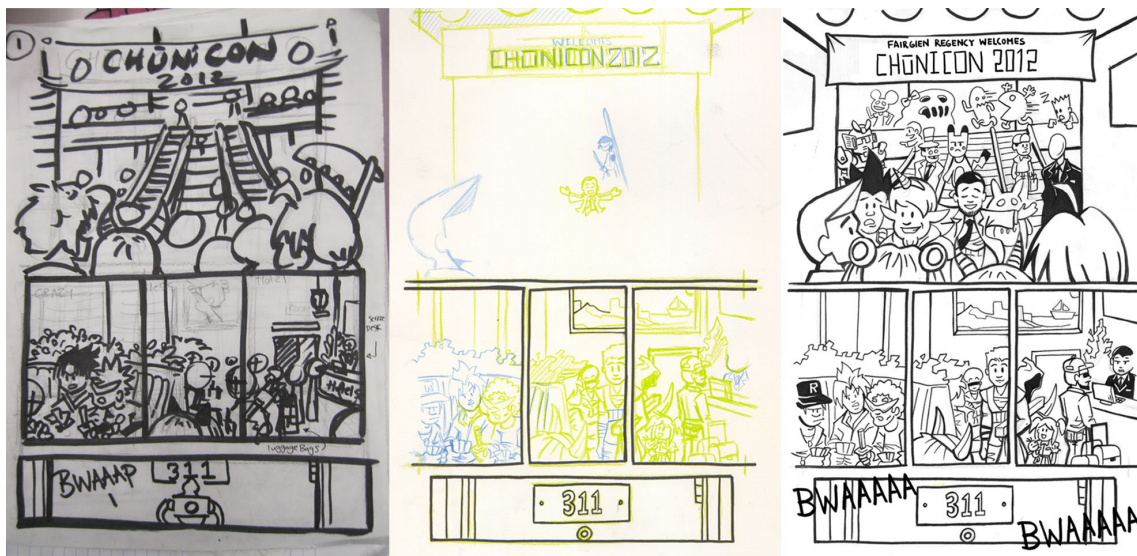
For me, the choice to integrate the two illustration methods seemed natural. Tablet drawing allowed me to play with the compositions in their developing stages, while physically drawing and inking the final versions felt more natural and let me work intuitively. Digital manipulation is an important tool for organizing illustrative work; however, I did not wish to be dependent on it for this project because of the endless editing made possible by the medium. That being said, several compositional choices in

this comic were made with digital manipulation in mind, such as the shaded flashback

segments and the gradient that indicates the protagonist's consciousness.
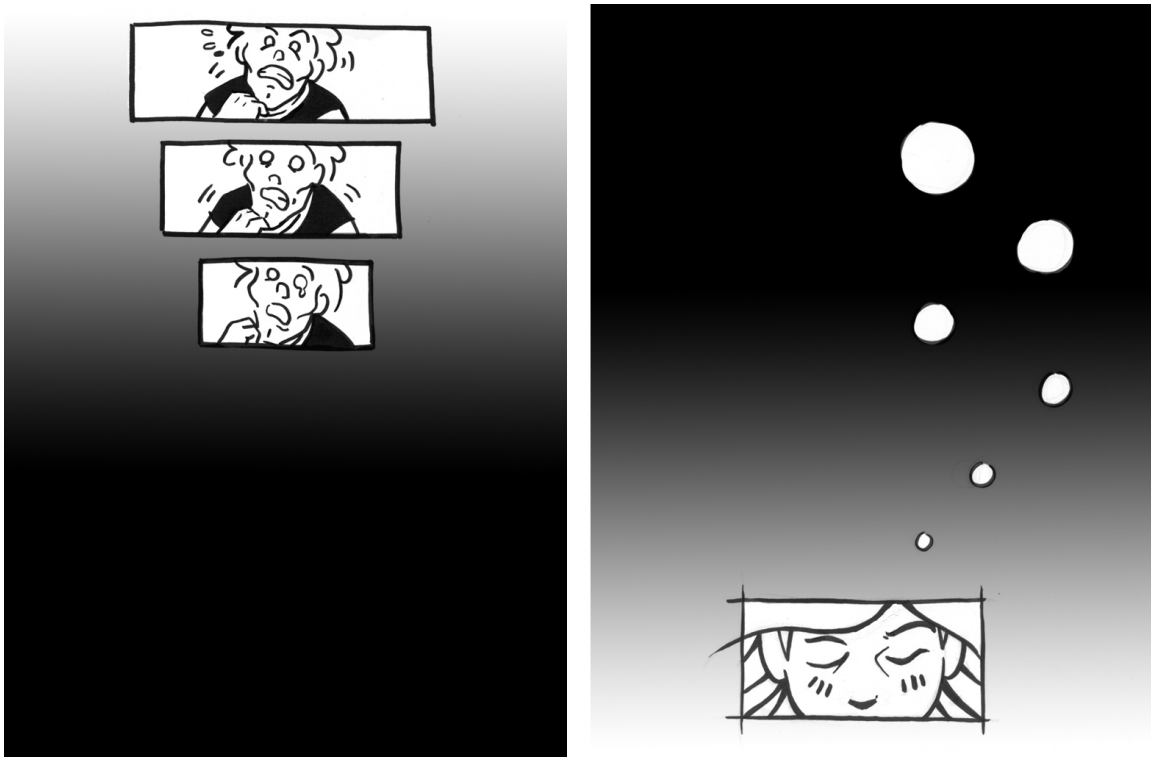
I decided to present my project electronically because of changing trends in

distribution. With the rise of eReaders in the last decade it's become vital to be

acquainted with eBook processes for successful self-publishing. "The internet's changed

how intellectual property works, and you just have to learn to let it go" (Sorensen).

Independent comic artists can achieve a wider audience via digital distribution and the

freedom of the web. Eventually I intend to release my project online for free through my

website with colored physical print for sale.

New Skin follows in a long line of seduction and murder stories stretching back to

antiquity, such as the biblical story of Judith and Holofernes. A more contemporary

comparison would be the 2005 film, *Hard Candy,* which pits a young sociopathic vigilante against a predatory pedophile. The film explores the questionable morality of the situation, but is ultimately overshadowed by shock value and unsympathetic characters. By establishing early on in the story that the pedophile character is predatory, the actions of the vigilante are justified in the eyes of the viewer. As a result, her torture of the pedophile becomes a spectacle instead of making the viewer question their sympathies. In my own work, I avoided these problems by having a neutral character, the daughter, who is situated between the competing moral extremes to act as the target of the viewer's sympathy. The daughter's relationships with her mother and Vince allow the reader to see the characters as dysfunctional people while the tense situation acts as the backdrop, not the focus. *Hard Candy* taught me the importance of the viewer's perception, which leads me to organize character dynamics in my story.

Another important influence on the organization of my story was the early Roman Polanski film, *Knife in the Water*. The film features three characters isolated on a boat and is able to sustain the viewer's interest through the characters' interactions with each other, as opposed to plot movement. It served as an example of how minimizing the cast could maximize character development. As a result I pruned the original short story of minor characters when I translated it into comic form. The story also went through small but vital changes in the wake of Steubenville rape trials. Originally the comic ended with the daughter leaving behind her flower hairpiece as evidence in the hotel room. After considering the victim blaming associated with the Steubenville case I decided the ending as it stood was too sympathetic towards Vince. I felt that cutting that ending would keep Vince and the mother evenly matched as monsters in the eye of the viewer.

Stylistically I chose to develop a sparse visual style inspired by the brush work of late 90's/early 2000's comic artists like Craig Thompson, and Bryan Lee O'Malley. These artists often took inspiration from Japanese comic styles to tell personal stories (*Making, 223*). Of particular importance to my choice of style are the comics of James Kochalka and Jessica Abel. In the graphic novel *La Perdida*, Jessica Abel utilized a simplified facial style while still conveying a wide range of emotions. While most artists associated with the brush style prize its ability to create smooth line work, Jessica allowed the medium's roughness to show through, adding an unsettling visual to tense situations.

from *La Perdida*, Jessica Abel, 2006.

James Kochalka, on the other hand, uses bold, smooth lines to amplify the cartoonishness of his work, which downplays the dark subtext hiding under his irreverent stories. Using a simplified style allows a cartoonist to retain the emotional tension of the plot while downplaying the shock-value that I found distracting.

from *Fantastic Butterflies*, James Kochalka, 2001.

My concern with emulating more minimalist forms was being able to convey complex emotions with less detail. Of equal concern was keeping the style from becoming ironic. If my characters were rendered too simplistically, the violence and emotional weight might become silly and fall into spectacle.

I wanted this project to be an exercise in effective character development and the successful balancing of morals. While my thematic interests shift on a yearly basis, my commitment to narrative has been a constant. Overall, I am interested in being a good storyteller first and a skilled illustrator second. The reactions I have received to this work lead me to believe that much of my planning paid off and that New Skin's narrative worked. That being said, I feel that I may have neglected style too heavily, and am unsatisfied with the level of skill I brought to its illustration. I intend to continue making comic works beyond college and this project has validated that decision.

Bibliography

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