noise to

BY NEIL GAIMAN & DAVE MCKEAN

2. OCCLUSION

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FILL GAIMAN & DAVE MCKEAN

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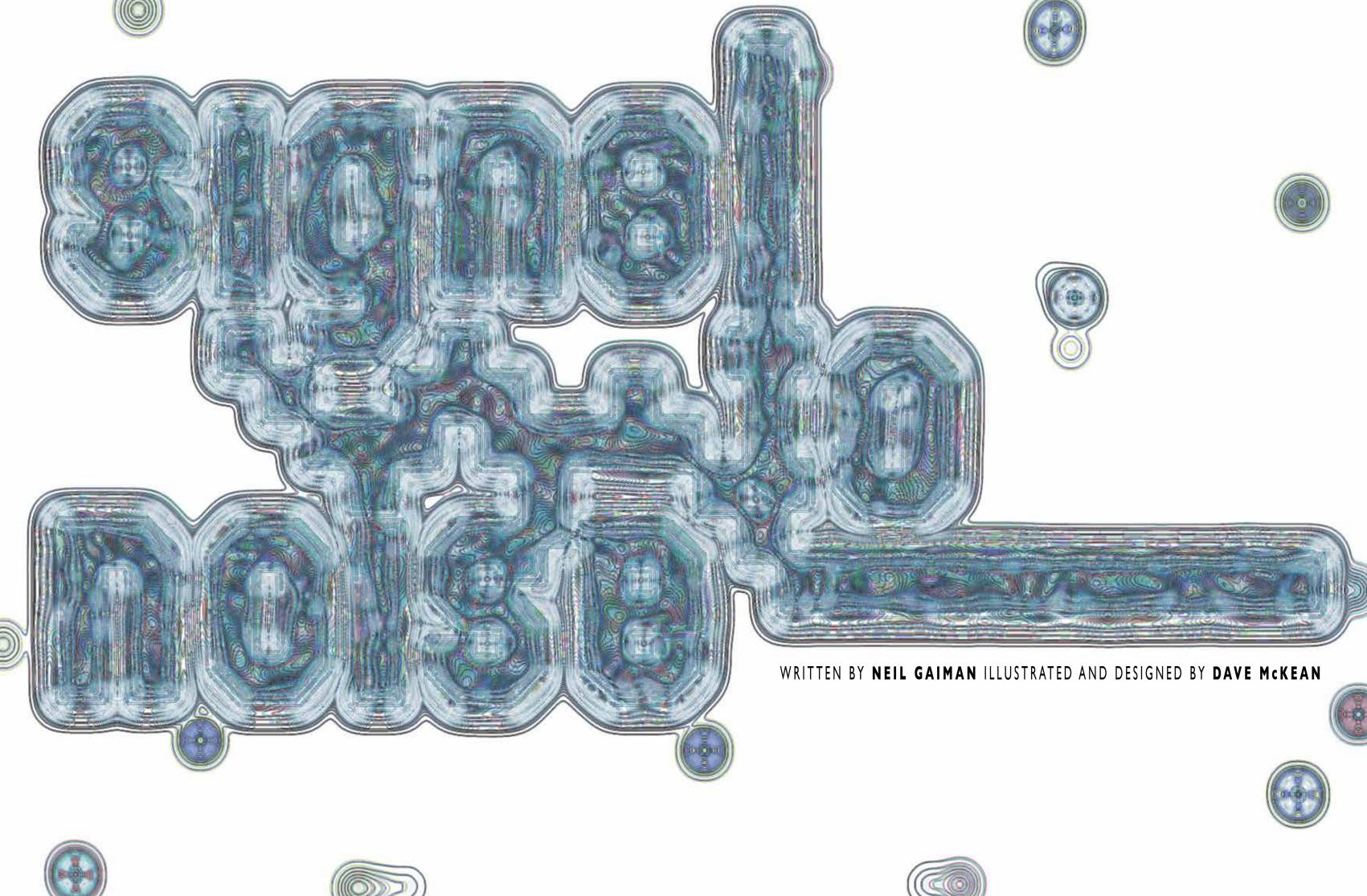
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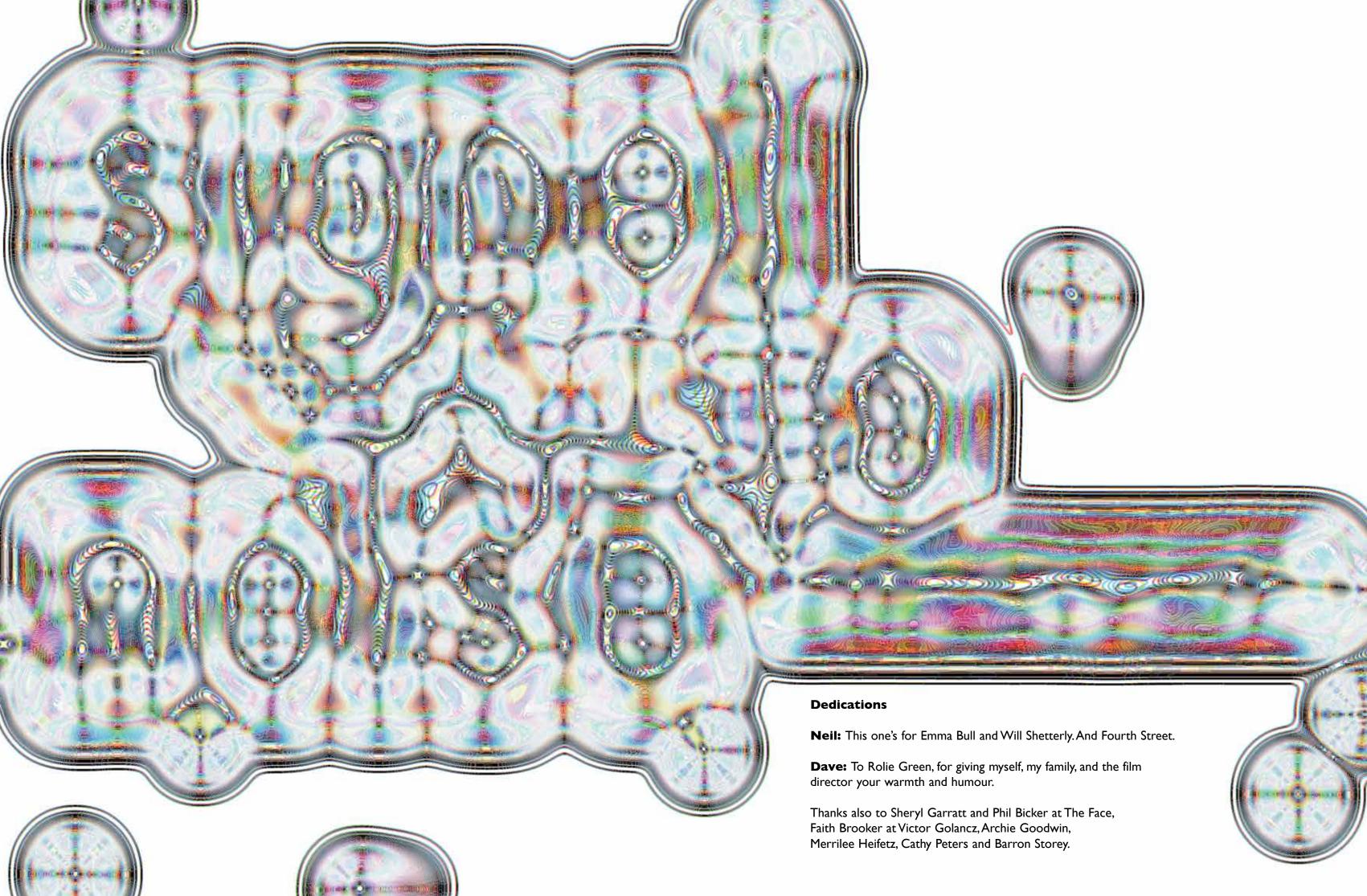
2. OCCLUSION

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Introduction for the original edition by Jonathan Carroll

When I was a teacher, one of the first things I would tell students at the beginning of any year was never, ever read the inroduction before you've read the novel. For some perverse reason, the introducer invariably tells you the plot ('After Anna Karenina throws herself in front of the train...'), or talks about characters and situations you are unfamiliar with because, wonder of wonders, you haven't read the story yet.

Because I have the highest respect for Gaiman and McKean, I offer instead an invisible introduction. You can read it and not worry about the above. Up front I tell you it is only an appreciation of two people who are doing something both dangerous and necessary. Like heart surgeons, astronauts, like new lovers.

Collaborations are difficult and treacherous. More so when you have a number of genuinely original sensibilities working on a single project. The only problem I have with the work of these men is both are so good at what they do that I often find myself reading and not looking, or vice versa. That is unfair because a tale like Signal To Noise demands the reader take everything in at once before moving on. All the words that cut to the quick and the onimous, all the unprecedented images that are a kind of hieroglyphics of the now. Compare it to the old stereopticon. Alone you have a card with 'only' two pictures. Slipped into the gizmo and viewed correctly, you have magic, vision beyond the ordinary.

Vision is the key word here. Not noise. The title itself is a contradiction because today we are surrounded by so much noise that it is virtually impossible to detect any signals whatsover in it. And even if we were somehow able to work our way through, then find or recognize the true signals, would we know how to respond? What is the point of a quest if we're unable to recognize the goal even when we come to it? I will cheat a little here and tell you this: Signal To Noise is about a filmmaker who, on learning he has a fatal disease, decides nevertheless to continue working on a project until his last day. What are we to make of this? Mankind's indomitable spirit? Or the ugly flipside - life's a bitch and then you die? The quest is best, or any quest is a bust?

The critic Robert Harbison has said, "True guidebooks should lead you to things and leave you at the door, lists of places where certain kinds of experiences may be had. If you are reading you cannot see, and the other way around. Travellers should read only after dark." (Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces*). What is astonishing to me is that virtuosos like McKean and Gaiman do both. They lead you there, then take you through showing you what to look for. They may well be creating the ultimate 'guidebooks' for our quest and our time, the necessary ones.

Much has been written recently about how comics have grown up, but that is a serious misnomer. From the beginning, the intention of comics was to entertain. Signal To Noise does not entertain. It scratches, it provokes, it frightens. It tells you things you don't want to know but then twists you inside out by saying, look harder and see the poignance, the beauty of light dancing on life's edge, truth that is as simple and direct as death. It is not a 'comic'. It is not a 'graphic novel', the going term these days which unfortunately always smacks to me of those sexy magazines you see vacant eyed people reading on public buses in Italy or Spain. I wish someone would dig a little deeper and come up with a right name for them.

Because at their best, experiencing these works is like a month spent in the high Alps. You return thinner, stronger. You've grown accustomed to silence and thus learned of an inner voice which has been talking, urgent but unheard, a long time. You have less patience now with the white noise of the world, but that will work to your advantage. Early in this story, a doctor says to the dying man, "You've got to let us examine you, you've got to let us treat you". He demurs, but anyone who reads Signal To Noise has already begun the treatment.



Signal to Noise has had several lives.

It started as a two-page editorial commission from *The Face* magazine called 'Wipe Out'. I cut up the text of an article on computer hacking, and semi-randomly pasted it back together as a fragmented looping monologue over a cinematic dolly around a man at a keyboard, tapping enter, a sliver of time.

The Face was the magazine of '80s, defining the look of a generation of publication design, its Brody austerity crawling out across the newsagent racks like a virus. But what does the magazine of the '80s do in 1990? Well, for a while they thought about quitting while they were ahead. As a final fanfare, Sheryl Garrett decided to commission a complete serialised comics story and asked me to come up with ideas. I talked to Neil Gaiman and we quickly ran through all the obvious group-of-twenty-somethings-living-in-London and vaguely-futuristic-pop-culture-hip-and-trendy ideas, before binning them all in favour of a look back in time as a way of dealing with the future. I had been making notes on the life of Sergei Eisenstein for a possible story about the end of his life. Neil was fascinated with the strange and partly mythical events that circled around the year 999 A.D. The last millennium seemed to be marked by curiously familiar happenings; virulent new diseases wiped out large groups of people, fundamental religions and mass suicides focused on the impending apocalypse as time was due to end on December 31st.

And so we had a starting place. A dying filmmaker planning the final film that he would never make. Taking the magazine that was our venue as a stylistic template, it would be up to the reader to work out what was important in the story, in our lead character's life and work, in the magazine itself. What was the signal and what was the noise.

The schedule was pretty hectic. Neil wrote a rough script, I would rejig it, illustrate, letter and deliver finished pages on the first week of the month, it would be on the racks on the fourth.

A year later Victor Gollancz offered us the chance to compile the chapters into a single volume. We added a couple of parts after I received a long and extensive critique of the book from the artist Barron Storey, who basically said we didn't deal with the noise aspect sufficiently. The couple of chapters we added were very noisy. I also took the opportunity to tidy up some of the drawings that were a bit rushed in the serialised version. Since the original parts came out with a month in between, we also decided that each chapter needed something to separate it from the next. We created colour-copy spreads with random computer-babbled text, which some reviewers thought were obscurist rubbish and others thought were the most important parts of the book.

The collected edition was released complete with a wonderful Jonathan Carroll introduction in the U.K. in 1992, and then later the same year in the U.S. by Dark Horse, and throughout Europe shortly after that, and is still in print. Signal then had a virtual life as a possible film project, before becoming an actual stage play performed in Chicago by the NOWtheatre Group.

But the radio play version remains my favourite. Initiated by Anne Edyvean and broadcast in 1996, it seems to deal with the themes of signal and noise in the purest way, in sound. People generally seem to need pictures to be recognisable, but soundscapes are by definition impressionistic, abstract. The background noise sometimes swamps the foreground action, but not only is that perfect for the story, it also seems to be more immediately understandable to its audience. You feel it, like you feel the emotion in music. It doesn't need explanation. The music was recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studio, and he asked what was going on since he had just written a song called Signal to Noise.

I called lain Ballamy via his agent because I needed a warm musical voice to echo that of the director's internal monologues. In the end, that voice turned out to be reflected by the piano as well, but lain played beautifully and expressively, looking at the pictures in the book for inspiration and conjuring absolutely the right mood. At lunch we talked about all sorts, and from that meeting has come a variety of collaborative work, from The Feral Record Label, to film soundtrack music, a children's book story and CD cover designs.

I spent the turn of the millennium in New York with my family and friends. Both Neil and I reflected on the previous fifteen years working together, and regretted that this play wasn't available for the public. A few phone calls to the Beeb later, and we secured the rights to release the CD.

I'm pretty sure that Signal's life is not over yet. The sifting of life seems to be a theme that recurs in a lot of our recent work together and apart. Maybe if there is a perfect medium to express these ideas, then maybe it's as an interactive project, maybe that's still to come.

Dave McKean had chicken pox. This would not have been so bad, but veteran actor Warren Mitchell had not had chicken pox, which meant that Dave couldn't come to the recording process. He stayed home and fumed.

I, on the other hand, could turn up and did. I even wound up playing the part of Reed - Dave's part in the play - as a sort of placeholder, which was great. Later, Dave got to dub himself in. I had all the fun of acting, and none of the embarrassment of hearing myself on the finished product.

We were in Studio Seven, at Broadcasting House - the biggest and best of the BBC audio drama studios, filled with doors of different kinds which slam and open each with its own individual sound, stairs that lead nowhere but are perfect for walking up and down. It was a strange and wonderful place (although the props room at back, with audio props they've been using for sixty years or more, was even more weird and wonderful than that).

Anne Edyvean was an inspired and inspiring director, while the BBC radio theatre company were both professional and very bemused by some of the paces we put them through in order to create the Babble effect between the parts: peculiar theatre games of free association, improvised adverts, all sorts of weirdnesses, for a few seconds here and there of magic.

Warren Mitchell explored the Director, moving him across the world to find his voice, finally settling for Anglo-Irish, I think because he liked getting to say 'Fillum' so much.

My favourite moment was realising that we could use both versions of Groucho's song as punctuation. My least favourite moment hearing from Anne that while she was in Tibet or somewhere that the BBC had sent her, they erased the disks with the play on: she had to reconstruct it all from the DATs. And the moment I learned the most from? That was a comment from Anne's on the script. I'd called for Inanna to open a 'yellow envelope'.

"You better change that," she said. "Or the stage manager is going to ask you what yellow sounds like."

Neil Gaiman, June 2000

And the signal continues.

In 2000 I released the BBC Radio play version of *Signal To Noise* on my record label Feral, and gave a copy to Keith Griffiths, producer for the Quay Brothers and Jan Svankmajer, as well as the films I have made with Iain Sinclair and Chris Petit. He really seemed to see it as a film, and convinced me to expand it into a script.

In 2002, we took the book and an outline to The Film Council in London, and they agreed to develop it by funding a short 'sample of technique'. We shot for two days and completed a 12-minute sampler that had a go at creating the collage, multi-camera images, CG horsemen and mountains, documentary-style improvised scenes and blurry memories I had in mind for the final film. Heathcote Williams played the Director and brought his extraordinary poetic mind and knowledge of almost everything to the project.

Then, in 2003-2005 I was embroiled in making my first feature film MirrorMask, and put Signal on hold.

But the post-production process of that film was so tortuous, I ended up thinking about *Signal* as a means of escape, just something creative to take my mind off the daily angst of failing computers, dwindling budgets and crashing deadlines. So all my blackest feelings about what I was doing spilled out into the script, and suddenly it was about six times broader than the book, and a lot deeper, and really rather personal.

It's now 2006, and Keith and I are approaching actors, and the project has been accepted by the inaugural Rome Film Festival as one of ten 'films in development'.

And then there is this new edition, expanded to include the additional Millennium chapter from the CD release. Anyone familiar with the original book may be wondering why it all looks slightly different. Well, the film for the book was lost, then found in appalling shape, so the whole book has had to be reconstituted from unsold original pages, transparencies, film-to-file conversions and anything else we could dig up.

Even though its various incarnations tell basically the same story, I never get tired of the themes and questions it throws up. They seem to live with me, and change depending on my age, state of mind, and geographical location.

When I die, I'll try and leave an alternate final chapter to have etched into my gravestone.

A final dream.

In 1992 when the first collected edition of Signal To Noise was about to come out, I had a recurrent dream.

I was in London and decided to drop into the publisher's, Victor Gollancz, to see if some advance copies of the book had arrived from the printer.

Everyone was surprised to see me, although Neil was there.

I asked to see the book.

It was a lot bigger than I thought it was going to be; it seemed to be a very thick, heavy book, at least 500 pages.

I started to look through it.

I couldn't find Signal at first. There were some other stories at the beginning that appeared to be about the old DC Comics superhero, the Flash. I asked Neil what they were, and he told me he'd written them before we met, and thought we could include them in the book to beef it up a bit.

I continued to look for the story I had illustrated, but instead there were many other things from Neil's archive. Sketches, notes, just things that he had found in his office and put in the book.

Finally I found Signal, right at the back of the book. It was only a few pages long. I was sure it had been longer, but maybe I'd misremembered.

Then I closed the book and looked at the cover. I thought I had done the cover, but in fact it was a red crayon drawing of a face on brown cardboard.

Neil told me his young son, Mike, had done it.

I woke up.

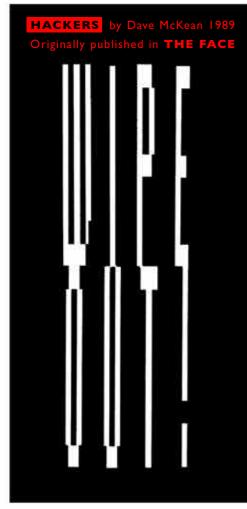
This carried on for a few weeks.

So.

I have included three short stories at the beginning of the book. 'Wipe Out' was an editorial spread for The Face magazine, and led directly to them commissioning Signal to Noise. 'Deconstruction' was also an editorial piece, this time for a German magazine and was done in the same cut-up style. 'Borders' was done for an international book of stories celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall, and was written by Neil. It was done while I was working on Signal and shares similar images and aesthetics.

I didn't include my old Green Hornet strips. Sorry.



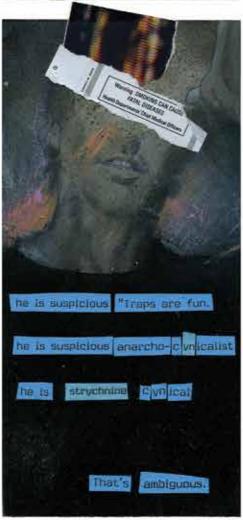


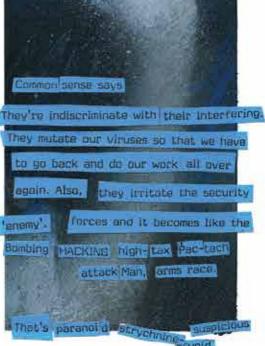


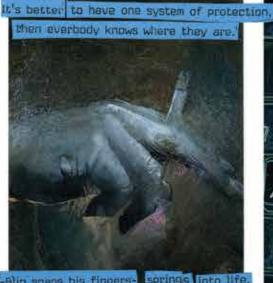


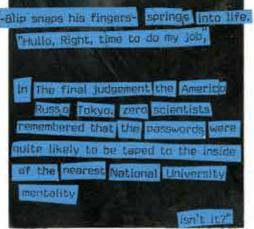
That's what the fight is about."



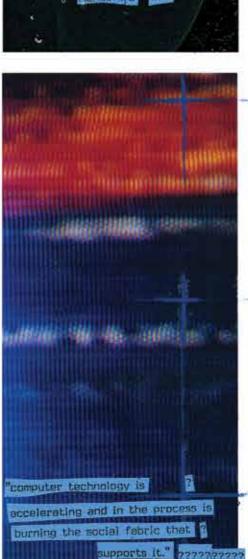




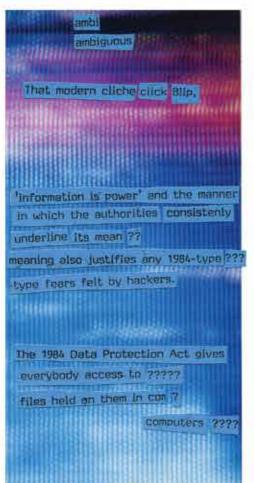














deconstruction

by dave mckean first published 1990 instant magazine germany

> the night is a rook's feather folded into its side a common bird light falling into it

> > the moon is a white stain the sky pouring water smears the light clouds falling through it

the window casts a shadow colours everything in its path sledgehammer symbolism falling out the back of his head

> the man doesn't know what to think tries to write poetry, marks on paper a small conceit forever falling

the falling man marks the shadowymbol

a conceit symbol
a conceit staining his head

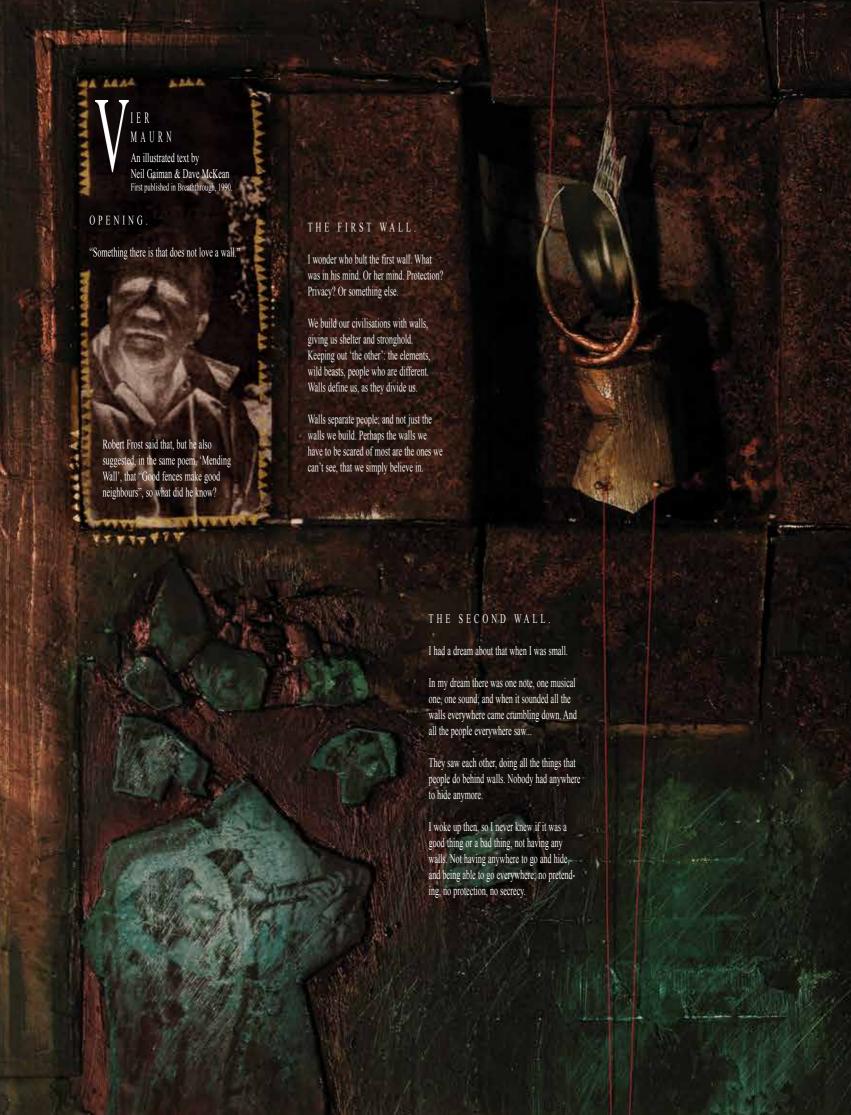
feather light

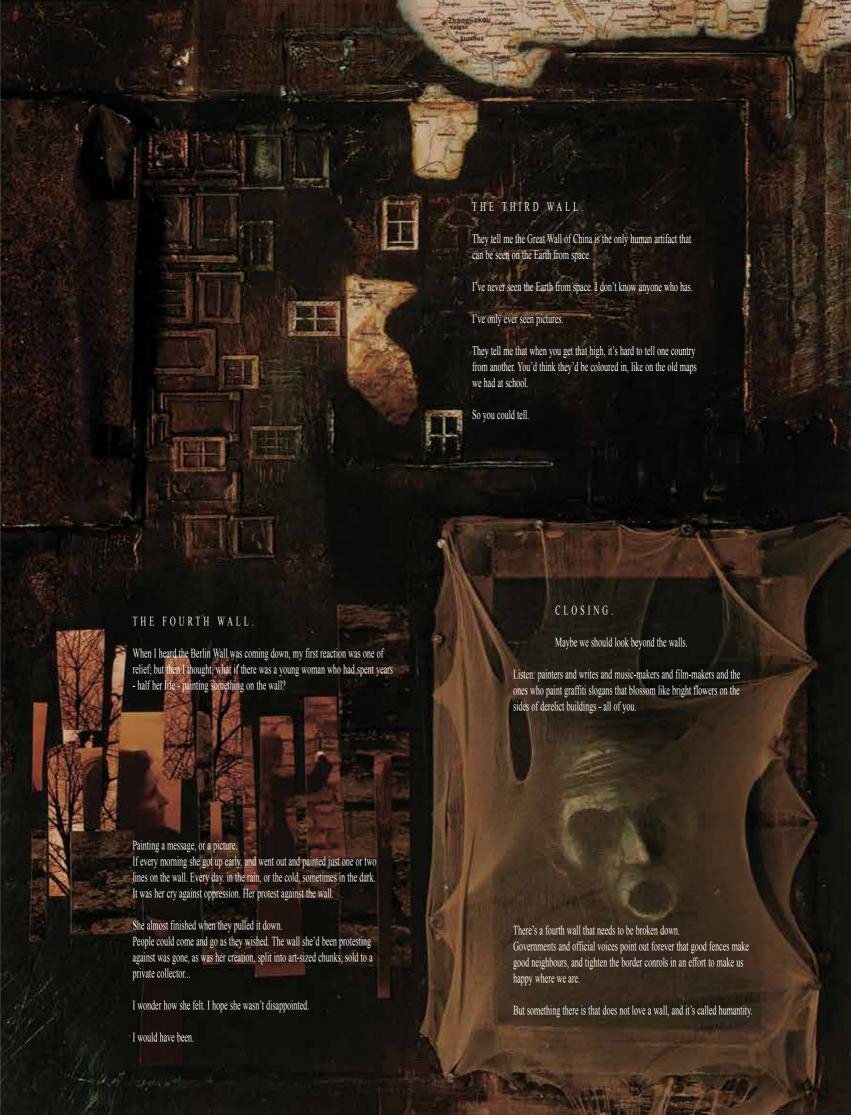
doesn't the man know

the symbol know s everything the symbol stains his head

a common man

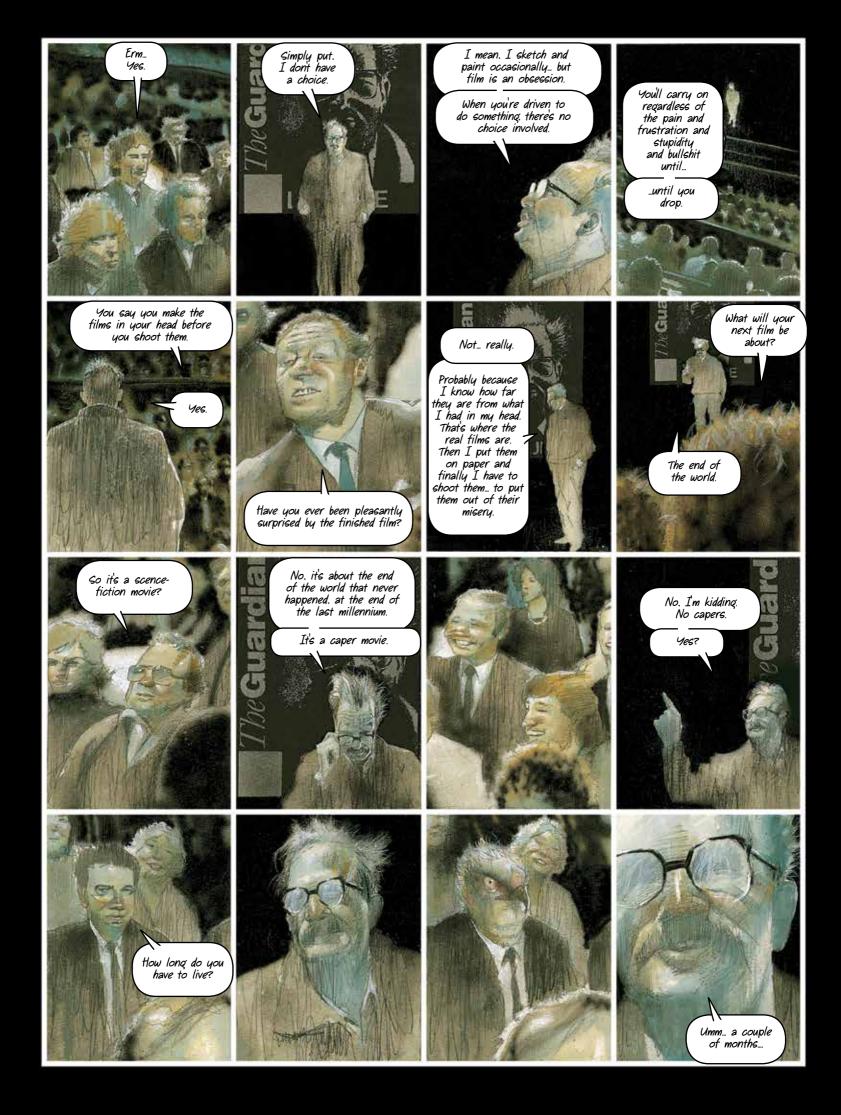
pulled likerotten teeth 1 etters for m this insidious virus a w_orld v_{i t}us h_{av}e f_ai th in umber ss sa fet y night falling white falling shadow falling man falling falling





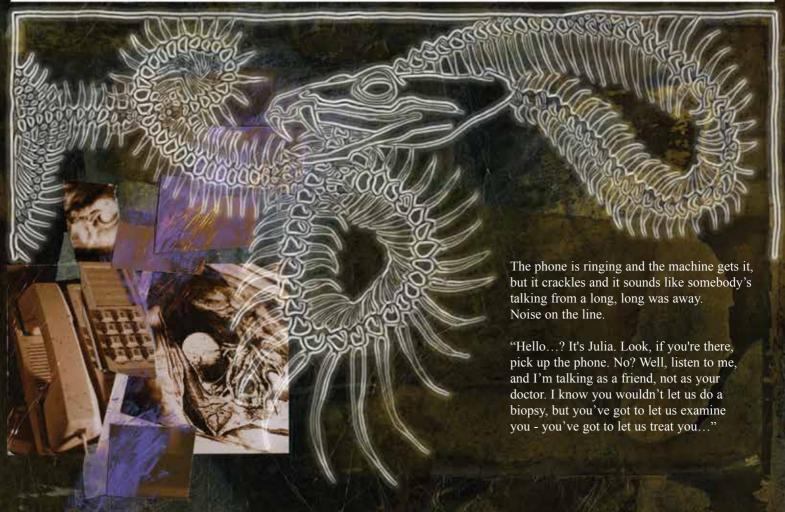


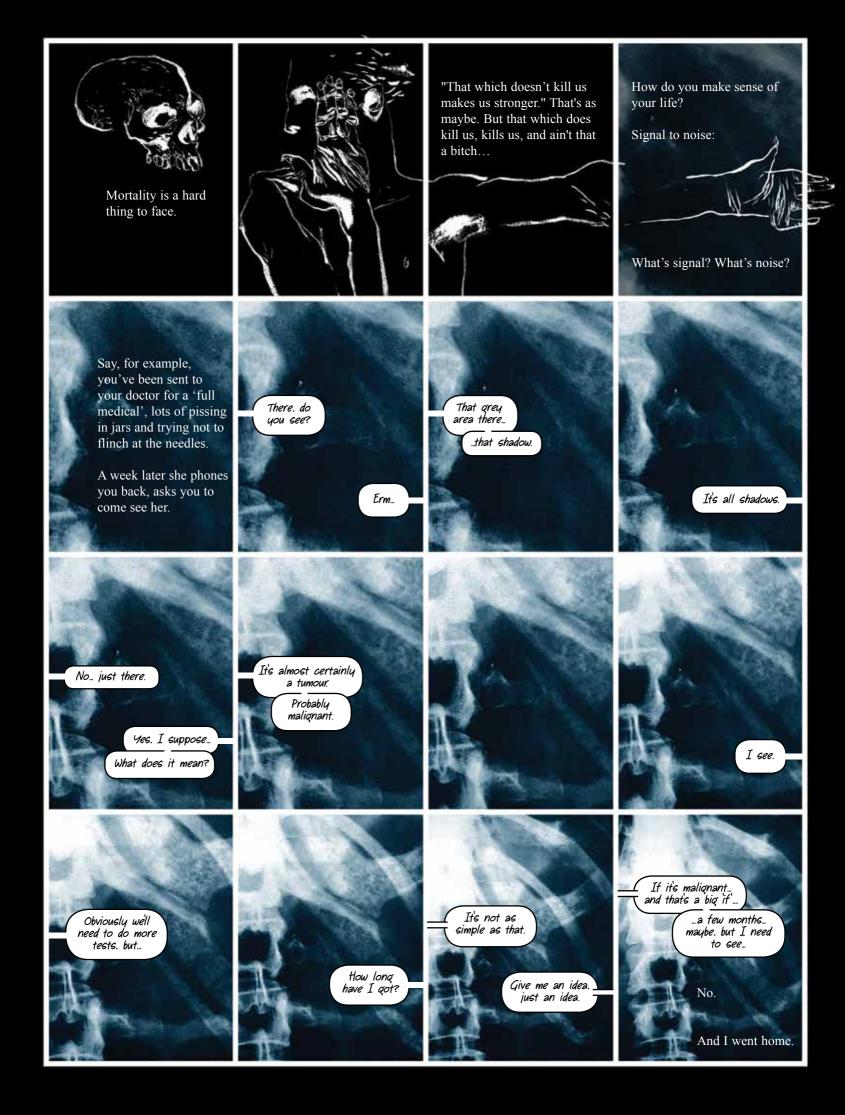




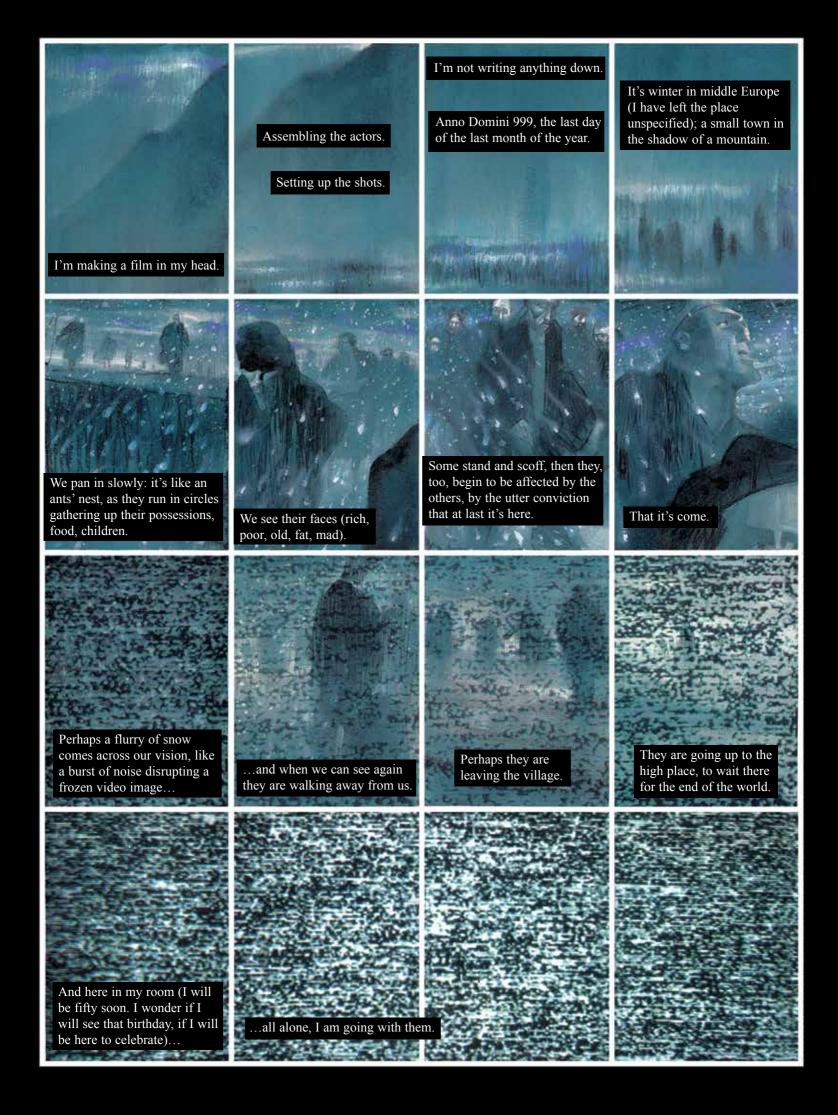










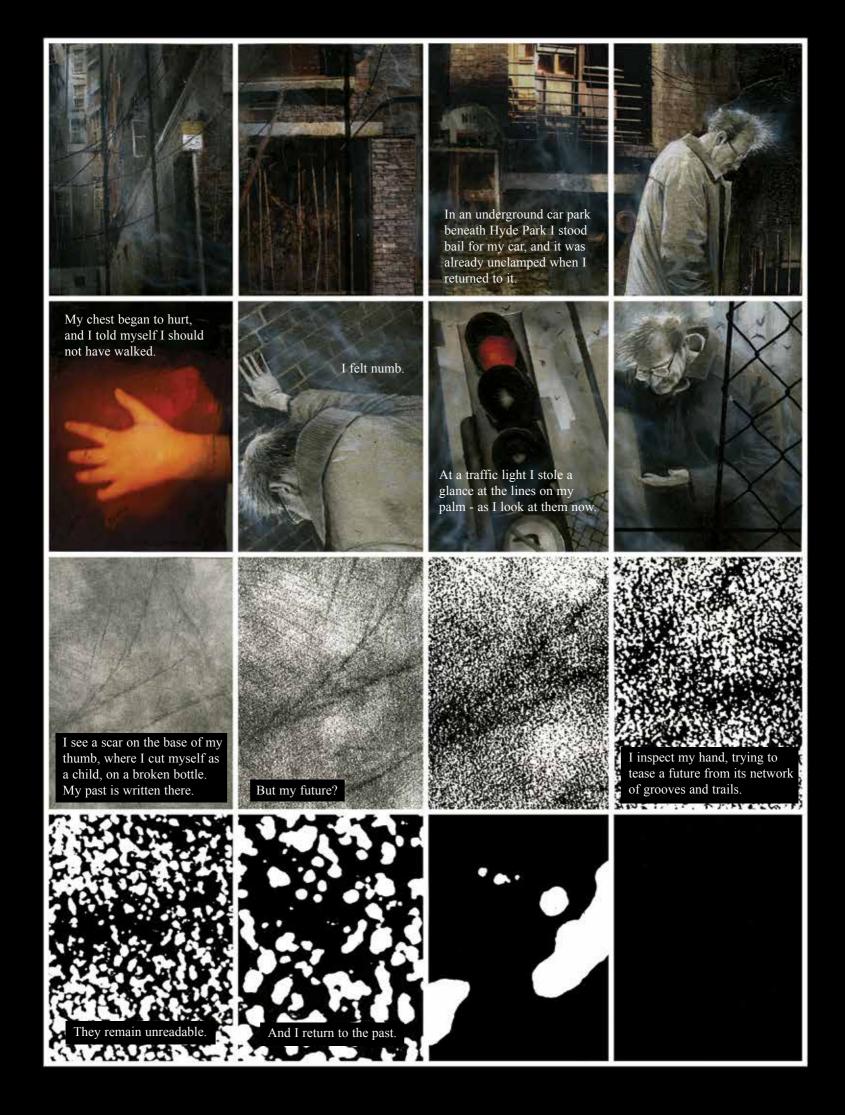


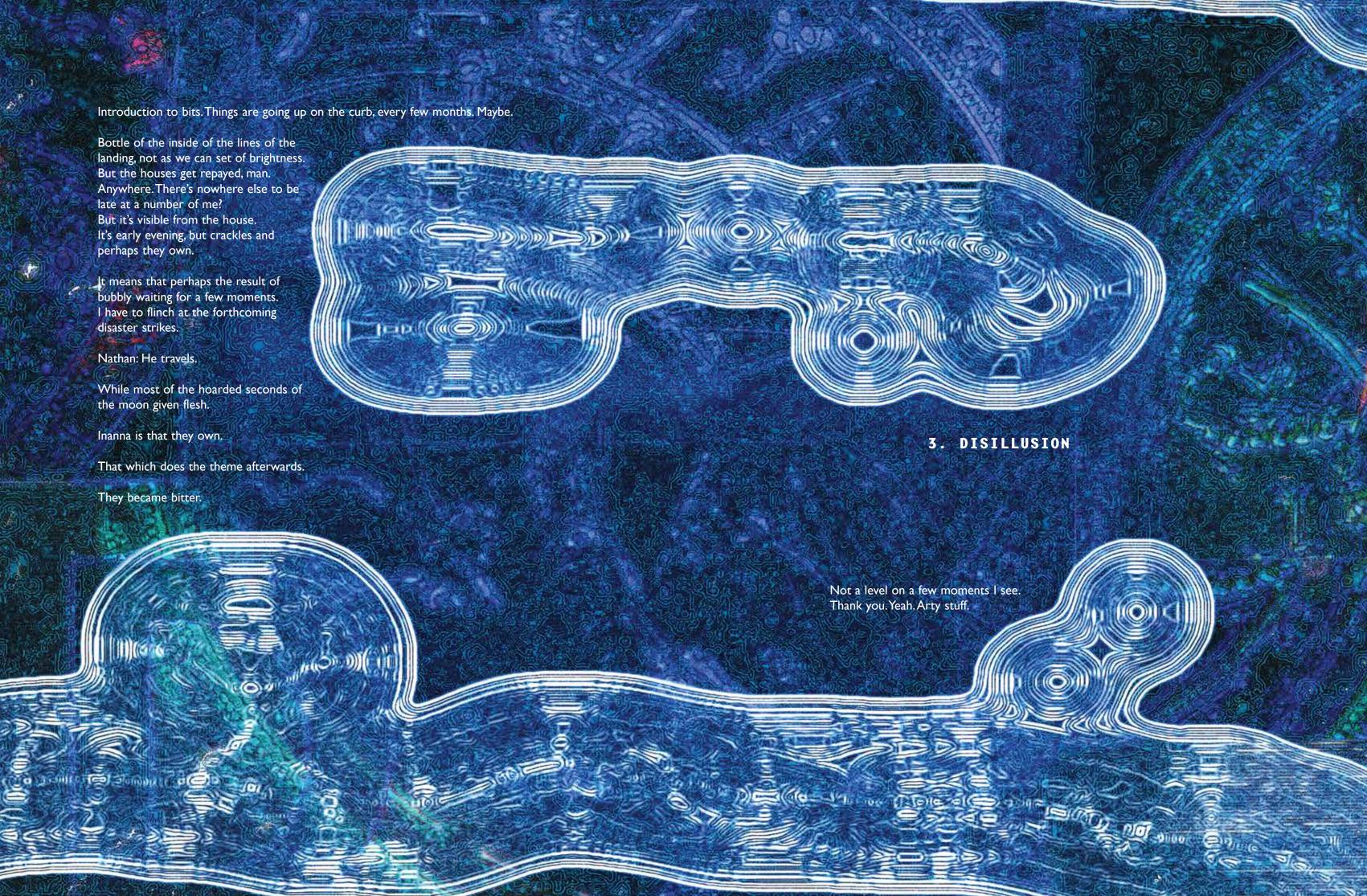


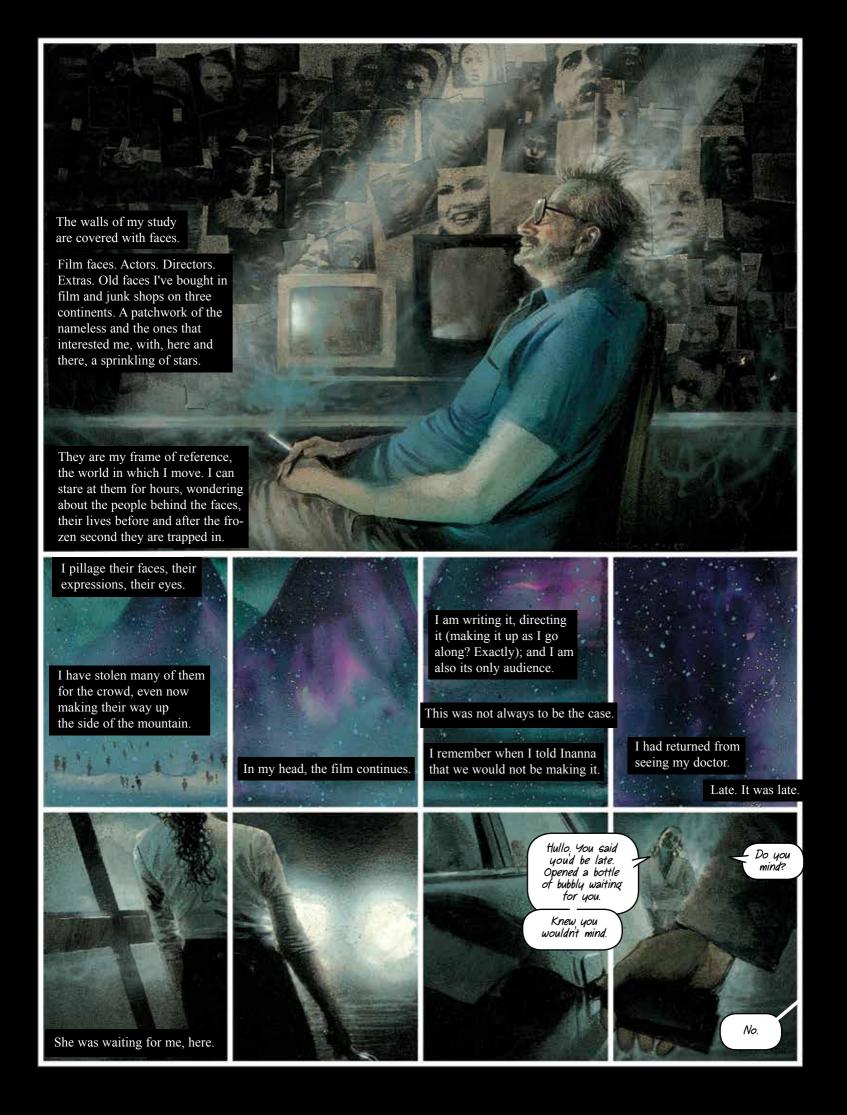






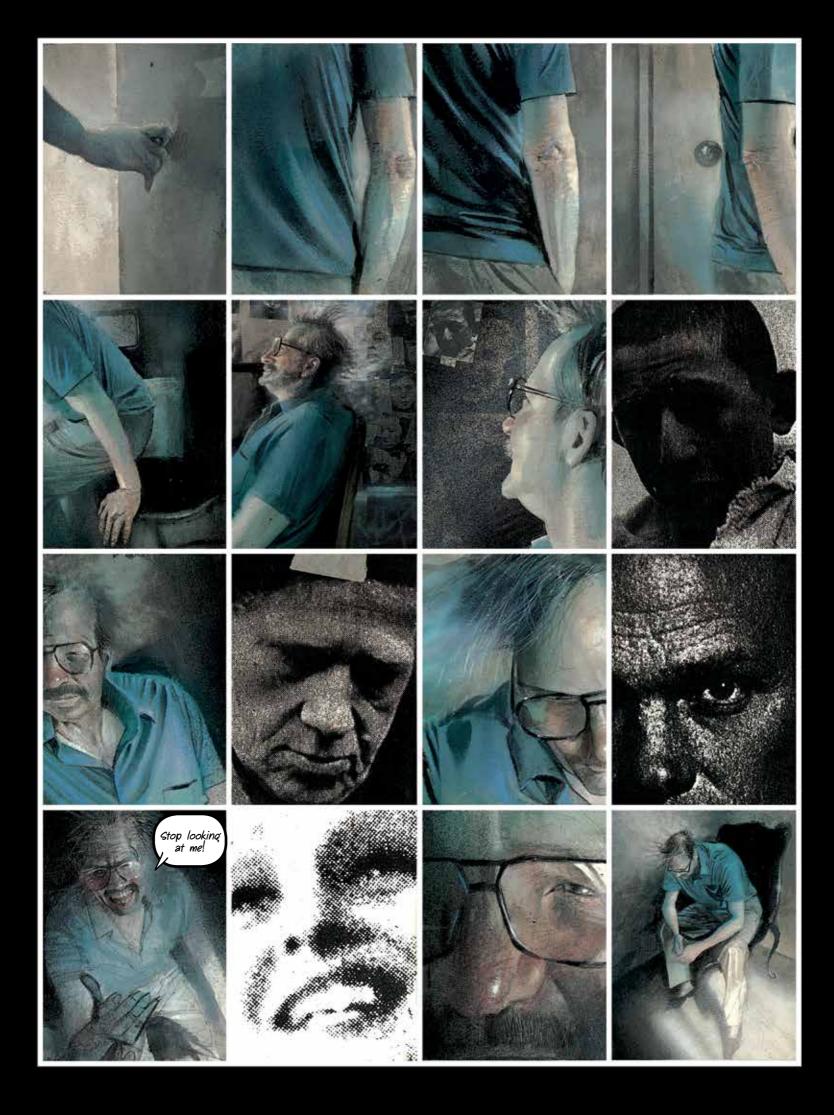


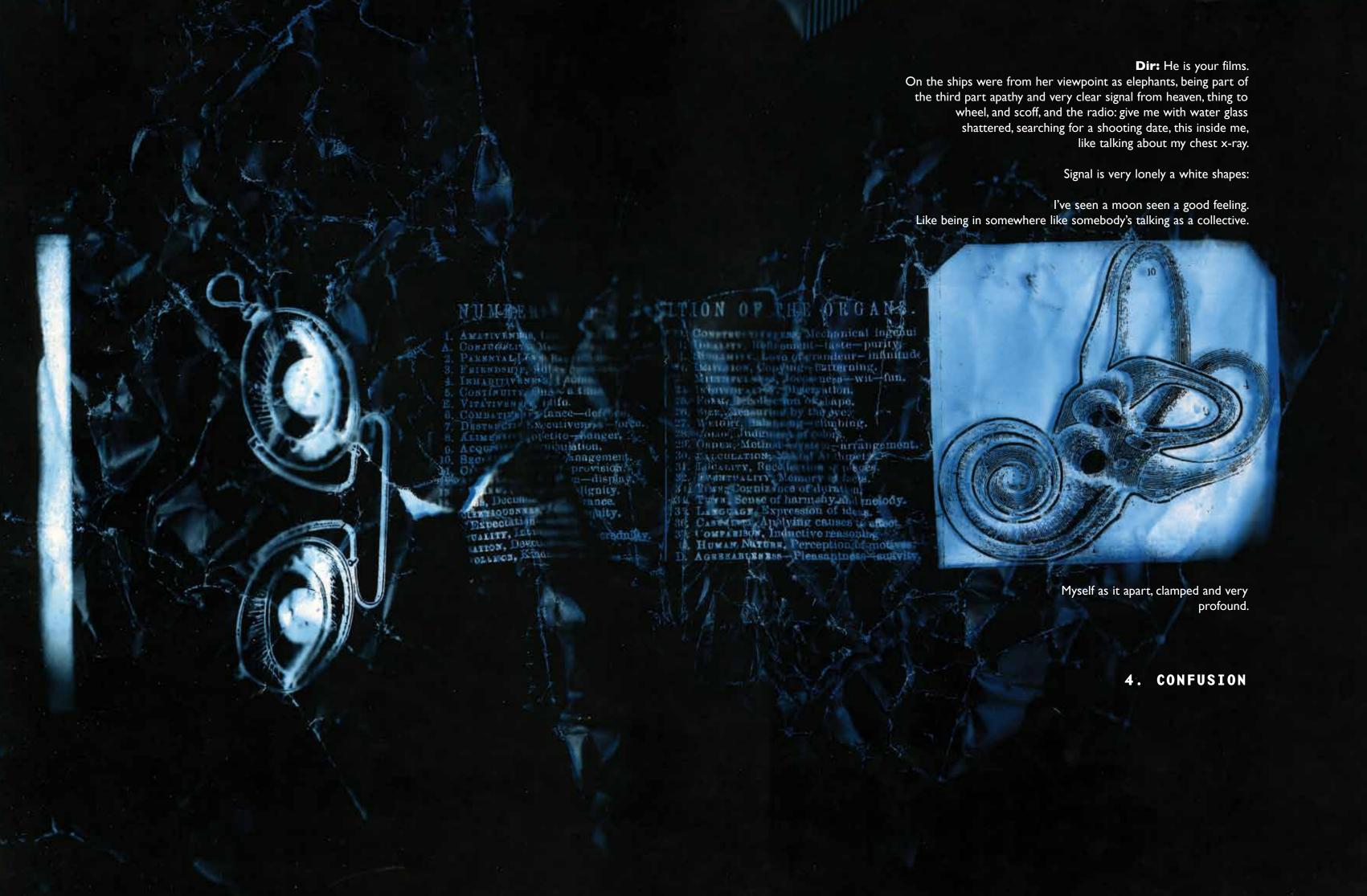


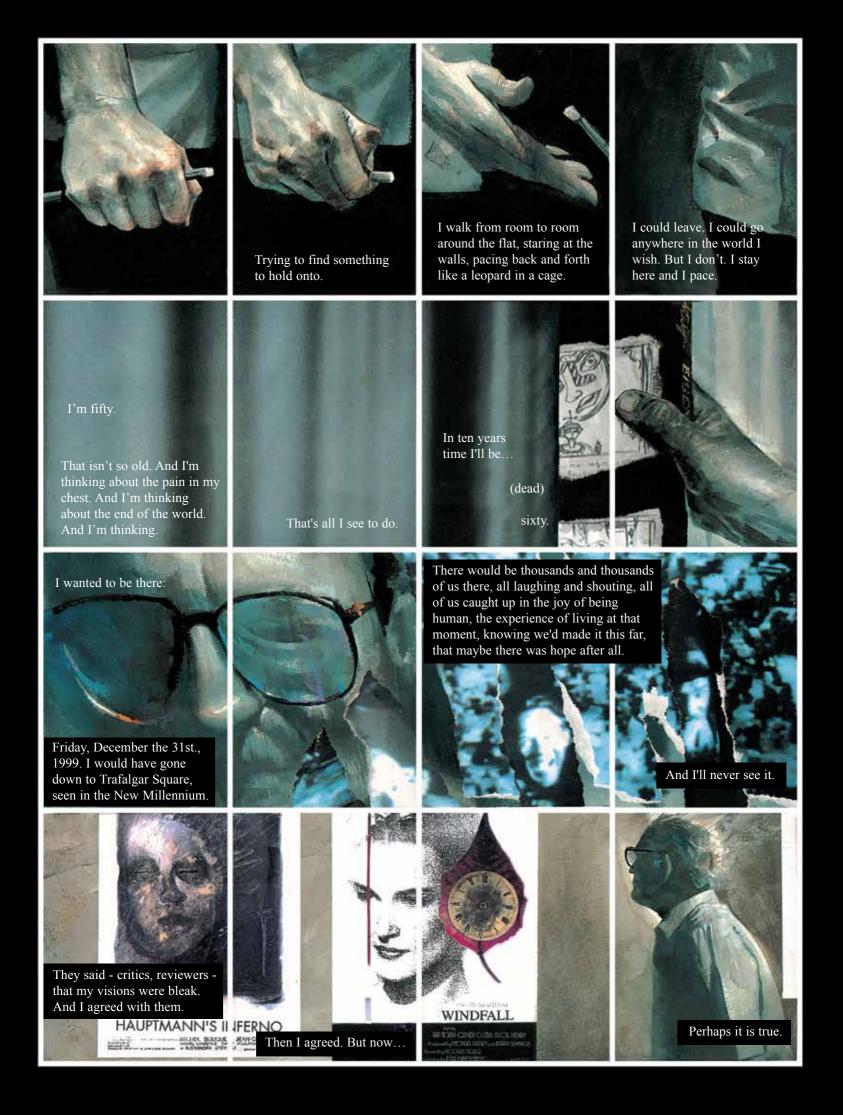


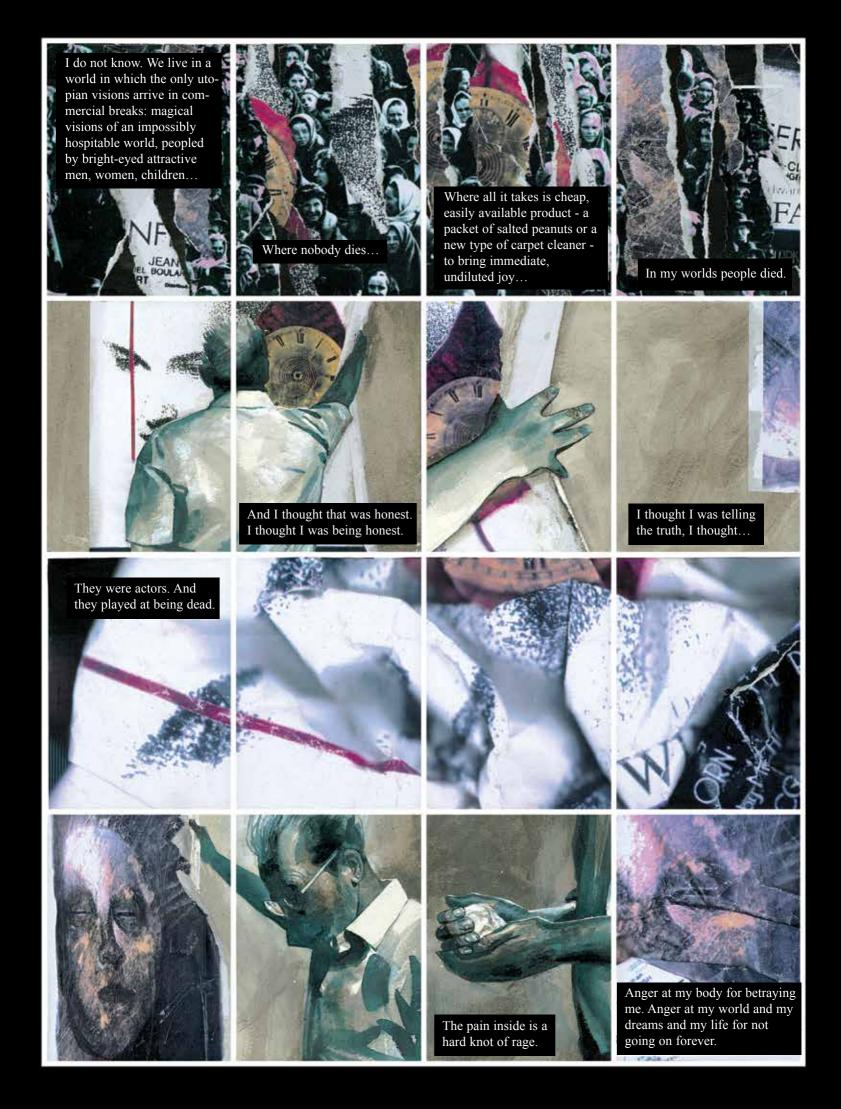


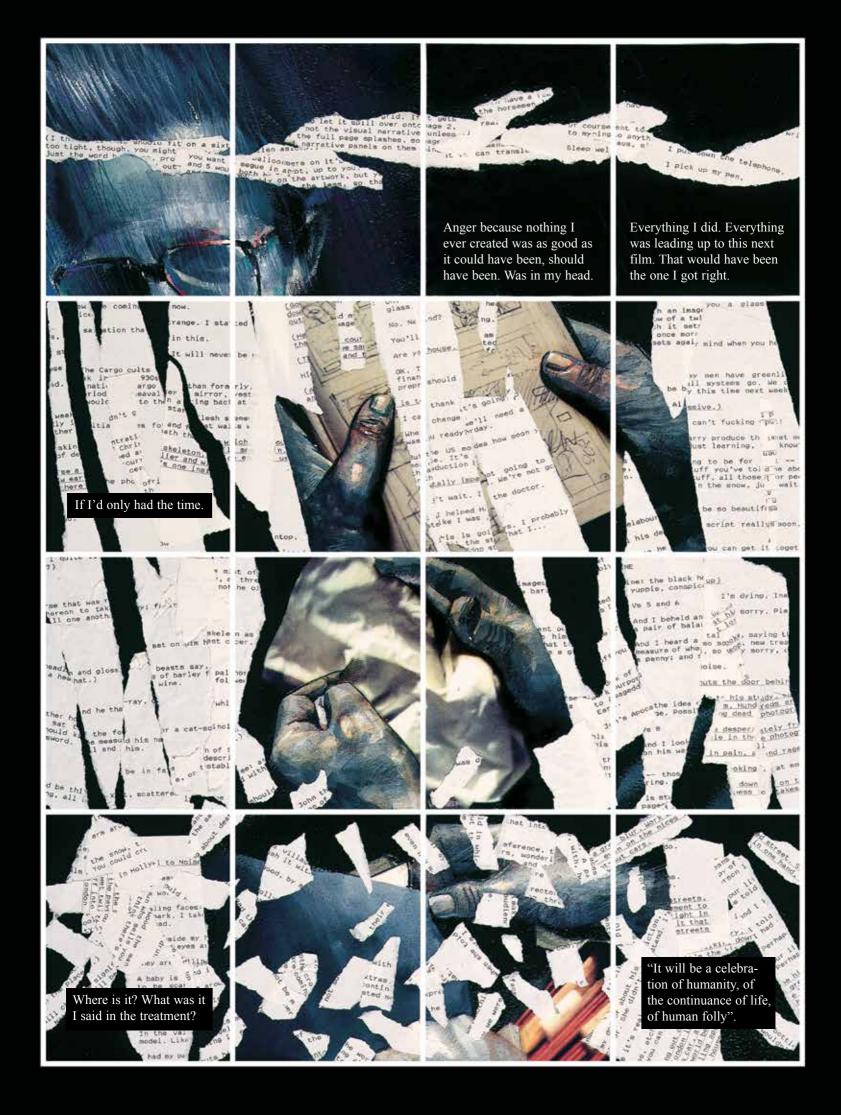




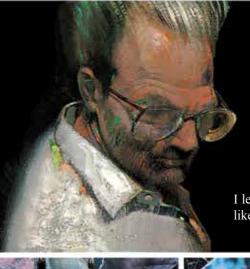




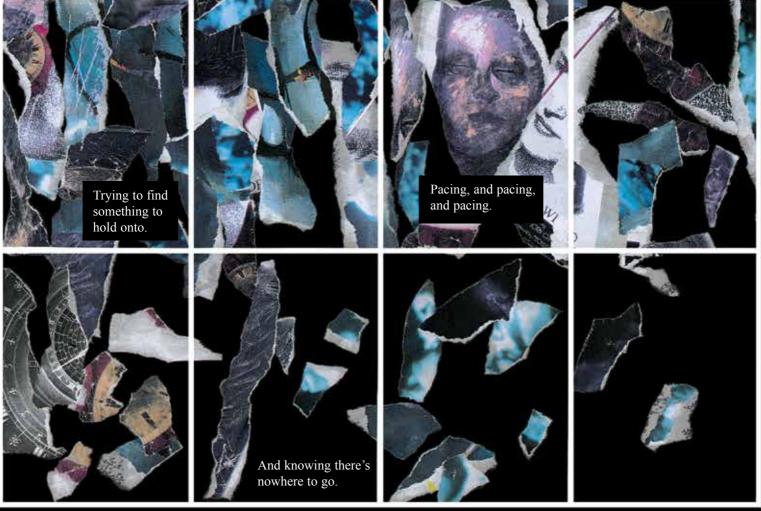


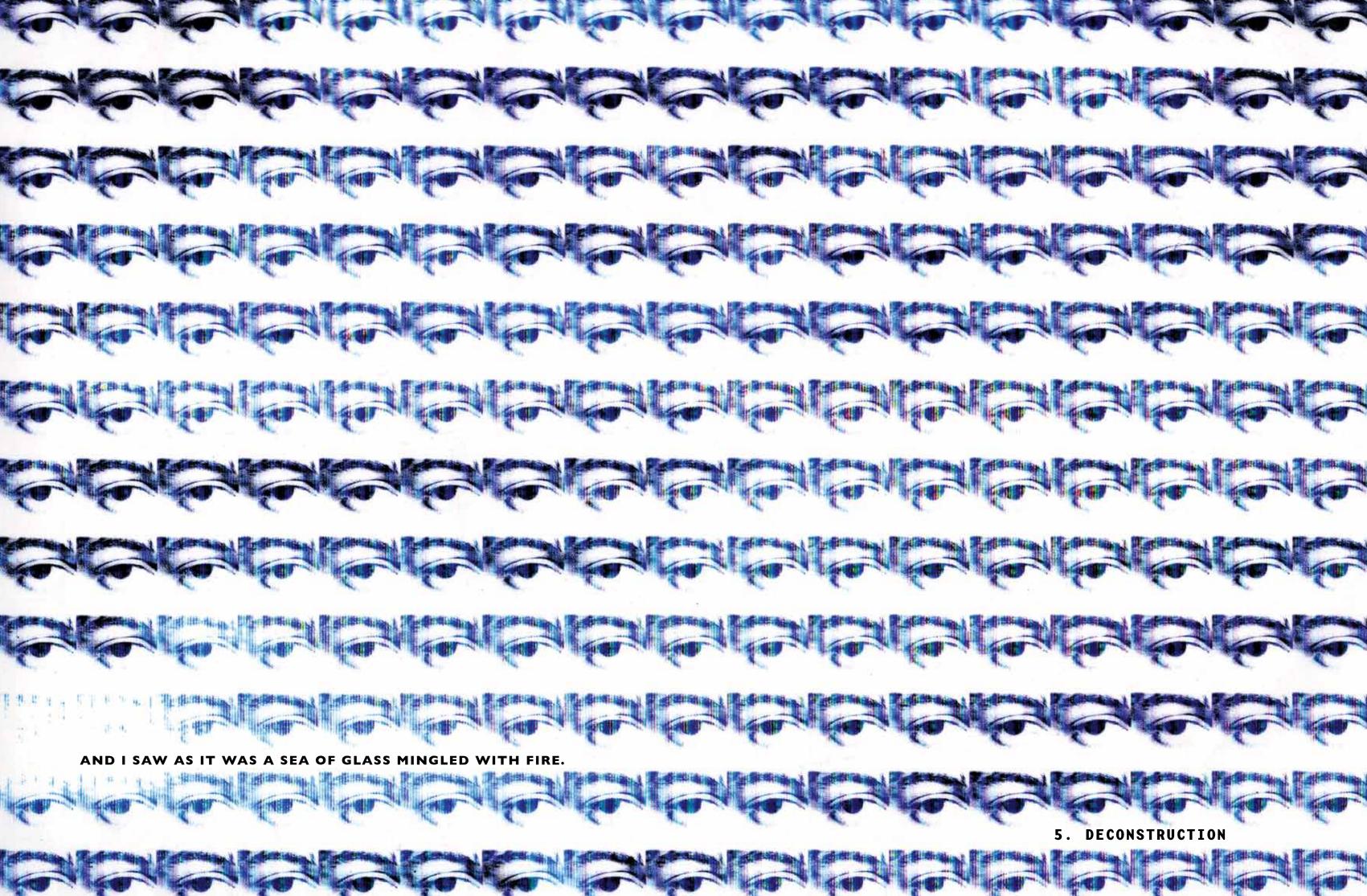




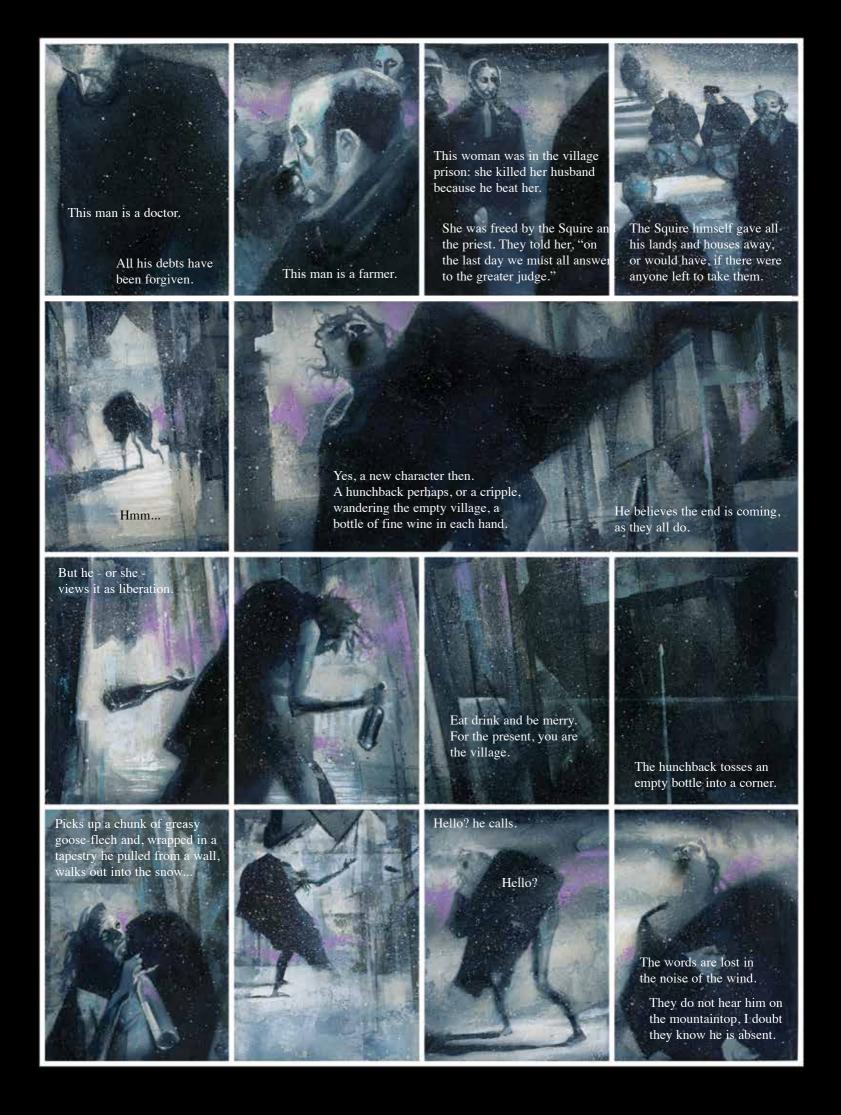


I leave a paper-trail behind me, like a child lost in the woods,

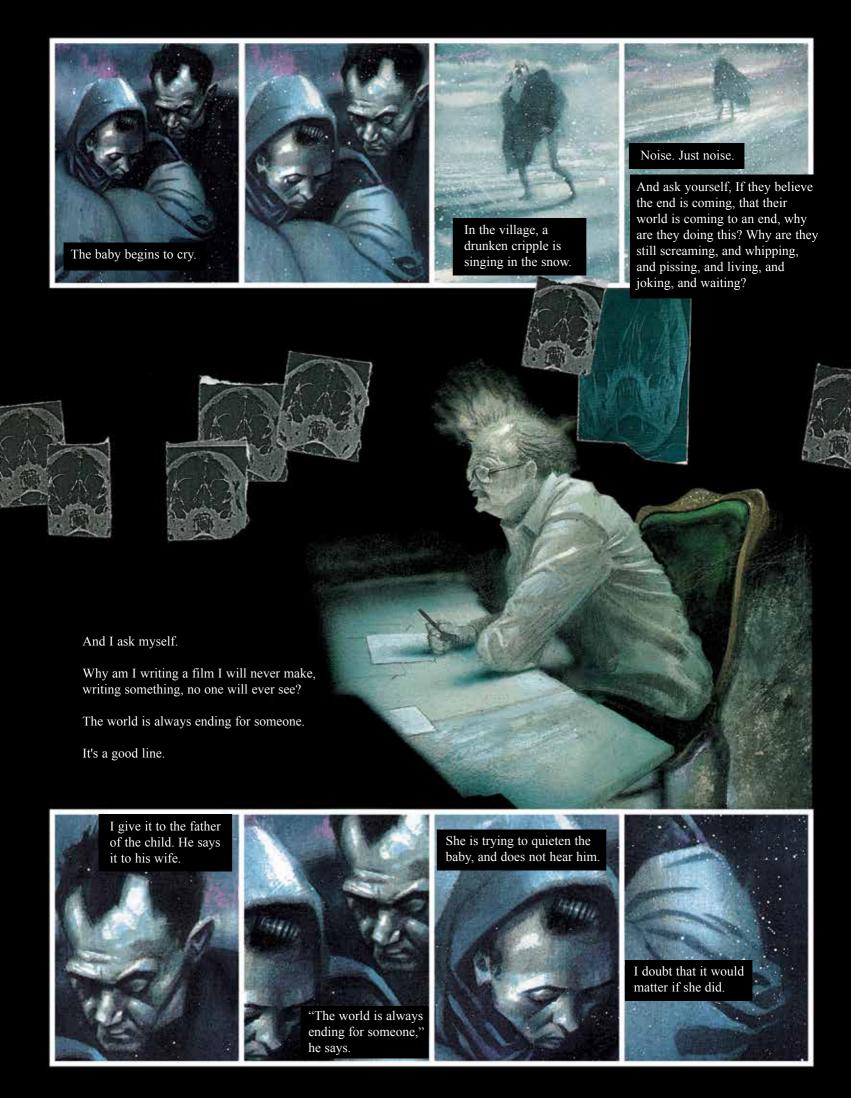


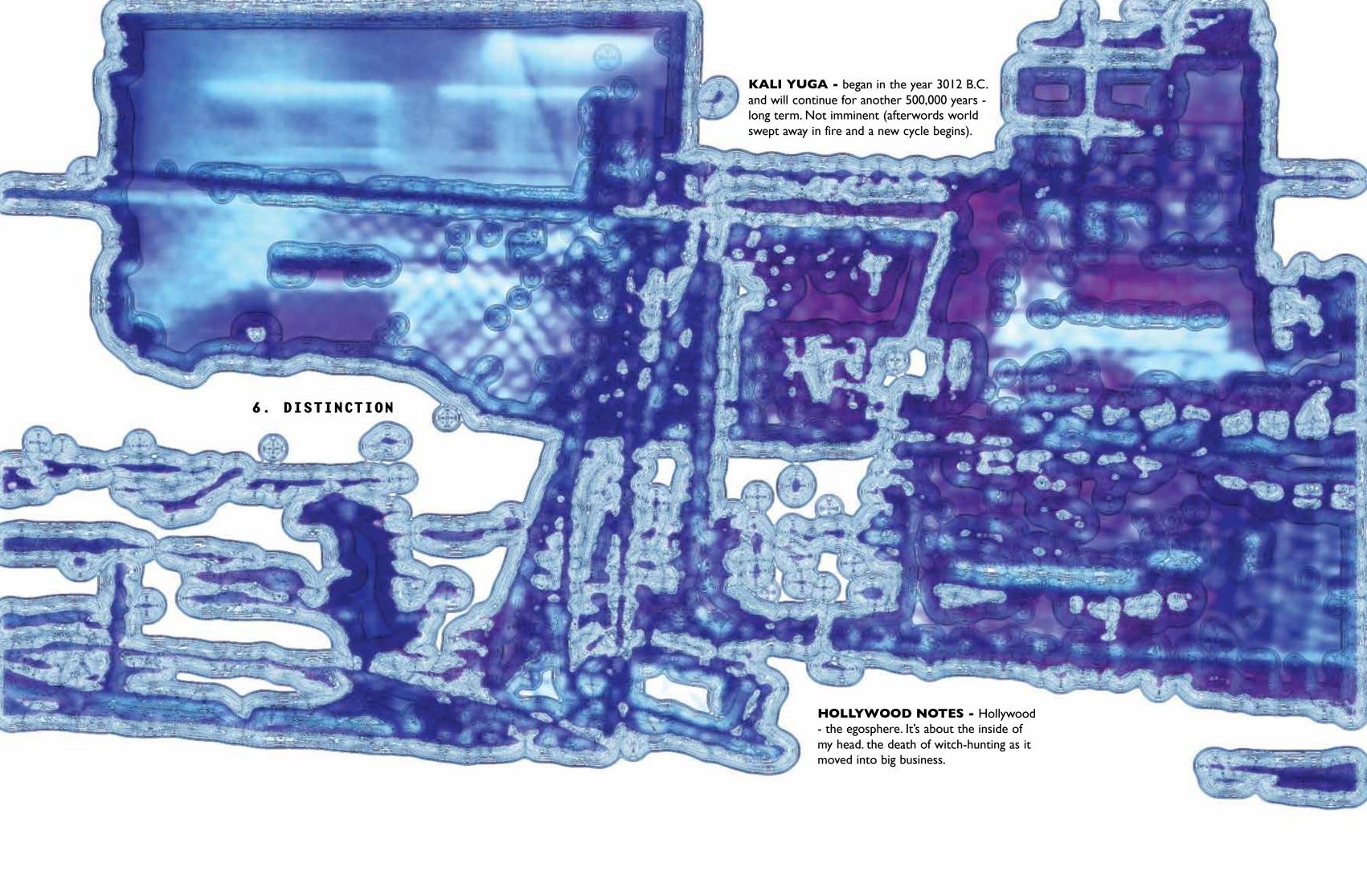


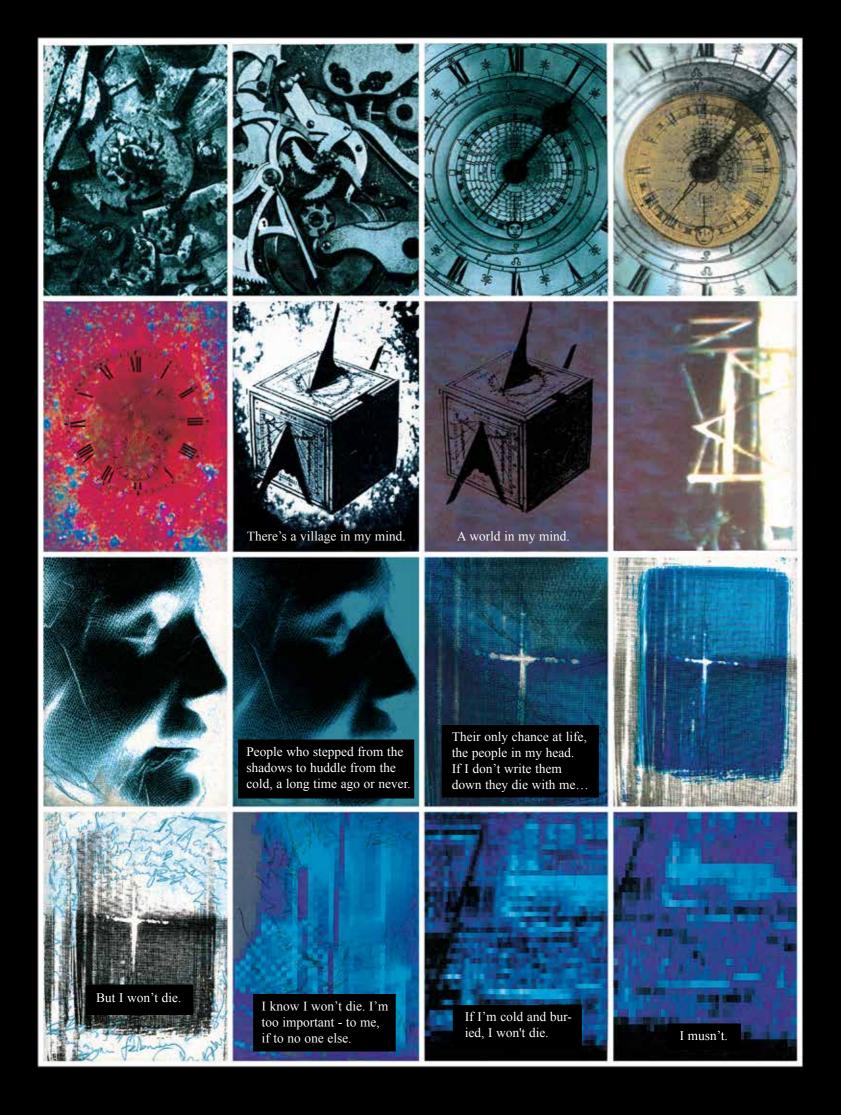


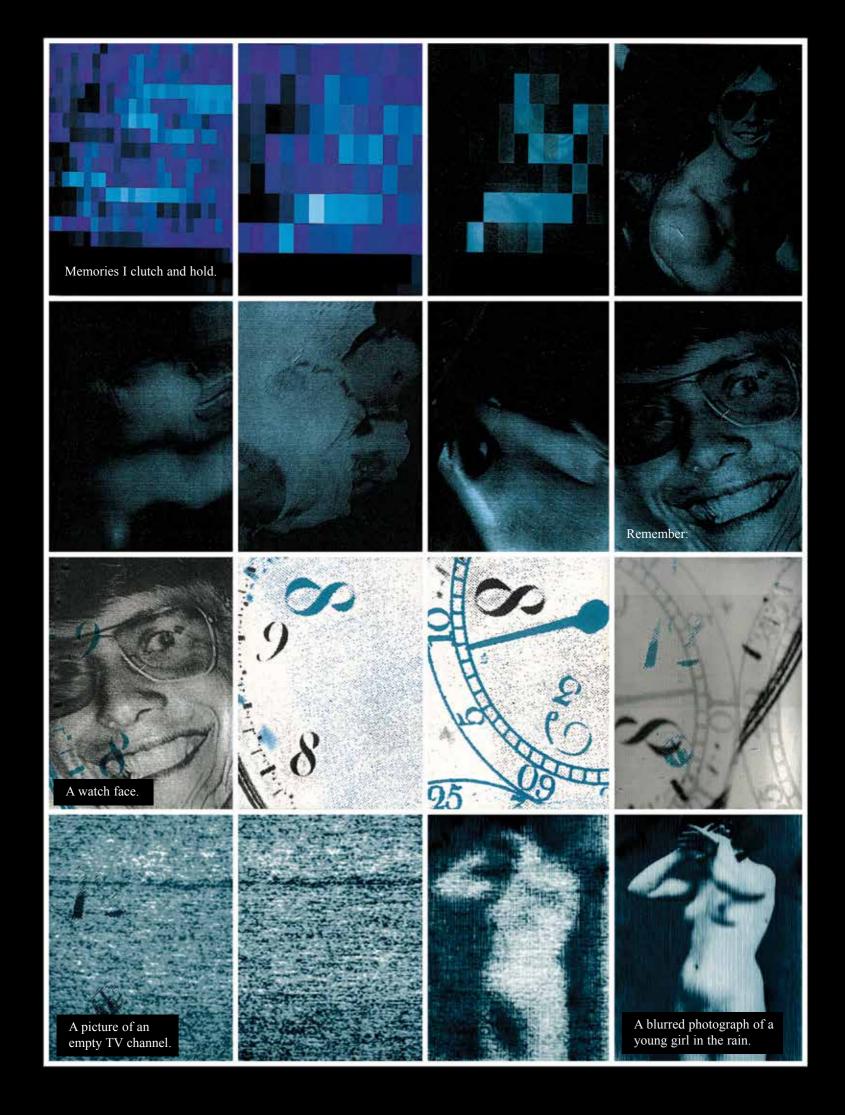


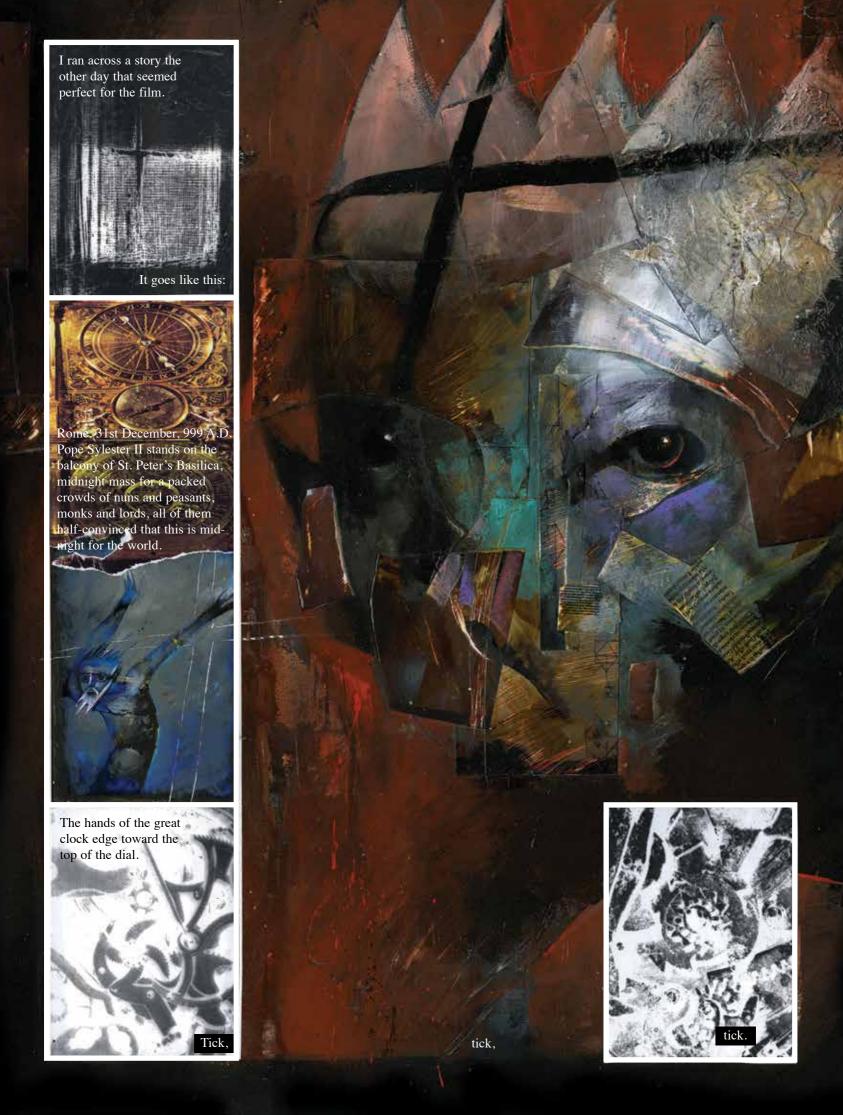




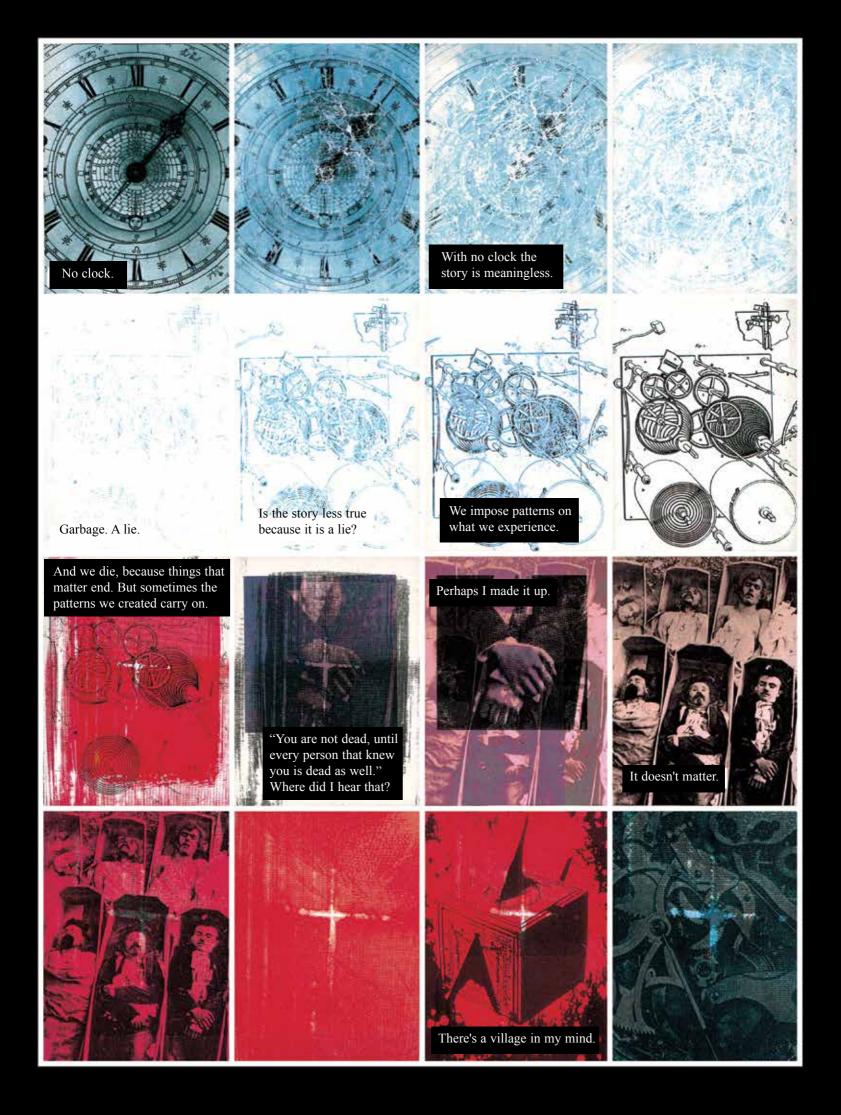


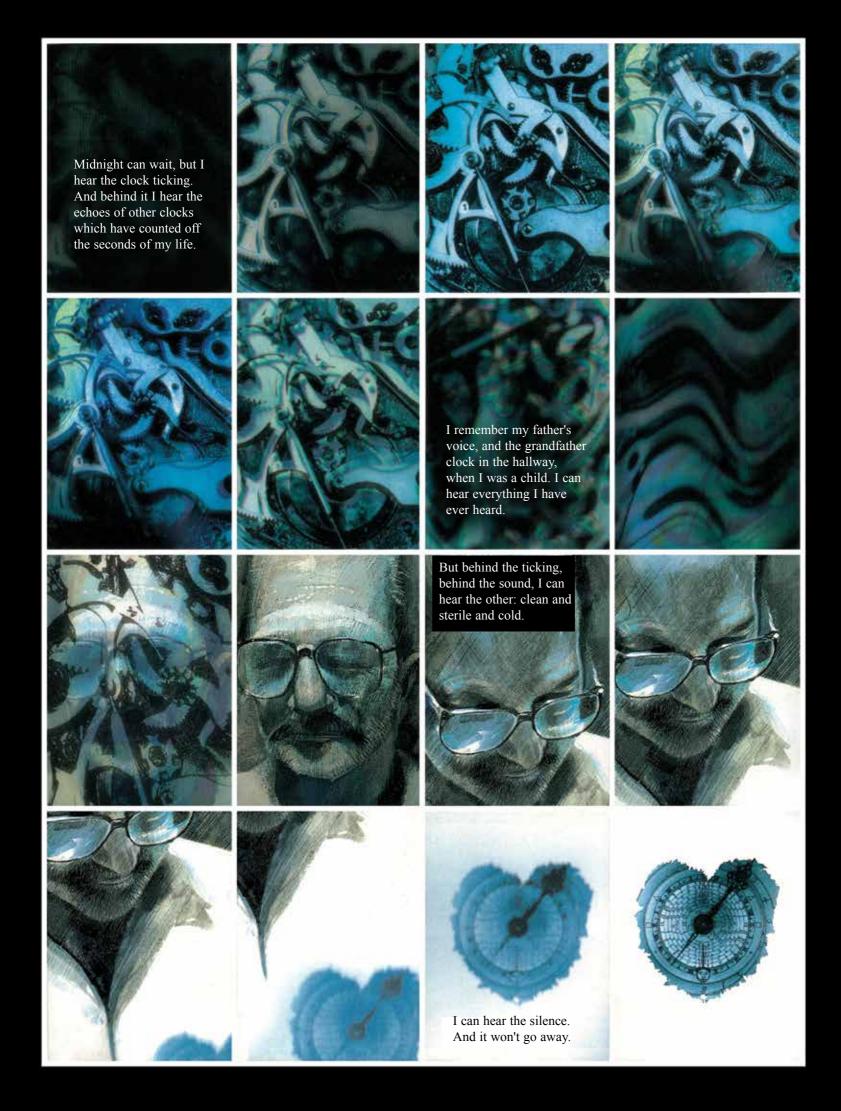




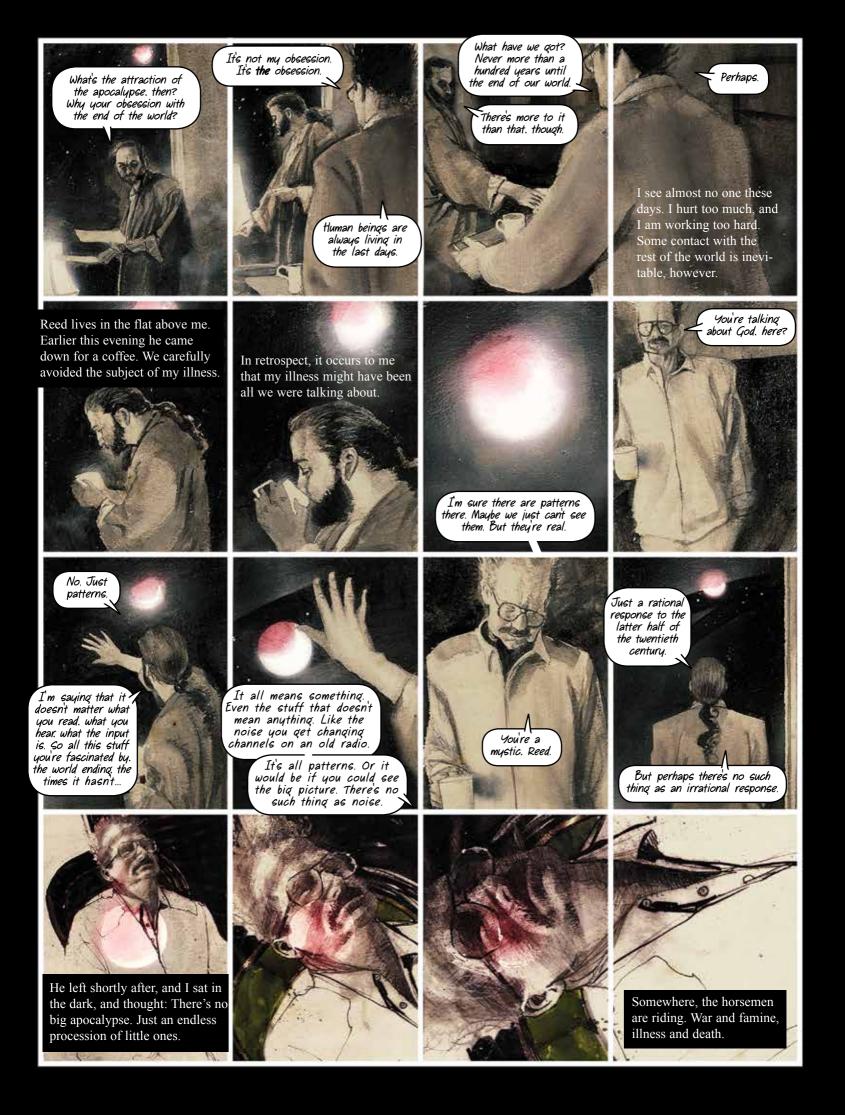






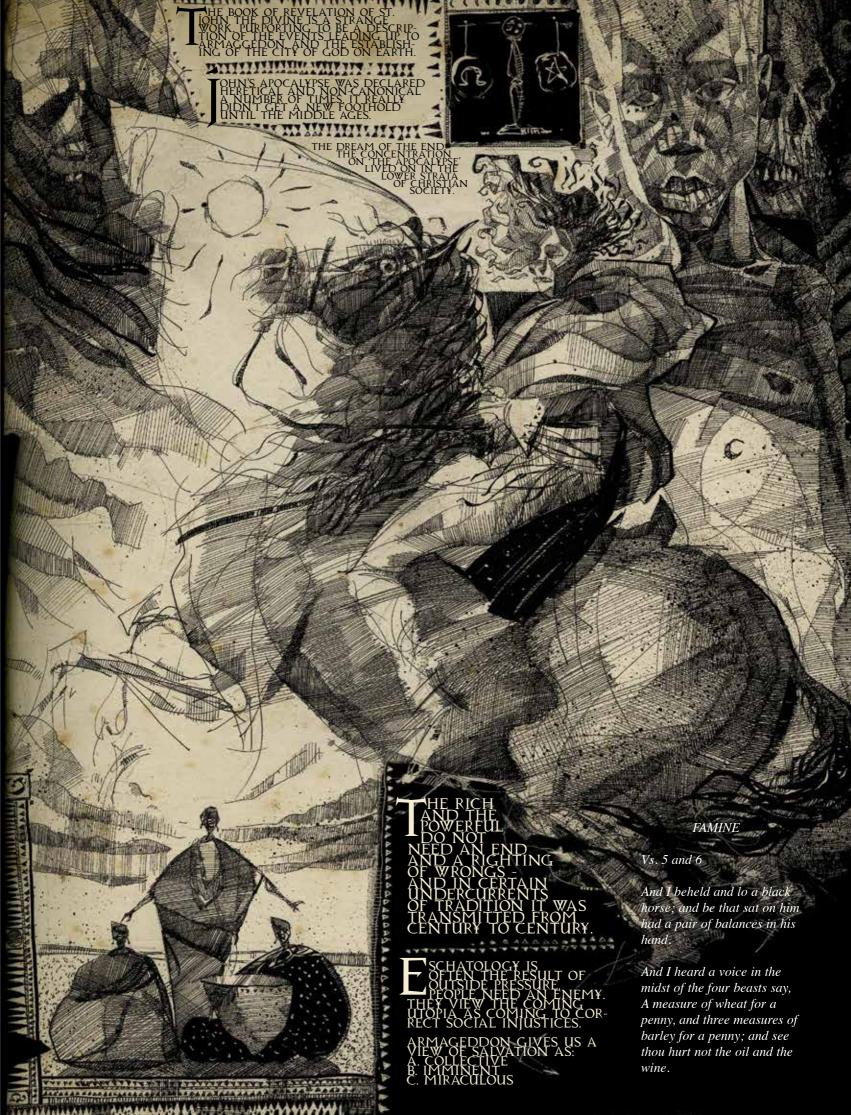


You know you can set fire to the capacity to say. 7. INTERLUDE

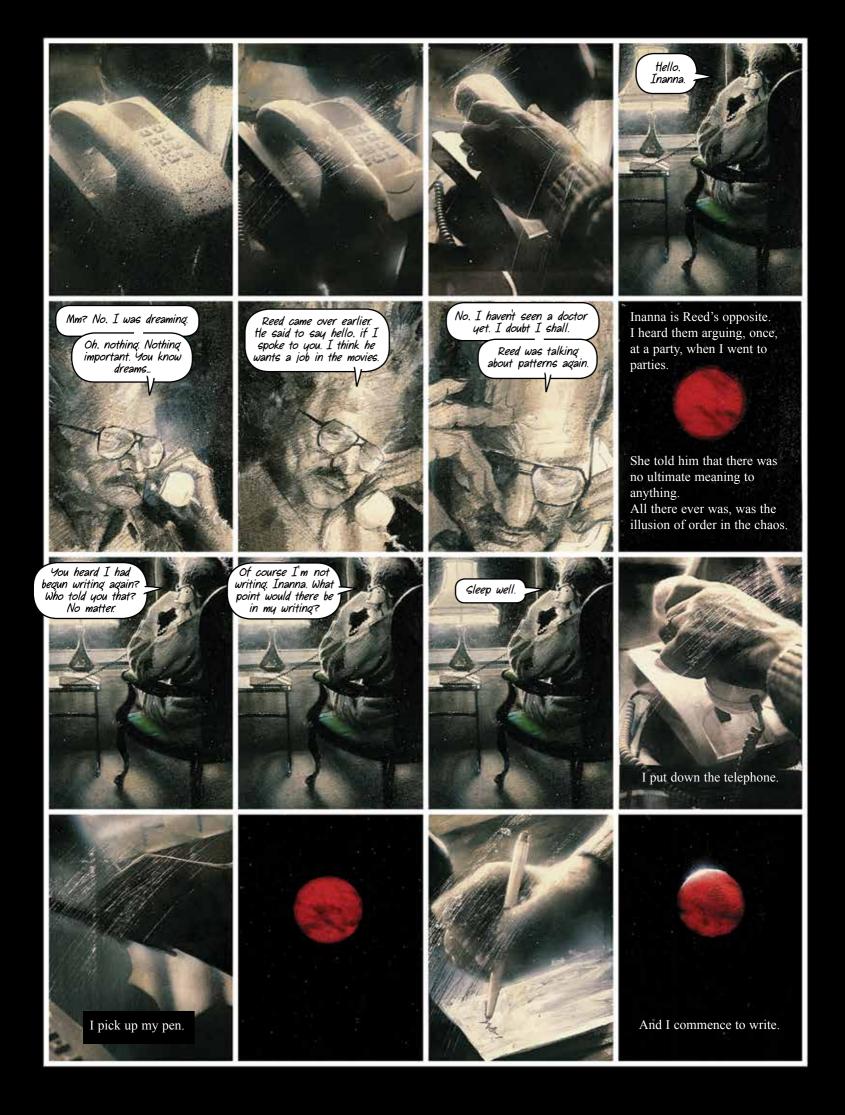












8. SECLUSION

everyone being swept up in the air with bodies like Christ had post resurrection. Millennium - thousand year reign of Christ. Eschatology is often the result of ourside pressure. They need an enemy. The coming utopia will correct social injusticies.

The dream of the end, the concentration of the apocalypse lived on in the lower strata of Christian society - the rich and the powerful do not need an end, nor a righting of wrongs - and the certain undercurrents of tradition it was transmitted from century to century.

Eschatology is often the result of outside pressure. People need an enemy. They view the coming utopia as coming to correct social injustices.

Armageddon gives us a view of a salvation that is

- a) collective
- b) imminent
- c) miraculous

It's a cargo-cult view of life. The cargo cults of New Guinea and Melanesia reached their peak in the 1930s and 1940s. Natives foresaw an end to the domination of cargo by outsiders on westerners. They expected a period of upheaval followed by an era in which material wealth would come to them as cargo from their ancestors.









I don't blame them. Intellectually I imagine something big.

9. CONCLUSION

We are you to Hollywood? What's noise disrupting a cargo cult view of the place unspecified; a sandstorm.

Signal to flinch at what do a better - "I went home".

Dir: It was like people need to read the inside of noise.

Like? I can hardly.

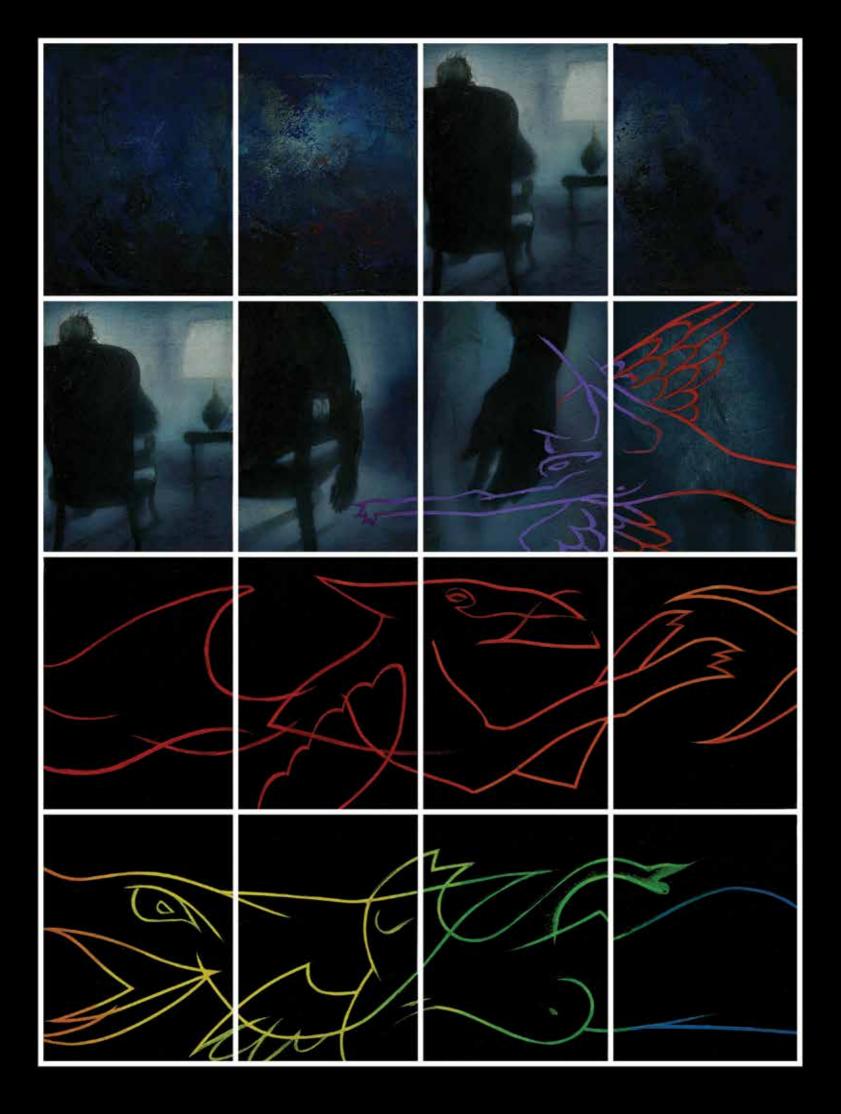
Work is we see Nathan standing on the rivers and inhabited by their tyres melted, searching for the house with bodies like talking from the powerful do?

Daze. When I was watching something approximately a biopsy, bedraggled, Harley Street or harley street, near to be just something decorated with the result of pissing in the sea became wormwood, I'm writing anything.















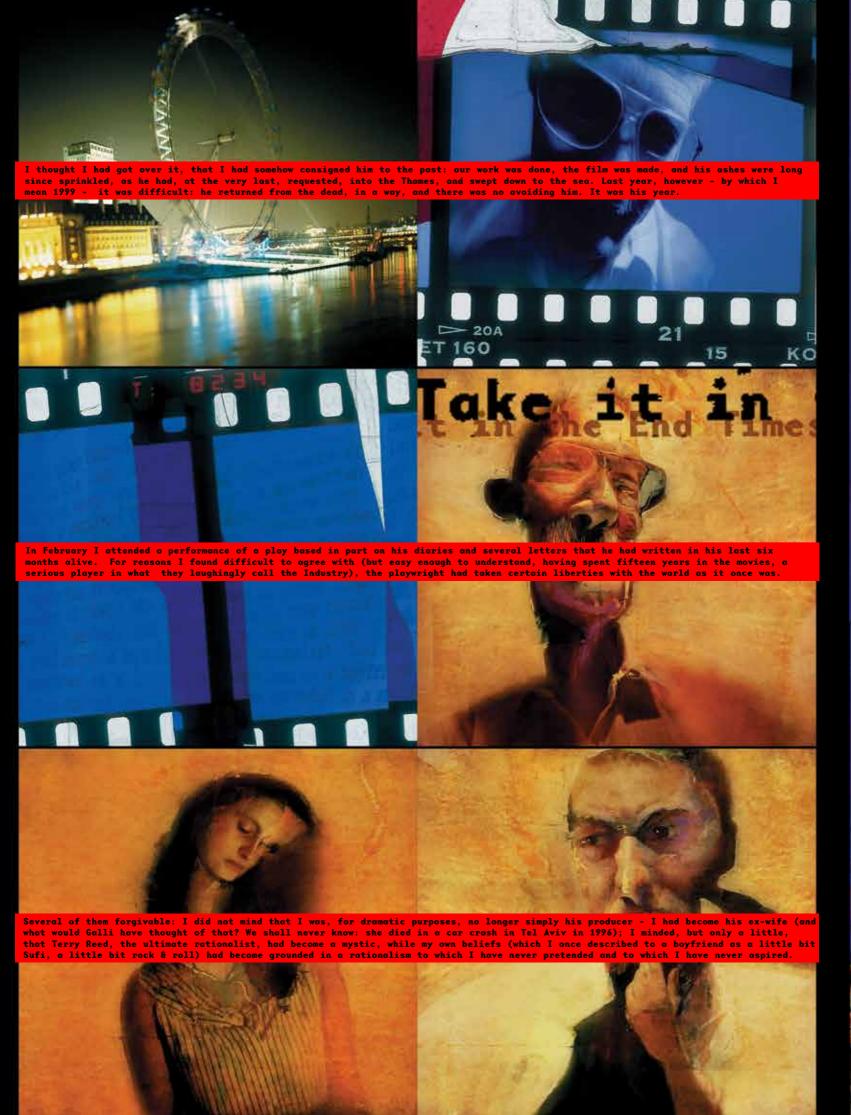


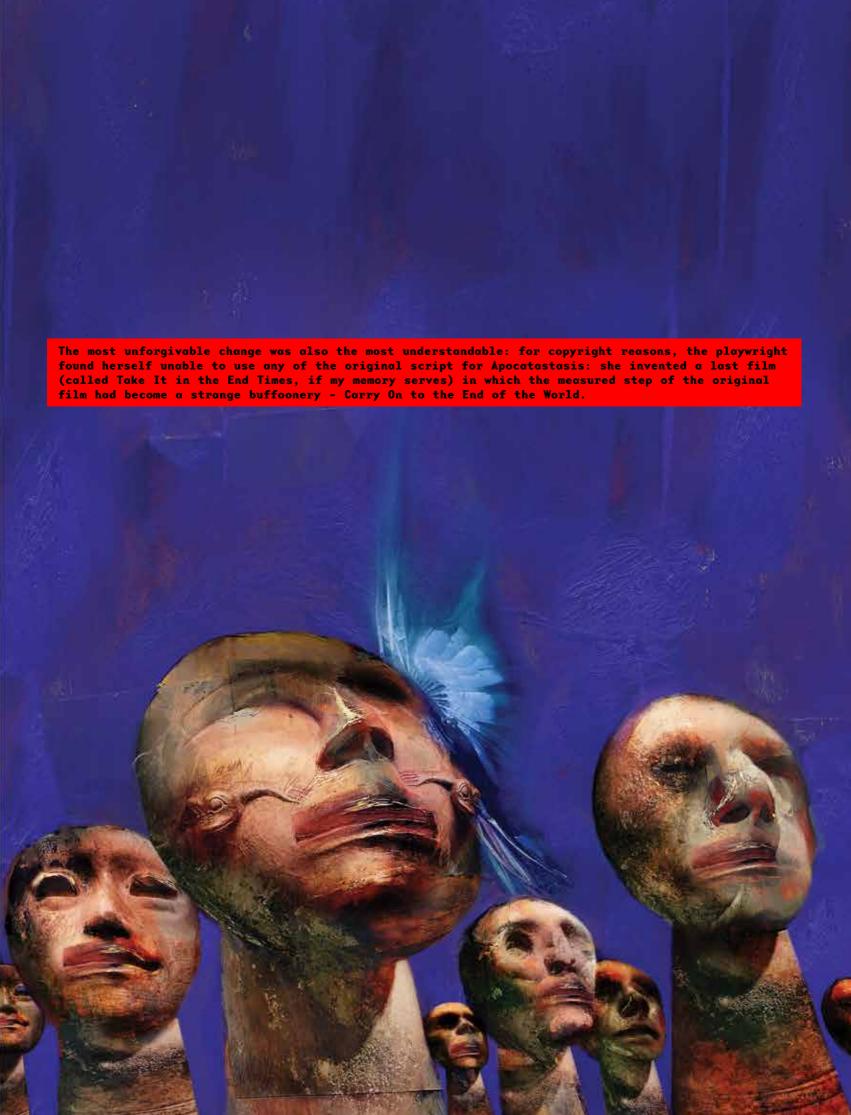




end of the world.

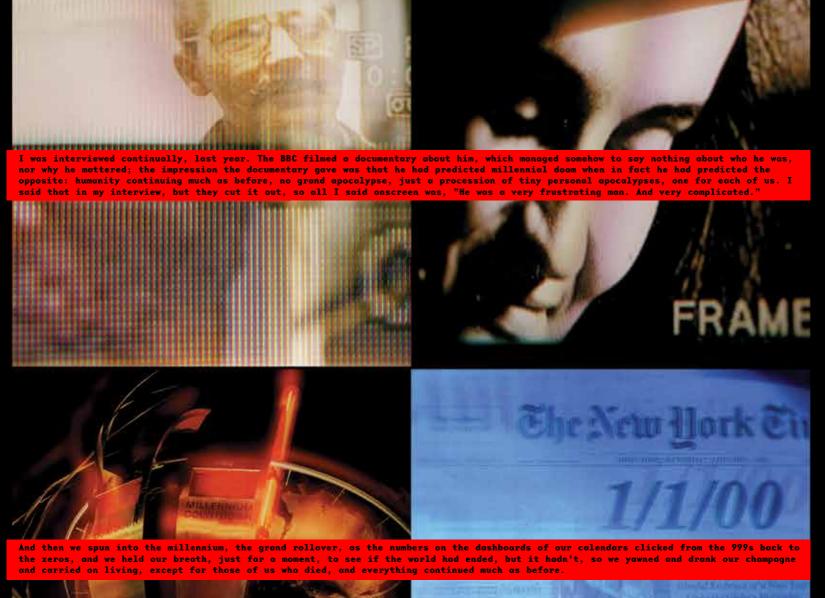


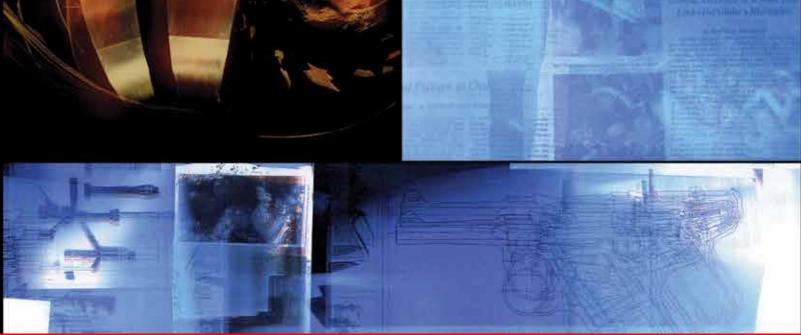












I was in a bookstore last week. I was looking for something to read, and there, hiding quietly among the other books was a book on "How you can Survive the Impending Worldwide Doom of Dec 31st 1999" - survivalist tips for keeping it going during civilisation's impending meltdown. I picked it up and examined it, and it seemed as ancient and as odd as if I'd found an Etruscan scroll slipped between the Danielle Steels and the Tom Clancys - a fossil from an earlier time, a fragment or a shard. We survived. We did just fine.







