# Postcard

[Production Folder]

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[Brief]

Suddenly! He is not sure how it happened, but Vince is now able to see beyond pictures. Beyond the glossy printing of a photo. He can enter the mystical world of postcards. With a touch of his finger he gets sucked into the beauty of a photo, setting foot in a different universe. Each Image contains its very own kind of reality. It must be a dream so he should be save, but is it?

[Storyboard]
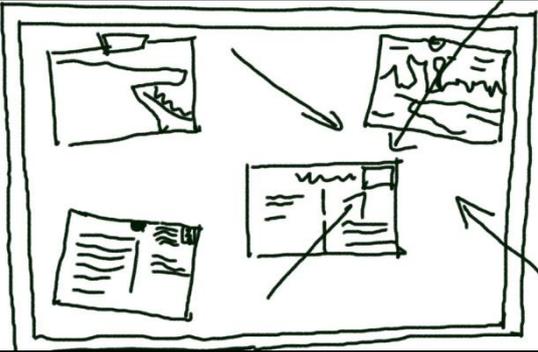
	Title Sequence 10 seconds The movie starts with a shot of a pin board with postcards on it. The camera then zooms in at the stamp. The stamp fades into the next shot.
	Character Asleep Duration 2 sec Character sleeps and does not move much.
	Alarm Clock Duration 3 sec A close shot of the Alarm clock so we know it is "early" in the morning.
	Character Sleeping 2 Duration 5 sec Character is still asleep in his bed but starts to move a little. Close to waking up.
	Alarm Rings Duration 8 sec The alarm clock starts ringing and a hand comes in the picture to grab it and stop the noise.
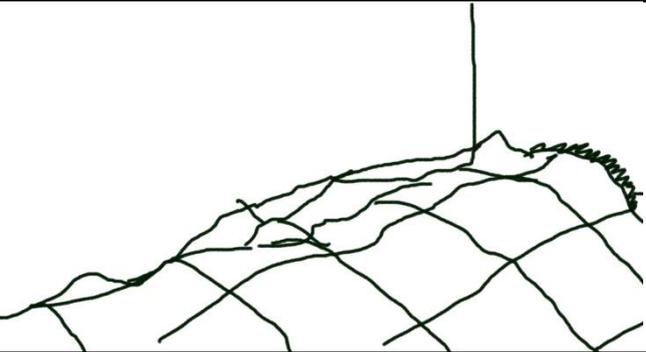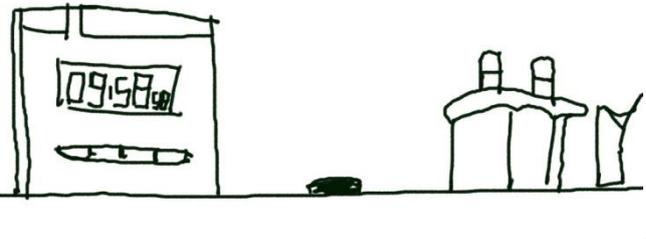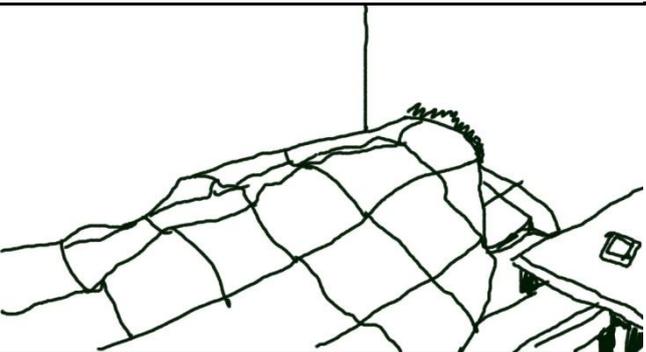
	Character Gets Up Duration 2 sec The character gets up slowly and unwillingly.
	Grab Rubber Duck Duration 1 sec The character wants to take a bath. Therefore it is essential that he grabs his rubber duck first.
	Taking a Bath Duration 3 sec The character sits in the bathing tub, showers and plays with the rubber duck.
	Dress Up Duration 6 sec He dresses up for the day. We just see the final part which is him closing the zipper of his Jacket. Then he exits through the door.
	Going Downstairs Duration 3 sec He goes downstairs to the kitchen.
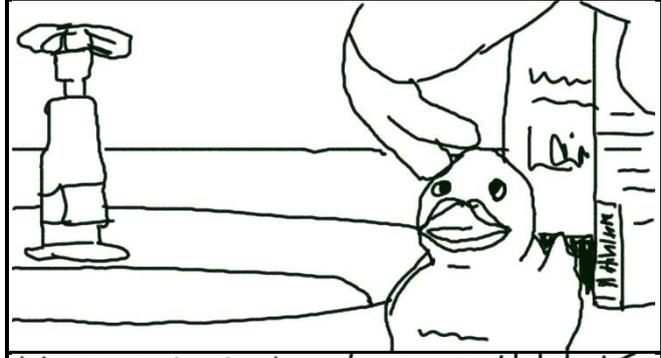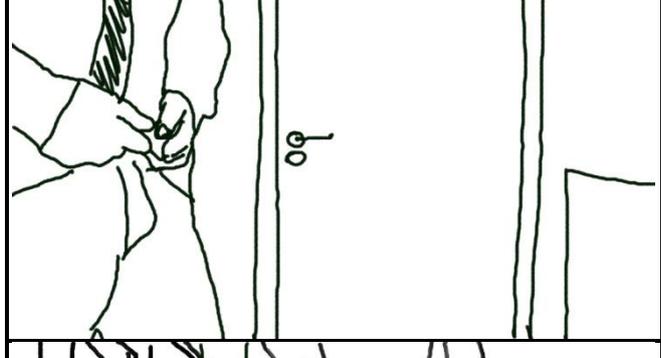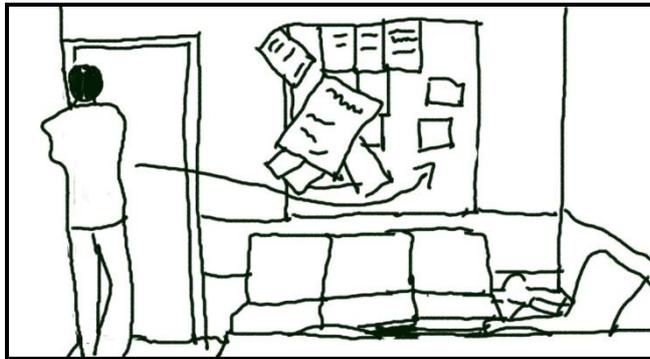
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	Entering the Kitchen Duration 8 sec He comes through the kitchen door and goes to the bar in the middle of the kitchen where he finds two postcards.
	POV Perspective Duration 8 sec He picks up both postcards but he's just interested in one of them. He takes it and goes to the pin board. Focus will be on the postcard the whole time.
	Suck In 1 Duration 4 sec While he pins the postcard to the wall it starts glowing and sucks him into its own reality.
	Postcard 1, Wild West, First Time Duration 40 sec He lands in an abandoned wild west town, looks around a little. He realizes that it is very hot, so he puts his jacket on the ground. Then he jumps off the right edge.
	Wake Up 2 Duration 3 sec He wakes up in his bed again, dazzled. He does not know if it was just a dream or reality.
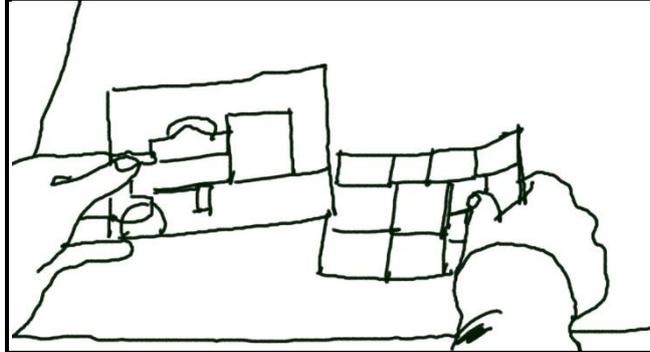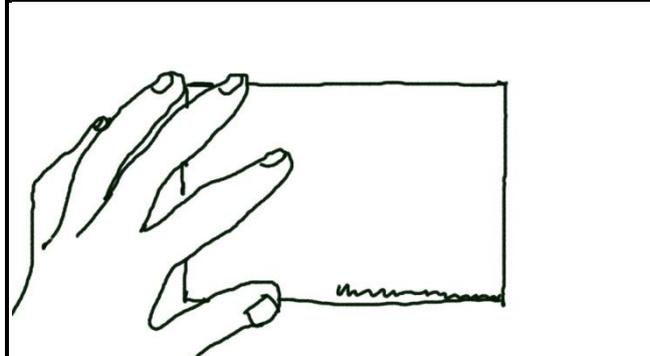
	Downstairs 2 Duration 5 sec Character goes down to the kitchen once more.
	Kitchen 2 Duration 3 sec He enters through the door and is in the kitchen again where he finds the postcard still pinned to the wall and he gets sucked in again.
	Wild West 2nd Time Duration 35 sec When he is in the postcard, he decides to mess around a little. At first he takes a closer look at the barrel and tips it over. Then he goes in the saloon. After a short time, the saloon breaks down like cardboard and we see him behind it.
	Wild West Close Shot Duration 2 sec A close on the character while he explores the world behind the left saloon. He moves to the front left, where the coach is.
	Wild West 2nd: Push Coach Duration 10 sec He goes to the coach and slowly pushes it out of the picture. The coach stops at one point and the postcard starts to rip apart.
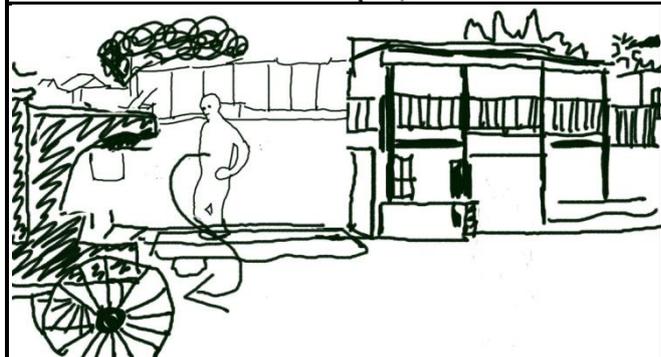
	Pushing Out Coach And Falling Duration 2 sec The card suddenly tears off and he falls out of it, straight into another postcard below.
	2nd Postcard Duration 15 sec He falls into the second postcard from the top and lands on the ground. When he stands up, he gets hit by a wrecking ball which sends him to sleep.
	Credits Duration 10 sec The camera moves down where a third postcard is attached which was not visible on the previous shots. It represents the credits and is done as if it were a filmstrip. In the audio, the story continues to its punch line.
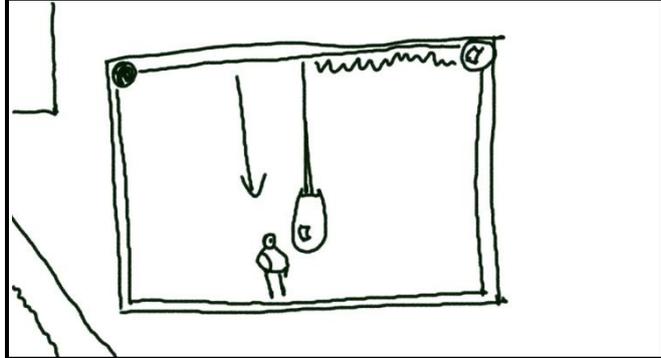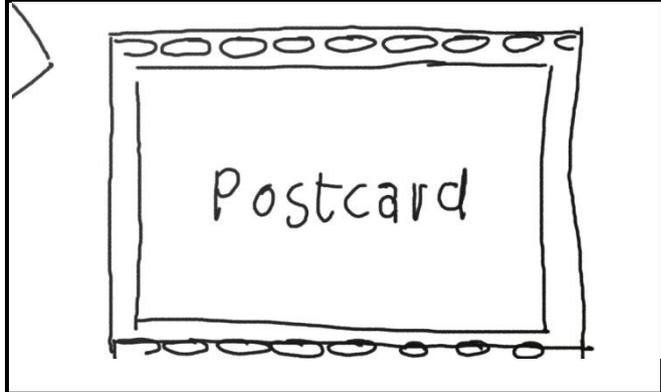
[Production Pictures]

The pin board in the intro sequence is a self made collage of multiple photos, postcards, pins, tape graphics, etc…. assembled in Photoshop. The stamp is another .psd with a coloured version of the character's sleeping footage.

For my first postcard I was looking for a distinct setting with as many different photos as possible from that site. This is the original photo. I replaced the trees, cut out the barrel, the sky and used another photo to extend everything behind saloon on the left.

This is the photo I used for the background. I had to flip it to match the lightning in the main photo. Then I fixed all the name plates that were now mirrored. Finally I made the shadows a lighter colour to match the other shadows in the scene.

The coach in the foreground. Cutting it out of the original photo proved to be harder than expected. In order to make the animation more realistic, I cut out the highlight of the wheel, the axis and the shaft to let them stay in place. Then I used a second, darker copy of the wheel layer with a little x and y offset to improve the three dimensional effect.

I wanted to have a shot of my alarm clock. The problem was that it is radio controlled and I could not change the time. So I decided to replace the display with a digital version in Photoshop.

I used some smoke and dirt effects for example when the character drops his jacket, when the shop falls over or in the wrecking ball scene. This was sometimes just an animated image or stock footage of smoke in front of black background.

Me while setting up the camera to record the character's shadow from the perspective of the sun.

A render of the windmill, the shop doors and the saloon. I used the selection path in Photoshop to generate the geometry of the saloon and textured the sides and the background with a tileable cardboard texture. The grey box above the doors simulates the shadows cast by the ceiling.
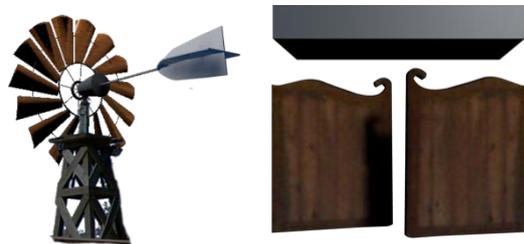
Following a suggestion, I decided to try my luck to enhance the first shots with some window shades.

And it is clearly visible in the edited shot that they make a huge and nice difference.

A combination of a graphic, many masks and a colour-corrected video of a tree make the track matte for the window shades.

I was lucky to find footage of a tree in a summer breeze which had been recorded with a tripod.

The cardboard that I used to texture my 3D scenes and a tree which I planted near the saloon.

[Shot List]

This is a translated version of the updated original German shot list

Real world footage:
- Shot of character in bed, sleeping, turning slow and fast, then getting up
- Character startled in bed frontally
- Alarm clock, static shot, close
- Close of mobile ringing, hand coming in the picture, taking the mobile
- Close of hand taking the duck near the sink
- Close of putting on jacket, leaving through door
- Going downstairs from different angles
- Coming in the kitchen, taking postcards on counter
- Ego perspective, taking postcard, going to wall and pin to pin board

Green screen footage (character and shadow plate):
- Character showering
- Going from kitchen door to imaginary pin board, touch postcard
- Jumping in Postcard, putting jacket on the floor, go to the left and jump off
- Going in Postcard second time, go to barrel, tip it over, enter saloon
- Knock down saloon, walk to coach and push coach out of the picture
- Character falling
- Fall in postcard, look around and get knocked down by wrecking ball

[Evaluation]

When I first started with my short movie I wanted to achieve two things: Using few special effects to really focus on quality and secondly delivering a proper plot that every viewer understands. Those two demands happened to be more opposing than I thought at first. I required quite a few special effect shots to make it look good. The sheer number of effects plus all the filming and learning the software were quite a demand for a one man production. I knew from the beginning that telling the story the way I wanted to, would require more than 2 minutes. There were, however, some time consuming problems I did not include in my original time plan. The workload overwhelmed my laptop right in the beginning and I had to switch to the university Macs. After a few days After Effects started crashing at a random basis. I counted up to 20 crashes a day. Some of the frames needed around 5 seconds to render even with adaptive resolution at ¼ which made testing new effects a pain. In the end I had to purge memory every two minutes to get around the error messages which made the workflow more and more sluggish. The first page from the After Effects manual that I thoroughly read was the one about Hotkeys. I learned many of them to improve the workflow.

The filming of the raw material went pretty smooth. By that time I had already built parts of the first postcard so I knew what the setting and lightning conditions would be like. I merely stumbled upon the wild west setting by accident while crawling through hundreds of images. I had a few ideas in the beginning to achieve proper shadows. I finally chose to use a second camera mounted on top of a MiniMax which filmed from the direction of the sun, thus producing an exact shadow plate. The idea here was that correct shadows are produced by what the sun "sees". In a professional setup, that camera should have been a little farther away to decrease the impact of too much perspective distortion as the character walked to the sides of the scene. Furthermore, I should have placed markers in the studio to ease the alignment of both the character's footage and the shadow plate in 3D space. I ended up doing this by trial and error. But I am glad how it turned out in the end, as the shadows are pretty exact in all shots. In one occasion I had to animate the shadow a bit because it was a little off.

Having a loose imagination of how the film should turn out had its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I was not bound to a strict timing and could rearrange timing and positions if I wanted to. But moving a huge amount of Layers and Effects at once across many nested compositions turned out to be a painful task in After Effects. I also ran into many limitations of After Effects. Working around those often meant to precompose layers. Together with the really poor workflow across nested compositions I had to struggle to find a working structure for my project to begin with. 3D Layers for example only cast shadows in their own composition so I had to turn *Collapse Transformation* on which ruined

other parts in my project. It took me many days to finalize a project structure that worked. I now know that I should have done that earlier to simplify the project.

I started out with my project in a 4:3 aspect ratio because it fit to the size of the postcard I designed at that time. When I wanted to change that in a later stage I ran in another limitation of After Effects: it does not provide a working way to upscale a composition. I found out that it is possible to link all layers to a null object and do the scaling that way. But this ruins the alignment of 3D Layers. Those limitations gave me some trouble when I decided to retarget my movie to a 16:9 aspect ratio. The same upscaling problem emerges with compositions that blur when scaled to more than 100%. There should be an easy way to increase a compositions resolution.

The both scenes of the character getting sucked into the postcard provided quite a challenge. I recorded the first version of the POV perspective with a green postcard as I wanted to track it and replace it with a digital copy. When I started editing, this turned out to be a poor and labour intensive decision so I did that shot a second time with a print of the postcard. Right after it is pinned on the wall, I replaced it with the digital copy. I therefore cut out the black border from the video footage and warped the video a little so that it aligned with the digital version. Afterwards I fixed the background behind the postcard and saved it as a still. Then I colour corrected the digital version and added some noise to make it identical to the recorded postcard. Finally I did some manual tracking of the camera movement and blended both versions during a few frames. For the last part, I animated the camera a little so that it continued to move.

I had different plans for the second suck in effect; I wanted to have another perspective. I recorded the character in the Chroma Studio and placed him in a still of the kitchen. I used the moving door from some other footage I had recorded and made a high resolution photo from the pin board with my digital camera which allowed me to zoom closer without artefacts. In order to improve the realism I added a strongly blurred shadow on the wall and a reflection on the counter. I was not fully satisfied with the results though. I kept comparing the resulting shot with some real shots of me in the kitchen but it was hard to make out the differences that made it look real. I did not correct out all of the green because the kitchen by itself did reflect quite a bit of green light because of the chairs and the floor.

The scene in the bathroom consists of some green screen footage of me sitting and showering, a shadow of a duck and a video of our bathroom. I intended this to be a longer shot but I did not like the look of it due to many reasons. The first being the monotonous colours, a weird bug with the particle simulator producing a green trail and the fact that I forgot to use something that looked like a nozzle in the original footage. I did not want to go the long way of replicating the nozzle and the attached hose in a 3D program and I thought of removing it from the movie at first but decided to shorten it instead.

The first postcard consists of many layers from different sources. Firstly we have the video footage from the character and his shadow plate. Next we have some trees which I keyed

out from YouTube footage. As Keylight does not work to key out white and as the Luma key is not usable for a good key, I used a track matte from a contrast and colour modified version of the same tree. The bird is a small part from a shaky handheld recording which I stabilized, keyed an then animated. I wanted my character to destroy the left saloon, so I had to extend the scene behind the shop. I used a different image from the same wild west town, flipped it, removed the sky, edited some shadows and corrected the now mirrored name plates of the buildings. I used Cinema 4D to build the windmill, the moving saloon doors, the falling barrel, the falling saloon and the tumbleweed and rendered out a separate shadow pass to ensure proper integration in the scene. I wanted the tumbleweed to look more realistic but I was not able to find usable footage of tumbleweed on the internet. It took me a while to learn how multi pass rendering was used for compositing and how I could generate a shadow pass on invisible planes.

It took me a long time to generate and find all the required footage and the graphics. As it was very hard to find properly recorded stock footage, I had to rely on YouTube material shot in usable conditions. None of that footage matched to the rest of course. This is why I had to put a colour correction and some brightness and contrast adjustments on basically every layer.

I found some footage for the 2nd postcard that was recorded quite shaky. I stabilized it in After Effects CS4, but the Warp Stabilizer in CS5 would have done a much better job. The stabilized footage was still a little shaky. But that worked for me. I simply did a second tracking on the stabilized footage to attach the character to the floor. Now I needed to integrate him in the scene. This time it was not as simple as doing a little colour correction, there was smoke all over the scene. My first idea was to use a hires image of smoke, animate it and use the keyed character as a track matte for this layer so that the smoke only affected the character's layer. This worked out better than expected and I was amazed by the result. The only part that did not look realistic was when he got hit by the wrecking ball. I decided to solve that problem by adding a shadow to the wrecking ball. I quickly animated a mask to follow the wrecking ball, used it on a copy of the character layer and animated that layer to scale up. After some colour correction, some transparency and blur the shadow was finished. This is one of the tiny details one would never notice in the final movie but it makes a huge difference when compared side by side.

Speaking of huge differences, I should certainly make a note on the window shades in the first scene. My first intention was to leave it the way I had recorded the footage because after all that was the real look of my room. But adding them improved the look so much that I decided to enhance them with even more details and a moving tree. I even thought of having a second layer of light for the character, as he is closer to the window and started to prepare a track matte which separated the character from the background. But I liked the way it looked by that time so I decided to abandon that idea.

Back in the first postcard I had to animate the coach being pushed out to the left. After I enhanced that animation a few times, I was tired of doing the wheels once again and found out how to write a simple expression that animated them relative to the x-Movement of the coach.

For the credits, I wanted to combine the look of a movie with a postcard. I used some real 8mm footage for the exposed parts of the film strip and built a looping animation with the perforation holes to fake the transport.

When I was done with most of my work, I started playing around with focus. After the second time the character gets sucked into the postcard, the focus is in the background and the coach is blurred. It starts to unblur as soon as the character moves to the camera. I realized that there was tons of enhancements and detail work that I still could do but I had to stop at one point.

In the end I started doing the soundtrack. After Effects was not usable at all for this task, so I exported the project to Premiere Pro and started adding and recording more and more effects and music.

My short movie is now 3.30 min in length and I am quite pleased with the result. I had to put more work in than I expected but it was worth it. I am not sure if I would use After Effects again for anything that requires more than a few effect shots. I guess I will first have a look at different compositing programs to see how they compare. After Effects is very easy to use but at some point I wondered how it could be used in a professional environment when looking at all the crashes and limitations.