

September 2019

Film on Paper, Graphics on Screen, Feminism in Story: An Exegesis of a Feminist Graphic Novel Project

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Xu, Jingwei (2019) "Film on Paper, Graphics on Screen, Feminism in Story: An Exegesis of a Feminist Graphic Novel Project," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor William Bardebes for his continuous and dedicated instruction during the journey of my practice-based research. Undoubtedly, it is impossible for my project to go on wheels without his professional supervision and urge. Numerous weekly discussions with William were not just a mechanism to propel my project towards the proposed goals, but also an incubator where inspirations were burst out. We went through a lot, from storyline to character's arc, from image-making to colour use, from character's speech to lettering, from book cover design to opening title composition, and from insights to communication. Then, the project was baked. More importantly, I developed my creative practice techniques and theoretical knowledge during the iterative process. This unforgettable study experience will be beneficial to my future art and design career.

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FILM ON PAPER,
GRAPHICS ON SCREEN,
FEMINISM IN STORY:

AN EXEGESIS OF A FEMINIST GRAPHIC NOVEL PROJECT

JINGWEI XU

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AN EXEGESIS OF A FEMINIST GRAPHIC NOVEL PROJECT

ICIB8007 Creative Practice Project Assignment 1



JINGWEI XU

1502041

POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA IN CREATIVE PRACTICE

2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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RESEARCH QUESTION

How do I communicate my interpretation of feminism and my main claims about the awakening of female subject consciousness by a graphic novel combined with a title sequence?

ABSTRACT

This research is the second stage of my entire graphic novel practice looking at a feminist topic – women’s awakening from marriage. In this phase, the study carries out the practical process of the creative work, involving a graphic novel (body), an opening title (hook) and a package of visual communication design (promotion), in order to convey my feminist claim that women’s real emancipation depends on whether they can rouse their subject awareness and break through the chain of marriage. Based on this practice-led research, my personal knowledge is generated, including the value of combining graphic novels and title sequences, the importance of symbolic storytelling and my understanding of female subjective freedom. In addition, this research potentially provides an arts-based research method, which can enable practitioner/researcher to utilise a reflective triangle model to develop art and design work.

THE STORYLINE

Twenty-five

Coral (the main character) is a housewife living with her husband Bernard and their children – a pair of twins (a boy and a girl). Every day she takes in charge of all house chores as well as looking after their children, and she enjoys this work and feels happy with her marriage-and-family life as well. However, Coral recently has been struggling with a nightmare, in which a long-dark-haired girl is imprisoned in a cage around by a number “25” and suddenly she finds that the girl in the cage becomes herself. Meanwhile, Coral accidentally identifies something wrong in her surroundings, such as her necklace and earrings totally the same as other housewives’. After seeing a doctor with her husband, she recalls all the truth of her past: In reality, Coral was Cory, the girl in cage in her dream, who was a celibatarian and compelled to get a special medical treatment by this doctor, owing to the new radical policy by the authorities that all women must get married before twenty-five years old, and then, Cory was modified to Coral, a very obedient and nice lady, and married with Bernard. Then Coral passes out. To stop Coral waking up, the doctor persuades Bernard to accept a brain procedure, but Bernard changes his mind and stops the surgery just before its starting, because he wants to keep Coral’s memories with him and their children. At the end, Coral is awake and her consciousness has returned to Cory. Bernard tries to request Coral to stay by highlighting their conjugal emotion and her kinship with their children, yet, awakened Coral still leaves the house – the forced marriage and family – after a short hesitation, and is going to seek her true life.

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INTRODUCTION

This exegesis articulates the practical stage of my arts-based research project – a feminist graphic novel, which has been commenced and completed based on my previous exploration on the topic of feminism and the form of graphic novels theoretically and practically. This phase’s goal is to synthesise and generate this graphic novel that can communicate my understanding of feminism and visual storytelling. It is significant to examine this practice since my personal knowledge can develop through the analysis. This essay firstly contextualises the project, involving the scope of study, research question and methodology, then lays out the process of the creative practice, inclusive of a graphic novel, an opening title and relevant visual communication design, and finally discusses the findings from three perspectives of combinatory form, symbolic storytelling and reflective ideas.

THE CONTEXT

Research Domain

This project looks at how I compose a graphic novel to convey female awakening from marriage.

The theme of women waking up from their gilded but fake marriage, generated from the topic of female self-consciousness awakening from covert oppression, is a vital but often neglected feminist concern. It is true that the concept of marriage has been moralised and beatified since it was born, thereby, marriage, especially so-called perfect marriage, can be a weapon of oppression of women. Marriage, as de Beauvoir (1949/2010) argues, is a vehicle that has been being used for reinforcing the male dominance. Yet, it seems to be rarely realised by people especially women. So it is very essential to look into this social issue.

To achieve that, it seems to me that a graphic novel is an effective way, due to its visual storytelling ability. Graphic novels, as a branch notion of comics (Duncan & Smith, 2009), can immerse readers in a story by means of making sequential images “to represent a person, place, thing or idea” (McCloud, 1993, p. 27). Therefore, it is possible to communicate ideas between creators and readers. Meanwhile, attaching an opening title (video) to this graphic novel (book) can boost the value and influence of communication at the digital age. This mixture of two sorts of media (print and screen) can be considered as an attempt to construct a new vehicle to express insights and define a new aesthetic form as well. After all, “graphic designers have an obligation to contribute to the public understanding of environmental and social issues” (Meggs & Purvis, 2012, p. 572).

Research Question

At previous stage, the research question was set up as below:

How do I communicate my interpretation of feminism and my main claims about the awakening of female subject consciousness by a graphic novel combined with a title sequence?

A personal solution to this question, developed from last research phase, is a process in which my learning from feminism and visual narratives evolves into a graphic novel that implies my feminist ideas under a story (Fig. 1).

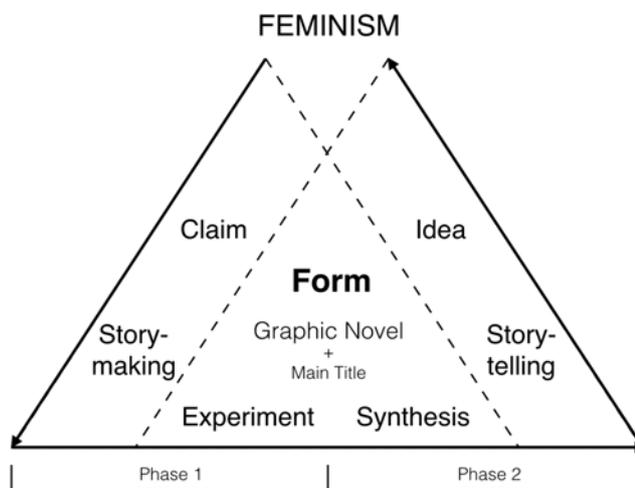


Fig. 1: The project solution triangle [updated version] (Xu, 2019) ¹

According to this solution triangle, the research at this stage focuses on creating the form – a graphic novel with a main title. So, the research is shifted to the practical direction, looking at how I develop a graphic novel, based on previous outcomes such as my claim, the storyline and the visual experiment, to embody my ideas in relation to feminism.

¹ This is a renewed version to make echoes between each side (e.g. claim-ideas, storymaking-storytelling), whereas the previous one indicates ambiguous information (Fig. 2).

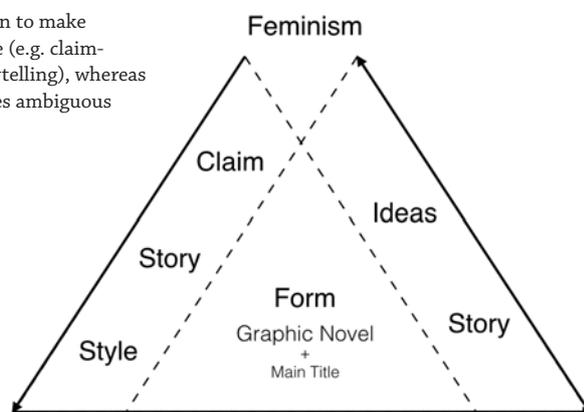


Fig. 2: The project solution triangle [first version] (Xu, 2018)

Research Methods

- Theories**

My research at this stage employs action research, grounded theory, visualising research and semiotics. Action research “helps you as a practitioner to develop a deep understanding of what you are doing as an insider researcher” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 19). Grounded theory enables me as a researcher to collect rich data rooted in these data themselves and everything that I learn in my studies can be seen as data (Charmaz, 2006). Visualising research assists me in visualising gathered data so that these data can become visual elements in the graphic project. Besides, Peirce’s semiotics is an additional vital method applied to the process of making meanings in my project. Just as Chandler (2001) has explained, in Peirce’s semiotic theory, the meaning of a sign does not arise until it is interpreted. In brief, in this phase, the research is carried out in action, in which new knowledge and theories are developed by constantly gathering uncontaminated data that are visualised and interpreted with meanings.

- Techniques**

Based on those theories above, this research project is put into practice by using comics making rules, motion graphic design laws and visual communication design principles. While for the body (graphic novel), this project employs five basic choices of moment, frame, image, word and flow (Fig. 3) in order to achieve a goal of clear and convincing storytelling (McCloud, 2006, p. 10), for the opening title, this research utilises motion design methods, such as developing ideas, creating motion, composing and editing (Krasner, 2008). Moreover, basic graphic design techniques are applied to the section of visual communication for branding and diffusing this graphic novel project.

- Tools**

More specifically, Adobe Creative Suite, like Photoshop, Illustrator, After Effects and Audition, and Wacom Tablet are indispensable and professional devices for launching the practice. By and large, Photoshop and Wacom Tablet mainly serve the graphic novel’s creation, while After Effects and Audition are the vehicle of the title design and Illustrator is mostly used for communication design.



Fig. 3: The five choices for clarity communication in making comics (McCloud, 2006)

THE PRACTICE

The practice of this research was divided into three major parts, involving a graphic novel (body), a main title (hook) and the visual communication (promotion). The three parts were commenced alternatively as well as overlapping with one another.

Graphic Novel

- **Storyboard revision**

Before launching the graphic novel creation, I revised the storyboard particularly in relation to the story arc and the character's emotional transformation.

For one thing, the section of climax (Chapter 4) in this story was expanded from 8 pages to 22 pages and accordingly from 56 pages to 84 pages for the entire story (Fig. 4 & 5). This facilitated to highlighting the conflicts between characters and make the story go reasonably as well. In this process, I invoked the five-choice rules, including moment decision, frame setting and panel layout, to visualise the supplemental parts. Consequently, more details were installed in each chapter to plump the whole story.

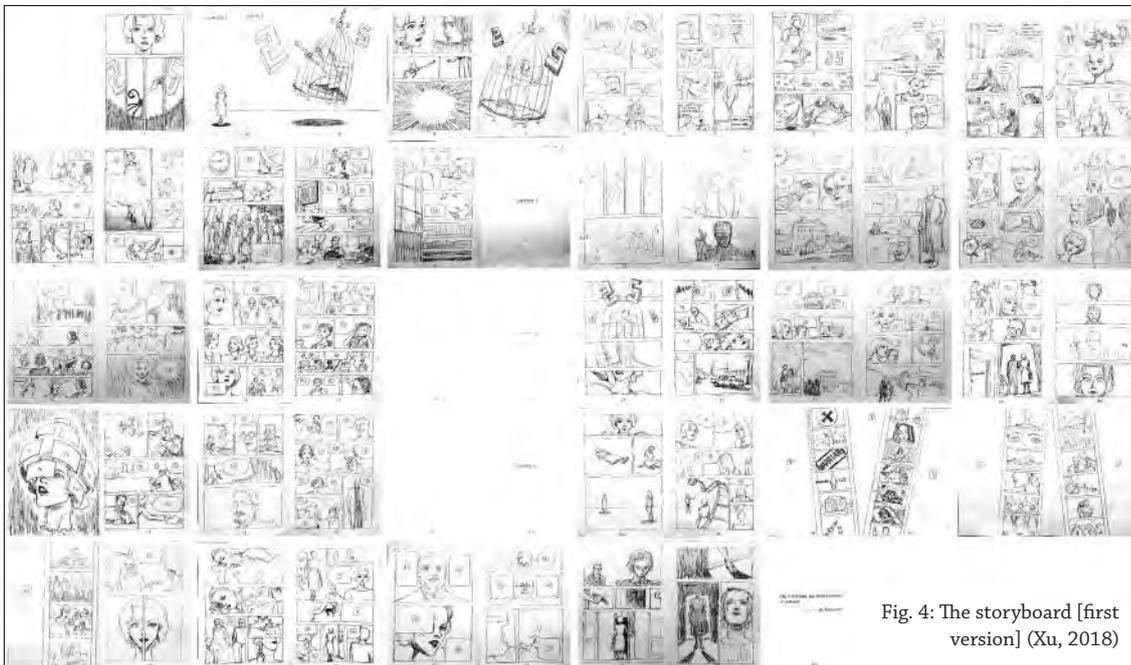


Fig. 4: The storyboard [first version] (Xu, 2018)

For another, to shape a convincing main character Coral/Cory, I inserted a couple of pages at the ending part to create a signal of her hesitation when she was required by her husband Bernard to stay for their children (Fig. 6). Similarly, the character Bernard was designed to change his mind and want to keep Coral's memories just before the operation on Coral by the doctor (Fig. 7). This setting for Bernard's emotional arc replaced the previous idea that made the

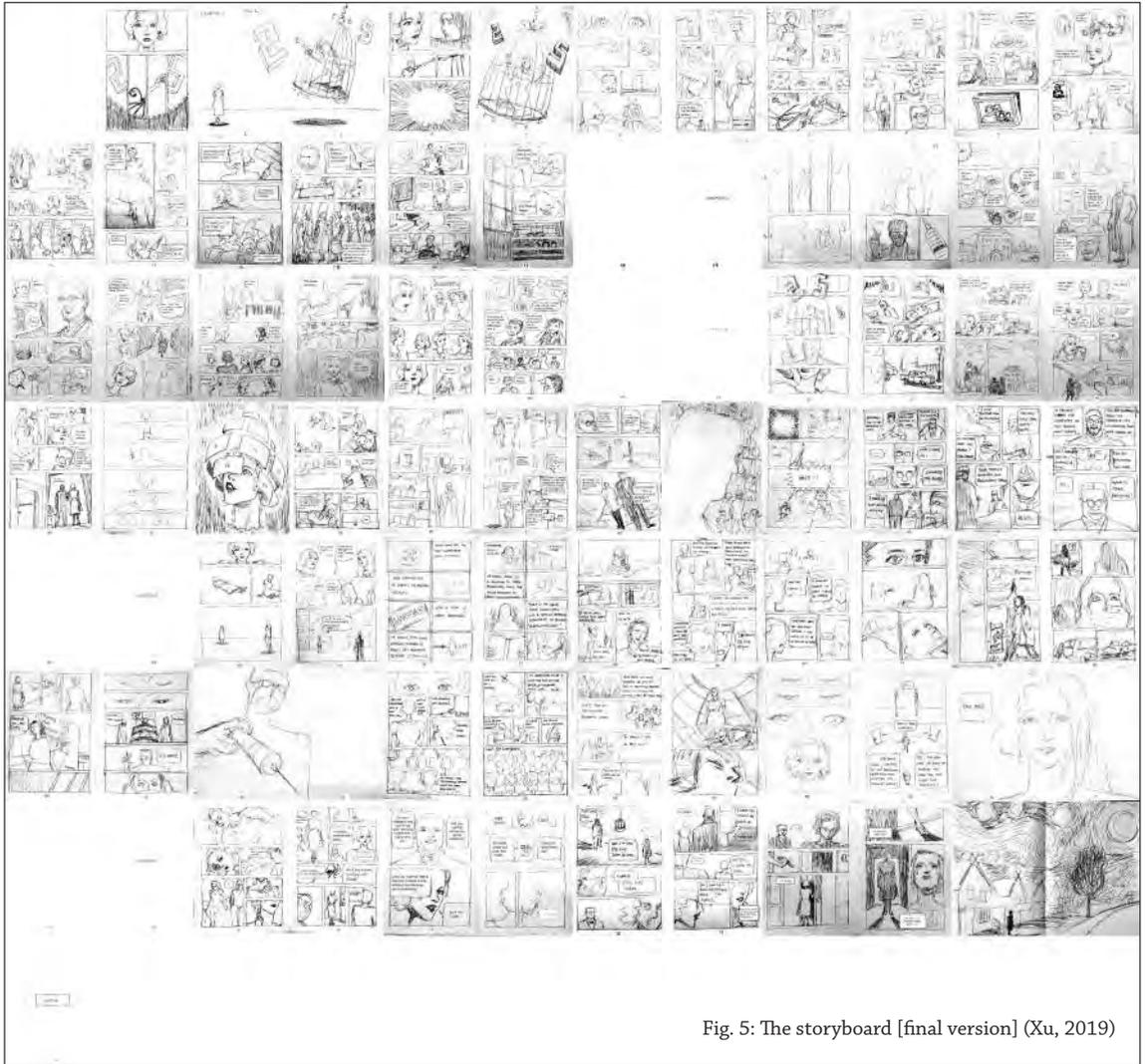
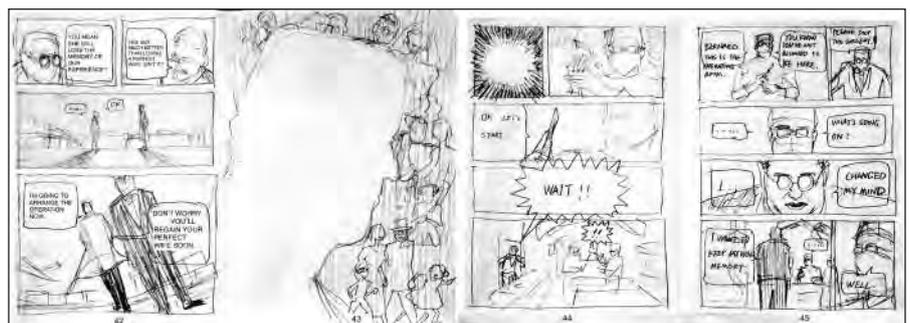


Fig. 5: The storyboard [final version] (Xu, 2019)

Fig. 6: Coral's hesitation (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 7: Bernard's hesitation (Xu, 2019)



doctor conceive the motivation to help Coral wake up (Fig. 8), which seemed to be farfetched. After all, the doctor is designed in this story as a representative of male power. Male power, according to Foxhall & Salmon (1998), “frequently includes the control of specific women whose associated submission manifests, symbolizes and highlights male superiority” (pp. 4-5).

It should be noted that the main character Coral (awake) still goes for leaving her conjugal family at the end even though her husband resorts to the parent-child relationship. It seems to me that this decision designed for Coral is a critical point, which differentiates women who are likely to become an independent subject and those who are still stuck in the trap built by a cosy illusion of marriage. After all, “marriage chains her to a man and makes her mistress of a home” (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010, p. 507), though this idea seems inevitably controversial.

- **Colouring test**

It is essential to test colouring within my project that I did not go through previously, as obviously colour is in a vital place in comic art. McCloud states (1993) that colour as “a central role” can “express a dominant mood” and help build “depth” and “scenes” (p. 190). In consequence, I tested two colouring types on two drawing styles respectively, resulting in four visual effects in this phase (Fig. 9, 10, 11 & 12).

After comparison, I got the final choice of style and colouring system: the line drawing with appropriate dark shapes and shades and full flat colour (Fig. 9). As clearly shown in Fig. 9, the mixture of modelling genre and colouring style depicts abundant details and emotional tones, which can contribute to the germination of a compelling visual storytelling. In contrast, the one of full colour on dark-shape drawing in Fig. 10 lacks of character’s facial expressions, although it offers an intense visual sensation. With respect to the two other experiments through light blue and red colour, their underweight visual effects are not likely to load the intricate storytelling (Fig. 11 & 12).

In terms of the colour system in Fig. 7, it evolved from Chris Ware’s colouring style. I researched into his colour use in *Building Stories* (Fig. 13) and *Heads or Tails* (Fig. 14), demonstrating a soften primary hue, then I extracted several colours and combined them with my bold-shade drawing, and then got the final result.

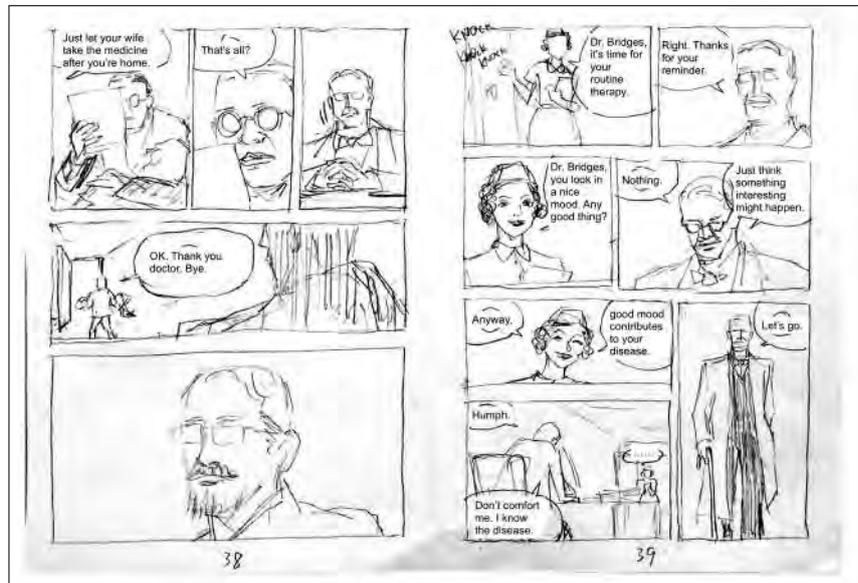


Fig. 8: Dr Bridges' motivation (Xu, 2018)



Fig. 9: Colouring test [full colour on line drawing] (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 10: Colouring test [full colour on dark-shape drawing] (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 11: Colouring test [two colour on line drawing] (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 12: Colouring test [two colour on dark-shape drawing] (Xu, 2019)

Fig. 13: *Building Stories* (Ware, 2012)



Fig. 14: *Heads or Tails* (Ware, 2014)



- **Finished art**

After storyboard and colouring style got set, I started to execute the finished hand-draw work on Photoshop. It was broken up into four steps – setting, inking, colouring and lettering, in which I installed a semiotic model stemmed from Peircean semiotics (Fig. 15) in order to enable visual signs to signify specific meanings in line with the feminist theme.

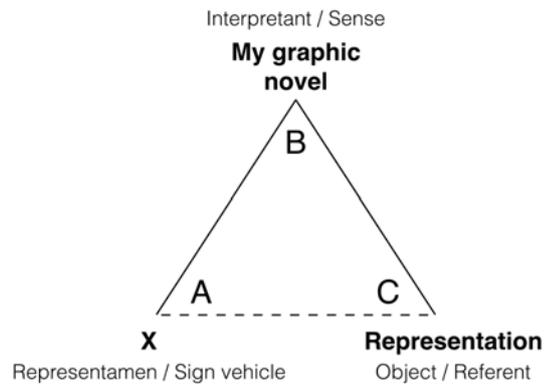


Fig. 15: The application of Peircean semiotic model to my project (Xu, 2018)

- o **Setting**

To start with, I built a page in A4 size with 300 ppi and set up the type area by Photoshop (Fig. 16). This setting was employed as a basic artboard into all pages.

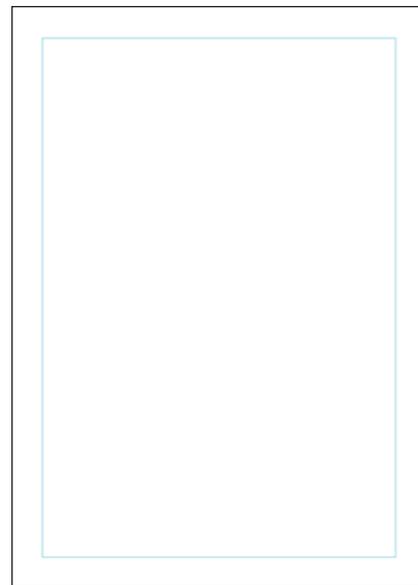


Fig. 16: Artboard setting (Xu, 2019)

- o **Inking**

Next, I lined frames out for a single page and inked images, containing lines and shades of figures, objects and circumstances, in each frame based on roughs from the storyboard (Fig. 17). This was a key step in the entire production since it built the fundamental picture world of the graphic novel. For this reason, I deliberated every facial expression and body language for each character, the visual reasonability of surroundings and their mutual relationship.



Fig. 17: Inking images (Xu, 2019)

More importantly, by means of the semiotic framework mentioned above (Fig. 15), the images (sign vehicles) can reflect (signify) their underlying meanings (referent) through the storytelling of the graphic novel (interpretant). On the whole, there are three kinds of metaphors, inclusive of brainwashing, prison and male dominance, in this visual narrative. Several examples are shown as below (Fig. 18, 19 & 20).

In these three representations, brainwashing creates a beauty myth that causes women voluntarily to stay in their gilded marriage/family/community, in fact a prison, which is constructed and controlled by male-dominant authorities. It means, in my semiotic system, that the process of women's emancipation has to break through threefold obstacles, i.e. brainwashing, prison and male power. Undoubtedly, waking up from their brainwashed mind is the primary step that is just what Cory/Coral does in the story world.

o Colouring

Then, I coloured each panel on the basis of the inks. The use of colour was basically split up into two types: neutral colour as identities of elements

BRAINWASHING		
Signifier	Interpreter	Signified
Necklace Earring Ring		Bondage
Hair dryer		Mind control
Propagandas		Indoctrination

Fig. 18: Sense-making – brainwashing (Xu, 2019)

PRISON		
Signifier	Interpreter	Signified
Cage		Cell
① Window bars ② Bedhead ③ Family photo frame ④ School fence ⑤ Shadow of window blind		Fetters

Fig. 19: Sense-making – prison (Xu, 2019)

MALE DOMINANCE		
Signifier	Interpreter	Signified
Syringe		Penis
Scalpel		Male power
Logo X		Patriarchy

Fig. 20: Sense-making – male dominance (Xu, 2019)

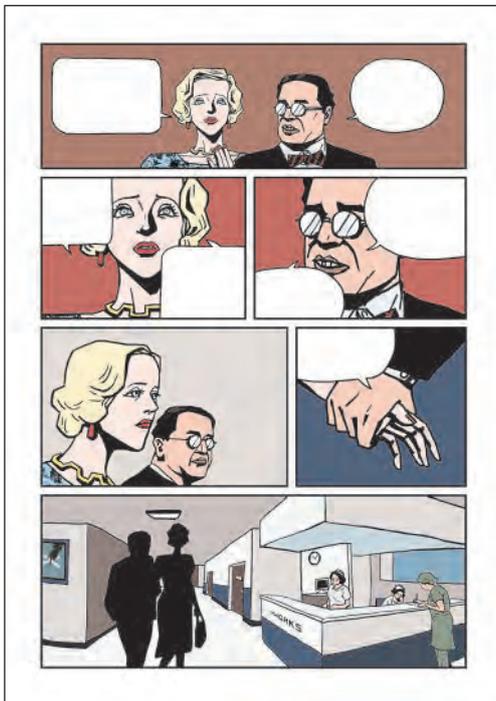


Fig. 21: A piece of colouring page (Xu, 2019)

without obvious tendency of emotion and emotion-making colour for constructing mood, tone or atmosphere. As demonstrated in Fig. 21, we can see the neutral colouring on Coral and Bernard from panel 1 to 5 and on the environment of the hospital in the last panel, while the use of emotion-making colour is mainly embodied in blank backgrounds, i.e. the brown, red and dark blue backgrounds in the first five panels.

Here I am about to focus more on how the emotion-making colour works in my storytelling, as colour's "function in art is directly related to our sense of participation, perception and imagination" (Pearce, 2012, p. 69). Basically, I set two key colours – blue and red – as a couple of contrast feelings on the two sides in a spectrum (Fig. 22).



Fig. 22: The emotion-making colour spectrum (Xu, 2019)

Although both of the two terminals are related to strong emotion, they have different metaphors. According to my application of Peirce's theory (Fig. 15), blue represents a sense of stability maintained by an ultraconservative power, whereas red implies an unstable and erratic feeling associated with blood, danger and tension as well as passion, excitement and courage referring to change and revolution. In this regard, Itten (1970) points out that red related to Mars is "a sign of material occupation by warriors in combat" and "the badge of revolutions" (p. 86), in contrast, "blue is always shadowy, and tends in its greatest glory to darkness" (p. 88). It is clearly shown in my graphic novel that in the main character's dream, the dramatical contrast between strong red and blue against dark black proposes an implication of the violent conflict between progressivism and conservatism, freedom and slavery, feminism and patriarchy (Fig. 23).

In addition to the dream world, the two opposite colours are also used in the reality of this story context to evoke certain strong emotions from a relatively neutral atmosphere. For example, as depicted in Fig. 21, the red palette backgrounds in the first three panels symbolise that Coral's past memories somewhat arise while she is walking into the hospital with her husband Bernard, whereas the dark blue background in panel 5 indicates that her husband representing male interests pulls her back to the reality – the patriarchal society. Similarly, in Fig. 24, the pure red

backgrounds in four panels, symbolising her nightmare, her past and the reality, signify Coral's sudden perception of something unusual. In other words, she is about to wake up from her fake beautiful life.

The strong red colour is also a distinct sign of transitions and flashbacks between Coral's dream/past and reality/present. For instance, there are three times that the protagonist suddenly



Fig. 23: Coral's nightmares (Xu, 2019)

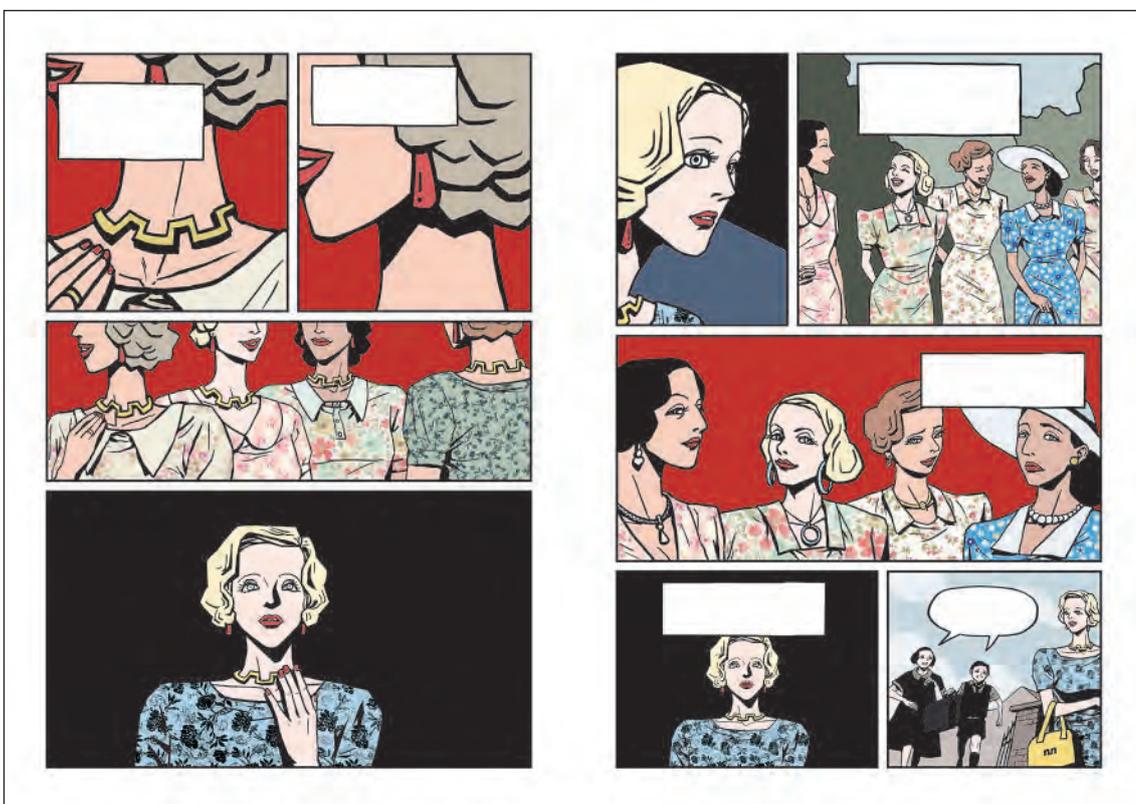


Fig. 24: Coral finding something strange (Xu, 2019)

awakens from her nightmares, in which the red colour covering the panel of Coral's eyes plays a role of linking the dream to the reality (Fig. 25). Regarding flashbacks, Fig. 26 explains how the scenarios in Coral's nightmares are flashing back around her head when she sees the doctor in his office.



Fig. 25: The transition from dream to reality (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 26: The flashbacks of Coral's nightmares (Xu, 2019)

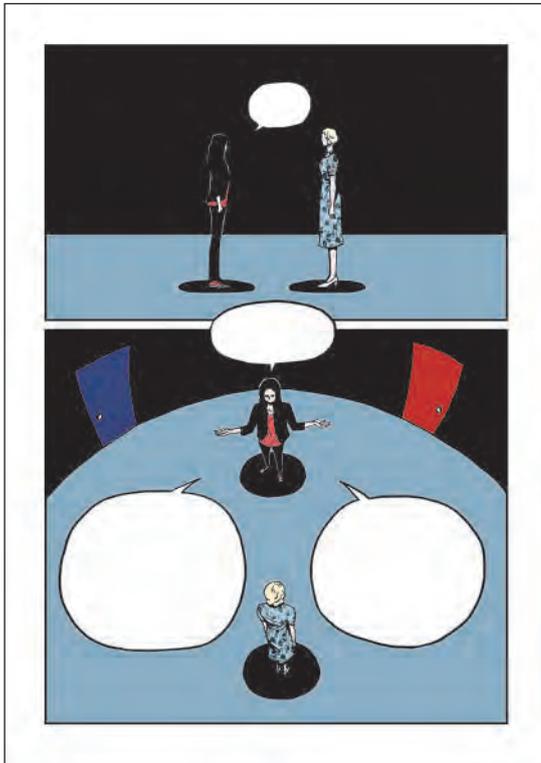


Fig. 27: The choice between the blue door and the red door (Xu, 2019)

In Coral’s final dream, different from other ones, the blue and red colours on two doors against each other, respectively stand for two contrary options: the blue door, staying in the “pleasant” town but without real personality; or the red one, going back to the real world and being true colours but with unstable and even dangerous future (Fig. 27). This setting of choice between blue and red is actually a salute to the two films of *The Matrix* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, both of which have similar plots. While Neo in the former faces two choices between a blue pill and a red pill provided by Morpheus (Fig. 28), Walter in the latter meets two options between a blue car and a red car at an airport (Fig. 29). As a result, Neo and Walter both choose the red, which enables the former to awaken from the Matrix (dream) and enter the true world (reality) although he will have to fight for his survival and freedom with machines – the ruler, and allows the latter to start his brand new life with excitement and even danger meanwhile discarding his previous mundane and cowardly life. Likewise, after recalling her past memories, Coral decidedly chooses the red exit to confront the reality – a male dominant world, rather than sleeping in the sweet dream weaved by patriarchal power. In fact, her choice has been indicated by her eye colour conversion from blue to brown that points to red (Fig. 30).



Fig. 28: *The Matrix* (Silver & The Wachowskis, 1999)



Fig. 29: *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (Goldwyn & Stiller, 2013)



Fig. 30: The brown eyes after Coral waking up (Xu, 2019)

Yet, Coral immediately comes across an obstacle – her husband requesting her to stay for their two children – after she awakens and regains her true consciousness of Cory. At this moment, the background colour of Coral’s panel turns to brown, a vague tendency compared to the orange red on the previous page (Fig. 31). This colour transformation reveals Coral’s emotional variation and some degree of hesitation in her decision, after all, she has a true relationship with her children. Nevertheless, awakened Coral is clearly aware of the most important thing to her and still remains true to herself. Consequently, the colour returns to red that indicates her explicit decision – getting rid of the chain of marriage and family and being herself (Fig. 32).

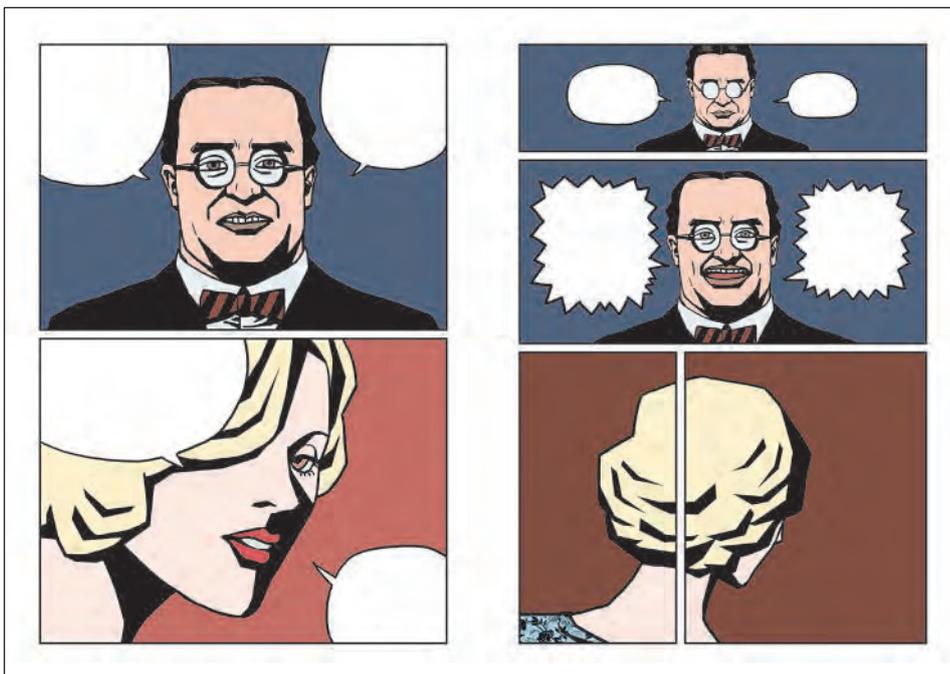


Fig. 31: The emotion-making colour's transformation [1] (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 32: The emotion-making colour's transformation [2] (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 33: The bright-dark tone shift over the story (Xu, 2019)

Apart from the blue-and-red colour strategy, I also put a bright-and-dark shift mode into the emotion-making colour system in order to present the implication of the switch between dream and reality. As shown in Fig. 33, the story timeline by and large proceeds from Coral’s dark nightmares to her bright and colourful daily life, and then the tone gradually turns to dim while she is going to see the doctor, and next the world goes into grey past memories, and after Coral recovers her consciousness the surrounding tone reveals its true colour – dark blue – a symbol of male power, and finally Coral goes out of her house, looking at the dark sky full of stars – a sign of hope and freedom. In the context of this story, the bright and colourful tone signifies an illusory reality that is actually a dream, whereas the dark and dim hue represents the truth and the approach to emancipation that seems cold and dangerous, though.

o Lettering

Finally, I added on words to panels. In regard of form, there were word balloons, word shapes and the interaction of word and picture that I work out.

I roughly sorted out of four types of text balloons, including rectangular boxes indicating narration (Fig. 34, p. 24), round balloons with a tail pointing to a character’s speech or thought (Fig. 35 & 36, p. 24), rounded rectangles with a tail owning the same function as round balloons (Fig. 37 & 38, p. 24) and explosive text frames depicting loudness from characters (Fig. 39, p. 24). What is needed to be pointed out is, in this story’s context, that round speech-balloons are a representation of real humans’ dialogues (Fig. 35 & 36, p. 24), instead, round-corner rectangles are used to indicate speeches of those medically modified women like Coral (Fig. 37 & 38, p. 24). Accordingly, Coral’s text-balloons change into round shape after she is awake (Fig. 40, p. 24). This connection exists between balloon shapes and certain groups of characters roots in the visual meanings of the two kinds of shapes: circles reflect a sense of warmth, comfort and activity whereas squares look stable, solid and conformist (Bradley, 2010).



Fig. 34: The rectangular text box (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 35: The round text balloon for speech (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 36: The round text balloon for thought (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 37: The rounded-rectangular text balloon for speech (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 38: The rounded-rectangular text balloon for thought (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 39: The explosive text box (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 40: The round shape of awake Coral's text balloons (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 41: Narrative words (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 42: Highlighting words (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 43: Loud words (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 44: Harsh sound words (Xu, 2019)

Closely relating to word balloons, words were shaped by selecting appropriate fonts that could follow their corresponding emotions, such as normal fonts for narration (Fig. 41), bold italics for emphasis (Fig. 42), big fonts for loudness (Fig. 43) and hand-draw letterings for vocal inflection (Fig. 44).

As the combination of picture and word is a critical characteristic “that distinguishes comics from other related artforms such as illustrated books” (Wartenberg, 2012, p. 102), I applied some of seven types of text-image combinations introduced by McCloud (Fig. 45). For example, the story ends up with Coral’s monologues, which refer to her shaking off her chains of marriage, in parallel with the sequential images, which

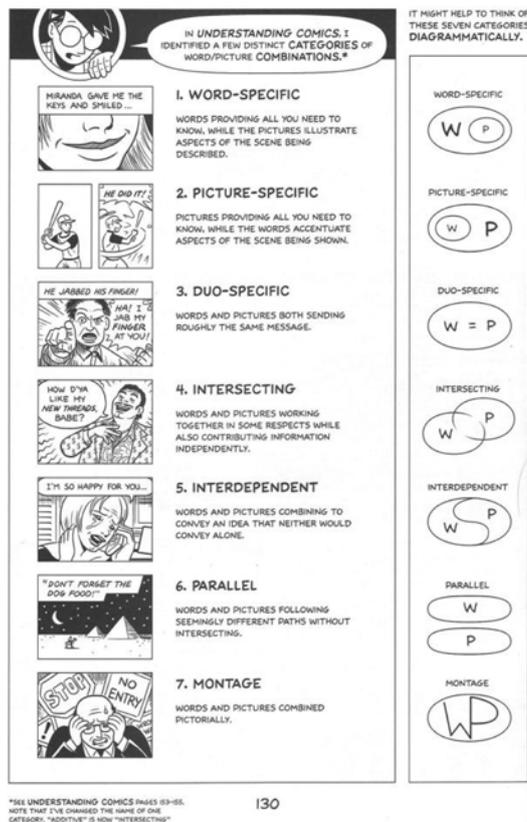


Fig. 45: Seven categories of word/picture combinations (McCloud, 2006)

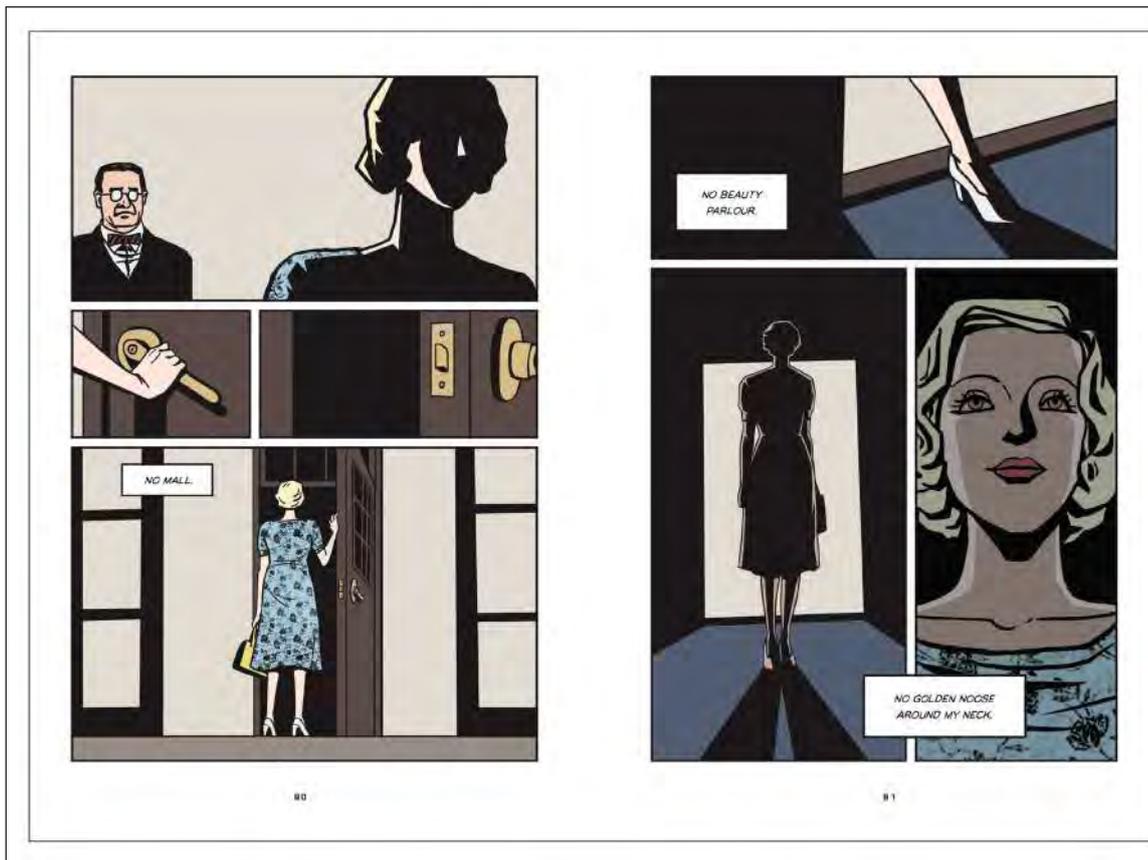


Fig. 46: Coral's monologue at the end (Xu, 2019)

describe her walking out of the house (Fig. 46). This means can not only “save room and create a dense, layered texture“ (McCloud, 2006, p. 138), but also bring out the theme of this story – waking up from marriage.

In respect of content, I repeatedly scrutinised every word from every single character so that a voice could match its opposite role. For example, I made Coral have a speech as shown in Fig. 47 like “but I can't get back into the Coral mould” (Xu, 2019, p. 79), a salute to “I can't go back to Jell-O molds” (Sherman-Palladino, 2018), said by Midge (the main character of the TV series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*) who was going to pursue her true colours (Fig. 48). This is a clear signal that Cory is awake from Coral – the brainwashing woman made by male power.



Fig. 47: Coral's words in terms of her decision (Xu, 2019)

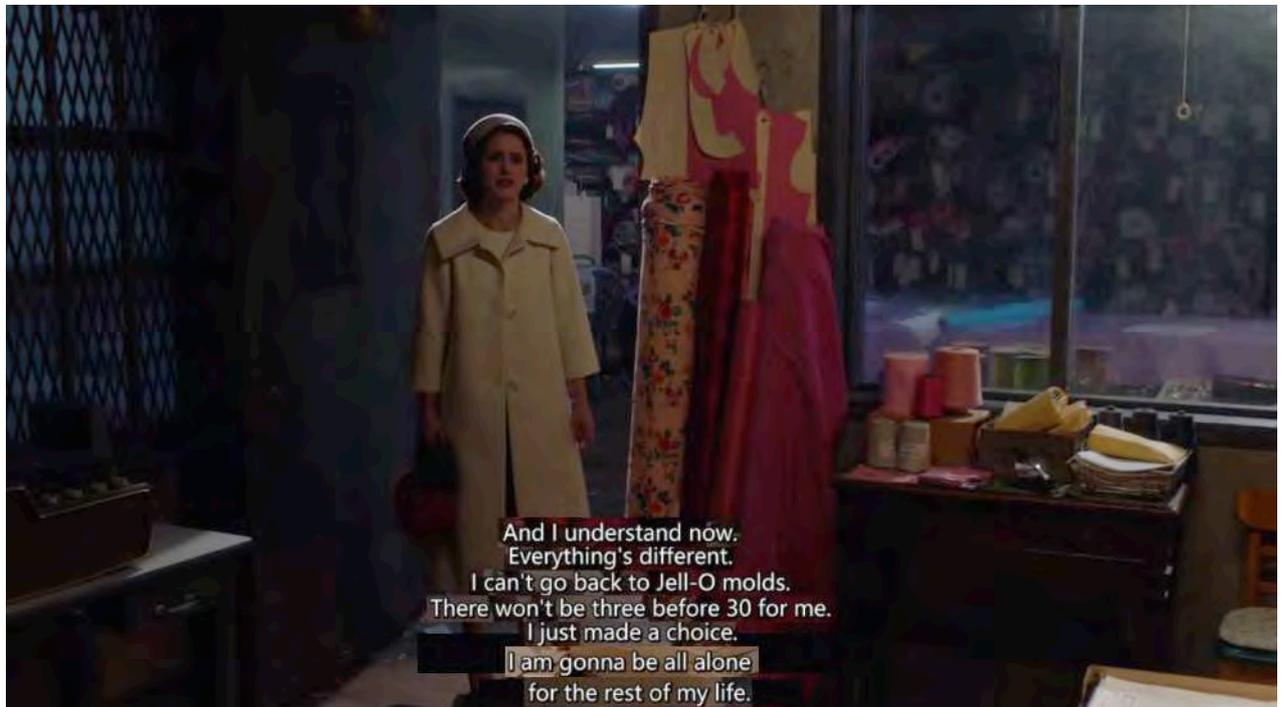
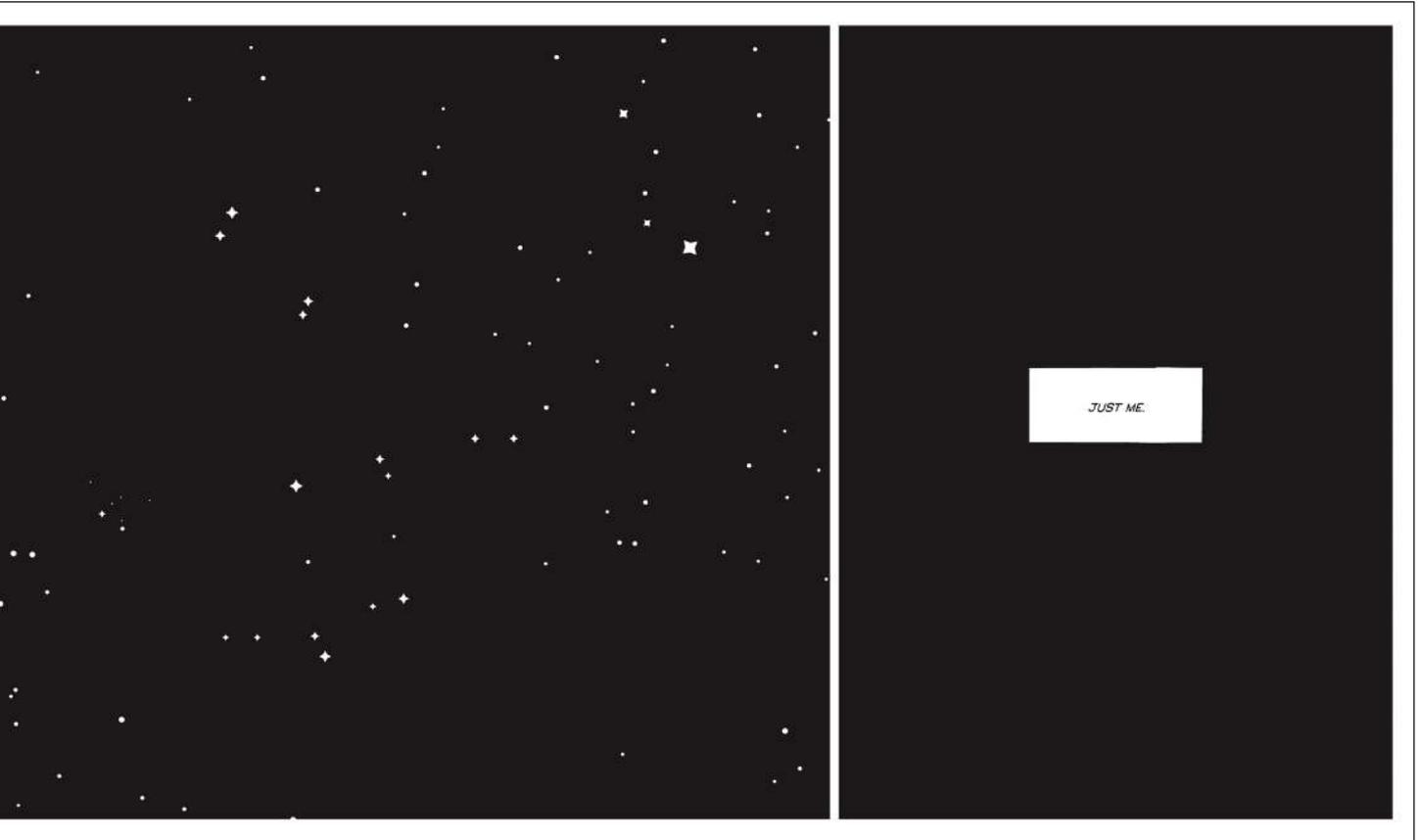


Fig. 48: Miriam's lines at the end of final episode in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* season 2 (Sherman-Palladino, 2018)

- **Book design**

At the same time of making artwork above, I commenced the design for the final physical book. Firstly, I selected a size of 160x231mm for this book from a group of options (Fig. 49).

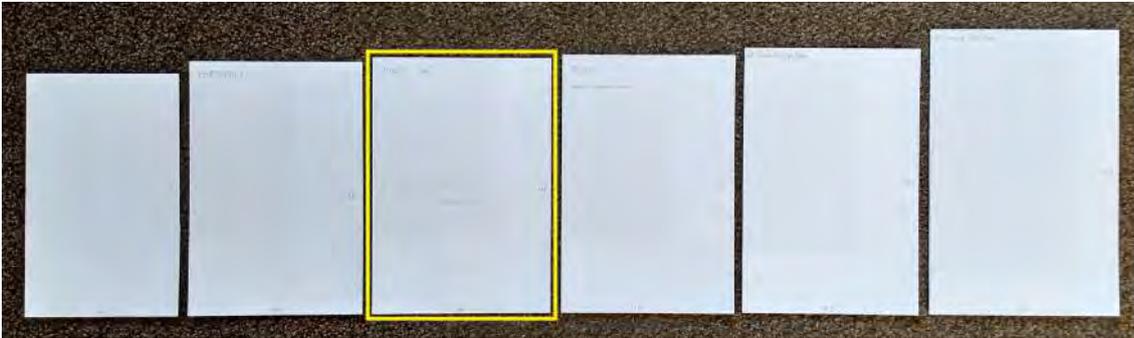


Fig. 49: The choice of book sizes (Xu, 2019)

Then, I developed the cover (Fig. 50) from a few rough designs based on the concept in relation to chains, shackles or cages (Fig. 51). As Fig. 49 clearly shows, the front cover is comprised of four black bars of a cage, behind which is a dark red shape outlining the main character's portrait against a blood red background. Also, the book title "25" is shaped as a component of the cage bars, so the front cover reflects an appropriate combination of image and text. In the vein of the front cover, the back cover demonstrates a simple layout: a logo of 25 along with a relevant website link in the centre of the space, as well as the spine straightforwardly shows the names of the book and the author. The colour use also followed the tone of Coral's nightmare. Overall, this cover design is supposed to concisely signify an oppressing sensation that can hook readers.

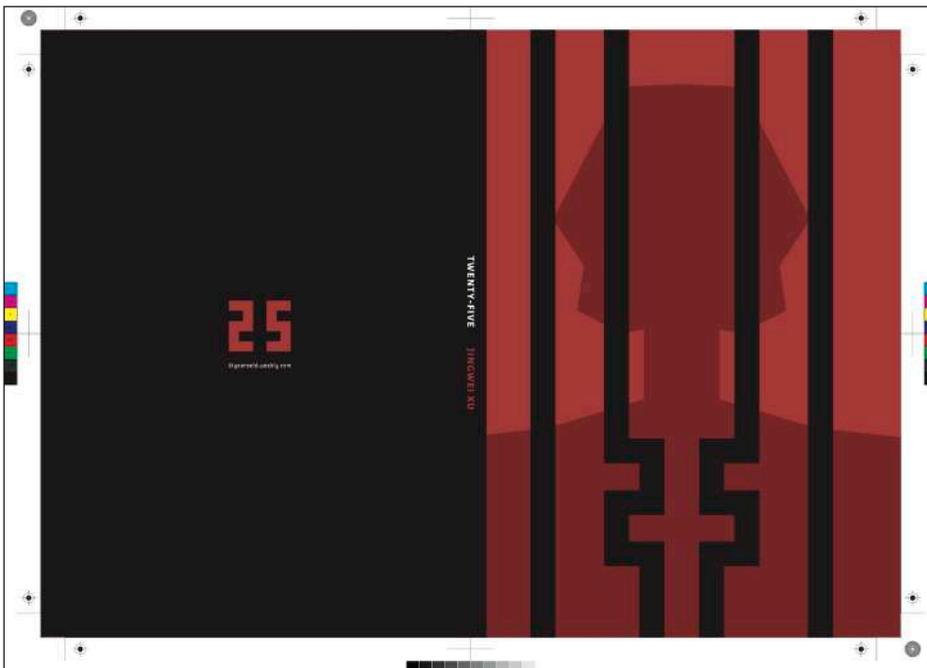


Fig. 50: The cover design (Xu, 2019)

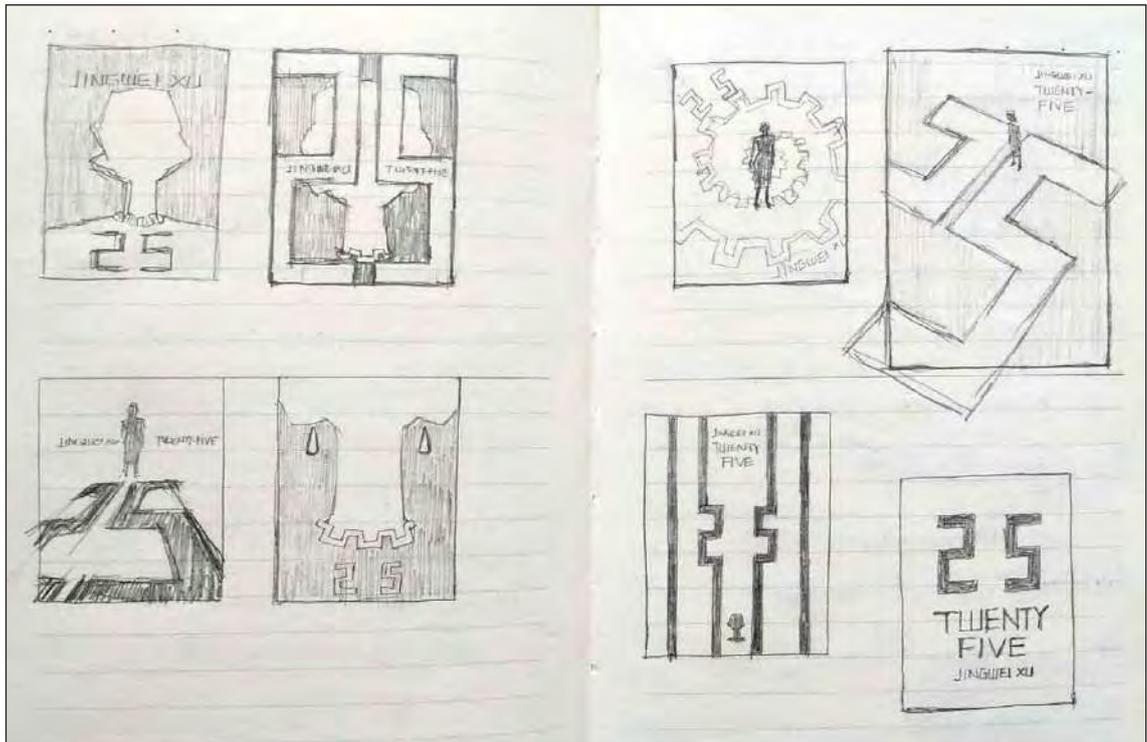


Fig. 51: The cover design roughs (Xu, 2019)

As to the page layout, it had been operated since the finished art started. After all, for graphic novels or comics, making finished art has to proceed with its layout design simultaneously. Only several points were new considerations, like page numbers, title page, credit page, preface page, chapter page and acknowledgement page.

Eventually, the physical books including hardcovers and paperbacks as a result were printed out based on above course of tense and complex performance (Fig. 52).



Fig. 52: The physical outcomes (Xu, 2019)

Opening Title

The opening title was supposed as a hook of the graphic novel, thus all work on it was for this aim.

Firstly, the video's duration was limited in around one minute so that it could meet the demand of digital-age audiences who are used to seeing fast pace. Then, the tone of this hook was set as a horror-like feeling, which gave rise to the moments in Coral's nightmare in the graphic novel. Following this tone, I got the direction to select the background music – a horror genre original music named *Consecrated Ground*² for free use, and then I edited by Audition and applied it to the title design. According to the preparation above, I wrote the script (Fig. 53), drew the storyboard (Fig. 54) and created a rough video

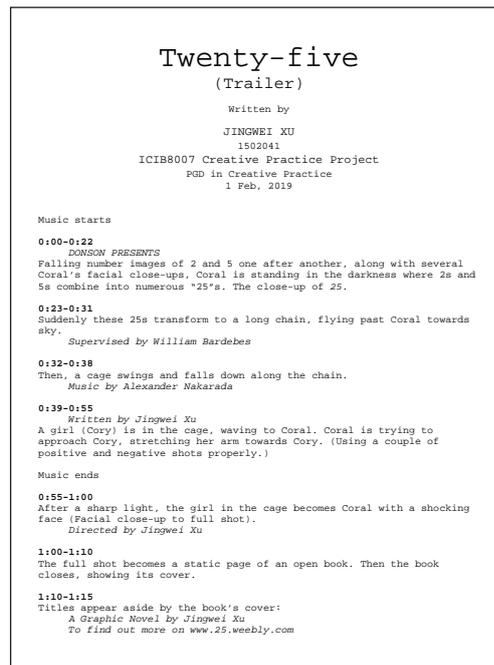


Fig. 53: The script of the opening title (Xu, 2019)

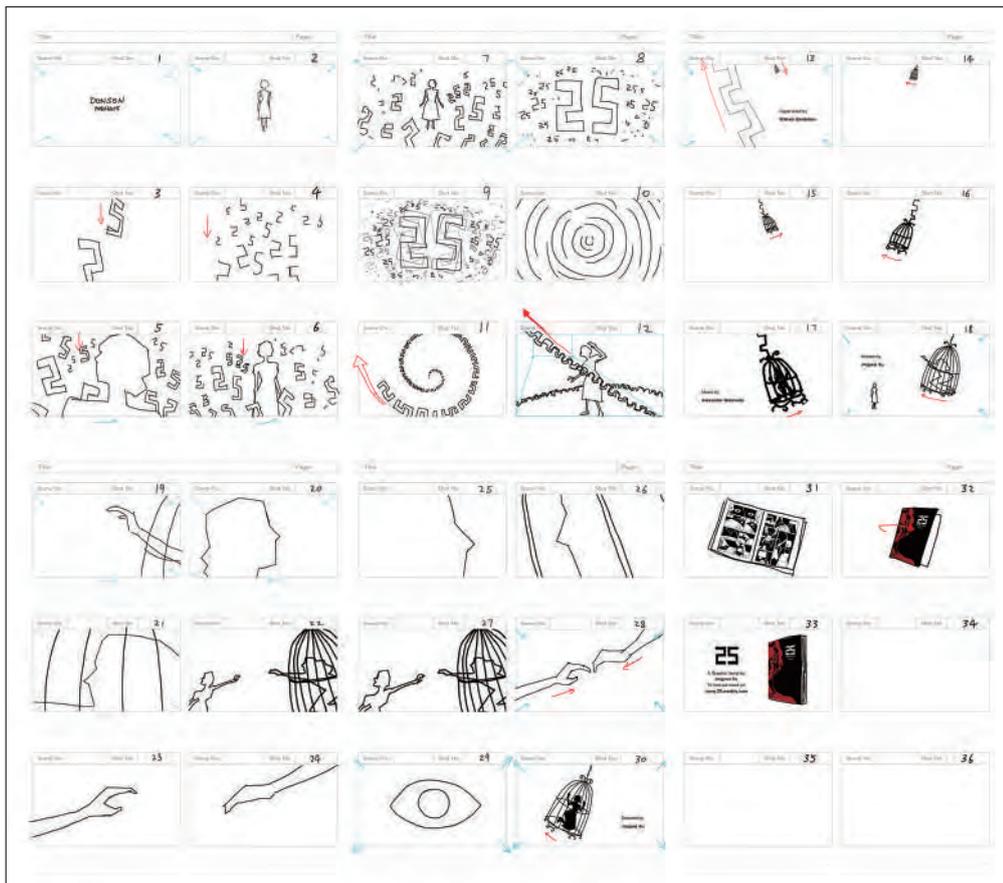


Fig. 54: The storyboard of the opening title (Xu, 2019)

² Written by Alexander Nakarada and retrieved from <https://freepd.com>.

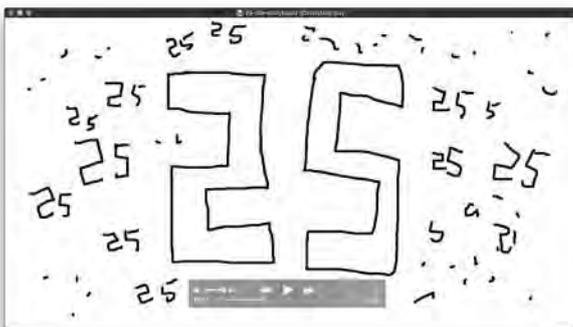


Fig. 55: The rough video of the opening title (Xu, 2019)

composed of the images of the storyboard and the music (Fig. 55).

Next, the formal composition was commenced and completed on the basis of the rough video (Fig. 56). This was an iterative process, from shape creation and shot connection to camera movement and character action. The genre was affected by the main title of *Feud: Bette and Joan* (Fig. 57) and Saul Bass's

design work (Fig. 58). It is noticeable that my opening title is made for a physical book other than a movie or a TV show. Thus, this title design is supposed to be a trailer for advertising the graphic novel, although it is also an opening sequence of this book. That is why this video ends up with a rotating book plus relevant information after the shot transfers from the animated world to the book pages (Fig. 56).



Fig. 56: The final opening title (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 57: The opening title of *Feud: Bette and Joan* (Prologue, 2017)

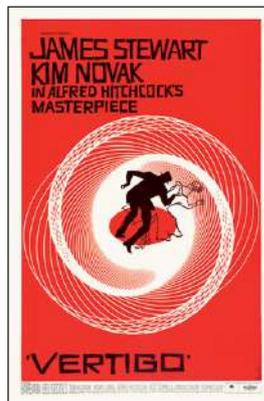


Fig. 58: The film poster of *Vertigo* (Bass, 1958)

Visual Communication

If the main title can be considered as a promotional means for the graphic novel, then the visual communication is more likely to be a hook or a series of advertisements for the entire artwork – the combination of a graphic novel and an opening video.

This work emphasised on branding the project. For this, I distilled the artwork's logo including static pattern (Fig. 59) and kinematic version (Fig. 60) from the title typeface on the book cover (Fig. 50, p. 28), due to its underlying meaning pointing to the central information in the story that “every woman turned 18 must get married before 25 years old” (Xu, 2019, p. 52).



Fig. 59: The static logo (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 60: The keyframes of the animated logo (Xu, 2019)

Depending on the logo, a package of visual communication designs came out, such as posters (Fig. 61, 62 & 63), 3D book display effects (Fig. 64) and relevant products like stickers (Fig. 65), calendars (Fig. 66) and invitation (Fig. 67). I also designed the moving pictures for some of them, such as a three-dimensional rotating book (Fig. 68), an animated poster and a motion invitation card, to adapt to the characters of digital media.



Fig. 61: The major poster (Xu, 2019)

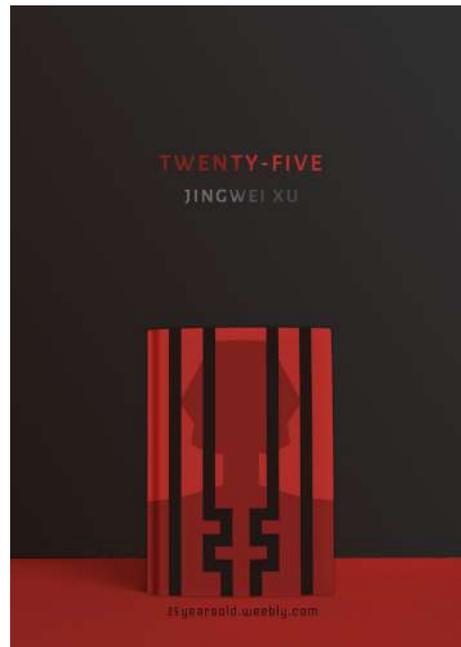


Fig. 62: The secondary poster (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 63: The poster in light box [rendering] (Xu, 2019)

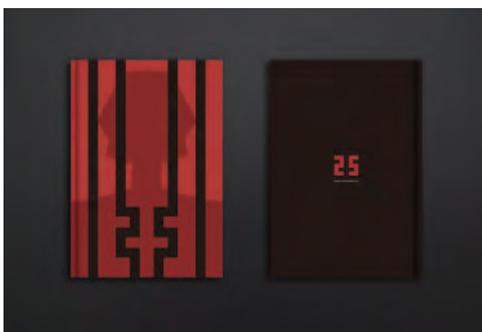


Fig. 64: The book demonstration [rendering] (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 65: The stickers (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 66: The calendars (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 67: The invitation of the project exhibition (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 68: The keyframes of the animated book display (Xu, 2019)

All of these advertising works were finally composed and presented in the form of two art shows, which were divided into online and offline modes. While the former is a website³ demonstrating the whole project associated with the introduction, the opening video, the book linked to an online book display platform and relevant advertising designs (Fig. 69 & 70), the latter was an exhibition involved in a local independent arts festival to show all physical work plus the video hook (Fig. 71). To some extent, the two sorts of shows have contributed to communicating my project.

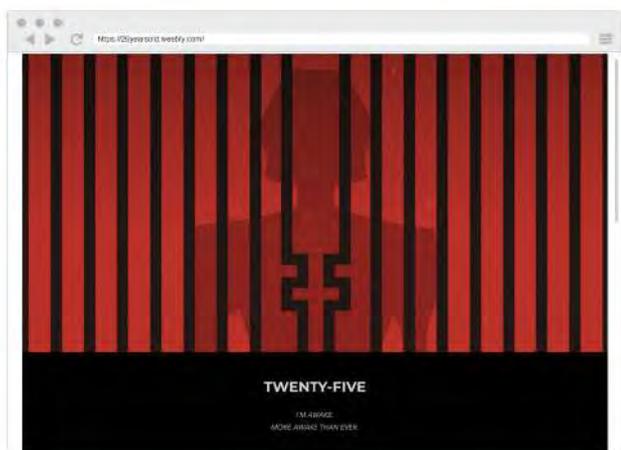


Fig. 69: The online show (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 70: The webpage capture of the online show (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 71: The offline show (Xu, 2019)

³ Based on Weebly that provides various templates to customise my showcase.

THE KNOWLEDGE

As illuminated above, the practical journey in my entire research looked at how to compose a narrative artwork – a graphic novel attaching a main title – by which telling a story and implying my understanding of feminism. During this iteratively creative process, I, in the centre of this practitioner-led research, have developed my personal knowledge with threefold meanings respectively from the perspectives of Form, Storytelling and Ideas.

Combinatory Form

The combination of a graphic novel and a title sequence can enhance the communication power of a graphic novel. It is true that a short video can easily spread via the Internet in the digital age. Consequently, a graphic novel book can take full advantage of the Internet – the most important medium nowadays – by attaching a trailer to be easy of access.

More importantly, rather than a commercial advertisement or a marketing strategy in a general sense, the opening title is an indispensable component integrated into the graphic novel both in content and in visual style. It means that this union can expand the artistic boundaries of comics and their concept in a certain degree. In the future, it might be a norm that audiences tend to see a graphic novel’s title sequence before reading the book along with the development of this combinatory practice. If so, not only graphic novels and comic books but also traditional publications might meet their renaissance.

Symbolic Storytelling

This upgraded graphic novel is still in use in telling a story. I have technically employed the laws of making comics into my practice and it worked well, however, what has tremendously contributed to my knowledge development is the application of Peircean semiotics. On account of this, I have generated a concept called Symbolic Storytelling, which is an interpreting system allowing elements (e.g. images, colours, dialogues) in graphic novels to symbolise referents (Fig. 72). In other words, an element has no connection with an object until a storyteller interprets it, or just as Chandler (2001) notes that “the meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation” (Chandler, 2001, p. 35). While this finding, from my perspective, can boost the philosophical value of graphic novels, it can also contribute to creators’ ideas reflection.

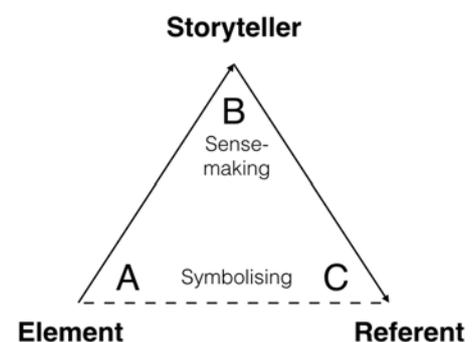


Fig. 72: The symbolic storytelling system (Xu, 2019)

Reflective Ideas

Through storytelling in a symbolic system, my ideas/claims have been unfolded as three points of my interpretation of female emancipation:

- o Women cannot genuinely obtain their freedom unless they actively get rid of the moral hijack of marriage, family and kinship, etc;
- o Women do not have to be well-behaved to cater for male supremacy;
- o Men are not likely to unselfishly help women or support feminism.

First of all, morality has historically and strongly been embedded in marriage, family and the relationship between family members. In this situation, a woman is hardly accepted into the society unless she becomes a wife and a mother (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010). In other words, the labels of “wife” and “mother” are the moral criteria for women. Therefore, a woman is immoral if she does not become a wife and a mother or she gives up the two roles. She is not allowed to be herself – the One, but the Other (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010). Under the control of this rule, it is extremely hard for women to move towards their emancipation, even though some of them have been aware of the importance of female independence. As far as I am concerned, women’s success in freedom must undergo the torture of ripping off their wife-and-mother role labelled by patriarchy. That is why Coral/Cory in my graphic novel finally decides to leave her marriage and children and primarily concern for herself – not a wife and a mother any more but “JUST ME” (Xu, 2019, p. 84). Of course, this is a fictional character, but still, she as a sign can represent women who are stuck in their marriage, family and kinship in real life.

Secondly, following the vein of the last paragraph related to the moral standard for women, it can be deduced that a woman who is not a wife or a mother is more likely to be seen as a misbehaved woman, let alone a woman like Coral/Cory who actively gives up her motherhood. This is the very issue for women seeking emancipation to be concerned about, and this is also a key problem that a gender-equality society must address. The first step of action seems that a so-called disobedient woman should not be judged from the social perspective. Meanwhile, from a personal angle, a woman does not have to make herself well-behaved and does not need to live in the shadow of stigma because of her disobedience.

In addition, people are increasingly realising the significance of men’s help and support for women’s awakening, however, men as representative of male power automatically stand up for their own interests. In the context of the graphic novel, the society is under the rule of an extremely conservative power, which is a guardian of patriarchy and treats women as objects. In such a situation, men as a beneficial owner have no reason to question the patriarchal culture. On the contrary, they wish that the situation that women are inferior to men would be perpetuated (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010). Even though a man, like Bernard in my fictional story, objectively enables his wife to wake up, his initial intent is keeping his wife’s memories about him and their children, not subjectively supporting feminism. It is true that his action helps Coral

recover her previous consciousness, however, he is absolutely not aware of feminism or his wife’s subjective will, as de Beauvoir (1949/2010) notes that “the man most sympathetic to women never knows her concrete situation fully” (p. 35). What he does is just for himself without any relation to unselfish help. Just imagine, would Bernard still help Coral wake up if he did not care about her losing memories with him and children or if she was still be Coral – a docile wife – not becoming Cory? The answer is no. That is to say, Bernard’s help would never occur if Coral never tried to wake up. In a larger context, men would not be involved in supporting feminism, if feminist movements never happened. Therefore, women need to keep a cool head and realise that female equal rights always rely on their own active struggles rather than the assistance of men who inevitably protect their own power and are unaware of, and unwilling to unselfishly help women.

All of these ideas above echo my claim generated in my previous research that women who struggle for their own rights must take the most effective step to wake up from their marriage, which is an ideal form to oppress females and reinforce male dominance.

CONCLUSION

As has been shown, this research has carried out a graphic novel practice, in which my claim is embedded that it is significant for women to wake up from their marriage/family/kinship that can be a form of oppression from patriarchy and to realise that they have the right to firstly consider their own interests when they come into conflict with their marriage or family. Of course, it has not been possible to precisely communicate my thoughts of feminism to the audience owing to the implicit nature of artwork, and also there are limitations in terms of my learning about feminism and visual narratives

from this research. What is clear, however, is that I have developed my knowledge, involving the value of the artform mixing a graphic novel and a main title together, the role of symbolism and semiotics in narratives and my understanding of female awakening. According to these findings and previous stage research, a solution framework for my whole research can be visually summarised as a reflective triangle model (Fig. 73).

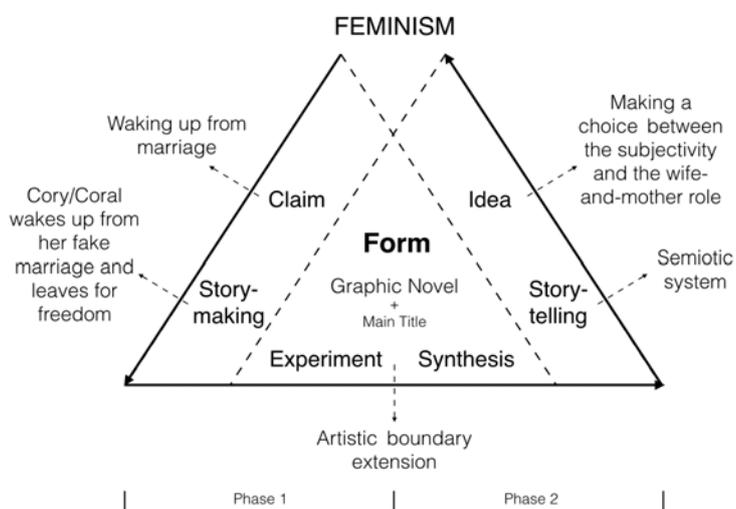


Fig. 73: The solution triangle for the entire research (Xu, 2019)

It is clearly shown in Fig. 73 that my research journey started from looking into the topic of feminism, which developed my main claim, then I constructed a specific story along with a series of visual experiments in line with my claim, next I conducted and completed the combinatory art form, narrating the story in a symbolic way, and finally through the storytelling my interpretation of women's emancipation was reflected and it responded to the topic of feminism where I launched my research. Potentially, this model can be an inspiring approach to further practice-led research on similar realm.

Lastly, as the graphic novel at present just unfolds a starting point, like an introduction to an entire unknown universe, it would be worthwhile to gradually develop the story world further in the future. For instance, the story can continue to explore how Coral is going to survive in the extreme male-dominant society. Or it can tell the same story from another character's view, such as Bernard, Dr Bridges or Coral's mother. Then, one volume after another, linking to each other, a Twenty-five Universe can emerge ahead of readers.

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