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Of Course, What Did You Expect, My Child?

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Of Course, What Did You Expect, My Child?

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

Of Course, What Did You Expect, My Child?

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Visual representations of fairy tales are not limited to children's books. References to these stories appear in nearly every aspect of our cultural landscape and offer a variety of interpretations to these narratives. These affect our response to the tales and reshape our collective imagination. This range in fairy tale illustrations plays a significant role in the intertextual conversations that happen between retellings and critical writings. I explore this by creating my own version of *The Little Red Riding Hood* through a series of eleven tableaux, where each presents a different moment of the plot through a specific medium. I investigate how familiar elements can be communicated in a new context to alter anticipated patterns. This paper follows my process as I examine the role I play as a visual author in the creation of narrative.

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List of Illustrations

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Why fairy tales?

With this project, I investigate my approach to storytelling and the role I play in the creation of meaning. Part of this urge stems from my interest in John Connolly's *The Book of Lost Things*. In it, a young boy named David enters an alternate, fairy-tale-inspired world in which his real-life experiences affect the way these familiar narratives are played out. The stories are repurposed by David's subconscious to reflect part of his reality, and the fairytale characters act as symbols that enable David to overcome his grief and anger. I became curious about the ways fairy tales impact David's world and how this process mirrors my relationship to narrative. These stories convey universal motifs that are decoded differently by every reader. Furthermore, the interpretations change from generation to generation and throughout one's life.

I noticed a similar way in which audiences and artists interact with stories they tell and revisit. It struck me that we continuously retell narratives with which we are familiar in theater performances. Artists alter the meaning or shed new light on a story that engages the spectators in a different way. Revisiting familiar stories is part of our cultural landscape. Like plays, fairy tales are retold and revisited often. They become recognizable, and this creates a sense of ownership. It generates a cycle where tellers feel the need to honor or repeat the original tale for fear of alienating their audience. To explore fairy tales would help me investigate my relationship to storytelling. I had a specific interest in finding ways to re-engage with well-known material to counter the over-familiarization of the tales and, perhaps, challenge the expectations of my audience.

How are fairy tales illustrated?

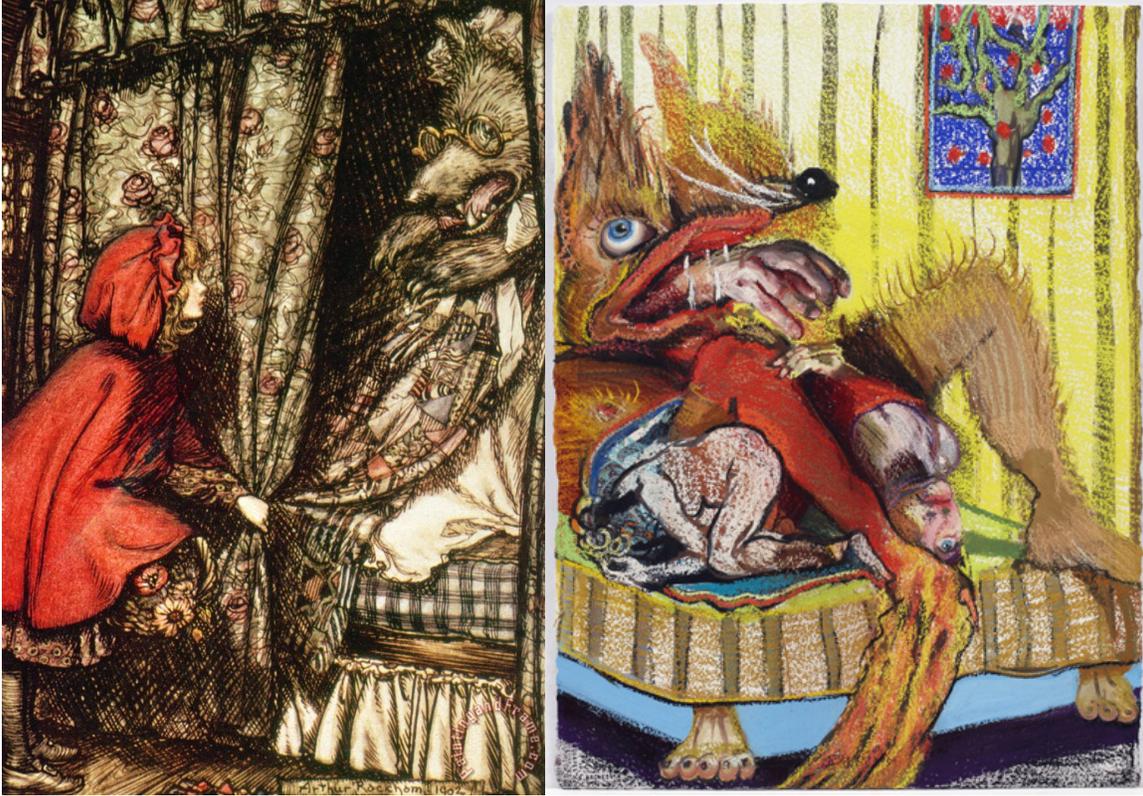


Illustration 1: A. Rackham, *Little Red Riding Hood*/ N. Frank, *Little Red Cap II*

I considered the development of fairy tale depictions, from George Cruikshank's and Arthur Rackham's nineteenth-century illustrations to contemporary illustrators such as Natalie Frank and Christian Jackson, which illustrate how imagery can be used to highlight narrative moments. Searching further, I found fairy tale references in advertising, fashion editorials, fine arts, games, graphic novels, and operas. It became apparent that fairy tales exist as metaphors in our everyday lives. We are repeatedly being told the stories, or parts of the narratives, in various ways.

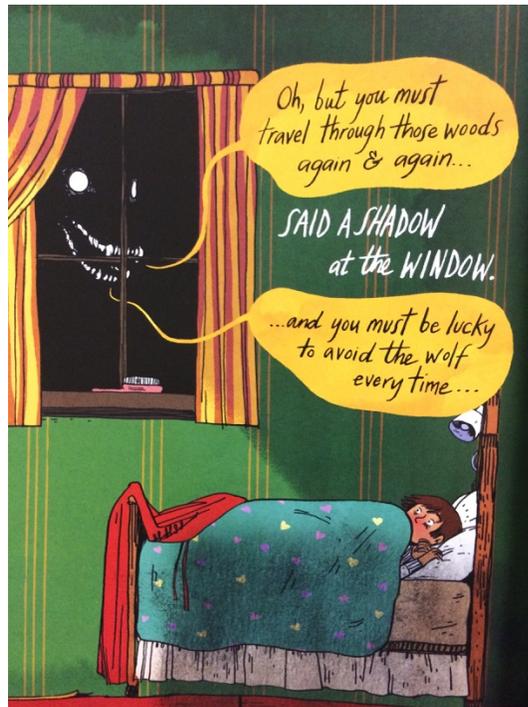


Illustration 2: Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods*

In *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales*, Vanessa Joosen examines the relationship between the increase of critical discourse surrounding traditional fairy tales and the renewed interest in fairy tales that developed during the latter part of the twentieth century (Joosen 5). I believe the intertextuality between the texts and the scholarly research is also affected by the visual representations of these stories. These non-literary depictions offer an additional version of that narrative. Joosen's analysis was essential to my process because it helped inform how I could explore fairy tales. As generators of these visual retellings, we take part in the conversations that lead to ways of

rethinking and re-examining the tales. We affect the ways we share and interpret specific sets of beliefs.

I became invested in Susan Redington Bobby's idea that changing the perspective from which we tell a familiar story can make it unfamiliar. Her analysis of Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* argues that:

by shifting preconceived patterns of storytelling, [Coover] is able to create new meaning, liberating the reader from the arbitrariness of pre-set narrative's but also of the arbitrariness of fixed links between signifiers and signified [...] achieved through the deconstruction of myth (Redington Bobby 107)."

Thus, a new type of illustration (signifier) can alter the value (signified) we place on it. I decided to reflect on the relationship between visual depictions and fairy tales by connecting different media representations into one narrative. My project would reconstruct a well-known fairy tale through a variety of different visual forms that use fairy tale iconography.

Why *Little Red Riding Hood*?

I began my search for a fairy tale whose plot is regularly presented in all forms of media. I wanted a story that is very present in our cultural subconscious. However, I needed a fairy tale that was not connected to one specific medium. I turned to *The Little Red Riding Hood*. Red's following is mainly due to an enormous body of intertextual writings and retellings that create an ever-changing portrait of the story. Some visuals, such as the red cape, have become canonized. Nevertheless, the familiar elements are not rooted in a single visual representation of the story. They have been, and continue to be, frequently subjected to various interpretations, such as Paul Delarue's *Grandmother's Tale*, Charles Perreault's *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, the Brothers Grimm's *Little Red Cap*, and more modern retellings such as Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Furthermore, the vast range of themes present in the different adaptations made it an ideal subject. The story deals with issues of sexuality, curiosity, desire, maturity and coming of age, that are regularly reclaimed by mass media. Thus, people's understanding of the tale and their response to the themes are all slightly different. *The Little Red Riding Hood* would allow me to expand the intertextual conversation between the knowledge we share of the narrative and the visual representations used to convey the story.

The project now had its final form: I would retell my version of *The Little Red Riding Hood* by creating a series of tableaux that would each present a specific moment in the story through a different visual medium. The audience would reconstruct the full

narrative by connecting the scenes together, and their personal understanding of the tale would allow them to fill in the blanks that would normally be occupied by the text.

What is my version of the tale?

Harold Bloom tells us that “even the simplest fairy tale has become a textual jungle in which one interpretation has grown itself upon another until by now interpretations have become the story (Tatar xix).” Indeed, Little Red Riding Hood has an impressive resume that is constantly remodeled by a wide array of scholars and authors. I started on the path to distil the knowledge I had gathered by asking myself a few questions.

Which moments of the tale did I want to represent? Through this, I defined my version of the story. I found myself drawn back to early illustrations of the story by Arthur Rackham, Gustave Doré, Walter Crane, and George Cruikshank. Many argue that the importance of some of these earlier drawings is still felt nowadays. Thus, I could use our familiarity to these to explore new ways of presenting the moments.

What medium did I want to use? I made a list of several visual formats that use fairy tale tropes and iconography. I chose a spectrum that would allow me to explore the story as an illusion, allusion or paradigm.

What medium worked with each specific moment? I explored different pairings between my content and possible visual forms each moment could take to see how one aspect could influence the other. I made choices that help develop the intertextual conversation surrounding *The Little Red Riding Hood* and depictions of the tale.

These are the final moments and the different visual formats I associated with them.

Advertisement: Red and Mother prepare the basket.

I start with the preparation of the basket because it is a crucial element of the Little Red Riding Hood plot. It is present in the narrative as far back as Delarue's *Grandmother's Tale*. Furthermore, the image of the child and the mother is a recurring feature of many fairy tales, and honoring this moment offers a useful introduction to Red.

Fairy tales share many characteristics to branding: they have long been used to promote particular sets of beliefs, and many stories have become indexes to larger themes. Red Riding Hood is perhaps one of the most iconic references to the fairy tale brand. Thus, it felt natural to begin my retelling by presenting an advertisement. I was inspired by mid-century ads' focus on selling family values, especially the household depictions used to market new kitchens. It is a precise representation of the harmonious relationship between the mother and Red. Advertisements also imply a new product, while the period style positions the tale as a classic.

Photography: Red leaves the house.

The moment of warning when Red leaves the house alludes to themes of maturity and independence carried in the tale. My telling reestablishes it from a young adult leaving the family home. This symbolic representation of the beginning of Red's journey alters some of the preconceived expectations the audience may have towards the story. It also generates identification from the spectator, as adults can likely look back at this

moment of their past. I chose to make Red a boy in this instance to establish the different persona the character would take throughout the exhibit.

The use of a Polaroid image as the specific photographic medium proposes a different kind of interaction with the illustrated format. It points to a practical use of the artform because instant photography implies an action and emphasizes its materiality. This creates a strong connection between the format, the story, and the viewer, by referring to an old and utilitarian approach to capturing a memory. In this case, I explore the new steps Red is taking by immortalizing them through the nostalgic quality of Polaroid photographs.

Cinema: Red is lost in the woods.

In his essay *Peasant Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose*, Robert Darnton considers how fairy tales were an index to the reality of people living in eighteenth-century France (Darnton 9). Although the forest represented danger at the time, it is no longer the case for contemporary audiences. I use the moment Red gets lost to explore the modern-day equivalent to the fear of getting lost in the woods. Tall buildings and dark alleys are a perfect allusion to the forest.

Cinema has helped foster the idea of fear projected upon major cities through genres like film noir and directors such as David Lynch. I use tropes and conventions of these styles to recreate the sense of danger the woods would have communicated in the original tale. The subjective camera takes away the spectator's agency, while the black and white, low-key imagery emphasizes the unknown and helps generate the feeling of getting lost.

Fashion editorial: Red meets Wolf.

The meeting between Red and the Wolf clearly admits to erotic interpretations centered on the male gaze and Red's sexual identity. I investigate the responsibility we place on our protagonist *vis-à-vis* the Wolf's attraction, and how this ultimately overshadows positive depictions of Red's sexuality.

Pairing the moment with images from fashion, a world where there is a normalization of sexuality, allows us to expect and project its presence. Because the bodies depicted most often help corroborate male sexual attitudes, there is an assumption that every editorial is under the male gaze, which ultimately dictates how people will interpret a positive portrayal of seduction. By combining the two, I reflect on the power an interpretation has and how in certain cases the origin of an argument is substantial enough to counter representations that aim to criticize that precise analysis. I rearrange the visual associations we have to the tale and explore how clothing can perform the moment in a new way. By playing with levels and what each character wears, I present a conversation between the power dynamics that exist among the characters and different perspectives on seduction. This leads us to reconsider how we define the Wolf's fascination with Red.

Instagram: Red wanders off the path.

The point where Red strays from the road suggests a denial of the Mother's warning. I use this scene to investigate the position of knowledge we possess as readers. I

present a series of flowers to enable my audience to travel with Red. Through this, I focus on the concepts of curiosity conveyed by the scene.

Instagram helps people curate their stories and allows their viewers to project themselves into that narrative. It thrives because of our desire to know more. I examine this new storytelling device by letting the audience situate themselves as sharer and viewer. They can identify as Red if their curiosity leads them to scroll through the different pictures and get lost within the different flowers. The tableau also manifests the Wolf's point of view because the act of scrolling through someone else's account has predatory connotations. This juxtaposition of the two experiences challenges the fairy tale's analysis as a tale of warning and presents an interesting interpretation of the relationship between sharing and contemplation.

Halloween: Wolf disguises as Grandma.

The moment the Wolf disguises itself as the Grandmother is the only one where the focus is not on Red. It makes us complicit of what is to come and represents well how knowledge of the plot can allow us to project ourselves in the narrative. I investigate notions of accountability by forcing my audience to become part of the story.

People become active participants in the tale when personifying the characters on Halloween. The variety of use of Red-Riding-Hood iconography reveals the permission we take to alter the story for our own purposes. I make my audience perform the scene by reflecting their image in the Grandmother's outfit. However, the physical barrier I create with the door denies them the possibility to change the story's outcome. This emphasizes

our awareness of the Wolf's actions. I include this shift in perspective to mark the part we play as an onlooker.

Paper dolls: Red undresses.

Early versions showed Red undress for the Wolf before getting into bed. The commitment to sanitize the tale eliminated this scene during the nineteenth century. However, Red is still often illustrated in a nightgown. Such depictions maintain the position of vulnerability the character is forced into when she faces the Wolf. It also fosters a reading in which Red is criticized for being alluring.

Tom Tierney's use of famous figures in the creation of his paper dolls inspired me to use this medium to generate thought-provoking interplays between the audience and the familiar image of Red Riding Hood. Paper dolls are interactive because the observer enables the clothes to be put on and taken off. Thus, the undressing scene becomes deliberate. I explore the spectrum of responsibility that is easily placed on the protagonist by challenging the audience in their immediate response towards who is accountable. To identify as Red is to accept this blame. To stay removed is to assume the Wolf's position. In both cases, I make the viewer answerable for the action. It provides a disquieting sense of anxiety for what is about to unfold.

Toys: Red and Wolf in bed.

Depictions of Red and the Wolf in bed are charged with sexual connotations. Through this emblematic moment, I engage with Bruno Bettelheim's interpretive

framework that centers fairy tales as a device children use to make sense of the world. His focus on the erotic expression of the narrative continues to shape a problematic understanding of the story where Red is forced to perform sexuality. This overpowers other revisions that aim to shed new light on the bond between fairy tales and youth. It also denies children a different relationship to the narrative.

I contrast Bettelheim's analysis by illustrating the scene through toys. Both figures have innocent features that help deactivate some of the fixed conclusions we learn as adults. Red is made of various patterned and colorful fabrics. This collage of multiple styles is comparable to the story's varied interpretations. The knitted appearance of the Wolf is reminiscent of something a Grandmother would make. The use of this symbolic medium allows a reflection of our ever-changing connection to the narrative.

Stacking dolls: Wolf eats Red.

Arguably the most notable of the tale, the moment the Wolf eats Red is distinguished by its obvious dramatic energy. The scene's climax is further accentuated by our knowledge of its outcome. This build up is expressed through a shift in perception as the Wolf's disguise is exposed through each question Red asks. *What big hands? What big eyes? What big teeth?* The multiplicity of versions of the stacking dolls supports a visual depiction of Red's doubt. Historically, these artifacts were created to represent variety within the same object. I engage with the medium's storytelling possibilities and illustrate the multiple steps that lead to the ultimate reveal. My audience's familiarity with

the conclusion is used to stimulate their imagination and move the narrative forward. The tableau is indicative of the array of new approaches a medium can bring to storytelling.

Comic books: Red frees herself.

Critics and scholars have problematized the model in which Red can only be saved by a man or a father figure; an assessment also embraced by many retellings. Even Delarue's tale features a crafty young girl who slips away through a ruse. I showcase Red's ability not just to escape, but to also fight back against these preconceived ideas.

I turned to comic books to empower my protagonist. Mainly superhero comics, which are engrained with themes of justice and retaliation. I use these tropes as visual representations of Red's ability to break away. I give her an armor and a cape to strengthen the well-known outfit. I depict Wolf as a man in a purposeful choice to blur the lines between Wolf and Hunter. I use the familiar axe as the weapon they fight for to reestablish Red as the owner of her own salvation. This alters the ingrained ideas that only a male savior can offer freedom.

Film animation: Red's happy ending.

With this last tableau, I embrace the predictable happy ending. Walt Disney has institutionalized several fairy tales with this method. Additionally, these animated movies shaped many tales visually in the same way the Brothers Grimm have done so in

literature. The fact that Red Riding Hood's popularity is not rooted in the Disney machine makes film animation an interesting way to conclude the exhibit.

The tableau is both an end and a beginning. Red walks away, which indicates a journey to come. The animation is presented in its process phase because Red's story is always re-written. The hand-drawn, colorless drawing keeps our protagonist from being associated with any one gender or race. The single frame acts as an index to the position my exhibit has within the larger Red-Riding-Hood universe. It presents one still from the thousands of images used to create an animated movie because my retelling is one of the countless versions of the tale. As an illustration, it stands on its own. Nevertheless, it attains its full meaning because it is in conversation with every other depiction and analysis of the story.

How do I present this story?

I was interested early on in playing with how much I told my audience about the project. Because the exhibit was staged at the University of Texas at Austin's Theatre and Dance Department, many people were already aware of the subject matter I was investigating. I wanted to allow the spectators to come into the project with an understanding that varied from one person to another. This led me to reduce the number of direct references to Red Riding Hood in the presentation material. The title, *Of Course, What Did You Expect, My Child?*, came from this desire to bring the viewers into a fairy-tale realm without indicating which story they would encounter. This also affected the directions I gave the graphic designer for the poster. I wanted to play with elements of wolf-ness, and reduce Red's presence outside the tableaux. It was also important for me to reference the eyes of the wolf in the presentation material, to point to the implicit role the spectator's gaze plays within the experience of the piece. I chose to add a simple quote at the entrance to help guide the visitors further. I used "Every society, and every age, produced its own version of the same tales (Connolly 343)" by the Grimm Brothers because it summarizes well the essence of the project. Quoting the Grimms also acted as a signifier because the authors' names are closely linked to fairy tales.

Because I purposefully chose to retell the fairy tale in a series of sequential tableaux, I felt the exhibit should present the story in a linear fashion. However, we rarely encounter the stories in this manner when fairy tales are presented in non-literary forms. I finally opted to show the artifacts in a circle. I placed the entry into it at the point where

the first and last tableaux met and let the viewers wander freely. I discovered few people experienced the eleven scenes in their intended consecutive order, or at least rarely on the first visit. I am confident this reflects the way we encounter *The Little Red Riding Hood* outside of its textual version, and I was happy to discover this was reflected in the overall presentation.

In the end...

The act of retelling is one with which we all engage. As a visual artist working in performance, I am often presenting viewers with new versions of stories they already know. With the exhibit, I could control what Donald Haase calls the context of reception: the different manifestations of the fairy tale were presented in a controlled environment, and the non-explicit presentation implied gaps needed to be filled (Haas 396). Fairy tales have been reclaimed by the cultural industry, thus altering or influencing the way they are interpreted and subconsciously understood by everyone. Through my retelling, I claimed ownership of the narrative and positioned myself within Red Riding Hood's cultural landscape.

I was surprised to see visitors identify very differently with each tableau. In certain cases, this reaction came from a place of memory. For example, some viewers were delighted to remember the time they played with paper dolls. Alternatively, numerous people were drawn to a tableau because of its use to convey the familiar scene differently from the narrative. Some were fascinated by the door and surprised to be placed in the position of the performer. Others enjoyed the many facets of the Wolf presented in the stacking dolls because it altered the way they usually encounter the violent moment Red is eaten. I believe I was able to help my audience reclaim ownership on this familiar story and subvert some of the direct associations people make when Red is presented outside literature. As Haase discussed:

By experiencing a wide variety of tales, [the audience] can view the stories of the classical canon in new contexts. By actively selecting, discussing, enacting, illustrating, adapting, and retelling the tales they experience, both adults and children can assert their own proprietary rights to meaning (Haase 399).

Furthermore, by using different visual formats, I experimented with Roland Barthes' idea of work that enables the reader to take an active role in defining the meaning of the text (Barthes 4). In the end, I achieved a complete retelling of the fairy tale through a writerly text. The limited explicit directions regarding how one was to experience the exhibit did not allow every member of my audience to encounter the tale in the traditional linear manner stories are told. However, I enabled the viewer to actively assess each vignette and to attribute meaning to the moments through their own experience. We became co-authors of the piece. In turn, this positioned the viewers and myself within the ongoing intertextual conversations around *The Red Riding Hood*, fairy tales, and storytelling.

Appendix A: Tableaux Pictures

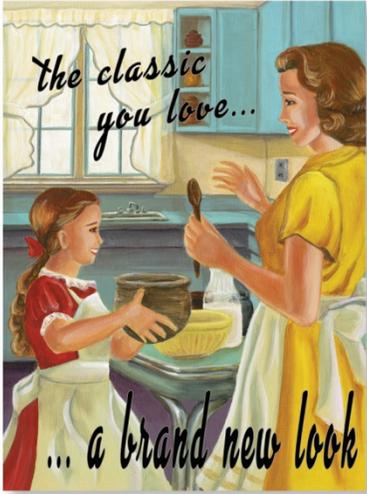


Tableau 1 – Advertisement: Red and Mother prepare the basket.



Tableau 2 – Photography: Red leaves the house.



Tableau 3 – Cinema: Red is lost in the woods



Tableau 4 – Fashion editorial: Red meets Wolf



Tableau 5 – Instagram: Red wanders off the path.



Tableau 6 – Halloween: Wolf disguises as Grandma.



Tableau 7 – Paper dolls: Red undresses.



Tableau 8 – Toys: Red and Wolf in bed.



Tableau 9 – Stacking dolls: Wolf eats Red.

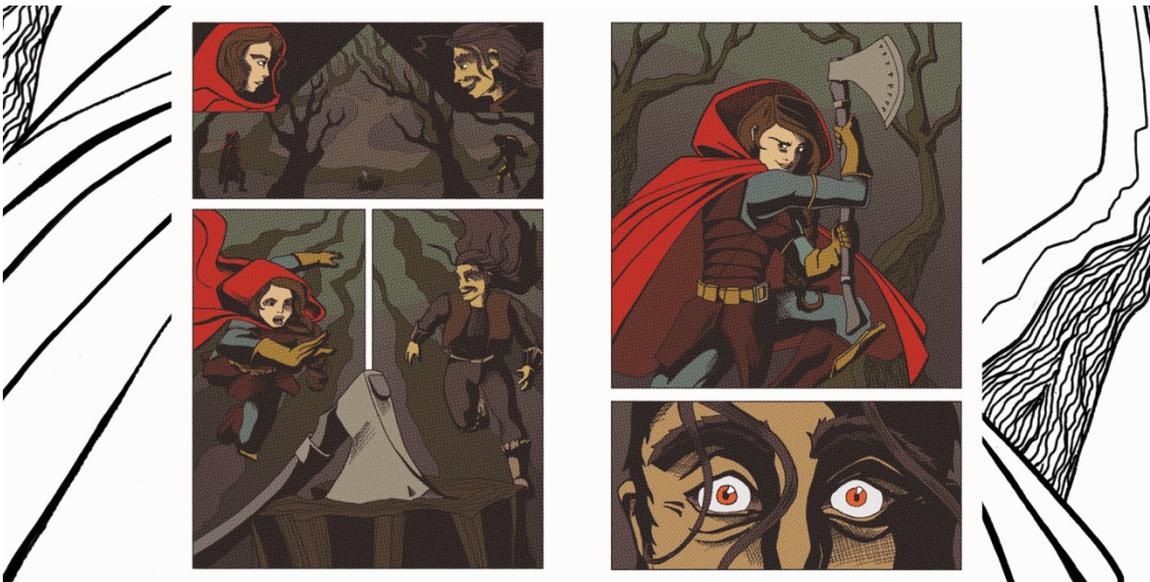


Tableau 10 – Comic books: Red frees herself.



Tableau 11 – Film animation: Red’s happy ending.

Appendix B: Exhibit Pictures



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