



# Unflattening

*Nick Sousanis*

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The primacy of words over images has deep roots in Western culture. But what if the two are inextricably linked, equal partners in meaning-making? Written and drawn entirely as comics, *Unflattening* is an experiment in visual thinking. Nick Sousanis defies conventional forms of scholarly discourse to offer readers both a stunning work of graphic art and a serious inquiry into the ways humans construct knowledge.

*Unflattening* is an insurrection against the fixed viewpoint. Weaving together diverse ways of seeing drawn from science, philosophy, art, literature, and mythology, it uses the collage-like capacity of comics to show that perception is always an active process of incorporating and reevaluating different vantage points. While its vibrant, constantly morphing images occasionally serve as illustrations of text, they more often connect in nonlinear fashion to other visual references throughout the book. They become allusions, allegories, and motifs, pitting realism against abstraction and making us aware that more meets the eye than is presented on the page.

In its graphic innovations and restless shape-shifting, *Unflattening* is meant to counteract the type of narrow, rigid thinking that Sousanis calls “flatness.” Just as the two-dimensional inhabitants of Edwin A. Abbott’s novella *Flatland* could not fathom the concept of “upwards,” Sousanis says, we are often unable to see past the boundaries of our current frame of mind. Fusing words and images to produce new forms of knowledge, *Unflattening* teaches us how to access modes of understanding beyond what we normally apprehend.

## Unflattening Details

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## From Reader Review Unflattening for online ebook

### Brent says

A though provoking exploration of different modes of perception as well as the complementary roles of text and illustration.

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### Paul Bryant says

The artwork & design of this big graphic work is

#### FIVE STARS

Great stuff, every page different, you never know what's coming next.

The TEXT of this book is.... so sorry... a big fat

#### ONE STAR

And therefore – here is a book impossible to rate.

I get that this is a philosophical dissertation and not no normal graphic novel, but to call it philosophical is an insult to Plato and his little argumentative friends because it's patronizing eyewash mostly, of the sort I might expect to read in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead For Under Twelves*. Let's just grab a few quotes to see if you agree:

*Lakoff and Johnson and Nunez say that our fundamental concepts do not spring from the realm of pure, disembodied reason but are grounded in our seeing and being in the world. That is, through our everyday perceptual and bodily activities we form dynamic image-like structures that enable us to organize and make sense of our experience.*

Well, hard to argue that Lakoff and Johnson and Nunez are wrong there. I don't think we need those guys to tell us that. But I really don't care. Sentences like those are like pouring wallpaper paste into your ear hole. You feel your brain clogging. Let's try another chapter

*To surpass our limits we built structures – giving our ideas solid form. These structures, in turn, shaped us*

And drone drone drone. Far as I could see (and I of course am blinkered by my monocular monocle, if only I could see through the fins of a basking shark) this whole thesis thing was summed up by William Blake in the 18th century

*“How do you know but every Bird that cuts the airy way,  
Is an immense world of delight, closed by your senses five?”*

I guess the answer is... well, you don't.... UNTIL YOU TAKE SOME GOOD ACID. Then you do. Let's try a third dip into the ongushing insight tsunami that is *Unflattening* :

*To set ourselves free we can't simply cut our bonds for to remove them (if only we could) would only set us*

*adrift, detached from the very things that make us who we are. ... It is hard to define where we begin and end – we are not static or finished for we emerge from the interaction of forces in motion – an association of vectors*

Who is this “we”? We this, we that, on every page. He sounds like hypnosis tape to help you quit smoking.

*We find ourselves floating free of our previous self, we have left all cigarettes behind now, they look like little white twigs a thousand miles below..... goodbye little cigarettes...*

*It's not a process of closing, being finished... oh please, spare me any more Mr Sousanis ... rather each new engagement generates another vantage point from which to continue the process anew.... No more, can't take no more...a distance between always remains, spaces for the unknown, openings for the imagination to spill into...*

[sound of reviewer crumpling to the ground]

*...incompleteness reveals that there is always more to discover*

*... you have to find it for yourselves...*

*... stars.... birds*

*shoe sizes*

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## **John Pistelli says**

*The pseudo-poet who writes his thesis in poetry is a pitiful writer (and probably a bad poet). From Dante to Eliot and from Eliot to Sanguineti, when avant-garde poets wanted to talk about their poetry, they wrote in clear prose.*

—Umberto Eco (qtd. here)

This book became famous before it was published, as it is the first doctoral dissertation done in comics form. *Unflattening* is based on a great idea, one implicit in several of the most important comics and graphic novels of the last few decades (Moore's *Watchmen* and *From Hell*, Morrison's *The Invisibles* and *The Filth*, Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*, Bechdel's *Fun Home*, McGuire's *Here*) and explicit in McCloud's *Understanding Comics*: namely, that comics is or ought to be the major art form of our time because its spatialization of time and its mutual imbrication of word and image promise to heal the rift opened by western modernity between abstract thought and concrete experience. By making a unity of text and image, of space and time, comics undoes the modern antimony that separates the known from the felt.

But the strength of this idea as presented in *Understanding Comics* comes from McCloud's grounding in the history of the arts in general and comics in particular (McCloud, by the way, provided a blurb for *Unflattening*). Ironically, *Understanding Comics* reads like a far more legitimate dissertation, in its painstaking historical awareness and its subtle extension of its comics-specific thesis to culture at large. Sousanis is, by contrast, all over the place, making enormous and extremely tendentious claims about how modern society has stunted human potential (we are all "standardized," "shades, insubstantial and without agency"), claims that go on, illustrated with ridiculous melodrama by pictures of people being produced on assembly lines and the like, for about 20 pages with scarcely any corroboration beyond some lines from

Marcuse and with no qualification, despite some obvious objections (for one, does not social media and pop culture constantly invite us to express our individuality? Sousanis writes as if were 1952). As I read, I began to understand why dissertations-in-comics-form might be discouraged!

Following this simplistic beginning, Sousanis's treatise does become more persuasive as he discusses the negotiated quality of human perception: we all have two eyes that together produce an image, and moreover, we see only small aspects of anything at one time, aspects that our brain provisionally and contingently builds into wholes. Consequently, our culture should adjust to this nimbleness and complexity of perception rather than forcing standardization of all sorts on us. When the argument is stated at this level of generality, I suppose I agree, though I also note that fairly rigid and hierarchical societies produced some splendid monuments, just as the standardized scientific worldview Sousanis decries has enabled him (and me and you) to live in comfort and safety beyond the dreams of ancient monarchs. Despite Sousanis's universalism and multiculturalism in this book, he essentially endorses the conventional ideology of the postmodern west, even introducing as his foils the usual villains of postmodern thought, the idealists Plato and Descartes.

Sousanis builds his thesis with examples, illustrations, and corroboration from a large number of domains, from astronomy to philosophy to anthropology to design to cognitive science. He never dwells on any idea long enough to evaluate its complexity or even its compatibility with any other idea he cites. Frankly, he would need a lot more words and a lot fewer images to do so, which, again, is why comics may be good for some things—narrative or lyric, say—and not for others—such as academic argumentation. To stay with only what I know, it is a falsification to quote or cite philosophers who are at odds with each other over first principles as if they were all, at bottom, saying the same thing, as Sousanis does with Adorno and Deleuze; it is an oversimplification that testifies against Sousanis's own thesis, because he is asking image-and-text to do fundamentally, inescapably *textual* work. And this is without mentioning the book's crypto-Buddhism, never explained or defended; Buddha appears as an image of the reconciliation of opposites that will put the Humpty-Dumpty modern subject back together again, and yet this is never integrated into the argument, nor is its divergence from other elements of the argument ever addressed.

Moreover, while Sousanis's drawing is functional and often—as when he does pastiche—amusing, it is largely inexpressive and, design-wise, complicated for complication's sake (as if to say, "Look what comics can do!") without adding much conceptually. Often, in another instance of inadvertent counter-testimony to his own argument, his rather (forgive me) flat artwork has the effect of illustration in a scientific textbook, a pictorial genre which has existed for a long time and which required no emancipatory perceptual revolution to come into being.

Finally, too much of *Unflattening* is simply platitudinous, as here:

Sousanis's composition, his skill with leading the reader's eye around the page, is impeccable and one of the book's strengths, but the book's overall faults are encapsulated on this page. Sousanis provides the fairly standard rhetoric of progressive education (the wisdom of which, speaking as a person educated rather rigidly by nuns, whose severe inculcation of fact and value has actually served me well, I tend to question); he does not even express it verbally with the grand poetry of its ultimate sources in the literature of American critical optimism, such as Emerson and Thoreau, and he illustrates it with exemplary pop culture figures that bring few ideas along with them, and merely serve as a cutesy flourish.

To end with a positive observation: as I noted, Sousanis's degree was conferred by Columbia Teacher's College, and I could easily imagine *Unflattening* as a pedagogical text for high school students or first-year college students in composition, literature, philosophy, or the arts. Precisely the qualities that make it inadequate as a philosophical or historical argument would probably allow it to serve well as an introduction to a broad range of ideas to students, and it probably speaks to their own frustrations in dealing with

academic institutions, which, for reasons not totally bad or avoidable, answer to the charges Sousanis too hastily flings at western society as a whole.

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### **Jimmy Ele says**

"This was a very interesting read" (strokes beard whilst wistfully looking off into the abyss of thought).

Continues to speak: "The premise of this book is to argue that comics are a superior form of communication."

pauses to clear throat: 'cough' "The author argues that people see things in a very narrow way. He likens most people's views to the characters of the dimensional odyssey "Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions".

Slaps at a mosquito that has decided to land on his cashmere sweater: "SLAP!".....continues: "It is a well constructed comic book which intends to broaden the view while at the same time joining the pictorial as well as written word modes of communication."

Gets up from his rocking chair near the fireplace, opens up a door in space-time and steps out into another dimension, we follow him.

"I could have told the author that he is 100% correct without the aid of comics."

Flies off into a higher dimension, never to be seen again. Leaves behind this review. 5 stars.

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### **Kim says**

Deploying the comics form was a brilliant choice.

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### **Andrew says**

2015 has been a pretty awesome year for comics. But this has got to be the most surprising release. A major university publishing a comic book? What's not to love? Now I can justify my comic obsession to my family!

Through the medium of comics Sousanis explores all of reality and our perception it (and communication of that perception).

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### **Tom LA says**

"Unflattening" is an "experiment in visual thinking". A scholarly discourse through the form of comics. How

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unique.

The author, Nick Sousanis, earned his Ph.D. in interdisciplinary studies last year from Teachers College Columbia University, where he produced his dissertation entirely in comics form.

Harvard University Press decided to publish the dissertation as a book, the first time the press has printed a comic. This in itself can explain why the content of the book is not as exciting as the concept itself of writing a PhD dissertation using comics.

I have to admit, I absolutely loved the concept, but I didn't enjoy the book as much as I was hoping to, and I didn't find it as stimulating as I thought it would be.

Overall, Sousanis argues in defense of multiple perspectives on reality and the power of visual literacy: "For centuries, words have been considered the superior currency of intellect. So much so that our reliance on the written word, like any other kind of dominant perspective, is so pervasive that we don't even realize our role in perpetuating it", he argues.

Question: is this really a "dominant perspective" that we all follow sheepishly, or is it rather an evolutionary achievement driven by the practical need to find the most effective and articulate mean of communication?

But beyond that point, if you only look at today, you'll see that a big part of the western world has already evolved, or it is moving on from the limitations of the written word, by embracing a mix of words and images. Many people use their mobile devices more than they read books. Emojis. Or look at the Kahn academy, at all the new approaches to teaching, the youtube-spin-off educational tools, and any type of internet-based graphic-related serious study.

So this is where I have my first issue with this work: within the academic world, the concept of a dissertation in comics might be very exciting, because these is a comic about being made of comics instead of words. But outside of the academic world, is this really so ground-breaking?

Ok: a university dissertation should not necessarily and strictly be a thing made only of words. That is a thing of the stuffy, rigid past. Images, drawings and comics can be widely used to express complex arguments of philosophy, science, religion, whatever else. I agree with the author.

Unfortunately, though, I really do not care about this, and more importantly, not one of the ideas presented in the book was new or even slightly original.

Second issue: I think the dissertation should have been better argued, the concept conveyed with stronger arguments. It's great that someone is thinking about shaking things up a bit in the world of dissertations, but let's not forget that this is still, ultimately, a doctoral dissertation, and as such, I was expecting much stronger and stimulating arguments.

Instead, I found the content of the dissertation itself actually pretty weak and vague. Is it maybe my snobbish-European-who-studied-philosophy point of view? Maybe. But Sousanis doesn't go much further in his argument than saying that everthing can be seen from different perspectives, and that "people" (never contextualized, never specified who or where) see things in a flat way, never stepping out of their habitual way of thinking, and doing things "just because they've always been doing them this way".

He hammers on this simple, commonsensical concept for more than two thirds of the book, using different metaphors and examples to repeat the same thing over and over.

These metaphors are conveyed with negative, bleak, pessimistic drawings, as if this lack of out-of-the-box,

ever-evolving imagination was a social disease instead of an absolutely normal aspect of being a well-adjusted homo sapiens.

The main problem of the author's view is that keeping a steady point of view, albeit rigid and illusory, is a very healthy thing that a human being can do. People who question their assumptions less than others live happier and more comfortable lives, this is just a fact. Evolution has set things up so that only a few people need to make the effort to look beyond the limits of their usual point of view, and provide new ideas, inspiration, new points of view. Not the majority. Because being like that is painful. It's generally the outliers who come up with the best ideas. But here is the thing: either you are, or you are not. A book, in prose or graphic novel format, is not going to change anything at all.

So why argue this point? Just to make an over-long introduction to the real point, which is "comics can communicate as well as words or even better sometimes, even in dissertations like this one?"

It's surprising that this "real" point is very thinly argued. The argument, I gather, is supposed to be the book itself. But to say that using different points of view is a good thing is not the most cogent and logical argument to prove that using comics in a doctoral dissertation can be useful. That is too broad, weak, just not enough.

Yes, there is also a good section about the value of drawings and comics in general, but there are many other arguments that the author could have explored but didn't... for example, proofs that in different cultures the value of images vs. words changes, and that in many cultures visual literacy was/is higher than in ours, with successful results. What about the power of ideograms? What about the neurobiology of language?

Only one time the book touches on something strong and useful to the core argument, that the author should have expanded on much more, but didn't, and that is the presence of visual literacy and visual communication in other cultures (i.e. pacific islanders maps).

Had he found more examples like that, he could have made his argument stronger, but no, the book ends a few pages later, offering yet another couple of metaphors about, again, how we need to shift our points of view!!

So in the end, the irony is that this book seems to prove that the comics form, although very powerful, is NOT as good as the literary form as a mean to convey arguments and to write a scholarly dissertation, because it lacks the higher level of articulation that can be achieved through words.

One might come to that conclusion after reading this book. However, I disagree. I believe comics have an immense power and can communicate even the most nuanced ideas. Just not this one.

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A couple of things I really liked:

- the visualization of "the strings stay on" at page 135
- the visualization of "understanding is grasping", page 78
- p. 90, disconnected static snapshots
- the author's clear love for comics

Finally, an important note about page 14: here we find a vague "good old days" narrative that goes like this:

"This creature [man], who once [when?? In Da Vinci's times??] attempted to define the universe through its own proportions, now finds itself confined, boxed into bubbles of its own making.... What had first opened

its eyes wide, darting, dancing, has now become shuttered, its vision narrowed".

In other words: we used to be able to think with an open mind, look for example at Humanism, but now we are not anymore, and everything is shit because of that. Whether you tell me this in words or in comics, I'm sorry but this one is SO weak. Do you realize that not even 1 % of the European population studied or cared about philosophy in Da Vinci's times? By quoting Da Vinci, you are actually proving the opposite point, that it's always been the outliers who brought truly original thinking. In every age, like today, there have been a majority of people thinking in a uniform lazy-standardized way, and a few people who thought in new, original ways. There wasn't a golden time when "people used to be all so open-minded". There just wasn't. That is an incorrect academic abstraction.

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## David Schaafsma says

Full disclosure: Nick Sousanis is one co-author of my book, Narrative Inquiry. At the time he was a doctoral student of another co-author, Ruth Vinz, at Teachers College, Columbia University, where I had for five years worked with her. I don't really know Nick at all, though we had a few brief exchanges in the publication process, through Ruth, knowing him, was the primary one to work with him. I did check out some of his online work, and liked it a lot, and he sent me some samples of some of the things he was doing in his doctoral work, including a short biography of educational philosopher Maxine Greene.

In the process of his developing the piece for Narrative Inquiry, I mainly just cheered. His contribution was unique in an academic publication about research methodology, in that it was done as a comic. I liked it a lot, and in the most enthusiastic responses to the book, it is the part of the book readers most like. No surprise. It's an example of narrative thinking in visual or graphic or comics form.

I basically begged to be on Nick's dissertation committee, but I was as it turns out pretty far down a long line of people willing/eager to serve as part of the process of the FIRST COMICS DISSERTATION EVER. That's right, this is a dissertation completely in comics form! And it makes an argument for multiplicity of perspectives, including, of course, visual perspectives, and intersecting and simultaneous visual and verbal perspectives, or comics. It's a demonstration and an argument for art as visual thinking. It's against a flat earth view of anything. And both tells and shows why.

So there are many works that make the case for comics, including Scott McCloud, Jessica Abel, whom he cites, and there are many philosophers making the case for ways of seeing, many of whom he cites. What contribution to the world of ideas does this make? Well, as many Goodreads reviewers of comics have observed, there is little here that is surprising or new in the conception. Its main contribution is in the demonstration, in the achievement of an experiment in visual thinking (ala McCloud's Understanding Comics) by a philosopher of education. A talented artist and thinker shapes it, and we are fortunate to have it, and to have it pave the way for more complex visual work in scholarship.

I perused some of the other Goodreads reviews; some of them find it a touch dry and pedantic and humorless, vs. most comics. Well, it's scholarship, published by none other than Harvard University Press, which has a stuffy reputation. So it's a good thing, this breakthrough for a major university press. If you are not an academic, would you care to read it, or care if a dissertation was in comics form, or would you want to read a comics dissertation? I dunno. I am a scholar, in addition to being a rabid comics fan of a range of stuff from art comics to superhero comics, and I liked it, was excited to see it, and will use it in comics classes I'll teach in the future. Check it out for yourself and see!

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## **Migl? says**

This is a dissertation written in the form of comics - I hope there will be more and I hope they will be better than this one.

The text seemed so basic and the images so Banksy - I mean, same-looking people going into the identical slots, because they're prisoners of their single perspective? References to other authors were ok, but I felt they were poorly developed. The main idea of the dissertation is that other perspectives broaden our mind, but it fell flat.

One star added for the idea of dissertation in comics and the creative use of panels, but it just wasn't a good or interesting read for me and some imagery made me roll my eyes.

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## **Derek Royal says**

I very much enjoyed this book, especially the first half. Sousanis sets the stage in the first three sections of the book, using Abbott's Flatlands as a springboard and presenting a condensed history of scientific/philosophical ways of looking at the world. But then in the last half, he seems to elaborate on his earlier thoughts without much progress or moving forward with his argument. When I was reading the first half, it hit me that this would be a wonderful text to use in a college course on the history of science, philosophy, or the like. Comics studies could even benefit from chapter three, "The Shape of our Thoughts," in that Sousanis links his earlier arguments on multimodal and alternative ways of experiencing the world to the comics medium. But then after this section -- basically, the second half of the essay -- the argument stagnates. In this last half Sousanis continues to make good points, but the last several sections read more as retreads or elaborations on the earlier arguments.

The strongest parts of this text is its art. Sousanis does a beautiful job of representing his thoughts in visual form. Indeed, one of the most notable aspects of Unflattening is its ability to express expository points in comics form, much as Scott McCloud does in Understanding Comics (it's a very similar kind of text). Another notable facet of the book -- maybe even its most educationally/culturally significant aspect -- is that it's the first (from what I can gather) example of a doctoral dissertation in comics form. What this might bode for future higher education is exciting.

Unflattening is getting a lot of positive press, and I think this is primarily because it's the first-ever text of its kind. And I would assume that most of the people giving unmitigated praise to it are those unfamiliar with comics as a medium, or if they are comics-friendly, they're only interested in the more alt or indie material. Maybe I'm wrong here. But I've yet to see criticism of this book on grounds of coherency of argument, fresh and sustainable rhetoric, or the like. Everything seems to have focused on the book's newness and difference. That's to be expected, I guess.

This is one of those books that warrants multiple readings, and perhaps my critique -- I wouldn't call them "criticisms," at least not in the negative sense -- would be different, or at least tempered, after several different readings.

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## **Zioluc says**

Unflattening è un saggio di dottorato in forma di fumetto pubblicato dalla Harvard University Press, e qui finisce tutto l'interesse del testo.

La tesi principale - e praticamente l'unica presente, dato che è ripetuta in modo sfiancante e contorto - è che "la gente" (?) è schiava dell'espressione verbale, mentre dovrebbe invece "alzare la testa" usando parole e immagini combinate (già: il fumetto) per adottare un punto di vista più libero e valido, o meglio ancora più punti di vista.

Un contenuto che, da lettore assiduo di fumetti, trovo assai poco innovativo e stimolante, mentre i disegni sono tra il passabile e il decisamente brutto ma soprattutto testo e immagine non si legano quasi mai tra loro. Le parole sono spezzettate in innumerevoli riquadri che si dispongono sulla pagina assieme a immagini che o le illustrano pedestremente o le abbelliscono infiorettandole con riferimenti visivi che però appesantiscono solo la decifrazione della pagina.

E' ironico che Sousanis citi più volte Calvino nella lezione americana sulla leggerezza e Scott McCloud nel suo magistrale *Understanding comics*: perché quelli sì sono testi in cui il lettore sente il cervello sciogliersi per contemplare per qualche attimo il mondo da nuovi punti di vista.

Vendo la mia copia a metà prezzo :P

[update: l'ho regalata alla biblioteca]

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## Pat says

Disappointing. I read the NYT book review and I was so curious that I immediately ordered the book. A philosophy thesis written as a graphic novel, published by Harvard!? What could be better.

Certainly, I give it an A for effort. The ideas were so simplified that they made me sleepy. I guess, though that I am being bitchy because I really did not like the drawings. I am a huge fan of graphic novels. This one would have benefited from cheating (finding a collaborator to do the drawings and spending more time on the ideas).

The few pages at the back that are the original map for the book are beautiful and brilliant. Too bad they are not bigger and legible. It would really interest me to follow the conception process.

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## Seth T. says

In one of my favourite moments in Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening*, he postulates (by way of citation) that we should consider argumentation as a dance. Rather than as a battle, with the requisite victors and losers, mounting casualties, and abiding sense of aggression, we should look at argument as an evolving cooperative effort. Two sides—two people—with their oppositional stances (in that they stand opposite each other) collaborating in a joined back-and-forth. Together, the participants artfully maneuver and through their conjunction arrive at new places, even if often remaining at distinction from each other. It's a beautiful picture and I don't think I'll ever wish to see argument as combat ever again. So: it is in my infatuation with the dancers' image that I approached Sousanis' own argument.

*Unflattening* is a thick work. If you don't count the pages and pages of end notes and bibliography, the book might seem a bit lean at a slim 152 pages. But the pages are large and they are full—not just packed with words and with images, but with ideas. This is, after all, Sousanis' dissertation,[1] so some sort of thought project *must* lurk within. I needed enough time with his discussion that I read it once myself, then had my wife read it to me in the car so I could (blasphemy!) focus on the words without the pictures getting in the way.[2]

Honestly, I'm not perfectly sure how to approach *Unflattening*: as a critic or as a reviewer?[3] On the one hand, the most interesting discussion of Sousanis' book and its ideas can only be written of from the critic's view. On the other hand, I suspect that few have yet picked up *Unflattening*, and so any discussion of its arguments would sit in a vacuum. Dead weight waiting for some moment when a future reader of the book accidentally trips across the critique and, really, how likely is that? So review it is. But how do I review a book that is essentially an extended argument for ways of seeing?

Reiterating from above, I honestly don't know.

*Unflattening* begins with an apocalyptic[4] claim that we are something of a doomed society of people labouring under the illusion of free thought. That is the problem Sousanis seeks to solve. He compares the combined human experience to that of the flatlanders of Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* (a book I haven't read in twenty years but for which I still hold a remnant appreciation), a people who only see and conceive in two dimensions, only able to experience depth through circumstantial evidence and who have no sense of height at all. Of course we in the three-dimensional world are able to perceive these things with ease but would scarcely be able to explain them to a flatlander without sounding either mad or unintelligible—or perhaps just resembling a wild fantasist (maybe a hokey sci-fi author). Sousanis, as Abbot before him, suggests that we are like flatlanders and require unflattening in order to understand the world in ways that would approach *The Way Things Really Are*.

Sousanis' solution (by my reading) seems to require in many ways a kind of mundane *deus ex machina*. He doesn't ask for a divine injection of new ideas, but he does propose that in our ties and bonds to the rest of human society we find a constant injection of new points of sight by which we might escape the ruts of perspective we travel daily. (That's a deeply simplified version of 152 pages of more nuanced discussion.) And while I don't think Sousanis' proposal escapes the dire problem set forth in his introduction, there really is something beautiful and testable in it.

Willard Quine, from what I understand, suggested something similar. According to a holiday discussion I had with a friend fifteen years ago, Quine described a person's core body of knowledge as a web in which everything more or less connects.[5] New information is acquired and woven into the web in ways that fit with preexisting beliefs. Occasionally, new information is obtained that cannot fit with the web. These recalcitrant experiences act as stones thrown through the web, collapsing portions of it entirely. The web of belief and understanding then must be rewoven in a fresh way to account for the recalcitrant experience. (I actually describe in my *Footnotes In Gaza* review how Joe Sacco's earlier book, *Palestine*, was the recalcitrant experience that instigated my own reconception of the Israel/Palestine problem.) This possibly Quinian explanation of the acquisition of new perspective fits well with what I think Sousanis is seeking to do with *Unflattening*.

For the most part, Sousanis makes good use of the form and presents a lot of good ideas bolstered with a lot of good pictures. One or two of his examples ended up falling flat[6] for me, but those're kind of just drop-in-the-bucket complaints.

Earlier though, I did mention that I required a word-only read-through to get a better taste for Sousanis' argument. That makes it sound like the book is at least in some sense a failure to incorporate the combination of word and picture that usually makes comics such a rewarding and facile experience. And it's true that I didn't really become comfortable with my grasp of *Unflattening*'s argument until I divorced the book from its visuals.

But (!) even while I listened to my wife read Sousanis' words, the visuals he employed played across my mind's eye, reuniting with the words they were meant to pair with. The visuals so strongly inform the reading that the text is lesser without them.

I blame my own impatience and distractibility for my original struggle. Sousanis fills his pages with so much visual information that the text became disjointed for me on first reading. I would read a text bubble, then focus on the illustration or illustrations that inform the text, then move on to the next piece of text—and in the meantime, I'd found that the specifics of the prior text bubble had begun to blur. If I had focused less on the illustrations, I likely would have better grasped the pace of argument on my first read-through. Different readers are going to have a harder or easier time depending on their own attention spans and methods for engaging the comics form. I am visually dominant and my wife is verbally dominant. She, reading *Unflattening* aloud to me while we drove from place to place, had little difficulty tracking with Sousanis' flow. (She also has a better attention span than me, so there's that.)

And again, despite the fact that I required multiple reads to fully appreciate *Unflattening*, several of the word-picture combinations will reside in me for some time. The dance sequence with which I introduced this piece. A comparison of how we view a coastline vs how an ant would see the same. A page of nautical knots and rigging discussing liberty through bonds. An eye-tracking rendering of the Mona Lisa. These are a handful of moments in Sousanis' tapestry that touched me and affected me in, I hope, lasting ways.

*Unflattening*, as a doctoral dissertation (with its continuous use of citation and its existence not as narrative but as extended argument) is a deeply ambitious project. And probably even an almost entirely successful project. It's worthy of your time and its greatest value may be in discussion of its ideas with others. I recommend it to you and recommend (as the best reward for the use of your time) that you engage in the critics's work yourself.[7]

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[Review courtesy of Good Ok Bad.]

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### Footnotes

1) Or maybe a revision of that dissertation. I'm unclear on that—not that it really matters.

2) More on this in a bit.

3) For those who've never encountered the distinction, the reviewer discusses the value of a work with the idea of the consumer in mind. The reviewer encounters a book or a movie or an album and discusses, from their own subjective vantage, whether the thing is any good or not. The goal of this (and why people actually read reviewers) is twofold: 1) to help readers know whether or not a work is something they'd be likely to happily spend their money or time engaging; and almost more importantly, 2) to help readers understand

their own expenditure of money or time. Expanding on the second point briefly, if a person appreciated a work, they want to read reviews that confirm their own tastes. Likewise, if they hated a thing, they hope to read a reviewer excoriate that thing. There is little more satisfying than to read that someone you respect holds the same opinion as you on a work. And then, outside this main group are the undecided who are looking to have their own tastes clarified through the mediation of a second opinion.

So to review: reviewers speak to the consumerist aspect of whether a thing was good or not. The critic, on the other hand, may not be remotely concerned with whether a work was enjoyable or emotionally satisfying. The critic is most concerned with the work presented and how it sits in the stream of all works. The critic investigates the thing's influences and how it might influence. The critic is concerned with meaning, with how the technicalities of the craft work to express the book/movie/song's purpose. The critic isn't interested in telling you whether or not a thing is something you'll be happy to spend time or money on. Instead the critic wants to help you understand the thing under the presumption that you have *already* consumed it. The critic is therefore unconcerned with spoilers because they have in mind the idea that there is no reason someone would be able to engage actual criticism without having a working knowledge of the thing being criticized.

4) Apocalyptic in both the common sense as well as in the literal sense. Common in that there is end-of-the-world seriousness to Sousanis' opening conclusion that the entire population essentially "exists as no more than shades, insubstantial and without agency." Literal in that he means it as an apocalypse, an unveiling of what is, a pulling back of the curtain.

5) The Quine in my imagination here may actually be overestimating the degree to which the average person's knowledge and beliefs actually form a coherent whole.

6) Ar ar ar.

7) Or even better, in the company of likeminded readers, perhaps in a classroom or bookclub.

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## Forrest says

Sousanis' syncretic work, while not as paradigm-shifting as he likely hopes it will be, is still a fantastic example of what *can* be done with the comic/graphic form, which is sort of the whole point of the book: to point out the potential of the comic as philosophical map. It is a meta-example of itself, and it is very, very well done.

Here, text and image flows and flows intentionally, with both words and pictures pointing the way for readers - and see-ers - through a sometimes (and again, sometimes intentionally) meandering argument for the primacy of comics over mere texts. While much of the information is, or should be, covered in a college general education curriculum, Sousanis has a gentle, yet insistent way of directing one's eyes and thoughts along his pedagogical paths. I would love to see more involved texts constructed in this way, allowing the student to absorb the entirety of ideas through pictorial forms, then "crunching" the details through text. The two can work together, even in separate volumes.

This is not the most profound philosophical treatise I've read. Not by a long shot. But the arguments presented are "good enough". What's truly eye-opening here is the use of the graphic form as a sort of thought map. I can't think of another graphic novel that has done it better than this. When I read this book, I am inspired and want to leverage this carto-graphic technique, despite my meager skills as an artist. Well, that's what collaboration is for.

Anybody want to collaborate? I've got ideas; lots and lots of ideas. And I can draw on a napkin as well as the next guy. But don't ask me to draw on anything more permanent. I'm just not up for it.

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**Emma Sea says**

NTS: ordered

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