

INTERVIEW WITH NICK SOUSANIS^{*,**}

Renata Mancini^{*}**

- 1) *Unflattening*¹ gained notoriety for being a thesis in a comic book format that was endorsed by a prestigious institution. Originally published by Harvard University Press in 2015, it has won many important awards and has been translated into several languages. How do you summarize the proposal of *Unflattening* for those still unfamiliar with the work? Who are the readers of *Unflattening*?

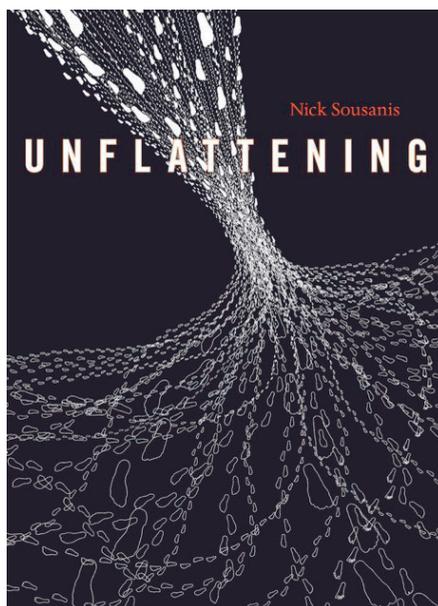
Unflattening is an argument for the visual (particularly comics) and other modes as legitimate forms of making meaning. It asks, through its form and its content, why should learning, assessment, and scholarship only be conducted in text? Why not include and bring these other ways of doing our thinking into our classrooms and our work? The argument proceeds entirely in visual and verbal metaphors – so more broadly it’s a push against considering things from a single perspective and instead draw on multiple ways of seeing to expand our understanding. Just as we see greater depth in having two eyes a distance apart, we can apply this to interdisciplinarity, to working in more than one modality at a time, to including images alongside text, and other ways of expanding the ways we see – and thus our ways of understanding.

* Interview conducted via e-mail by Renata Mancini (February 2019).

** Nick Sousanis is an Eisner-winning comics author and an assistant professor in Humanities & Liberal Studies at San Francisco State University, where he is starting an interdisciplinary Comics Studies program. He is the author of *Unflattening*, originally his doctoral dissertation, which he wrote and drew entirely in comics form. Published by Harvard University Press in 2015, *Unflattening* received the 2016 American Publishers Association Humanities award for Scholarly Excellence and the 2016 Lynd Ward prize for Best Graphic Novel. Sousanis’s comics have appeared in *Nature*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Columbia Magazine*. More at www.spinweaveandcut.com or [Tw @nsousanis](https://twitter.com/nsousanis).

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¹ Portuguese edition: *Desaplanar*, translation by Erico Assis (Veneta, 2017).

Figure 1 – Cover of *Unflattening*

Source: Copyright 2015 Nick Sousanis & Harvard University Press.

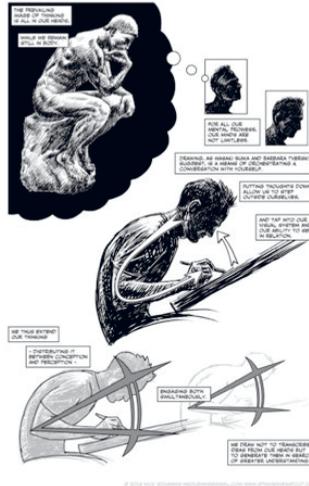
The readership is broad – as I’d hoped but not truly expected. It’s reached a general public interested in questions about thinking and is taught as an undergraduate common text, in interdisciplinary core classes, in high schools where student responses are projects rather than papers, in master’s research courses, in arts education courses, and comics studies, among others. I’ve seen it used in entrepreneurial contexts, in leadership situations, and design. My intent in leaving the meaning in metaphor, was that it would be open to a wide range of readers – they wouldn’t be kept out of the conversation by the language, and could apply the book to their own situation

- 2) In *Unflattening*, you argue that by releasing yourself from the linear structure inherent to words, new ways of thinking about the world are possible. Although your thesis relates to images in general, it is made in comics format, which you say is “an amphibious way of seeing and thinking” in that the visual and verbal are indissociably perceived in the final construction of meaning. Is this path of mixed reading, this amphibian perception, something that, in itself, opens new ways of perceiving the world?

I certainly think so, and I see it in my own work and in what my students create in working this way. Simply put, we are complex creatures, we are always making sense of our environment through our eyes and our bodies themselves. We’re good with language and words are absolutely important, but how can we bring those other ways of making meaning into the equation, rather than pretending they don’t matter – that thinking is just a conversation in our heads?

When we make marks on a surface, our visual system goes to work (as it always is doing) looking for relationships and we end up making connections we wouldn't see without putting this down in visual form. It's not by any means a denigration of text, only to say – if we include these other means, let's see what sorts of discoveries we might make that we couldn't have otherwise.

Figure 2 – Excerpt from *Unflattering*



Source: Copyright 2015 Nick Sousanis & Harvard University Press.

As part of my process, I make these sketchmaps on large sheets of newsprint – a mix of drawing and notes and arrows showing relationships as I see them (some are reproduced at the book of *Unflattering* and I frequently show them on my website). This becomes an extremely generative process where I'm always surprised by where the sketches lead me. So, it's important to see the sketches themselves not as representations of my thinking (like I simply drew a picture of what's going on in my head), but my thinking itself. It couldn't exist without the paper and the action of mark-making. Language, drawing, movement are all ways of leveraging our thinking. Using more than one tool to approach something I think necessarily allows us different glimpses into it, as a kind of self-collaboration.

- 3) Regarding the language of comics, would you accept the idea that there can be a continuous tension between text and image, a negotiation between verbal and visual vectors that establishes a dynamic of dominance (and occasional equivalence)?

Yes, the comics scholar Charles Hatfield describes comics as an art of tensions of many sorts, and I see that as quite so in how we create them and how we experience them – going back and forth between reading and looking, and constantly drawing connections between each. You're constantly switching how you are attending to the page – between word and image, between panel and

panel, and whole page and individual elements. I see this quite intently reading comics to my daughter the last few years from when she was around two to now almost five. Comics are difficult to read out loud, you have to point a lot to who's saying what, if there are sound effects or other things, it's unclear when to read them. The whole page is decoupled from a linear chain of reading and that means you really have to pay attention in a sophisticated way. So on one hand, comics can seem to be easier reading – fewer words, pictures to help you understand the words – and that's all true, but at the same time you have to keep negotiating these interconnections and making inferences back and forth between picture and words, and it's difficult work. My daughter has been a strong reader for almost a year now, and I attribute that a lot to our reading of comics together.

- 4) In your argument for a plurality of points of view and multiple perspectives, you seem to establish an equivalence between elements that, although in principle can be related to each other, are of different orders: on one hand, the relation between “self and other” and, on the other, the relationship between flat and multidimensional space. It seems that they are treated with the same status in the course of your reasoning. If so, would the notion of depth have anything to do with this parallelism?

I'm not sure I totally understand the question, but I'll say, one of my main points (and I use E.A. Abbott's *Flatland* to get at it) is that whatever perspective you have, however enlightened you may think it is, there's still more to go (this draws on American pragmatism). Just as A. Square's visits with the linelanders and the dot prepared him to understand a three-dimensional space that was beyond his current experience, what are the ways of understanding that escape us because we can't see them? I emphasize that the title of the book is *Unflattening* not “unflattened” – the “ed” ending indicates something finished. The “ing” points to something that is always in progress, we are always learning more to expand our understanding.

- 5) You have already announced a new project called “Nostos” as a continuation of *Unflattening*. What can we expect from this new project?

Well, if *Unflattening* was an argument for comics and other visual ways of working, then with *Nostos* (as it is currently called, that may change when it's finished) I intend to go further with that and think about how drawing and the movement of our bodies themselves are integral to our thinking. It very much comes out of my workshops and teaching that stem from *Unflattening*, where I get people (who typically describe themselves as non-drawers) to use drawing as a way of doing their thinking. This book won't be an instructional book, but I see it as a way of helping people understand that this is not about being an artist, but that by virtue of being human, we all can participate and use the things typically reserved for the arts as a means to do our thinking.

mate based on wealth etc., that's more what we mean by bringing in multiple perspectives, and that's where you generate better ideas. The Greeks knew over 2,000 years ago that the earth was round – and they figured it out by getting multiple viewpoints of observed phenomena.

Unflattening is most certainly not an argument for relativism – that all viewpoints matter equally. If people want to look to my book for anything, it should be the importance of working in more than one mode to ask your questions, looking for perspectives from people who aren't you, trying to include multiple voices in how we move forward – find ways to expand what we do...

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