

REVIEW

Unpacking *Unflattening*: A Conversation

Unflattening, Nick Sousanis, Harvard University Press, 208 pages,
164 pages of illustrations, April 2015, ISBN: 9780674744431

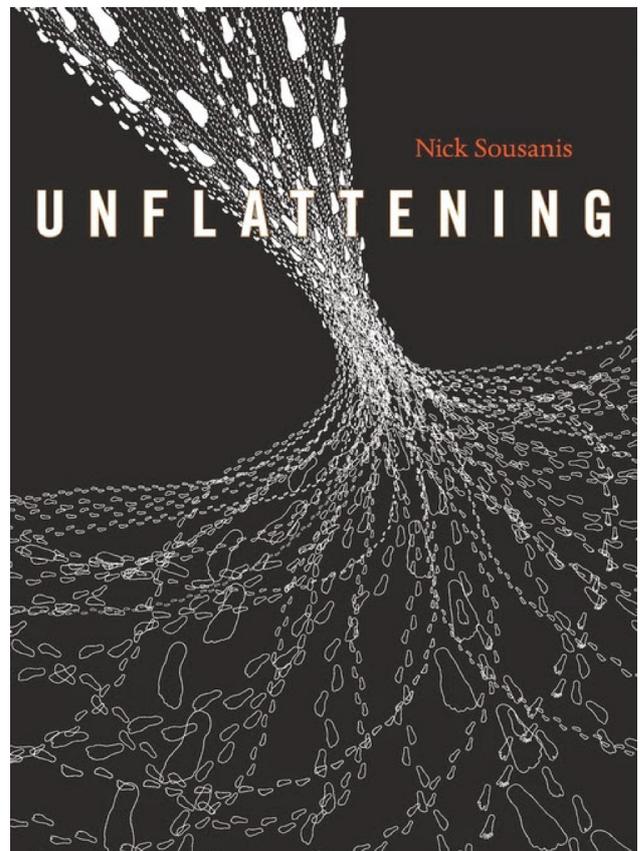
Damon Herd* and Peter Wilkins†

Unflattening (2015) is the first comic published by Harvard University Press. It is the book version of Nick Sousanis' PhD dissertation from Teachers College, Columbia University; a project that has commanded the attention of the comics scholarship community precisely because it is comics as scholarship. This is a collaborative book review in the form of a dialogue between two authors, with each of the reviewers asking the other questions about the book; it is an effort at "unflattening." In the responses, the reviewers have (wilfully?) misunderstood each other and deviated from the question as they pursue their lines of thought. *Unflattening* is provocative, and critical comments in the review are a result of Sousanis making us think and question. The reviewers hope that this project is not just a one-off, and that Sousanis and others continue to explore thinking through the multimodal medium of comics.

Keywords: multimodality; epistemology; perception; philosophy; Sousanis

Peter Wilkins (PW): What is the meaning of the title "*Unflattening*" and what does it say about the form of this book?

Damon Herd (DH): *Unflattening*, as I see it, is about expanding our way of thinking away from flat pages of text and emphasising "the importance of visual thinking in teaching and learning." Sousanis does this by drawing attention to single minded (or single sighted) views of the world, such as the lack of dimensions in Edwin A. Abbot's *Flatland* (1884). Sousanis then suggests that we expand our worldview by finding different perspectives, like Hermes flying into the sky on winged sandals. This metaphor works well and is expanded on by Sousanis throughout the book as he introduces Plato, Eratosthenes and Descartes, and their ways of interpreting the world around them. Leaving Plato's cave and seeing the world beyond the shadows on the wall is akin to Hermes taking flight. I'm not sure if this is intentional but the title also alludes to the process of 'flattening' in comic books. This is the first stage of colouring a comic, the process of blocking out areas before tone, shade and nuance can be added. Sousanis' book may be flat pages just like a book of text but he uses visual metaphors to explain his ideas and add nuance.



Book cover of *Unflattening*, by Nick Sousanis, published in April 2015 by Harvard University Press. Copyright © 2015 by The President and Fellows of Harvard College. Used by Permission. All rights reserved.

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DH: Do you see the book as being different to a text book (I actually meant ‘a book just containing text’ here but Peter read my ambiguity as ‘coursebook’ or ‘instruction manual’)? And are there any precedents for Sousanis way of working?

PW: I don’t think that *Unflattening* is a text book in the sense that it presents the key concepts of an accepted paradigm. Rather, it is attempting to establish a beach-head for a paradigm of using drawing (or looking at drawings) as a way of thinking that adds a dimension to thinking only with words. This strikes me as a bit strange because drawing is no more or less ‘flat’ than prose: both are 2D representations; in fact, we could see drawing as “flattening,” representing the three dimensional world in two dimensions. But Sousanis is less interested in technicalities here than in the idea that the more ways we can represent concepts the better. I also think that Sousanis is perhaps less interested in pitting multimodal expression against monomodal expression than he is in pitting expansive thinking against reductive thinking. A thinker can work in language alone and still not be a “flatlander.” At least I hope so.

That said, there are text book-like sections in *Unflattening*, such as the drawings that help explain parallax, that use images as explanatory devices to show rather than tell. But on the whole this is a polemical “essay comic” that uses some of the techniques of information comics of the kind that Ian Horton examines in magazines (2013), long discontinued I think, like *Look and Learn* and *World of Wonder*, that would teach kids how to train dogs or how a rocket works. The key difference is that Sousanis is less interested in simply demonstrating concepts than he is in exploring them, figuring them out. This exploration, and the fact that this book is a PhD dissertation made me wonder if the act of looking at drawings could ever equal the act of drawing them in terms of intellectual value. The speed ratio of how long it takes to draw comics compared to how long it takes to look at them is curious to me: the act of drawing is slow and reflective while the act of looking is generally quick and intuitive, at least in my experience. We could, of course, say the same thing about reading versus writing.

PW: How necessary do you think drawing is to Sousanis to making his point? Is he drawing because he can? Or because he must?

DH: I think drawing is essential to Sousanis making his point, and I think you are correct that the act of drawing is a different way of thinking than just looking at drawings. Perhaps, if using the book as a teaching tool, it would be useful to create a series of practical drawing exercises so that students could experience the ideas through their own creativity rather than just by reading; drawing what they see through each eye perhaps to emphasise the differences that help create parallax. The drawings that you mention explaining parallax help show how Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the world, and also introduce the simple icon of the eye which Sousanis braids through the book. At one point it represents a section of the Earth being measured by Eratosthenes; later it becomes the feedback loop of seeing and drawing, and

how it contributes to thinking “We draw not to transcribe ideas from our heads but to generate them in search of greater understanding.” At the end of the book the icon multiplies to illustrate the “accumulation of experience” and constant refreshing of our point of view which helps us unflatten the world and reminds us of “what it is to open our eyes to the world for the first time.”

On the final page, the last panel of the book is a ‘realistic’ sketched rendering of an eye, with several of the icons reflected in the pupil like a strand of DNA. Two pages earlier the page is strikingly designed in solid black with the thick white lines of the eye icon slashing through the panels. This page reminds me of *Rumble Strip* (2008), Woodrow Phoenix’s book which examines humanity’s relationship to the car without depicting any people in the book. I interviewed Phoenix last year for *Studies in Comics* journal and we briefly discussed whether he would consider doing a PhD (his latest book *She Lives* (2014) grew out of an MA project). He was reluctant to submit to the academic experience again (Herd 2014), but in many ways *Rumble Strip* is that project. Sousanis’ book may be the first PhD dissertation submitted in comic book form but it is not without antecedents – Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1994) being the most obvious.

DH: Does your question of whether Sousanis draws because he can or must betray your own thinking? Do you think that the book could exist as a text only book? What do you think drawing brings to the book?

PW: It does betray my thinking in the sense that I tend to be critical of arguments that portray one mode of thinking as “flat” in contrast to a different mode of thinking that is rich and three dimensional; such arguments tend to turn a technological choice (or limitation) into a moral one. The dystopia that opens the book is an example of this. The drawings depict a soul-less, identity-less education as standardization that thwarts creativity, critical thinking, and freedom. The opening of the book, both images and writing, solidifies, rather than unpacks, what I see as an overly simplistic opposition between flat and unflat, mechanical and organic. As I wrote in my answer to your first question, I believe that Sousanis is ultimately critiquing a mindset rather than a modality or technology of expression. Still, it is difficult in the book’s first chapter, along with the “Flatland” interlude, not to identify writing with flatness and comics with three-dimensional thinking. The opening *is* allegorical, though, so it’s possible to read comics as one of many modes that can unflatten thinking. What matters is how you think about something, not necessarily the means you use to express your thinking. The multimodality of comics does not guarantee unflattening, as lots of superhero examples illustrate.

I was intrigued with Sousanis’ depiction of standardization and mechanization as evils because it made me think of the printing press and how the way it mechanized and standardized type led to an explosion of human thought rather than the “contraction of possibilities” (6) that Sousanis identifies with mechanization and standardization. The faceless figures in rows on page 13, actually reminded me of interchangeable type (**Fig.1**).

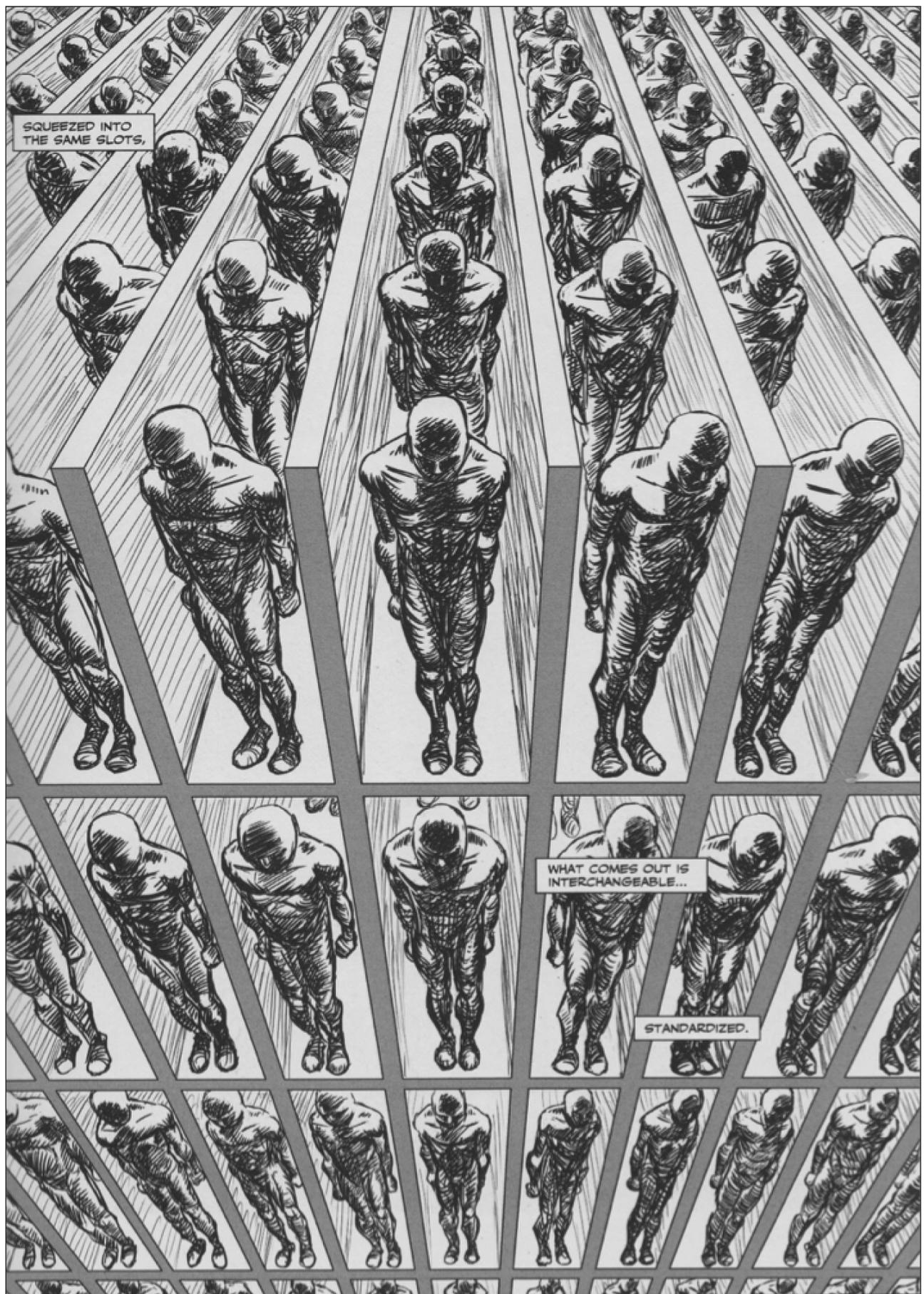


Figure 1: Sousanis 2015: 13. Image excerpted from *Unflattering*, by Nick Sousanis, published in April 2015 by Harvard University Press. Copyright © 2015 by The President and Fellows of Harvard College. Used by Permission. All rights reserved.

I've often wondered why multimodal expression, rather than simply writing, has not been more prominent in the history of ideas. My hunch is that the technology of reproducing writing was more efficient. Drawing is not standardized and takes (or has taken) more time to produce and reproduce, so it is in some ways more limiting to the generation and exchange of thought than writing for reasons of technology alone.

PW: How does *Unflattening* invoke your prior experience of reading comics? How does it conform to or deviate from that experience?

DH: I don't see *Unflattening* as deviating from my prior experience of reading comics, but I see comics as a fairly open field to play in; sculpture, site-specific installations, and performance can all be comics to me, they don't have to be images printed on a page or viewed on a screen. In that sense *Unflattening* is a more 'traditional' comic in that it is printed (although I have seen Sousanis' work with installations on his blog). I also see many connections to the work of Alan Moore in *Unflattening*, whether this is deliberate, coincidence, or just an example of the how embedded Moore's work in the comics reader's (this comics reader's) psyche I'm not sure. On page 44 Sousanis discusses how the closer we look at something the more detailed it becomes using the example of measuring coastlines – the smaller our ruler then the longer the coastline becomes. This was addressed in the fractal mathematics of Benoît Mandelbrot, who was famously an influence on Alan Moore's truncated potential masterwork *Big Numbers* (1990) (the book's initial title was *The Mandelbrot Set*).

On the very next page there is a panel depicting raindrops hitting the ground and causing ripples, an image repeated in *Unflattening* chapter 6 'Ruts'. This brings to mind the final page of Moore's Batman book *The Killing Joke* (1988) drawn by Brian Bolland, where Batman and the Joker share a joke then in the next panel they are gone and we only see the rain hitting the ground. The Moore book that *Unflattening* most called to mind though is *The Birth Caul* (1999), which started out as a performance piece and was later adapted into a comic by Eddie Campbell. An examination of his childhood, the book begins when Moore discovers his mother's birth caul (a thin membrane which occasionally covers the baby's head at birth) among her possessions after she dies. Some of the page layouts and 'sketchy' style drawings remind me a little of Campbell's work on the book. Also, *Unflattening* is dedicated to Sousanis' daughter who was born around the time of its completion, so it's perhaps no surprise that the book has themes of birth, renewal, and seeing things anew. The final chapter opens with a drawing of a baby's head with the phrase "we don't know who you are until you arrive, we don't know who you'll become until you've explored the possibilities." In some ways *Unflattening* is a manual for life for both Sousanis' daughter and for the reader, to help us be aware of the many different ways of seeing.

DH: Where do you see *Unflattening* sitting with comics and comics theory?

PW: While we have seen comics aspiring to become understood as literature ("The Graphic Novel") and

high(er) art for some time, it is a pleasure to read a comic that aspires to high theory. One of the things I find most appealing about the book is that it acts on arguments about the power of comics to help us learn, understand, and explore. The obvious reference point in terms of comics theory is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993). *Unflattening* shares its explanatory mode with that book, I think. But *Understanding Comics* has more of a first person narrative feel, exemplified by the use of a cartoon stand in for the author and speech bubbles in place of text boxes. *Unflattening* abounds in text boxes, devices we see less and less of in fictional comics as creators trust the images to do their work without textual explanation or support. Sousanis' text boxes float over the images to give the appearance of written essay on top and illustration beneath. Sousanis' pages are also dense and busy—not in a bad sense—just that there's a lot going on in them. No uniform panel structure establishes a rhythm. Of course that might represent the standardization and mechanization of comics. Sousanis is interested in more rhizomatic and fractal forms, so, in a way, the book is as much a critique of a certain way of constructing comics as it is of writing. Many comics creators approach their art by using constraints (see Simon Grennan's forthcoming *Dispossession* for a text where every page has defined structure and mode of presenting the material; it's all about the rules), whereas Sousanis is about unconstraining. It is very capital R Romantic in its expressiveness.

Recently I've been reading about David Hockney, and it strikes me that with his cubist photo montages, paintings of water, and paintings that one's eyes must travel through rather than capture in a single moment of looking, Hockney has been working on a similar project: an invitation to see differently or even an insistence upon it. Hockney's imperative to get inside the image and move around in it suggests a Rimbaudian sensory derangement in the name of aesthetic principle. Hockney's paintings and other artworks have always been theoretical explorations as well as aesthetic objects. Sousanis' *Unflattening* is an aesthetic object as well as a theoretical exploration. It is a beautiful book to hold and to look at.

Competing interests

Damon Herd: I am in *Unflattening*, or at least outlines of my feet are, and I am listed in the acknowledgements along with fellow *Graphixia*¹ contributors Hattie Kennedy and Paddy Johnston. Sousanis participated in *Graphixia's Comics & The Multimodal World* conference in 2013. He wasn't actually there but contributed to several sessions due to the lively social media backchannel that was one of the many successes of the conference. Since then I have communicated with Sousanis on Twitter and by email, and when he posted a request for drawings of people's feet to use in a section of his thesis I had no hesitation in contributing.

Peter Wilkins is a Deputy Editor of *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*.

Note

¹ <http://www.graphixia.cssgn.org/>

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