



Graphic Thought

Valentina Ramia

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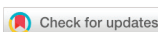
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Graphic Thought

Valentina Ramia

Nick Sousanis. 2015. *Unflattening*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 208 pages.

As the following excerpts demonstrate, *Unflattening* is a skillfully drawn and carefully written graphic novel that doubles as Nick Sousanis' doctoral dissertation on perception, pedagogy and comics for Teachers College at Columbia University. The book unfolds an academic argument in the form itself, displaying graphic sequences and text boxes to assert that comics are the antidote to thinking and seeing flatly.

At once intellectually demanding and aesthetically satisfying, *Unflattening* makes for active, relational and imaginative reading. Sousanis' drawings make you want to caress the pages as you flip through them, an effect that only a beautifully illustrated graphic novel can create. Its written language is modest but decisive and often feels poetic because of the pauses caused by the distribution of the text on the page; a balm for sore academic eyes.

Sousanis' paneling is so versatile it can present Bruno Latour's actor-network theory in a single page, emulate Fritz Lang's storyboard for *Metropolis*, and allow for superhero-themed comics passages, such as the one in which the boxily built Lockerman explains the role of imagination in thinking vi-

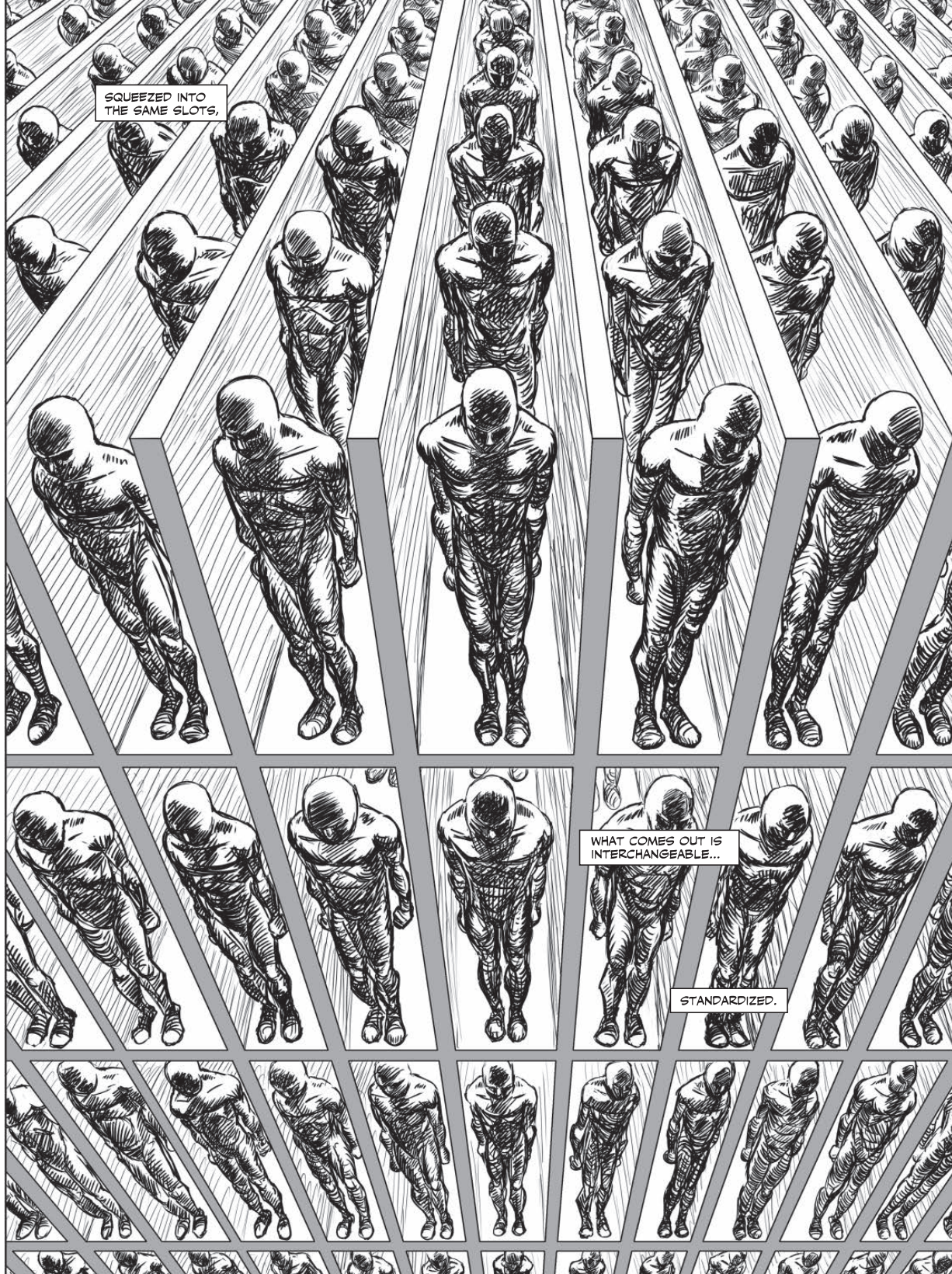
sually. The drawing style, too, is impressively eclectic. It can easily remind a graphic novel connoisseur of Charles Burns' heavy usage of black ink that gave an eerie expression to the mutant characters of *Black Hole*; but it can also appeal to those who better connect with realistic illustrated depictions, such as Sousanis' outstanding drawings of nothing less than the *Mona Lisa*. At the same time, Sousanis' artistic dexterity is unpretentious, a feature greatly appreciated in encounters with high theory.

But visual metaphors are far more than didactic to Sousanis. "While image *is*, text is always *about*," he claims, and comics, in his view, is the medium that enables us to think of "what can be made visible when we work in a form that is not only *about*, but *is* also the thing itself." As such, *Unflattening* comes to life immediately, the first chapter being, in fact, the most effective example of Sousanis' confidence in the form's ability to create alternate epistemologies. In an extraordinary sequence of 18 pages, Sousanis presents the notion of "flatness," the one-dimensional, unquestioned way of inhabiting the world that anthropologists usually refer to as "common sense." As he acknowledges in the notes to the chapter, Sousanis draws from references that range from characters in *Star Trek* to Diego Rivera's murals and Alberto Giacometti's sculptures, and he makes graphic representations of the thought of writers and philosophers, such as Herbert Marcuse and Italo Calvino. Sequences zoom in and out to express the movement of ideas; changes in visual perspective allude to changes of perspective in thought; and the interplay between words and images takes you in and out of conceptual propositions.



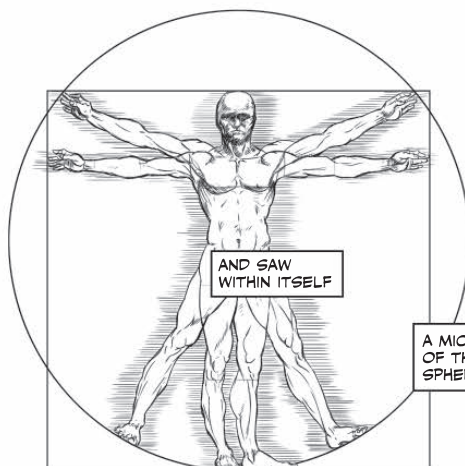
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One of the opening sequences of the book, which is also a visual reference to Ivan Illich's Deschooling Society.



The graphic representation of "flatness," inspired by the production design of the film Metropolis.

THIS CREATURE, WHO
ONCE ATTEMPTED TO
DEFINE THE UNIVERSE
THROUGH ITS OWN
PROPORTIONS,



AND SAW
WITHIN ITSELF

A MICROCOSM
OF THE GRANDER
SPHERES,

NOW FINDS
ITSELF
CONFINED,

BOXED INTO
BUBBLES OF
ITS OWN
MAKING...

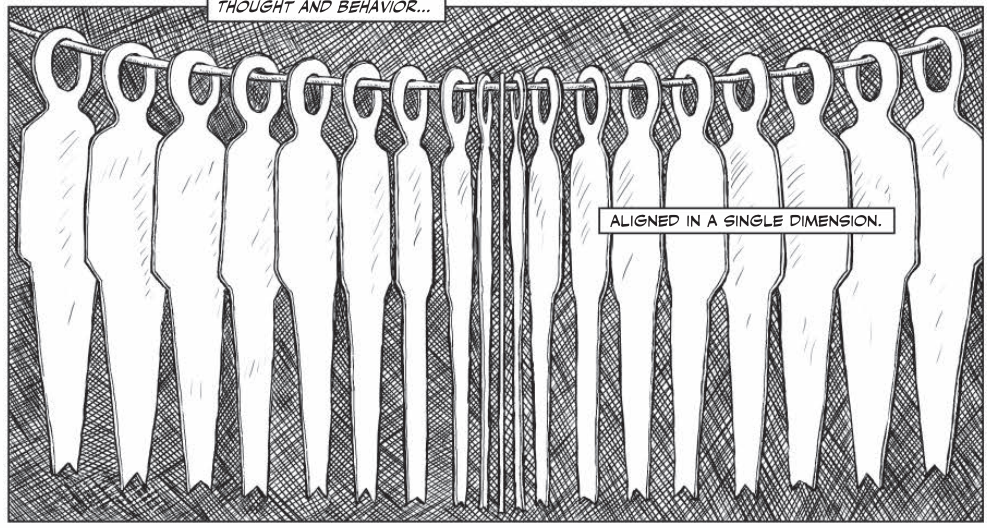


ROW UPON ROW...

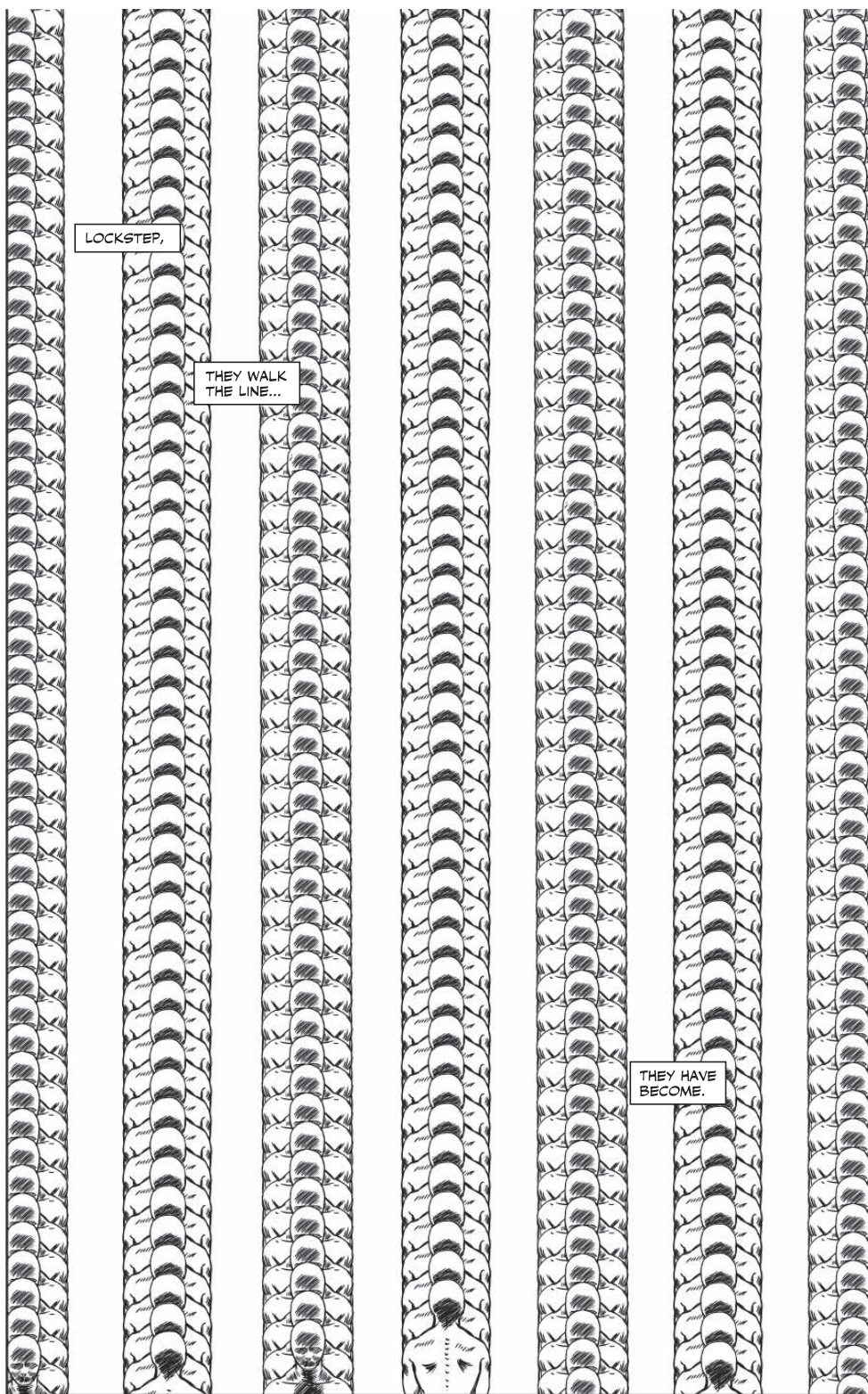


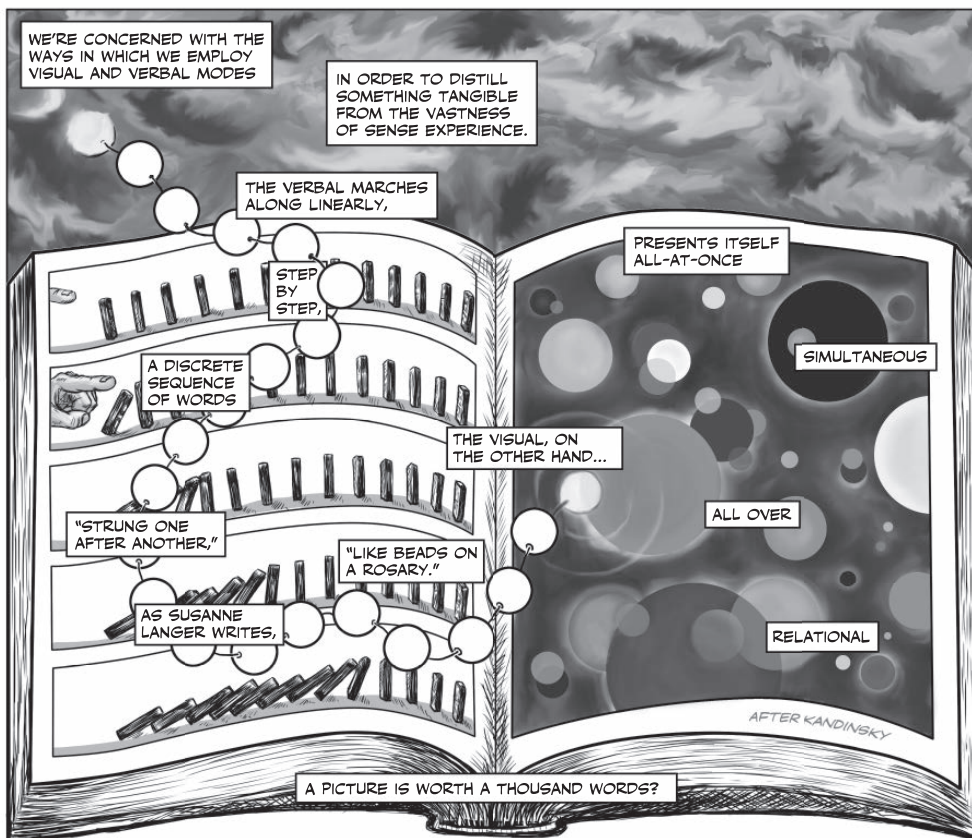
UPON ROW.

THOUGHT AND BEHAVIOR...

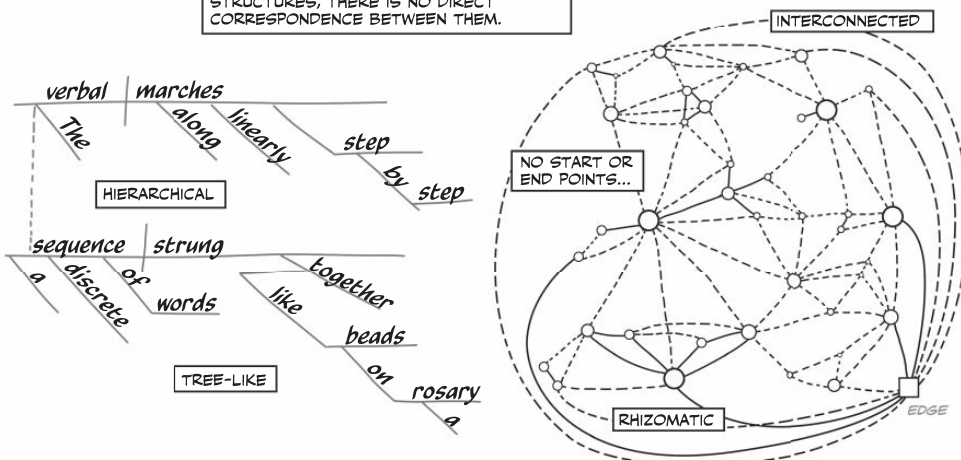


ALIGNED IN A SINGLE DIMENSION.





PERHAPS. BUT BECAUSE OF THEIR DISTINCT STRUCTURES, THERE IS NO DIRECT CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THEM.



A DESCRIPTION OF AN IMAGE NEVER ACTUALLY REPRESENTS THE IMAGE. RATHER, AS MICHAEL BAXANDALL OBSERVES, IT IS A REPRESENTATION OF THINKING ABOUT HAVING SEEN A PICTURE - IT'S ALREADY FORMULATED IN ITS OWN TERMS.

WHILE IMAGE /S, TEXT IS ALWAYS ABOUT.

IN RELYING ON TEXT AS THE PRIMARY MEANS OF FORMULATING UNDERSTANDING, WHAT STANDS OUTSIDE ITS LINEAR STRUCTURE IS DISMISSED,

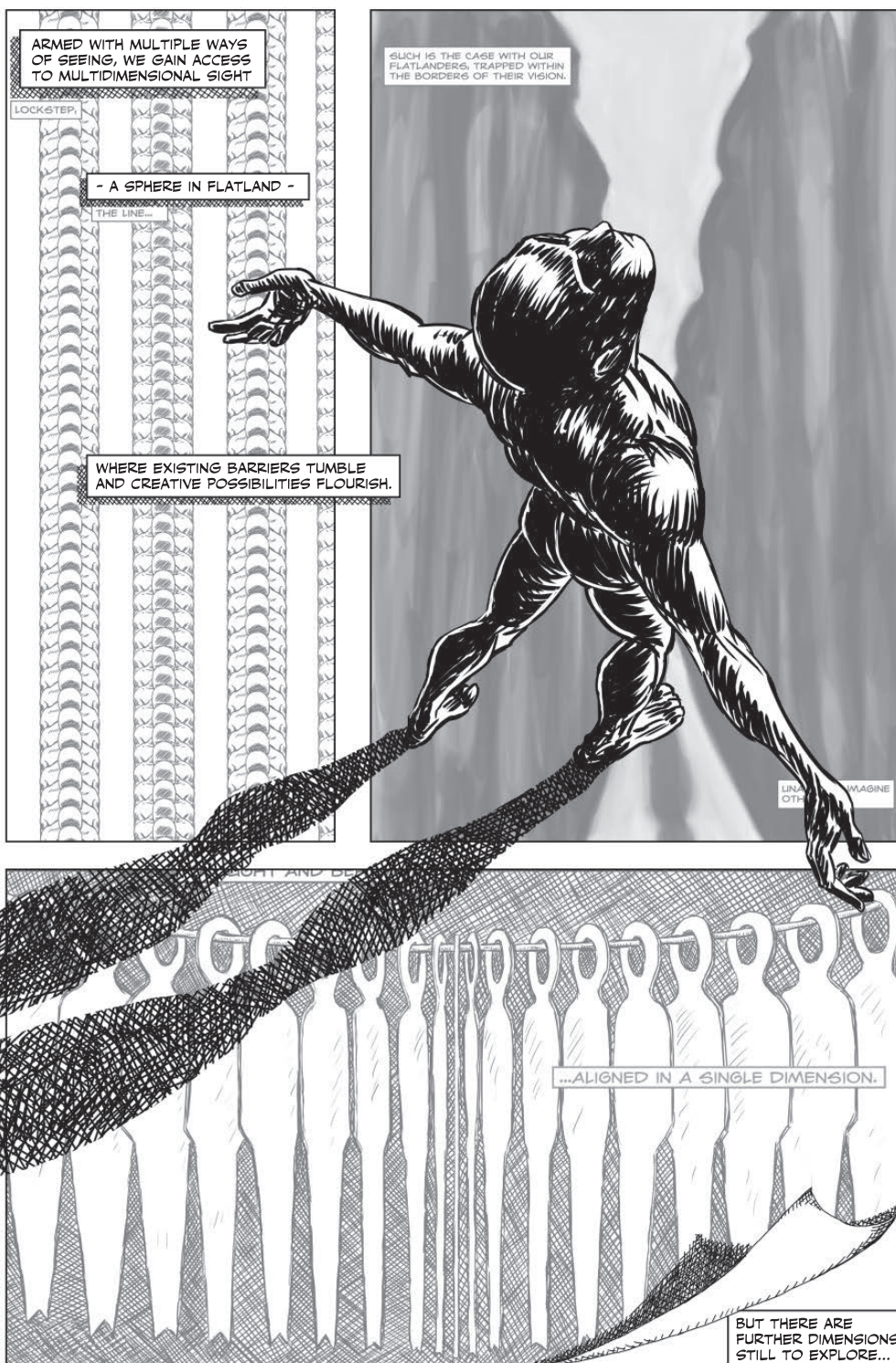
LABELED IRRATIONAL - NO MORE CONCEIVABLE THAN THE NOTION OF "UPWARDS" TO A FLATLANDER.

THE VISUAL PROVIDES EXPRESSION WHERE WORDS FAIL.

WHAT HAVE WE BEEN MISSING?

AND WHAT CAN BE MADE VISIBLE WHEN WE WORK IN A FORM THAT IS NOT ONLY ABOUT, BUT IS ALSO THE THING ITSELF.





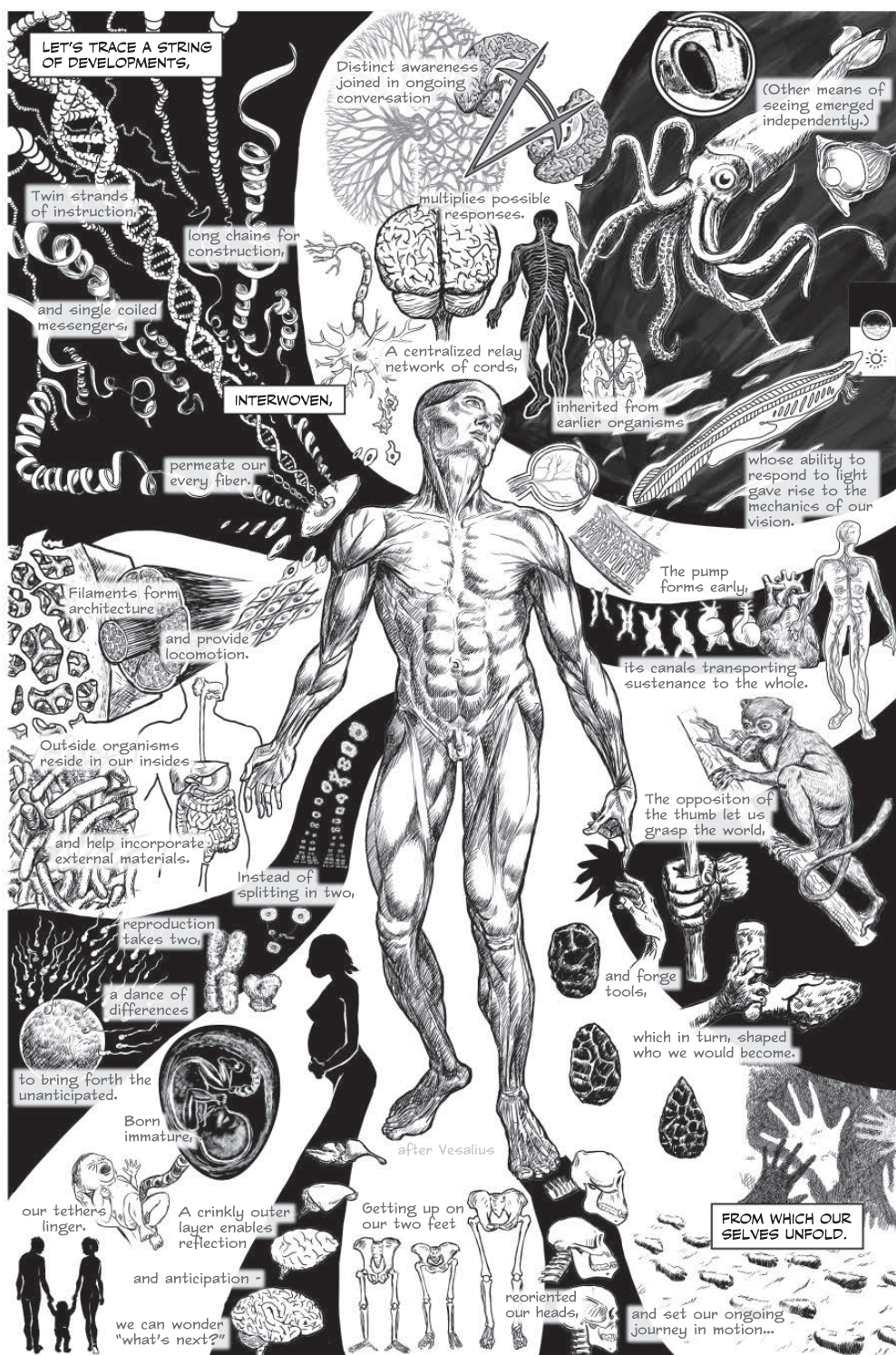
With this deftness of form, Sousanis presents his argument in the central chapters. But it is also here where a reader's patience might be put to the test, mainly because complex theories are summarized at the cost of oversimplifying them. For example, Sousanis admitted in an interview to having read only 20 pages of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* before incorporating their concept of the "rhizomatic structure" into his argument. To be fair, this practice might be more frequent than admitted, especially with complex theories such as Deleuze and Guattari's; but the stakes are higher when the concept is a central part of the discussion.

The last chapter of the book, entitled "Awaking," is winsomely intimate. It opens with a drawing of a baby's silhouette with text that reads, "We don't know who you are until you arrive/We don't know who you'll become until you've explored the possibilities." With these words, Sousanis is at once sending a message to his unborn daughter — to whom the book is dedicated — and encouraging his readers to embark on the journey he proposes. A few pages later, we encounter the illustration that became the cover of the book: a river of feet modeled after hundreds of pictures that he asked to be sent to his email address (the invitation to participate is reproduced word by word in the book's notes). In this way, the end of the book seamlessly incorporates other voices, giving the sense that a collective journey has already started.

The attention to how language and art can become catalysts for a new way of relating to the world is a product of Sousanis' unique passion for two distant currents of thought

that do not frequently converge. On the one hand, Sousanis' training at Teachers College exposed him to the thought of philosophers of education that range from Paulo Freire to Maxine Greene (the former a forerunner in the use of comics for pedagogical and political emancipation, the latter a prominent philosopher of the aesthetics of education, who was one of Sousanis' mentors at Columbia). On the other hand, Sousanis' work is influenced by the thought of comic theorists such as Scott McCloud, whose work is seminal to scholars concerned with the relationship between comics, visual communication and cognition. Add to this pairing a philosophical curiosity and an extraordinary grasp of pace and space, and the result is an author who writes and draws in a style without precedent.

Sousanis' work is thus much more than a creative way of crafting a dissertation. He is not using an artistic medium to present academic research. Rather, he is inviting us to trouble our notions of writing, reading, drawing, thinking and understanding and insists that we juxtapose them, make them multidimensional. He requires an imaginative leap from us, so as to leave behind the two-dimensional plane of the book we are holding and travel with him to the world of comics, a form that can "hold the unflat ways in which thought unfolds ... A vehicle well-suited for explorations to come." Once this journey is undertaken, he promises, the reader will feel born again. Even if the promise is not entirely fulfilled, *Unflattening* will certainly leave readers feeling something new, a freshness in their relationship to words and images.





The one-dimensional, unquestioned way of inhabiting the world, that anthropologists usually refer to as "common sense".

Valentina Ramia is a doctoral student in anthropology at Stanford University. She received an MA in anthropology as a Prize Fellow and an MS in public policy from The New School. Her research is concerned with the politics of emotions in asylum proceedings, particularly with how fear is evaluated in immigration courts. She is also a classically trained pianist.