Graphic Thought

Valentina Ramia

To cite this article: Valentina Ramia (2017) Graphic Thought, Anthropology Now, 9:3, 147-158, DOI: 10.1080/19428200.2017.1390888

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2017.1390888

Published online: 04 Jan 2017.
Graphic Thought

Valentina Ramia


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 visually. 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.
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,

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.

The rhythm and distribution of panels in Unflattening are uniquely combined with Sousanis' eclectic drawing style.
This creature, who once attempted to define the universe through its own proportions, Thought and behavior... aligned in a single dimension. a microcosm of the grander spheres, and saw within itself Now finds itself confined, row upon row... boxed into bulles of its own making...

LOCKSTEP,

THEY WALK THE LINE...

THEY HAVE BECOME.
In relying on text as the primary means of formulating understanding, what stands outside its linear structure is dismissed, and what can be made visible when we work in a form that is not only about, but is also the thing itself.

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.

Comics, in Sousanis’ view, are the antidote to thinking and seeing flatly.
Labeled national—no more conceivable than the notion of “upwards” to a flatlander.

The visual provides expression where words fail.

In relying on text as the primary means of formulating understanding, what stands outside its linear structure is dismissed, and what can be made visible when we work in a form that is not only about, but is also the thing itself.

What have we been missing?

No start or end points...

A picture is worth a thousand words?

The visual exposés expression where words fail.

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.

A sequence of discrete steps along a line like beads on a rosary. As Susanne Langer writes, "strung one after another," step by step, the verbal marches along linearly, a discrete sequence of words.
ARMED WITH MULTIPLE WAYS OF SEEING, WE GAIN ACCESS TO MULTIDIMENSIONAL SIGHT.

WHERE EXISTING BARRIERS TUMBLE AND CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES FLOURISH.

BUT THERE ARE FURTHER DIMENSIONS STILL TO EXPLORE...
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.
long chains for construction,
Twin strands of instruction,
and single coiled messengers,
Filaments form architecture and provide locomotion.
Distinct awareness joined in ongoing conversation...
A centralized relay network of cords, inherited from earlier organisms.

multiplies possible responses.
whose ability to respond to light gave rise to the mechanics of our vision.
The pump forms early, its canals, transporting sustenance to the whole.
The opposition of the thumb lets us grasp the world, and forge tools, which in turn, shaped who we would become.

Instead of splitting in two, reproduction takes two, a dance of differences to bring forth the unanticipated.

Instead of splitting in two, reproduction takes two, a dance of differences to bring forth the unanticipated.

A centralized relay network of cords, inherited from earlier organisms.

whoose ability to respond to light gave rise to the mechanics of our vision.
The pump forms early, its canals, transporting sustenance to the whole.
The opposition of the thumb lets us grasp the world, and forge tools, which in turn, shaped who we would become.

Instead of splitting in two, reproduction takes two, a dance of differences to bring forth the unanticipated.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Outside organisms reside in our insides and help incorporate external materials.

Inherited from earlier organisms.

Born immature, its canals transporting sustenance to the whole.
The opposition of the thumb lets us grasp the world, and forge tools, which in turn, shaped who we would become.

FROM WHICH OUR SELVES UNFOLD.

Getting up on our two feet reoriented our heads, and set our ongoing journey in motion...

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.

A crinkly outer layer enables reflection and anticipation — we can wonder "what’s next?"

Our tethers linger.
Valentina Ramia

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.