



Unflattening

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a wealth of knowledge and diversity of perspective from their individual and collaborative experiences. We would strongly recommend this book, and particularly the reflective prompts, for any educator searching for an engaging, reflective experience and to rekindle a passion for undergraduate education.

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Unflattening, by Nick Sousanis, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, 208 pp., \$US22.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780674744431

It seems something of a travesty to write a review for an academic journal about a book that seeks to undermine not only the academic/popular divide but also to question the prominence of writing itself as a medium to convey knowledge and engage with ideas. In writing *this*, I'll have to engender some of the very practices that artist-author Nick Sousanis is seeking to radically question and fall back on the age-old privileging of language over image that his comic undoes. For this book, a published version of Sousanis' doctoral dissertation, is about the image/word binary and all that it implies about what gets privileged as knowledge in Western higher education.

Enacting the challenge it poses, this comic book (some might prefer a phrase like 'graphic text' but I take my cue from Sousanis and other comic artists and writers who prefer to acknowledge the associations with low-brow popular culture that 'comics' denotes) forces its reader to read and think *otherwise*. The title conveys the process: to fully gain from the book, we must undertake an 'unflattening' and revoke our usual tendencies in reading, instead reading image *and* word as dually occupied in conveying the book's ideas. Long-term readers of comics (I am closely related to several) may have built up a predisposition for this activity and find no difficulty with it, yet I wonder how most higher education academics and readers of *HERD* will fare. My hope is that they (you) will engage, for there is much in *Unflattening* that will interest and stimulate thought for higher education scholars, teachers and students.

In terms of *Unflattening's* status as a comic, this is not my area of expertise but the drawing seems to me complex and beautiful, by turns elegant and polished, and sketchy and raw. It draws on conventions of comics – speech bubbles, frames – but also subverts them, playing with the form. While there are figures, there are no characters or narrative in the sense of a story, although there is an argument. Doing its part (along with the drawing) in furthering

the argument for ‘unflattening’, the language is poetic and philosophical, and challenging. The comic engages with the concept of knowledge, thereby showing its status as academic text, and like the best kind of academic work it demands that its reader stretch themselves, and reflect on what could be different, and what the history of ideas has included and excluded. And of course, the very act of reading the comic – slowing down, really allowing both word and image to work together – poses a fundamental challenge to how many of us in mainstream academia read and think, particularly in these efficient and utilitarian times.

At the core of Sousanis’ work is its most complex argument, beautifully realised in the marriage of image and word. In the central chapters, entitled ‘the shape of our thoughts’, ‘bodies in motion’ and ‘the fifth dimension’ (capitals eschewed), Sousanis engages with concepts and tools familiar from postmodern literature and theory – fragments, stories within stories, fractals and rhizomes. What is different, here, is the result of these concepts being explored in line as well as language: ‘Perhaps, in comics, this amphibious language of juxtapositions and fragments we have ... [is] a means to capture and convey our thoughts, in all their tangled complexity, and a vehicle well-suited for explorations to come’ (p. 67). I think Sousanis is right: it is difficult to convey in language the multiple dimensions of experience (including the experience of being in higher education or, more specifically, of doing doctoral research) that a concept like the rhizome denotes – perhaps comics come closer? The drawings on page 67 suggest this is so: a person’s head diffracts into a multitude of tiny squares, each filled with an image (a telescope, the eyes of a deity, a leaf, a candle, a swimmer, the sky).

The book’s status as the first doctoral dissertation to be drawn and written entirely in comic book form suggests another aspect that *HERD* readers will engage with – in particular researchers in the field of doctoral education, doctoral students and supervisors. The opening offers an account of how knowledge workers are produced – how the student is manufactured on a grand scale and in factory-like conditions, the medium and the message both recalling Robinson’s (2010) oft-shared animated talk which situates the origins of mass public education firmly in its nineteenth-century industrial capitalist past. In Sousanis’ version, the story of how people are sorted into ‘assigned paths’ (p. 8) through educational institutions provokes reflection, along the lines of Foucault, on the rigidity of thinking and research in a discipline *and* on processes such as PhD milestones, which, for all their beneficial intentions in supporting the progress of a research project, can seem sometimes to stand in for its generation: ‘every procedure is designed to ensure that proper results are received’ (p. 9). I’m reminded of O’Connor’s (2014) comment (in a book previously reviewed in this journal) that doctoral research involves mess, play and the all-important unknowing that is part of engaging in difficult, high-level thought. Reading *Unflattening* I was reminded of the need for difficulty in research, for getting lost, or pushing against disciplinary and linguistic frame locks (Bernstein, 1994), for resisting ‘flattening’.

Although *Unflattening* marks something of a departure, Sousanis is not the first to use the medium of comics to depict and explore aspects of research and the generation of knowledge in higher education. Jorge Cham’s popular *PhD Comic* (an ongoing online strip, a series of books and now a film) also points to issues, joys and problems in contemporary doctoral education – but there the similarity ends. Cham’s is a series of light-hearted comic strips with funny characters drawn from recognisable types, Sousanis’ is a single work engaging with a difficult set of ideas: *PhD Comics* is to *Unflattening* what *Garfield* is to *Hicksville*. In this beautiful and complex book, Sousanis grapples with core tenets of Western knowledge: who are our heroes, and why do we valorise their charts and grids so much more than, for example, the oral traditions of Pacific navigators who could read the stars? It is a beautiful book and a complex book that defies categorisation – that’s why I recommend it.

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