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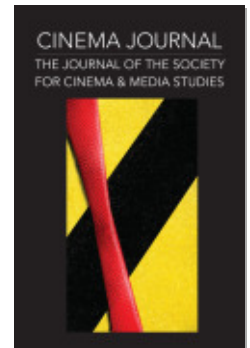
Unflattening by Nick Sousanis (review)

Gregory Steirer

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a case in point, suggesting that the imaginative layouts of the *Little Nemo* series (*New York Herald*, 1905–1911) may have been inspired by the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where Ferris wheels and roller coasters created opportunities for immersive and transformative adventures and perspectives that exceeded the views made possible by films of the time.

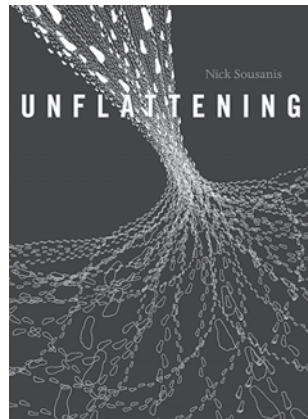
Other historians have discussed the history of comics as a history of the development of sequential art. While Smolderen certainly documents the evolution of that narrative and visual form, he is more interested in the ways that earlier painters, engravers, and illustrators pushed against the boundaries of their media to challenge accepted approaches. Smolderen reminds us that systems of representation are also systems of social order. With their opportunities for exaggeration and parody, comics continue to create environments that question and critique dominant beliefs. The wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach to comics that Smolderen presents sets a new standard for the field, and the imaginative connections he draws should inspire other scholars to think as creatively. This is an important translation of a book that will continue to inspire scholars for years to come. *

Unflattening

by Nick Sousanis. Harvard University Press.
2015. \$22.95 paper. 208 pages.

reviewed by GREGORY STEIRER

It's been five years since I wrote "The State of Comics Scholarship: Comics Studies and Disciplinarity" for *International Journal of Comic Art*.¹ At the time, comics studies was barely a blip on most people's scholarly radar. Only two scholarly journals had been in print for more than a year: *International Journal of Comic Art*—affectionately referred to by those few in the know as *IJoCA*—and the open-access journal *ImageText*. Only one university press published work on comics: the University Press of Mississippi. Virtually no faculty lines existed, or courses in comics studies, and for those brave enough or foolish enough to nevertheless pursue work on comics, there was little institutional support or recognition to be had. Not surprisingly, very few English-language dissertations focusing on comics were undertaken (an average of slightly



1 Gregory Steirer, "The State of Comics Studies and Disciplinarity," *International Journal of Comic Art* 13, no. 2 (2011–2012): 263–285.

fewer than fourteen a year between 2001 and 2010).² Indeed, in my doctoral program in English and cinema studies in the mid-2000s, doing graduate work on comics was simply a nonstarter.

Five years later, it's remarkable how much has changed. A plethora of newly established journals devoted to comics has sprung up (*Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *European Comic Art*, *Studies in Comics*, and *Journal of Comics and Culture*, to name a few), while some of the leading non-comics-studies journals, including *Cinema Journal*, *PMLA*, and *Critical Inquiry*, now publish work in this subject area. University presses are competing for manuscripts on comics, and new comics scholarship book series have launched at the University of Texas and Rutgers. Although faculty positions explicitly demarcated as "comics studies" remain rare, hiring and tenure committees are increasingly accepting (sometimes even welcoming) of scholars who work on the medium. Comics studies courses—at all levels—are everywhere. And the comics studies dissertation is now, for many graduate students, a real option.

Despite these shifts in visibility and opportunity, however, in another respect comics studies has barely changed at all: as a scholarly field it largely remains in what I called in 2011 a "proto-disciplinary arrangement."³ Scholars are scattered across disciplines—and even academic divisions—that too rarely communicate. The Modern Language Association wing of comics scholars, for example, barely interacts with the International Communication Association wing. And much of the scholarship itself, as Philip Troutman observed back in 2010, still rarely takes up disciplinary questions or explicitly situates itself within larger scholarly conversations, even among other comics scholars.⁴ There are, of course, exceptions, but comics scholarship continues to proceed more or less atomistically, focused exclusively on its object, the comics text. As a result, there is little that can be identified, metadiscursively, as comics studies in the strong scholarly sense. Or, as Jean-Paul Gabilliet put it nearly ten years ago, "it is impossible . . . to affirm that a strong intellectual field has been erected that constitutes, in a concrete way, 'comic studies' as a field of knowledge within normal scholastic and academic institutional frameworks."⁵

A paradigmatic example of this curious state of comics studies—marching forward at a phenomenal rate while also remaining static and inchoate—can be found with Nick Sousanis's recent monograph, *Unflattening*.⁶ Published in 2015 by Harvard University Press, Sousanis's book utilizes the form of the graphic novel to explore an array of conceptual issues pertaining to processes of perception and knowledge construction. Almost universally lauded by the mainstream press, the book is a visually stunning and mostly unprecedented expansion of comics studies as a field and—perhaps even more radically—a methodology. For this reason, the book has been awarded a bevy

2 Ibid., 266.

3 Ibid., 278.

4 Phillip Troutman, "The Discourse of Comics Scholarship: A Rhetorical Analysis of Research Article Introductions," *International Journal of Comic Art* 12, nos. 2–3 (2010): 432–444.

5 Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 306–307.

6 Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

of honors and prizes, including the 2016 American Publishers Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence and Penn State's 2015 Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize. In recent months the book has also been nominated for a prestigious 2016 Eisner Award for Best Academic/Scholarly Work pertaining to comics.

That a work of comics studies—and an unusual work, at that—should be so universally lauded is in itself telling of how far comics studies has come in recent years. Even more telling, however, is the fact that Sousanis's book was originally produced as a dissertation, completed in 2014 for Teachers College at Columbia University. In the encomia it receives, *Unflattening* is thus also routinely celebrated as the first dissertation successfully submitted in comics form. Imagining some ferocious institutional battle—a controversial proposal and even more controversial defense—I contacted Sousanis for details about his struggle in getting Teachers College to green-light the project. Surprisingly, there were no details, for there was no struggle. As Sousanis explained to me, his committee and department had been supportive from the beginning, and at no point did the project encounter any institutional resistance.⁷

For all its accomplishments and deservedly enthusiastic reception, however, *Unflattening* remains an idiosyncratic work of comics scholarship and scholarship more generally. It is, as Douglas Wolk, writing for the *New York Times*, called it in one of the few muted responses the book has received, a “genuine oddity.”⁸ Approached as a scholarly monograph and indeed as a dissertation (Sousanis explained to me that only minor changes were made between the two), the book appears frustratingly unmoored from traditional disciplinary processes and scholarly conversations. Who is this book for? And to what body of research is it contributing? The works of Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen are cited in part 3, but *Unflattening*'s engagement with these comics scholars is extremely limited, and ultimately the book does not convey any rigorous interest in comics studies as a field. Engagement with scholars in fields outside of comics studies is similarly limited: although Sousanis draws on a wide and eclectic range of thinkers, including Herbert Marcuse, Bruno Latour, James Elkin, Ivan Illich, and Lewis Mumford, these figures are treated not so much as interlocutors as source material. *Unflattening* introduces their work via short, almost aphoristic quotations, confined to rectangular text boxes (though sometimes also represented visually as well—as with the depiction of actor-network theory as a web of ropes and pulleys).⁹ Although the book's rejection of traditional scholarly writing practices is in no small part responsible for its success with the mainstream press, the rejection has a cost. In jettisoning conventions of the *scholarly* and the *disciplinary*, the book ends up placing itself outside of scholarship as a communal practice. For better or worse, it becomes a personal work, a work *sui generis* (literally, “of its own kind”).

But such a work, to be fair, is better assessed for what it is than for what it isn't. And *Unflattening*, considered on its own terms, is hard to fault. The book is beautiful, often startlingly so, each page clearly a labor of love. The layouts are imaginative,

7 Nick Sousanis, phone interview with Gregory Steirer, April 26, 2016.

8 Douglas Wolk, “Comics,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/29/books/review/31wolk-comics.html?_r=0.

9 Sousanis, *Unflattening*, 135.

sometimes challenging, and often stunning. I keep returning, in particular, to the last page of part four. A trio of text boxes in the upper left explains: “Armed with multiple ways of seeing, we gain access to multidimensional sight/—A sphere in flatland—/ Where existing barriers tumble and creative possibilities flourish.”¹⁰ To the boxes’ right, slightly off-center on the page, stands the figure of a man, head tilted back and arms spread outward in a gesture of openness. His hands reach outside the linear bounds of his panel, while before him lies the empty next page, an unmarked plane of pure white. There is, as this example suggests, a kind of positive energy to *Unflattening*, not quite the hokum of self-help writing, though sometimes close. Sousanis wants not just to inform his readers but also to move them, to inspire them to think differently. How much more open and expansive our thinking would be, the book proposes, if we were to communicate in drawing instead of writing.

Sousanis is on to something here, for sure, but this binary—sometimes framed in terms of vision and language or image and text (see, for example, part 3)—is also the one major weak spot in the work. Indeed, the binary (at one point supported even by reference to Plato) practically begs for deconstruction: Is not drawing a form of writing? And writing a form of drawing? Although the two, one could argue, are different practices institutionally and are thus framed differently within systems of education and labor (not least of which is comic-book production), these are not the arguments Sousanis puts forth. Instead, he relies on a *metaphysical* distinction: “The visual provides expression where words fail.”¹¹ Words, however, are often visual, and their visibility is a key aspect of how we process them when we read. One might invoke here *Finnegans Wake*, in which the shape of letters and their grouping on the page is as important as what they signify.¹² Faulkner also comes readily to mind in his failed plan to have *The Sound and the Fury* printed in multiple color inks (*Unflattening* is curiously silent on the issue of color).¹³ We might also think of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*—or of poetry in general—in which the shape of text, its appearance on the page, is integral to the poem’s meaning.¹⁴ And to make this point we needn’t stick with the avant-garde or high cultural. Issue 15 of Star Comics’ *Muppet Babies* (Star Comics, 1985–1987; Marvel Comics, 1988–1989) treats text boxes and word balloons as narrative objects; they are bent and squished by characters, their letters used as tools.¹⁵ In BulkyPix’s *Type:Rider* (2013), a game for Apple’s iOS, fonts become entire worlds. Indeed, precisely because words are often visual, and their production a kind of art, comic-book letterers have long been recognized by Comic-Con International with their own category of Eisner Award.

I would also have liked to see *Unflattening* engage more with other comics and graphic novels. As the *Muppet Babies* example suggests, the territory Sousanis covers in his book has been well charted by comics writers and artists—though often with more

10 Ibid., 82.

11 Ibid., 59.

12 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939; New York: Penguin, 1999).

13 William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 2nd ed., Norton Critical Edition (1929; New York: Norton, 1993).

14 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

15 Laura Hitchcock and Marie Severin, *Muppet Babies* 15 (New York: Star Comics, 1987).

mischievous intent than that of *Unflattening*. Grant Morrison's *Multiversity* (DC Comics, 2014–2015) comes immediately to mind, as does indeed a great deal of Morrison's work (including the very recent *Nameless* [Image Comics, 2015]). Ales Kot has likewise frequently explored the comics medium's modes of constructing and representing knowledge (most recently in *The Surface* [Image Comics, 2015], with Langdon Foss and Jordie Bellaire, and *Material* [Image Comics, 2015–], with Will Tempest). And it would be remiss to not mention Alan Moore, who perhaps more than any comics professional has used the medium to interrogate what meaning is and how it is constructed (see especially *Promethea* [America's Best Comics, 1999–2005], *Providence* [Avatar Press, 2015–], and of course *Watchmen* [DC Comics, 1986–1987]). Although *Unflattening's* bibliography includes a small number of graphic novels (all by writer-artist "auteurs"), these works are barely mentioned in the book's body. Chris Ware is quoted in part 3 as likening "comics to 'frozen music,'" but *Unflattening* offers no direct or even indirect engagement with his work or that of other comics creators.¹⁶ Indeed, I am curious how one might even do so without restoring the very form of representational rigidity that *Unflattening* sets out to escape. A verbal quotation might easily be broken up, cast in a variety of fonts, and strewn across a page (or multiple pages). Given the framework of copyright law, how might one do something similar with a visual quotation? Must one resort back to the single panel, inevitably labeled "Figure 1" or "Illustration 2"?

Although these are questions admittedly outside the bounds of *Unflattening's* purview, it is ultimately bounds and purviews that Sousanis is most committed to bringing into question. "So pervasive are the confines," he argues early in the book, "inhabitants neither see them / nor realize their own role in perpetuating them."¹⁷ A single, large panel on the following page depicts a series of initially blank figures, each gradually stamped with identical features as they move along the route of an elaborate conveyor belt. "Level upon level / they pass through an elaborate sequence of discrete steps, / A recipe of add this, mold that. / Every procedure is designed to ensure that proper results are achieved."¹⁸ This is not an unreasonable representation of the process of producing a dissertation or writing a scholarly monograph (though Sousanis has other targets in mind as well), but it is a simplistic and even strangely ungenerous one. Institutionalized boundaries and the prescribed steps that reinforce them are cast here as impediments to truly thinking, but never as the products of thinking or the means through which thinking takes place.

In the end, *Unflattening* is something of a paradox, for in bypassing most of the strictures of academic scholarship it has likewise discarded the values—however in flux and in contest—those strictures represent in the first place. What might Sousanis's scholarly graphic novel have looked like had it not so readily presented itself as a scholarly exception? Or, to indulge in the counterfactual for a moment, what would *Unflattening* have been had it found a more skeptical reception among a dissertation committee at Teachers College? I have no doubt that Sousanis, an adventurous thinker and talented artist, would have still produced a graphic novel, but the experience of

16 Sousanis, *Unflattening*, 66.

17 *Ibid.*, 8.

18 *Ibid.*, 9.

friction and resistance its production entailed would, I suspect, have molded it into something sharper, more cutting, and yes—for better or for worse—scholarly.

By way of conclusion, I want to return obliquely to the current state of comics studies, for which I suggested *Unflattening* might usefully serve as a representative example. In my conversation with Sousanis about his book, we talked briefly about the field: about his future work and the work of his colleagues, about my own work, about comics studies courses and assignments. Even in this slightly artificial context (a phone interview for a book review), I found Sousanis refreshing and even inspiring. “Why not?” he posed a number of times. “Why can’t we?” Together, we even mooted writing this review in comic-book form: with drawings and panels and text boxes. I found the idea intimidating but also exciting. After all, why not? Why can’t I? Ultimately, I did not, as you can clearly tell, pursue the idea further, and I have no idea whether *Cinema Journal* would have accepted such a work even had I the talent to produce it. I hope, however, that someone else will soon submit to the journal a work in comic-book form, as a review or even a scholarly essay. And I hope that *Cinema Journal* accepts it. Though not too readily. *