

UNFLATTENING, NICK SOUSANIS (2015)

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 208 pp.,

ISBN: 9780674744431, p/bk, £18.95

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Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening* is not only an academic argument for a mode of associative thinking across disciplines and across the verbal visual divide, it is not only an advocacy of comics as a medium enabled by this kind of thinking, it is, crucially, also a hand-drawn demonstration of this very mode of thinking. Every page, created with the tools of comics, involves multiple vantage points, constantly shifting viewpoints and multidirectional navigation across disciplines – both in the line of argumentation and in the ways of visualization in the medium of comics. The book uses comics to change and enrich the reader's usual mode of thinking that is based on categories, borders and a monocular approach to the world – this is what the author calls the process of unflattening.

Unflattening's primary undertaking is to loosen connections in one's thinking patterns, and via this to enable the creation of new relationships. 'Unflattened' thinking builds on interconnectedness and imagination, which is demonstrated, on the one hand, on every page in the way Sousanis uses the tools of the medium of comics to guide the reader through the richly layered page designs, and, on the other hand, in the diversity of Sousanis's examples, which range from cartography to ancient Greek astronomy, to the Ministry of Silly Walks, to optics, to Nelson Goodman, to how the brain works. *Unflattening* is a tour de force of organizing knowledge and of re-materializing all that knowledge through the embodied act of drawing.

In this review I intend to focus on *Unflattening's* contribution to contemporary comics studies via both its form and the questions it raises. In terms of form, *Unflattening* relies solely on the toolkit of comics. Though it is beyond debate that comics as a medium does not constrain the topics that can be expressed with it, and there have been academic essays in the medium, the publication of *Unflattening* will hopefully give a boost to academic studies in any discipline published as comics. In this respect, what *Unflattening* demonstrates to me most clearly is how dense one has to be with one's argument and with one's quotes, either verbal or visual: academic writing in the medium of comics does not allow for lengthy block quotes, or unembedded quotations left there for the reader to digest. Instead, verbal referencing, which is the guarantee of a piece of writing being well-researched and which serves as the textual embedding of an argument into existing academic knowledge, becomes just one piece in this academic puzzle, as the argument in the medium of comics equally builds on and benefits from the adjacent visual components, and their interactions with, for example, quotations. Interestingly, verbal quotations are attributed a spatial dimension: they become part of page design; their rhythm matters.

Their visuality becomes prominent, and in their arrangements, the verbal references play a role in the visual arch and rhythm of the pages, building up diagonal (46, 51, 53), X-like (42) or Z-shaped page structures (33, 43, 79, 94, 95).

Unflattening typically avoids grid structures or pages made up of an arrangement of panels. Instead, Sousanis demonstrates that the page as surface allows for dynamic associations and dynamic connections between elements. The most geometrically regular pages are the ones in which a definition of comics is given (60, 62), as well as the short interlude called 'Strings Attached'. Here, a Chris Ware-like dense arrangement of panels of all shapes and sizes shows the story about the daily routine of a puppet. The story builds on repetition as its organizing principle, and is a nod towards the traditions of comics as a story-telling medium (118–20). The story of the puppet introduces traditional narrative to the scholarly work, while the structure of the intricate grid by which it is told points out the degree of departure of almost any page of *Unflattening* from this structure.

Under Sousanis's hand, comics is associated with spatial arrangement of parts rather than with the grid, and his layouts emphasize the curvy directions in which the elements are to be connected. Sousanis reflects specifically on the medium of comics in Chapter 3, 'The shape of our thoughts'. The shape of our thoughts is not verbal, nor is it based on Cartesian disembodied logic: it refuses the primacy of the verbal over visual expression; it is multimodal. At this point in the argumentation I miss a reference towards the works of W. J. T. Mitchell (1994, 2005), or other researchers of our visual culture. Strongly building on the premise of visual culture studies and with the medium of comics in mind, Sousanis considers the logocentric disregard of the richness of visual expression insufficient. While verbal structures are hierarchically organized, visual expression, which may or may not incorporate verbality, allows for a simultaneous and relational organization of thought and information, enabling an essentially rhizomatic structure (58). In a debatable move, Sousanis writes that 'the visual provides expression where words fail' (59), whereby he almost reintroduces, now with reversed values, the already disregarded hierarchy between the verbal and the visual. Interestingly, this valorization of visual expression happens on a page that most possibly contains the greatest number of words in the book: on page 59 quotations by female poets from various eras create a three-dimensional background of inscription against which a white, ghostlike figure of a lady is measured. The page, in spite of the almost reintroduced hierarchy, demonstrates the collaboration of the verbal and the visual to express a new value.

It is after this page that Sousanis defines comics, on a page made up of regular panels, as a 'hybrid form (meant to be both read and viewed)' (60) that exists across cultures and times. Sousanis introduces comics by repeating McCloud's definition, highlighting the sequential nature of the medium (61), and immediately goes on to acknowledge the underlying importance of the surface of the page on which not only sequentiality, but also simultaneity, unfolds (62). Because of its hybridity, comics is capable of holding 'different ways of knowing [...] in relationship at one time' (63). Sousanis points out that comics is the perfect medium that demonstrates and activates the renewal of our thinking as 'through its multiplicity of approaches for constituting experience, this form can provide an elevated

perspective from which to illuminate traps of our own making and offer a means to / step out' (66). Stepping out into the multidimensional possibilities of creative thinking is made possible by establishing new creative connections, which is inherent to both making and reading comics.

Leaving the possibilities for creative thinking unexplored leaves the individual in the realm of flatness: conformity, pre-organized knowledge, standardized answers. This mode of being has been cunningly illustrated in the first chapter, entitled 'Flatness': by using three-point perspective and depth the spectacular images of a human factory build on the illusion of the third dimension – the very opposite of flatness. Chapter 2, 'The importance of seeing double and then some', has paved the way for Sousanis's view of comics as a mode of multimodal thinking. Here, based on the fact that our vision is created by the integration of two views perceived by our two eyes, Sousanis argues for the impossibility of a fixed viewpoint from which to observe the world, and advocates 'shift[ing] our vision from the one-dimensional to a more multidimensional view' (39). Comics enables such a view by enabling the 'unflat ways in which thoughts unfold' (66).

While Chapter 3, which addresses comics directly, and the preceding chapter, which explores the complexities of perception, all scan the visual domain, Chapter 4, 'Our bodies in motion', departs from approaching comics and creativity only visually, and explores the role of the body in perception and in drawing. The dynamics of the drawn line are connected to the experience of dynamics of the body in motion (75), and parallel to this, relying on Lakoff and Johnson's research on the embodied mind (1980), thinking is redefined as a process that is always in relation to the body. This way, both subject matters of *Unflattening* – the medium of comics and a complex mode of thinking – are reinterpreted as embodied. Drawing, which is born out of embodied movement via the re-arrangement of ideas, becomes, in this book at least, the primary means to generate ideas 'in search of a greater understanding' (79). The body, drawing and imaginative thinking are connected in the project of *Unflattening*, which ends, in the chapter 'Awaking', with an open invitation of the reader to continue the project started on the pages of this book in his or her daily practices.

Acknowledgement

Eszter Szép's work on this review has been supported by the ÚNKP-17-3 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Human Capacities.

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