



## Unflattening, by Nick Sousanis, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, 193 pp., US\$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-674-74443-1

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Unflattening**, by Nick Sousanis, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, 193 pp., US\$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-674-74443-1

Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening* not only deroutinises the traditional dissertation form, it conveys the content through an aesthetically pleasing pastiche of images and text, which necessarily disorients and challenges the reader. The work is a treasure trove of ideas related to education, epistemology, ontology, interdisciplinarity and metacognition. An in-depth engagement with the book will reveal the contours of Sousanis' influencers and inspirers (e.g. Ivan Illich, Maxine Greene, Scott McCloud) as well as his brilliance as a scholar, artist, thinker and emergent public intellectual. Do not just read this book. Engage with it. Deeply.

From the start, Sousanis (literally) illustrates the flatness within us, the readers-consumers. Human beings, by our very nature, are steeped in flatness. We have only our own perspectives and experiences upon which to draw as we navigate our lives. Sousanis opines that we have accepted flatness to the point of nurturing, systematising and exalting it within societies, schools, daily routines – and ourselves. Herein lies the problem he uncovers, repeatedly, through palpable examples he gleans from, for example, literature, popular culture, and even biology. Within those very same examples, fractures in the axiomativity of flatness are presented for the readers' consideration. We are taken down the rabbit hole – or into the rabbit warren – throughout the book and shown our boundaries, as well as the agency we possess to transcend many of those boundaries. Drawing upon everything from the formidable olfactory systems of dogs, to Edwin Abbott's science fiction novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, to notions of parallax and sightedness, to Lewis Carroll's fantastical novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and even reconsidering temporal restraints with reference to *Doctor Who*, Sousanis makes the theoretical tangible through visual representation. What follows is a chapter-by-chapter overview. It should be noted that many excerpts from *Unflattening* are available for review on Sousanis' blog (Sousanis 2015).

Chapter 1, 'Flatness', begins with a sequence of conveyer belts transporting underdeveloped humanoids through levels of machinery and robotic arms that alter design, transform structure and fill voids, resulting in uniform human bodies, in uniform rows, in uniform boxes. This, as Sousanis explains, is the birth of flatness. It is the production of one existence in a world of endless possibilities. In essence, flatness is the death of individuality and the simultaneous birth of conformity. Leading into the first interlude, *Flatland*, Sousanis offers up an escape from flatness – dimension. Drawing from Abbott's novel *Flatland*, Sousanis explores the worlds of dimension, the complexity of space beyond current understandings, and the power of transcending boundaries.

Demonstrating that perspective is as accessible as sight in Chapter 2, 'The importance of seeing double and then some', Sousanis highlights the flatness that each eye provides and the dimension their joined efforts produce, thereby unflattening vision. Proving vital to even Ancient Greek philosophers, unflattening defies the absoluteness of one singular vantage point and creates a space for comprehensive understanding through the interplay

and collaborative dance of differing leads. It is only through this deepening and expansion of thought that the same can be seen as new. Approaching the multidimensional relationship between reason and perception, Sousanis continues with his use of images and text to explore the intricacies of their purpose, application and unflattened potential within Chapter 3, 'The shape of our thoughts'. Arguing that comics require the reader to take part in this unflattening through the transformation of the static into the kinetic, the text artfully exhibits the collaborative dance that makes even the best explanation in words alone seem like a mediocre attempt. Without the images to strengthen the text or the words to support the images, meanings are often relegated to flatness and the cycle begins again.

Within Chapter 4, 'Our bodies in motion', Sousanis challenges readers to consider the nature of our physical bodies and how embodiment necessarily affects discernment. What we perceive is always in relation to ourselves. All experience is syphoned through and understood within the context of one's cumulative experiences. Sousanis postulates that drawing provides us with a metacognitive lens through which we might not only record our thoughts but also bring these unconscious cognitive processes to the surface, drawing our way towards new, less encumbered perspectives. Imagination and story are at the crux of Chapter 5, 'The fifth dimension', and Sousanis argues that our imaginations and stories also allow us to think outside ourselves. We are asked to take comfort in the limens, the in-between spaces that often lead to creative associations and surprising synergies.

Unthinking habitual actions and thoughts are the topic of Chapter 6, 'Ruts'. When what we do and how we think become axiomatic, we beckon flatness. The second interlude, *Strings Attached*, takes readers through the routine of a puppet's everyday life. This mechanised routine presented by small repetitive images is disrupted when a monarch caterpillar reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland* asks the puppet 'Who are you?' The puppet's strings are revealed as we learn we are naturally part of a process, a system over which we in fact have little control, but that affects us wholly nonetheless. It is recognising this impact that is key.

Chapter 7, 'Vectors', describes the ways in which we are affected by forces – biological and other – and how we should learn to see the ongoing construction of ourselves from various vantage points. Movement away from flatness comes from recognising the strings and using them as harnesses. 'Awakening', the final chapter, finds our protagonist newly reborn, recognising that which was experienced in the previous chapters, and that we are all capable of unflattening.

This work demands slow reading – the reader will likely begin consumption with a sprint and end with a saunter, lamenting the book's final chapter. It took long, intentional moments for us to drink it all in. The applicability of the book to understandings of the learning processes is most salient at the beginning (Chapter 1, 'Flatness') and end of the book (Chapter 8, 'Awakening'). Freire's ([1970] 2003) 'banking model' of education is made apparent at the start as Sousanis shows us education as industrial complex, which has become normative. And Sousanis does well to remind us that cultural and societal norms often become our own. He wrote: 'These structures we built, in turn, shaped us' (p. 108). We are imprinted, moulded by our surroundings. We must learn to unlearn these internalisations. At the end of the book, Sousanis suggests how we might recover from our educative misgivings. This starts with a change of perception. He pleaded with the reader: 'we are anything but flat' (p. 129). Individuals – from across the globe – have been lulled into making flatness their reality, which we might liken to Freire's ([1970] 2003) notions of magical and naive consciousness. Yet Sousanis propels us towards a critical consciousness (Freire [1970] 2003) when he stated: 'You don't need to be given

something you had in you all along. You have to find it for yourself, on your own two feet, from the beginning' (p. 144). He followed this statement with: 'Let us open this out and see what possibilities emerge when we author paths as uniquely our own as our feet themselves, in shoe sizes determined by the wearer,' (pp. 147–148) gesturing towards the striking illustration on the cover of the text.

Even upon reading the book, stepping away from it, talking about it, and ruminating over it, a clean explanation of the book's content, purpose and audience is elusive. With each turn of the page, the very existence of this book works to dismantle traditional, logocentric and antiquated forms of knowledge creation. What counts as scholarship is also called into question. Sousanis champions the visual. Specifically, he positions visual thinking as a legitimate form of new knowledge production. The book itself reflects current trends related to reconsidering traditional dissertation forms in response to an increasingly connected, multimodel, hypertextual and digital world. Moreover, comics have long been stigmatised. Sousanis brilliantly dismantles this stigma through producing a dissertation – seen as the gateway to the society of scholars – as a comic – seen, often, as childish, silly and trivial. Yet the form perfectly complements the content. We dare any scholar to consume the work and argue against its scholarly prowess.

In sum, this book addresses many things. Sousanis necessarily asks us to act, at least in the sense that we must actively reconsider that which we consider routine and normal, as being unfamiliar and strange, even as he confronts us with things we already know while presenting us with our own imposed flatness. To us, however, its educational themes are most important. Despite this, a wide readership, including but not limited to teachers, philosophers, designers, social scientists and comics scholars will benefit from this work. Sousanis inspires, invigorates and entices just as much as he challenges, befuddles and agitates. For us as readers, the final pages were most tenuous. We wanted climax, closure, and an answer – a plain directive. But Sousanis left us chasing questions instead of giving us an answer. There was a strong lesson in the visceral discomfort we experienced. That was, perhaps, the point.

## References

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