

# UNFLATTENING

## Reimagining research through a visual-verbal dissertation

Expanded outline of Pictorial-talk delivered at HASTAC Conference, December 2, 2011 by NICK SOUSANIS

**ABSTRACT:** Poised between art and language, comics are a deceptively dense, multi-dimensional, medium whose inherent multimodality approaches the complexity of our thinking more fully than text alone. Through a dissertation done entirely in comics form, I seek to expand the boundaries and radically reimagine what scholarship can look like. Comics are primed to take their place in education as a rich site for creative and critical practice and an expansive means of expression.

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WHAT FOLLOWS IS A DISCUSSION OF WHAT I'M UP TO IN MY DISSERTATION ALONGSIDE HOW I'M GOING ABOUT IT.

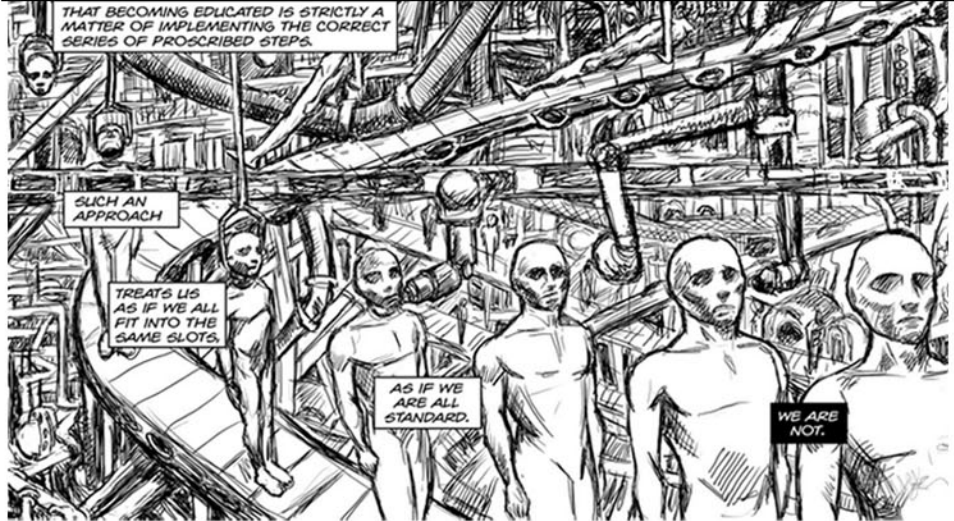
HENCE, THIS IS PRIMARILY ABOUT THE COMICS MEDIUM AND WHY I'M USING IT. THESE TWO STRANDS WILL ALL TIE TOGETHER AND COME FULL CIRCLE IN THE END.



UNLESS NOTED, ALL IMAGES ARE BY ME!

FIRST, LET'S ADDRESS THE IDEA OF **FLATNESS** - BY THAT I MEAN - A FLATNESS OF SIGHT, OF POSSIBILITIES. IT'S A PLACE OF "THIS IS HOW IT IS" WHERE EVEN OUR CHOICES ARE PRE-DEFINED, AKIN TO WHAT HERBERT MARCUSE DESCRIBED AS: "A PATTERN OF ONE-DIMENSIONAL THOUGHT AND BEHAVIOR."

AN OVER-EMPHASIS ON STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT SACRIFICES A NIMBLENESS OF MIND FOR AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM ORDERED AROUND A LIMITED NOTION OF INTELLIGENCE. IN THE PROCESS, QUITE LITERALLY NARROWING STUDENTS' WAYS OF SEEING, THEREBY CONSTRAINING THEIR WAYS OF THINKING.

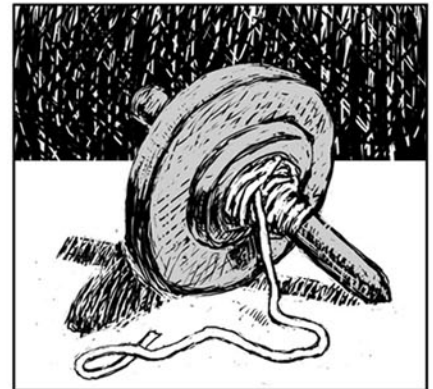


"But isn't everything here green?" asked Dorothy. "No more than in any other city," replied Oz; "but when you wear green spectacles, why of course everything you see looks green to you." - The Wonderful Wizard of Oz



THE EFFECTS ARE PERVASIVE - IN 2010 THE NYTIMES REPORTED A DECLINE IN PICTURE BOOK SALES RESULTING FROM PARENTS PUSHING THEIR CHILDREN TO READ CHAPTER BOOKS AT EARLIER AGES TO PREPARE THEM FOR VERBAL ASSESSMENT TESTS IN SCHOOL.

FLATNESS IS A HEAVINESS IN WHICH THE POTENTIAL ENERGY IN A PERSON IS NEVER SET LOOSE - A FIELD OF TOPS WOUND AND LEFT UNSPUN...



BUT WE'RE MORE THAN THAT.

SWIMMING WITHIN THE WORDS, THE WORLD THAT DEFINES US - IT'S HARD TO CONCEIVE HOW TO STEP OUTSIDE AND SEE OUR WAY FREE. THIS PASSAGE FROM ITALO CALVINO HELPS ME ARTICULATE WHERE I WANT TO GO WITH THIS: "WHENEVER HUMANITY SEEMS CONDEMNED TO HEAVINESS, I THINK I SHOULD FLY LIKE PERSEUS INTO A DIFFERENT SPACE. I DON'T MEAN ESCAPING INTO DREAMS OR INTO THE IRRATIONAL. I MEAN THAT I HAVE TO CHANGE MY APPROACH, LOOK AT THE WORLD FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, WITH A DIFFERENT LOGIC AND WITH FRESH METHODS OF COGNITION AND VERIFICATION...."



THE SOURCE OF PERSPECTIVE IS FOUND RIGHT BETWEEN OUR EYES. WE ARE ALWAYS NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VIEWS OF TWO EYES - ERROR IS BUILT IN!

BY INTEGRATING MULTIPLE VIEWS, WE ARE ABLE TO CREATE A MORE COMPREHENSIVE AND DIMENSIONAL PICTURE.

THE KEY IS GAINING PERSPECTIVE... HENCE:

"UNFLATTENING" IS A SIMULTANEOUS ENGAGEMENT OF MULTIPLE VANTAGE POINTS FROM WHICH TO ENGENDER NEW WAYS OF SEEING.

BY LOOKING FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES, CONTINUALLY COMING FROM A DIFFERENT VANTAGE POINT, WE REFRESH OUR OWN VIEWPOINT AND CREATE NEW POSSIBILITIES. AS MARCEL PROUST WROTE, "THE ONLY REAL VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY CONSISTS NOT IN SEEING NEW LANDSCAPES, BUT IN HAVING NEW EYES."



THE DISTANCE BETWEEN OUR EYES ITSELF MEANS THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE VIEW EACH PRODUCES.

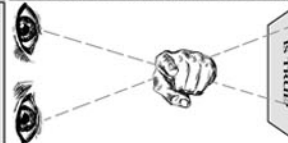
BY LOOKING ALTERNATELY THROUGH ONLY ONE EYE AT A TIME...



WHICH VIEW IS TRUE?

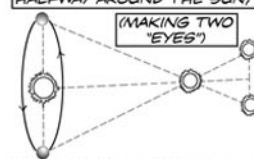


WHICH VIEW IS TRUE?

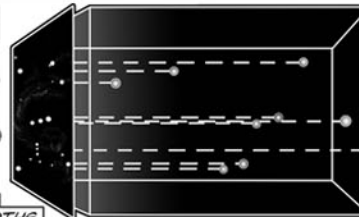


THIS DISPLACEMENT - PARALLAX - ENABLES US TO PERCEIVE DEPTH.

SIMILARLY, UTILIZING A TRIP HALFWAY AROUND THE SUN,



(MAKING TWO 'EYES')



WE UNFLATTEN THE NIGHT SKY TO REVEAL ITS VAST DEPTHS.

JUST AS THE EARTH IS NO LONGER PERCEIVED AS THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE, THE DEPRIVILEGIZING OF A SINGLE ABSOLUTE VANTAGE POINT OPENS UP THE WORLD.



after Flammarion

IN ULYSSES, JOYCE EMPLOYED LITERARY PARALLAX VIA MULTIPLE NARRATORS TO EXPAND THE NARRATIVE'S DIMENSIONALITY. LIKEWISE, MULTIPLE NARRATORS IN KUROSAWA'S RASHOMON DISPLACE NARRATIVE STABILITY AND DEMONSTRATE THAT THERE IS NO "TRUE" PERSPECTIVE.



BY MAKING OBSERVATIONS FROM MULTIPLE ANGLES,

WE CAN EXPAND OUR VISION.

OUR APPROACH IS NOT LIMITED ONLY TO WHERE WE SITUATE OURSELVES, BUT HOW AND WHAT WE ATTEND TO.



WE MAY FOCUS ON FORM, FEELING,



OR A MORE INTIMATE LOOK.

THE PARTICULAR MOMENT WE MAKE OUR OBSERVATIONS CAN RECAST IT IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT.

THEORY BRINGS THE UNSEEN TO THE SURFACE PROVIDING INSIGHT FOR MAKING SENSE OF WHAT IS SEEN.



THE VERBAL'S ROLE AS THE SOLITARY PATH TO SERIOUS, RATIONAL THOUGHT IS IN URGENT NEED OF RECONSIDERATION

IT'S TIME TO THINK ABOUT SEEING AS THINKING.



A GRILLED CHEESE SANDWICH CAN BE SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY.

IT'S ALL IN HOW WE SEE.

AND RATHER THAN MERELY TALKING ABOUT IT - I WANT TO WALK THE TALK IN USING A FORM THAT EMBODIES IN FORM WHAT IT ADDRESSES IN CONTENT...

JUST AS THE COMING TOGETHER OF TWO EYES PRODUCES STEREOSCOPIC VISION,

WITHIN THIS SPACE BETWEEN DISCIPLINES, THEIR INTERPLAY...

... AND OVERLAP...

...FACILITATE THE EMERGENCE OF NEW PERSPECTIVES.

AT ITS CORE, THIS IS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN WHICH TO WEAVE/INTEGRATE MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS, DISCIPLINES - NEW MEANS OF SEEING...

MY WORK IS THUS GROUNDED LITERALLY IN SEEING.

BUOYED BY RUDOLPH ARNHEIM'S PROJECT TO RECONNECT THINKING AND SEEING. PERCEPTION IS NOT SOMETHING SEPARATE - MERE DECORATION - BUT INTEGRAL TO OUR MAKING OF MEANING.

THROUGH A DISSERTATION DONE ENTIRELY IN COMICS FORM, I TACKLE THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTIPLE WAYS OF SEEING LITERALLY USING A VISUAL MEDIUM. IN DOING SO, I SEEK TO RADICALLY REIMAGINE THE FORM RESEARCH CAN TAKE AND EXPAND THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT SCHOLARSHIP CAN LOOK LIKE.

AS A CREATOR, I SEE COMICS AS OFFERING A WHOLENESS TO MY THINKING - I USE TEXT AND IMAGE AS NEEDED TO BOTH SHOW AND TELL.

COMICS POSSESS GREAT EXPLANATORY POWERS COUPLED WITH BROAD ACCESSIBILITY. I CAN HAND A COMIC TO SOMEONE AS DEEP AS ANYTHING I MIGHT WRITE IN STRAIGHT TEXT - YET PEOPLE WILLING READ THEM! IN THAT WAY, THEY BECOME SUBVERSIVE!

COMICS ARE A DECEPTIVELY DENSE, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL, MEDIUM WHOSE INHERENT MULTIMODALITY APPROACHES THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR THINKING MORE FULLY THAN TEXT ALONE. THEY ARE UNIQUELY SITUATED TO INTEGRATE DIVERSE DISCOURSES AND THUS A PERFECT INTERDISCIPLINARY PLATFORM. COMICS ARE PRIMED TO TAKE THEIR PLACE IN EDUCATION AS A RICH SITE FOR CREATIVE AND CRITICAL PRACTICE AND AN EXPANSIVE MEANS OF EXPRESSION.

IN ORDER TO SHOW THAT COMICS ARE UP TO SUCH A TASK, LET'S EXPLORE WHAT COMICS ARE AND HOW THEY WORK...

FIRST, A BRIEF HISTORY OF VISUAL NARRATIVE/LANGUAGE. ARE COMICS A NEW MEDIUM OR A CONTINUATION OF A LONG LINEAGE OF VISUAL LANGUAGE? PLACING COMICS IN THIS CONTEXT LENDS THEM A LEGITIMACY OBSCURED BY THEIR ILL-SUITED NAME (A STORY FOR ANOTHER TIME.)

*Comics through the ages? Lascaux cave narrative, Bayeux Tapestry, Mayan Codex, and Superman's 1938 debut...*



COMICS OFFER A RETURN TO A TIME BEFORE THE RIFT BETWEEN IMAGE AND TEXT GREW SO WIDE.



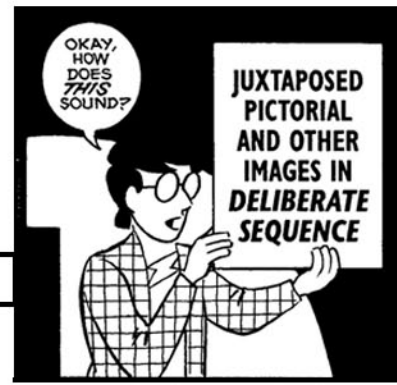
COMIC BOOKS HAVE BEEN GAINING GREATER ACCEPTANCE IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS, PARTICULARLY AS A MEANS OF TRANSCENDING AND BRIDGING LITERACY BARRIERS, FROM THE **WORLD COMICS PROJECT**, WHICH CALLS COMICS A, "LOW TECH COMMUNICATION MEDIUM" THAT ANYONE CAN CREATE AND SHARE TO IMPACT THEIR COMMUNITY ([WWW.WORLDCOMICS.FI/](http://WWW.WORLDCOMICS.FI/)) TO **THE COMIC BOOK PROJECT**, ([WWW.COMICBOOKPROJECT.ORG/](http://WWW.COMICBOOKPROJECT.ORG/)) WHICH HAS BEEN ADOPTED TO GREAT EFFECT IN SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE.

YES - COMICS CAN BE A GATEWAY TO LITERACY AND AN ACCESSIBLE VEHICLE FOR DEEP EXPLANATION, BUT THEY ARE AN ESSENTIAL MEDIUM IN THEIR OWN RIGHT RIPE FOR EXPLORATION IN ACADEMIA.

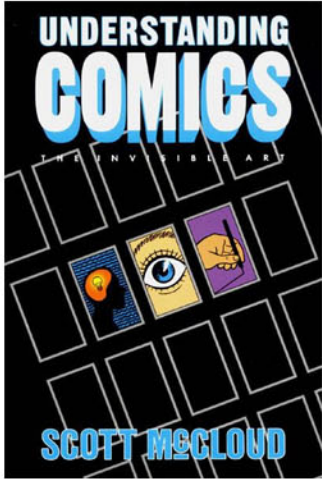
SCOTT MCCLLOUD'S GROUNDBREAKING 1993 "UNDERSTANDING COMICS," OPENED WIDE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE MEDIUM - NO LONGER NARROW, AND MAKES POSSIBLE THE SORT OF THING I'M DOING.

TO HELP US BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW COMICS WORK, I WANT TO LOOK AT WHAT I CONSIDER TO BE *THREE DEFINING ASPECTS OF COMICS*.

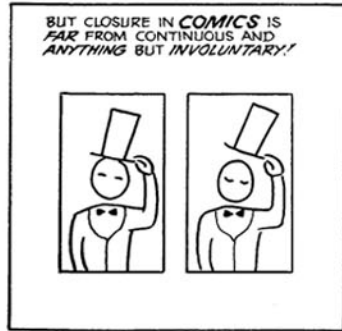
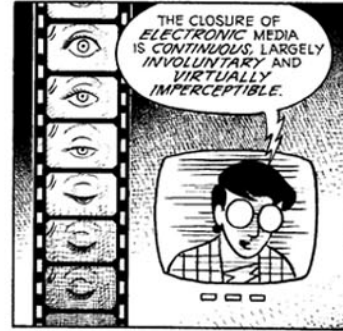
*FIRST UP, IS MCCLLOUD'S BIG IDEA OF JUXTAPOSITIONS.*  
HE DEFINES COMICS AS: "JUXTAPOSED PICTORIAL AND OTHER IMAGES IN DELIBERATE SEQUENCE, INTENDED TO CONVEY INFORMATION AND/OR TO PRODUCE AN AESTHETIC RESPONSE IN THE VIEWER" (P. 9).



McCloud by McCloud



THE NEGATIVE SPACE BETWEEN PANELS - OR GUTTERS - IS WHERE MCCLLOUD SUGGESTS COMICS DERIVE THEIR LIFEblood, FOR, "IN THE LIMBO OF THE GUTTER, HUMAN IMAGINATION TAKES TWO SEPARATE IMAGES AND TRANSFORMS THEM INTO A SINGLE IDEA" (P. 66). THE GRAPHIC READER CONSTRUCTS MEANING AND A COHESIVE NARRATIVE FROM THE STATIC, JUXTAPOSED PANELS THROUGH A GESTALT-LIKE ACT OF CLOSURE - WHAT MCCLLOUD DEFINES AS "OBSERVING THE PARTS BUT PERCEIVING THE WHOLE," (P. 63). JUXTAPOSITIONS ARE KEY - THE READER STITCHES TOGETHER THE SEPARATE ELEMENTS, CONNECTING THE DOTS TO MAKE MEANING.



LEAPING ACROSS THE EMPTINESS BETWEEN ELEMENTS,

THE GRAPHIC READER ACTIVELY CREATES MEANING THROUGH A GESTALT OF CLOSURE - JOINING THE SEPARATE AND TRANSFORMING STATIC INTO KINETIC.



McCloud on Closure in comics

COMICS ARE THUS AN ACTIVE, PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE FOR THE READER. THIS PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF COMICS IS FURTHER COMPOUNDED BY THE SIMPLIFIED (BUT NOT SIMPLISTIC) DRAWING STYLES EMPLOYED, WHICH ALLOW THE READER TO LIVE WITHIN AND INHABIT THE CHARACTERS ON THE PAGE. LIKE A CHILD TRANSFORMING A CARDBOARD BOX FIRST INTO A SPACESHIP AND THEN A CASTLE - THE CARTOON IS A SPACE FOR IMAGINATION.



*ITALO CALVINO ON COMICS AND THE IMAGINATION*  
THE ITALIAN WRITER CREDITS LOOKING AT TRANSLATED AMERICAN COMIC STRIPS BEFORE HE LEARNED TO READ AS BEING INSTRUMENTAL IN OPENING HIS MIND TO IMAGINATION, THIS "THINKING IN TERMS OF IMAGES. ... I COULD EASILY DISPENSE WITH THE WORDS - THE PICTURES WERE ENOUGH. ... IN MY MIND I TOLD MYSELF THE STORIES, INTERPRETING THE SCENES IN DIFFERENT WAYS" (P. 93). EVEN AFTER HE WAS READING, HE RECOUNTS, "I PREFERRED TO IGNORE THE WRITTEN LINES AND TO CONTINUE WITH MY FAVORITE OCCUPATION OF DAYDREAMING WITHIN THE PICTURES AND THEIR SEQUENCE" (P. 94).

THE **SECOND ASPECT**: COMICS POSSESS A DUAL NATURE - BOTH A **LANGUAGE & ART**/SEQUENTIAL & SIMULTANEOUS.

BALANCED BETWEEN ART AND LANGUAGE,

WE READ COMICS SEQUENTIALLY - PANEL BY PANEL - LIKE TEXT, BUT WE ALSO TAKE IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE WHOLE PAGE ALL-AT-ONCE, MUCH AS WE WOULD A PAINTING. THIS "ALL-AT-ONCENESS" - OR SIMULTANEITY - SPEAKS TO OUR ABILITY TO SEE THE WHOLE AND THE PARTS AT THE SAME TIME.

THIERRY GROENSTEEN LIKENS THE ORGANIZATION OF SIMULTANEOUS IMAGES IN COMICS TO A SYSTEM OR A NETWORK (P. 146). A CONNECTED SPACE OF ASSOCIATIONS STRETCHES WEB-LIKE ACROSS THE PAGE BRAIDING IT INTO A COHESIVE WHOLE.

DUE TO THE CONNECTED, SIMULTANEOUS NATURE OF THE COMICS PAGE, TIME IN COMICS (QUITE UNLIKE FILM), TRANSPIRES IN SPACE.



COMICS PAGES EXIST IN A STATE OF TIMELESS-TIME, FULL OF HOLES - YET WHOLE.



GROENSTEEN LIKENS THE ORGANIZATION OF SIMULTANEOUS IMAGES IN COMICS TO A SYSTEM OR A NETWORK (P. 146).



A CONNECTED SPACE, NOT RELIANT ON A CHAIN-LIKE SEQUENCE FROM PANEL TO PANEL...



...RATHER ASSOCIATIONS THAT STRETCH WEB-LIKE ACROSS THE PAGE BRAIDING IT INTO A COHESIVE WHOLE.



EACH PANEL IS THIS:



ONE WITH EVERYTHING.



THIS ECOSYSTEM FACILITATES THE WEAVING OF VISUAL AND VERBAL.



HARVEY (1979) INSISTS COMICS ARE ROOTED PRECISELY IN THIS BLENDING -



AN INTERDEPENDENCY OF WORD AND IMAGE.



I MEAN, THIS IS RIDICULOUS. WHY HOLD A DEBATE WHEN YOU ALREADY KNOW THE GODDAMNED OUTCOME?

BECAUSE...

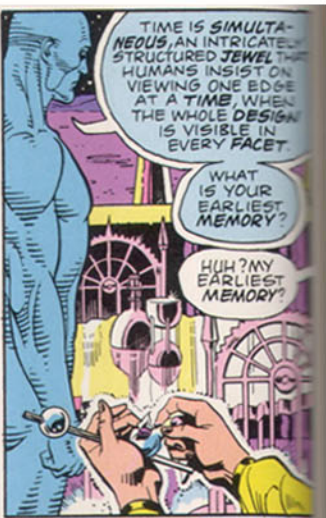
"BECAUSE THAT'S HOW IT HAPPENS!" I KNOW, I KNOW...

OH GOD...



LISTEN, JON, OKAY, I'LL PLAY IT YOUR WAY... BUT YOU HAVE TO HELP ME UNDERSTAND I MEAN, I CAN'T TELL THE FUTURE...

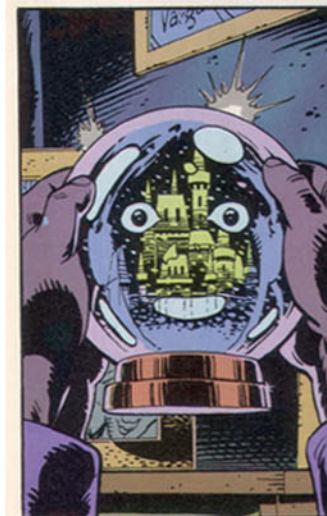
THERE IS NO FUTURE. THERE IS NO PAST. DO YOU SEE?



TIME IS SIMULTANEOUS, AN INTRICATELY STRUCTURED JEWEL THAT HUMANS INSIST ON VIEWING ONE EDGE AT A TIME, WHEN THE WHOLE DESIGN IS VISIBLE IN EVERY FACET.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY?

HUH? MY EARLIEST MEMORY?

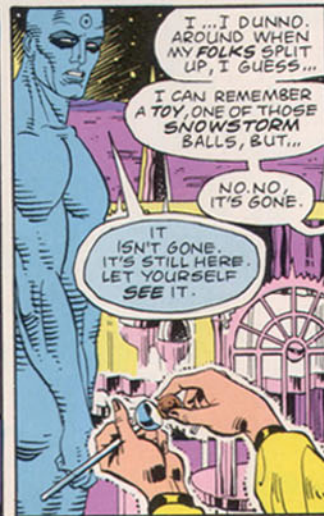


I ... I DUNNO. AROUND WHEN MY FOLKS SPLIT UP, I GUESS...

I CAN REMEMBER A TOY ONE OF THOSE SNOWSTORM BALLS, BUT...

NO, NO. IT'S GONE.

IT ISN'T GONE. IT'S STILL HERE. LET YOURSELF SEE IT.



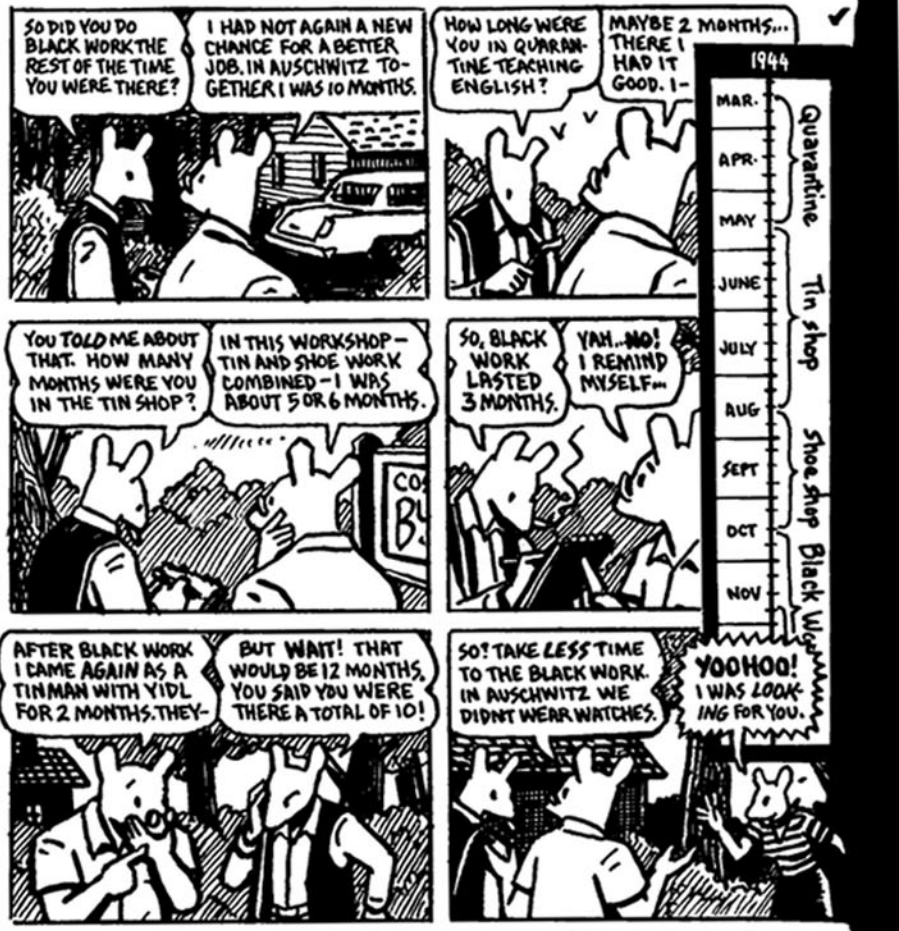
"WELL, I ... I WAS FIVE, SOMETHING LIKE THAT. I MUST HAVE GOT WOKEN UP ... THERE WAS SHOUTING DOWNSTAIRS ..."

"MY MOM AND DAD. GOD, I CAN HEAR THEM NOW."

Simultaneity meta-textually represented in Moore and Gibbon's "Watchmen" The upper middle text - "There is no future. There is no past. Do you see?" - directly references the fact that we can see the panels before and after the one in which the character is "speaking" - we read here and all-at-once.

THIS HAS SOME NEAT IMPLICATIONS...

TIME-ENCODED YET TIMELESS, FRAGMENTED YET SEAMLESS, THE COMICS PAGE IS A SINGULAR PLACE THAT MAKES POSSIBLE THE SIDE-BY-SIDE COHABITATION OF MULTIPLE THREADS AND FRAMES OF REFERENCE - ENABLING THEM TO INTERACT AND SPEAK TOGETHER ACROSS TIME AND SPACE. OUR ABILITY TO TAKE IN THE ENTIRE COMPOSITION ALL-AT-ONCE AND DISCERN VISUAL CUES ALLOWS THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF STORY TO REMAIN DISTINCT - YET COHESIVE.



Layers of Time Juxtaposed in Spiegelman's "Maus"

HILLARY CHUTE (2009) OBSERVES SPIEGELMAN'S INTEGRATION OF PAST AND PRESENT IN MAUS THROUGH THIS SPATIALITY OF THE COMICS PAGE, "HE THUS REPRESENTS THE ACCRETED, SHIFTING 'LAYERS' OF HISTORICAL APPREHENSION NOT ONLY THROUGH LANGUAGE BUT ALSO THROUGH THE LITERAL, SPATIAL LAYERING OF COMICS, ENABLING THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST TO BECOME RADICALLY LEGIBLE ON THE PAGE" (P. 351).

COMICS' SPATIAL SIMULTANEITY GIVEN THEM AN EXPANSIVE CAPACITY FOR LAYERED, PARALLEL, AND INTERWOVEN NARRATIVES - UNIQUE TO THE MEDIUM.



Layered storytelling is prevalent in the comics of Alan Moore. In this example from *Watchmen*, Moore & Gibbons intercut multiple simultaneous narratives occurring in two locations. The checkerboard coloring of the 9-panel grid is just one aspect of how the authors utilize the medium to help keep readers firmly grounded in both narratives.

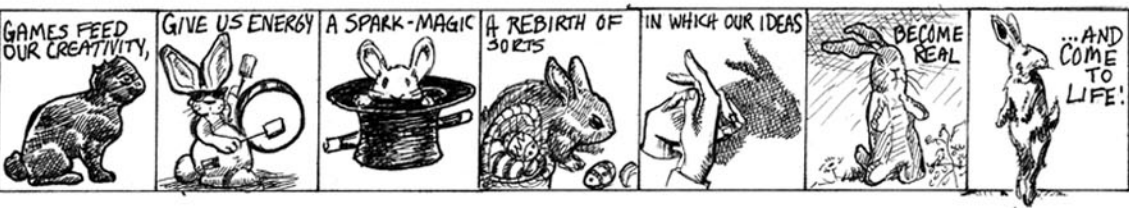
**ASPECT THREE:** THE ECOSYSTEM THAT IS THE COMICS PAGE FACILITATES VISUAL-VERBAL WEAVING, WHAT HARVEY (1979) CALLS A BLENDING OR INTERDEPENDENCY OF WORD AND IMAGE.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE IS CYCLICAL, EACH INFORMING THE OTHER. THIS DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES IN COMICS EXEMPLIFIES GUNTHER KRESS'S (2001) NOTION OF *MULTIMODALITY*, WHERE MEANING RESIDES IN MULTIPLE MODES CONTRIBUTING ENSEMBLE TO THE WHOLE (P. 1). GESTURE, IMAGE, AND ACTION ARE NOT ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE "REAL" THING, BUT INTEGRAL TO THE WHOLE. THEIR INTERACTION CREATES A KIND OF *RESONANCE*, WHERE EACH ENRICHES AND BRINGS GREATER COMPLEXITY OF MEANING TO THE OTHER, REINFORCING AND GROWING NOT IN ADDITIVE FASHION BUT RATHER *MULTIPLICATIVE*.

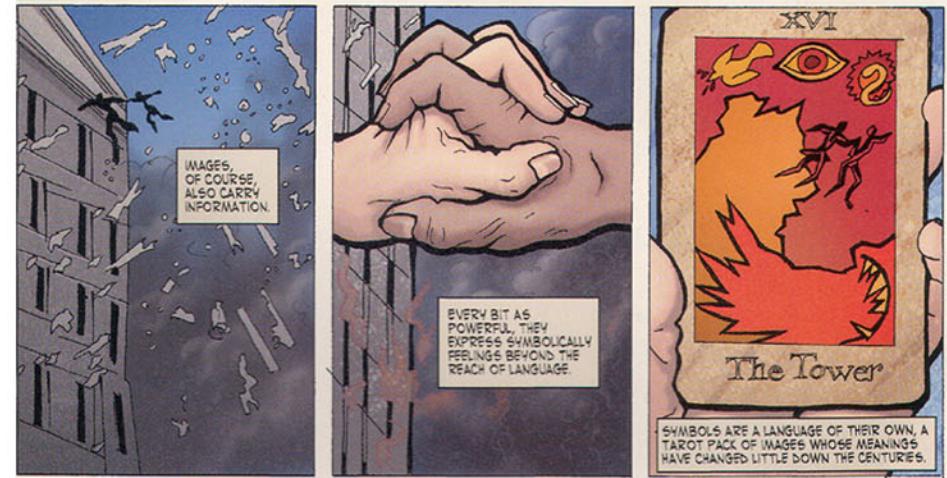
words suggest  
it's a push and pull - a dance of equals.  
pictures suggest

THE RESONANCE AND INTERPLAY BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE CAN MAKE FOR A GREAT DENSITY OF INFORMATION AND RESULTS IN THE EMERGENCE OF SOMETHING BEYOND WHAT EITHER CAN DO ALONE.

BY OVER-PRIVILEGING THE VERBAL AS THE SOLE PATH TO SERIOUS, RATIONAL THOUGHT - MUCH LIKE TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER USING ONLY A THERMOMETER - LIMITS THE POSSIBILITIES FOR UNDERSTANDING AND MAKING OF MEANING. SIDE BY SIDE AS EQUAL PARTNERS ON THE COMICS PAGE, IMAGES AND TEXT TOGETHER CARRY MORE MEANING THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS, OFFERING THE PROMISE AND POWER OF EXPANDING OUR SEEING AND HENCE OUR THINKING.



From Sousanis's essay "Possibilities" making use of metaphor in image and text, and visual-verbal resonance.



Alan Moore's works demonstrate a sophisticated level of visual-verbal resonance - image and text amplify one another. Above, from "This is information" with Melinda Gebbie and left, from "Watchmen" with Dave Gibbons.

COMICS EPITOMIZE INFORMATION DESIGNER EDWARD TUFT'S (1990) MAXIM, "WORDS AND PICTURES BELONG TOGETHER, GENUINELY TOGETHER" (P. 116), A UNION HE SEES AS ORIGINALLY ENACTED WHEN GALILEO PUBLISHED THE FIRST TELESCOPIC OBSERVATIONS OF SATURN IN 1613. FOR TUFT, ENVISIONING INFORMATION IS ABOUT ESCAPING "FLATLAND" IN BRINGING TOGETHER MULTIPLE LAYERS OF INFORMATION IN COMICS (AND DESIGN) WE CAN ORCHESTRATE A GREATER DIMENSIONAL WHOLE.



WITH THEIR CAPACITY FOR **JUXTAPOSITION**; THEIR DUAL **SEQUENTIAL** AND **SIMULTANEOUS** NATURE; AND **VISUAL-VERBAL WEAVING**, COMICS HANDLE THE NESTED, TANGENTIAL, PARENTHETICAL, AND ALL-OVER NATURE OF OUR THINKING AND OFFER A WHOLENESS OF EXPRESSION THAT FAR EXCEEDS THEIR DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE APPEARANCE.

IN CONVERSATION, I OFTEN CATCH MYSELF INTERJECTING ONE THOUGHT ON TOP OF ANOTHER, ALL OUT OF SEQUENCE.

MY PARTICULAR PENCHANT FOR PARENTHETICALS (NOT TO MENTION ALLITERATION (ANOTHER STORY ALTOGETHER)), BRINGS TO MIND MY GRANDMOTHER WHO DELIGHTED IN TELLING STORIES, WHICH INEVITABLY ENDED UP GOING DOWN MULTIPLE SIDE TRACKS OF THOUGHT.

SHE'D BE TALKING ABOUT SO-AND-SO, AND THE MENTION OF THE STREET THIS PERSON LIVED ON

SENT HER OFF VISITING ITS INHABITANTS, LAYERS DEEP IN NESTED STORY.

(SHE ALSO LOVED DOING CROSSWORD PUZZLES, HMMM...)

I THINK COMICS OFFER A MEANS BY WHICH THESE MEANDERING, INTERSECTING NARRATIVES COULD BE WELL-REPRESENTED.

AND THAT HAS ME WONDERING...

WHAT DO OUR STORIES LOOK LIKE BEFORE WE TELL THEM?

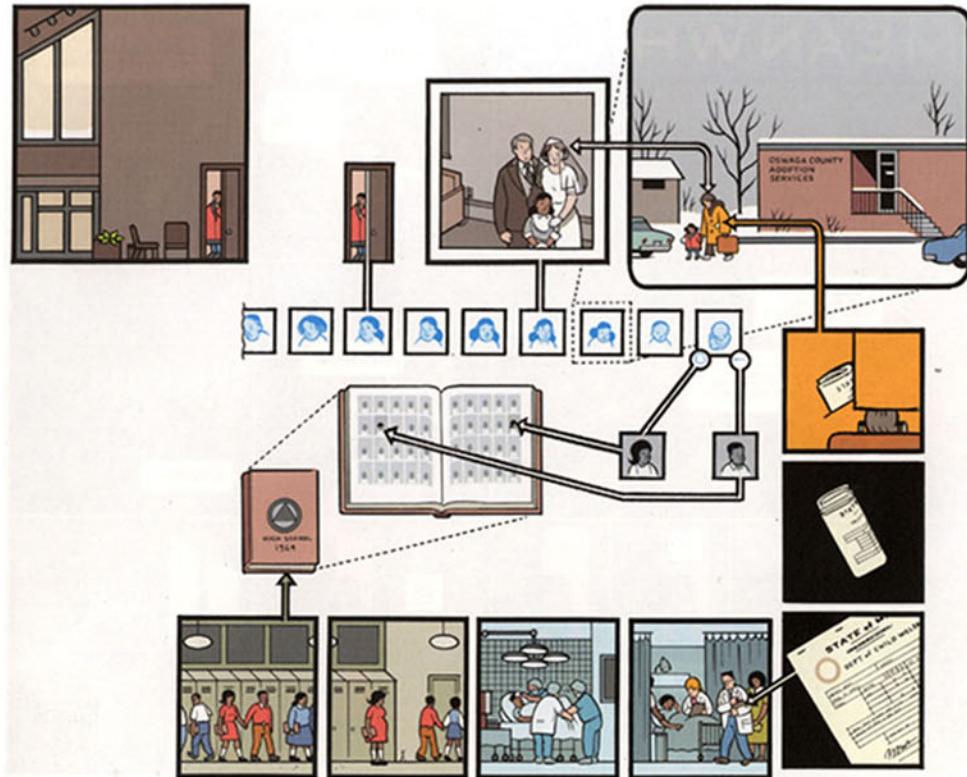
OR, HOW CAN WE BEST DESCRIBE,

# The Shape of Our Thoughts

a meditation ON & IN COMICS by Nick Sousanis

1

SUSANNE K. LANGER (1957) CITES BERTRAND RUSSELL AS REGRETTING "WE CANNOT CONSTRUCT A LANGUAGE WHICH WOULD EXPRESS ALL RELATIONS BY ANALOGOUS RELATIONS; THEN WE WOULD NOT BE TEMPTED TO MISCONSTRUE LANGUAGE" (P. 81). BUT PERHAPS WITH COMICS - A LANGUAGE OF JUXTAPOSITION AND AN ART OF FRAGMENTS - WE CAN HAVE THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS AND ACHIEVE A WHOLENESS OF EXPRESSION, WELL-SUITED TO CAPTURE THE RICHNESS AND COMPLEXITY OF OUR THINKING.

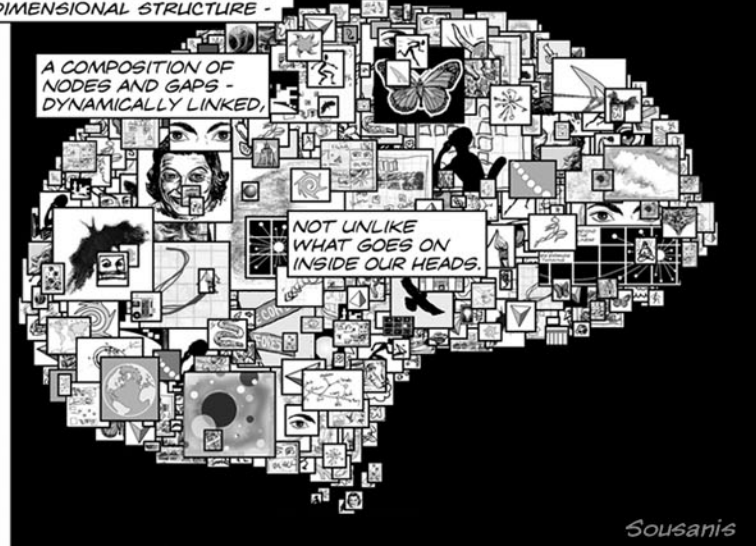


The work of Chris Ware (above) demonstrates comics' potential for conveying the complexity and tangential nature of our narratives.

BENEATH COMICS' APPROACHABLE APPEARANCE LIES A DECEPTIVELY DENSE, MULTI-MODAL, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL STRUCTURE -

A COMPOSITION OF NODES AND GAPS - DYNAMICALLY LINKED.

NOT UNLIKE WHAT GOES ON INSIDE OUR HEADS.



Sousanis





PEOPLE AREN'T ONE WAY - WE AREN'T FLAT.

LET US THEN CONSIDER EDUCATING FOR THE ARTS, COMICS, AND VISUAL THINKING MORE BROADLY, AS NOT SIMPLY A MATTER OF CULTURE OR AESTHETICS, BUT ESSENTIAL AS A MEANS OF ENABLING MULTI-DIMENSIONAL SIGHT.

UNFLATTENING IS A DOOR OPENING, EYE OPENING - A RUPTURE IN OUR EVERYDAY FABRIC, DISPLACING EXISTING FRAMES OF REFERENCE.

AND OPEN DOORS.



THE ABILITY TO IMAGINE OTHERWISE AND STEP BEYOND "THIS IS HOW IT IS," TO "THIS IS HOW IT MIGHT BE."

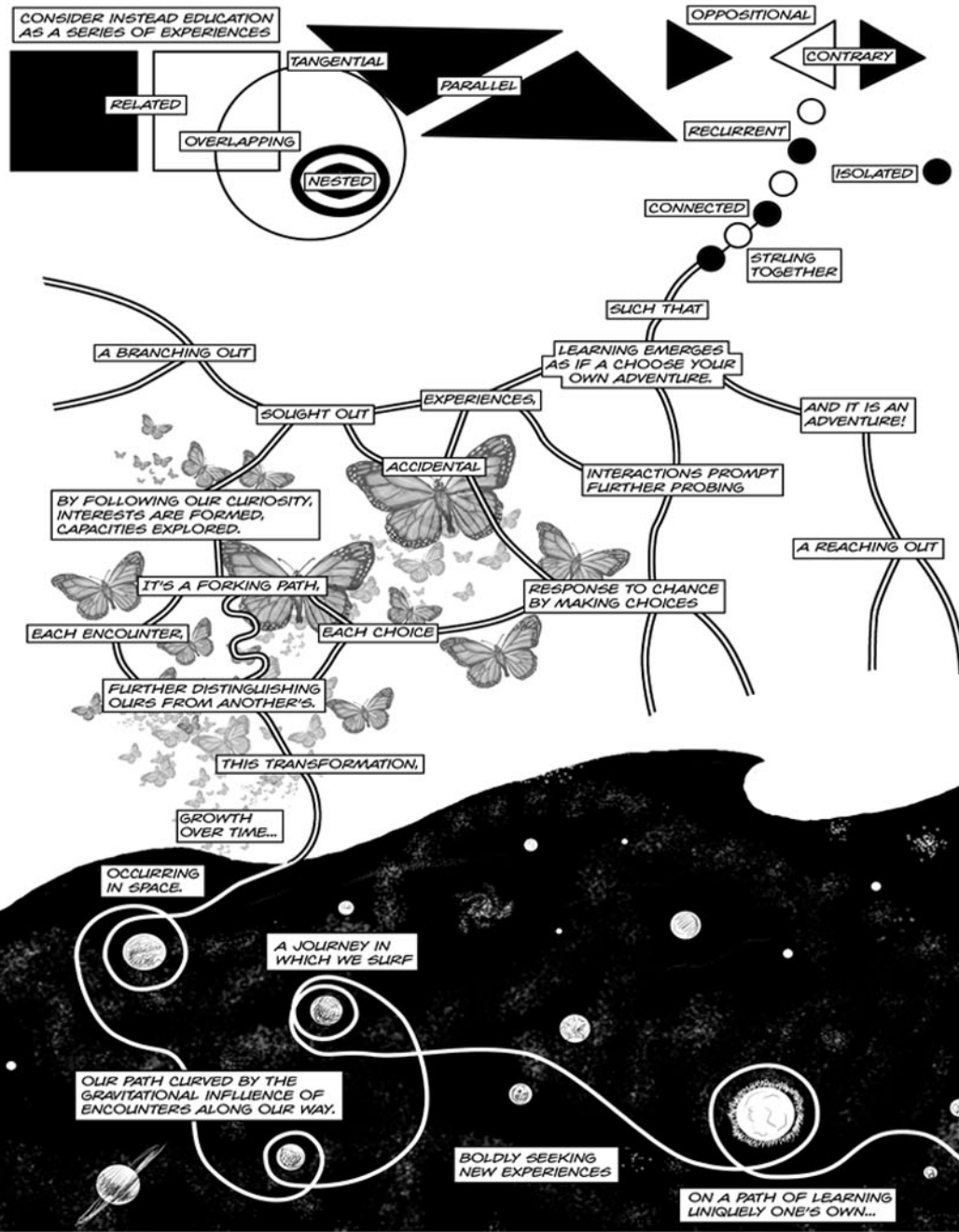
RATHER THAN BEING TRAPPED IN THE RUTS OF HISTORY, WE CREATE OUR OWN STORIES...

TO OPEN EYES,



ULTIMATELY I OFFER THIS WORK AS A POLITICAL CHALLENGE AND SEEK TO EXPAND THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT RESEARCH CAN BE AND FORMS SCHOLARSHIP CAN TAKE. BY INCORPORATING THE VISUAL - NOT AS ILLUSTRATION BUT AS TRULY INTEGRAL AND INTEGRATED - I WISH TO CONTEST THE VERBAL'S ROLE AS THE DOMINANT PATH TO SERIOUS, RATIONAL THOUGHT.

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH DISCUSSION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHER MODES OF THINKING WITHIN THE ACADEMY - I HOPE IN OFFERING THIS WORK, IT'S A SPARK TO SUGGEST THERE'S BEEN ENOUGH TALKING AND IT'S TIME TO LEAD THE WAY IN DOING IT...



TO SEE MORE OF SOUSANIS'S COMICS, PLEASE SEE [WWW.SPINWEAVEANDCUT.COM](http://WWW.SPINWEAVEANDCUT.COM). TO STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION: [NSOUSANIS@GMAIL.COM](mailto:NSOUSANIS@GMAIL.COM). FOR HIS COMICS COURSE WIKISITE: [WWW.COMICSCCLASSROOM.WIKISPACES.COM](http://WWW.COMICSCCLASSROOM.WIKISPACES.COM). AND NOW ON TWITTER - @NSOUSANIS (THANKS TO HASTAC!) THANKS, NICK