



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis (review)

Stacy Leigh Pigg

Anthropologica, Volume 60, Number 1, 2018, pp. 353-355 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/705351>

and make research meaningful in the academy and beyond. It is not only about writing culture, but also about making culture, differently.

**Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, 198 pages.**

*Reviewer: Stacy Leigh Pigg  
Simon Fraser University*

First: read this book, slowly. Let your eyes pause, taking in the whole page at once. Change your focus to zoom into detail, and then pan outward again. Feel how your eyes want to wander across the page, and then feel the alternative visual paths also present. Hear a caption as you read it, also noticing the silences in the pauses marked by the spaces on the page. Then look at the caption as if it were not letters but a form. Allow your senses to project your body into the illusion of three-dimensional space conjured by the drawings. *Unflattening* is constructed as an experience. Its argument lies in its very form.

*Unflattening* asks how humans construct knowledge: How do fixed viewpoints limit us, flattening experience and perception? How do multiple vantage points open up new possibilities for imagination and insight? Constructed as an experiment in visual thinking, *Unflattening* uses graphic art to argue for greater appreciation of images – over words and text alone – in our understanding of what counts as knowledge. It is a philosophical meditation on thinking itself, on realism, abstraction and the imaginary, rendered through illustrations that play with motifs drawn from science, mathematics, map-making, philosophy, Greek mythology, and literature. The text in the caption boxes presents the authorial voice, a calm, elegant narration inviting the reader to

Look anew

Italo Calvino once wrote, “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 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.”

A changed perspective is precisely the goal for the journey ahead: to discover new ways of seeing, to open spaces for possibilities, to find “fresh methods” from animating and awakening.

It is essential to note here that this need not be achieved only by such heroic efforts as winged sandals (or stallion).

Rather, it is, as Calvino noted, about finding different perspectives, and this begins by thinking about seeing ...

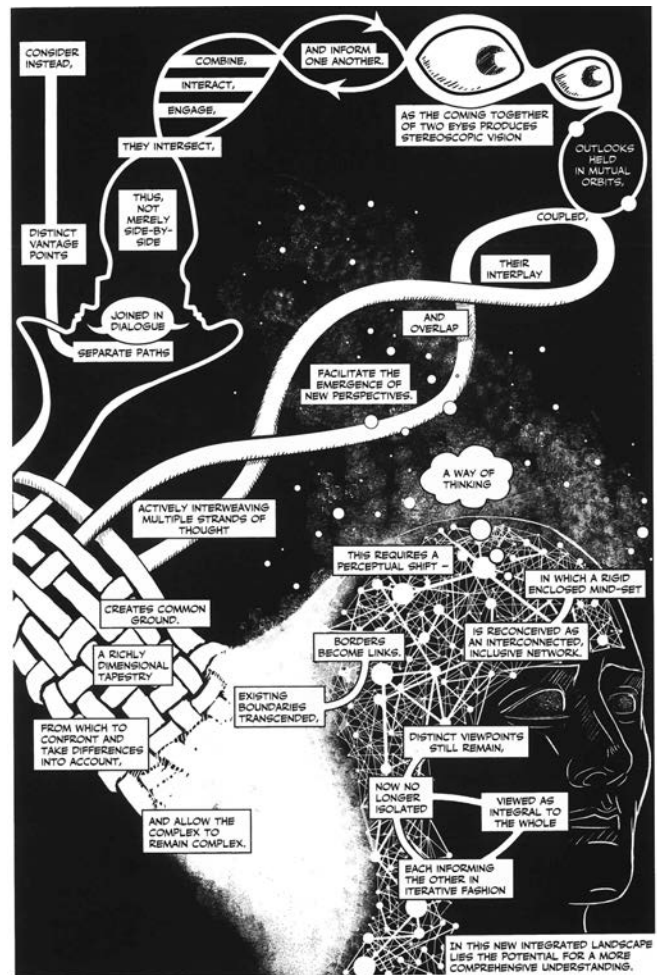


Figure 1: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (2015, 37) (images courtesy of Harvard University Press)

These captions descend slowly from the upper-right corner to the lower left in the airy white space between the two elements of the illustration (spread on pages 26–27) depicting the figure of a man, seen from behind, soaring upward with winged sandals, lifting off from an orb whose surface consists entirely of a steep walled maze. Peering into this world as if from above, we see figures wandering inside this maze, robotically moving forward unable to notice the other walkers or to even know that their path is in fact a maze of dead ends. We can see what the trapped automatons cannot. We can also identify with the transcendence of an aerial perspective enabled by flight. In this spread, as in the composition of other pages in the book, the captions guide interpretation of the images, even as the drawings expand, deepen and complicate the words. The execution is beautiful, expressive, moving and thought-provoking. Widely and deservedly lauded as an innovative marriage of scholarly insight with comics art, *Unflattening* delivers on its promise to open up new insights.

Anthropologists, specifically, can find in this work food for thought beyond the main message intended by the author. An anthropologist could project onto Sousanis’ extended riff on

“multiple vantage points” a lucid expression of the touchstone of an anthropological sensibility. Even as anthropologists continue to wrestle with the colonial legacy enshrined in an anthropology that defines itself as “the study of (other) cultures,” some of us are striving to supersede the essentialisation in what was known as the comparative perspective (as notoriously enshrined in that positivist wet dream, the Human Relations Area Files). We are reimagining anthropology as the self-aware exploration of the condition of human situatedness and of the ongoing processes that generate points of view. Anthropology has shifted the ground of its disciplinary self-definition from an object of study (non-Western others, or, later, culture) to seeing itself as a perspective, that is, a style of seeing and asking questions about perspective itself. Sousanis uses the visual metaphor of the parallax effect to show how “multiple vantage points engender new ways of seeing” (22) and the “point of view changes everything” (23). Is this not what anthropology plays with?

*Unflattening* also contains within its imagery some core elements of decidedly Western social theory. As foreshadowed by the image of Perseus flying upward to see beyond the maze (discussed above), the book rests on the imagery of escape from constraints. Limitations on imagination are conveyed by way of an extended abstract metaphor of angle of sight in relation to space, giving rise to stunningly expressive perspectival imagery throughout the book. But another metaphor also runs through the imagery: that of society as a box imprisoning the erstwhile autonomous individual. “Society” is never directly named as a source of constraint in the text, but some of the imagery builds on tropes of anomie, alienation, depersonalisation and conformism. The opening chapter, for instance, plays with imagery of factory mass production, showing anonymous shrink-wrapped human figures moved along conveyor belts, weighed and measured, lined up in slots and sent to toil in cubicles

- Put through a series of instruments – tools devised to ...
- Calculate and convert the human into data – more boxes
- Imposed by forces far removed
- Unseen and unseeing
- Squeezed into the same slots,
- What comes out is interchangeable
- Standardized
- (12–13)

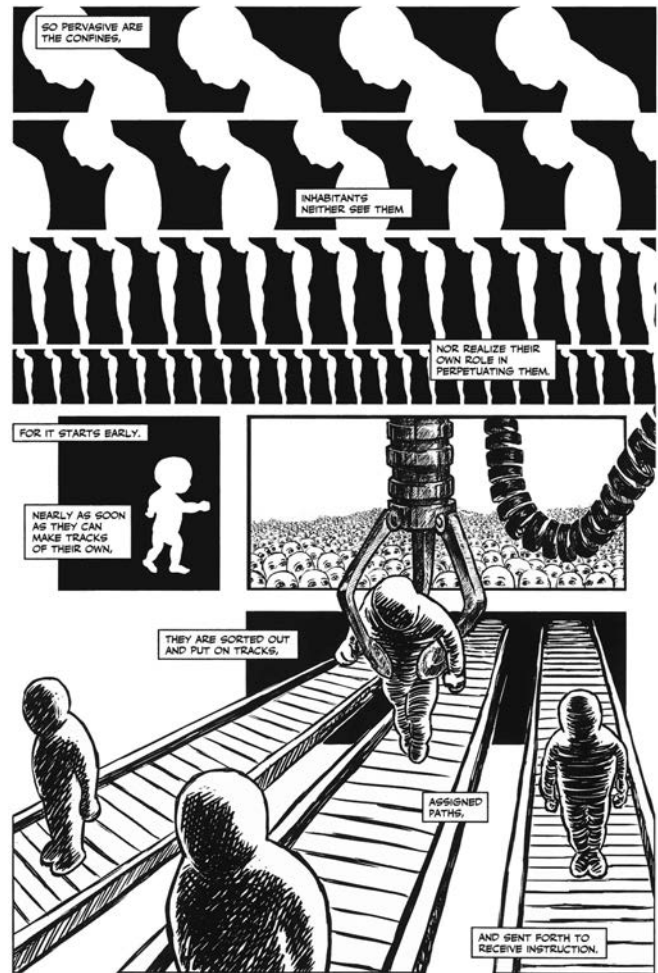


Figure 2: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (2015, 8) (images courtesy of Harvard University Press)

These image + text passages certainly reveal a folk understanding of society as a force pressing in on the self, like a shoe poorly fitting every unique footprint. The imagery also articulates the anxieties about modernity and industrialisation that sparked so much Western social theory. In the drawings, tellingly, all the anonymous, mummy-like figures represent the modal “human” as male. As imagistic expressions, these drawings might be taken to represent Sousanis’s own interpretive shortcomings, rooted in a paucity of visual tropes much like that limiting the allegorical Flatlanders he presents to us. And yet, be that as it may, these images do *work*, and well, to unveil the tropes embedded within so much purportedly universal high theory, not to mention common North American vernacular understandings of individual versus society. And so the images stand. Open to our contemplation and interpretation.

Interpretive openness is, in fact, essential to how the medium of graphic narrative (also known as comics, sequential

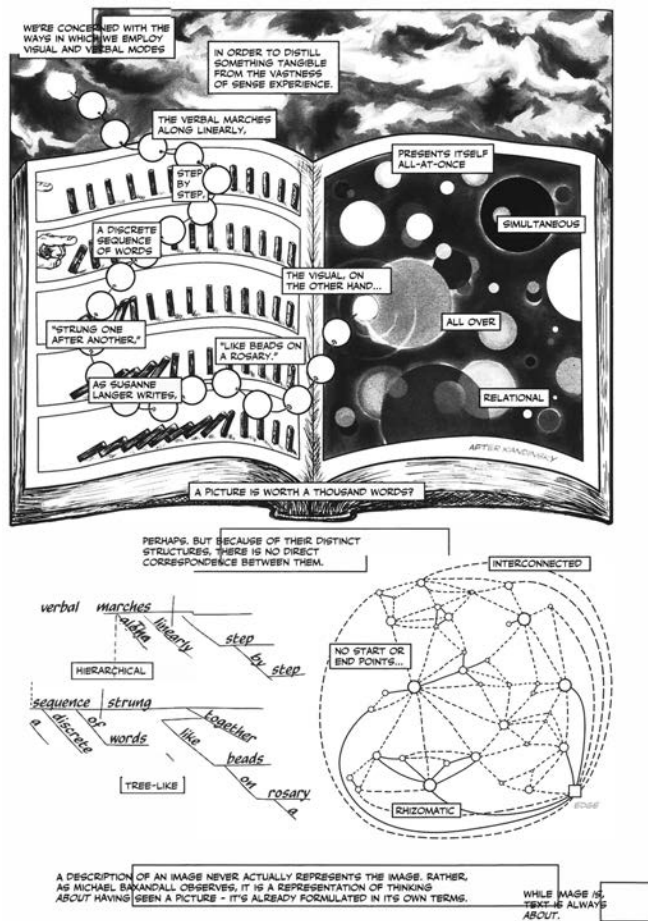


Figure 3: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (2015, 58) (images courtesy of Harvard University Press)

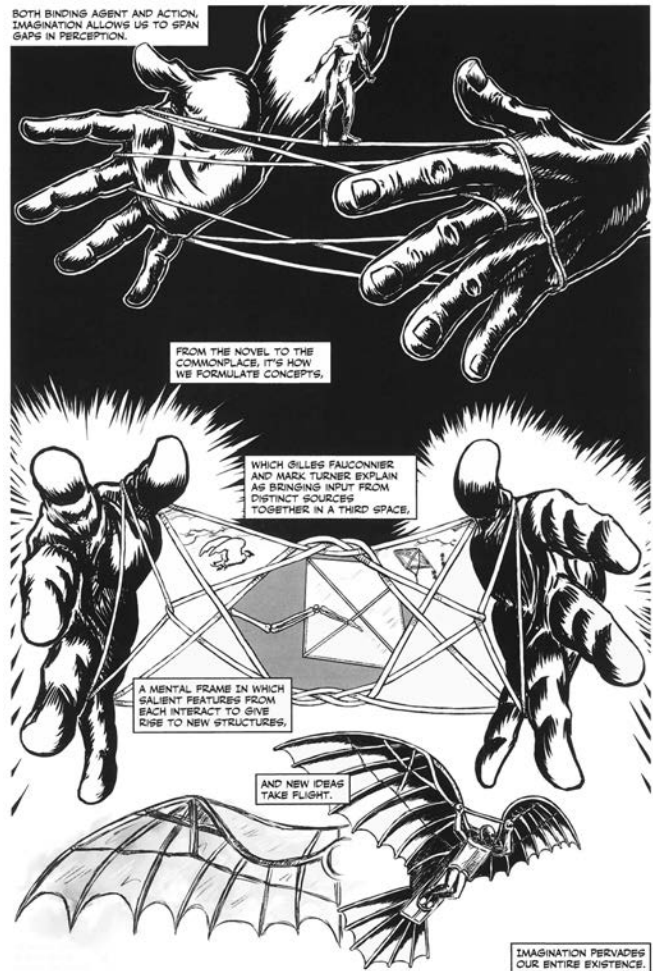


Figure 4: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (2015, 91) (images courtesy of Harvard University Press)

art) functions textually. Compositionally arranged image + text allows a reader to swish around in puddles of ambiguity created by the topography of parts and wholes. Even as the composition purposefully sets out its own stepping stones to make a story, alternate readings can offer up different paths to seeing what is being shown. Graphic scholarship therefore calls for new strategies of exegesis and critique when we consider what such texts “say.”

The perspectival looseness of graphic narrative structure, with its built-in ambiguities resolved by the reader’s own piecing together of the thread, has tremendous potential as a form for ethnographic writing. *Unflattening* offers an example of an avowedly scholarly, explicitly abstract and theoretical graphic narrative. While the first forays into ethnographically informed graphic novels penned by anthropologists have thus far worked with traditional storytelling elements of character and plot, *Unflattening* stimulates thinking about how theory – conceptual abstraction that shapes what we notice and how we analyse – could also itself be expressed through drawn image.

**Guillaume Blanc, Élise Demeulenaere et Wolf Feuerhahn** (dirs.), *Humanités environnementales : Enquêtes et Contre-enquêtes*, Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2017, 350 pages.

*Recenseuses: Enkelejda Sula-Rashimi, Université de Sherbrooke  
Astrid Brousselle, University of Victoria*

Cet ouvrage vise à tracer l’émergence du domaine d’études qui constitue les humanités environnementales, niche interdisciplinaire développée au sein des sciences humaines et sociales et portant sur l’étude de questions liées aux enjeux environnementaux contemporains. Plus spécifiquement, il a pour ambition d’analyser le développement institutionnel et intellectuel