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Nick SOUSANIS, *Unflattening*

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Nick SOUSANIS, *Unflattening*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2015, 193 pages.

Scott McCloud, the famous American comic artist and theorist best known for his pivotal work on *Understanding Comics* (1993), described *Unflattening* as “a complex, beautiful, delirious meditation”. Others, like Douglas Wolk in the *New York Times*, considered *Unflattening* to be “a genuine oddity, a philosophical treatise in comics form” (*New York Times Book Review*, May 2015). *Unflattening* is all this and more: it draws from art, science, philosophy, and mythology to offer us a linguistic and visual reflection on knowledge, discourse, and meaning-making processes.

Written entirely in comics form, Sousanis’ book is an invitation to explore the intersections between form and content, hereby expanding our definition of literacy and scholarly inquiry. Before its publication by Harvard University Press, *Unflattening* existed as Nick Sousanis’ doctoral dissertation, which he defended at Columbia University. As a matter of fact, it is known today as the first doctoral dissertation entirely written in comics format. While the book contains a collection of written notes designed to provide more information about the “backstory” and “influences behind the words and drawings” (p. 155–170), the visual text (p. 1–152) works pretty much as a stand-alone piece. Simply said, *Unflattening* is an ambitious, theoretically grounded, and beautifully designed text. Since its publication in 2015, it has not gone unnoticed: *Unflattening* has earned several awards and prizes, among which the 2016 Lynd Ward Prize for Graphic Novel of the Year and the 2016 American Publishers Prose Award for Excellence in Humanities.

As a genre-defying piece, *Unflattening* takes its readers on a 193-page visual and linguistic journey during which Sousanis argues for the necessity to “[overcome] a linear perspective” (p. 44) and “seek out new ways of being in directions not only northwards and upwards, but outwards, inwards, and in dimensions not yet within our imagination” (p. 46). This invitation to widen our worldview and to embrace different perspective is articulated not only through the drawings that create meanings and show and connect concepts across pages, but also through references to the ideas of different writers and thinkers such

as James Joyce, Edward Tufte, Bertrand Russell, René Descartes, Plato, among many others.

The content itself is divided in ten chapters. Hence, the book takes us from reflections on and viewing of “flatness...” (chapter 1) and “flatland...” (chapter 2) to an exposé about “the importance of seeing double and then some...” (chapter 3), and then to discussions about “the shape of our thoughts...” (chapter 4), “our bodies in motion...” (chapter 5), “the fifth dimension...” (chapter 6), “ruts...” (chapter 7), “strings attached...” (chapter 8), “vectors...” (chapter 9), to end on a call for “awaking...” (chapter 10). Each chapter, as signified too by the repetition of the suspension points at the end of the titles, opens a conversation, hints at and unveils new perspectives for readers to consider. Far from closing doors or arguing for definitive stances, the chapters merely suggest and invite us to question and to look around.

In this regard, *Unflattening* is a book to be read and to be seen. By showing the limitations of a two-dimensional approach to the world, *Unflattening* encourages us to appreciate the affordances of multiple points of views and overcome a mono-modal approach to meanings. “In relying on the text as the primary means of formulating understanding, what stands outside its linear structure is dismissed”, argues Sousanis (p. 59). *Unflattening* pushes its readers to engage with visual elements, creating interplays between words and images that together form new rhizome of meanings. While its richness may make it difficult to summarize the content, the book’s fundamental function is to challenge traditional ways of thinking and to disrupt the *status quo* of the primacy of words over pictures that characterizes Western culture. The book’s recurrent theme of the footprint and path is particularly meaningful here; it signifies both the idea of tradition and conventions—“narrow paths” as a “series of prescribed steps” (p. 147)—as well as the possibility to break existing lanes and to create our own individual pathways. To illustrate this idea, the book plays with drawings of feet, footprints, and tracks while also making references to examples such as the Monty Python’s ministry of silly walk or Gene Kelly’s *Singing in the Rain* role. The juxtaposition of footprints as Peircean index with references to Monty Python contributes further to making *Unflattening* a multi-layered text where drawings and words inform and deepen each other, and where pop culture references meet and intersect seamlessly with references to Plato or Descartes.

Another important characteristic of *Unflattening* is also that, albeit it is above all a visual text, its goal never seems to dismiss words entirely. The objective is rather to show how drawings can add a new dimension to our understanding of words and meanings. To disrupt and to unflatten what we have is the main message. In many ways, Sousanis's book is a call for opening and complicating, never to subtract or replace. The *unflattening* metaphor is in direct reference to *Flatland* by Edwin Abbott, a 1884 novella that examines the implications of living in a two-dimensional space. Given its call for a resolute multimodal approach to communication and meanings, Sousanis' text is also reminiscent of the New London Group's endeavor to challenge and reconceptualize traditional language-based approaches to literacy and communication¹. While not a pedagogical *manifesto per se*, *Unflattening* raises important questions about the definition of scholarly inquiry and the role of visuals in a writing classroom. In this regard, the book works too as means to challenge conventional and uniform pedagogical approaches to writing.

Spanning across disciplines and genres, *Unflattening* is a fascinating book that can be of interest to an eclectic readership. Sousanis's work can have a place in a course on comics, multimodal composing, semiotics, or culture, among many others. Anyone interested in theories of meanings should read Sousanis' work. While one may regret at times that the book questions and hints a lot at multiple (too many?) areas, often letting readers find their own answers, the questions it raises and the thoughtfulness it uses to involve readers' senses and perspectives make it a worthwhile read for anyone interested in knowledge and meaning-making processes.

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1 The New London Group; 1996, "A pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures", *Harvard educational review*, vol. 66, n° 1, 60–93.