Book Review:

Unflattening

by Nick Sousanis

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Is it possible to teach high school students philosophy in a comic art format? Doesn't the graphic or comic format mean that the content will be "dumbed down"? Alternately, is it possible that at least some ideas can be better understood using both pictures and words?

Nick Sousanis, a post-doctoral fellow in comic studies at the University of Calgary, makes a strong case for the latter in his book *Unflattening*. Douglas Wolk, in his May 2015 review in the New York Times, calls this work "a philosophical treatise in comics form." It is, I would agree, a philosophical treatise. The concept of *Unflattening* is a novel way to explore the many facets of flatness and its undoing.

"Flatness" is one dimensional, whereas "unflattening" reveals multiplicity. So, what is flat? And why does it need to be unflattened? And why should the reader care? Is this worthy of a philosophical treatise? And is a comic arts format a good way to address this concept?

The first chapter begins with a presentation, in words and drawings, of the flatness of the social and cultural world into which we are born. Two captions on the page state that "the enclosures become internal" and "what is outside is replicated inside" (Sousanis, 2015, p. 11). Chapter one is followed by an interlude that begins with a short quote from Herbert Marcuse. It reads as follows, as Marcuse put it, "reduced to the terms of this universe, they exist as no more than shades, insubstantial and without agency" (Sousanis, 2015, p. 21). This interlude extends flatness as a social condition and cultural construct to flatness as a perspectival plane and uses an unnamed but illustrated Hermes as a vehicle for transcendence. Agency and its relationship to the flattening and unflattening is one of the important themes that is explored throughout the book.

The last chapter, *Awakening*, underscores the importance of the theme of agency. Using two metaphors as inspiration and guide to explore the meaning of standing on one's feet, and the power of the grasp, each metaphor in the chapter, following the lead of Lakoff and Johnson (1999), embeds understanding in the human body while providing, at the same time, a new perspective on agency. I leave it to the reader to explore these metaphors and their relationship to agency as they engage the words and illustrations in this chapter and in this book. I think the reader will be rewarded for that exploration with new insights into the meaning of the embodied self and *Verstehen*.

This fascinating book further explores flatness and unflattening by examining and illustrating Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) studies of metaphor as well as their re-thinking of philosophy and psychology in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenges to Western Thought* (1999). One of the premises of *Philosophy in the Flesh* is that "reason is not disembodied, as tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experiences" (p. 4). The integration of illustration and words in *Unflattening* provides the ideal vehicle for conveying this idea in its richness and depth of understanding. The flavour and shape of this work is influenced by the breadth of sources cited and often illustrated, including but not limited to Ivan Illich (1972), William James (1907), Susanne Langer (1942, 1962), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), George H. Mead (1925), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and a score of other philosophers, psychologists, and novelists. It is the intention that this short summary/articulation of a couple of the complex ideas in Sousanis' treatise will whet the appetites of teachers and students to engage with and be challenged by the multidimensionality of *Unflattening*.

The illustration clearly enriches our understanding of the complex concept of flatness and unflattening. More than a philosophical exploration, this work is an invitation for young people to think deeply about who they are and their role in the construction of self and the understanding of the world around them. It is an invitation also for teachers to do the same for themselves and their students.

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