Talking Comics with Nick Sousanis

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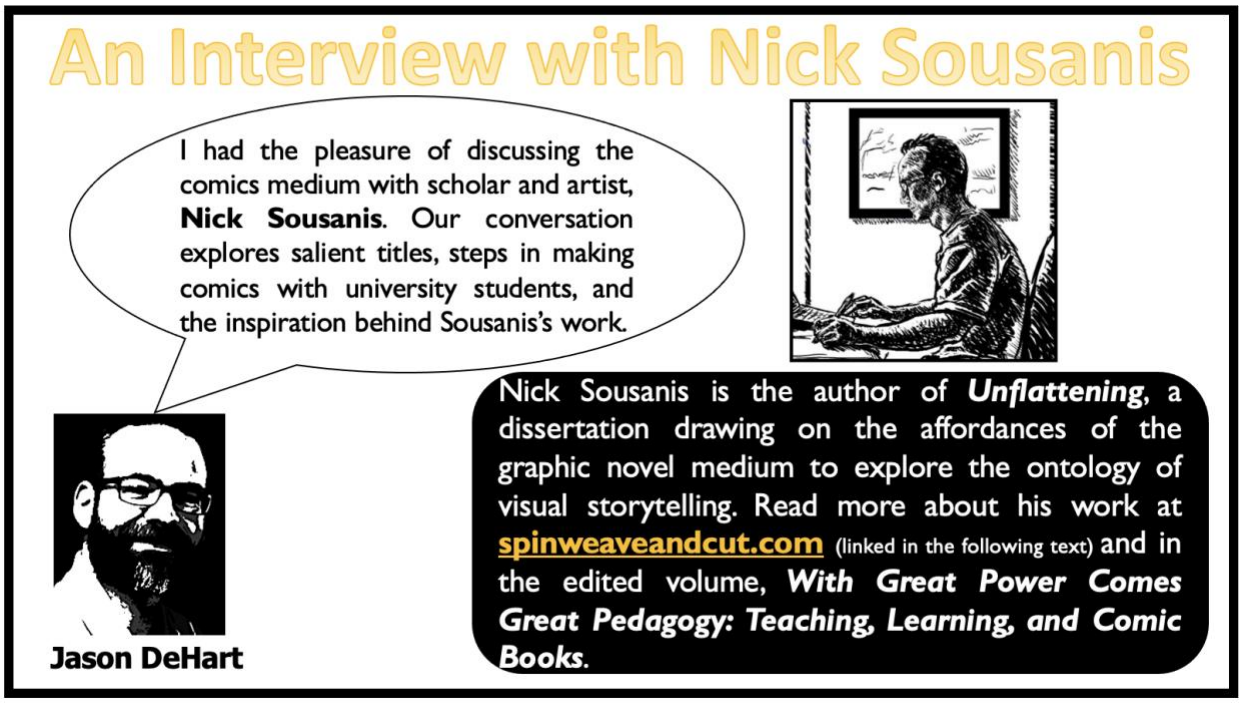

In June 2021, scholar, author, and artist Nick Sousanis was kind enough to engage in an interview with me regarding his work in comics, as well as his pedagogical processes. Sousanis is an Associate Professor of Humanities & Liberal Studies at San Francisco State University. Readers are encouraged to explore his dissertation in graphic novel format, *Unflattening*, his chapter in *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy*, as well as his website, Spin, Weave, & Cut.

I was a comics maker as a kid. I was into reading comics and drawing my own comics, and I published or printed on my own as I went through high school. I went to university and it's not a thing you could do, even in art school, which I didn't go to. It's not a thing you could do, right? So, I studied mathematics and I still was dabbling in comics, but there just wasn't an outlet for me because I went to school to do smart things and comics weren't counted as smart things. I feel like when you study mathematics, people always say, "Oh, you're so smart." And when you make art, they say, "Oh, you're so talented." And, in my life, I was a really talented mathematics student. I was very clever but how smart is harder to say. But as a comics maker, I think working in comics actually make me smarter than I could be without them. And I think what I see, part of the goal of my work, is healing some of that rift between smart and talented, and art and science, or however you want to divide those up. I really believe I can do more in comics form than I can do without them, and they allow me to think in ways that I couldn't. I just think it's kind of time. It's funny. When I came to Columbia, I'd been out of academia for a while, so it didn't occur to me that it was a big deal. *Maus* had been out. *Persepolis* was out, and *Understanding Comics*. All the big titles that we talk about as serious comics. They'd been around for a long time, so I thought the argument had been won. My dad is a physics teacher, so I thought I would make comics about physics and education. The work ended up becoming much more about itself and much more to say, "Hey, comics should count in this space and here's why." Comics are just a subset of other multimodalities.

I love that idea of alternative representation, and I know I've been in the analysis phase of research before. Sometimes you get to look at your project in a completely different way, and some themes start to make more sense and help you kind of coalesce some of those pieces a little bit more.

Yeah, and that's what I see in my students. More recently, now that I have a comics program, I get more people come from drawing or animation than I used to, but I get a lot of non-drawers, and primarily non-drawers. People who quit at age seven or so. They do amazing things and they discover things about themselves and, I mean I really think about it as, "How do we organize thinking in space?" We're visual creatures. We navigate the world by all this complex stuff going on in our eyes and our brains and with it, that system allows us to do all

these things. If you just say, "I'm going to bring that into conversation with my ideas, you've now got this really great partner to make you think more." I think that's true whether your final product is going to end up being a comic book, and that's a very specific thing, or it's simply going to be a process for your thinking.

The parallax view was one of the concepts I have revisited recently, thinking about comics and film. That idea of always looking at the world through these multiple modes and even the fact that we're looking and kind of this like binary vision. It's an interesting way of kind of thinking about how we take in the world, and thinking about film, too.

I think there's so many things that we don't realize we're doing. I share stories about my boy when he was nine months old, crawling through table legs and chairs. He knows all this information about his body and how big his shoulders are, and we do too, right? You go through a doorway and you don't think, am I going to make it or not, or should I? You just do it. Your visual system and the rest of your body is attuned for movement. That's how we develop so that we can navigate the world. Then, you go to school and you tend to sit in chairs and face a certain direction. This is not an anti-text and it's not an anti-chair thing either, but what happens when you say, "What are other ways that you think that you make sense of your world? What if that's just part of it?" I think my own perception of comics, back when I was in college, was like they were this sort of fun entertainment thing, but not a serious thing. When you start to realize, "Oh no, wait, look how sophisticated it is when somebody has to figure out how a word balloon is layered over something else." There is a ton of meaning you can make. Why not leverage that? Why not make that a realistic possibility for people?

A lot of times readers' eyes will go right to the words right away. They'll finish the book in a record amount of time. But then, you're saying they're all of those other affordances that the comics page has. All of those images. So, I am sometimes guilty of that too and I've been reading comics since I was probably six or seven years old. Just attending to the words and then you reach the end and it's like, "What was it that I was just reading?"

Well, if I'm giving a talk, I'll ask that question. What do you do first, read the words or the pictures? And in fact there are other options. You can take in the whole page and figure out the composition and then start to make your way back and forth. In the book, it's rhizomatically-linked stuff. It's not linear chain. Writing isn't either because you're making those nonlinear chain connections across the word, but the words themselves have to unfold in a serial manner, while comics don't. So comics really break the hierarchical chain of reading into something else.

Comics are not an easy thing to read out loud. I started reading comics to one of my children when she was two and a half. By the time she was about three and a half, she would point out when I missed sound effects. She was aware of how everything fit together in a really sophisticated way. She had to pay so much attention to everything. I credit that with making her a really early reader because she had to pay attention to all of the features, but I think it's just such an important skill.

For teaching comics, I do a ton of visual annotation/analysis with students (there are examples posted on my site) for every book we read for class, and I do a bigger project on it. When you start to make marks on top of somebody else's, you start to see things. I feel like all the students who sit there for half an hour with a comics page have this explosive understanding of what a comics page is and that helps you uncover the whole book. I don't come from a literature school of teaching comics. So I start from the fact that this is a visual form, and then move to elements like plot and themes. That, I think, is much better at the end because you now understand how this the text is made and how it's conveying meaning, whereas I think if you do stick at the word level, you go straight to themes. Not that there's anything wrong with that, right? But then, it's sort of like it didn't have to be a comic book. It's made it prettier that it's a comic book, but it didn't actually affect how you experienced it. I think we switch to the idea of, "Let's visually try to make sense of this first." It shifts your mind in a way. I think students get this x-ray vision where they really know how to look at and every detail starts to mean something to them.

And the time-consuming process. The thing that I've read that graphic novelists talk about is how much time it takes to put all of those things together. And then you get to the end and here's the book, and someone immediately says, "Where's the sequel?" So, when I look at *Unflattening*, I can't even imagine the time that went into *Unflattening*.

It took some time, but I had time back then, so it went quicker.

What training in making comics and art do you have?

I was the kid in class who drew things, so I drew a lot. I don't have training in comics at all because that didn't exist, but I have an MA in painting. I ran an arts magazine in Detroit, and my comics-making really dipped from college 'til much later. I have a sort of bizarre training in art. I'm not trained for comics at all, except my experience is making on my own. All the work I tried to do in art school tended to look like comics. While I loved my professors, they didn't really understand that side of it. They would say, "Why do you keep breaking things into little boxes?" I have anatomy training. There's a lot of experience at some point in my life.

That first chapter of *Unflattening* is very much designed to say, "This is a guy that draws." It's sort of overwrought and how many details and lines and every page has some sort of infinite sequence in it. It was really intended for the person who doesn't believe an academic can makes comics. In later parts, where I get a little more abstract in composition and some of the style, I wanted the reader to know that I could do that first thing anytime I wanted to. That was a very intentional choice. It was hard to start the book because it doesn't have a story. When I hit upon using that imagery, I was very intent that it would look a certain way. Some mix of classical printmaking. That sort of line work, and the 70s and 80s superhero comics I grew up reading. I tried to draw in lots of different ways and that's part of my nature of how I make comics is to draw on other styles, but my default is to start drawing in the style of what I read as a kid. It's hard to get away from. I wish I could. I've watched students who do these much more expressive, more lively kinds of drawing, but I struggle with that.

So, it's kind of like your visual is almost like a visual citation or literature review at the beginning of the book to say, these are the things I can do, these are the things I know.

A little bit. I just wanted people to open it and say, "Oh my! This is drawing." It's very important to me that this was work that was taken as seriously by comics people as it was by academics. I think the bar for impressing academics with your artistic skills is lower, right? So, I made a strong effort to get to know comics people once I got to New York City. And then, I would say my last couple years and in school, I spent as much time with the comics community as I did with the academics, because their opinion of how the work worked mattered more to me because they had more insight into that side of things.

You probably get the question of pushback a lot. Was there pushback from the scholarly community then? Does it continue?

I mean, I'm sure it's out there. It's hard to know. I did not. My advisors, one was Maxine Green who was 90 when I started and 96 when I defended in our living room, a few weeks before she passed. I had Ruth Vinz, who was an English Ed professor who was very senior. And professor Robbie McClintock who was emeritus by the time I graduated. So, there were three professors who didn't really have anything to lose. A younger professor might have been a little more nervous. They were just ready to see something new.

I also should always clarify that when I applied, I applied with the idea I would make comics. I sent samples of my comics, and that's why I wanted to come back. I was teaching at a university in Detroit where I had done this mixed Master's. I did interdisciplinary studies, one in math and one in art. Because I took so many art classes, the people there said, "Why don't you get one with us?" So, I did that too. I was teaching there and I had started making some comics again, political comics. I used those as my pitch, and I really saw in that my whole unusual life history from being a tennis pro and teaching tennis all the way to the end of my doctorate, that everything I was doing was education but it wasn't necessarily in a classroom setting.

My parents are educators and so education was always really important to me, it just came out in these very not quite straightforward ways. I have a lot of unfinished comics between high school and finally coming back full on to them about a decade later. The comics allowed me to do

this thing I love to do, but also allowed me to reach people in this really accessible way that wasn't simple.

Comics are sort of deceptively complex. So, you could hand somebody a comic and they would read it. You can't hand someone a 32-page journal article! No offense to journal articles, but you can't talk to your waiter and say, this is what I do and have them respond, "Oh, that sounds cool" and then hand them a journal article. They're not going to take it, and they're going to look offended. But a comic book they might take. I can use comics to transcend some of the limitations of vocabulary.

I remember an AERA conference where some senior professor said, "Well if you're not into academia, why are you here?" I said, "That's not really what I'm doing here." I'm saying, "Why can't we do more things? Why can't we expand what it means?" If you don't like something your country does, it's not like you just walk out. You protest, you stand up for things you think are important. So, that's the only like public experience I had. I will say, though, the most interesting sort of sort of pushback I had in school was my cohort, not all of them, some I was very close to and they were very supportive, but I feel like there were a few that were either worried for me, like, "What is this guy going to do?" Or like, "Why can't I do that? Shouldn't you have to do something else?" I don't know where it came from. They just didn't understand it, or were upset that they didn't get to do it.

It helps to be an older student returning. You find your communities pretty quickly who want to support you. I really think I just hit this weird moment where interest in comics and digital humanities were super supportive of me very early on. I think was demonstrating what they were arguing in a sideways way. The pushback has been pretty small.

Most of what I see is not direct. It's maybe a Tweet that someone sends out because I feel like Twitter is a place for any opinion about anything to be voiced in a vacuum that isn't really a vacuum. For students that I work with, comics seem to be embraced. At least, they seem to.

I think they do. I think about a student this year, who I think she was a first gen college student and not a drawer. I had her in my intro comics class last semester, which is a sort of broad readings and theory. I do have them make all the way through, that's

how we learn. She made this wonderful comic like, and we were in Zoom, so I don't even see a lot of these students part of the time.

She made this pretty long comic about her experience as a transfer student navigating the university for a first time. She drew well, but she doesn't come from some mastery of skill. It was this great, great piece and I sent it to my chair, just because I thought it was pretty cool. The chair sent it to one of the associate deans and the dean said, "You know, this is something we need to do." This student ended up getting the minor, so she took three classes this semester to graduate with the minor. She has poured herself into it. We do some stuff with Lynda Barry's work, so that really resonated with her. She made some really profound pieces about her experience, and I'm going to do a formal interview with her sometime just to get at how important it was to her to help her open up. She just thought this would be a fun class, and besides that piece, she ended up making comics about her life and the town she's from that's mostly Mexican. She just made all these really profound things, but she didn't come as an illustrator or a comics geek, just as, "Why not? I'll check this class out."

I'm on a mission here to get every student in our university to take a comics class not because I expect them to all be makers, or to be lifelong readers of them (well, you do kind of expect that but...), but just to see what happens, to see when that sort of understanding of what they can do is opened, what they might discover about themselves as thinkers, as makers. I'll just give you one more example. I had a student last semester, who really was a great student but not a drawer. She didn't want to be a drawer and she's actually better than she would say, but she just didn't feel like she was. We do a thing with pictureless comics. You make a comic but using only words and the things like word balloons and stuff like that. We did this, and I kept encouraging her because she had really nice clean lettering style and letter forms and she made a long final project. It was maybe 15 pages or something about surviving an abusive relationship she'd been in, a completely pictureless comic except the very last corner of the last page had one image in it. Everything else with words, and how she used the panels and it was awesome. She read it to us in our final Zoom meeting and it was really hard to know how we were going to continue class after she did this because it was so good and emotionally powerful. So, comics can be that or they can be lots of cross hatching like I do, and anywhere in between. I think that's a little trickier for fine art. Like, "Well, if I don't draw the nose right or I don't draw it expressively," which isn't even true, because I think we have a value

system that that is a little looser in comics. If you understand the form, there are so many ways you can get at it.

What you're saying is making me think about how we've had these examples like *Fun Home*, *Maus*, those big titles that stand out over time, but the thing that seems to be happening more and more, and maybe this is just my perception, is that comics are becoming more this space of exploring personal stories and exploring social issues. It's taken a turn in the past five to ten years, it seems like.

I think you're quite right and I feel like Graphic Medicine has been the biggest part of that. The first time I taught a comics class at Columbia as a student, I had these two professors from narrative medicine sitting in my class and I didn't know anything about narrative medicine. They were getting really interested in this thing called graphic medicine, but they didn't know anything about comics. I feel very fortunate that we had this cross-pollination very early in my teaching career and very early in the graphic medicine movement, which is now much bigger. I now make that at least a part of all my classes to expose students to it and they take to it so quickly.

It's not always about health or psychology, but I think you're right. Like the student talking about her college experience. That really grounds them in it, and it doesn't mean they don't jump out of that and tell other kinds of stories, but I think that's often a way in to tell about things that really matter to you. In the past, people would assume it had to be about superheroes or funny situations. And sure, for some people, they are that, but we're not all going to make the great superhero epic. Everybody's got some story about their life or some story about their uncle, or some family history.

We read Thi Bui's, *The Best We Could Do*. That's a pretty common read in our class. I have them read it and then take about five minutes in class or for 15 minutes after class, students make a quick sketch of what a comic about some family story. That always ends up prompting for a few of them something they do for a final project or a bigger project down the road, because all of a sudden it's like, "Oh I, yeah, I have these things in my family I want to know more about or I want to share." This is something I think about teaching in general, but I think it's very true here. I'm not going to hold somebody's pencil. I can't hold your arm and say, "This is how you make a nose." I can't do that, but I think opening the space to say, here's what it looks like, here are some examples,

here are some things we will try together. I think being open to it, students just rush through the door, and they just fly. I think it's pretty universal that students will take to it.

I find a lot of openness to it and especially when I use a document camera in Zoom. I'll put an image up on the screen and I'll model and mentor. You went to a place that I was going to ask about next in your pedagogy, which is mentor texts and mentor artists. Do you usually start with your own art? Or do you go to other places, or is it kind of a mixture?

I tell them about what I do the first day so they know where I'm coming from. But I use a lot of my talks on theory because a lot of my work came out of teaching comics, like when I'm trying to talk about how the comics page isn't purely sequential. I use my examples as the sort of base for theory a lot. I don't have them read my book, that's not something we do. Thi is definitely a great one. I know Thi well and I'm a huge fan, and the book is stunning. You look at Bechdel. She's a very trained drawer. She honed her craft in *Dykes to Watch Out For* for years, for decades, and it's very precise. The overall impact of the work overwhelms any of that, the compositions are so beautiful and powerful. I find it's very relatable and you can see how someone could make that. I think something like *Fun Home*, which I love, or something like *Watchmen*, which I also love, there's a level of craft there that shows masters at the top of their game. They are seasoned people who came from an artistic training.

I'm thinking now that I need to incorporate *The Best We Could Do* in some of those initial conversations, because I usually share *Unflattening* and then I'll share a page or two from *Stuck Rubber Baby* to kind of demonstrate some of the complexity.

So, that's a different conversation, right? If you're trying to demonstrate the complexity, I would show mine as well. It's a daunting one, I think, for the non-drawer to say, "Holy cow, look at all those little lines and all." It is a certain kind of skill that takes some training and it's important to say, Nick is not a guy who showed up in doc school and said, "Oh, I think I'll make comics." I've been making them from my life even, with pauses in there, my hand was always doing something.

I think of a student I have, he took my very first comics class just on a whim and would ask me all these philosophical questions about comics. Like, "How would you do this about time or space?" I'm like, "I don't know, try it." They were all beyond me kinds of questions. Even when he's not in my class, he's been sitting in the back just working on stuff, and he has forced himself to become a pretty solid drawer. He didn't go the more cartoony Lynda Barry route, he went the more French philosophical comics route. That's a harder skill to master, but he's getting there. His comics as structural are really quite brilliant. As drawings, they're very solid but he's still figuring that curve out, but he's forced himself to do it.

When you say mentor texts, we spend a bunch of time, especially in the making classes, saying, "Find three artists that you really like and each week we're going to pick some activity where you draw hands like they draw hands, or how do they draw water? Or how do they insert word balloons? So, copy them and see how they solve those problems." You'll find your hand can figure those things out. So, I'm a big fan of that. Thi's work is great. In my intro class, I often use that and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*. Gene's great and it's a great story, and he's very polished. You see a clear line style to Gene's work, and it teaches well. We often start, there's a book Sarah Varon's, *Robot Dreams*.

I start with that one, too. 

Oh, hey! It's so good. I used to bring it to class when I would teach wordless books and my students would sit down and read it and start sobbing. They were like, "Why aren't we doing this book?" Here's a book that my then four-year-old is reading and my 22-year-old college students are reading. I think they are surprised that I'm bringing this children's book to class. They're surprised it doesn't have any words, and then they're stunned by how much they're moved by it. That sort of opens a big door for them.

I use it to provide an example of what a gateway can be, because it's a thicker, more substantial book, even though it's a children's book and you have to look at the images. 

You have to.

I mean you have to take time with that. 

Typically, I think *The Arrival* is probably, Shaun Tan is the probably the most commonly taught wordless one. I love the book. I've only done it once because I think it's such a mastery of craft. It's a near unattainable level of craftsmanship that I think can be daunting and you can say, I love this book, but no, I can't do that. I think with Sara's book, I want to teach them how cartoons work too. This almost nothingness of lines can yet be so alive. I think her book really speaks to that, whereas Tan, again I probably lean more towards wanting to draw like him, but I don't think that *The Arrival* teaches anything about cartooning because it's a level of realism that's just difficult to attain. It's something that deserves lots of study. It is a hugely important book. That's the hardest thing, right? What books not to teach.

And it keeps growing, the list keeps growing. 

Oh yeah, it keeps growing. There's so much good work. I also use Forney's *Marble*. It's a memoir about her bipolarism and she's quite a great cartoonist. It's both a raw look at her life but it's also relatable for students. I can think back to our time in school, and I'm sure mental health was an issue, but it wasn't acknowledged. I don't think I go a week without having some conversation with a student about something related to mental health. Which is good, and I didn't expect it, but I think it's important. The book addresses that and she also draws in this immaculate, very clean style, but then super cartoony. She goes all over. So, it's a real education on what comics can be, too. It's useful to me on a lot of levels.

So, I'm thinking about anybody that might be reading this or viewing part of it and they're thinking from the standpoint of being new to comics as a medium, or new to comics and scholarship. Are there any recommended starting points for somebody that's starting to explore the area?

I was going to say the education part of my website is now crammed with so many resources. I don't make comics like Lynda Barry at all, and I don't teach comics like Lynda Barry at all, but I also have enormous respect and excitement for that work. One of her books, *Syllabus*, and her newer one, *Making Comics*, might be equally appropriate. I think it's just such a great way to rediscover that sense of, "I can make things, and it's fun." There are a lot of Lynda Barry pieces that I sneak into class.

At the same time, in Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story*, there is one page of the most boring story he could think of and then 98 versions of a story where he switches style, genre, and storytelling ways. I'm a huge fan of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, but Madden's book shows the potential and that you can figure out the potential yourself. Scott's book is such a useful book to see what comics can do. He's gotten so good at it. I use a lot of Scott's work to point out how we can do things in class, but I tend to not make it a textbook, recognizing too that a lot of students who get into comics are going to go buy it because they should. It's something you should have on your shelf.

As far as books to read, I do think Sara Varon's *Robot Dreams* is such a great one. She's a great cartoonist but it's a style that you can imagine that you could do. Even if it's harder to do it than it looks, it's still a style you could imagine. I would never start with *Watchmen.* I love it. I learned so much from studying it, and I made Alan Moore sort of my research mentor as a doctoral student. I learned so much from that, but I was already into comics. I already knew how to read them. I already knew genre of superheroes, so I think that's just too much for somebody.

I like David Small's *Stitches*. I haven't taught it in a while, just because of other needs in the class. It does deal with a lot of issues of wordlessness. It's so dependent on the mood and composition of pages. He's a master. It's really good, it's cartoony but in there is such control. When I was a teaching comics ed class, I would teach *Stitches* and *Fun Home* side by side because they're sort of similar thematically, both dealing with closeted parents and trying to make sense of their lives.

Stitches is about as close to cinematic and near-wordless as it can be, and *Fun Home* is this tightly controlled literary text. So, I like that sort of pairing to show comics could be really wordy or they can be really expressive, and anywhere in between.

I was thinking about how *Stitches* speaks to the idea that I'm telling my story, but then the style is also different from *Arrival,* or Howard Cruse.

There's just so much good work and it starts to become your taste. I like a certain level of complexity in my comics-making that other people may not, so that's tricky. I was thinking about Tillie Walden's *Spinning*, which I teach in my making class. We don't really have a book that we read as a class, but I do that one and I like it because she's a 19-year-old who makes this book and it wins all these awards and it's great. It's a very personal story and it's a really impressive use of the form.

I tend to lean towards formal approaches in my interest. That's why I say my school of teaching tends to be quite different than Lynda Barry's. It's very much about how the form works and hers is very much about the expressiveness of the marks you're making, and I think students need all of that, because you find your own place. I think Thi's work, as we said already, is such a great one. She does some really interesting, very subtle work. *Watchmen* does amazing things with time but it's not subtle. It's all very crafted, but Thi does amazing scenes. I'm thinking of a four-panel page. It's her talking to her dad and sometimes it's her as an adult talking to him as a boy and he's smoking a cigarette, but he's still smoking and he's older and she's changing ages and you get what's going on, but she's doing these shifts in time that are really, really profound but incredibly simple. Visually they're simple things to do, but then, if you think about what's actually happening, I think a question I might pose would be: How would you represent that in another media?

Right. 

You just couldn't do that. Maybe with film you could do it, but it would be weird. With an animated cartoon, perhaps you could. I had a Master's Courses this semester. We read Emil Ferris's *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. We were thinking about this

one page where you see the older brother for the first time and he comes in, and he is incredibly handsome and he's in color. The rest of the page is in black and white, and there's this horrid, very cartoony looking woman yelling slurs at him. The kinds of marks she's made are carrying a whole other level of meaning. How do you translate that into something else?

I think that's when you try to say that's how comics are complex, you can talk about the form, but you can also talk about how the drawn line carries meaning to it that is above and beyond what's being drawn. I think if I want to point out my own sort of flaws, I think my drawn lines tend to be very accurate. You can kind of feel David Small's drawings. Mine overwhelm you with some other kind of technical sense, but not something you see in Lynda Barry or David Small, or Thi, for that matter. The line itself is telling you a lot and that's really interesting, and I see students do it. I think that's something I have a ways to go on. We come from different places, all of us, and I think that's fine. For me, it's not even being critical of my work as much as to say there are moments when I watch a student who can draw fingers however they want but somehow it still works. I've got to look at fingers and make them that certain way.

I was just thinking about the medium that could maybe be the closest approximation to comics, and I guess it would be film but it's a fleeting image. A film feels more like a quick sequence where I take something in and unless I press pause I'm already at the next thing.

Right. On the one hand, in film the visual elements can be quite similar, and I think comics have tended to look towards movies for a lot of their inspiration in the past. Certainly, in superhero comics and that sort. Film is a time-based medium. There are things you can do in film that are really hard to do in comics. Comics are a static and flat medium. Time has to be expressed in space and that allows for all these other kinds of juxtapositions. I think of the Canadian cartoonist Seth who says comics aren't prose plus illustration, but rather poetry plus graphic design. In poetry, the form matters, like in comics. If you try to stick my comic on a Kindle, or Comixology, it wouldn't work. You can't scroll through panels. A storyboard works for a movie. People make comics, but even in Archie comics, characters come out of the panel. There are things that happen that really do depend on the shape of the page. Almost every comic has some element of that. I really think that flattened, static nature of comics makes them different and more akin to poetry and graphic design kind of issues. I think for makers, it's great to look at film for the kinds of

shots you make, but I think if you start looking at things like graphic design and poetry, how does that change what you can do on the page?

I know that comics were the thing that got me into reading and that's the story that I share.

Yeah, that's awesome. When you asked about pushback, you'll still see the horror stories about some librarian or maybe a teacher (and contrary to this, in general librarians have been huge champions of comics) who says, "Your kids should get a real book or, you know, do real reading." Those stories still happen. They're not gone, but they definitely happen less than they used to. Then there are still the stories where comics aren't just for kids. But you know, *Captain Underpants* is still getting banned. I think perceptions are slowly changing. I'd print little miniature excerpts of my book and I give them away all the time. I've given away probably several thousand copies of this little mini comic version of my book, and it's hard to explain. If you say, "I do scholarship as comics," the response is, "Who's your character?" And I say, "I don't have any characters." And then, "What's it about?" "Well, there's not really a story." Do you have your students make? Is that part of?

I do. I always have, even back to before I taught at the college level, my students would always make something, and it's not usually the first thing that we do. I'll introduce a few comics in a middle grades methods class that I teach. We read *New Kid*. Last time, we read *Guts*, as well.

Oh yeah *Guts* is great. Raina's work is definitely, you know. I waited for it until my daughter was six and she's just obsessed with them. That's such a great opening for comics.

I love it because it talks about normalizing personal health. 

That text is amazing, it's such an important book.

So, students get to make. And I teach a literacy assessment course. I co-teach it. So, we spend part of the time looking at this more formal way of assessing literacy, and then I bring in a series of six or seven graphic novels that the students read with me, and I talk about the different instructional approaches that you can use. And usually by the time we've read two or three, we're making something. Because that connection is so strong I don't know how you would read a graphic novel, and this is just my experience, and not make something in response.

I think you have to. I recount the story in one of my chapters in *Unflattening* of when I was a tennis pro. That's been my life and living, and that's a very hands-on activity. I made making a significant part of my comics and ed classes at Columbia my first couple of times. We did it pretty much from the beginning, but it was still a side thing.

The second or third time I taught the course, McCloud's book and some other texts didn't arrive on time. So, I just front loaded all the activities that I had been inventing. I remember catching myself a couple weeks into the term and saying, "Yeah, sorry the books haven't come yet. I know we haven't really learned..." and I stopped. I said, "You know, I was just about to make a statement that is sort of antithetical to what I'm doing right now, and antithetical to what I think about teaching." I think we're so schooled in thinking we've got to read these sources, that we don't appreciate how much we learn from, "Hey, make me a comic. Everybody, do this, make a comic about how you got here and do one version of it in three panels and one version of it in two pages."

You can interpret how you got here, from birth to now or how you physically walked here or drove here. I don't care, that's up to you. Then you compare those two with your own, your two versions with the whole classroom and what choices everyone made, and all of a sudden, you've got this enormous wealth of knowledge that you just taught yourself. Which doesn't discount reading McCloud's book or reading Thierry Groensteen. It just suggests it's in us to start with.

So, I think for me the making is in every class and if we read Gene Yang, the step is, "Well, draw yourself as a character from Gene Yang's book." Let's spend five minutes on it in class. For every author we read, let's just do it. It's silly, it's not that hard, but maybe you'll find a style you like. That's the advice in that chapter.

I love the idea of how the final project can be a creative one, but I think if you haven't built your way up to there, you're going to get three exceptional students who are really geeked about it and good, and you get a few others that try it but who aren't good at it and don't have the experience. I think if you start it from the beginning, even in just little tiny doses, even five minutes of class, students will make a thumbnail or make a quick sketch of how to do something weird with time on a comics page. Some of them will go crazy with it. Or panel breaking, or figure out some way that you can really discover things because, why not?

If it's "just do it" and not graded, they have nothing to lose and it's five minutes, so the constraint of time is not there. They just have to come up with something. I think when you see it in your own work, when you read Thi Bui's work, you start to notice, "Oh look at how her word balloons are." She does this kind of funny thing with them. Would you have noticed that if you were just reading it? You get a good feedback loop between, "Oh, I tried something and then I noticed all these new things in the stuff I'm reading." Again, even if, at the end of the day, the skills don't change much I don't think that matters. It doesn't change how readers see either way. I think of this one student. He said he was not a drawer and his final was about his grandmother's Alzheimer's. He didn't really know her. Very simplistic figures and symbols more than anything, all built on a regular rectangular grid across all three pages. He had three panels on one page that were intentionally left blank and they were so good. One was about him not knowing his grandmother, one about her becoming a nobody, and the final one acknowledging when she died. His drawing skills weren't accomplished, but he fully understood the form – and that let him make tremendous meaning on the page.

Yeah, that's a semiotic pause that you can't quite get? again in the same way.

Exactly. I think understanding that sort of grammar, punctuation, whatever words you use for what comics do is a lot more than, "Here's what happened in the story." With

the pictures, it's a different kind of meaning making. Learning to choose what you need to include and what you don't need to include. That's everything, right? I think a lot about my comics now as sort of choreography, orchestrating a series of movements that I want you to experience, and how I want you to experience them is part of the spatial way they move and decisions about what I need to leave in. What can I let you figure out? It's different if you write a comic for a four-year-old. You need more of those things because they can't make the kind of leaps that you can make. They might understand the picture but other elements confuse them.

So true. So, I will close with a thank you for talking with us, Dr. Sousanis.

Thank you.

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