

9-1-2021

Ferris, Emil. My Favorite Thing Is Monsters, Fantagraphics, 2017, 416 pages. Sousanis, Nick. Unflattening, Harvard UP, 2015, 208 pages.

Wilma Romatz
Mott Community College (Retired), whromatz@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Romatz, Wilma (2021) "Ferris, Emil. My Favorite Thing Is Monsters, Fantagraphics, 2017, 416 pages. Sousanis, Nick. Unflattening, Harvard UP, 2015, 208 pages," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 26 , Article 15.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl26x99c>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol26/iss1/15>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

Ferris, Emil. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, Fantagraphics, 2017, 416 pages.

Sousanis, Nick. *Unflattening*, Harvard UP, 2015, 208 pages.

Wilma Romatz

C. S. Mott Community College, retired

In February 2020, just before the Covid curtains came crashing down on our world, an invitation to the Michigan State University Comic Forum piqued my attention. The Forum was to feature two speakers, Emil Ferris, the author of an award-winning graphic novel, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, and Nick Sousanis, the award-winning author of *Unflattening*, which was written and drawn in comic format as his dissertation at Columbia. According to the forum flyer, Sousanis's book "argues for the importance of visual thinking in teaching and learning." That description was too enticing to ignore since I had finished my own dissertation about visual thinking through the English Department at MSU in 2002, studying the ways drawing could affect my community college composition students' writing. I learned later that several of the early pages of *Monsters* were Ferris's thesis for her Masters in Creative Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Both books have been around long enough to spark considerable response, but they remain important through the interviews, websites, and lectures that have brought Sousanis and Ferris's work to a wide audience. It is exciting to know that sequels to both books are in the works.

Sousanis's wide-ranging research that she presented that Saturday in February was as exciting as I had hoped it would be, but I was surprised to find myself equally drawn to Ferris's presentation. Even though on the surface, Ferris's world of monsters and horror comics is so different from Sousanis's world, the two works share several major themes. *Monsters* is drawn in a variety of graphic techniques from loose to highly rendered cross-hatching, both black and white and in color. *Unflattening's* more academic approach strives to embody the theory behind visual thinking with precise and measured complex drawings. Both creators are very passionate about their work—a prerequisite for the depth and width of the two books. That passion led me to purchase both books, and now I am passionate about them too.

The theorists Sousanis cites—among others, Rudolph Arnheim, Suzanne K. Langer, Lev Vygotsky, and especially Maxine Greene—were familiar to me from my research, and perhaps their voices resonate among JAEPL readers as well. However, it is the way in which Sousanis develops and presents these theories that makes the book inspirational. He weaves and spins ideas from ancient Greece to modern times in words and images together. Graphic memoirs and novels were already popular when he began in 2004, but drawing a dissertation was a totally new venture. The idea didn't emerge full-grown for him either. For his first class at Columbia with Maxine Greene in the early 2000s, he drew his response for her class, describing her as a spinning top—a metaphor he developed in several other comics—and that gave him the idea to go even larger with the process.

Unflattening

The opening lines and images of *Unflattening* present a powerful graphic illustration of what Sousanis sees as the condition of today's world. He writes, "Like a great weight, descending, suffocating, and ossifying, flatness permeates the landscape." These words march through fifteen pages of drawings of mummy-like figures moving along on rolling sidewalks, heads looking down, heading for a huge education factory where they will be adjusted and molded. Sousanis shows how "our vision has been shuttered... boxed into bubbles of our own making" (14), leaving us with narrow vision, unable to see beyond our own boundaries of thought. His image of human development through history is a page of beautiful spinning tops, "darting, dancing, animated and teeming with possibilities," that have now fallen over and their energy has been "curtailed, never set in motion, leaving only flatness" (16-17).

He compares these figures to Edwin Abbott's two-dimensional inhabitants of *Flatland* (originally published in 1882) who can see nothing beyond their flat plane of existence. Sousanis's prescription for what we must do to escape this flatness is to develop double vision. He points out that because our eyes see stereoscopically, by integrating two views we can perceive depth. In the same way, "Unflattening is a simultaneous engagement of multiple vantage points from which to engender new ways of seeing" (32). He will develop this metaphor through the rest of the book to make the point that seeing with "double vision" lets us escape being stuck in a rut, guided like puppets on strings because of our culture, background, and training. It makes it possible for us to become willing to see others' viewpoints and to work to bridge the gaps between groups and individuals.

The shape of our thoughts, Sousanis contends, is limited by the languages we use for thinking. In panels and whole-page illustrations he depicts the way that drawings (here in comic format) can move back and forth between the linear—words marching across the page and the "all-at-onceness" of the image—to better represent what actually happens when one thinks (58). He cites several experts who have researched the differences between *sequential* and *simultaneous* kinds of awareness, illustrating each in a medium that moves back and forth between both modes. "Words...are not the sole vehicle for communicating thought...[and] comics, beyond uniting text and image, allow for the integration and incorporation of multiple modes and signs and symbols" (65). For him, however, make no mistake—images are not mere illustrations of the words, but together they communicate more than either words or images can say alone. He says, "Drawing *is* my thinking" (Keynote).

In addition to what we perceive visually, he explores the concept of how our bodies in motion, bodies as modes of thought, add another dimension to thought. The physical movement required to draw affects thought. He says, "drawing is a way of seeing and thus, a way of knowing, in which we touch more directly the perceptual and embodied processes underlying thinking" (78). When we draw "we thus extend our thinking—distributing it between conception and perception," engaging both simultaneously. "We draw not to transcribe ideas from our heads but to generate them in search of greater understanding" (79). An elegantly curved full-page dancing figure shows how "Drawer and Drawing journey forth into the unknown together." His drawings make the theory

come to life on the page. Although Sousanis doesn't mention Sondra Perl's "felt sense" or Peter Elbow's "embracing contraries," he appears to be influenced by these classic concepts from composition theory that Maxine Greene surely must have talked about with him.

The fullness of this book creates the potential for unlimited discussion of these vast and compelling topics, and he has so much work available on his website that anyone interested in digging into both the theory and its practical application has a rich field to explore. Throughout the reading I kept wanting to see Sousanis's process for constructing his drawings, and I was happy to find that the appendix includes several pages of the beginning drawings and brainstorming he used to work out the theory and layout for the book. In one interview he admitted that he had made at least fifty drawings to come up with one page. He only shows a bit of the process in the appendix, but it is a good start for understanding how his "drawing *is* his thinking," as he said in the forum and other lectures.

From the beginning of his work on his dissertation at Columbia, Sousanis published his progress in his blog. Now he generously has published his syllabi for his classes on thinking through comics along with exercises and examples of student work. The blog, *Spinweaveandcut.com* is an inspiring— and practical—source that could be instrumental in achieving some of the reform needed for today's virtual education problems, with the increasing emphasis on the visual.

Sousanis's lectures from several conferences and forums also have been posted on YouTube. In one he said, "Everything I do is to try to help people see themselves in a new light...[to ask] 'how can you look at something and see yourself and our environment in new ways?'" *Unflattening* has been published in seven languages, and Sousanis says he is amazed at the popularity of his work.

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters

Emil Ferris's presentation inspired me to explore just what it is that makes some people love horror. To tell the truth, I have never really been a fan of horror of any kind, and I probably would not have picked up the book without first hearing Ferris talk. The wide scope of her background and insight began to change my mind within the first few minutes. Ferris talked about how drawing had essentially saved her life after scoliosis kept her from walking until she was three. She felt like a monster much of her life. Then, after she contracted West Nile Virus at age forty and became paralyzed, drawing was her means for recovery. Not only does she show why she loves monsters, and why the monsters we have created need and deserve love, her book demonstrates the healing powers of making art.

This amazing 400 page, four pound novel, devoid of pagination, is only slightly disguised autobiography. Its format is the hand-drawn, hand-written journal of ten-year old Karen Reyes, filled with her account of growing up in the sixties in Chicago, feeling like a misfit. Using only ballpoint and Flair pens as a child might do, she is able to tell a compelling and complex story. In spite of the darkness of Karen's life and experiences, a sense of hope underlies even the most difficult parts of the story, and both large

and small details offer an intriguing perspective on life with bits of surprise and humor along the way.

We meet Karen in her bedroom in the basement of a once elegant building in Chicago that she says “smells like the early Impressionism of Vincent Van Gogh—all big strokes of umber and ochre—a peppery greasy I love you smell.” She dreams that she is in danger; she howls as a screaming mob comes down her street. She changes into a werewolf saying “it is easier being a monster than being a human girl.” She maintains this werewolf persona that represents how she sees herself throughout the novel.

It is easy to love this small girl with fangs and an under bite whose depiction is reminiscent of Sendak’s drawing in *Where the Wild Things Are* and who is set on understanding the wrongs she sees around her, as she tries to figure out how to live through the pain of growing up.

She soon learns that her beautiful upstairs neighbor Anka Silverberg is dead, found shot in the heart and tucked neatly in bed. The police ruled it a suicide, even though Anka had been shot in her living room. This makes no sense to Karen, so she borrows her older brother’s hat and trench coat and becomes a detective. She explores hidden parts of her building and checks on the alibis of her strange neighbors.

Karen doesn’t understand her older brother Deeze’s many sexual relationships that he doesn’t even attempt to hide from her, letting her see him in all his own brokenness. She loves him deeply and worries about him. He protects her and takes her to the Art Institute of Chicago, where she has an unusual relationship with the paintings she says are her “friends.” Ferris has Karen draw several of her favorite paintings in her journal in great detail and also lets Deeze explain some of them to Karen, including their monster imagery. She says, “I remember Deeze laughed when I told him that the witch [in Saftleven’s *A Witches’ Sabbath*] smelled like wood smoke and egg salad sandwiches.” Ferris thus gives the reader a new perspective on these works of art. Later Karen imagines herself being pulled into some of the more frightening paintings.

Early in the Comic Forum lecture, Ferris talked about the *vesica piscis*, sacred geometry, and Imoto’s research on the effect of Tibetan priests’ prayer on water. Intriguing as it was, at first that seemed to be a distraction in the middle of a discussion on her life, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and monsters. However, the symbolism of the *vesica piscis*, the almond shape formed in the center of two overlapping circles, is central to Ferris’s composition throughout the book as Ferris pointed out in her lecture. Deeze explains to Karen that it is very ancient knowledge, and that “the pyramids, ancient temples, cathedrals and even the Art Institute were all designed using it.” Everything is energy, Ferris said, and this symbol represents all the dichotomies—mother/father, above/below, life/death, and the transition from one world to another. There are certainly many dichotomies, triangles and almond shapes in this book.

The Chicago of *Monsters* was a complicated place to grow up in 1968 with the murder of Martin Luther King setting off rebellions and the poverty and danger of Karen’s (and Ferris’s) neighborhood. Ferris has drawn over fifty pages to show this setting and these monstrous events in great detail. Against this background, Karen is trying to come to terms with what love means, and with her own sexuality. She thinks about all the women who seem to be addicted to Deeze. She is assaulted one evening by classmates and punished by the nuns for defending herself, even though she is the victim.

In response she goes home and draws the cover of a Ghastly comic, a huge warty, claw-toothed head leering over a frightened man and woman. Above it she writes, "Love is actually the weirdest Monster out there."

Throughout her journal, Karen turns to drawing these covers as a way to deal with her fear and stress. When Karen learns that her mother is dying of cancer, a journal page shows her rage. Later, over the DREAD cover she writes "Dear notebook—I'll tell you straight—in my opinion the best horror magazine covers are the ones where the lady's boobs aren't spilling out as she's getting attacked by a monster. Those covers give me something worse than the creeps. I think the boob covers send a secret message that it is very dangerous to have breasts—and considering what Mama is going through, maybe the magazines know stuff that we don't...."

And yet there is humor in the depiction of this life. The hand-drawn monster-themed valentines Karen gives her classmates made me laugh out loud. One says, "I would have given you my heart but all I could spare was this ventricle," a piece of macaroni with red food coloring dripped over it like blood. She risks having the nuns confiscate her notebook but draws several monster cards on her math paper including a "shrieking violet" and a heart-shaped box filled with eyeballs. Karen is surprised that the nuns tell her she will go to hell for reading horror comics even after telling the class about the "cephalophore" saints like St. Denis who carry their own heads." Deeze tells her that St. Christopher, "the 'Dog-headed' saint...[is his] main (wolf) man." A very Egyptian-looking, wolf-headed character tells Karen, "if I can be a saint, then you can definitely be a detective." Like the many references to Egyptian mythology, this wolf-head appears throughout the novel.

Several of the carefully rendered portraits look almost sculpted on the page. There is much heart and feeling in the way Ferris draws her characters and it is clear, as she said in an interview, that she *feels* the characters as she draws them. She said it's a family joke that her daughter comes in and asks, "Which character are you crying about this time?"

It is difficult to miss the symbolic significance in the fact that the murder victim Anka Silverberg represents life, and the difficulties she faced are significant on more than a personal level. Anka is always drawn in blue ink, wearing scarab earrings, and her cat whose forehead fur is in the shape of the *ankh* (the Egyptian symbol of life) is named King Tut. As an extensive flashback, in her detective role, Karen listens to Anka's recording of her difficult early life during the Holocaust and draws many pages of those images in her journal as she listens. The hatred of the mob reverberates throughout the story in stark contrast with the love shown by the prostitutes who took Anka in and raised her. It is easy to compare Anka's experiences in 1940's Germany with what was going on both in 1968 Chicago, and what is happening today. Karen says, "A Nazi is a person who chooses to NOT SEE anything that would keep them from being cruel...even if what they will NOT SEE is how their cruelty will destroy them."

The irony in this book, and what it borrows from horror comics and film, is the idea that the true "monsters" are good. They are the misunderstood, the misfits, the different. The villagers are the mob, the unthinking followers whom Karen identifies as the Mean, Ordinary, and Boring. "A good monster sometimes gives somebody a fright because they're weird looking and fangy...a fact that is beyond their control...but bad monsters are all about control...they want the whole world to be scared so that bad monsters can

call the shots.” Perhaps Nick Sousanis would say they are the Flatlanders. Perhaps they are related to 21st century politics.

For both Sousanis and Ferris, comics are one answer to the divides we are experiencing in today’s society, a means for rising above the narrow constraints media, history, and culture have placed upon us. That comic art rather than “fine” art would be the medium they choose to express that position might seem far-fetched to some, but to others, it could not be more appropriate. Drawing comics is a metaphor for thinking beyond the fixed, “that’s the way it’s always been,” a place where we don’t think about any “side” but our own. When we begin to try to see the other side, (and realize that there are no sides) we stop being “Not-Sees.”

Neither book is a quick read and delving into them has evoked a year-long explosion of thought and a shift in my own perception as well. Several times while reading, I have recalled themes from AEPL conferences I have attended, and I could envision featuring these two comic artists in a future gathering in the mountains.

Sousanis explores the theory behind drawing as thinking in carefully drawn page after page of deep intellectual compositions. Ferris’ book is a *tour de force* and an example of the beauty of working in both words and images. As I read, it struck me that *Monsters* is a literary work on the scale of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s allegorical novels, and at the same time, its art elevates the comic genre to a high level. Together they say if we keep thinking of writing in words alone, we miss so much of what is possible. For teachers, writers, and artists, the important thing is that literally putting pen to paper in whatever way one’s skills allow opens the boundaries of thought to new and exciting directions.

Works Cited

- Ferris, Emil. <http://www.emilferris.com>
 —. Speaking as a distinguished alum at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpgP2SJSqyQ>
 Jennings, Dana. “First, Emil Ferris Was Paralyzed. Then Her Book Got Lost at Sea.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/arts/design/first-emil-ferris-was-paralyzed-then-her-book-got-lost-at-sea.html>.
 Sousanis, Nick. <https://spinweaveandcut.com/unflattening/>
 —. <https://spinweaveandcut.com/maxine-eugene/>
 —. <http://www.comicsforum.msu.edu/2020/02/22/2020-msu-comics-forum-keynote-address-livestreams-archived/>
 —. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6cASACXOAQ> Nick Sousanis speaking with Professor Latinx

