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“I’m reminding us of where we came from”: an interview with Nick Sousanis

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ABSTRACT

In Fall 2022, we sat down with Nick Sousanis, Eisner-Winning comics author, and the creator of *Unflattening* to talk about his forthcoming work, *Nostos*. He shared with us his research process and the formalistic challenges he has given himself to explore the capabilities of comics to document and display. We talked about making comics as a way of thinking and processing ideas including the birth of the universe, conception, and the development of a child. We also hear stories from the classroom as Nick Sousanis shares unique examples of comics from non-drawers and finally, we consider the future of comics for blind and low-vision readers

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In Fall 2022, we sat down with Nick Sousanis Eisner-Winning comics author and the creator of *Unflattening* to talk about his forthcoming work, *Nostos*. He shared with us his research process and the formalistic challenges he has given himself to explore the capabilities of comics to document and display. We talked about making comics as a way of thinking and processing ideas including the birth of the universe, conception, and the development of a child. We also hear stories from the classroom as Nick Sousanis shares unique examples of comics from non-drawers and we finally consider the future of comics for blind and low vision readers

Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo: Hi, nice to see you! By the way, we like your *Captain America* shirt.

Nick Sousanis: Likewise, long time. That’s all I own are superhero t-shirts!

Camden and Zullo: Did you see the recent *New York Times* article that in France there are these athletes that are doing superhero, Spider-Man-like moves on buildings to turn out the lights? They’re environmental activists that are wanting to turn out the lights in all these huge buildings in Paris because they’re burning so much electricity.¹

Sousanis: I had not. Oh – cool! I found it.

Camden and Zullo: Alright, can we start right off by talking about your current book project, *Nostos*. Do you want to start there?

Sousanis: Yeah, here's a piece of it (Figure 1)

Camden and Zullo: Very nice, wow.

Sousanis: It's very slow going. This opening is fifteen feet long and is a continuous image across it all. I have a roll of it. It's coming. It's painfully slow, because I was pretty slow figuring out what I was doing, but you probably want to know what it's about.

Camden and Zullo: Yes, but we're also interested in the fact that the opening is fifteen feet long stretched out. What are you doing there?

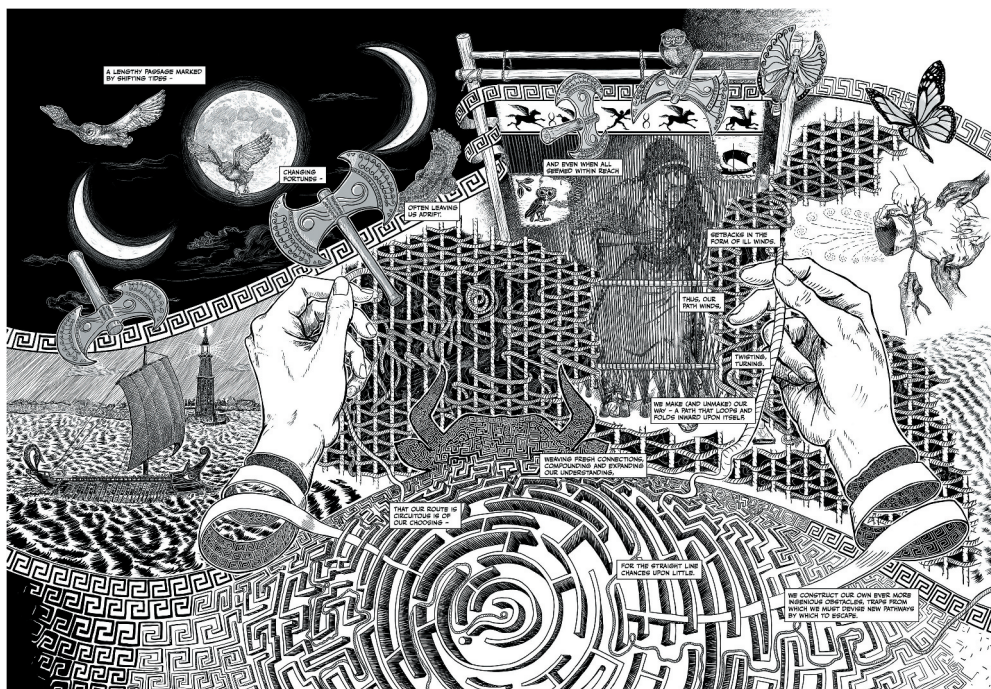


Figure 1. From *Nostos*. Reprinted with permission.

Sousanis: Well, besides the stuff I'm trying to get at, I'm also playing some formalist games with myself. So, the opening chapter has a tapestry that winds through it and on it is a retelling of *The Odyssey* that I never really talk about, but all the images are a retelling of it. The chapter is about the creative process. I thought about comics and the historical connection between comics and tapestries. The opening chapter (I'm really hoping Harvard will release it separately as a standalone in an accordion book) is this continuous sequence. I just wanted to try it. It works as a book – like all the page breaks are there – it's designed to work as a book, but it's also this fifteen-foot-long spread. Then the second chapter is about the life of a not-yet-born child and then the first year or two of life out in the world. I think I did more research just for that chapter than my whole dissertation.

Camden and Zullo: What kind of research did you do? Can you give us the range – in a nutshell?

Sousanis: I read all things about development, about what babies hear before they're born, all the sounds and smells that they take in, what they remember. I read books about baby laughter and each book would sort of lead to another. I dove into the research, and with each page it would just keep blowing up. Once I started, I didn't know how to stop. I didn't know how to gloss over anything: I had to get it right. This chapter, began with no panel boundaries at first, there's all sort of fluid imagery, but as we move into the birth of the baby and how it learns routines, the chapter begins to gain more structure – not a specific constraint – but definite order to it that builds as the chapter (and the child) develops. Each chapter is different; in the recently finished chapter, I go backwards another jump to conception and the development of the foetus. In that chapter each page composition is built around circles. So, lots of circles! The subject matter required another ridiculous amount of research. It was not as long a chapter, but figuring out the material and what to draw for these difficult to visualise moments – getting all the details right took a lot of time. I was consulting with scientists in the field. I began realising how many of the sources I was reading were frequently wrong, especially images and videos I came across. I don't know if that's because they're taking short cuts or if it's because they were simplifying or it's that the person visualising the science didn't know the science. So, I was determined not to perpetuate any of those errors, even though most of my readers will have no idea, there are a few of them out there that will say, 'Hey that's right' or 'oh no, that's not.'

Camden and Zullo: Was that particularly true in the in the section on conception? Was that the one that was most in error?

Sousanis: Yes, that was particularly so for the chapter on conception. It's really hard to visualise what's going on in this time and it's not incredibly well-documented in humans.

Camden and Zullo: What comes up as you are talking is form, form in relation to the ideas that you're wanting to depict or the story that you're wanting to depict and how form captures that.

Sousanis: The circles are interesting for that reason. I collected circular compositions that I knew of, but I also put the question out on Twitter and people sent many instances to me. So, I made a whole web page of circular compositions for my classes and myself, and anyone curious about such things.² I used these examples as jumping off points, but I would have drawn the chapter faster if I hadn't been boxed into circles, most likely. It's interesting how when you put yourself into that constraint that a very different kind of story comes about, a different kind of way of explanation and narrative comes out because I've got to deal with the circles like this. If I could just go in sequence that would be easier, but no, I can't, so now I have to figure out a new way to write so that the words fall along the image. It changes what I write, what I say, it changes everything, which is fun (if slow).

Camden and Zullo: When you say circular images the person that comes to mind immediately for us is J. H. Williams III. All of his work, of course, but *Batwoman* in particular comes to mind.

Sousanis: Oh yeah, I got a bunch of J.H. Williams' images in the collection of circular layouts. I also have a page on hexagonal layouts too.³ The next chapter is on the origin of the universe and the formation of stars, and my plan is to work with hexagons. Hexagons are really a hassle. There aren't many good examples out there. For the circles, I didn't recreate any from what I'd seen. Like, here's your composition and here's my page. That felt wrong. There's one where I said, 'Oh I like how you're doing that now, what can I do that changes that?' But I tried to make things that I wanted to see so I could use them as examples of ways to do it. I'm not sure why I've decided this, but I have.

Camden and Zullo: It's interesting to see you think about comics and shape or form, how comics take shape through different forms like the tapestry, circles, and now hexagons.

Sousanis: The first page I drew was of Penelope weaving and unweaving as the tapestry goes through the page. Besides the images from the *Odyssey*, I also reference back to *Unflattening*, but in terms of constraints, I play a bit with things I've heard Matt Madden discuss in regards to the Oubapo constraint-based comics collective.⁴ On this page, I wrote, 'We construct our own ever more ingenious obstacles traps from which we must devise new pathways by which to escape.' The whole page was sort of exploring that idea.

Camden and Zullo: How are you following up on ideas from *Unflattening*?

Sousanis: It's definitely a continuation of the first book (Figures 2 and 3), a sequel of sorts or an extension of it: but the concept of it is a reminder of where we came from both as children and as a species. I'm reminding us of where we came from. I want to really think about what thinking is and thinking as something in our bodies and thinking as something in our hands and in our mark-making, and then without saying it overtly, I'll turn towards education. What does this mean for how we learn and how we teach? As with all my work, I won't say any of those words, but that's where I'm headed.

Camden and Zullo: I think from our standpoint, the focus on origins, developmentally makes perfect sense. We don't of course have any idea of what the climax of the book will be but . . .

Sousanis: Nor do I!

Camden and Zullo: But it's the idea, *ab ovo*, that notion in Latin, thinking of something from the egg or from the very beginning. There's a lovely tradition of that, which arguably, we're losing touch with, so it would make sense from our standpoint that you return us to a sense of origin.

Sousanis: That seemed important to me. I think we spend a lot of our attention on things that are awful and ridiculous and a waste of time. I mean, the amount of time we've had to spend thinking about Trump in our last six years, like how much of our lives have been wasted on that? And we have really important things to do, so the idea of reminding people what they are, maybe it works, maybe it doesn't. We'll see, but I think about it when I teach simple things like how you see a smiley face in in electric outlets, pareidolia, and we're so good at it that you don't think about it, right? Oh yeah, I see a face of course. But when you start to slow down and say, 'what's going on? What's going on in my head and my body to make me see that?' I often feel when I'm telling students, when I say this to them, they look at me like I'm crazy, like 'well yeah, duh dude, it's a face, right?' But the cognitive act for you to turn two dots and a mark into that is a pretty big deal. I think if we can remember that, it starts to show how capable and creative everybody is. That's my hope, we'll see what it looks like, but so far so good. As far as it's slowness, maybe that's what I get for naming it as I did (well, it was my editor's idea to name it after the *Odyssey*, but maybe naming it after the Scottish Play would be even worse), it's bound to take a long time to get there either way.

Camden and Zullo: When you were working on your first book, were you as scrupulous? Everything you do is scrupulous, but were you as aware of time in your first book? In

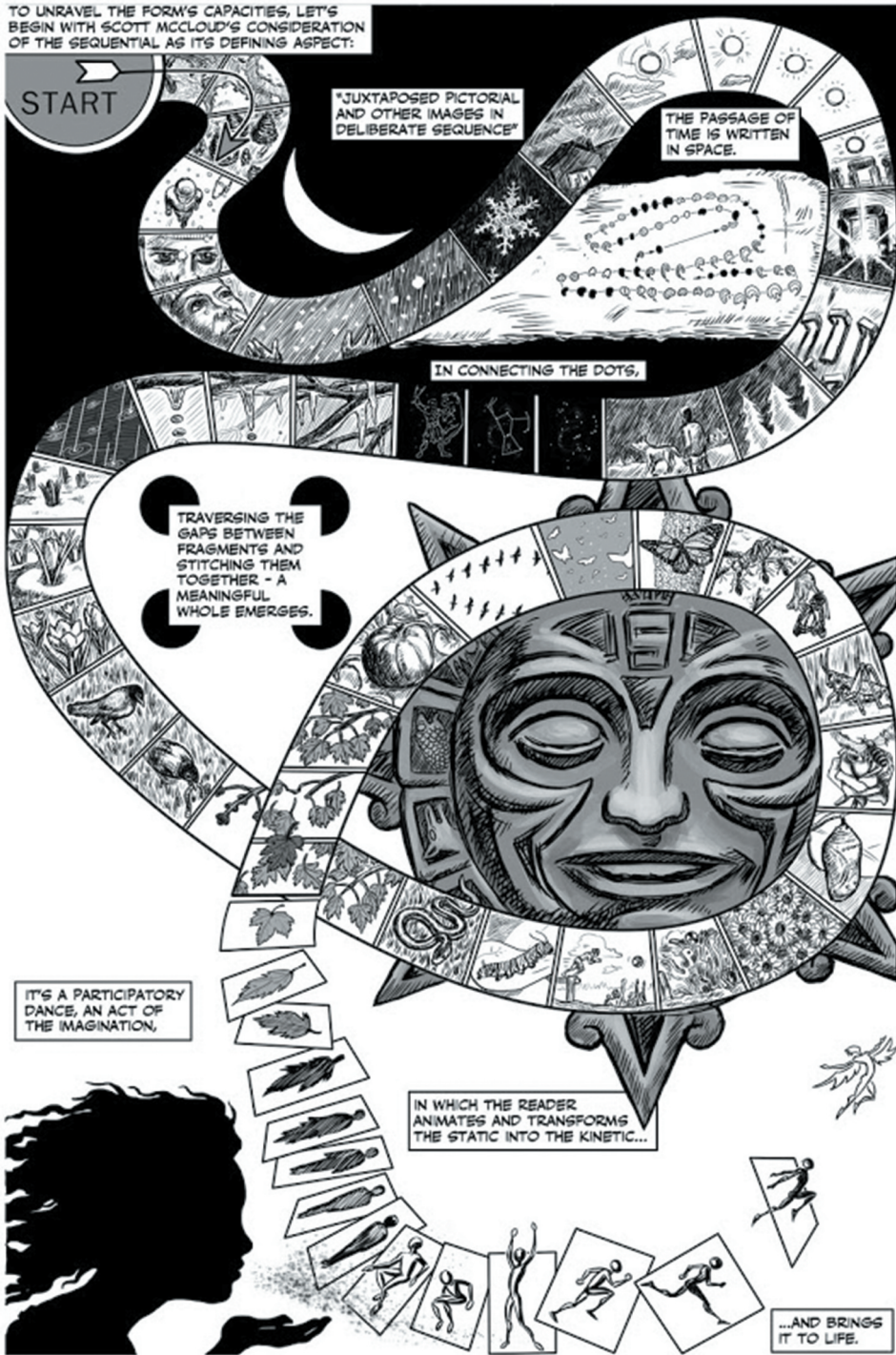


Figure 2. From *Unflattering*, p.61. Reprinted with permission.

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Figure 3. From *Unflattering*, p. 62. Reprinted with permission.

other words, is this just a process that you go through where you're saying, 'Oh my gosh, I wish it didn't take so long, etc?' Is that part of the thing that you have to do to yourself in a way?

Sousanis: I'm slow cause it's really dense and there's a lot that goes on in every page, but then I worked all the time on the book and now I don't because I have a professor job and I have two small humans. Each time I look at notes from five years ago for things I'm going to start doing now – I did a bunch of general research at the beginning – I get to the actual chapter and it's like writing a new book each chapter. Not all the topics will be so hard. The baby stuff was extremely difficult because I drew like six-hundred different drawings of babies or so – and I'm not that good at drawing babies. Plus, in each page they're at different stages. It was a lot. I was thinking about this the other day after I did a class visit on Zoom and someone said, 'how long does a page take you?' Some of them take a crazy amount of time but one of the real difficulties is that I never draw the same subject. So, if I were drawing Batman, and I'm pretty good at drawing Batman now, I'd get really good at drawing Batman and then I would get to draw Batman panel after panel. But on one page I have sixty different kinds of cells in the human body. So, each panel I had to do research to draw what I'm drawing in the panel and then I'm done with that. That's it. I don't ever have to draw those cells again. So, then I have to learn a new thing. Hopefully drawing stars and quarks and things won't be so hard. Stars at least will be a little bit easier because we know what they look like.

Camden and Zullo: Your cartooning is different from others, you're almost more of an illustrator, like a medical illustrator.

Sousanis: I'm not as good as a medical illustrator. My technical skills probably aren't as strong as theirs, but I'm also not much of a cartoonist. I mean I've never been a cartoonist. Even when I drew superhero stuff as a kid, I still wasn't a cartoonist. Accuracy has always been important and maybe I'd like to let some of that go. So, we'll see. Hopefully, some of the constraints I have for the later chapters will say "Well in this chapter you only have to do things like an only 'chibi'⁵ style chapter. It'd be quite a departure.

Camden and Zullo: It's interesting because you consider what you do comics, but you just don't consider yourself a cartoonist? Can you say more about how you think about that? Obviously, comics and cartoons do not always have to overlap, but we are these nerdy literary critics who always want to find a category. So, if this is not cartooning, what is this?

Sousanis: I definitely make comics. I absolutely make comics. Now even when people ask what my work is, I say comics then I have to explain ‘yes, it’s a graphic novel and whatever,’ but cartooning and it’s probably a fine distinction . . .

Camden and Zullo: It’s an intriguing distinction.

Sousanis: But if I draw a spider, I really want to draw that spider, like that kind of spider. There’s a spider in *Unflattening* and it’s a specific kind of spider that has a certain kind of eyes and makes a web and it’s not a generic spider that I could cartoon. I researched that spider to make sure I had one that fit what I was going for and that it looked right. I’m the child of a physics teacher [my dad] and an environmental studies teacher [mom], and if I draw some kind of critter that’s not that kind of critter then I know, at least my mom’s going to know. So, it just feels important to me. This is not a knock on cartooning in the least, because cartoonists are awesome and I am envious, but I just don’t think I can do that. I’m sure I could I could train myself to do it, but my inclination is to draw things that look like the things.

Camden and Zullo: Although, in art history Leonardo’s drawings are referred to as cartoons. Michelangelo’s drawings, too. Just a quibble about the word, right? We’re not talking about *Archie* all the time (though we could).

Sousanis: I think you’re right. I mean the word comes from the cardboard-like material they drew on, so it’s a quibble. My daughter teases me because she’s like, ‘I’ll teach you how to cartoon.’

You know, I just like drawing things a certain way.

Camden and Zullo: So, we just interviewed Lynda Barry: she would perhaps say you want to listen to your daughter.

Sousanis: Right and I teach my students Lynda’s stuff about drawing people. I teach them all that stuff, and they thrive on it but it’s not the comics I make. I appreciate Scott’s [McCloud] definition of comics. He’s also got this strong emphasis on how you can relate more to the cartoon and I think that really reveals more of a bias for comics that you make than it is for what’s true. I don’t think we could like *The Arrival* less because Shaun Tan’s drawings look too much like real people to relate to them. I just I don’t buy it. I think cartoons are amazing in how you can relate to a cartoon in ways that seem to

transcend the simplicity of the marks, but I don't believe that the more realistic side of things are any less so. I just don't. That part feels like a bridge too far for me.

Camden and Zullo: So, can we say you are more of an illustrator just not a medical illustrator?

Sousanis: When you said the word illustrator – I really recoil when somebody calls me an illustrator, too. I first came back to making comics as an adult for a political art exhibition around the 2004 presidential election. For the first show, before the election, I made a McCloud-like political comic where I'm explaining things and there's me walking and saying look at this and look at this. Then a week after the election, I made a follow up piece that dropped the visible narrator altogether and instead became a metaphorical show of hands (as in voting). Every panel was a different reference to hands. I'm from Michigan, so the state of Michigan was in there, and all kinds of things like ET's glowing finger, Mr. Spock's Vulcan salute, a foam 'we're #1' hand, the bird, and even the robotic arm on the space shuttle – for every single panel. That really shaped me (and has since become an exercise I do with my making comics students). I'm a huge fan of McCloud's work and owe so much to it and Scott for the inspiration and the path it paved for things like my work, but I'm kind of an anti-fan of the work that mimics it (even when I really like the people doing it!), only because comics have so much potential to go in all kinds of directions. And for me using visual metaphor and verbal metaphor has been really productive and generative, and so I think probably one of the reasons I'm doing this crazy stuff with constraints for the new work is to teach myself things that I can do with comics. So much of my work comes out of what I do in classes, maybe not the subject – the subject matter too, but what I can do with the form. I give my students challenges and I give myself challenges so I can see what I can do. *Unflattening* is the only book I've ever made, so I feel like I'm sort of just getting started.

Camden and Zullo: Can you say more about what role you think the comics form plays in helping us to think as creator and as reader? With your students, you're helping them to think through comics, right?

Sousanis: Absolutely true. This is the core of my argument: comics handle sequential stuff in the way we move through time, but because of the all-at-once, simultaneous nature of the visual, they let us do all those side things, all the other thoughts, too going on in parallel at the same time. Like while I'm talking to you, it's making me want to add this idea and this idea and think about what I have to do after. We're having a sequential conversation (despite my penchant for parentheticals) even as I'm thinking of other things and getting new ideas all the while (as I'd imagine is the case for you both as well). Comics lets us put both sequential and simultaneous modes on the page at the same time and I feel like that is so powerful.

The idea of observing events in time and graphically noting them in spatial sequence is a fundamentally human thing, and a really important literacy. In *Unflattening* I made this redrawing of a Palaeolithic lunar calendar from like 30,000 years ago where they're looking at the moon. They must've asked, why does the moon change each day? What makes that happen? So, all they can do is mark it, make note of these changes on a flat surface, right? That's the only way they can do it. They can't make videos of it; they only have access to a flat surface and mark making tools. It's not to say that that calendar is comics, but what I'm asking is how do we make sense of time? How did they? By making marks on a flat surface. The more I teach comics the more I'm sort of struck by it. This medium that doesn't do anything, this flattest, most static of mediums is arguably the most powerful form for talking about time and the simultaneous, all-over nature of our thoughts.

I am also thinking about how comics can capture simultaneous events as I get ready to do this chapter that opens with the first fractions of a second of the universe. There's not a lot of reference material – no good stock images – but I think the comics form can do something there!

While I've read an enormous amount on the subject now, I've come across pretty much nothing for interesting or useful visuals. I mean, certainly people have made fantastic drawings of explosions or something, but nobody's drawn this 'birth' moment [Nick notes afterwards that Jens Harder's *Alpha* does in fact make a pretty cool attempt at it], but I think comics could do something really novel with that because of the way the form can both be a sequence – as in here's this thing and then that thing, but comics also deal with the space itself – the sort of panel-breaking ways that way in which the whole page composition becomes an actor and essential to the meaning-making. There feels to me like great potential to try something really new and explore ways that I can talk about this really impossible moment to imagine using the form of comics in ways I haven't thought of yet and I definitely haven't seen yet. I think comics offer a way to get at things that are really difficult to get at in other forms.

I feel like my students can do that, right? They can think about space. I always really like Seth's quote about comics not being 'prose and illustration combined.' Rather, they are 'poetry and graphic design.'⁶ My students don't all come to comics with drawing experience; I get some people with experience, but I get far more of them with none. As I said earlier, Lynda Barry's work is incredibly helpful for this because it's a good way to jumpstart them with some confidence and letting go of things. A lot of the activities I use like the 'grids and gestures' activity I came up with (that you guys have seen) gets people to make marks and see how much they already know about drawing and think about how time works on a page, all these things to free them from the fear of not being able to draw a nose that looks like a nose, right?⁷

One of my favourite student's comics which I've shared is from a guy who was a non-drawer; not only was he a non-drawer, he didn't even bother drawing noses on his people. So, it's about his grandmother's passing from Alzheimer's and how he really never knew her. It's a three-page comic laid out in a three by four grid. My favourite part of it is on the second page, three panels that align in a diagonal each of which is left blank. In the first, he talks about how he didn't really know his grandmother. Then he writes, she was nobody to him, and in the final panel, the words read 'then she was gone.' There are a lot of other great things he does with symbols and such across the pages, but he

totally understood his drawing skills were in a technical sense non-existent – but his comprehension of what he could do with comics with what he had to work with was brilliant. I didn't teach him anything about how to draw except some activities that got him seeing what he could do with marks, lots of looking at comics and analysing and copying how the authors made meaning on their pages, but he understood how to use the page to organise his thoughts and say something. It's a profound thing. And understanding, and maybe even more importantly, trusting that he could say so much by drawing nothing, speaks volumes about his learning.

I think of reading *Persepolis* in class, and there's the page where Marji's neighbour's house has been bombed and it goes to black on the last panel. A bunch of students wanted to talk about that, about how powerful that was and about what great cartooning that is, and she didn't draw anything. Marjane Satrapi didn't draw anything, and they're moved by it.

I also had a student a couple years ago, also a non-drawer where we did an assignment on pictureless comics. So, the comics are made up of words, sound effects, you can break and play with the panels and compositions, but you just can't draw things. This student thrived with our in-class assignment trying it out, and because she was convinced she couldn't draw, I kept encouraging her, 'keep doing more of these'. She ended up doing her final as a pictureless comic about her experience in an abusive relationship and it was unbelievable. I don't even know how we continued the class after she shared her work. It was really hard because it was a difficult topic of course, but the work was also *so* good. She just crushed it. It's like fifteen pages long or something and there is a drawing, I think, this tiny drawing of her in the corner in the very last panel, but the other fourteen and a half pages are solely conveying meaning through the composition, her use of words and letterforms. It's really extraordinary – and I think speaks to the spectrum of approaches to making comics and how everyone can find a way to express themselves through the form.

The other student comic I always share at public talks, is a student's look at herself, talking about how she is being put in boxes (and here she plays with panels as both window and literal box within the narrative). On the last page of the excerpt I share, she writes about letting go of that because boxes restrict her unnecessarily because she can go anywhere she wishes. And on this page, she only uses text, and the words wrap around the page in a spiral asking you to rotate the paper or turn your head to read along. The comic's really profound but it's inspired me a lot because she's using the form to change how you read. I think that happened somewhat accidentally in my earlier work.

Camden and Zullo: Yes, you did that.

Sousanis: But now that's something I think about with greater intentionality. For example, when I did the page on entropy for the *Boston Globe* (Figure 4). If you see my sketches (Figure 5), you can see that for most of my page designs, I'm mapping out the reading path in addition to the image composition – and they are often not the same thing. In starting a page, I ask myself: how do I want someone to read this? I'll just share the labyrinth page from *Nostos*. Here, you read across the two spread left-to-right across

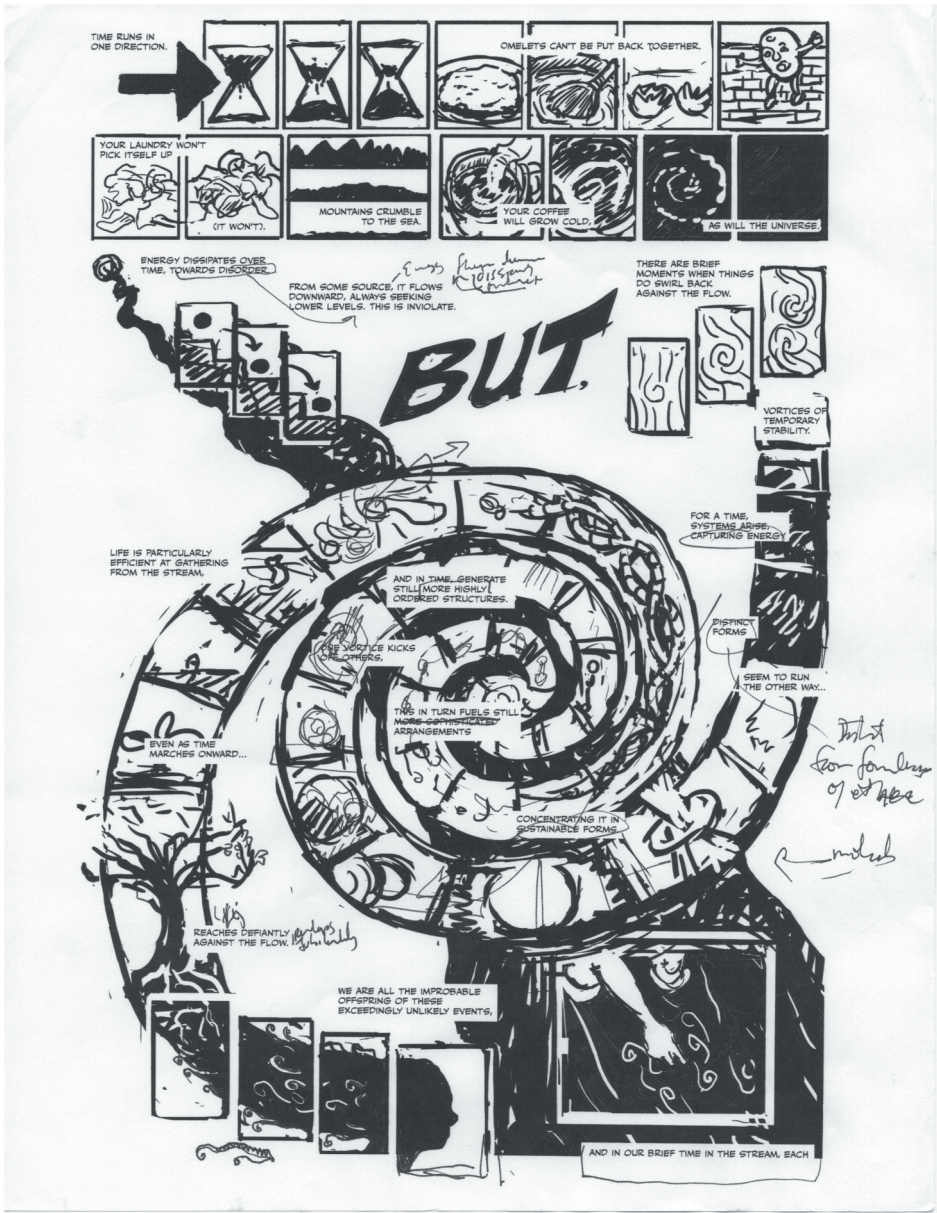


Figure 4. Sketch of 'Entropy.' Reprinted with permission.

the entire top, but as you continue following the cues on the page to jump to the next line of text, the words end up having you jump back across the fold and right there, I wrote, 'That our route is circuitous is of our choosing.' Then as the reading path slides back to the right side page again, it reads, 'For the straight line chances upon little.' So, I think I've

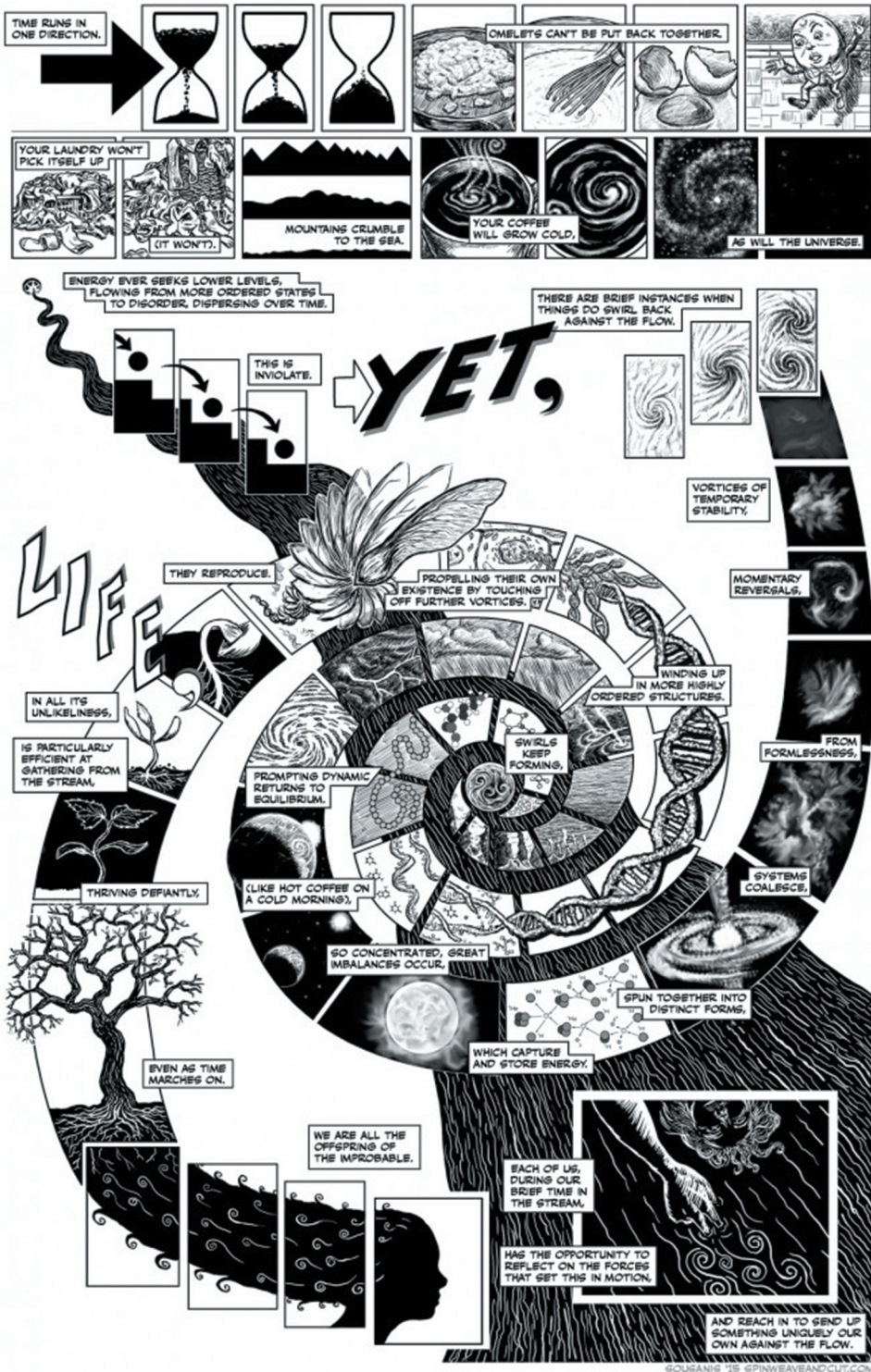


Figure 5. 'Entropy.' Reprinted with permission.

done all the things I need to do to make sure that people go the right way. I mean, we'll see, but I love the way that you can make the reading experience integral to the meaning making. More linear comics that you can swipe through and read on your phone have their own appeal and they're great, but I'm very resistant to them for my own work because I like the idea that you are engaged in a sort of physical experience reading.

Camden and Zullo: The physical part is important even therapeutically, there is EMDR therapy, eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing, where you reroute and/or direct people's vision and it has therapeutic effect and you are asking folks to also use their hand in this process even as you trace. So, that engagement of hand eye movement can perhaps change neurological focus even if instantaneously, there'll be some adjustment. That's promising in terms of the effect of the comic on the reader especially if it's done, not in a therapeutic way, not in a clinical way, but for entertainment purposes and to spur creativity.

When you were talking about showing the beginning, the modest ambition here to show the beginning of the universe, no big deal, right? But when you do that, when you're doing that, are you now going to do a bit of research on the physics of it?

Sousanis: I have done a lot. My dad's a physics teacher, and he's quite interested in this topic. So, there's a slight chance it'll be a tiny team up with him, though I think mostly he has pointed me to some readings and now I'm just off and running. It's really tricky, though, because reading things like string theory, I don't know what to make of it, whether I believe any of it or whether those studying it believe it anymore. It's changing fast and the Webb telescope that went up a couple months ago is already changing things pretty dramatically in terms of our understanding of the cosmos and its history. So, in my work, I want to be ambiguous enough that it's not out of date three hours after I publish it, but also accurate enough that people know that I know what I'm talking about. Again, this is a constraint. It has to make sense to somebody who has no idea what I'm talking about, right? That was the case with all the stuff about babies, where I've put very specific words that do mean something scientific precisely as I intend, but they also mean a much broader thing and leave space for a reader to find their own way in. Again, because the book isn't really about any of these subjects, it's just taking you on this tour of them as it's building this other conversation. So, it's a challenge. It's going to be a challenge. Once you get past the first minute of the birth of the universe, though, it'll get a lot easier! Before the first minute, it's really hard.

Camden and Zullo: You are reckoning with mystery as well as science, or knowledge and all in comics.

Sousanis: It's a good challenge.

Camden and Zullo: So, one chapter is on conception and the next one is genesis, how far back do we go?

Sousanis: That's it. We're going forward from here on out. The book makes a series of backward jumps and in fact, that tapestry, half of the things happening on it are moving backwards in time, while other things are moving forwards in time. So, I sort of set up the fact that I'm going to jump backwards, but once I hit the origin of the universe, I'm done going backwards. It's all forward from there.

Camden and Zullo: What's interesting is you are talking a lot about what is not remembered but known. We don't remember or have pictures of the birth of the universe and we certainly don't remember utero. However . . .

Sousanis: Right. I do think that definitely gets to your last question about how comics can help because I do think they can. For example, if you understand the maths, you can sort of understand that first second, but how can you put the maths into sort of a physical form that people can see? I do believe comics can do that with the weird kinds of juxtapositions you can get, which allow you to see in a higher dimension of sorts.

Camden and Zullo: This takes the discussion of how comics document the repressed or forgotten into really interesting territory.

Sousanis: Right. When I did the baby chapter my initial plan was to do all first-person view, but it soon became clear nobody would know what was going on. I think that's what made the chapter so much harder. It was going to be very abstract but then I felt compelled to get it all right (and perhaps of use). I mean, maybe this is where the book could have gone, like there was a fork in the road and I went down this fork instead of that fork.

I also want to say this about constraints, but you may or may not know, I've been doing this project making comics accessible for blind and low vision readers?⁸

Camden and Zullo: We saw it on your website. Go ahead, we want to hear more about this.

Sousanis: It's something that occurred to me when I was making *Unflattening*, particularly my metaphor for seeing through one eye and then the other (Figure 6) because obviously there's people who have only one functioning eye or neither. I realised that my whole metaphor of vision leaves some people out due to its subject and then the fact that it's a comic – an inherently visual medium – leaves this whole other set of people out

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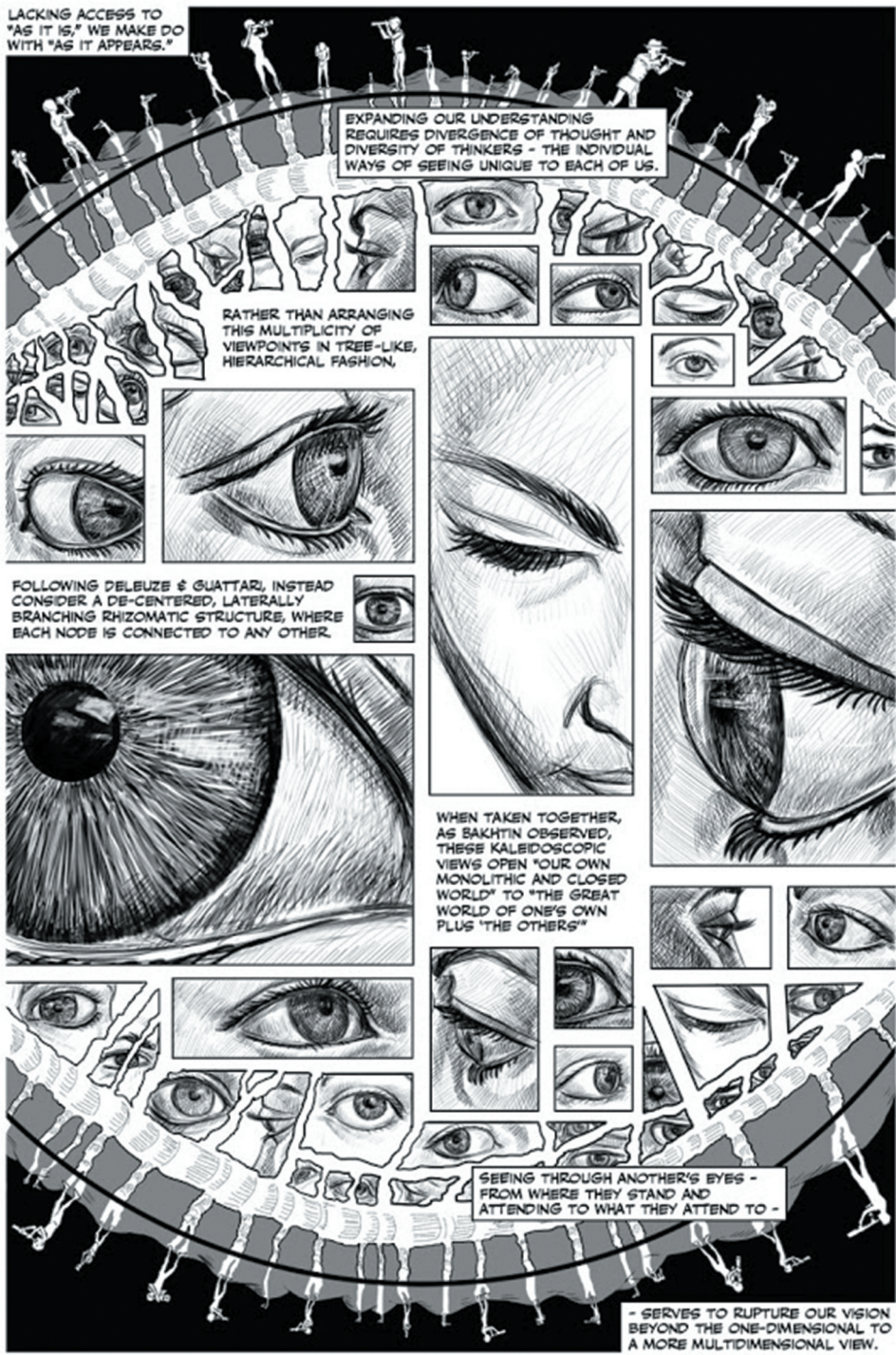


Figure 6. From *Unflattering*, p. 39. Reprinted with permission.

entirely. When I got hired at San Francisco State, I happened to be at incoming orientation with another prof (Dr. Yue-Ting Siu) hired at the same in the program for visual impairment (her now husband worked on comics and autism, so she was interested in and had some familiarity with comics already). So, we got to talking and then anytime I'd see something about comics for blind readers, first with Ilan Manouach's *Shapreader* and the few other instances I've seen over the years, I'd send it her way and say, 'is this actually cool or is this like a sighted person's idea of what a cool thing is for blind people'

Then two years ago I had a student who was going to do her master's thesis as a comic and the library needed it to be accessible. So we met with the library and ultimately, this is an easy thing to do, you just write descriptive text for it, but I was thinking, we could see this as a headache or we could say, how is this an opportunity to see what more we could do? Because there is no good standard for this, right? Best practices for making comics accessible to blind and low vision readers don't exist. So, from that we wrote a small grant and we were going to have this little gathering to sort of inform us about what's out there and we invited Scott McCloud and his daughter Sky McLeod, who has the same visual degenerative disease as his dad, her grandfather. She inherited the same thing. She's still a filmmaker, after having done a lot of visual stuff until her twenties. So, we had the two of them along with a few people who lead institutions on accessibility who are blind (Chancey Fleet and Josh Miele) and a few others coming to this issue from academia. Then about a week before I said, let's put it out on Twitter just to see if we get a few more people. Then eight hundred people showed up!

Camden and Zullo: Wow!

Sousanis: So, then we had another event. This one was a full day symposium on the different modalities for accessibility. There was one on tactile, one on audio, and one on technology and a fourth session, about representations of disability, which included comics scholar Jose Alaniz. Thanks to the experience of my colleague Ting and Emily Beitiks (of the SFSU Longmore Institute on Disability), our panels consisted of more blind presenters than sighted and all had blind moderators – as I've learned from them, 'nothing about us without us.' Following up on this, we launched a competition on accessible comics and are funding the proposal winners to bring these accessible comics ideas to life. The competition's over and we expect to be sharing the finished projects in the spring.

All this has brought me back to my own work. One of the things I'm thinking about, is whether I can design a chapter that uses some of the things I've been learning from this? Make it readable from the ground up for blind and sighted audiences . . . Another sort of constraint to push my understanding of comics and make something that we need more examples of. We'll see.

Camden and Zullo: It would be a lovely pioneering enterprise to think about rendering of comics within a Braille that would be not just the text but the illustration. It's an area of comics we know so little about.

Sousanis: What I really learned from that very first convening is that there's no one size fits all solution to this. Some people were born blind and their concerns are very different than the people who became blind later in life. People who became blind later in life may want to know more about colours. Then there's people who are good with tactile Braille all that and there's people who don't do it at all. There is no simple solution to this but makes the need for it all the more pressing.

Camden and Zullo: But there's obviously an audience and dare we say a market.

Sousanis: I think so. I keep thinking we should just open a shingle and provide this for Marvel and DC so somebody can read Spider-Man just like their sighted friends. You just should be able to do it. It's kind of shocking to me as I get into it that that hasn't happened. I'm not really going to do it because I can't even get my own work done though.

Camden and Zullo: But you're talking about it, which is important.

Sousanis: Well, we're hoping we build a bigger community around it which is which has been happening. So, we'll see.

Camden and Zullo: So, you mentioned Spider-Man and we're curious, what are you reading right now? But I think we already know: physics!

Sousanis: Well, the reading I spend time on, yes. I read a lot of science, but that's always been true. I read with my kid a lot, both kids now and there is so much good comics made for kids today. We read *Baby-Sitter's Club* is good, *Smile and Drama* by Raina Telgemeier are fantastic. Then you know, there's a whole range of *Zita The Space Girl*, and they just don't quit. *Batman* and *Scooby Doo* are really good. They had cuts referencing characters that I know because I've been reading Batman comics since the '70s.

My daughter doesn't have any idea who these characters are, but I can explain it. So that's good. But I mean, things like *When Stars are Scattered* by Omar Mohamed and Victoria Jamieson. The illustrator, though, who is not the author of it cranked out some three hundred pages of compelling things about these boys' lives that people need to see. I still read superhero comics, because I'm sort of a legacy reader. I'm curious if Batman is eating well, getting enough exercise, all those things. Any time J. H. Williams draws something I have to see it

Zullo: You mentioned *Nightwing* in a recent interview, right?

Sousanis: Right. (Artist) Bruno Redondo did this amazing thing where they had one continuous image for the whole comic.⁹ I've corresponded with him, they did the thing I kept pointing to Harvard like look they can do it, let's get this out! Because I made mine about two years before that – I just don't have the rest of the book. Superhero artists, they come up with some good stuff. Greg Smallwood, who's drawing *Human Target* right now, that guy, every page that guy does is amazing. I read a lot of comics, though.

Camden and Zullo: Us too. Thanks for sharing. We are always interested in what others are keeping up with as well. Thank you for meeting with us.

Sousanis: Alright, stay warm over there.

Notes

1. Paris Dispatch, "With Leaps and Bounds, Parkour Athletes Turn Off the Lights in Paris," *New York Times*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/world/europe/paris-energy-conservation-parkour.html>.
2. For examples of circular compositions in comics, see: <https://spinweaveandcut.com/circular-compositions>.
3. For examples of hexagonal compositions in comics, see: <https://spinweaveandcut.com/hexagonal-compositions>.
4. Oubapo, Oubapo de Bande Dessinée Potentielle (Workshop for Potential Comics) is an approach to creating comics using constraints. To learn more, see: <https://mattmadden.com/comics/oubapo>.
5. 'Chibi' is a style of caricature from Japan which draws characters in an exaggerated small style.
6. See Seth, 'Poetry, Design and Comics: An interview with Seth by Marc Ngui.' *Canada: Carousel Magazine*, Vol. 19 (2006):17–24.
7. Nick Sousanis, 'Grids and gestures: A comics Making Exercise,' *SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education* 2, no. 1 (2015).
8. For more information, see <https://spinweaveandcut.com/blind-accessible-comics>.
9. See Tom Taylor and Bruno Redondo, *Nightwing #87* (DC Comics: Burbank, CA, 2021).

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