

# Nick Sousanis Story of How: Comics

I do my research in comic book form. That is, I draw and I write as one, often at once, never letting one be subservient to the other. Text and image are equals. I'm not so sure this was as much a, what form should I work in?, as much as a, this is what I do, and why not do it as academic research? This May, I completed what is believed to be the first doctoral dissertation entirely in this form (from Teachers College, Columbia University), but I hope having done it, it opens the door so that there will be others – and that it will help fuel others in other mediums and modes of expression. To do it, I had to argue why it worked and demonstrate it along the way. No one does this when they write only in text. That's the convention – no need to justify it. Again, hopefully the next person to tackle their work in comics form, perhaps can point to this for justification, and then just get on with their work and explore what they need to explore.

Why comics for me in the first place? A few reasons: first, it's a form I grew up reading and grew up making. It fueled my creative explorations. But I confess, there was a time – post-high school and for many years to come – that I left comics in the back seat and focused my studies on more “serious” avenues. I don't regret the other studies, but I do regret not being as active in my comics practice all along. But here we are. I came back to it circuitously, but in doing so, I saw its potential, not just to tell tales of the fantastic, but to create educational works that could be both accessible but not simplified. The medium is expansive in the layers of thought it can hold in what appears to be a simple space. So, I make works in comics that I can share in academic circles but can also be given to people I meet on the street.

And I do this. The same pieces. And this means a lot – it offers me a way to take what I think are important ideas that are usually walled off in academic language and bring them to anyone. And this is essential. But perhaps the most important reason I work in comics, is that I think better in them. That is, when I make sketches, I let my eyes be part of my thinking. And our visual system is incredibly powerful and active all the time – in ways that we can't even be aware of. So now my internal thoughts and eyes get together through the actions of my hand, and they have a conversation and things start to happen. And there are words too – except I'm not stuck to the linear form that writing usually requires and can instead build tangents, create different sorts of juxtapositions and layers. The way our minds work. That is – do you think in straight lines? Doubtful. You think all over and sometimes all-at-once. And comics both let me generate ideas in that vision-thinking conversation, but then they let me put my thoughts down with pictures, words, and arrange them in the space in ways that, I think, approach the complexity of what's going on in our thinking.

The more I reflect on the form I work in and learn from other authors and those who theorize on its workings, the more conscious I become of how I operate in it, and the more it pushes me to make better work. – Nick

You can see samples of my work at [www.spinweaveandcut.com](http://www.spinweaveandcut.com). A particularly relevant piece to this short essay might be this one:

<http://spinweaveandcut.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-shape-of-our-thoughts-in-visarts.html>