Behind the Scenes of a Dissertation in Comics Form

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Abstract

A behind the scenes look at the process and practice of the author's dissertation written and drawn entirely in comics form. Specifically, the commentary explores the thinking and sketches behind the opening part of the third chapter titled "The Shape of Our Thoughts," which focuses on the interaction between image and text.

This serves as a behind-the-scenes look at the opening six pages from the third chapter of my dissertation, which I wrote and drew entirely in comics form. Some background: I completed the dissertation in May 2014 for a doctorate in education from Teachers College at Columbia University. The work consists of 132 comics pages along with references and such. Titled *Unflattening,* through its very form it makes a metaphorical argument for the importance of visual thinking in teaching and learning. A primary concern of the work is that the visual is never mere illustration to accompany ideas in written text, rather the form itself embodies the content. Visual and verbal are equally integral to making meaning. In that regard, the following commentary is rather at odds with my point – it's all words *about* pictures. Thus, this behind-the-scenes look is *not* meant to serve as an explanation – the pages stand on their own and I'd recommend reading this only after seeing them. Due to *Unflattening* being published by Harvard University Press (http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674744431), the pages discussed only appear on my website here: http://spinweaveandcut.com/ch3-opening-amphibious-refraction/

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Let me open with a brief overview of what has come prior to contextualize these pages. In the opening chapters, I develop the notion of flatness as a narrowing of sight and a contraction of possibilities in which inhabitants lack the critical dimension to see beyond the borders of the systems they're born into and are ultimately complicit in perpetuating.

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Figure 1.

Given the setting I'm theorizing within, I am addressing issues in education and schooling, but neither term is ever used. This conscious avoidance of specific terms and instead relying on verbal and visual metaphors is something I employ throughout the entire dissertation, with the intention of creating a work that doesn't turn the reader away with specialized

or politicized language, but can invite them to find their own way of connecting to the material.
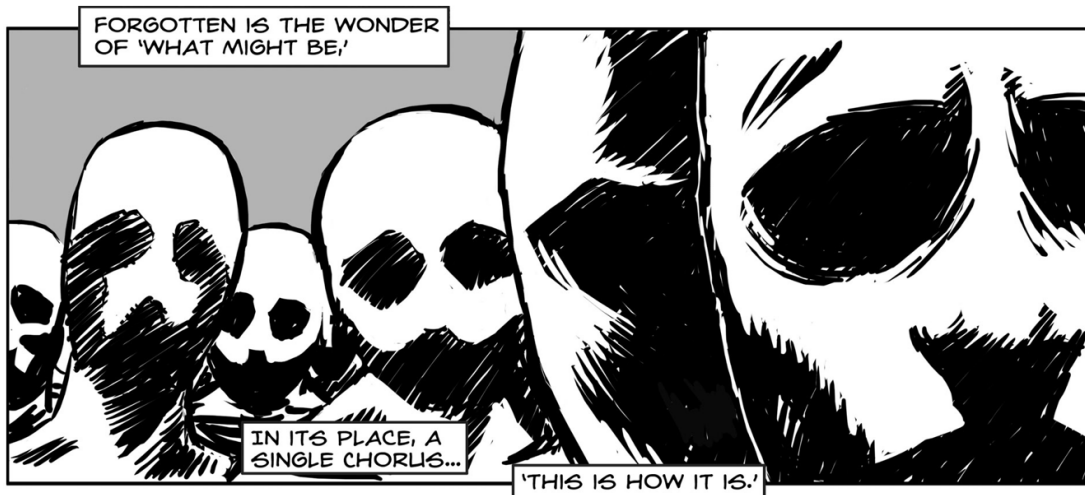

Figure 2.

Having set up the problem, I suggest ways to move beyond flatness by engaging in a discussion of interdisciplinarity through the metaphor of perspective – a seeing through two (or more) eyes – as a means for stepping out of imposed boundaries (and again, I never use such terms as "discipline" or "interdisciplinary").
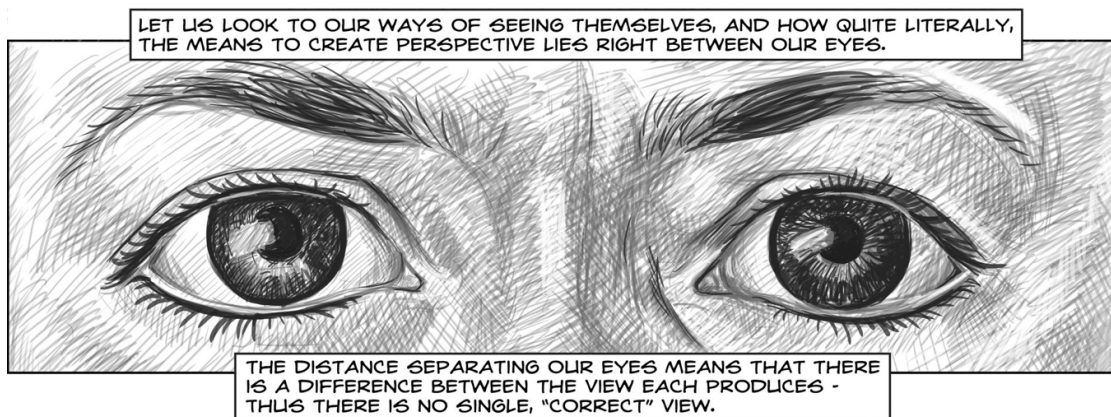

Figure 3.

With this third chapter, "The Shape of Our Thoughts," I'm turning from the more general approaches of engaging multiple modes set forth earlier to specifically take up image and text. The chapter builds to a discussion of how the comics form works – and why comics are so well-suited to convey and embody my argument (though that falls outside of the excerpt discussed here).

Figure 4.

A little overview of my process: I'm frequently asked whether the words or pictures come first. To which I answer each time, truthfully but not particularly helpfully, "yes." From an initial notion, I begin jotting down notes and images to start to give it substance. It is then, in that spatial interplay between my visual system and what I've sketched that the piece starts to take shape. The sketches shown throughout this commentary are representative of that process. Let me also here offer a few general thoughts about making comics, at least from my perspective. Unlike storyboarding, to which comics are often compared, working in comics requires a concern not just for what goes in the panels, but also attention to the size, shape, and location of the panels on the page – where they are and what they're next to – really a consideration of the entire composition as a whole experience. Art Spiegelman refers to this as "architectonics," and I think the connection between comics and architecture and the way both disciplines organize spatial experiences for a viewer/visitor to move through – is significant. Where a prose document can stop in mid-thought and continue on the next page – comics can't – each page needs to be considered as a whole unit. Its shape (hence the title of this chapter) informs its content and contributes significantly to the meaning conveyed.

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Figure 5.

Okay, on to the specifics: the initial image I sketched for this sequence was the man's head partially submerged on what has now become the third page. That partially submerged image just kept asserting itself and so I moved outward from it as an anchor from which to build the rest of the sequence. For some time, I'd been toying with hybridity – specifically amphibiousness – as a metaphor for comics' capacity for holding both visual and verbal modes in a single form. The notion that language is a sea we swim in was also a recurrent image and they complemented one another nicely.
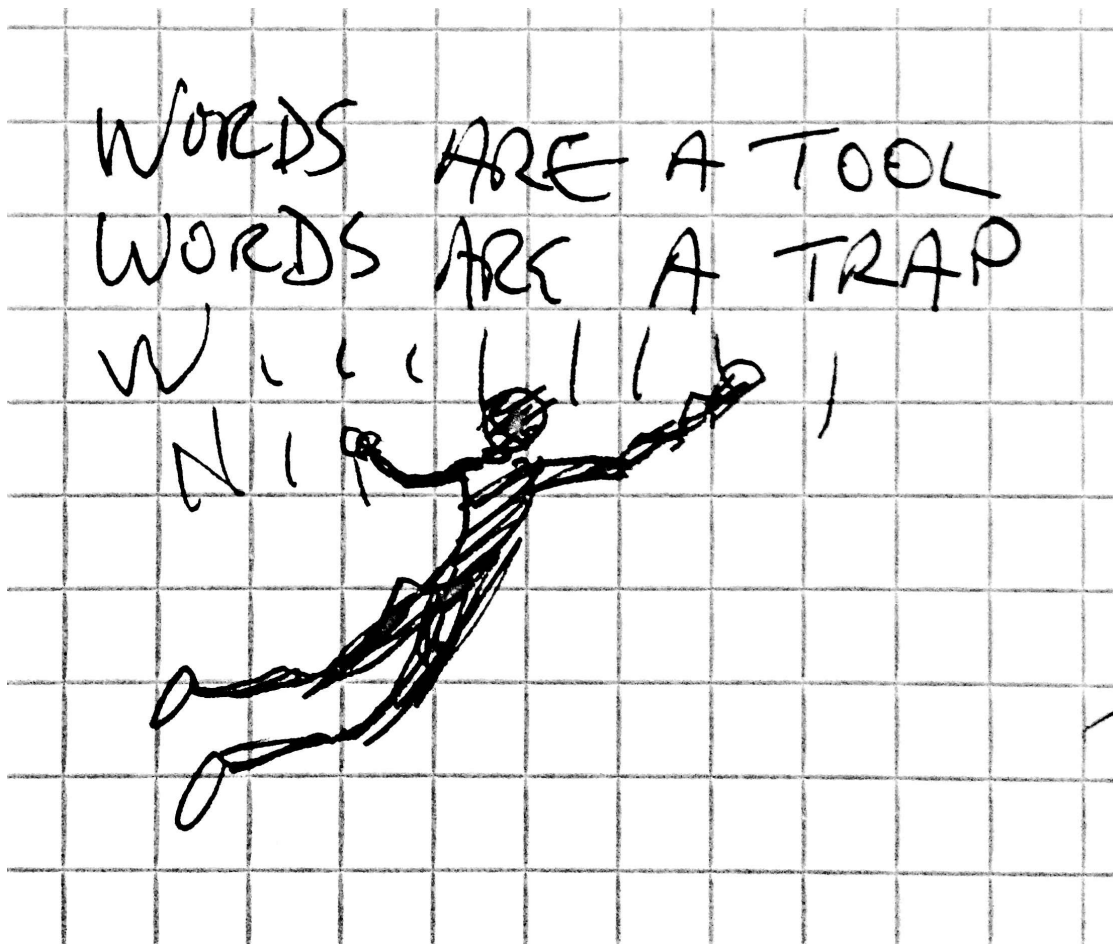
Figure 6.

On this opening page, I wanted to draw the focus on this central figure, impossibly deep, isolated and alone and immersed in his thoughts – this sea is his entire world. Had this been an essay in text, I would likely have opened with something about "words are a tool, words are a trap" – but since the trap aspect is not evident in the imagery, I shifted that language to another page, and that choice in turn shaped how the following page came together.

Figure 7.

For the second page, I now could show this trap, conceived as a bubble of sorts that would become evident as we pulled back further. This progression called explicitly for a sequential series of images. I think my first attempt was to have him revealed to be in a snow globe. This was ok, but it felt a little forced, and I knew, because I had this amphibious figure to work towards, that somehow I needed him to emerge from it, which didn't work in a globe! Seeking inspiration, I happened to look at the flowing vine-like glass sculptures my wife created, and saw that that world inside the solid glass, with air bubbles trapped and frozen within, was a world much like the one in which I envisioned this figure swimming. This idea was closer – it had the right feel, if not the right form. As I laid out the three pages in thumbnail form, I saw the connection between this scene and the close up on the figure's eyes in the next page. Of course, it was like a pupil enclosed by the iris!
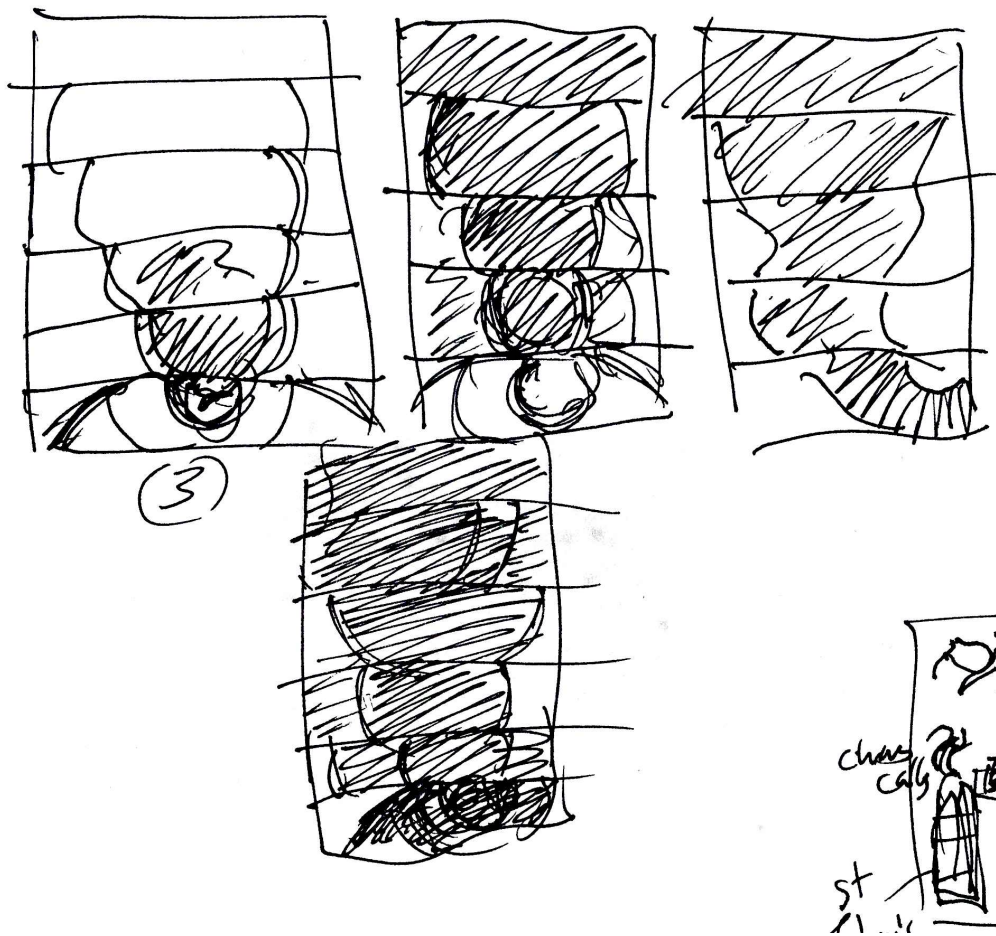
Figure 8.

Essentially, it matched my earlier sketches of the bubble but now I had a specific reason for its presence that held the page together. It seems strangely obvious after the fact – this is all about seeing, how could it not be exactly this image?! (This revelation reminds me of one of my favorite essays on the creative process – a short piece by Alan Moore at the back of the collected edition of *V for Vendetta*. The book, as with most of Moore's works, appears to have been made from a perfect crystal, emerged fully formed from his brow. But the details of the story's creations as he outlines it, is this bizarre set of wrong turns, stumbling luck, synchronicitous moments, and the willingness to keep following along where it took him and artist David Lloyd to arrive at the final result.) As for the particulars of this page's layout, text and image are working tightly together and informing one another. In the top panel, our figure is in the depths but seems under control. Next, the boundaries begin to be revealed and by the third panel we begin to see how he's enclosed in something beyond his awareness. Descending further, he's smaller and more adrift than in charge. Finally, the eye is clearly revealed, and the text returns to talking explicitly about seeing.
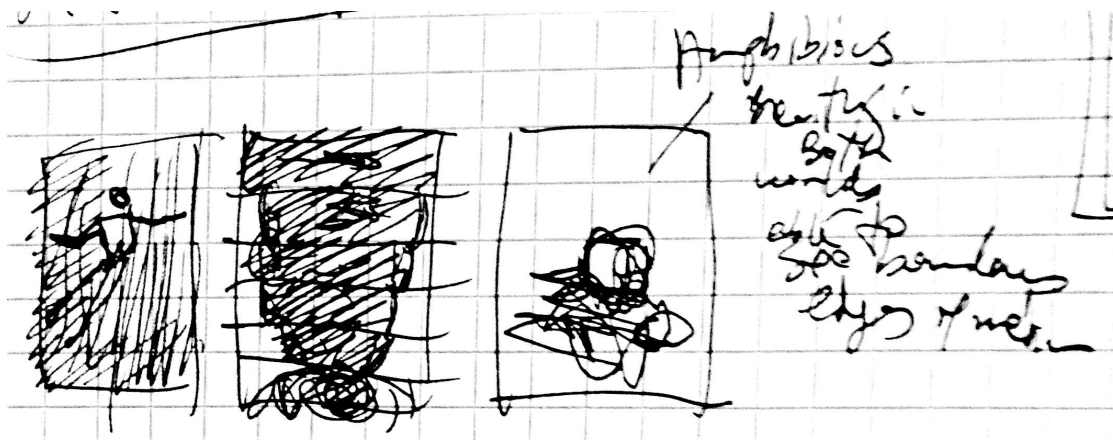
Figure 9.

S.I. Hayakawa's passage that opens the third page is from his introduction to Gyorgy Kepes's "Language of Vision," and his two-page essay served as significant inspiration for much of this chapter. My text, "to breach the surface…" is the first mention specifically of the medium I'm working in. Comics as hybrid form. Its denizens must be amphibious in terms of being at home and able to breathe in either text or image. Our man remains submerged, not gasping for air. His eye is posed just as the final panel of the previous page. Has that figure emerged or is he residing still within himself – creating a loop of sorts. Looking to the text above him – we're "seeing from other sides." Again, thinking about the page as a spatial experience, it is both a sequential reading experience as well as a simultaneous viewing experience. Here the text is a visual element in terms of moving our eye through the page. "Text immersed in image," came to me early on, but its partner for how to describe what happens to pictures was more difficult. In an earlier piece, I'd played with the idea of suggesting pictures in comics as being anchored by words, but I'd left it out in not wanting to suggest text is more concrete than images are. But here it came back to me, and the idea that the box would be below the other made it function a bit like an anchor as well. This led me to recall Roland Barthes and his description of image-text relations as "anchor" and "relay." And then the pieces all came together and I could use "relay" to come back to referring to the boundaries and give a text reference to "fluid" to accompany the imagery. It's both discussion and demonstration at once. The final line is a joke that sets up the most self-reflexive page of the piece.
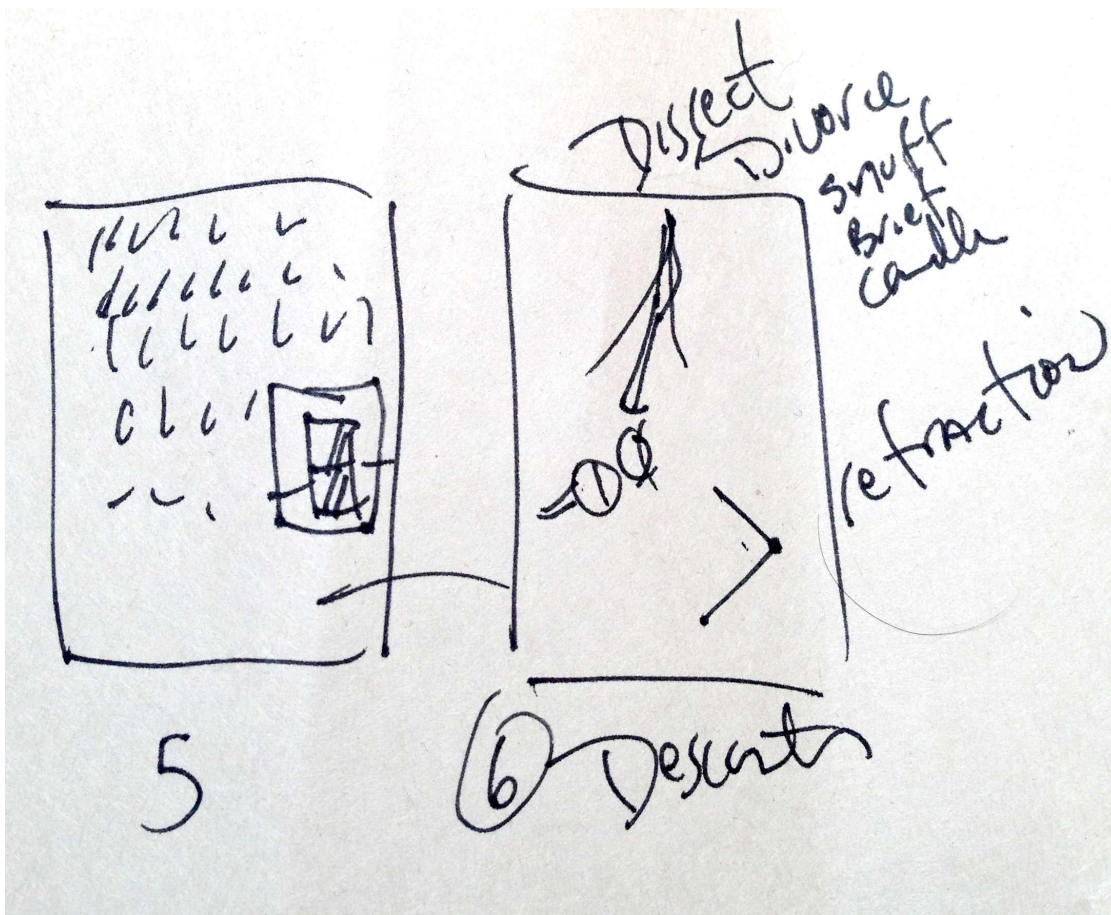
Figure 10.

I knew from the very beginning that at some point in the dissertation, that there had to be a single page completely in text that looked exactly like a dissertation was supposed to look. I thought it would be the first page of this chapter, but I think it worked out more effectively here – the contrast is particularly jarring in the midst of the narrative. In part this was inspired by conversations in my dissertation proposal seminar, where colleagues suggested – out of expressed concern for my behalf – that maybe I should do half in text to explain what I'm doing and why I'm doing it in comics. As the political implications of this piece became increasingly apparent, I realized there could be no hedging. In order to truly demonstrate the form's legitimacy, I found it essential to go all in. And that was that moving forward. By including the image of the bent pencil, I really wanted something that looks like and was set apart in just the way an illustration would be in an academic text. (Though note, the juxtaposition of the text talking about "mere illustration" and the illustration itself – despite the form here, I'm still playing with image-text interaction.)
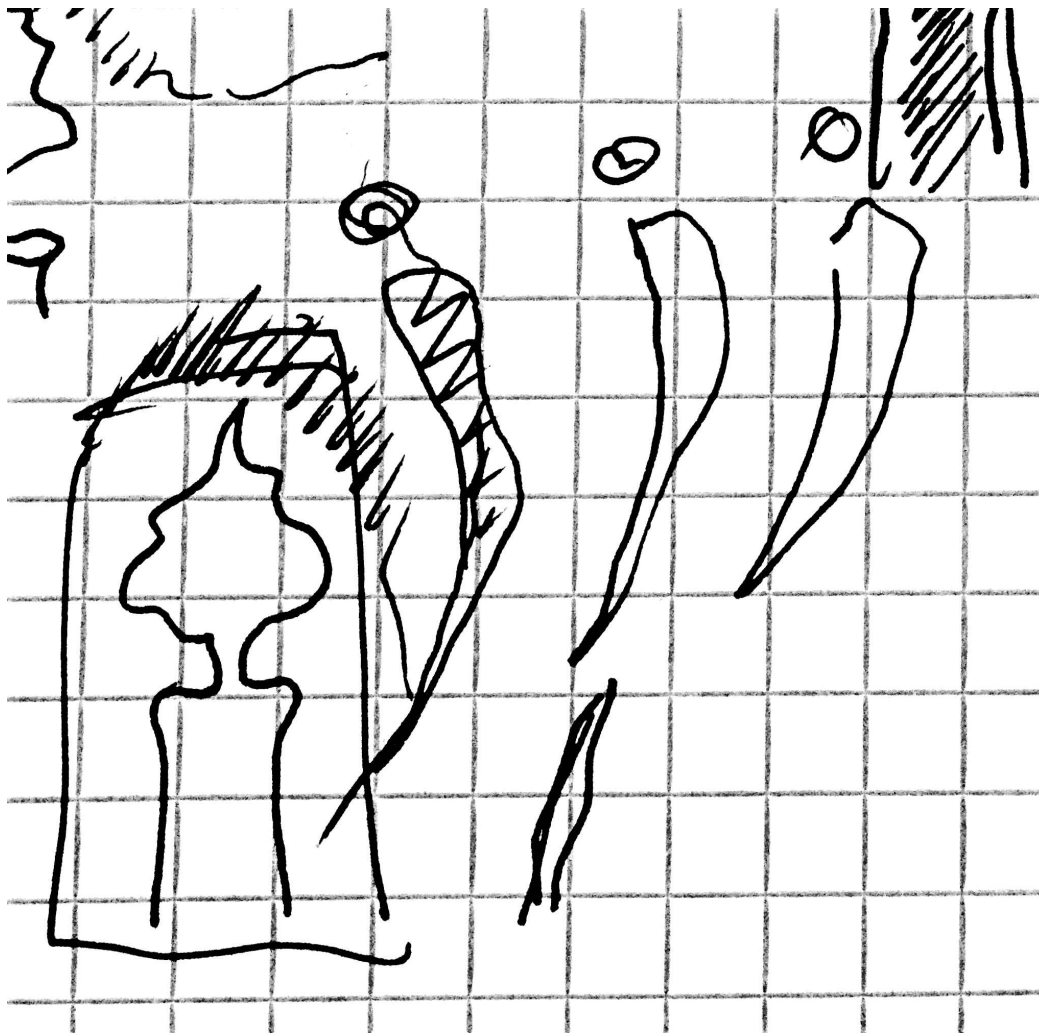
Figure 11.

Plato's cave is tangentially referenced earlier in the narrative, and I had wanted to revisit that here. Initially, the Descartes discussion was a separate page, but in thinking on Iris Murdoch's discussion of Plato's view of the arts in her book *The Fire and the Sun,* I eventually made the leap to join Plato's sun/fire and Descartes' candle, which would in turn provide light for the cave wall shadows (and this image is plucked from an earlier chapter). Again, this seems obvious in hindsight, but in the midst of it, it's just an organic mess of notes and sketches and some guiding notion that I'm trying to hang onto and see where it leads. The burning of the page also came late in the process, but I think that the use of trompe l'oeil holds the whole thing together – and points strongly to the artificiality of a particular form being held up as what knowledge should look like.
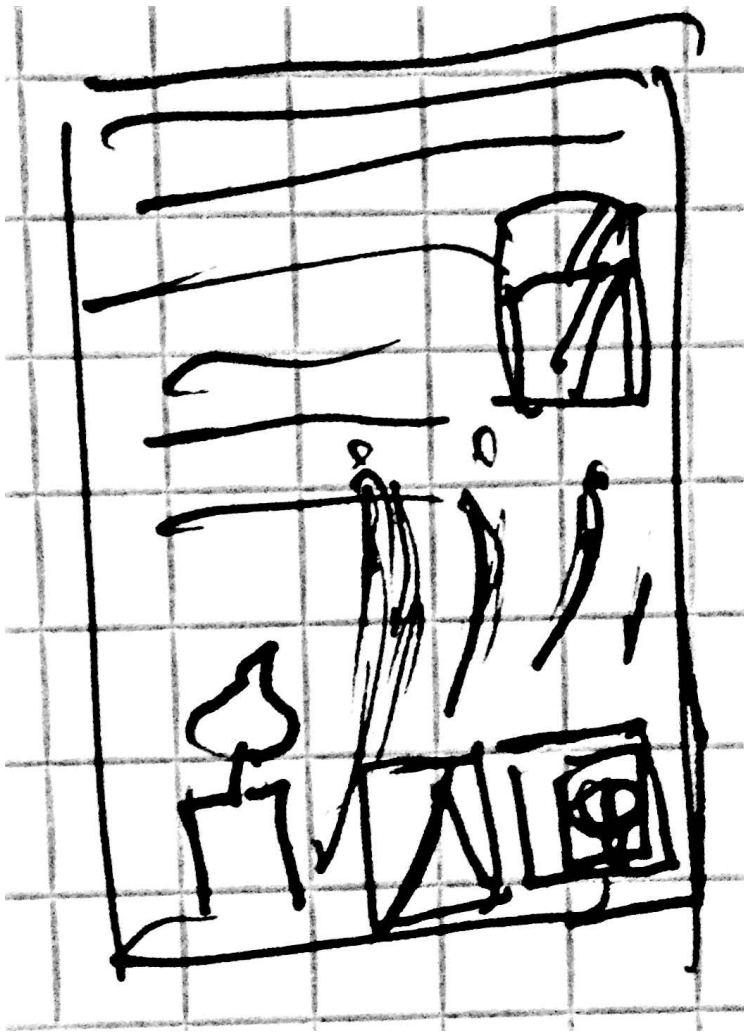
Figure 12.

One more note on this page – when I submitted the dissertation to the office of doctoral studies for corrections, it came back to me with almost no comments – except that because this page had a "figure" on it (that bent pencil image), I needed to have a list of figures denoting it at the beginning of the whole document. Now, in a document completely made of images, I would have a list of images pointing to exactly one page – the one with the most text on it of the entire piece and where I most directly turned to the reader to point out the convention I'm challenging. A rather delightful irony – and one I think only made my point stronger.
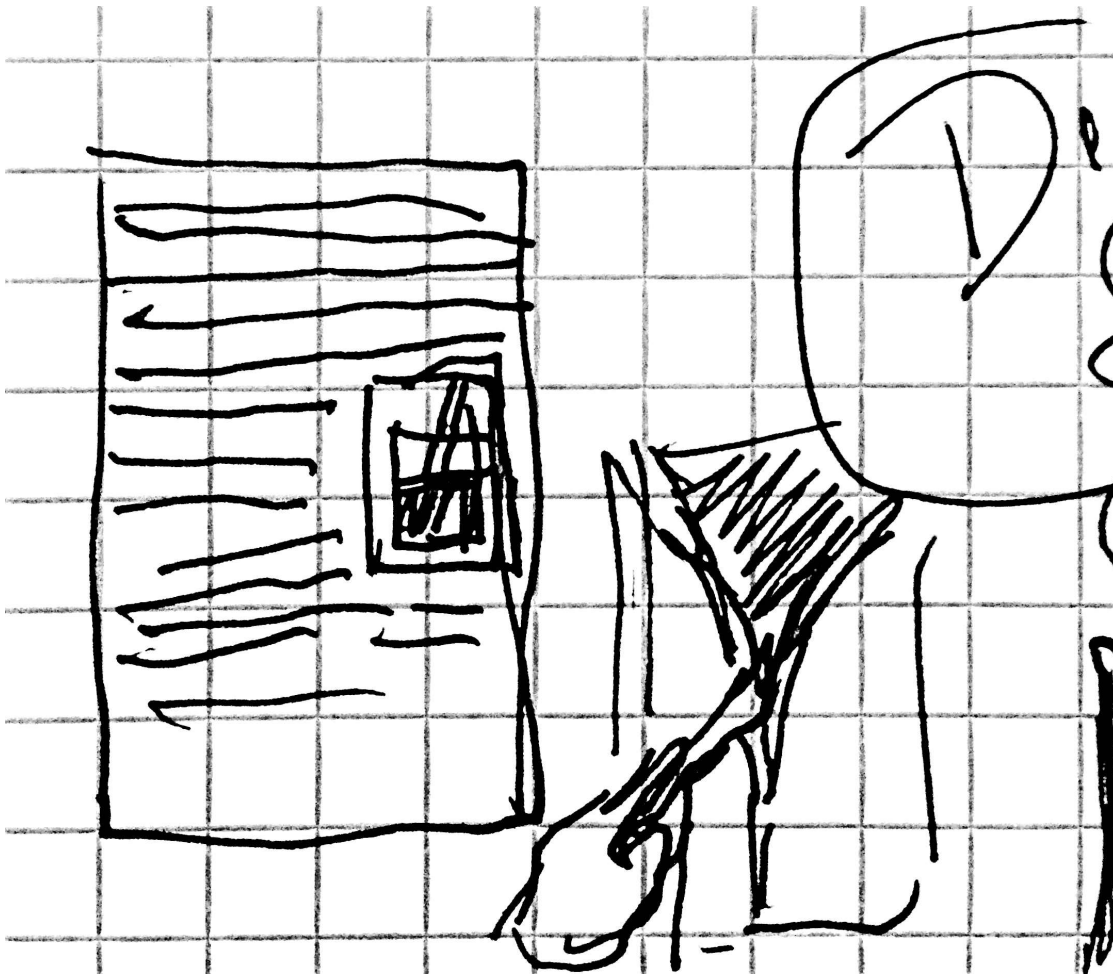
Figure 13.

The page on Descartes and dissection is part of my broader argument addressing the reduction of the human to the thinking machine – and a removal of the role of the senses in constituting thought. This had been all combined on a single page with the page following, but that just kept not working – it was much too tight, so I pulled it out and gave the idea of dissection and duality their own space. Often breaking things apart like this has let me look at the images and ideas from a fresh perspective, and figure out what it is I'm exploring with much greater understanding than I had before.
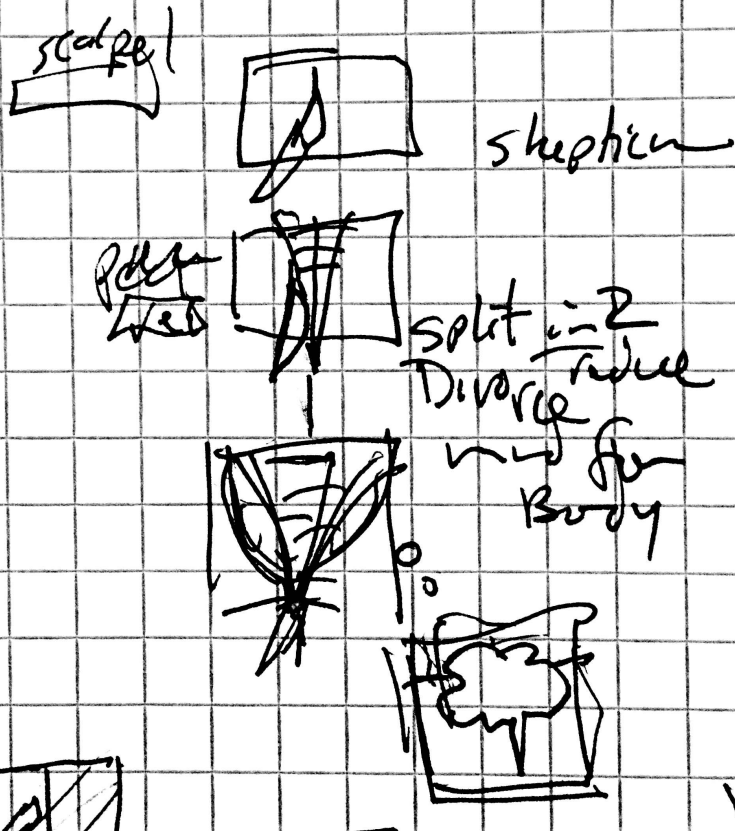
Figure 14.

Even with this clarity, this page still posed some particular challenges. I wanted to show this incision as unfolding in time and opening up an interior space.
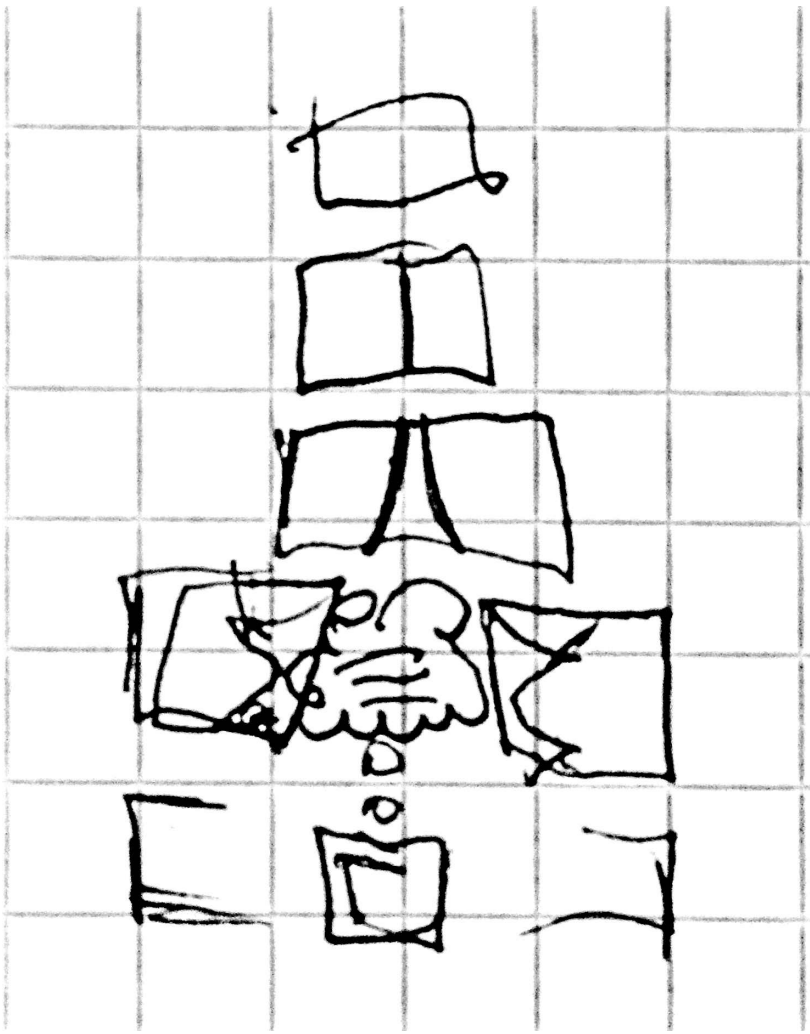
Figure 15.

But, a knife moving down creates a cut moving upwards – which works against the way we read it top to bottom – the reveal happens in time rather than in space as it does in comics.) While I was mulling this over, one of my students in my class made a sketch of a pattern of upside down "V"s.

Figure 16.

This random image triggered a better solution for how to arrange the composition. The brain in the vat – half-submerged – is also intended to return us to the idea of being immersed in the sea that is language, while the dissection imagery was in part triggered by thinking about dissecting frogs, which in turn takes me back to thinking about amphibiousness.
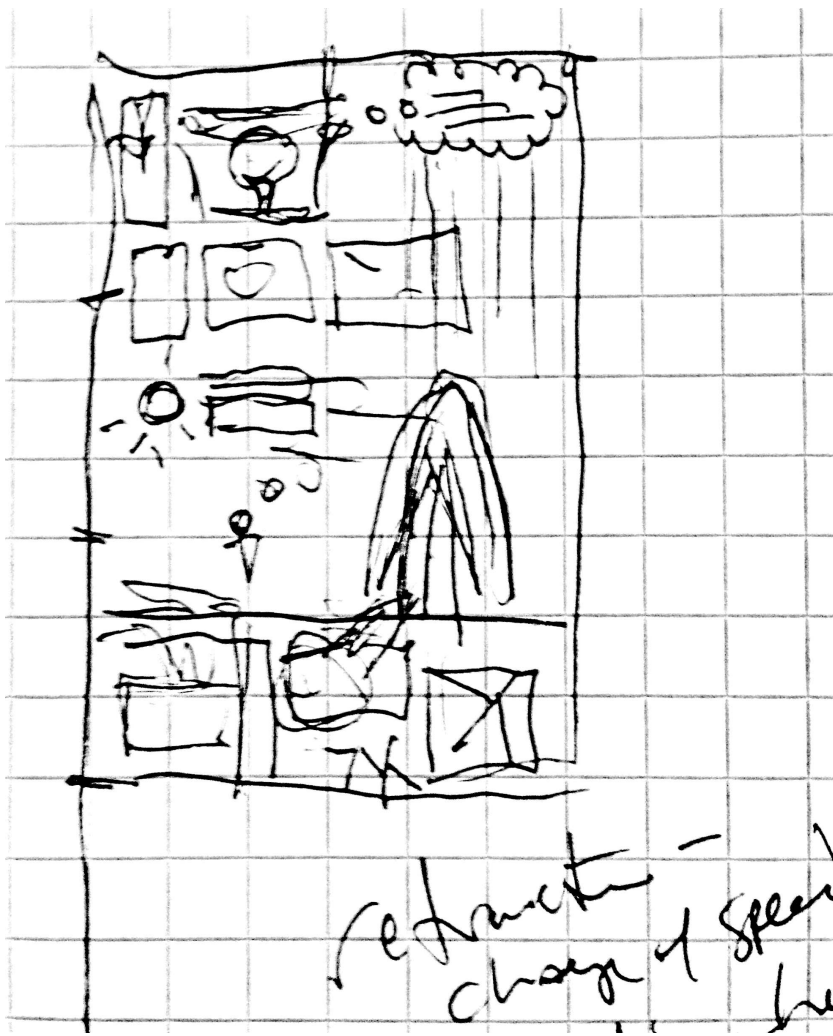
Figure 17.

The concept behind this final page came together as I was figuring out the entire sequence, and really served as the glue that kept it all from reading as a series of separate ideas. Reflecting briefly once more on my process, one of the guiding principles was gleaned from my advisor Ruth Vinz, who places an emphasis on the "search" in research, and sees it as a journey to follow where one's curiosity leads. In this case, I was exploring Descartes' writings – unaware at the outset of his role in explaining the phenomenon of refraction. But in coming upon that, I had my eureka moment tying everything together. This is two-fold.
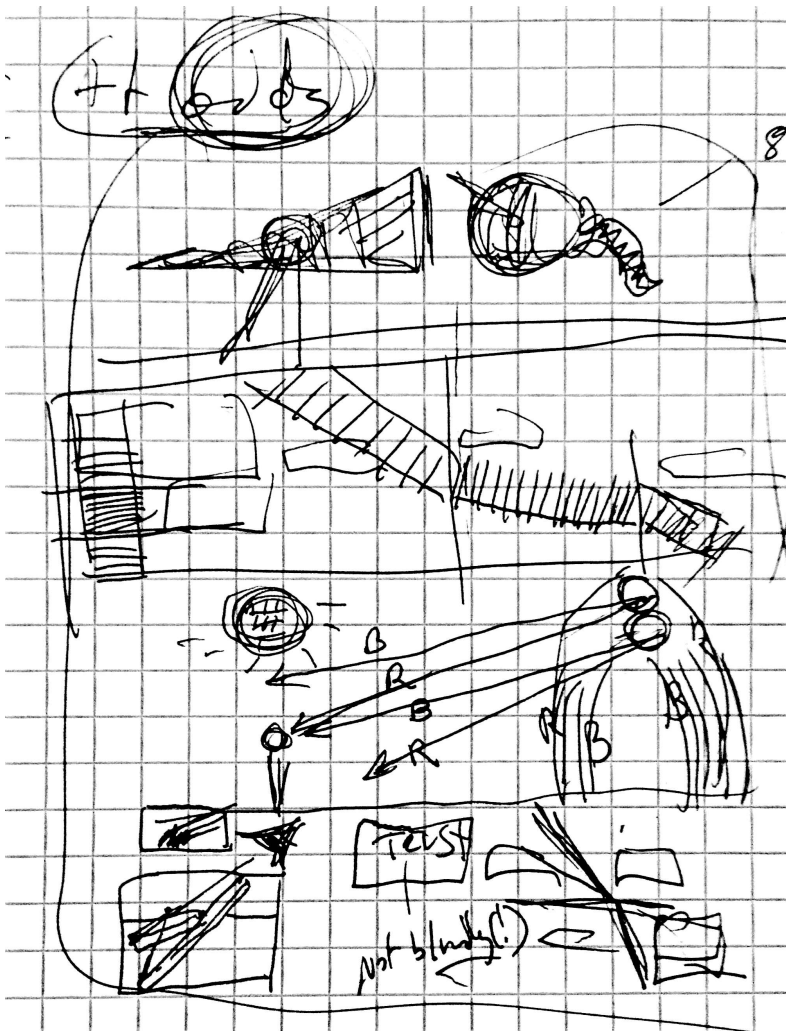
Figure 18.

First, there's the James Burke-like aspect of it in terms of a series of historical "Connections" linking Descartes and refraction as a means of returning to and responding to Plato's bent reed example. But still more exciting – as I'd been referencing air and water throughout the chapter, in injecting the concept of refraction that occurs between these two mediums, I could also use it as a metaphor for the interaction of visual and verbal mediums (which continued to be an important thread running through the rest of the chapter). Breaking into scientific explanations might seem a bit extraneous, but throughout this work – as with the concept of seeing perspective or being amphibious – I'm always seeking to address two things at once. Here, refraction as phenomenon but also the way image and text bend meaning in their respective ways. Perhaps the most important thing that has emerged for me in working in the manner that I do, and is strongly evident in this example, is that in trying to address aesthetic concerns, I'm prompted to do more research, and delving into the reading pushes me to pursue new images. It's a generative cycle and I find it takes me places that absolutely wouldn't occur to me were I working only in text. In this regard, I find that comics are not only more than up to the challenge of presenting serious inquiry, but also they serve as a powerful thought-space to help expand our research process from the ground up.

Figure 19.

– Nick Sousanis

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