

Mutual  
Images

ISSUE 2

WINTER 2017



JAPANESE POP CULTURES IN EUROPE TODAY:  
ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, MEDIATED  
NOTIONS, FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 2 – WINTER 2017

MUTUAL IMAGES  
A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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EDITED BY  
MARCO PELLITTERI

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

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***The visual language of Comics:  
Introduction to the structure and cognition of sequential  
images – Neil Cohn***

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 240 p.

Review by Francesco-Alessio URSINI | Jönköping University, Sweden

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Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics* provides an interesting introduction to "Visual Language" (henceforth VL) theory, which is a theory about the "language" through which comics are produced and interpreted. The book presents VL as a theory that can capture the psychological and cultural aspects of comics' creation and consumption. For instance, it offers an account on how readers can interpret and memorize complex sequences and pages of panels to form coherent stories. The book also discusses how the visuals used in American comics and Japanese manga can be seen as "dialects": that is, distinct images of a more general "language". The overarching theory of VL can thus be seen as a theory of the mind-internal (i.e. psychological) and mind-external (i.e. cultural) processes that allow readers and comics artists to use this visual language in order to create comics, manga, bande dessinées and so on.

Our goal in this review is to present and analyse the theoretical and empirical import of VL, and of Cohn (2013) with it. As we clarify in our discussion, the book offers an innovative perspective on cultural

differences across comics traditions, and their ability to interact with and reflect one another, as a realisation of the near-universal principle governing VL. Thus, our goal is also to analyse the validity of this overarching claim. For this purpose, we first tackle the book's contents by offering a thorough chapter-by-chapter summary, and then evaluate its key features and empirical import.

### Summary

The book opens with an introductory chapter qualifying the definition of VL as a “language” that authors employ to create comics, and readers to interpret them. The two crucial components of this definition are as follows. First, a Language is defined as a communicative system that includes a set of rules (or grammar) to produce information units (e.g. sentences: *Mario loves Peach*) from a basic set of expressions (or *vocabulary*; cf. Yule 2014 and similar introductions). Expressions in a language have meanings, since they can convey any kind of information about the world, and can form a set of building blocks for expressions: a vocabulary. Second, expressions and information units are presented via a modality, which can involve sounds in spoken languages, and signs in sign languages. Therefore, VL can be considered a language insofar as we can define a grammar, a vocabulary and a modality for this language (Cohn 2013, 4-6).

The introduction also sets out the goals of the book, by presenting the research questions that VL, as theory of the language used to produce comics, should address research questions that VL should display insofar as it is a language. The remainder of the book, then, investigates whether and how the grammar, vocabulary, meaning and modality of

this language can be defined, and how they can be used to produce comics. Furthermore, Cohn suggests that VL should meet one further theoretical requirement: it should have a psychological “reality”. Speakers usually acquire languages during their developmental period (i.e. grammar rules and vocabularies are learnt and memorized). In a parallel fashion, Cohn argues, they are likely to acquire VL, or one of its many dialects, if they become exposed to and/or interested in them. Thus, as the author argues, VL and other “spoken” languages can be seen as expressions of more general, underpinning cognitive mechanisms, which differ in the modalities by which they convey meaning. The rest of the book, divided in two sections, offers the relevant arguments in support of this claim, which can be summarised as follows.

The first section presents VL and its properties. In the first chapter, two traditional arguments of treating comics as a language are discussed and defused. The first concern is that panels tend to lack specific identifying features such as fixed shapes (i.e. panels are arbitrary signs). Comics lack a finite inventory of basic signs, as some scholars argue (e.g. Duncan and Smith, 2009; Hick, 2012). The second concern is that comics lack a fixed, systematic lexicon of panels and other relevant units. If these concerns are correct, then comics lack a finite inventory of basic building blocks, unlike languages.

Given these arguments, the first concern is tackled by showing that visual representations in comics, from pictures to motion lines, tend to be highly codified and referential. Illustrations of dogs, humans and other “entities” in comics have a strong iconic component, as they resemble the objects they represent. The second is tackled by proposing that panel sequences tend to occur in different patterns, although there

is a limit to this complexity. Much like languages can either have a subject (e.g. *Mario*) before or after the verb (e.g. *sings*), so comics involve a finite inventory of structures through which stories are presented. Therefore, the author clarifies that “comics” are treated as the end result of the processes underpinning VL, rather than a language, i.e. the “system” that creates these works. In other words, Comics are *not* a language (i.e. a set of rules defined over a lexicon), but the “results” of these modality-specific language processes.

The second chapter proceeds by discussing the basic building blocks of the “Visual Lexicon”, defined as visual morphemes (Cohn 2013, 32). In linguistics, morphemes are defined as the smallest units of identifiable meaning in a language, which combine to form words (e.g. *re-*, *analyse* in *re-analyse*: Fábregas & Scalise 2012, ch.1). Within VL, morphemes are defined as any visual units that appear in illustrations, from hands to planes. These visual morphemes form an *open class* of morphemes, since their number can be unlimited, and they can occur as distinct units. Thus, their properties parallel those of free morphemes in languages (e.g. nouns in English: *cat*, *dog* and so on). A sub-set of visual morphemes acts as bound morphemes, in the sense that they codify possible interpretations of the signs they combine with (e.g. “starry eyes+face=stunned person”). Bound morphemes can also be attested in (speech) bubbles: for instance, a balloon with dashed contours signals the thoughts of a character. Thus, after discussing in detail the morphology of illustrations and (speech) bubbles (i.e. the properties of visual morphemes in VL), the author concludes that one domain of language can also be found in VL.

The third chapter presents an analysis of panels, addressing the perceived lack of a finite inventory of panels in VL and the consequent lack of regular panel structures and sequences that emerge from the combination of these building blocks. The chapter offers a typology of four panel types, based on the content they refer to as minimal attention units. Thus, macro-panels depict multiple active entities, mono-panels depict single active entities, micro-panels offer partial depictions (e.g. close-ups), and amorphic panels offer depictions of static sceneries. Thus, a parallel between VL and cinema studies is created (e.g. Bordwell and Thompson 1997). The chapter also suggests that minimal sequences of panels, or ‘constructions’, mirror their equivalent structures in language as minimal entities conveying meaning. Crucially, it is argued that the use of constructions does not limit authors’ creativity, but provides them with “templates” through which ideas can be organized in a cohesive manner.

The fourth chapter shifts the focus of the discussion from the lexicon of illustrations and panels to visual grammar, analysing how narrative structure emerges from panels. Previous theories of narrative structure in comics are discussed and shown to involve the interpretation of panels as juxtaposed elements (i.e. McCloud 1993), and of the networks that panels can form via their formal and content relations (i.e. Groensteen 2007). They are suggested to be too reductive or too complex, respectively. A similar argument is offered for approaches based on sequential interpretation, adopted from cognitive narratology (e.g. Herman 2003). As Cohn (2013, 69) observes, comics involve more complex narrative analyses, since several “multi-directional” aspects are involved in their production and interpretation. For instance, panels

can present the unfolding of a story from a “bottom-up” perspective (i.e. from the single events to the overarching narrative), but a story can also be organized in a “top-down” manner: a premise, a narration and a conclusion. Thus, a more complex narrative structure theory is needed to analyse the relevant data.

Narrative structure is thus analysed in terms of groupings of panels that can be connected with respect to their “packaging”, as proposed in ‘story grammar’ theories (e.g. Rumelhart 1975). The core categories that make up the structure of a narrative are introduced and discussed. For instance, a panel belongs to the *Peak* category if it marks the key point in the narrative, from which a *Release* panel can then offer the resolution to this tension. Different categories of panels can in turn form arcs, which correspond to the phrases of linguistic analysis (e.g. *the blue cat* being a definite Noun Phrase: Yule 2014, ch.7). The chapter discusses in detail the properties of each category. It proposes that arcs can be combined together into more complex hierarchical structures, represented as diagram trees. Thus, an arc presenting panels that set up a story (i.e. a combination of panels belonging to the *Initial* category) acts as the *Initial* arc of a more complex narrative arc. The chapter concludes by discussing a comparison between VL and theories that apply this analysis of narrative structure to other forms of visual narrative (Stainbrook 2003).

The fifth chapter introduces ‘External Compositional Structure’, which is a theory of the organisation of panels on the page, and its comprehensibility to readers. The chapter discusses how the different panel layouts that can be found in comics can also impact the reading practices of readers. While standard “2x3” panel structures (i.e. two

columns, three rows) usually invite readers to follow the “Z-path” (i.e. left to right, top to bottom: inverse Z-path for manga), other layouts may counteract this preference. The chapter then discusses the different layouts of the reading patterns readers follow. For instance, if a top-left panel is missing, readers usually start reading a page from the top-most and/or left-most panel, trying to preserve the Z-path. The rest of the chapter shows that these rules can generate reading hierarchies, represented as diagram trees, capturing how readers navigate page layouts of any complexity (Cohn 2013, 103-106).

The sixth chapter discusses empirical evidence supporting the analysis offered in the previous chapters. As the chapter shows, there is growing experimental evidence that comics *comprehension* involves precise psychological processes, since readers must be able interpret illustrations, panels, narratives and layouts to understand a story. One such example is an ERP (‘Event-Related Potential’) study by the author and associates (i.e. Cohn et al 2012), in which participants were asked to read a short strip in which the *Peak* panel did not present a key event of the short narrative, thereby creating an inconsistent narrative. One result is that a so-called “N400” effect was attested. This effect is known to occur whenever the participant’s brain tries to interpret the meaning that a sentence, or a short clip, or other “messages” conveys, without any success (e.g. Kutas & Federmeier 2011). Since participants were often unable to interpret the incoherent narrative of the short strip, an N400 effect was attested. Overall, the chapter presents a wealth of empirical studies based on various experimental methods, which also offer (ample) evidence for the psychological reality of the comprehension of visual morphemes, narrative structure and page layout.

Section 2, which covers the seventh to the ninth chapters, discusses how VL can be applied to the analysis of comics from different traditions, and highlights their constituent properties.

The seventh chapter, for instance, discusses ‘American VL’, focusing on the morphological, narrative, and external compositional properties that can be found across American mainstream (e.g. superhero), “cartoony” and “independent” comics.

The eighth discusses ‘Japanese VL’, focusing on the characteristics of Japanese mainstream (i.e. *shōnen* and *shōjo*) manga, and its global impact on other VL languages.

The ninth chapter focuses on ‘Central Australian VL’, discussing and analysing the “sand narratives” of Warlpiri and Arrente (Green 2014). Sand narratives differ considerably from standard comics, since they are stories acted out on a space surrounding a narrator, who draws “pictures” on the sand. However, their structural properties suggest that their underlying VL is formally similar American and Japanese VLs.

Overall, the three chapters show that the VL theory outlined in the first section can be used to offer an accurate, descriptive analysis of seemingly different VLs across the globe. Therefore, they suggest that VL can be seen as a “general” theory of the languages through which comics are produced and interpreted across cultures.

Chapter ten, then, concludes by proposing the principle of equivalence: “*We should expect that the mind/brain treats all expressive capacities in similar ways, given modality-specific constraints*” (Cohn 2013, 195, italics in the original version). The principle is invoked as a way to capture the fact that, if comics are produced via a Visual Language, then this language should share the same features and properties of other forms of human

cognition, including language “proper”. The discussion of how different visual languages. have identifiable visual morphemes, panel types and narrative structures (i.e. a lexicon and a grammar) suggests that this is likely to be the case. The discussion of how the aspects and processes involved in the interpretation of comics are psychologically real (i.e. the discussion in the seventh chapter) also offers further evidence. The book concludes by sketching other domains of study, akin to those found in linguistics, that can be investigated by building on this proposal (e.g. the acquisition of VL as a language to produce comics).

As this summary hopefully shows, the book proposes a thorough argument for the validity of VL theory as a tool to investigate comics and the processes that underpin their production and comprehension. Interestingly, even if socio-cultural aspects are not studied in any relevant detail, the book implicitly argues that seemingly different comics cultures can be seen as more specific “images” of a more general and perhaps abstract aspect of human culture. By connecting different aspects of our cognitive faculties (e.g. the ability to create narrative structures, to draw, to identify similarities between real and drawn objects, and so on), humans are also able to turn these basic skills into complex, culturally transmissible skills.

Consequently, since different cultures have developed different and co-existing expressions of this complex cognitive behaviour, it should come as no surprise that manga and comics (and other forms, we hasten to add) have “intermingled” and influenced one another. Under the perspective put forward in this book, this is a natural result of the general nature of “comics”. If one general system (here, VL) can produce different expressions as permutations of basic “bits of information”,

then inter-cultural exchanges of these bits are to be expected. With this point in mind, we discuss whether the arguments offered in the book can withstand closer scrutiny.

### **Discussion**

In order to discuss the merits and imperfections of Cohn's proposal, our discussion will focus on three key points: the soundness of VL as a language, the validity of its treatment of distinct visual languages, and the general merits of the proposals. We hasten to acknowledge that, although we outline some pertinent/substantial non-trivial theoretical problems with the proposal, the work deserves ample praise for its bold goals and wealth of empirical support. However, at least three problems regarding the theoretical choices made in the text cast a shadow of doubt on the internal consistency of VL and its formulation.

First, Cohn's analysis of what constitutes a VL seems to be based on a non-conventional analysis of linguistic domains as domains which can be mirrored into VL. Linguistics is far from being a field without controversies, but it is commonly accepted that morphology is usually accompanied by syntax, semantics and phonology, respectively the studies of meaning, sentence structure and "oral" realisations of words and sentences. However, Cohn takes "story grammar" as a reference for a syntactic model of comics, even if no actual argument for this choice is offered. Though a type of grammar in the formal sense of the word, story grammar was proposed to account phenomena and stories that are not entirely linguistic in nature. Therefore, this choice brings VL away from a linguistic template, and a motivation is never offered.

A second, related problem is that the discussion of narrative templates is offered by comparing fixed sequences to linguistic constructions such as idioms. Such a choice is surprising, if not incoherent, for only a subset of *linguistic* frameworks falling under the umbrella of “Construction Grammar” takes this approach (e.g. Croft 2003; Goldberg 2006). A similar reasoning applies to external composition structure and the use of hierarchical structures (i.e. trees), choices which are *not* connected to extant proposals in the literature (e.g. Mann & Thompson 1988; Asher & Lascarides 2003). This is theoretically and empirically problematic, since narrative structures are analysed and tested via methods that belong to linguistics, such as ellipsis and other constituency tests. In other words, the tests that VL incorporates lack fully explicit logical connections to the frameworks from which they originate.

A third problem can be found when one looks at the lack of a discussion assessing whether a meaning and an “external” level of VL can be found: a semantics and a phonology of VL. The lack of semantic analysis and a study of the content and content relations that comics can offer is a shortcoming that is left to be resolved by future research. However, this omission raises the problem of which building blocks of comics work like phonemes (i.e. speech sounds), units that allow comics users to “share” the content and form of comics. Although the properties of illustrations, panels, and balloons are discussed in detail, they are argued to be instances of VL and their morphology. This is problematic, as morphology is usually defined as the study of the minimal *meaningful* units of language (i.e. morphemes: Fábregas & Scalise 2012, ch.1) *and* their realisations in a specific language. In other words, the proposal in chapter two collapses morphology and phonology into one domain,

without ever addressing that decision in any detail. It does so, furthermore, by glossing over one identifying aspect of visual morphemes: their potential to be minimal meaningful units. To the best of our knowledge, the separation of morphemes from their phonological realisations is accepted in most, if not all theories of morphology (cf. Fábregas & Scalise 2012, ch.8). Thus, this conflation seems unwarranted.

The upshot of these criticisms can be summed up as follows. VL is presented as a “collage” of linguistic and non-linguistic yet “grammar-like” proposals, and applied to comics without a fully developed discussion of their merits and other theoretical alternatives. Consequently, some choices are problematic because they involve mutually exclusive theories.

For instance, the diagram trees also found in generative approaches to syntax (e.g. Chomsky 1995; Steedman 2012) presuppose an approach to structure that Construction Grammar rejects. Constructions are assumed to be flat, rather than hierarchical. A mirror problem of this approach is that the choices outlined in the book seem also quite eccentric. The use of narrative structure to analyse stories’ structure is actually mutated from film and narrative studies, not linguistics. The theoretical choices that are closer to linguistic theory, *per se*, are never entirely given a motivation, and a degree of inconsistency is noticeable. Constructions presuppose the *lack* of sentence structure, at least in some frameworks (e.g. Goldberg 2006). However, to analyse comics’ narrative structure and panels’ structure, Cohn invokes the hierarchical structures found in generative, non-transformational (Jackendoff 2010) and transformational approaches to syntax (Chomsky 1995). The problem emerges at the level of morphology, too, since both illustrations

in panels *and* entire panels are treated as morphemes, even if no notion of a visual word is given. Alas, the impression is that the author combined theories that can easily account for specific phenomena, but are internally inconsistent when combined into a unified model of VL.

Furthermore, the analysis of comics languages in section 2 tends to present American and Japanese comics and their cultural-specific aspects according to fairly sweeping generalisations. For instance, the assumption that most “mainstream” authors in American visual language illustrate according to the “Kirbyan” dialect may be justified, provided that the case can be really made for the majority of a genre (e.g. superhero comics). We cannot judge whether this is really the case or not, as we are not experts on this genre. However, the apparently exclusive ascription of certain key features (e.g. powerful male bodies) to only this “dialect” is likely to be unjustified. For instance, classic *Weekly Shōnen Jump* series such as *Dragon Ball* featured characters that had the same “body proportions” discussed for the “Kirbyan” dialect (Toriyama 1984-1995). One could argue that different dialects of different VLs share these features because they usually convey action-oriented stories for young men. That is, their content and expected audiences affect these VLs, and render them similar. Cohn’s analysis, however, seems to gloss over these facts,

Another problem with the analysis is that its generalisations regarding Japanese VL(s) seem to completely ignore *seinen* and *josei* manga, i.e. manga for adult readers, which generally present a much more variegated set of features than those discussed by Cohn (cf. Shodt 1996, ch.2; Bryce & Davis 2010). More generally, Cohn’s approach to the analysis of different VL dialects seems to lack the nuanced perspective

that is necessary to account for dialectal variation in languages and, by extension, VL(s). This is not surprising, and it is closely related to the lack of a linguistically-based analysis of syntax and phonology. A well-known fact is that dialects vary with respect to their grammar, phonology and lexicon (cf. Trudgill 2000), and VL only fully presents a linguistically-oriented theory of the lexicon. In other words, the type of variation that these dialects offer cannot be assessed via the incomplete formulation of VL.

A final problem stems from the overall architecture of VL, an issue that we can address by discussing the actual theoretical import of the principle of equivalence. As it stands, this principle echoes Fodor's assumptions underpinning the "language of thought" and "modularity of mind" proposals (Fodor 1975, 1983). In a nutshell, the language of thought hypothesis suggests that each aspect of our cognitive abilities can be represented through a system of rules, or a "language". The modularity of mind hypothesis, instead, suggests that each ability (e.g. vision, language, hearing, and so on) has specific "processing" centres, even though each of these centres operates via domain-general rules (i.e. they share the same "language of thought"). A crucial matter is that these assumptions do *not* suggest that complex cognitive abilities work in the same way. Reading, writing, and other tasks that involve the interaction of more basic abilities probably follow more complex, if not distinct and emergent cognitive abilities (for example, decoding phonological input and mapping onto graphical representations: Beaton 2004 ch.2). Thus, the principle of equivalence does not directly extend to VL theory, at least not in its current formulation.

This problem, unsurprisingly, emerges from the fact that the principle of equivalence and the architecture of mind it presupposes are assumed, rather than thoroughly argued for. Construction Grammar theories, for instance, explicitly reject this architecture of the mind (cf. Goldberg 2006, ch.2). If even the case for a “faculty of comics”, like the one advocated for languages in modular frameworks (e.g. Chomsky 1995), can be made on empirical grounds, then a formulation of VL should be consistent with these basic assumptions about how the mind works.

As matters stand, then, it may seem that the book suffers from a lack of theoretical consistency that has some specific empirical problems. The analysis of the various aspects of the language(s) creating comics offer imperfect accounts or “images” of these properties. Furthermore, the proposal seems to have little to say regarding the *production* mechanisms that can be found in VL. One wonders if VL can also offer a theory of the mental processes underpinning authors’ “thought processes”, perhaps mirroring those found in language production (cf. Levelt 1989).

The book, nevertheless, has some very strong and appealing points, and should be amply praised for them. First, it takes very seriously the fact that comics as complex cultural artefacts also involve complex mental processes, and that these processes can be investigated experimentally. This aspect alone grants the absolute relevance of the work to the academic and *scientific* study of comics. Second, the work also shows a resolute commitment to a scientific approach to the analysis of comics as a cultural and psychological phenomenon. In other words, the work pioneers a direction of studies for the field that is far more promising than descriptive, “theory-light” approaches (e.g. McCloud 1994).

In conclusion, the problems outlined in this discussion can be certainly corrected and expunged from future versions of the book, even if this does not appear to be a trivial task. The crucial contribution of this work is that offers clear, thorough and very convincing proof that comics can be studied in a scientific manner as expressions of the complex behaviour and culture of humans. If this proposal is indeed on the right track, then one would expect that different comic cultures interact and share features of this culture, *qua* reflections of a “general” culture of comics. Thus, it is an invaluable contribution to the field of comics studies.

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