



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network

THE COMICS GRID
Journal of comics scholarship

Review

How to Cite: Simmons, TE. 2018. Unmasked Lex Text: A Review of *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing*. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 8(1):17, pp. 1–11, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.134>

Published: 09 October 2018

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

REVIEW

Unmasked Lex Text: A Review of
*On Comics and Legal Aesthetics –
Multimodality and the Haunted
Mask of Knowing*

On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing, by Thomas Giddens, Routledge, 230 pages, 2018, 29 b/w images, ISBN: 978-1138224032

Thomas E. Simmons

University of South Dakota, US
tom.e.simmons@usd.edu

This review probes *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing* by Thomas Giddens (Routledge, 2018). The book explores the unique ways in which comics – with their hybridized text and images – can augment the ways we come to know of law's rationality. This review explains the primary methodologies that Giddens utilizes such as highlighting the strict rationality of legal texts and their chaotic edges through comics narratives. It concludes with a warm endorsement of this deeply intellectual contribution to comics studies.

Keywords: aesthetics; epistemology; cultural legal studies; multimodality; psychoanalysis

The intersectionality of law and literature has been well mapped (Friedman 2008: 48–49). As Judge Posner has observed, there are a 'variety of registers in which the legal theme in literature is sung...' (Posner 2009: 21). Comics are now widely recognized as literary (Wright 2001: xiv). And law and literature scholars have recently turned their attention to comics (Ledwon 2015: 213). So are there any unique insights to be gained from applying a cultural legal studies approach to how law is presented in comic books? Thomas Giddens' book answers in the affirmative.

On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing (Giddens 2018; **Figure 1**) represents a unique and rather ambitious undertaking. Giddens believes that the multimodality of comics – their hybridized text and visual language; their shifting frames and perspectives – opens a lens to the chaotic edges on law's boundaries. Comics, he claims, can even render the law without boundaries. And more, he asserts, comics can reveal the ways in which all forms of knowledge are shaped by an unstructured unconscious. This is what he means in his book's subtitle by 'the haunted mask of knowing': an epistemological legal skin stretched tight across something bottomless. At the same time, he means a mask that must be worn before the legal subject can be seen by the law. As I said, this book is ambitious. And dense. And intriguing.

The core of Giddens' book is epistemological. 'Aesthetics is not simply the analysis of art, but an episteme' (Giddens 2018: 3) he avers. 'It is something that permeates the very process of knowing; with aesthetics, what is communicated by art is not as important as how it is communicated' (ibid). This is not a popular culture monograph. Nor is this book interested in the cultural aspects of law. Rather, *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics* seeks to unveil and unmask a fluid, open-ended way of knowing divorced from law's stability.

The core of Giddens' thesis is also grounded in concern with the unconscious. Essentially, the unconscious is what Giddens is seeking to locate by linking jurisprudential knowledge and the multiframe, multimodal, and multisensory experience of comics. Comics may be uniquely situated to achieve this unmasking. Comics require a participatory sensory involvement by the reader, especially in imagining the transitions that occur in the blank spaces; in the panel gutters. In a sense, the reader must perform a work – or at least participate with it – to read it. Comics are also hybridized media, combining sequenced images, rendered sounds, ballooned dialogue, and text with handmade lettering. The unresolved and competing nature of the medium can give way to fragmented interpretations as meaning is constructed. Comics can thus mediate order/disorder 'in legal knowing, as well as knowing more generally' (Giddens 2018: 21; **Figure 1**).

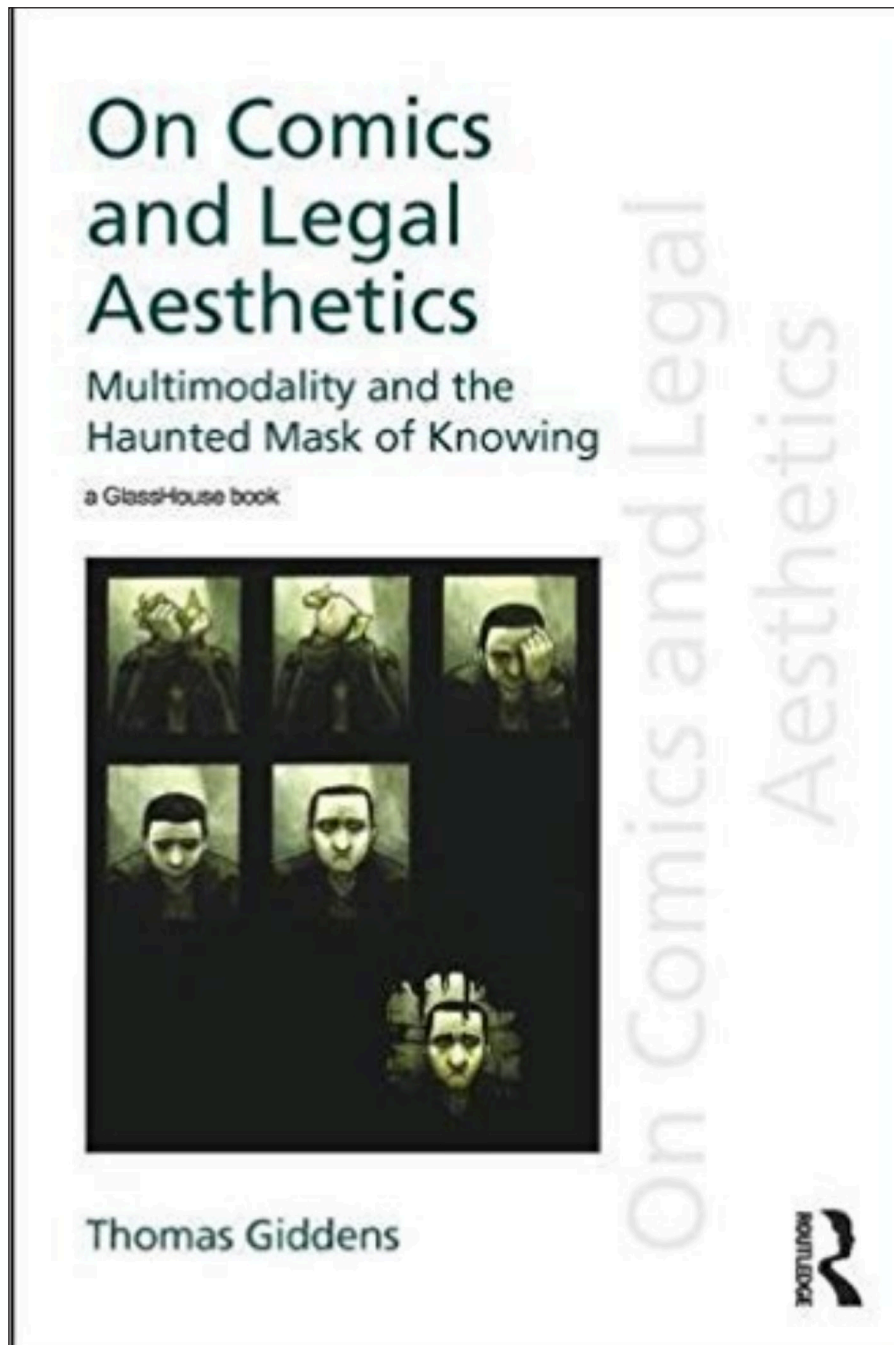


Figure 1: Cover of *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing* (Giddens 2018). © Routledge.

Giddens pursues comics' epistemologies in terms of the unconscious, but he does not simply wish to read comics in order to engage with a formless unconscious or a shapeless void. His version of the unconscious contains an infinite openness; an infinite potential with which the law imperfectly engages. The law has significant limitations. Giddens even believes that some forms of reason and legal text are 'life-defying' (Giddens 2018: 136). Law fails to capture true life, he says: 'The *anima* – the "something" of the human – always exceeds its logical structures' (Giddens 2018: 62). Law, he continues, is unengaged text. And so to the law, the unconscious is shapeless, nihilistic, and empty. To the law, the unconscious is an unknowable void. For Giddens, the unconscious is rich and important to human affairs. Certainly, the unconscious is atextual. The legal world, by contrast, is almost pure text. This dichotomy between text and non-text deserves exploration. Perhaps comics, as unstable text/visual narratives, can illuminate some of the borders between the textual and the atextual. Perhaps comics can uncover the tensions between law's rational structure of principles and the verdant, chaotic, threatening world which exists outside of legal doctrine.

While eschewing cultural context, Giddens is vigorously interested in achieving a 'critical insight into the values that shape systems of law and judgment' (Giddens 2018: 9) such as proportionality, punishment, and authority. He pursues the shaping of law 'from human contexts and aesthetic preferences and practices' (Giddens 2018: 13). He concedes the 'formulaic elegance' (Giddens 2018: 9) of law. Although lawyers partake of rationality and reason in the application of law to facts, '[a]s jurists, "injustice" may be something we feel' (ibid.) and a gut reaction of 'wrongness' might offer ways of finding justice that reason and intellect may miss. Granted, a merely rational text can repress other ways of knowing such as emotional or aesthetic ways. Comics' multimodalities might help us encounter the limits of legal texts and connect with these other ways of knowing. Because both law and comics contain a layered multiframe, perhaps comics can open a repressed irrational unconscious for the law.

Giddens stitches the shared multiframe of law and comics thusly:

Like comics, law divides the world into a set of frames to be read and inhabited by its audience. Law's complex and pluralistic construction of categories and regulations, of nested clauses and conceptual objects, is the multiframe within which the legal subject is constituted. And like comics, law operates as a form of mediation. But where law's mediation is substantive, navigating competing interests and the exercise of state power through judicial processes without questioning its own institution, comics' mediation is formal navigating tensions between multiple modes of (re)presentation. Indeed, comics' multimodality exposes the interactive boundaries between different orders of knowing, most superficially between those of the textual and the visual, but also the rational and the aesthetic (Giddens 2018: 23).

Having completed his opening statement and sketched his ambitions, Giddens turns to particular works to strain through his methodology. He utilizes ten graphic novels and comics for his exercise including *The Ghost in the Shell* (Shirow 1995) and *The Sandman* (Gaiman 1991–96). A helpful appendix provides thumbnail sketch plot summaries of each. Perhaps the most engaging chapter contains his sifting of *Arkham Asylum* (Morrison and McKean 1989).

As readers familiar with the graphic novel know, in *Arkham Asylum*, Grant Morrison and Dave McKean present Batman not as the healthy silver age crime fighter, but as a troubled individual struggling with his own demons. The story is interlaced with references to psychoanalysis, the Tarot, and eastern mysticism. Its primary trope is madness. The current inmates of the asylum – including super villains like the Joker and Killer Croc – have seemingly mutinied. Batman's quest is to restore order. Against this narrative runs a parallel story of the asylum's eponymous founder, Amadeus Arkham. In the end, Amadeus Arkham is dead while Batman triumphs over Killer Croc and Batman's own repressed traumas. Both Batman and Arkham jointly encounter insanity, but Arkham is overcome by it, ensconced as an inmate, while Batman emerges from it. The comic then reveals that the asylum's administrator (Charles Cavendish) released the inmates to bait Batman (Morrison and Gibbons 2004: 53; **Figure 2**).



Figure 2: A panel from *Arkham Asylum – A Serious House on Serious Earth* (Morrison and McKean 2004) p. 53. © DC Comics.

Another staff member kills Cavendish. And the story concludes as Two-Face tosses his infamous coin – at Batman’s suggestion – to decide whether Batman should live or die. Batman is granted a reprieve, but the villain-inmates confirm that there will always be a place for him within the asylum.

Giddens subjects *Arkham Asylum* to his multimodal approach and teases out a number of insights. He introduces two main contentions: First, he explains Batman’s role in the comic as an extra-legal avatar of justice who is facing internal struggles within the asylum’s walls by utilizing a kind of aesthetic criminology. Second, Giddens frames the comic as an examination of threats to the rational legal order and sums up the tale’s moral: ‘that we should remember the “madness” outside the legal order and thus see that law is always already more than its conscious “sanity”’ (Giddens 2018: 63).

As Batman journeys through Arkham Asylum, encountering the various mad villains, a triple symbolism is at work. On one level, the villains simply represent the criminality which Batman seeks to undo. On another, they stand for a variety of forms of “madness”, symbolic of the dynamic sensuality of unstructured experience that exceeds rational attempts at order” (Giddens 2018: 72) and that which rational legal texts push aside. So Clayface represents untreated disease. Scarecrow represents unacknowledged terror. And Two-Face mimics yet satirizes law’s aim of total objectivity. Finally, on a third level, the villains act as folds of Batman’s interior, as he descends into the asylum of his own mind, a descent mirrored by the retelling of Amadeus Arkham’s trauma, the murder of his wife and daughter (mirroring the murder of Batman’s parents in his own origin story).

The particular breaking point for Amadeus was his gruesome discovery that his daughter Harriet’s murderers had stuffed her dismembered head inside her dollhouse. A key page from the graphic novel nicely emphasizes Giddens’ point about the interface between the multimodalities of comics and the limits of law (Morrison and McKean 2004: 35; **Figure 3**). The surface of the page acts as a kind of canvas as well as the stylized gutters between panels; it is a painted surface textured with gore. The panels are rectangular and reminiscent of windows – perhaps dollhouse windows.



Figure 3: A page from *Arkham Asylum – A Serious House on Serious Earth* (Morrison and McKean, 2004) p. 35. © DC Comics.

Two of the panels show Amadeus' in-peering eye, slice one, he is looking in and slice two, his eye widens at what he sees within. Three of the panels have a kind of photographic clarity. They are a partial view of a young girl's frozen face. In these panels, also bisected by another plane; an angled window pane; the face is unblinking, but the perspective zooms in – and in – until the pane disappears. And a pair of panels neither look in nor look out; they contain a cuckoo clock, which chimes the beats of the scene while emphasizing its effect on Amadeus: 'Cu-koo,' (pause) 'Cu-koo.' Finally there are the four square inset text boxes narrating in Amadeus's voice: 'And the doll's house ... Looks ... At ... Me.' All of this, of course, is governed by the reader's own choices of ordering and reading. And thus the reader finds herself both looking in and looking out of the dollhouse. Only the medium of comics could convey this triple-looking and seeing in words and wordlessness so effectively and economically.

The dollhouse page is situated within the larger narrative of another walled structure – the asylum. So 'by specifically placing Harriet's head inside the house, that which fills the Asylum becomes more than just a symbol of Amadeus' trauma, but is also suggestive of that which dwells inside the head – dreams and madness' (Giddens 2018: 81). Batman is told that the asylum is a head, too, one which contains all the villains, a head, which perhaps, is Batman's own. Morrison and McKean contrast the walls of the asylum with the walls of the dollhouse, then invert this idea and announce that the asylum is the head which dreams its contents: 'the Asylum is the head in the house, dreaming itself' (ibid.).

After Amadeus' breakdown, he is imprisoned in the asylum, locked in with that same madness he had sought to contain. Amadeus is lost to irrationality, while Batman is able to emerge from it, but still carries the threat of repressed lunacy – the bat. Giddens explains that threats to disorder are contained within the asylum. The asylum is a house of reason which houses a loss of meaning. Similarly, as law gives architectural structure to human affairs, it functions as reasoned judgment within the mind of a lawyer. But every mind also contains an unconscious, an irrationality, and the potential of madness and a loss of control. 'The house in the lawyer's head

has a severed head inside it: a repressed terror of chaotic disorder, irresolvable harm, and unstructured life' (Giddens 2018: 85). The head inside the house is the lawyer's head, too – 'dismembered, removed, the capacity to structure and order gone with it' (ibid.).

Despite all this, one shortcoming of Giddens' book can be noted. Giddens' strict duality of law and chaos, reason and the unconscious, sometimes seems to stretch too thin. An unbending duality omits the complexity of jurisprudence as known through comics. Law is not simply rational. Law can be mad. And it can partake of various degrees of irrationality, just as the human experience can. Its rational texts – when they are rational – can be subverted and inverted because the texts never truly exist on a separate plane. The texts only act as law through human actors.

Still, Giddens' insights are stirring. This is much more than a selection of various readings through a certain lens. The analysis is cumulative. Each chapter and reading builds upon the last towards a satisfying conclusion.

This is an important book, joining only a few other excursions into comics and law like Giddens' earlier edited volume, *Graphic Justice* (Giddens 2015), and Neal Curtis' monograph (Curtis 2016) on superheroes and sovereignty. This book delicately deploys a penetrating eye to comics, some of which (e.g., *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1986–1987)) have been over-studied and others (e.g., *Adamantine* (Berry 2012), an image from which peers out from this book's cover) which have hardly received serious notice at all. Giddens has charted a path for others to explore. It's a path worth following.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Berry, H.** 2012. *Adamantine*. New York: Random House.
- Curtis, N.** 2016. *Sovereignty and Superheroes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719085048.001.0001>
- Friedman, K.** 2008. History and Development of Law and Literature. *Maryland Bar Journal*, 41: 46–51.

- Gaiman, N** and **Variou**s. 1991–1996. *The Sandman* (10 volumes). New York: Titan Books.
- Giddens, T.** 2015. *Graphic Justice – Intersections of Comics and Law*. New York: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315765754>
- Giddens, T.** 2018. *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing*. New York: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315310138>
- Ledwon, L.** 2015. Understanding Visual Metaphors: What Graphic Novels Can Teach Lawyers About Visual Storytelling. *Drake Law Review*, 63: 193–237.
- Moore, A** and **Gibbons, D.** 1986–1987. *Watchmen*. New York: Titan Books.
- Morrison, G** and **McKean, D.** 2004. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. New York: Titan Books.
- Posner, R.** 2009. *Law and Literature* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Shirow, M.** 1995. *The Ghost in the Shell*. New York: Dark House Comics.
- Wright, B.** 2001. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

How to cite this article: Simmons, TE. 2018. Unmasked Lex Text: A Review of *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics – Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing*. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 8(1): 17, pp.1–11, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.134>

Published: 09 October 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, a stylized 'O' with a person inside, representing accessibility.