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Anita Lam  
*York University*

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### Abstract

The first issue of John Layman and Rob Guillory's *Chew* was released in June 2009 by Image Comics at a time when the American comic book market was so dominated by stories written within the superhero genre that 'comic books and superheroes [had] almost become synonyms' (Rhodes 2008: 6). Within this superhero market, *Chew* was remarkably not a comic book about a superhero. Instead, *Chew* is a New York Times bestselling, Eisner award-winning series about Tony Chu, a Chinese- American cibopath. As a neologism created by the comic's authors, cibopathy describes the ability to receive psychic impressions from whatever one eats. Although Chu has this extraordinary ability, he does not have a secret identity, a costume, an origin story or a mission to save the world from evil. Instead, Tony works as a detective for the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in a possible future where the FDA has become the most powerful government agency in the world. While the Department of Homeland Security enhanced the scope of police powers as a result of the catastrophic events associated with September 11 in our reality, the FDA has done the same in response to the devastating events associated with an avian flu epidemic in *Chew*'s alternate reality.

## **Chewing in the Name of Justice: The Taste of Law in Action**

**Anita Lam**

The first issue of John Layman and Rob Guillory's *Chew* was released in June 2009 by Image Comics at a time when the American comic book market was so dominated by stories written within the superhero genre that 'comic books and superheroes [had] almost become synonyms' (Rhodes 2008: 6). Within this superhero market, *Chew* was remarkably not a comic book about a superhero. Instead, *Chew* is a *New York Times* bestselling, Eisner award-winning series about Tony Chu, a Chinese-American cibopath. As a neologism created by the comic's authors, cibopathy describes the ability to receive psychic impressions from whatever one eats. Although Chu has this extraordinary ability, he does not have a secret identity, a costume, an origin story or a mission to save the world from evil. Instead, Tony works as a detective for the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in a possible future where the FDA has become the most powerful government agency in the world. While the Department of Homeland Security enhanced the scope of police powers as a result of the catastrophic events associated with September 11 in our reality, the FDA has done the same in response to the devastating events associated with an avian flu epidemic in *Chew*'s alternate reality.

In this alternate reality, the government has instituted a Poultry Prohibition, which has in turn led to chicken speakeasies and a black market for chicken. In this world where chicken is outlawed, 'only

outlaws have chicken' (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.12).<sup>1</sup> As a result of governing food through crime, the FDA is the government agency responsible for not only enforcing the laws associated with the Poultry Prohibition, but also for investigating food-related deaths. With respect to the latter, Tony Chu is drafted into the FDA's Special Crimes Division because of his cibopathic talent. He is asked to solve food-related crimes by eating the bodily evidence. In the first five issues, Tony has ingested parts of a perpetrator's corpse, a dog that has died by mysterious means, and a severed finger.

In the course of doing his job, Tony needs to 'eat terrible things, all in the name of justice' (Layman and Guillory 2011: 2.6). In contrast to superheroes – such as Batman – who mete out vigilante justice (Phillips and Strobl 2006; Vollum and Adkinson 2003), Tony is concerned with criminal justice only as a vehicle for determining 'whodunit' in a particular case. Aided by thorough forensic and criminal investigation, Tony acts as a psychic medium, using his mouth and digestive system as an additional forensic apparatus in order to solve criminal cases. In doing so, he extends law's primary visual sense – here, understood as the forensic gaze – to include the use of taste as a forensic apparatus. Using *Chew, Volume One: Taster's Choice* as an exploratory case study, I will now analyse what happens when the central metaphor for understanding law's practice of knowing is not visually-oriented, but instead related to the processes of eating and digesting food.

In considering Tony Chu as a psychic *medium* that extends law's gaze through the addition of taste, I will structure my analysis using Marshall McLuhan's (1964) argument that all media are extensions of our human senses. A summary of McLuhan's argument can be found in part 1 of this article. In part 2, I will consider law's occularcentrism and introduce the concept of taste as it is represented in *Chew* as a helpful medium for engaging with crime and justice. In part 3, McLuhan's insights about media will be used to examine representations of Tony as a psychic medium and as a site of embodied knowledge. In part 4, these same insights will be used in an examination of the medium of comics, namely in a discussion of how the sense of taste is translated into the visual

medium of comics. In doing so, the comic book illustrator translates taste into the sensory medium privileged by law, but does so through the cool medium of the comic. Unlike law, the cool medium of comics invites the reader to be a willing and conscious collaborator in interpreting the unfolding of narrative and graphic events.

## **1 Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is an Extension of our Human Senses**

In *Understanding Media* (1964: 51-56), Marshall McLuhan recounts the Greek myth of Narcissus as an exemplar of how media operate. As the myth goes, a young Narcissus becomes entranced by his own reflection in a pool of water, mistaking his reflection for the presence of another beautiful person. He becomes so fascinated by this reflection that he perishes. McLuhan suggests that the key to understanding this myth lies in recognizing that the word 'narcissus' stems from the Greek word 'narcosis' or numbness.

According to McLuhan, a medium is any extension of ourselves (McLuhan 1964: 23), specifically an extension of our human senses. Like Narcissus, we too are fascinated by extensions of ourselves in any material other than ourselves. Paradoxically, while a medium may extend a particular human sense, it can also 'amputate' or 'numb' the other senses that it does not mobilise. For example, if sound is intensified through its addition to motion pictures, then this will have the effect of diminishing the role of mime, tactility and kinesthesia (McLuhan 1964: 54). When a new medium is introduced in society, the extension and amputation of senses will demand a new ratio among the senses and organs of the body. For example, the introduction of television has had the effect of intensifying the visual sense in Europe's aural-tactile culture and intensifying the aural-tactile senses in America's visual culture (McLuhan 1964: 54). In both instances, the intensification of particular human senses, whether aural, visual or tactile, has been associated with the amputation of taste and smell.

In applying McLuhan's insights to the medium of law, we notice

that law has extended the human senses primarily in a visual direction, privileging the eye as the authoritative organ of knowledge. As it relies largely on print, law can be categorised in McLuhan's terms as a hot medium. A hot medium extends one single sense in 'high definition', by providing the intended audience with all the necessary data (McLuhan 1964: 36). In contrast, comics are considered a cool medium because in providing less visual information, they require a high level of audience involvement and participation.

As its dependence on print has favoured uniform, linear and continuous forms of thought, the hot medium of law has also had the effect of extending the sense of sight while numbing the presence and use of other human senses. Although in recent years critical legal scholars have begun to use aural metaphors (Manderson 2000), (North) American legal discourse continues to favour visual metaphors over other kinds of sensory metaphors (Hibbitts 1995). The favouring of visual metaphors in legal discourse is possibly a result of the historical privileging of sight as the noblest and most intellectual of senses in Western thought and philosophy (Levin 1993).

Thus, the primary modal metaphor used by law is a visual one. By modal metaphor, I am referring to a metaphor that either directly or indirectly evokes a specific mode of human sensory experience (Hibbitts 1995: 236). The modal metaphor is an interesting area of inquiry for sociolegal scholars for two particular reasons. First, such a metaphor is often associated with law's practice of knowing, by connecting how law legitimately forms its knowledge with a particular mode of sensory perception. In law's bias towards visual metaphors, we can infer that law's favoured practice of knowing is ocularcentric, and is encapsulated in the notion of 'law's gaze'. Second, the modal metaphor is related to McLuhan's understanding of media as active metaphors because of their power to translate human experience into new forms (McLuhan 1964: 64), including new sensory forms as well as new forms of knowledge. Following this logic, each type of medium can frame knowledge in qualitatively different ways (Lowe 1982), especially because each medium is related to a particular ratio of sensory perception.

## **2 The Forensic Gaze**

In keeping with law's ocularcentrism, forensic investigation has also conventionally been visually-oriented. In North America, this is most clearly demonstrated by the privileging of eyewitnesses over earwitnesses in a court of law (Yarney 1994) – both of which are favoured over 'smell-witnesses' such as police drug dogs (Gray 10 January 2012). Despite evidence to the contrary (see Buckhout 1974), it is often assumed that sight is a more reliable and exact source of information than hearing (Hibbitts 1995). The visual bias of forensic investigation is also related to the various practices and technologies used over time to make criminality visible.

In delving into what is now considered criminology's sordid past, Cesare Lombroso – founder of the positivist school of criminology and criminal anthropologist – was notable for his observations on the criminal body as a site of criminality. Specifically, his work on the born criminal suggested that human bodies could be made to testify about their criminal predisposition through forensic and scientific practices (Horn 2003). Nineteenth-century practices, such as phrenology, physiognomy and photography, treated the body as a legible surface upon which evidence of criminality could be found. In scrutinising the surface of the human body, forensic practices were designed to visualise both criminal types and criminal individuals. For example, in the nineteenth century, photographic techniques were employed to create a composite portrait. Such a portrait was created by overlaying a number of different individual portraits on top of one another in order to make directly visible a particular human type, such as the face of the 'average' criminal (Valverde 2006). In addition to visualising criminal types, photography was used to make visible individual criminals in the standardised form of the police 'mug shot'. Other forensic imaging techniques, such as fingerprint and DNA imaging (Cole 2001), were later used for criminal identification as additional means to visually document the markers of human individuality.

Like their real-life counterparts, fictional detectives also sought to identify criminals using primarily visual means. For example,

Sherlock Holmes is popularly depicted holding a magnifying glass which is the tool (or medium in McLuhan's terms) he uses to amplify his extraordinary ability to see and decipher the hidden meanings of physical objects. Sherlock Holmes' approach to detection is replicated in real-life legal and forensic practice through what Mariana Valverde (2003: 54-56) calls the 'forensic gaze'. The forensic gaze refers to a clue-driven gaze focused on physical details and traces left by bodies or found on bodies. This particular gaze is used by law to gather and present largely visual evidence to judges and juries. Thus, both real-life and fictional forensic practice and detective work have been informed and shaped by ocularcentric practices and metaphors.

For the remainder of this paper, I would like to use *Chew* to examine what happens when we shift this underlying modal metaphor from vision to taste. *Chew* makes such an exploratory investigation possible because of its particular narrative structure. The comic book series is structured in the format of a police procedural where one case is solved per issue and forensic practices are emphasised as part of detective work. The series' overarching, serial narrative, however, is anchored in the realm of speculative fiction rather than detective fiction. As speculative fiction, *Chew* is a 'what if?' story premised on an alternate reality: what if the FDA had vastly expanded its police powers in the wake of massive food-related deaths? What if poultry became a prohibited food? More importantly, what if taste was valued as a more powerful forensic tool than vision? In exploring the latter issue through comic book storytelling, *Chew* allows readers to also speculate about what might happen if taste becomes both the metaphor and medium for forensic practice and detective work.

Both speculation and serious consideration of taste has been made possible by the current interest in cuisine and gastronomy in popular culture as well as more recent academic work (see Kaplan 2012). Taste has become a more prominent sensory experience in North America and much of the Western world with the rise of celebrity chefs and the Food Television Network since the 1990s (Civitello 2008). *Chew* acknowledges the emergence and existence of such a 'foodie' culture



(Levy and Barr 1985) through the character of Chow Chu, Tony Chu's older brother. Chow was a former TV chef on the Culinary Network's *In the Kitchen with Chow*. He was fired for announcing on the air that the avian flu and the consequent government ban on chicken are both 'bullshit' and part of a larger unknown government agenda to control the population (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.7). In highlighting avian flu, *Chew* recognises the growing popular understanding of the dangers of mass food production, particularly in the case of meat cultivation and processing.<sup>2</sup> Thus, *Chew* mobilises recent audience interest in cuisine and food production, and in doing so mobilises taste as a potentially important model of perception and knowledge.

### 3 Analysing *Chew*/Chu

While Marshall McLuhan's method of media analysis (1962, 1964) entailed an investigation into the large-scale psychic and social changes that resulted from the introduction of certain kinds of media in society, the following analysis of *Chew* is a far more modest investigation into the relationship between representation and medium. In analysing representations of Tony Chu as a psychic medium, I will examine how the body of the taster is made visible. While visually-oriented forensic practices are preoccupied with making criminal bodies visible or finding physical clues left on bodies, a forensic taster does not freeze criminal bodies for his or her own perusal. Instead, it is the body of the forensic taster that comes under the reader's scrutiny as a site of embodied knowledge.

#### 3A Reading the Forensic Taster's Body as a Site of Embodied Knowledge

Of the five human senses, vision is considered the most abstract sense because it does not depend on close physical proximity to an external object. In fact, the best view of an object is often not the closest view. Vision then is a sense that works most effectively when distance from a concrete object is involved. The notion of distance is related to the

concepts of impartiality and objectivity, both of which have come to characterise the values associated with vision (Hibbitts 1995). When knowledge is gained through sight, the knower is thought to stand at some distance from the site of knowledge, allowing him or her to contemplate the site without emotions or biases. Because the knower is not personally or closely connected to the site or object of inquiry, he or she can objectively evaluate a particular concrete reality. In doing so, the ocularcentric knower is thought to produce knowledge in an abstract form (e.g. the fact). For the most part, scholarly attention replicates the knower's gaze by focusing on the object of inquiry rather than on the knower.

In contrast to the relationship between the ocularcentric knower and abstract knowledge, the taste-centric knower is necessarily put into very close proximity to a particular object, and consequently becomes a site of embodied knowledge. In order to know through taste, we need to place the object directly in our mouth, removing any distance between us and the object to be consumed. In addition, taste does not function analogously to any kind of gaze, whereby we can hold ourselves separate from that which we taste. Instead, the object that we taste becomes a part of us, as we become a site of embodied knowledge. As a result, the tasting knower is not easily separable from the knowledge gained through tasting. Thus, we need to consider the embodied character of taste-centric knowledge.

When scholars consider the embodied character of knowledge in general, they often note that such knowledge takes a personal form because it is housed in particular individuals and cannot be separated from the individual knower (Fourcade 2010). Since Immanuel Kant's (1961) theorizing on aesthetics, taste has been traditionally thought to produce and take on such a personal and embodied form of knowledge. In his musings on the five human senses, Kant argued that taste did not allow for objective evaluation because it was a subjective sense. Because we need food to survive, we cannot be disinterested or indifferent to it or its taste. Consequently, we cannot make objective judgments about food since these judgments are highly influenced by our appetite and

our idiosyncratic preferences.

In evaluating the legitimacy of knowledge gained through taste, we need to consider the authority and credibility of the taster, including his or her appetite and idiosyncratic preferences. This consideration is heightened in the case of the forensic taster because the acts associated with tasting (e.g. chewing and digestion) have the effect of destroying, either wholly or partially, any body of evidence, leaving in view only the body of the tasting knower. In the case of *Chew*, Tony Chu is our tasting knower, and he is immediately placed under the reader's scrutiny on the introduction page of the first two issues of the comic book series. The reader learns about Tony and his cibopathic talent through examples of how his talent has affected his appetite and his eating preferences. Although Tony is 'almost always hungry' (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.3), he rarely eats because his cibopathic talent interferes with his appetite. As a cibopath, Tony is able to psychically know everything that has happened to whatever objects he places in his mouth (with the exception of beets). Given Tony's visible lack of enthusiasm for any kind of food, the reader is aware that he views his 'power' as a curse because his dining experiences are associated with negative imagery, such as the pesticides associated with fruit and the vicious butchering of livestock.

Because the knower is inseparable from the practice of knowing through taste – notably, *Chew* (the title of the comic book series and the verb associated with a process of ingestion) is deliberately a homophone of Chu, the surname of the series' protagonist – Tony's body comes under analysis as the physical site of his embodied knowledge. Throughout the comic book series, the reader's focus is always on Tony's body and Tony's bodily activities rather than on the bodies of a criminal or a victim. While criminology's history has demonstrated an interest in reading real-life (criminal) bodies, readers of comic books are also interested and well-versed in reading cartoon bodies. Comic book illustrators are well-aware that they need to create easily legible character bodies, and have devised body stereotypes. According to Will Eisner (2008a: 145), one of the most important contributors involved in the development of

the medium of comics, the stereotype is an essential part of the language of comics, and serves to make a character recognizable to readers by making him or her easily 'readable' through the use of standardised images that have been repeatedly simplified over time (Eisner 2008b: 11). This readability is also related to the cartoon format, which is a form of amplification through simplification (McCloud 1994: 30) or stripping the image down to its essential meaning. Often, this essential meaning is manifested through the presence of a specific detail. In this instance, the specific details rely on stereotypes of cartoon body types. When it comes to drawing male bodies, there are two basic body types: the physically strong and the physically weak.

The physically strong type is manifested by the presence of broad shoulders, well-defined muscles and a narrow waist. The superhero is an exemplary drawing of the physically strong type. The 'heroic proportion' of the superhero body has also been defined through height. According to well-known Marvel superhero illustrators Stan Lee and John Buscema (1978: 42), the average man is 6.5 heads tall, whereas the 'average' superhero ought to be 8.75 heads tall. In contrast to the remarkably tall superhero, Tony Chu is roughly 5.25 heads tall and drawn within the broad confines of the physically weak body type. Despite a disproportionately large head, Tony has a short and thin body.

As a consequence of his cibopathic talent, Tony's skinny body is shaped by his diet of beets and his general lack of appetite. His 'power' is not related to a visible display of physical strength, but is instead anchored to the workings of his internal digestive system. Having cibopathic talent is at once both extraordinary and ordinary. While cibopaths are extremely rare in the *Chew* universe – there are only three male cibopaths in existence – they are physically ordinary individuals. There is nothing physically 'super' about them. Moreover, the meaning of Tony's lean body is also related to his particular personality. Although phrenology – i.e. the practice of reading a body's exterior surface for signs of an individual's interior intellectual and moral states – has been generally discredited as a valid scientific practice, its logic continues to inform the drawing and reading of comic books. As co-creator Rob

Guillory describes, Tony has the body of a 'stick figure' (qtd Harper 4 August 2011) because he is at heart a 'stickler' (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.4). As a detective, Tony is a 'by-the-book square that never met a departmental regulation [he] couldn't love' (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.4). He was even willing to arrest his brother Chow Chu for buying chicken on the poultry black market because 'It's the law' (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.12). With his angular body, Tony is not only rule-bound<sup>3</sup> as a law enforcer, but he also plays the role of the 'straight man' as the series introduces comedic elements. Co-creator John Layman describes Tony, in comparison to the series' supporting characters, as 'the quiet guy who took a little while to get to know and is kind of a grump, but everyone around him is more animated and interesting than him' (Layman qtd Truitt 9 May 2011).

In contrast to his smaller-than-average body, Tony has a larger-than-average head. The size of his head highlights the psychic nature of his power and the importance of processing various mental impressions. His head is also enlarged to emphasise its significance as an ingestion site, whereby the chewing and immediate tasting of an object trigger his cibopathic power. Recruited for his cibopathy, Tony is expected to expand the senses conventionally used by the FDA to solve and fight crime. However, his sense of taste is related to a practice of knowing that is built on the metaphoric processes of eating and digestion. These metaphoric processes are broadly conceived and rendered in *Chew*'s comic form as simply 'eating' (or more specifically, 'chewing') and 'digestion.' Although there are semantic distinctions to be made between eating (e.g. biting and swallowing) and digestion (e.g. rumination), specific articulations of these activities are obscured by their primarily visual representation in *Chew*. For example, Tony's eating and digestion activities are illustrated without the accompaniment of any written description. When there is an illustration of Tony engaged in the process of chewing his food (see figure 2), readers can also interpret this particular activity as masticating or manducating, but these semantic distinctions are made by readers during their interpretation of the image.

### 3B Stomaching the Evidence: Digestion as Incorporation and Assimilation

In keeping with *Chew*'s broad conceptualization of eating and digestion, how does Tony Chu taste crime and criminals? In representing cibopathy, *Chew* literalises the metaphor of eating and digestion as a way of knowing. Before I analyze how these processes have been literally and visually rendered in Tony's forensic activity, it is worthwhile to briefly explore how we know through ingestion and digestion. In this exploration, I will take some theoretical cues from Friedrich Nietzsche's work even though he does not have a coherent body of work on digestion<sup>4</sup> as a knowledge practice. Through the repeated use of gastroenterological metaphors, Nietzsche theorized not only about how the body might operate as an organic processor of the pluralities found in the world, but also about how the body connects to the intellect. While the former consideration is valuable for exploring how forensic evidence is organically processed by Tony's body, the latter is particularly relevant in the case of exploring how Tony's digestion is linked to his psychic powers.

In drawing a connection between physical and mental (in)digestion in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche (2000: 696) claims that the mind is connected to the intestines, such that 'all prejudices come from the intestines'. Nietzsche builds on this analogy between mind and intestines by treating digestion as a polysemic metaphor that covers the entire dynamic process of transforming food-stuff into body-stuff (Weineck 2006). In writing about food and nutrition, he is interested in the mental, social and moral effects of food-stuff on the body.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to other philosophers that have traditionally privileged mind over body (such as those working under the assumptions of Cartesian dualism), Nietzsche maintains that mind and body are inseparable, and as such mind and food are inextricably linked. Because digestion is important for the maintenance and transformation of the body, poor digestion is related to poor living and poor thinking. While we have previously considered Tony Chu's body as a site of embodied knowledge shaped by his appetite (or lack thereof), Nietzsche would also consider his active body as a site of digestion (see figure 1).





**Figure 1:** Tony chews on the perpetrator's corpse  
Copyright permission granted by John Layman and Rob Guillory.

Immediately prior to the events depicted in figure 1, Tony Chu has discovered a serial killer – Tracy Lee Cobb – working in a chicken speakeasy as a sous-chef, and confronts the murderer in the restaurant’s back alley. While Tony requests that Cobb give him the names of his murdered victims, Cobb refuses and commits suicide to avoid another prison sentence. In the six panels that make up figure 1, Tony uses his cibopathic talent to discover the victims’ names by ingesting and digesting Cobb’s corpse.

In the process, Tony engages in what Nietzsche calls ‘incorporation’. Incorporation literally refers to taking something into the body (Franco 2011) through the process of ingestion. Figure 1 visually represents the process of ingestion to an outside observer, beginning with the second panel in which readers are presented with a close-up of Tony’s open mouth with its dripping saliva and bared teeth. The angle in the panel is meant to create the impression that Tony is ‘moving in on the audience, ready to take a giant bite out of the reader’ (Layman 2009) in much the same way that he will take a bite out of Cobb. In chewing on Cobb, Tony is able to access his memories, especially when the digested bits of the serial killer become incorporated into Tony’s body and mind.

Through the process of incorporation, Tony is able to digest what Cobb has experienced and absorbed in his consciousness, including all the crimes that he has committed.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, Tony’s digestion allows for assimilation. According to Nietzsche, assimilation can be metaphorically understood through digestion, a process in which plurality and difference can be reduced to unity and similarity (Blondel 1991). While Nietzsche describes the mind’s power to assimilate multiple and different experiences as akin to the stomach’s power of digestion (Pasley 1978), *Chew* ties this assimilation process to what Edgar Allan Poe termed ‘ratiocination’. As an approach to detective work, ratiocination allows a detective to put himself or herself in the mind of the criminal through a combination of logical reasoning and creative imagination. In *Chew*, the criminal mind is literally incorporated into the detective’s mind through assimilation. This mental assimilation of memories occurs alongside sensory assimilation.



Unlike vision, which can operate independently of any other human sense, taste does not seem to amputate or numb the other senses because its effective operation relies on the assimilation of visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile experiences.

To the outside observer (the reader), these other sensory experiences are visually rendered in several ways. While not privy to Tony's mental assimilation, the reader does witness his ingestion of Cobb through the sight of his biting into Cobb's muscle and sinew (see panel four in figure 1). As hearing is as fundamental as vision to the experience of eating and tasting, panels three to six emphasize Tony's chewing through onomatopoeic sounds such as 'chomp' and 'scrripp'. When comics translate sound into image, they create word-images that serve as sound effects. For example, in panel three, we see the sound effects of chewing, where the volume of the sound is rendered by the boldness of the font used to write 'chomp'. The jagged edges of the word-image 'chomp' serve as a visual cue that reflects the jagged teeth used in the action of chewing. The olfactory sensation is highlighted by the spray of Cobb's rust-coloured blood, which brings to mind the metallic scent of blood. By never showing a close-up of Tony actually biting into Cobb, the creators of *Chew* deliberately do not represent the tactile experience of biting into flesh or the experience of tasting a corpse, both of which would not be palatable for much of the comic book audience.<sup>7</sup>

In *Chew*, the digestion process itself is invisible to the reader as it is in real-life to outside observers. Only the ingestion process (as in figure 1) and the outcome of digestion (namely, the knowledge needed to solve a crime) are explicitly represented in the comic book series. In representing the knowledge acquired through digestion, *Chew* does not follow Nietzsche's theory about knowledge. For Nietzsche, bodily activities and processes do not yield knowledge *per se*, but only incomplete interpretations and perspectives, both of which serve the body's needs in the world (Grosz 1993). Knowledge then has survival value – in that it is related to the preservation of life – rather than truth value. In contrast, *Chew* represents the forensic knowledge acquired through cibopathy as objective truth. For example, Tony's knowledge

of the names and circumstances of every single one of Cobb's thirteen female victims is proven to be correct through standard police procedure (Layman and Guillory 2011: 1.21). The names of all the victims are verified by numerous police case files and databases. Evidence was gathered from Cobb's apartment by police detectives, including his murder weapon and his collection of victims' heads. In the second issue, both fingerprint and DNA identification verify Tony's cibopathic knowledge of the victim. Thus, Tony is considered an asset to the FDA precisely because the government agency can attach truth value to his cibopathic knowledge.

The attachment of truth value to Tony's cibopathic knowledge is particularly important in both the realm of forensic practice and in the genre of (classical) detective fiction. In classical detective fiction (such as the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle), detectives are motivated by a search for truth, where truth lies in discovering the identity of the criminal (Valverde 2006). In the world of *Chew*, a cibopath is able to taste the truth (of 'whodunit') even from the dead.<sup>8</sup> With this ability, the cibopath is made analogous to the figure of the vampire. Of the three known cibopaths in the universe of *Chew*, the third cibopath, a mysterious Serbian, has been nicknamed 'The Vampire'. Like the cibopath, the vampire is also a figure that is well-known for its feeding and tasting.

In playing on the connection between cibopath and vampire, *Chew* makes a novel association, as the vampire has primarily been used as a metaphoric figure for the serial killer (Jarvis 2007) rather than for the law enforcer. In panels four to six in figure 1, Tony is shown holding the serial killer's corpse in much the same way as a vampire would hold and cradle the victim's body during a feeding. As the creator of *Chew* notes, 'if we didn't know any better, it would almost appear like a scene from a vampire movie, with the vampire feasting on some hapless victim' (Layman 2009). Semiotic associations to the vampire are also highlighted through the use of a nocturnal setting, emphasised by the use of dark gray tones, and the depiction of gushing blood from a victim.

Although cibopaths may act like vampires, the value of their

feeding is not based on survival. In (Western) myth, vampires feed on live bodies in order to survive, and to continue to paradoxically 'live' in their dead bodies. In contrast, cibopaths, when acting as law enforcers, are live bodies that feed on dead bodies in order to extract the truth from the dead. In contrast to older forensic techniques, such as photography and fingerprint identification, that assumed identity could be read on the surface of the body, new forensic technologies, such as brain imaging and DNA imaging, increasingly construct identity as something that is internal to the body. As a forensic tool, the cibopath exists alongside other 'new' forensic technologies (e.g. brain and DNA imaging techniques), as his feeding punctures the surface of the body to delve into a perpetrator or victim's interior in order to know 'whodunit'. Unlike vampires, cibopaths do not suck the life out of bodies. Instead, they extract the truth, specifically, the truth related to someone's murder or someone's criminal activities. Again, the forensic value of the cibopath is anchored to the truth value associated with his special power. Because the dead cannot keep their secrets from a cibopath, the cibopath is able to extract new clues from literally dead ends and cold cases.

### **4 Comics as Medium: The Taste of Law in Visual Action**

In line with Marshall McLuhan's argument that the medium is the message (1964: 23), a medium analysis is considered far more important than a content analysis because a medium shapes content through its particular formatting. As we have previously discussed, the formatting of content has had the effect of extending human senses in a particular direction. As a medium, comics are rather mono-sensory because they are primarily visual (McCloud 1994: 89). In this section of the paper, I examine how the visual medium of comics *translates* the sensory experience of taste into images. Here, I am treating – as McLuhan did (Grossweiler 1998: 72) – extension and translation synonymously when describing a medium's capacity to engage the senses.

While critical legal scholars (such as Manderson 2000) have thought through what it would mean if we could see with our ears, I would like to explore what it would mean if we could see with our taste buds and other digestive organs. Unlike vision and aurality, taste and digestion are not specifically localised in a single organ; their operation relies not only on both gustatory and olfactory senses but also on the activities of various bodily organs, including the teeth, tongue, stomach, intestines and so on. In figure 2, however, Tony Chu's cibopathic power is given form in a double-page spread in the series' first issue, focusing mainly on the power of his taste buds. In this scene, Tony tastes the chicken soup prepared by Cobb, the serial killer, in a chicken speakeasy. While Tony is represented in the foreground, the background is composed of equally sized panels arranged in a grid format 22 images long and 17 wide. This arrangement represents the psychic impressions that Tony receives as he tastes the soup. More importantly, the reader is given direct access into Tony's mind as his psychic images are visualised in their fragmented form. Related to Cobb's various murders, these images depict different screaming female victims, a slashing knife, an eye glazed over in death, and a close-up of Cobb's cruel smile. In this instance, the chicken soup is a bowl of criminal evidence.



**Figure 2:** Tony tastes a bowl of chicken soup  
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In figure 2, the comic form explicitly highlights how taste, as a modal metaphor, corresponds to different values than those associated with the modal metaphor of vision. While vision is noted for its ability to differentiate, taste entails an experience of assimilation. In its capacity to make fine and precise distinctions between objects and people, vision separates and creates a 'self' that is different from the 'other' (Hibbitts 1995). In contrast, taste muddles the separation of 'self' and 'other,' by putting 'self' and 'other' in extremely close proximity within the same space (e.g. the mouth). Through taste and digestion, the 'other' is incorporated and assimilated into the 'self'. In figure 2, the cool medium of comics ensures that the reader is performing the assimilation process. The reader understands that the multiple and disparate background images are impressions of Cobb's memories that have been incorporated into Tony's mind. As the monstrous and criminal 'other,' Cobb's memories are made available to Tony because Cobb has accidentally cut his finger and bled into the chicken soup. In addition, Cobb has cut the soup with the human flesh of his victims, allowing Tony to also access the victims' memories. Mimicking the detective, the reader assimilates these multiple images into a single narrative that will explain the how and why of Cobb's crimes.

In removing the physical distance between 'self' and 'other,' taste is also a sensory experience that physically affects the taster. Ingestion is fundamentally hedonic in the sense that we expect to react to whatever we put in our mouth, whether in pleasure or in painful disgust (Sweeney 2012). In figure 2, Tony's facial expression of queasiness clearly demonstrates his disgust after only one sip of soup: his cheeks are puffed out in an attempt to avoid spitting out or vomiting over the soup. This sudden and involuntary response of disgust (which is often accompanied by the instant removal of whatever was placed in the mouth) suggests that judgment based on taste occurs through immediate discernment. In contrast, judgment based on vision is thought to occur only after prolonged contemplation, which is made possible through both spatial and temporal distance from an object.

Vision has also been associated with the making of timeless

judgments because it is a sense that does not necessarily depend on a sequence of events (Hibbitts 1995). In contrast, taste – like aurality and touch – embodies a sense of time because it constructs its perceptual unity through a temporal sequence of sensations (Jonas 1966) as well as dynamic processes. During ingestion, we do not experience the flavours of food-stuff as an isolated single sensory experience. Instead, flavours are often experienced as conjoined in sequence (Sweeney 2012). In representing taste as a temporal sequence of sensation and experience, the medium of comics uses spatially juxtaposed sequences of panels.

Typically, each panel is read by the reader as a moment in time. When being read, each panel represents the present. Panels that have already been read represent the past, while panels that have yet to be read represent the future. Figure 2 with its background of small panels, however, plays with time, by collapsing past and present across two borderless pages. While a border often frames a comic book page, figure 2 is notable for its ‘bleeds’ (McCloud 1994: 103), or its images that run off the edge of a page without a border. In ‘bleeds’, time is no longer contained by the border, and the moment represented on the page becomes timeless. The moment is frozen in time<sup>9</sup>, emphasizing its significance to the plot. The borderless figure 2 stops the action in the narrative, by focusing an entire scene on Tony’s cibopathy in action.

The timeless moment is associated with the foreground image, in which Tony tastes the chicken soup. However, time has not stopped because the background panels embody its on-going presence. All the background panel images are occurring in the present in a temporal sequence, which is presumably in sync with the moments during which Tony’s taste buds are processing his various psychic impressions. However, these background images are also simultaneously images of past events. Through Tony’s cibopathy, these images are flashbacks to Cobb’s multiple murders. As North American comic book readers of police procedurals (such as *Chew*) are also probably television viewers of crime procedurals (such as American television crime series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*), they have likely been trained to understand visual flashbacks as dramatic re-enactments of the crime scene. In

television crime procedurals, flashbacks allow viewers to visualise and reconstruct how a crime occurred. As the content of one medium is another medium (McLuhan 1964), the content of comics is informed by and builds on the medium of television.

The medium of television generally orders its flashback images in a linear temporal sequence, often chronologically following the murderer's actions before, during and after the commission of a crime. While the medium of comics can also order its images in a linear sequence, figure 2 is noteworthy because the flashback images are not arranged in such a manner. Arranged in a non-linear pattern, Tony's psychic impressions mimic the experience of tasting. Taste is a non-linear sensory experience, relying mostly on the tongue to taste multiple yet fragmentary flavours. As each flavour hits a taste bud on the tongue and needs to be assimilated into an overall taste, each flashback image is a visual fragment of an overall perceptual reality that needs to be assimilated by the taster. In contrast to vision's uniperspectival nature, where the eye can only behold a single reality at a time (Hibbitts 1995), taste is able to accommodate multiple realities (in the form of multiple flavours) all at once. In the background of figure 2, the reader experiences multiple images all at once rather than one image at a time.

In order to visualise the palate, the creators of *Chew* have turned to the palette. In contrast to the rationality represented by the gray text of legal communication (Valverde 2006), the colourful comic pages clearly do not emulate the 'black letter of law'. Instead, the colours are designed to trigger emotions in readers in much the same way as tasting triggers feelings from Tony Chu. In figure 2, the background flashback images are tinted either vermillion (orange-red) or chartreuse yellow (yellowish green). Both colours imply that the soup is not particularly appetizing, reinforcing Tony's sickened facial expression. In addition to the vermillion watercolour spatters emulating blood spatters, the vermillion-tinted images are all flashback images to Cobb's various murders, allowing all of these memory-images to be grouped together through colour. The chartreuse yellow panels are memory-images of the more recent past, during which Cobb has cut his finger while cooking

the soup. Through colour, the medium of comics is able to translate the sensory experience of flavour and taste into visual cues.

## Conclusion

Using McLuhan's early insights about media, this paper examined law and forensics as visual media that have extended the sense of sight at the expense of other human senses in both actual practice and in metaphoric descriptions of its practice. Using *Chew*, I explored what might happen if we consider a forensic practice based on taste, and how such a practice might provide an interesting contrast to better understand current forensic and legal practices that are based on visual media and metaphors. Unlike ocularcentric legal practices, taste-based practices have the potential to provide occasions for incorporation and assimilation of multiple and fragmentary realities. Judgments based on taste occur almost immediately, and are triggered by subjective and physical reactions to the flavours of a particular food item. The subjectivity associated with judgments of taste place the taster under scrutiny. These values associated with taste may appear to be incompatible with those of law, particularly when law prides itself on objectivity and impartiality. However, taste should not be so easily dismissed because it provides a modal metaphor through which we might critically think about justice.

Justice has been primarily characterized through visual and aural metaphors by legal scholars. For example, the visual metaphor of blind justice suggests that justice should be meted out in accordance to the principles of impartiality and equality before the law. Although paradoxically suggesting that law relies on sight (Jay 1999), the notion of blind justice is commonly represented in courthouses by the figure of a blindfolded Justitia. While her blindfold represented the judge's neutrality and incorruptibility in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it has come to symbolize the rendering of colour-blind and gender-blind judgments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Resnik and Curtis 2012). Justice has also been characterized through aural metaphors as being the outcome of fair hearings (Hibbitts 1995), and as being accomplished through the



inclusion of a polyphony of marginalized voices (Weisbrod 1989-1990). Here, the inclusion of multiple voices is often anchored to a conceptualization of voice as a symbol of empowerment and justice, whereas the 'silences of law' serve to mark the place of oppressed and powerless victims (Constable 2007). Both these visual and aural metaphors relate to prescriptive theories of justice, where the performance or achievement of justice is equated with a particular operation of the eye or ear. In these instances, the eye or ear is associated with some sought-after quality, such as impartiality or the ability to listen to different voices.

In contrast to these prescriptive theories of justice, *Chew* illustrates a descriptive theory of justice based on the modal metaphor of taste. For the most part, we tend to assume that justice, particularly vigilante justice, would provide a gratifyingly sweet aftertaste. This assumption has been supported by recent scientific research that suggests revenge (or altruistic punishment) is associated with stimulation of the human brain's reward centre, which is also typically activated by pleasant tastes (Knutson 27 August 2004). In contrast to the notion of sweet justice, *Chew* suggests that justice might include disgusting tastes. It suggests that justice can only be achieved after we are forced to confront and digest crime's nauseating evidence. In order to 'do justice,' we need to be prepared to taste severed fingers, dead dogs and corpses. Even though it might have a sweet aftertaste, justice is not initially associated with tastes from which we derive any pleasure. As a 'what if' story, *Chew* leaves the reader with a morsel on which to chew: what if justice entails the eating of revolting things whose taste we can barely stomach but must bear in the name of a greater good?

## Notes

- 1 All page references refer to *Chew, Volume One*, which is a compilation of the first five issues in the comic book series. In referring to the compilation, the references are formatted in the following way: Issue number. Page number.
- 2 Recent popular documentary films, such as *Food, Inc.* (2008) and *Earthlings* (2005), have made knowledge about the dangers and cruelties of meat cultivation accessible to a wider audience.
- 3 As a rule-bound law enforcer, it is not surprising that Tony has a body shape analogous to a ruler.
- 4 While Nietzsche does employ the metaphor of rumination, particularly in his writing about the practice of interpretation (see *Genealogy of Morals*), *Chew* does not make use of this particular form of (re-)ingestion and (re-)digestion. While the metaphor of rumination implies repeatedly turning to the same material and chewing it over again and again, Tony's cibopathy works instantly and infallibly, circumventing any need for prolonged or repeated contemplation.
- 5 This preoccupation with the effects of food can be seen in *Ecce Homo* (Why I am So Clever), in which Nietzsche prescribes a 'moral' diet whereby philosophers should abstain from meals between meals and from drinking coffee. While coffee is thought to spread darkness, tea is considered wholesome, but only when sipped in the morning.
- 6 In *Genealogy of Morals* (Second Essay, 1), Nietzsche refers to both digestion and incorporation in his description of forgetting: 'Forgetting [...] is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression, that is responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it (one might call this process 'inpsychation') as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment – so-called 'incorporation'.
- 7 The visual style of the entire comic book series can be described as light and cartoony. The unrealistically cartoony images are meant to mitigate the horror and disgust evoked by the grotesque scenes during which Tony tastes corpses.

- 8 In Issue 4, Tony is able to 'read' from the ashes of an incinerated corpse the final moments of that person's life.
- 9 We can consider this the comic version of the filmic freeze-frame, where action is slowed down or halted altogether to direct the viewer's attention to a particularly momentous scene.

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