Gothic and Comics
Arkham Asylum: A Haunted House on a Haunted Page

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Arkham Asylum[1] was first published by DC Comics in 1989 as a single graphic novel in the 'prestige' format. Its release was dogged with controversy as DC censored and postponed the text in case its transvestite Joker impacted negatively on the Tim Burton movie (Baisden 1989). It continues to receive mixed reviews: on Goodreads it has an average score of 4.1, but over 20% of readers score it poorly and the comments demonstrate real vitriol towards this 'incoherent' 'overrated' 'mess', naming it the 'worst Batman comic by far'. Despite this, *Arkham* has enjoyed ongoing popularity and been re-released twice. It encapsulates many of the strategies and themes (metafiction, pop culture, symbolism, shamanism) that would go on to characterise writer Grant Morrison's *oeuvre*. While not a traditional serialised comic, it is a great example of comics' divided cultural status. It 'blur[s] distinctions between high and low culture by employing hardback production, glossy, painted art and self-conscious references to psychoanalysis, mythology and literature in a story about Batman fighting the Joker' (Brooker 2001: 323). Comics and Gothic both exist in a state of tension (between high/low culture, repulsion/attraction, and exaggerated/hidden), and *Arkham* exemplifies this.

Gothic is a labyrinth of texts and echoes – older works become recontextualised, and new ideas are 'gothicked up' (Byron 2012: 72). Carver (2011) notes references in the early Batman stories to many traditional Gothic texts (Poe, Conan Doyle) and archetypes including vampires and mad scientists. Gothic archetypes like these are multiple and contradictory: Edward Cullen and Count Orlock are both vampires, but could not be further apart in aesthetic, cultural and structural terms. The comic book superhero is similarly multiple and paradoxical. Creators are encouraged to find 'their own distinctive 'take'' on the character (Brooker 2012: 112) but at the same time the texts themselves feed into each other, bound in monstrous disunity; and both Brooker (2012) and Bavlnka (2013) connect *Arkham* in particular with Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and Heath Ledger's Joker.

The superhero archetype is more Gothic than it might seem: a figure of fragmented identity, held together by processes of exclusion. It is a mistake to see the hero identity as a 'mask' and its alter ego as the 'real' person underneath. This is foregrounded in *Arkham* when one of the inmates wants to remove Batman's mask to see his face, and Joker responds 'Oh don't be so **predictable**, for Christ's sake! That *is* his real face.' The alter ego and superhero identity are often binary opposites (mighty Superman/puny Clark Kent; obsessive Batman/playboy Bruce Wayne; brash Spiderman/shy Peter Parker) that are inexorably bound together (Round 2005).

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[1] Written by Grant Morrison, art by Dave McKean, lettering by Gaspar Saladino.

In many instances the superhero can also be defined as the antithesis of the colourful villains he fights (consider Lex Luthor's human capitalist against Superman's altruistic alien). Morrison claims that *Arkham*'s villains all represent different aspects of Batman's troubled psyche. Psychological readings like this have dominated the critical attention paid to the comic to date: Singer (2006) discusses the sexual deviance of its antagonists (275-6); Lieshout (2013) reads the triumvirate of Joker, Bruce Wayne and Batman as the id, ego and superego respectively; and Wurtz (558, 560) argues that the house embodies Batman's mind.

However the fragmented identity of the superhero is pushed to its limit in *Arkham Asylum* through a series of doublings and inversions. Boney (2010) notes how *Arkham* 'alternates between inversion and mirroring […] to complicate many of the binary absolutes and oppositions we've come to expect from superhero books. Madness becomes sanity, male becomes female, and rationality becomes chaos'. The asylum staff become prisoners and victims, and are as mentally disturbed as their inmates in both past and present (Gordon 2014). The 'successful' attempts to 'cure' Two-Face have left him incapable of making the most basic decisions. Gender is also flipped (reinforced by repeated images of clown fish, which can change sex): Joker appears in high heels and speaks to Batman in provocative language ('big boy', 'sweetheart', 'honey'); the 'Tunnel of Love' in Amadeus's memories is a red, fleshy, vaginal heart; doctors Cavendish and Adams reverse gender roles and apparel at the end (Morrison 2014: 53); and Joker is ultimately happy to release Batman.

Morrison notes in his script annotations that 'In the reversal reality of the Feast of Foods, it's the arch-villain who does the most good, while the hero is ineffective and lost until the conclusion' (Morrison 2014: 65). Inversion is particularly obvious between Batman and Joker: Joker is described as having 'some kind of super-sanity' and the multiple versions of his character across comics history are explained as 'He CREATES himself each day.' By contrast, Batman loses his grip on reality during a word association test and mutilates himself intentionally: whimpering 'Mommy?' and rushing into the depths of the asylum after a pearl-like globe of his blood falls slowly to the ground.

Gothic symbols feature heavily throughout *Arkham*, which is 'woven tightly around a small number of symbolic elements […] The MOON, the SHADOW, the MIRROR, the TOWER and the MOTHER'S SON' (Morrison 2004: 2). These are based on the Tarot and the psychology of Carl Jung. The Moon card represents dreams, intuition and the unconscious, often with respect to the Jungian shadow self: an unconscious aspect of personality that may be positive or negative. The Mirror is an important stage of self-recognition in psychological development. Jung's exploration of its role in the unconscious suggests that 'the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face' (1935: 43). The Tower tarot card is a destructive image, representing sudden change or revelation, particularly the confrontation between lies and truth. Finally, the 'mother's son' is reflected in many aspects of Jung's psychological model, which identifies the 'mother complex'. The mother archetype rules over the

mother/son relationship, and has both positive (birthing, nurturing) and negative (devouring, controlling) sides. Similarly, Jung's concept of 'anima' is the woman in man: relational and sexual, opposed to rationality and reason (animus).

The mirror reveals the true self or soul – or lack thereof. Dorian Gray's picture is 'the most magical of mirrors' (2005: 83), while the vampire has no reflection. Mirrors appear at key points in *Arkham*: Batman looks into a mirror and sees a child, perhaps the young Amadeus Arkham, or himself as a young Bruce Wayne, doubling and merging these characters. Later, gazing at a circular window, he sees his mother's face and smashes the glass. At a wider level, in *Arkham* the house itself becomes the mirror, with its dream-like inmates representing Batman's deepest fears and desires. As the Hatter says: 'Arkham is a **looking glass**. And **we** are **you**' (Figure 1). The typography encodes 'our' within 'your' (Wurtz 2011) and links 'we' and 'you' as emboldened words. As he speaks the Hatter fades from view and again Batman is left looking at his own reflection, his hand pressed flat as if against the glass of a mirror.

Figure 1[2]
The Hatter

The mother's son connotes ancestry and inevitability: the Gothic curse from the past or the inability to escape one's destiny. As Batman admits: 'Sometimes I… **question** the rationality of my actions. And I'm afraid that when I walk through those Asylum gates […] It'll be just like coming home.' Here the domestic lexis links Batman's anima to his mother (as do the memory sequences of her death), and presents this relationship as inescapable; reinforced when he calls out to her while navigating the Asylum.

Critics have defined the asylum as an abject and liminal space, full of repressed memories (Wurtz 2011) and 'dense layers of meaning' (Rollins 1994: 7). Lieshout discusses the institution's hybridity and liminality, pointing out its contradictions as a confining space that also offers the possibility of breaking out. She draws particular attention to the threshold, defined by Aguirre (1990: 5) as 'part of the Other', since by standing here we have already crossed into the other side, even if only in our minds. She reads this as a liminal and abject space, where borders are crossed and binaries break down (Kristeva 1982). The remainder of this article will explore how the comics medium emphasises this transgression of borders.

In comics we see the past, present and future laid out on the page, and move freely within it. In *Arkham* this notion is echoed in the story's content: the events create an echo chamber of flattened time, as Batman's obsessions haunt Amadeus's mother, driving her to insanity. But perhaps the most

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[2] Figure 1. *Arkham Asylum*, Grant Morrison, Dave McKean and Gaspar Saladino, 1989. © DC Comics. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

striking point about *Arkham*'s page architecture is its contradictory and conflicted aesthetic. Dave McKean's abstract, dark and fluid art jars against the thin, white, rigid gutters: scaffolding and style are incompatible. The gutters divide most of the pages into regimented grids (Figure 1) and although when Batman fights Killer Croc these lines become wavery and hand-drawn, and at especially violent points in the comic they become red, they quickly return to their regular form. This clash between symbolic art and uniform structure is unappealing and odd. It contributes to a sense that throughout this comic the page exists in a state of tension (Hatfield 2005).

I also argue that a sense of Gothic excess invades the comics page through its mobility of voice and view, switches between different layers of storyworld, and self-conscious artistic style (Round 2014). Excess abounds in *Arkham* in all these ways. In the opening pages Batman's memories are drawn from a range of conflicting perspectives, which include his embodied viewpoint (gazing at Commissioner Gordon) alongside numerous disembodied perspectives (in profile; extreme closeup). This mobility is juxtaposed against the knowledge that these are Batman's memories and so should be drawn entirely from his perspective. At later points we are given the embodied viewpoint of Joker or Batman – sometimes jumping between these in quick succession. The swift time hops that occur throughout the book also sustain excess, as we flit dizzyingly between Arkham's past and present with only visual clues (such as the typography) to guide us.

Figure 2[3]
Joker

Morrison (2004) has claimed that the abstract artwork and metaphorical story in fact work against each other, overloading meaning. Dave McKean's artwork combines paint, ink, pencil, collage, photography and more. His Joker is a whirling force of chaos, his hair a green mist that follows him around, his features indistinct and his eyes unnaturally white (Figure 2). Gaspar Saladino's lettering is another great example of excess – he creates a different lettering style and distinct speech balloon shape for each character. Although Gaiman and McKean's *Black Orchid* had previously given Batman a black speech balloon and precise type, Saladino's construction of unique fonts to individualise each character is a landmark innovation (and would later be picked up by Todd Klein in *Sandman*). Saladino's contribution to *Arkham Asylum* is vast, particularly the Joker's anarchic font, which appears without speech balloon to enclose it, breaking free of any formalist boundary, and whose use of red over white lifts it from the page, bursting out towards us (Figure 2), and the Hatter's font is just as significant.

All this comes together in the role of the reader – a revenant creator of this comic, who is asked to identify, interpret, contribute and conclude the story. In Radcliffe's terms, this creates the terror-gothic as we expand our senses to

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[3] Figure 2. *Arkham Asylum*, Grant Morrison, Dave McKean and Gaspar Saladino, 1989. © DC Comics. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

perceive obscured events. As Boney (2010) explains: 'We're not just being challenged to catch all the references; we're also being challenged to put together the pieces of the parallel narratives of Batman and Amadeus Arkham.' We are forced to imagine terrible events (such as Pearl's hypothetical blinding) in the space between or outside of panels: the crypt or gutter, named by Lieshout as 'the liminal space where what is invisible becomes visible' (21). For this reason, I name the comics reader a revenant or spectral author, responsible for creating and contributing key story events as they unlock the contents of the crypt (in the gutter between panels).

Lieshout defines the gutter, where the reader is most active, as an abject space, as Kristeva (3) claims the abject is: 'at the border of my condition as a living being […] Abjection, then, is perhaps a border – a liminal space, if you will – in which self is both deconstructed and established.' In *Arkham* the reader is forced to become intimately involved with the psyches of Amadeus Arkham and Batman himself: contributing to their memories and interpreting their actions. This is stressed by the comic's visuals, as the mobile perspectives often suggest we are not just embodying the characters (i.e. looking out as them), but also being looked *at*. 'When Dent asks at the end of the book "Who cares for you," he's looking through a house of stacked Tarot cards directly at us.' (Boney 2010). Figure 1 also 'places us (the readers/viewers) looking over the shoulder of Batman, and the Mad Hatter's "and we are you" might well be directed at all of us' (Boney 2010). Wurtz takes this further, pointing out that when the Hatter suggests 'PerHAPS IT'S **yOUR** HEAD, BATMAN' (Figure 1) his unique typography literally encodes 'our' within the word 'your'.

Inversions, tensions and contradictions abound in *Arkham Asylum*, as sane becomes insane; inside becomes exterior; and the Asylum itself becomes a liminal, metaphorical space. Amadeus Arkham's journal, the most private of documents, is our framing narrative; and his incantations within his secret room shape and create the whole. The comic tears down expectations and transgresses borders. As Amadeus concludes: 'I see now the virtue of madness, for this country knows no law nor any boundary.'

Critics acknowledge that Gothic has become a 'sprawling category […] in its blurry designation of architectural form, novelistic subject matter, visual effect, subcultural style, musical genre and metaphorical trope. Because of the jumbling together of different phenomena, Gothic is everywhere and nowhere' (Warwick 2014: npag). These words could be written for *Arkham Asylum*, which blurs together architectural space, mythic story, lavish aesthetic, cultural worth, intertextual references, and overwhelming symbolism. Its events are deeply traumatic yet may not even be real. *Arkham Asylum* is both within and without.