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Editor's Introduction

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[A] INTRODUCTION

Law has always depended on visibility to exercise its social function. Courts, robes, files, hearings, witnesses, verdicts, prisons, all belong to the visual and symbolic life of a legal system just as much as its technical operation. The law needs to be recognized as law, and therefore it depends, at least in part, on forms of appearance. The idea for this Special Section begins with that simple observation. In contemporary culture, however, the visibility of law no longer belongs mainly to the courtroom: for many people, law is actually encountered less through statutes, judgments, or legal proceedings than through films, television drama, documentaries, comics, social media, news images, popular narratives, and increasingly digital or algorithmically produced visual forms. Moreover, the public imagination of law is often limited to its criminal iteration and shaped by images of trials, lawyers, judges, police officers, victims, offenders, investigators, prisons, and punishments. These images help form expectations about what law is, what justice should look like, who deserves protection, who appears threatening, and what counts as a convincing legal truth.

The title of this Special Section, "Justice on Display", points therefore to questions on how justice is made visible, how legal authority is staged, how legal narratives are framed, and how public feelings about law are produced. Visibility can support law's authority, but it can also make injustice perceptible, and it can conceal, simplify, racialize, sentimentalize, or sensationalize problems that are, first and foremost, legal in nature. The visual life of law is therefore ambivalent: it may educate or mislead, clarify or distort, expose or obscure. The essays collected here approach this ambivalence from different directions, and examine the ways in which the visual and the narrative participate in the making of legal meaning. Comics, television drama, reality television, environmental data, literary

trials, and musical performance all appear in this Special Section as instruments to imagine, question, hide, expose, or assess the law. This Special Section, therefore, moves between different forms of display, beginning with graphic narratives and their capacity to stage the tension between legality and justice, turning to television drama and policy discourse, considering tactics of shadow and fog, and finally reflecting on the trial as a scene of exposure, in which judgment lays the defendant bare before others and before themself. The contribution of this Special Section aims to be an invitation to think about law as a cultural and visual practice, to ask what happens when justice is watched, narrated, aestheticized, obscured, or exposed, and to question who benefits from particular forms of visibility, who is harmed by them, and what remains outside the frame.

[B] THE FOUR ESSAYS

Paolo Addis and Giuseppe Martinico's contribution opens the Special Section by turning to comics, manga, anime, and superhero narratives as forms through which law can be imagined critically. Their article treats graphic narratives as a space in which questions of legality can be made visible. This is especially important as comics often place law under pressure: their protagonists frequently act in worlds where legal institutions are corrupt, absent, inefficient, compromised, or morally insufficient. Figures such as Batman, Daredevil, and the vigilantes of *My Hero Academia: Vigilantes* are narrative devices through which readers can confront the unstable relationship between law and justice. These characters ask whether legality is always a condition of justice, whether unlawful conduct may ever appear morally necessary, and what happens when a legal system no longer seems capable of protecting the values it claims to embody. The importance of this contribution lies partly in its pedagogical dimension: Addis and Martinico show that graphic narratives can be used to teach constitutional law by complicating it, as comics allow students to approach foundational legal questions through familiar cultural forms such as the rule of law, the monopoly of legitimate violence, due process, professional ethics, vulnerability, disability, and the distinction between formal legality and substantive justice. In this sense, popular culture makes law not more accessible but more questionable and more contingent.

The article also speaks directly to the broader theme of this Special Section: comics are visual narratives, but their relevance is primarily in the way they stage conflict through bodies, masks, gestures, panels, shadows, violence, and moral confrontation. Law appears in these

stories as something embodied and dramatized: in the blind lawyer who becomes a vigilante, in the masked figure who cooperates with police while remaining outside the law, in the hero who bends rules in order to preserve a justice that the rules themselves cannot secure. What emerges, then, is that graphic narratives make the conflict between law and justice more available for thought, and show that legal authority is most revealing when it is unstable, contested, or placed at its limits.

Megan Johnson's essay shifts the issue from graphic narrative to television drama and public discourse, focusing on how legal and political meanings are organized through narrative. The article revisits the BBC drama *Three Girls* alongside Baroness Casey's National Audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse and examines how sexual violence, race, victimhood, and criminality become publicly intelligible. Johnson's attention to framing is quite significant: representations of group-based child sexual exploitation enter a public field already shaped by questions about race, gender, immigration, policing, and institutional failure—that is, in a context in which the visual and narrative presentation of abuse can also reproduce racialized assumptions about who appears dangerous, who appears vulnerable, and whose suffering is recognized as legally and politically significant. Johnson's analysis is especially valuable because it resists the false choice between confronting sexual violence and criticizing racialized representation, and questions how public accounts of such violence may become attached to selective images of perpetration and victimhood. When non-white men are repeatedly figured as sexual threats to white girls, and when non-white victims become less visible within the same narrative field, the result is a distorted public understanding of both harm and justice. The display of injustice can be necessary to make institutional neglect visible and demand public response; but display can also arrange attention unequally, illuminate some victims while obscuring others, expose one form of harm while reinforcing another. Johnson's essay, therefore, shows that visibility in law is always mediated by cultural and political conditions: what is seen, and how it is seen, matters. To narrate injustice is also to distribute recognition, suspicion, and credibility; the question is not only whether law sees victims, or whether the public sees institutional failure, but how such seeing is structured by race and gender. In the context of this Special Section, Johnson's article warns that justice on display may expose harm, but it may also reproduce the very hierarchies that a just legal response should resist.

Frans Willem Korsten's contribution complicates the very idea of display. If the first two articles consider how law and justice are

imagined or narrated through popular forms, this article turns to the opposite problem: what happens when law, harm, responsibility, and accountability are made difficult to see. The central concern of the essay is the management of visibility: some things are placed before the public eye, while others are delayed, dispersed, euphemized, proceduralized, or pushed into shadow. The article develops this argument through the Dutch nitrogen crisis and the broader ecological consequences of agro-industrial practice. These are not harms that easily lend themselves to dramatic representation: environmental damage is often gradual, technical, dispersed, and difficult to picture, and it does not always appear in the form of a clear victim or a visible wound. This makes it vulnerable to what Korsten calls tactics of shadow and fog: the production of doubt, delay, opacity, and partial visibility through which powerful actors can avoid responsibility while appearing to remain within the legal and political processes. Korsten rightly insists that popular culture matters not only when it represents law directly, but also when it helps sustain affective attachments, distractions, and fantasies that shape the public's relation to legality. Korsten's discussion of Dutch agricultural imagery and popular television shows how an industry can be made visible in comforting and familiar ways while the destructive material conditions of that same industry remain largely unseen. The result is that one image is made available so that another reality becomes harder to perceive. The legal dimension of this argument is equally important: Korsten shows how opacity may be produced through legal and quasi-legal forms such as information procedures, litigation, mediation, settlement, plea bargaining, regulatory delay, and technical disputes about data. These mechanisms may be legitimate in themselves, but they can also contribute to a withdrawal of law from public scrutiny. In such cases, the problem is that the processes through which responsibility might be established become slow, inaccessible, fragmented, or invisible.

Korsten's notion of juridical cohesion gives this argument its wider force: besides institutions and procedures, the rule of law depends on a shared affective attachment to legality—a sense that the law matters, responsibility can be pursued, and public wrongs can be named. When tactics of shadow and fog repeatedly frustrate that attachment, they weaken the public's capacity to care about law as a common project. In this respect, Korsten's article significantly expands the meaning of "justice on display": display is also a struggle over opacity, data, delay, environmental harm, corporate power, and the visibility of responsibility. Korsten's essay is a reminder that injustice may be produced by what is made difficult to see just as much as by what is shown.

Persio Tincani's essay brings the section to a more philosophical and literary close. If Korsten's article asks what happens when law and responsibility are withdrawn into shadow and fog, Tincani turns to the opposite movement: the trial as a scene in which the person judged is exposed. His reading of Roger Waters' "The Trial", in dialogue with Franz Kafka and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, presents judgment as a process of unveiling. Indeed, Tincani treats exposure as intrinsic to the trial: a trial does not simply determine whether a defendant is guilty or innocent; what it actually does is place a life before others. A trial arranges facts, memories, motives, failures, desires, and weaknesses into a public or quasi-public scene of judgment and, in doing so, it strips the defendant of privacy and distance. The person on trial is made visible to the court, to the public, and to themselves. This makes the trial a particularly intense form of legal display. Unlike other images of law, the trial produces visibility directly, through the very act of judging. Evidence, testimony, accusation, confession, narrative, and verdict all work to expose the subject. Tincani's essay points out that legal visibility is not always emancipatory or reassuring: to be seen by law can also mean to be laid bare, reduced, interpreted, and shamed.

One of the most interesting aspects of Tincani's analysis is the connection between trial and shame. Shame appears as more than a possible consequence of conviction; it is, in fact, something generated by the exposure itself. Even an acquittal cannot fully undo the experience of having one's life opened to judgment. The trial's display, therefore, exceeds the verdict: what the law reveals, or claims to reveal, may continue to mark the subject regardless of the formal outcome. Visibility in the law is often associated with transparency, accountability, and open justice, but Tincani shows that visibility also has a punitive dimension: the trial may promise truth, but it also produces vulnerability; it may seek judgment, but it also creates shame. Tincani's essay, therefore, closes the sequence by returning to one of the deepest problems in the idea that justice must be seen: the same visibility that allows judgment to take place may itself become part of the punishment.

[C] THE AMBIVALENCE OF LEGAL VISIBILITY

The articles of this Special Section all underscore, in different forms, the problems of visibility in the law. Making law visible does not necessarily make it clearer, fairer, or more accountable. Visibility may serve justice just as well as it can distort it. Visibility may help audiences grasp legal problems that would otherwise remain abstract, but it may also replace the sophistication of the law with recognizable plots, types, images, and

emotions; it may expose institutional failure as well as persons unequally; the same facts may invite public scrutiny or simply become a show for the masses. Arguably, the central claim emerging from this Special Section is therefore not that law should be more visible, or less visible, but that the conditions of legal visibility require critical attention. This is made particularly significant by the fact that the general public's knowledge and understanding of the law is increasingly formed outside formal legal institutions: popular culture, media narratives, political discourse, visual symbolism, and digital circulation all shape what law is imagined to be. They influence what counts as justice, what appears as injustice, who is seen as vulnerable, who is seen as threatening, and what forms of legal authority appear credible or suspect. The public life of law is hardly confined to courts, legislatures, or official documents; one may argue that it is just as much produced through images, stories, genres, performances, and acts of framing as it is in parliaments, courts and law schools. The representation of the law, therefore, cannot be treated as secondary—in fact, images and narratives do not simply come after the law, translating it for a wider audience: they participate in the formation of legal meaning; they can make law teachable, as when graphic narratives open constitutional questions to students and readers; they can make institutional failure emotionally available, as television drama often does; they can create or reinforce racialized and gendered assumptions about crime, victimhood, and danger; they can conceal responsibility through comforting images, procedural delay, euphemism, or technical opacity; they can also turn judgment itself into an act of exposure, where the subject of law becomes visible in ways that are painful, irreversible, or punitive.

The ambivalence of visibility is therefore the main contribution of this Special Section to the wider debate on law and visual culture. On one hand, legal visibility can educate and give form to abstract principles, dramatize conflicts between legality and justice, and allow non-specialist audiences to engage with questions that might otherwise seem remote. This is one of the most important functions of popular culture for the law. On the other hand, the same process can also mislead: narrative demands resolution; genre often seeks recognizable villains and victims; images can intensify emotion while narrowing understanding. What becomes visible may be compelling simply because it is partial and easy to decode.

Moreover, legal visibility can also legitimize. Courtrooms, trials, robes, official documents, public hearings, and the various rituals of the law all produce authority through appearance. Law demands to be trusted more

than obeyed, and part of that trust is generated through forms of display. Visibility, however, may also reveal the fragility of that authority: when institutions appear corrupt, absent, racially selective, environmentally ineffective, or morally insufficient, visibility becomes a mode of critique. To see the law is also to see its failures. Invisibility, though, is not simply the opposite of display. One of the broader lessons of the articles in this Special Section is that invisibility is often produced: harms may be difficult to see because they are dispersed, technical, slow, or hidden behind expertise; responsibility may be obscured through procedure, delay, settlement, data disputes, or carefully managed public images. In such cases, the problem is that visibility is organized in ways that protect some actors and expose others. The politics of display is therefore inseparable from the politics of concealment. This is why the question of justice on display cannot be reduced to the familiar formula that "justice must be seen to be done". That formula remains important, but it is insufficient: it assumes that visibility supports legitimacy. The essays in this issue show that visibility may also undermine legitimacy, manipulate public feeling, racialize suspicion, displace accountability, or punish those placed under the legal gaze. What matters is not only whether justice is seen, but how it is seen, by whom, through which media, under which conventions, and with what effects.

These essays, therefore, invite a more critical vocabulary for thinking about the visual life of law, and encourage the readership to attend to staging, framing, genre, affect, opacity, exposure, and shame. These matters are part of how law becomes meaningful in public culture. Law's authority depends not only on rules and reasons, but also on appearances, narratives, and the management of attention. To study justice on display is therefore to study the fragile relation between law, imagination, and public belief.

[D] CONCLUDING REMARKS

As stated beforehand, "Justice on Display" began from the assumption that law depends on being seen. The authority of the law is not sustained by rules alone, but also by scenes, symbols, performances, narratives, and images. To display justice is to frame it, to decide where attention should fall, what kind of story should be told, which figures should appear central, and which forms of harm should become legible. Sometimes this display can open law to criticism, pedagogy, and democratic scrutiny, reveal the distance between legality and justice, expose institutional failure, and give audiences new ways of thinking about legal authority. Sometimes this display simplifies, racializes, sentimentalizes, obscures, punishes,

and makes some subjects hyper-visible while leaving others outside the frame. This is why the visual and narrative life of law deserves sustained attention. Popular culture helps shape the conditions under which law is recognized, trusted, feared, resisted, or misunderstood. Films, television dramas, comics, reports, rituals, trials, and public images all participate in the making of the legal imagination, in what people know about law, what they expect from it and, increasingly, how they feel about it.

The articles that follow are therefore an invitation to see justice as something the visibility of which is always constructed and contested. The question is not only whether justice is seen to be done: it is how justice is made visible, who controls that visibility, who is exposed by it, and what remains unseen.

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