

Reimagining Comics Visuality: The New Genre of Audio Comic *Unseen*

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Abstract

Accessibility issues have for long excluded blind and visually impaired readers from accessing comics, leaving a significant section of population out of the medium's reach. Consequently, there is a compelling and an immediate need to make comics accessible to the visually impaired audiences as they are to everyone else. In this regard, the paper examines Chad Allen's *Unseen* (2019), a comic book in audio format as a breakthrough work, introducing a new genre of audio comics. Chad's work, we contend, enables an immersive translation of visuality of comics into aural medium, creating a prototype of an accessible comics genre. Besides interrogating the forces shaping audio comics, the paper highlights its genre conventions and distinctions to separate it from other routine audio comic renditions.

Keywords: Accessibility, comics, *Unseen*, disability, audio comics, accessible comics

Mark Benton, a well-known comic book historian, rightly observes that comic books have touched the lives of nearly everyone alive (1989). While his claim may be regarded as substantially valid for most persons with sight, the same cannot be generalized for visually impaired audiences. World Health Organization (WHO) reporting on the magnitude of eye conditions worldwide, estimates at least 2.2 billion people to have vision impairments or blindness (2019). It is very likely that many among them, particularly the congenitally blind, draw a blank on any discussion on comics. Persistence of such disabling experiences even after nine long decades of comics' meteoric rise and influence across the world with

many scholars promoting it as a useful cultural product for early literacy (Monnin, 2009; Shagoury, 2010), highlight the accessibility woes that infect the medium. Whalen et al. (2016) point to comics being “potentially exclusionary in nature towards blind/visually impaired readers. There are indeed numerous problems for this significant audience inherent in considerations of any art that typically expects some sort of substantial visual interaction” (p. 8). These aspects underscore an urgent and immediate need to reimagine a more accommodative comics artform to ensure a barrier-free access to all.

This paper argues Allen’s *Unseen* (2019), a comic book in audio format to be a significant leap towards reimagining comics for the blind and visually challenged as it introduces a new genre—the audio comics, characterized by its accessibility and its immersiveness. Critically interrogating *Unseen*, the paper delineates the genre conventions, which we contend lie at the heart of its narrative animation and draw upon its distinctions to establish it as a separate genre, not to be muddled with apparently identical/allied audio renditions of comics. In doing so, we demonstrate the valuable aesthetic innovations and combinations of audio strategies embodied in the audio-comic as establishing a universal design which can be accessed and enjoyed by audiences with and without sight alike. The present discussion offers a detailed elucidation of these arguments.

Allen’s work is ground-breaking on many counts. To begin with, *Unseen* is designated as the first comics ever written by a blind person. Chad Allen, born a person with sight, grew up on a staple of comics before he was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa¹ at the age of fifteen, resulting in his complete blindness. He draws on his experiences of comics to create *Unseen*, an audio comic “written by a blind person, with a blind heroine, for blind (and sighted) audiences” (unseencomic.com). As noted in the tagline, Afsana, a blind Afghani assassin, is its protagonist. She serves both as a contiguity and a defiance to the lineage of blind American superheroes such as Doctor Mid-nite and Daredevil. Unlike them, she exhibits no superpowers. Allen deliberately eschews bestowing her with any extraordinary power as he feels anything of the sort to be ‘cheating’ (Wilson, 2019) and instead he makes her rely on her solution-driven skills. Again, unlike American disabled superheroes, she belongs to Afghanistan, a troubled South Asian country in the future of 2050, accomplishing her daunting tasks for the promise of a US-born status and a large sum of money.

Unseen is also the first ever audio comic without a corresponding graphic representation, posing an ontological challenge to the fundamental premise of comics being a visual narrative. It also prompts many to question if an audio narration of the sort be considered as comics at all. Our response to such sceptics and audio comic naysayers is twofold. First, it is not uncommon to find graphic works/novels that completely abandon one mode of representation in favour of the other—either verbally or visually. For instance, works such as Yuichi Yokoyama's *Travel* (2008), Nicolas de Crécy's *Prosopopus* (2009) and Olivier Schrauwen's *Le Miroir de mawgli* (2011) are pure visual texts without any verbal component. Postema (2018) reflecting on such authorial designs asserts, "The choice to forgo language may sometimes help foreground a narrative theme, such as the theme of language barriers in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2007) or the unspeakable horrors of war in Joe Sacco's *The Great War* (2013)" (p. 59). Just as there are wordless comics, there are pictureless comics too. McCloud (2009) notes "Imageless comics are the logical extreme on the other end from wordless comics" (as cited in Postema, 2022, p. 159). Possibilities of the sort are explored as early as 1984 in mainstream comics with nearly six pages in "Snowblind" of *Alpha Flight* # 6 bearing only panels, speech bubbles and captions with no graphics accompanying them. They were sketched to recreate the scene of temporal blindness experienced by Kolomaq owing to him being covered by snow—evidencing that pictureless comics too heighten the thematic experience of a narrative akin to wordless comics, as in this case, the snow blindness. It only seems imperative from this standpoint that *Unseen* written from the perspective of the blind heroine should be an audio comic recreating the nonvisual world she inhabits.

Second to the question of what makes *Unseen* 'comics', we wish to draw on the paradigmatic features of comics to compare them with the narrative structure of Allen's experiment. Scholars have identified 'sequential pictorial images' (McCloud, 1993) or 'sequential art' (Eisner, 2004) as fundamental to the medium; the panel-gutter structure and closure are also established as essential. "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments. And mentally construct a continuous, unified reality...Then in the real sense comics is closure" (McCloud, 1993, p. 67).

Conventionally, the 'sequential pictorial images' and the fractured narratives have been achieved through visual images and grammar

of panel-gutter. However, to bind the aesthetic experience of comics to sensorial perception of vision alone and not to the prerequisite of producing sequential mental images is fallacious. Hague (2014), a comics scholar, notes, “the notion that comics are inherently and/or exclusively visual (and therefore that only their visual elements are meaningful) is unsatisfactory because it does not account for the myriad multisensory aspects of comics” (p. 3). Similarly, McCloud’s argument above illuminates that the aesthetic experience of comics must result in stimulating an active imagination deliberately drawing readers into ‘closure’, i.e. mentally completing the incomplete graphics by bringing their prior knowledge and experience. He further asserts, “There is no life here (in comics iconography) except that which you give it” (p. 59). Grassini (2006) also reiterates “image is born in the senses, but its beauty is illuminated in the intellect” (as cited in Secchi, 2022, p. 127). We submit that Allen’s work demonstrates that these mental illuminations need not necessarily be born through the sense of sight. Reinforcing Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) belief that both visual and verbal modes are equally competent for such expression with the only difference that “what is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and clause structures, may, in visual communication, be expressed through the choice between different uses of colour or different compositional structures” (p. 2), Allen recreates a verisimilitude of a fractured narrative through his carefully crafted image-evocative verbal narration intercepted with innovative aural panels. The result is an immersive comics experience.

Clearly, the seamless interweaving of the ‘visual features of comics’ both in terms of graphic details of the action within the panel and the visual grammar of the panel-gutter into the audio comic marks an essential genre convention. We contend that this ‘aurality of comics visuality’ lends legitimacy to *Unseen* as a ‘comic’ and, by extension, to the new genre of audio comics.

Reflecting on the essence of comics that were paramount while creating *Unseen*, Allen asserts:

It (Comics) is flashy images; there is a lot of action happening; there is a lot of excitement and a lot of energy in a lot of these images of comics. So, the sound had to mirror that experience. We needed to also understand the progression of the story through a panel type structure. So, that’s why there is a whooshing sound between each supposed panel

that you would be visually seeing if you were looking at actual comics. (Hatton, 2019, 2:46)

Allen's audio comics aurally recreate the high action drama in the listeners' mind just as the graphic visuals affect the consumers in conventional comics. His success may be gauged from the fact that his work tied for the first position in a competition held for the blind and visually impaired comic book writers². It was also chosen to be exhibited at the Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco and The Palo Alto Art Center in California.

After ascertaining 'comics-ality' of audio comics, we now turn to examine another cultural force that shapes the genre—the audio drama. Allen in conversation with Thomas Reed recalls how after missing comics post blindness, he was enthralled to reconnect with his favourite Marvel character Doctor Strange through audio description on one of his movie theatre experiences. This got him thinking if he could experience comics in this format (audio description), why not make comics itself more widely available through a more readily available format like an audio drama (VI Program SFSU, 2021). A brief enquiry into the format of an audio drama would illuminate how Allen interweaves certain features of audio/radio drama into his work.

Audio/radio dramas can be said to be a legitimate heir to the oral culture integral to human storytelling. The famous British actor Paul Scofield describes it as being "entertained through my ears and otherwise be free" (as cited in Guralnick, 1985, p. 80). An audio drama devoid of costumes, scenery, makeup, audience, visible movements is stripped to the most archaic power of the narrative, the speech.

Tim Crook (1999) identifies three types of speech integral to audio dramas: The theatrical speech which includes dialogue exchange and performance of action; the textual speech which refers to the narrative role of language—stitching together the spatio-temporal continuity of the story. Crook equates textual speech to the 'lens of a film camera' as it conjures up images in the listeners' mind. The textual voice also achieves non-invasive spatio-temporal transitions in a narrative. The last being the emanation speech, although not frequent, refers to a deliberate phonic/verbal silhouette of words where words are either not fully comprehended or heard. These speech variations with complex diegetic sound design create compelling verbal narratives. Allen borrows this

feature from the radio/audio drama into his work. We argue that the genre of audio comics reinvigorates the audio-drama-like speech models and its accompanying sonic design to imbibe the tradition of powerful verbal stories which we submit as the second generic convention of audio comics. Thus, *Unseen* introduces a new genre with two core conventions: 'aurality of comics visuality' and 'speech-model of the audio/radio drama' fused together to be rightly labelled, 'audio comic'.

Another question we address is, how is the genre of audio comics distinct from the apparently analogous format of audio renditions/adaptations of comics which routinely hit the market. Ever since the first audio rendition of comics by the New York mayor, Fiorello La Guardia in the 1940s owing to a long haul of a newspaper strike (Snyder, 2022) there have been several attempts at such renditions. In fact, audiobook publishers like Graphic Audio and Audible regularly adapt conventional comics aurally, often loosely calling them 'audio editions', 'audio adaptations', 'audio renditions' and even 'audio comics' interchangeably. By delineating the genre distinctions between audio comics and audio renditions/adaptations/editions in this section, we urge users of the terms to take note of the distinctions and to be more cautious in applying the labels. For purposes of comparison, Graphic Audio's audio adaptation of *Daredevil: Guardian Devil* written by Kevin Smith and illustrated by Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti (1999) and directed by Richard Rohan (2015) is taken as a test case of the routine audio editions as we discuss how it varies from *Unseen* under different subheads below:

Aurality of Comics Visuality: A Deliberate Design

Unseen "Chapter I" which is a little over twenty-minute audio comic, opens with a steely male voice tersely announcing the mode of incorporating visual panels into its audio: "When you hear this voice (Whoosh) the panel changes" (0:03-07). The description, although brisk, lasting barely a few seconds, is a significant aesthetic innovation incorporating the visual grammar of comics into the audio comic. Eisner (2004) delineates the panel function as "lines drawn around the depiction of a scene, which act as a containment of the action of segment of action, have as one of their functions the task of separating or parsing of the total statement" (p. 28). The panels, although integral to comics, have been a barrier to its accessibility. But with the simple, distinct, and

inventive sound at the beginning of audio comics design, Allen's work makes it possible to include the fractured linkages of comics without interfering with the narrative.

In addition, the inherent timing of the action which panels embody is also well incorporated. Eisner asserts, "The device most fundamental to the transmission of timing is the panel or the box" (p. 28). He identifies the number and size of panels to contribute to the rhythm and passage of time in comics. (p. 30). While these conventions are intuitive for readers with sight, for the visually impaired consumers the speed of action must be aurally communicated. The verbal reproduction of the pace with which Afsana attacks and kills the serial rapist who held her captive reveals how innovative paralinguistic codes can be interwoven to achieve a synchronic and diachronic reading experiences of traditional comics into audio comics.

With similar ingenuity *Unseen* goes on to imbibe the highly visual feature of perspective into its design. After giving a broad perspective of General Harris' office in a panel on Afsana being taken there, the narrator re-describes it from another perspective as: "We see the office from another viewpoint. There is now a closet door. Harris is taking a briefcase off its shelf" (*Unseen*, 7:41).

In contrast, in the routine audio renditions exemplified by *Daredevil: The Guardian Devil*, the critical elements of comics visuality—panels, timing and perspective remain largely untranslated. This suggests that the comics conventions are well woven into the creative design of an audio comic while remaining conspicuously absent in audio renditions—marking an important generic distinction between the two formats.

Universal Design of Accessibility

A conscious commitment to accessibility is evident in Allen's audio comic. The only graphic element of *Unseen*, its cover, is consciously described keeping the needs of the visually impaired listeners in mind. Listeners learn not only the title of the comic 'Unseen' but also the way it dominates the cover page written in bold 'slowly fading as the word ends'. The face of the woman on the cover is also well described:

A woman's face - young, confident, focused. Her dark hair is swept to the side, covering one eye. Underneath is a mask, extending down her face, forming two axles over her eyes which are black as obsidian. This is Afsana, the heroine of *Unseen*. (0:52-1:16)

The powerful narration with clever choice of words and stress paints a picture of a strong, young, and resolute disabled heroine in the listener's mind. The long aural panel shift of whoosh following this, slow and deliberate, clearly takes the readers on an imaginative trip to the militarized zone of the Southern border of the United States where the action is set. Most evidently, by ensuring that the graphic information is consumed with parity both by audiences with and without sight, *Unseen* demonstrates the universal design of accessibility as being integral to its creative design.

However, the conventional audio rendition of *Daredevil: The Guardian Devil* begins with the text of Karen's handwritten letter for Murdock. The letter, reproduced by an attractive female voice with the soothing music at the back, starts quite immediately and almost abruptly after the cinematic introduction of the audio publisher *Graphic Audio* and an announcement of *Daredevil's* location 'Hell's Kitchen' and the year 1999, in which the story is set. It bears no references to the graphic components—the cover, the appearance of the chief protagonist or the location of the plot. It leaves out the visual scenes of New York streets and Murdock's bedroom encapsulated in long panels of the opening sequence, resulting in a significant gap between the graphic information in the comics and the audio rendition. In fact, the audio version is reduced to a mere textual narration, thus substantially decreasing the nuances of the original comics. It not only fails to create a powerful narrative in the listener's mind, but also leaves much of graphic information inaccessible for the visually impaired listeners who cannot readily refer to the graphic comics independently. Such shortcomings reinforce Christopher's critique of such aural works failing to effectively communicate the aspects of the comics that were conceived of visually. Consequently, it results in "serv(ing) to reinforce the centrality and necessity of the visual mode that underpins traditional, visually-centred definitions of comics" (Christopher, 2018, para. 12) rather than subverting them. Such accessibility gaps and failure characterize the routine audio editions. And we argue that this innate difference in accessibility-consciousness separates audio comics from the regular audio editions/renditions/adaptations.

Role of Theatrical-Textual Speech and Narrator

Chad Allen's *Unseen* incorporates the power of textual and theatrical speech equally into its audio comic. The textual speech which serves as a glue to hold the world of *Unseen* together much in line with the

traditional audio-dramas becomes evident from the beginning. The powerful voice of the female narrator (Vanessa Stewart) opens the story by spending a few moments describing the scene of the panel with the rich soundscape of a military landscape in the background. A closer look at the select snippet of narration foregrounds the use of the textual speech/narration in Allen's work:

Narrator: Dawn rises over the Southern border of the United States. The militarized zone is a hive of activity. Bunkers and military compounds dock the landscape. The lines of immigrants march through the tons of teeming fences leading towards the convoy of buses. Buses are lined up one behind the other. Some of the immigrants appear weak and malnourished. Soldiers are in complete control, even though some immigrants attempt to fight back. They are yelling for food and water. The soldiers aggressively keep order, continuing to pack them into buses. One soldier knocked a troublemaker down with the butt of his gun... This is Afsana. Whoosh (Panel Change). (1:21-2:25)

The description of the introductory panel reveals how the narrator brings together select information on the environment, people, their appearances, actions, and events to create a mental vision of the totality of the scene. The carefully scripted information about the rising dawn, the bunkers, lined up buses, malnourished and helpless immigrants protesting creates a very vivid verbo-visual scene. These intimate details in the audio narration mixes with a multitude of acoustic sounds of distinct human voices of immigrant's protest, gunshots, and the helicopters to not only meet the imaginative needs of the visually impaired but also serve as a stimulus to activate inner images and perceptions of the environment of the story, thus making it aurally graphic. Such narrative interventions with brief, accurate and relevant information through textual speech for each panel amidst the rich theatrical speech of dialogues of different characters delivered by a full cast of voice artists is typical of *Unseen*.

Daredevil: Guardian Devil's, textual speech or narration in terms of the graphic information is rather weak and without any degree of consistency. Certain characters like Nicholas Macabes are described in detail while a majority of the other characters including Gwyneth are left to be imagined. Likewise, the textual speech regarding spatio-temporal settings is inconsistent, resulting in serious omissions between the visual narrative of graphic information and audio renditions. Thus, the audio

rendition is reduced to what Chatman (1978) calls a mere verbal story which could take place 'nowhere particular' while in its graphic story, spatio-temporality is embedded in every panel and page. Evading such details underscores its faulty accessibility design. So, unlike the powerful confluence of textual-theatrical speech in audio comics, the role of textual speech and the narrator is negligible in a highly theatrical-speech dominated *Daredevil: Guardian Devil*. We argue that this again serves as a major distinguisher between the two formats.

Conclusion

In the final assessment, we establish that the audio-comic *Unseen* opens up new possibilities of making hitherto visually-rigid comics truly accessible and immersive. The genre conventions of 'aurality of comics visuality' and 'audio-drama-like speech models' along with its inherent accessibility consciousness lends a distinct aural power to audio comic over mundane audio renditions. The evocative potential to stimulate inner images of the scene in the psyche of the listeners as demonstrated by Allen's work not only defies a comic to be a purely visual form, asserting its multimodality but also amply demonstrates that power of aural forms to recreate the experience of graphic comics.

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