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http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/stic_00004_1

Title	Dark night of the soul : applicability of theory in comics and radio through the scripted podcast drama
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Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/56015/
Published Date	2019

Dark night of the soul: Applicability of theory in comics and radio through the scripted podcast drama

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Abstract

This article responds to McCloud's theoretical framework for comics and applies this framework to audio drama, which I argue is, like comics, a mono-sensory medium (one can only be seen in static image and the other can only be heard); both require a great degree of closure from the audience to frame together sequential narratives (of visual art and sound, respectively). To do this, it uses the case study of Marvel and Stitcher's *Wolverine: The Long Night* (2018), a 'scripted podcast' (audio drama). While comics are escaping from decades of critical disregard due to their status as a popular or lowbrow medium, radio and by extension audio drama still suffer from critical neglect. It is, therefore, one of the aims of the article to release audio drama theory from torpor by applying theory from comics. *W:TLN* has been chosen as a case study due to its status as a made-for-podcast story rather than an adaptation from an existing comic book; it also responds to trends within audio drama towards a nonfiction/fiction amalgamation influenced by true crime podcast conventions. This article argues that *W:TLN*'s understanding of audio/radio as a mono-sensory medium is overdetermined in its use of blindness, darkness and radiogenics. It also discusses the ways in which comics and audio drama use time and space. The article also examines the reasons why the podcast medium has been deemed acceptable within the wider Marvel Comics Universe and the ways in which *W:TLN* responds to implied continuity through a transmedia conception of character attributes (e.g., how the continuity of the *X-Men* films influences the story and characters in *W:TLN*).

Keywords

podcasts

audio drama

comics studies

superheroes

marvel

transmedia

Introduction

Like many forms of popular media, audio drama and comics have struggled over a question

of definition. Scott McCloud devotes an entire opening chapter of *Understanding Comics* to

questions of definition, finally settling on 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate

sequence' as a working definition for comics (1993: 9). Similarly, by using the very term

'audio drama', I might be implying that what I discuss may in fact be different to *radio*

drama. Radio itself has been defined as 'increasingly elastic' (Baker 2012: 3) and radio

drama as 'a kind of loose confederation of diverse offerings whose only points in common

are that they are usually in the form of dialogue' (Bond 1970: 218). Indeed, the case study

discussed in this article, Marvel and Stitcher's *Wolverine: The Long Night* (2018), does not

define itself via any of these terms, but as 'scripted podcasting'. There appears to be a

deliberate attempt here to distance *W:TLN* from other forms of fictional radio storytelling,

perhaps to reclaim 'a previous lost generation of listeners to speech radio' (Berry 2016a: 11).

As suggested by Zeller-Jacques, wider superheroic meta-texts such as films 'are latecomers

attempting to retell stories told many times before, or to find new ways to treat old material'

(2012: 147), an aim explicitly referenced by the ground-zero-type continuity inherent in

W:TLN, despite arguments that such approaches appear to threaten its accessibility to a

general audience (Brinker 2017: 223). The podcast's writer, Benjamin Percy, suggests that in the story '[t]here are glimmers that people will recognize, references to Weapon X and wartime Logan, Japan and past relationships that he's had' but intertextuality will be minimal (cited in Marnell 2017). This is, perhaps, motivated by the 'continuity calamity' engendered by licensed video game spin-offs from the Marvel Universe that resulted in a 'preference to create narratives that occur around the fringes' of established cinematic/comics universe plots and avoiding retelling these stories wholesale (Flanagan et al. 2016: 193).

As Logan works through his memory in *W:TLN*, so this article will also parse McCloud's comics theory, drawing parallels between the theory and practice of audio drama and that of comics. While it will draw on other comics theorists, the focus is primarily on the utility of conceiving of audio drama as a mono-sensory medium the way McCloud does for comics. So, to return to our initial questions about definition, I will in this article refer interchangeably to radio and audio drama, as I believe *audio* drama (that is, drama that is not primarily broadcast but that is disseminated through other, usually digital means) shares most of its characteristics with *radio* drama. Hugh Chignell has argued that a podcast remains radio because of the way it is produced, much as the way a film is made (whether on celluloid or digitally) has no bearing on whether it is ontologically a film (Chignell 2009: 1). More precisely, many podcasts are only defined as such due to their mode of distribution; radio programmes like the BBC's *Woman's Hour* are repackaged in podcast form while remaining essentially the same content. Therefore, in terms of production and format/distribution, *audio* drama can be examined in critical terms in similar ways to *radio* drama.

Painting an (inner) picture: What can audio storytelling theory learn from comics theory?

Scott McCloud argues that 'comics is a mono-sensory medium. It relies on only one of the senses to convey a world of experience' (1993: 89). The same could be said, but has been little argued, about audio drama. Thierry Groensteen has argued that a comics maker has 'la liberté de s'affranchir des lois du reel' (the freedom to escape the laws of reality) (2013: 29), a quality descriptive of audio drama but more often framed as a handicap, Tyrone Guthrie noting that radio 'melted as you looked and listened, and, like so much moonshine, it disappeared forever' (1931: 24). Indeed, Andrew Crisell influentially, and controversially, characterized radio as a 'blind' medium (1994: 3), and despite his assertion that this term was not meant to be pejorative, is frequently interpreted as negative (Crook 1999a: 62–64; Dubber 2013: 13), such that later radio scholars suggested other terms to characterize the medium. These terms called attention to radio's 'invisibility' (Shingler and Wieringa 1998: 137) and 'darkness' (Hand and Traynor 2011: 35–36) as opposed to its blindness. I now propose to characterize radio as 'mono-sensory', a term that says more about what it does rather than what it is or is not, taking its cue from McCloud's theories of comics. This argument is made from the viewpoint that audio drama theory has much to learn, adopt and apply from comics, and this article will explore this new critical outlook.

This is not to suggest that audio drama and radio studies are bereft of theoretical underpinning. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, radio theory has lagged behind its audio-visual and visual counterparts, with the first publication to feature 'radio studies' in the title being, appropriately enough, Chignell's *Key Theories in Radio Studies* in 2009. Radio studies, and consequently the theoretical and aesthetic aspects of audio drama, have borrowed from a number of disciplines, such as film, music, poetry, stage theatre and prose literature – but to date, hardly ever from comics. This would seem to be intuitive, if we agree with

McCloud's assertion that comics is a mono-sensory medium: we can only *see* comics; we can only *hear* radio. How can these two seemingly oppositional senses ever converge in a meaningful way?

Below is not an exhaustive exploration of the ways in which comics theory can be applied to audio drama, but a number of these theoretical propositions will be taken up in the second half of the article. McCloud argues that '[t]hrough traditional realism, the comics artist can portray the world without – and through the cartoon, the world within' (1993: 41), much the same way audio drama can. Radio from its beginning has been known as an intimate medium that is nevertheless broadcast to millions. This 'macro-micro' relationship (Rattigan 2002: 13) is analogous to comics, with realistic-sounding dialogue and sound effects representing the world without, and inner monologue, sound effects that can take on fantastical elements, and music often representing the world within. Because of the nature of both media, through the effortless movement between realism (the world without) and cartoon/inner space (the world within), we can adopt McCloud's championing of the unique characteristics of comics (and in this case, audio drama).

Borrowing from Eisner (2008), McCloud argues that comics are sequential art (1993: 5). If comics are sequential (visual) art, then audio drama is sequential (sound) art.[1] 'In pictures', McCloud argues, 'meaning is fluid and variable', lending itself to multiple interpretations (1993: 28). Sounds and sound sequences are also open to multiple interpretations. The ambiguity of sounds has long been known in radio, where clues – usually in the form of speech – are required for contextualization. This concept is known as 'signposting' (Crook 1999a: 54–60, 68–69). 'Indexical' sounds have, through convention, come to embody a shared meaning, but this is by no means 'natural' or 'obvious', much like gutters in comics (McCloud 1993: 60). The most indexical radio sound of all, the cry of seagulls (Gielgud 1957: 43), does not always signify the seaside to every listener all the time;

to paraphrase Eisner (2008: 7), comprehension of a sound requires a commonality of experience. If even individual sounds, without the context of speech, are open to multiple interpretations, sound sequences have even greater potential for ambiguity.

The analogous structure of comics and audio drama can be pushed further with their use of closure, defined by McCloud as 'observing the parts but perceiving the whole' (1993: 63). According to McCloud, by closure we mentally complete that which is absent. He goes on to argue that television requires more closure than film (1993: 65) and that comics' use of closure is surpassed only by that of the written word (McCloud 1993: 70). Might not audio be the equal, if not the superior, of comics in terms of closure? After all, if both are mono-sensory media, we use the visual-only information from comics to mentally reconstruct all other aspects of their fictional worlds – sound, touch, taste, smell, time and motion. In audio drama, from sound-only information we construct a storyworld through sight, touch, taste, smell, space and, to an extent, motion.

Radio is one of the first examples of electronic media, in which closure is, McCloud argues, 'continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible' (1993: 68). Certainly, the process of closure *must* be virtually imperceptible as it must be instantaneous and within the mind in audio drama, relying on mental imagery generation. If the experience of putting together the sounds, sound sequences and mental images of audio drama is analogous to comics, then it is less involuntary and less continuous than in comics, perhaps predicated on the listener's commitment to not only paying attention but also a conscious effort to inhabit the storyworld and interpret it. A key aspect to radio studies has been radio's nature as both primary and secondary medium, with the latter aspect most frequently exploited due to the place of radio as background in the car and compared to once-primary medium television (itself now relegated to second screen). Whether listening to audio drama involves primary or secondary listening is largely a matter of perspective. Nevertheless, by way of

comparison, it is difficult to imagine comics as a secondary medium, therefore making the choice to listen more effortful than the choice to read a comic, and the experience of audio drama listening, interpretation and enjoyment a learned skill (McMurtry 2017).

McCloud argues that 'pictures are received information. We need no formal education to "get the message"' (1993: 49). By inference, writing and reading require literacy to decode the abstract symbols of language, with the medium of comics merging the two. By analogy, sound is perceived information, while audio drama narrative conventions are learned. Therefore, I would argue that audio drama listening is a kind of literacy that develops with practice, not necessarily a natural skill. These conventions are clearly dependent on context. Listeners of American radio drama of the 1940s, raised (for the most part) on a diet of commercial sponsorship, understood the conventions of scene-setting and -shifting. Other types of conventions might be established in short serials like Newstalk ZB's soap opera sci fi thriller, *Claybourne* (1998), in which a limited number of musical cues functioned as indications of mood, as link, and indexically (functions argued by Hand and Traynor 2011: 50). *Claybourne* often used its music to signal change in location, change in mood and ominous presence, economical conventions predicated on its exceedingly short episodes (around ten minutes).

McCloud argues that in comics, the perception of space in chronological terms is equivalent to the perception of time spatially, given the fact that in real terms, comics do not have a time dimension as they are static visual objects (1993: 100). The reverse is actually true in audio drama: the perception of space in audio drama is predicated on time. This is because audio drama does not really exist spatially, but can use its dimension of time to help engender a spatial dimension. Crisell argues that radio exists *primarily* in time (1994: 9) but does not preclude the possibility of its existing, in some sense, in space – indeed, Eisner suggests that distance from auditor is an essential component of sound comprehension (2008:

23). Creating a believably spatially nuanced world in audio, to the degree of a spatially imagined Gotham City, for example, through various devices such as the 'climate-setting' splash page (Eisner 2008: 64) or various rhythms of panels achievable in visual art, is difficult but not impossible. Emma Rodero has argued that in addition to a combination of sound effects, *sound shots* are necessary to create convincing audio drama (2012: 462) (sound shots are 'changes in the sound intensity, established by distance with respect to the microphone'). It is interesting that McCloud focuses on the ability of comics to speed up or slow down time, as when a 'silent panel such as this could indeed be said to depict a single moment!' (1993: 98) or the sense of timelessness engendered 'when the content of a silent panel offers no clues as to its duration' (McCloud 1993: 102). Audio drama's manipulation of time works in a similar way, when a single moment in the 'real world' lasts more than half an hour in inner space, as with Tyrone Guthrie's innovative stream-of-consciousness experiment, *The Flowers Are Not for You to Pick* (BBC, 1931).

'I guess somebody's listening': Marvel and Stitcher's *W:TLN*

'I'm the best there is at what I do…'

To explore the ways in which comics theory can be applied to audio drama, and indeed to argue that the two forms are not nearly as different as might first be believed, I will analyse Marvel and Stitcher's *W:TLN*. While '[a]daptation has been a central practice since the beginning of radio drama' (Hand 2018: 372), *W:TLN* offers a unique example of a made-for-podcast story rather than an adaptation of an existing comics story. (Indeed, the success of *W:TLN* the podcast was such that it was adapted into a series of Marvel comics; see the conclusion.) As is evident in the title, *W:TLN* is a creation of Marvel and its seemingly infinite universe. The X-Men were one of Marvel's 1960s hero teams, 'a gang of ostracized mutant schoolchildren whose struggle against discrimination paralleled the civil rights

movement' (Howe 2012: 3). In the 1970s, the character Wolverine joined them in a story from *The Uncanny X-Men* (Dittmer 2013: 75). Defined by super-strong adamantium implants (including retractable claws) and an inborn healing mutation, Wolverine's 'heightened senses, his hirsute body, and his hair-trigger temper resemble the wolverine', if not also the Wolfman (Packer 2010: 127). As one of a slew of post-Vietnam anti-heroes, Wolverine was notable for his willingness to kill (Kaveney 2008: 106) and evincing a strong streak of individualism and distrust of authority – born in part through experiences of being a government experiment and having his memories wiped. 'Some call him Logan, but his three claws still serve as his signature. He's known as Wolverine' ('About Wolverine').

The sound of superheroes: Beyond zap! Bang! Pow!

While Marvel and Stitcher's collaboration on *W:TLN* is unprecedented in podcast form, superheroes are no strangers to radio drama. Indeed, both comics and radio in America were coming of age in the late 1930s and the early 1940s, and so it seemed a natural movement from comics to programmes such as *The Adventures of Superman* (1940–51) (in which Batman made occasional cameos). Such programmes were made as adventure/entertainment serials for young listeners, joining a motley assortment of (male) heroes in the same mould, from film (*Tom Mix*), comics (*Dick Tracy*), pulp novels (*The Shadow*) or specially created-for-radio heroes, some of whom had later transmedia success (*The Lone Ranger*, *The Green Hornet*, *Captain Midnight*, *Sky King*). As with comics in that time period, the target audience for these serials were children, although many adults listened as well. *The Adventures of Superman* was notably radiogenic in a number of ways, including the network signature, which was 'one of radio's best, setting the stage for those quarter-hour flights of fantasy with a cascade of voices, narration and sound effects' (Dunning 1998: 14).

Furthermore, as argued by Cassell, the key to success was strong commercial sponsorship (2014: 33).

Participating within the US post-network radio drama revival (Patterson 2016), *The Fantastic Four Radio Show* demonstrated a concerted effort within Marvel to dramatize comics on radio in the 1970s, using Twenty-First Century's sound effects library and featuring Bill Murray as Johnny Storm in 65 five-minute episodes (Cassell 2014: 34). Like the later *Star Wars* dramatization on NPR (1981), *FFRS* had the support of its creator, in this case Stan Lee, who narrated the series. A sideways absorption of both transmedia principles and the Marvel nexus between audio and comics was the 1972 'rockomic' *From Beyond the Grave*, a *Spider-Man*-themed contemporary music album tied together with an audio drama story (Greenfield 2019; Huey n.d.) spearheaded by Ron Dante (the front man of the 'virtual band' the Archies, known for their 1969 hit 'Sugar, Sugar', spun off from the *Archie* comics). More recently, in the United Kingdom, Dirk Maggs, known for his cinematic approach to sound drama, produced several radio dramas for the BBC based on comics characters, including *Batman: The Lazarus Syndrome* (1989), *The Adventures of Superman* (1993), *Batman: Knightfall* (1993–94), *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Judge Dredd* (1995). Maggs' approach placed a strong emphasis on intertextual references, suggesting that such references might 'prove to be even more relevant' to adaptation's 'meanings and effects' than the source text, a viewpoint introduced by Cardwell (2002: 67).

'Scripted podcast'

Considered by some to be moribund (Zurawik 2014) and by others not yet mainstream (Todd 2018), podcasting is described by the majority of pundits as mainstream (Llinares et al. 2018: 6; Berry 2016a: 17, 2016b: 662; Bergman 2017). Recent figures in the US estimate a listenership of 112 million to podcasts (Edison Research and Triton Digital 2017: 40). With the popularization of podcast storytelling arguably reaching a global

audience post-2014, inevitably audio drama formats have taken inspiration from the precepts of true-crime nonfiction podcasting through such aspects as distribution, platforming and mediation, influenced at least in part by the success of WBEZ Chicago's *This American Life*'s podcast *Serial* (2014–present) (Hancock and McMurtry 2018).

If the Marvel Comics Universe is the 'prime example of transmedia storytelling' (Brinker 2017: 209; Flanagan et al. 2016: 177), then why has it taken so long for an original Marvel fiction podcast to materialize? As Brinker has argued, '[t]he unprecedented availability of content on the Internet, along with a proliferation of media outlets that cater to ever more fragmented audiences and specialized niche markets, has increased the competition among producers' (2017: 209). *The X-Men* is a 'pre-sold franchise with a ready-made audience' (Zeller-Jacques 2012: 144). Furthermore, as Smith suggests, Marvel has fulfilled an 'obligation to cater to both dedicated and casual modes of consumption' (2018: 175). In 2012, Zeller-Jacques argued that superhero films were beginning to 'move beyond' straight adaptations from comics (2012: 144), feeding into Smith's notion of *implied continuity*, 'which utilises the narrative elements of plot and storyworld', in which 'narrative designers frequently forgo the copious explicit references to prior events that typify narratives in the era of direct market dominance' (2018: 176). As Flanagan et al. point out, the adoption of the Marvel *Cinematic* Universe (the usual explanation for the acronym MCU) 'begs an explanation of how' Marvel's transmedia approach 'can be understood as fully utilizing a range of platforms' which leads back to the 'central, privileged cinematic hub' (2016: 177). According to Dan Fink, executive director of development for Marvel New Media,

> The audio medium is one that, for years, Marvel was intrigued by. It intrigued me to know how a Marvel superhero story would work in this medium. We weren't looking to reinvent the wheel, we wanted to do what worked. (White 2018)

To that end, the choice of medium at this time and in this manner serves several purposes. I would argue that the drama was made as a serialized podcast due to a symbiotic relationship between Stitcher and Marvel, in that its status as 'pre-sold' commodity would bring more mainstream listeners to Stitcher, Marvel fans who perhaps were not podcast listeners; in turn, this potentially increases Marvel's audience base, by appealing to existing podcast listeners who, perhaps, are not Marvel fans. Indeed, as Groensteen (1993) has argued, as more people were reading for pleasure in the twentieth century, they often chose reading material like the *bande desinée*; by analogy, the increased number of podcast listeners suggests the reason that Marvel has now turned to this 'mass consumerist' mode.

Wolverine: The Long Night

I will now provide a brief summary of the action in *W:TLN*, followed by a close analysis via comics theory, primarily drawn from McCloud as discussed in the first half of this article. Two Special Agents, Sally Pierce (Celia Keenan-Bolger) and Tad Marshall (Ato Essandoh), arrive in the isolated Alaskan town of Burns, investigating the violent deaths of several young women and bizarre acts of violence among the town's itinerant fishing community. Their investigations put them in uneasy partnership with Sheriff Ridge (Scott Adsit), his deputy Bobby (Andrew Keenan-Bolger) and the oligarchical civic leaders, the Langrocks, Joseph (Bob Balaban) and his sons Brent (Landon Killea) and Hudson (David Call). The Agents are, in fact, pursuing the mysterious Logan (Richard Armitage), who seems to be associated in Burns and the surrounding community, including the Ekwauk Inuit village, with acts of sabotage, allying him with local Eco-terrorists the Strawberry Kids, waitress Mallory (Zoe Chao) and Inuit fisherman Sherman Moses (Chaske Spencer) and his sister, Dinah (Kumiko Konishi), the only victim to have survived the gruesome attacks. Also in the town is the enigmatic Aurora cult, led by zealot Nick Prophet (Brian Stokes Mitchell), who awaits 'the long night' that is coming. While it is hinted that a memory-wiped Wolverine

may be responsible for the attacks, by the final episode, Logan is exonerated, and the agents are revealed to be Sentinels (robots who destroy mutants like Wolverine).

Despite a history of fantastic/science fiction elements in *The X-Men*, the investigative frame story of *W:TLN* suggests links with *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–present), which featured the fantastic played straight. Similarly, performances in *W:TLN* echo the nonfictional podcast form: naturalistic rather than pitched a 'tone higher on the scale of reality' (Egan cited in Richardson et al. 2013), clearly informed by true-crime podcast conventions (White 2018).

The mono-sensory medium

Audio drama, like comics, is posited as a mono-sensory medium: through sound, all other aspects of the story are evoked. If comics are sequential (visual) art and audio drama is sequential (sound) art, as per McCloud, both media make use of closure and depict inner and outer worlds. Given that the production team of *W:TLN* (writer Benjamin Percy, producers Jenny Radelet and Daniel Fink, and directors Brendon Baker and Chloe Prasinos) have a strong grasp of the medium-specific nature of both comics and audio drama, they recognize the mono-sensory nature of both media and manipulate this in their storytelling techniques. There are two main ways in which *W:TLN* manifests a continuity with the audio drama form, through a clear absorption with the themes of blindness and darkness, which is in a sense an absorption with the mono-sensory nature of radio itself, and through use of radiogenic qualities such as heightened language, which function as a kind of closure of the kind McCloud described.

The term *radiogenic* has a two-part definition: having origins in radio, and following the conventions and aesthetics of radio. It is this latter part of the definition that concerns us here, in describing the kind of heightened language (James 1994: 16) utilized in *W:TLN*. Radio's formulation of heightened language has different aspects, which the makers of

W:TLN have adopted by stressing the link between oral storytelling and audio dramatic presentation. This is hardly a new link, filtered down through Marshall McLuhan's portrayal of radio as the electric hearth (1964: 49) and frequently used in contemporary horror podcasts such as *NoSleep* (2010–present). Nevertheless, the emphasis on scenes and storytelling framed by interview, allowing characters (ostensibly speaking to the agents in the story) to speak directly to listeners, demonstrates a debt to the documentary true-crime podcast strand, itself influenced by the spoken word techniques of Ira Glass, Katie Davis, Jay Allison and others (Glass 2017: 70; Davis 2017: 99). While seemingly natural, authentic and spontaneous, such storytelling in documentary radio/audio form conceals careful editing and framing techniques (related to the radiogenic convention of 'broadcast talk' or 'scripted speech'). This is, I would argue, a form of the closure that McCloud posits. We mentally complete that which is absent. Familiar with interviewing techniques from other media, both audio-visual and static, closure in *W:TLN* helps listeners to interpret narrative from aural clues.

For example, closure works on several levels during these interview sequences. We can easily 'see' the interviews taking place between Agents Pierce and Marshall and 'regular guys' in Burns. However, heightened language allows for more daring feats of closure to take place. For example, the hunter's report in Episode 4, Scene 1, describes the dream-like and uncanny scene of Logan giving into his animal side, the hunter's language heightened to do the work it needs to do: 'wolves fadin' in and out of sight […] not a stitch on him, he's crouched low and he's runnin' with the wolves […] just like that, the man's bloody face rises out of the carcass'. In comics, such flashbacks would no doubt be accomplished by visually depicting the scene the hunter recalls, probably with the addition of caption (O/S) narration. Closure helps listeners narrow the gap between scenes taking place out of sequence spatially and temporally. Such exercises in closure allow *W:TLN* to have its cake and eat it, too, by

carefully transitioning interview into narration and flashback scenes with scene-setting sound effects, ambiance, sound shots and relevant dialogue.

Blindness, darkness and radiogenics

As previously discussed, much has been made of radio (and audio drama's) 'blindness', although few would have thought to discuss comics in terms of being a 'soundless' medium. As reworked as a mono-sensory medium, audio drama in *W:TLN* demonstrates a huge palette for mental imagery at least as ambitious and rich as any in comics because images – inspired by sounds and sound sequences – are provided by listeners' minds, and potentially these can surpass the two-dimensional artwork of even the most talented of comics artists. Nevertheless, the makers of *W:TLN* seem to delight in its sightless potentials despite also taking advantage of all the available methods for creating rich sensory worlds from a mono-sensory medium. In this way, they hearken back to some of radio's earliest dramas, such as Richard Hughes' *Danger* (1924), in which middle-class sightseers are plunged into complete darkness when they are trapped in a mine. The idea was that listeners, too, would be in complete darkness (Crook 1999b), as they were engaging with a mono-sensory medium instead of the more familiar, multi-sensory stage theatre.

Thematically, *W:TLN* is suffused with ideas of darkness, caves, shadows and underground spaces, not the least of which is the title, which comes from the Aurora cult's insistence on the coming of the 'long night'. The cave discovered by Pierce and Bobby in Episode 6 requires, by the fact of its darkness, descriptions from characters to each other, in which the audience can vicariously join. However, the most obvious illustration of thematic radio darkness is in Episode 3, in which Pierce and Marshall descend in an elevator to the cult's underground headquarters. McCloud's formulation of closure is again at work, with the characters now having to work as hard as the listeners by mentally completing the gaps in their perceptions. Like the listeners, Pierce and Marshall cannot see the action of the story.

However, unlike the listeners, they have the use of their sense of touch. The sound effects and sound shots in some sense function spatially for listeners; like Pierce and Marshall, the listeners understand the spatiality of the story's surroundings on a rudimentary level.

In Episode 3, Marshall asks their guide, 'You live down here in the dark?' to which she answers, 'You will notice in the absence of vision, your whole body becomes a receiver'. The link between darkness and radio is no accident, with Prophet envisioning himself as a kind of radio: 'I'm in touch with a different frequency […] I speak to the shadows, and the shadows speak back to me' (Episode 8, Scene 9). More literally, the Aurora cult makes use of pirate radio to reach out to the citizens of Burns and beyond, with Bobby telling the agents in Episode 1 that 'They send out these communication blasts that override our radio […] Just listen'. The self-referential use of radio is, once again, a time-honoured technique, going as far back as *Marémoto*, scripted for French radio in 1924, in which listeners vicariously listen in on desperate radio broadcasts from a shipwrecked crew, based on actual events, with the story told entirely through what we might now term 'found footage'. Although the term 'found footage' may be unwieldy for audio drama, it is, as Aldana Reyes points out, less a genre than a technique (2015: 124), frequently exploited by sound media.

More relevantly, perhaps, to the 'found footage' theme, the agents obsessively use surveillance technology in *W:TLN*, a technique admittedly not unique to sound media. Ostensibly, this is done so that the agents can spy on characters like Sheriff Ridge, Bobby (Episode 7, Scene 4), the Langrocks (Episode 4, Scene 8), the Aurora cult (Episode 3, Scene 9), Mallory (Episode 6, Scene 6) and even the technologically skittish Logan (Episode 5, Scene 2). However, allowing the audience to listen in on such recordings resolves the need for constant reliance on other radiogenic techniques (detailed below) such as reported dialogue and flashback, and indeed forms yet another way in which closure helps resolve mental gaps.

As McCloud has argued, given the mono-sensory aspect of comics, we use our eyes to experience them, appreciating both images (perceived information) and words (which we are trained to interpret). We cannot literally hear comics, including dialogue, and so sound is represented in comics through such devices as word balloons (McCloud 1993: 89). There is also no reason the tone, timbre and qualities of voices cannot be imagined in comics through the concerted use of written dialect and syntax and description of tone, as Flanagan points out regarding Wolverine (2017: 5). Therefore, audio drama and comics, as mono-sensory media, use related but different tools to work within the ontology of the two media.

As noted above, Wolverine's 'voice' in comics has always been a distinctive one, particularly syntactically, with non-standard speech patterns ('Look, I been a guinea pig in my day. Didn't make me overly sociable') (Wheedon et al. 2005: 4) ('Jubilation, darlin', come on out, now – don't make Pappy Logan mad at you, girl! I ain't gonna fight you, Jube. I couldn't') (Nicieza et al. 1991: 25), and with a streamlined approach to interior monologues ('I really like beer') (Wheedon et al. 2005: 9). This distinctive voice was not always deemed appropriate; Mark Millar elected to keep Wolverine silent in *Wolverine* #32, a story set in a concentration camp, on the advice of Will Eisner (Bazz 2009). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that visual characteristics have been more defining for the character, these being his short, hirsute, muscular body, his yellow X-Man outfit and, of course, his claws. The challenge that must have confronted the makers of *W:TLN* was how to present Wolverine in the dark. It would be difficult, although not impossible, for a main character to remain unseen throughout the story in comics. As argued by McCloud, comics creators are constantly working against confusion or boredom (1993: 90), and an unseen protagonist could induce both. Nevertheless, White (2018) suggests that Wolverine's voice has always been an implicit part of his character, musing that the actor cast in *W:TLN* 'needed gravel in their [*sic*] voice and the ability to intone rage, grief, and feral intelligence'.

Without a doubt, one of the most successful transmedia characters in audio, comics and prose fiction, The Shadow, has functioned best in invisible mode on radio, and it can be argued that the frequently terse Batman, while at ease in darkness on the page, presents a challenge in the audio medium. To be unseen is not the same as being unheard on audio, whereas a character does not have to speak in comics to have presence. To that end, *W:TLN*'s investigative framing story works against expectation, particularly for comics fans, who might expect their very visual protagonist to be front and centre in the audio world. McCloud argues that '[t]hrough traditional realism, the comics artist can portray the world without – and through the cartoon, the world within' (1993: 41). By this analogy, Logan's presence is seldom clearly defined, given how little he actually speaks in the drama. He is almost never 'cartoon', in that we almost never hear his inner world. Almost all of his dialogue is played back in found footage and flashback rather than in 'real-time' scenes. This is an effective and intriguing strategy, although it does fail to use one of the most radiogenic properties of all, the intimacy that is the hallmark of the audio form (Arnheim 1971: 11; Meserko 2015: 797). The first time we hear the title character speak in *W:TLN* is not actually speech at all, but his letter to ex-girlfriend Maureen 'read' by him to the listener. The first time we hear Logan 'real time' is in his phone message to the agents (Episode 3, Scene 9). We hear him mediated again through the phone in Episode 5, Scene 3, leaving a message for Maureen. His dialogue in the spectacular scene at the Langrocks' in Episode 9 is relayed in flashback by Bobby, and his provocative offer to Agent Marshall in Episode 10 is relayed by Marshall to Pierce. Perhaps the only time we *actually* hear Logan is at the very end of the drama, when he and Mallory are sailing to Japan.

There are, in general, very few indications of inner worlds in *W:TLN*, perhaps predicated on its true crime/documentary audio drama lineage. We are, for example, given no insight into what inner worlds may exist for Marshall and Pierce (for good reason, given

that they are Sentinels and to enter their inner world would give the game away). There are two notable exceptions. In Episode 2, they discover a book at Logan's cabin, inside which is the aforementioned letter to Maureen. This is the closest we get to an interior monologue from Logan, in which he reveals some of his inner world. In the second example, the agents, as Sentinels, are incapable of fantasy, and yet Marshall rewires his programming so he is able to give a false version of reality to Pierce (and the listeners) in the first part of the final episode when Logan forces him to drive to the docks; this, in itself, is very much a hallmark of audio storytelling, as there is no audio equivalent of the quotation mark (Verma 2012: 61).

Adventures in time and space

Although, as previously noted, audio drama cannot exist in the same spatial dimensions as audio-visual media, it *does* have a spatial dimension, which is something that, again, *W:TLN* works to exploit. In doing this, closure is once again referenced, as using sound clues helps to construct the entire (visual) spatial storyworld. For example, although *W:TLN* is set in the geographically huge space of Alaska, the action focuses, for the most part, on the town of Burns; the single-town setting is something that *W:TLN* does not share with most comics versions or the big-budget *X-Men* films. To that end, the makers of *W:TLN* attempt to spatially orient us in the town by virtue of Bobby driving Marshall and Pierce around the town in Episode 1 to 'show them around'.

Mono-sensory media like comics and audio drama can experiment with different kinds of economy in storytelling. For example, a (visual art) sequence could tell a story economically with no dialogue in a few panels that would require extensive dialogue in audio drama. In audio drama, actions and visual data have to be described through dialogue; we cannot experience them through visual stimulus. So, for all the ways audio drama and comics use closure similarly, this is clearly one way in which they differ. Audio drama cannot provide a picture (perceived information, which, according to McCloud, we

instinctively understand). Therefore, that which is absent (a visual reference) must be invoked through dialogue, sound shots, sound effects and music. If this information is analogous to comics' perceived information, then the techniques of redundancy and repetition in audio drama correspond to written language, for which, as per McCloud, we need to be trained to gain meaning: we need to learn to 'read' redundancy and repetition in audio drama. For example, in Episode 2, the agents exclaim in shock when attacked by the Strawberry Kids, 'They're shooting us with pennies?!' Clearly, a listener would hear the sounds of attack but would have no idea what missiles were being shot at the agents if not for this speech explanation (redundancy). Whether or not a person being attacked by pennies would realistically say so aloud out of sheer incredulity is debatable. As encapsulation in comics 'involves selecting certain moments of prime action from the imagined story and enclosing renderings of those moments in panels' (Duncan et al. 2016: 108), to combat ambiguity in audio drama, such moments must be signposted with dialogue. Redundancy and repetition is also frequently invoked in *W:TLN* when the agents perform solo investigations and they then fill each other in on them at a later point in time (e.g., in Episode 5, Scene 6, when Marshall explains in flashback to Pierce what happened during the bear hunt).

While it is not unknown for flashbacks and non-chronological use of time to be important parts of storytelling in comics, the storytelling/interviewing frame adopted in *W:TLN* allows it to exploit another highly radiogenic quality, time (which comics, as a mono-sensory medium, has difficulty portraying in a single image, as per McCloud). As argued previously, in audio drama, the perception of space is predicated on time. Audio drama is a time-based medium, and time is allowed to telescope impressively in *W:TLN,* given the number of scenes that report back on what happened at a previous (undepicted) point in time. For example, in Episode 3, the agents watch a YouTube video of an Aurora cult

demonstration that took place some time previously; we move seamlessly from their viewing this in the present into flashback of the actual event, as told by a victim's parents. The paradigmatic example occurs in Episode 10, in which Pierce is interrogating Marshall in the present. One week ago, 'in Burns', she says, implying a spatial and chronological remove from the events of the past week, 'you violated the Weapon X code [and] intentionally destroyed and erased your neural surveillance guide'. In confirming that both agents are Sentinels, Marshall narrates a flashback that moves chronologically and spatially back to his claimed version of events, when Logan forced him to drive him to the dock and was killed when Marshall drowned him. The story then moves further back in time to the end of Episode 9 and allows these events to unfold. Then the narrative moves forward again in time to retrace the narrative that Marshall gave before, by providing the real version of events. Clearly, both mono-sensory media of comics and audio drama can present the issue of time and space in a two-dimensional and single-dimensional form.

Conclusion

As Zeller-Jacques has argued, '[d]uring the past decade, comic-book adaptations have become an increasingly familiar sight on our movie screens' (2012: 143). Despite the popularity of Dirk Maggs' superhero comics adaptations, *W:TLN* is the first known licensed adaptation in podcast form. This is surprising, especially given the number of superheroes who could benefit from audio treatment (e.g., Daredevil, who is blind but can still 'see', who would seem to be the perfect poster-boy for such a medium). White (2018) even compares *W:TLN* to *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008), 'an experiment in finding an audience and setting the stage for a larger, more cohesive story' (White 2018). As previously stated, Marvel have adapted the scripted podcast as a comic, released in January 2019, and written by Percy.

As originally part of the paid-for subscription-based Stitcher Premium strand, *W:TLN* is closely entwined with the ongoing challenge of podcast monetization (cf. Sullivan 2018;

Heeremans 2018). *W:TLN* represents a viable new breed of audio drama, given that it falls somewhere between original story and traditional theories of adaptation, adhering more closely to Cardwell's definition of adaptation as 'the purposeful "re-fitting" of material from one artistic context to another' (2018: 13). As such, Marvel and Stitcher have collaborated on a second podcast series from the original team, *The Lost Trail*, set in Louisiana. Furthermore, Marvel announced in August 2019 that they would expand their podcast offerings to include an adaptation of *Marvels*, an acclaimed 1994 collaboration between Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross interrogating Marvel events through the lens of a photojournalist (Marvel 2019; Minor 2019).

Irrespective of what future experiments are attempted for superhero audio drama, I have argued that the link between what McCloud terms mono-sensory media (comics and audio drama) is strong and offers a fruitful theoretical framework for dissecting audio drama, one that is necessary, given the critical ignorance in which this form is still held. Given that I have focused almost exclusively on McCloud's (1993) work, and even then have not had the space to apply concepts like transitional conventions to audio drama, there is a vast amount of scope for taking these ideas further. As *W:TLN* ends with Logan and Mallory heading off for horizons new in Japan, so we look to the future of a productive collaboration between comics theory and audio drama theory.

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Note

[1] Nonfictional audio storytelling could also come under this definition.