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Infinite Narratives on Infinite Earths. The Evolution of Modern Superhero Films

Introduction

Since 2017 the newly established cinematic meta-genre known as a comic book film – which is synonymous with a superhero movie with its dominant super-human characters – seems to gain more and more recognition as not only a profitable but also respectable line of modern cinema. Following the critical and financial success of James Mangold's *Logan* (2017) – this dark and nostalgic 'farewell' to the beloved *X-Men* franchise's actors and characters like Hugh Jackman (Wolverine) and Patrick Stewart (Professor X) that was able to receive the historic, first Oscar nomination in a 'serious' category for adapted screenplay (while recent superhero films were almost exclusively recognised in the 'technical' categories with David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* actually winning the prize for best makeup and hairstyling at the 2017 ceremony) – in 2018 *Black Panther* (dir. R. Coogler) was defined by some of the critics as a cultural phenomenon (mostly in the United States for its unprecedented focus on a black superhero character and moving the film's narrative towards Afro-American culture and tradition as well as becoming the first ever superhero film to be nominated as a Best Picture of The Year in the 2019 American Film Academy Awards. Besides the final verdict of the Academy (which eventually appreciated Peter Farrelly's *Green Book*) the 2019 ceremony still managed to highlight a milestone for superhero cinema

by picking an animated feature – *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* – as the Best Animated Film (and according to many observers it was the *Spider-Verse* and not *Black Panther* that deserved a place amongst the Best Picture-nominees). The short-term future for superhero films seems to be even more impressive after 2019 with Todd Phillips’s *Joker* receiving a massive positive response from both critics and viewers and surprisingly winning the Venice Film Festival’s main prize – The Golden Lion. This milestone in the history of superhero films could lead not only to the first-ever Best Picture prize being received by a comic book-inspired film at the 2020 gala but also to many new artistic directions for further comic book-based instalments by continuing the more self-aware and experimental approach as presented in *Joker*. The main goal of this article will be to unravel some unexplored narrative patterns of comic book superhero stories that may lead to a completely new landscape of superhero cinema in the future. The key concept of a quantum narrative will be presented here as a comic book-based formula that can produce an altering stories within a given film franchise and shape them as an individual ‘puzzle’ in an overall multi-diegetic representation of a whole superhero universe.

From plot-less to plot-altering narratives

Before analysing possible new directions for superhero films and their narrative/thematic fresh ideas it is crucial to reconstruct the most recent reception of this section of cinema. For more than a decade (since the premiere of Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* in 2008, starting the Marvel Cinematic Universe) the superhero-themed blockbusters have dominated popular cinema which is clearly exemplified by the 2019 film *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. A. Russo, J. Russo) topping James Cameron’s *Avatar* as the most profitable film of all-times. What is significant, however, is that besides the obviously enthusiastic approach of modern viewers towards the comic book-inspired film series most of the critics still remain rather sceptical about the actual ‘quality’ of this new trend. As Luke Buckmaster writes in his very critical reception of *Avengers: Endgame* and his expected ‘damages’ that Russo’s film may bring with its success: “Just as Donald Trump’s presidency shows there’s no bottom in American politics, only various kinds of falling, these onerous and intellectually lazy blockbusters – which serve up plates of visual gibberish and laugh at the very idea of concepts such as narrative efficiency – prove the studio has no nadir. Nothing it won’t stoop to” (Buckmaster, 2019). It is interesting that amongst the general contempt for superheroes-led ‘lazy blockbusters’ Buckmaster feels the need to underline the element of a limited ‘narrative efficiency’ as the main guilt of *Endgame* (the most elaborate narrative case of a modern comic book film). It is nothing new, however, to find a crit-

icism of superhero stories as never-truly-ended plots that constantly recycle the same characters, twists and narrative patterns to serve the most predictable (and safe) form of entertainment. Such a criticism can be found in Douglas Wolk's approach towards the superhero comics which, according to Wolk, "aren't really meant to be read as freestanding works [...]. Instead, superhero comics' readers understand each thirty-two-page long pamphlet as a small element of one of two gigantic narratives [represented by the brands of DC Comics and Marvel Comics – T.Ž.]" (Wolk, 2007, p. 90). The lack of narrative efficiency that disgraces superhero films as texts that are expected to present a coherent and 'efficient' story appears to be nothing less than a direct adaptation of superheroes' original attributes from the comics – that is the narrative's insufficiency as one of the main 'pleasures' of this genre.

Is it quite obvious then that some of the film critics and theorists are reluctant to appreciate superhero films since they do not necessarily respect the 'traditional' values of popular features and borrows most of their narrative tools from the area of comics. Some of the researchers, however, are trying to find a way to put superhero films into the audiovisual patterns of storytelling, suggesting that this area of cinema can be regarded not only as 'motion comics'. Such is the case of Maya Philips's article "The Narrative Experiment That Is the Marvel Cinematic Universe" that stands in contrast to Buckmaster's critical view and tries to appreciate the new narrative formula of Marvel Studios' productions by comparing them to the formula of a soap opera: "Unlike most novels and films, soaps are all middle, he [Rick Altman – T.Ž.] writes. Despite their length, soaps tend to feel hemmed in. [...]. Both soaps and fantasies may contain traditional plot-based narratives with moments of *resolution or convergence*, but, in a sense, such moments aren't the point. It's the fictional world that's most alluring" (Phillips, 2019). Philips uses the same argument that could be found in Wolk's opinion about superhero comics – the key thing here is not to regard an individual text (film or comic) as a separate, self-dependent whole but rather as a part of a bigger structure than never truly stays absolutely self-contained and thematically closed. The lack of any 'finality', 'resolution' or 'efficiency' (as Buckmaster suggested) may once again be seen as something unfit for a long-term exploration within the classic narrative model of cinema but, as the Marvel Cinematic Universe proves, it seemingly happens to be the most attractive form of film storytelling right now. One could argue that maybe we shouldn't perceive these never-ending stories as narrative systems but only as secondary 'attractions' within superhero-based productions with the main focus aimed at the characters, their relationships and evolution between the series of films to be even. As for the narrative conditions of superhero films it is not accurate to treat them as plot-less or plot-ignoring (narrative-ignoring) artefacts but rather as plot-altering cases where

the ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ may be seen as schematic, fractured, unfinished or insufficient but nevertheless this particular notion comes from the organic nature of superhero stories. A superhero story (as a film or a comic book) can be regarded as incomplete in terms of narrative efficiency but the thing is that a superhero story can never truly achieve this efficiency and frankly this is not the goal of these stories at all. The ‘pleasure’ of superhero narrative comes from the idea that it can never be finished or resolved in any way – therefore any new story is only a set-up to another arc, any new arc leads to a new crisis or crossover, any new crossover results in shifts in the status of individual characters or their stories and any narrative shifts may cause the start of alternate stories or interpretations of the same motif etc. The elements of ‘variation’ and ‘reliance’ appears then as the core ingredients of the superhero theme. As a result, the process of exploring the interconnectiveness and alternate routes within the superhero narratives stand as the major ‘attractions’ of superhero-related productions for both their rich potential of narrative ‘variations’ and commercial immensity in selling these arcs. As Russell Backman concludes about the nature of superhero serialised narratives: “Serialization pulls the alternate direction toward continual and perpetual action – the maintenance of some stable traits over the extended period of time. The balance between cataclysm and continuity has led superhero comics again and again toward the development of narrative tropes of revision, opening their narrative worlds up to maximal contingency” (Backman, 2014, p. 203).

From Infinite Earths to Infinite Narratives

Until now superhero films seemed to follow mostly the ‘continuity’ element from Backman’s approach, focusing on the superhero-related narrative concept of a fictional universe. Right now – following the global success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – the idea of a ‘universe’ (a set of individual stories/films correlated within the bigger fictional world and intertextual narrative structure) has become the main ‘novelty’ of superhero films that is inspiring many other comic and non-comic related franchises to build their own universe-like systems (Żaglewski, 2017). The main ‘profit’ that comes from a ‘universe-al’ approach – especially within the superhero narratives – is the aforementioned feel of continuity that shapes the set of superhero titles (as individual and incomplete as they are) into their final form and meaning that depends on intertextual ‘flow’ of characters, plots and diegetic consequences. After a decade of dominance by the universe-centred sort of comic book films it would be efficient, however, to look at a second category referred to by Backman, which is ‘cataclysm’, that stands for the inevitable points of diversification and inconsistency within superhero narratives that lead directly towards the concept of a diegetic and narrative multiverse (as a more elabo-

rate form of a universe dependent on creating alternate timelines and interpretations). As Backman himself explains: "Marie-Laure Ryan, a narratologist writing about multiple universe fiction, describes the type of storytelling that *What If?* engages in as the exploration of counterfactual narrative circumstances. [...]. Ryan relates multiple universes to modal logic, which is not concerned with the truth of any statement, but only with the truth conditions of counterfactual statements. For both modal logic and narratives about alternate timelines, internal consistency rather than actual occurrence determines validity" (Backman, 2014, p. 207). The second comic book-related 'novelty' in shaping the general conditions of popular storytelling would be a strategy of synchronic stratification of characters, storylines or even whole fictional manifestations of a given universe as well as its meanings and turning points. In other words, within the tradition of superhero comic books there exists an infinite amount of 'counterfactual' interpretations of a given element – some that drastically re-shape the common concept about a certain hero or their adventures and some others that just explore the 'what if?' approach, where a given artist can propose a contradictory vision of well-known stories.

This overwhelming spread of possible superhero narratives – not only heading towards widening the horizontal timeline but also its vertical 'alternations' – can surely be regarded as one of the most ambitious in the history of popular fiction or even, as Nick J. Lowe suggests, "the largest narrative constructions in human history (exceeding, for example, the vast body of myth, legend and story that underlies Greek and Latin literature)" (Kaveney, 2006, p. 25). The scale of the superhero multiverse structure is most accurately manifested in one of the original graphic stories that actually explored this idea in comics – namely in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* written by Marv Wolfman and drawn by George Pérez in 1985. This 12-issue storyline presented by DC Comics was basically the very first use of a multiverse concept based on clashing all the former iterations of DC Comics' characters (living on different 'Earths' that represented different moments in DC history) in the form of a 'narrative orgy' (Darius, 2015). that ended up in spawning a new, consistent DC universe (at least until another multiverse-related conflict). The historical meaning of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* came from the very first recognition of any existing iteration of a given character (or narrative *Earth*) as valid and possibly still narratively 'useful' to explore some 'counterfactual' ideas about DC's tradition. By turning into a 'multilayered' version of a diegetic world both DC and Marvel – that also followed this trend to sustain its own multiverse – actually proposed a very interesting experiment in serialised storytelling that surely complicated the traditional 'linear' narrative. Superhero stories had now become not only timely but also narratively 'infinite' since the idea of a 'definitive' interpretation was no longer present nor canonical. As for the strictly narrative consequences of

such an approach, superhero storytelling turned from serialised patterns towards the ‘quantum seriality’ or ‘quantum narrative’. Such is the suggestion of William Proctor who proposed to define ‘quantum seriality’ as “a labyrinthine narrative network that incorporates a wide array of transmedia expressions into an ontological order that rationalizes divergent textualities as part and parcel of the same story system that canonizes all [...] creations” (Proctor, 2017, p. 320). By taking inspiration from quantum physics and translating its foundations for the purpose of narrative research, Proctor assumes that heading towards the multiverse structure in fiction results in perceiving both DC and Marvel superhero storyworlds as hyperdiegetic creations where every action or event can lead to a number of ‘quantum events’ that “creates an alternative timeline or world that continues along its own pathway through time and space, completely cut off from the parallel line” (Ibidem, p. 321). A quantum narrative would be then a complete reevaluation of film narrative’s ‘efficiency’ (as Buckmaster lamented) towards an even more radical undermining of the ‘finality’, ‘completeness’ or self-independence of a single realisation (namely a comic book or a comic book-based film). It is crucial however to look here at these new possibilities not as a perversion or nullification of a film’s narrative system but as a chance to actually widen its conditions by using ‘altering’ mechanisms. It should highlight once again the new ideas, inspired by superhero comics, about a narrative’s ‘resolution’ or ‘efficiency’ as a result of intertextual collaboration between the ‘quantum paths’ of cinematic franchises.

Introducing quantum seriality in modern superhero films

The idea of quantum narrative was fully introduced in the 2019 blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* where the very concept of a multiverse and a multiverse-related narrative was introduced as a crucial part of the film’s plot. The latest Avengers feature deals with a time travel concept which is used as a solution to the catastrophic events of a former film (*Avengers: Infinity War*) that ended up with a massive reduction of all living beings in the universe down to 50 percent. The main goal for human survivors in *Endgame* is to go back in time not to simply stop or erase the apocalyptic moment but rather to gather all the mystical artefacts (called Infinity Stones) from the past to undo the decimation in the present. As one of the film’s humorous scene explains, our popular knowledge about time travel and ‘solving the problems of the future by reshaping the past’ (as presented in *Back to the Future*, *The Terminator* or numerous episodes of the *Star Trek* series) is wrong and does not correlate with the quantum mechanics of possible time travelling-tools. On a few occasions within the *Avengers: Endgame* storyline the creators are clearly introducing the idea of an ‘infinite multiverse’ which is a direct response to the Avengers’ mission to find the Infinity Stones. As one of

the characters explains in the movie: "Think about it: If you travel to the past, that past becomes your future, and your former present becomes the past! Which can't now be changed by your new future!", and the other continues: "The Infinity Stones create what you experience as the flow of time. Remove one stone and that flow splits. Now, this may benefit your reality, but my new one, not so much. In this new branch reality, without our chief weapon against the forces of darkness, our world would be over-run and millions would suffer". As a result *Avengers: Endgame* ends not only with the final triumph of Earth's superheroes but also with open possibilities to explore new branches of time (realities) that were shaped after the film's 'time heist'. Finally, the rather coherent and unified timeline of the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise splits into at least four new possible narrative paths – each of them caused by some changes that happened in MCU's 'history' through the events of *Endgame*. It was quickly announced that this new possibility in storytelling will be explored by further productions from Marvel Studios like the *Loki* series (developed as an exclusive mini-series for the new Disney+ streaming platform) that will continue the time/narrative branch caused by *Endgame* where the titular anti-hero changes the continuity of MCU's former timeline (presented by the movies) and leads to an 'alternate' look at milestone events or never-before-seen backstage of Marvel's cinematic mythology.

When it comes to pointing out the leader in embracing a 'multiverse' narrative within cinematic productions the title should be taken by *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* animated feature (premiered in December 2018) that went even further with familiarising cinema-goers with the comic-related concept. As far as the story goes *Into the Spider-verse* concentrates on Miles Morales – a young boy who happens to gain spider-like powers (just like the 'original' Spider-Man – Peter Parker) and has to deal with the heritage of 'with great powers comes great responsibility'. The innovative status of the film comes with the idea of clashing Miles with other iterations of Spider-Man from other narrative universes. And so Morales teams-up with Spider-Gwen (a teenage female Spider-Man), Spider-Noir (a Spider-Man character inspired by the film noir aesthetic and living in the period of World War II), Penny Parker (an anime-themed young girl from the future with a spider-robot as her sidekick), Spider-Ham (a Looney Tunes-like 'cartoon character' in a spider costume from a Looney Tunes-like universe) and finally Peter B. Parker (a much more 'classic' version of the original Spider-Man but still a rather 'unexpected' variation of this hero with a mid-life crisis). All of these strange versions of the Spider-Man idea come together through a strange, realities-converging machine designed by the film's main antagonist who finally learns that there are possibly infinite manifestations of the web-slinging hero. Although it is rather an innovative aspect in presenting a superhero fantasy by

adapting some crucial elements from Dan Slott's *Spider-verse* comic book event from 2014, it is interesting to look at this particular production as yet another attempt to dramatically broaden the idea of a cinematic superhero-led feature. Like Terrence Wandtke accurately explains: "Like oral culture, superhero stories maintain a basic core for their characters but retell (or redraw) their stories over time and produce many variants. As Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, and more recently John Miles Foley have argued, the electronic and digital ages do not engage in this anti-canonical practice organically but self-consciously: perhaps preferring the recent to the original but definitely telling stories that place variants alongside each other. [...]. Moreover, the film is a quantum leap beyond fan fiction alternative arcs and into the digital age embrace of narrative and narratology based on variants" (Yanes, 2019). As Wandtke suggests, *Into the spider-verse* serves as a 'graphic' introduction to the mass audience of a 'quantum seriality' by underlining the fact that there is no such thing as a 'definitive' interpretation within superhero stories and 'every story matters' in terms of creating a variation-based multiverse of concepts and themes. Both *Avengers: Endgame* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* are seemingly circling around the multiverse-al quantum narrative to illustrate that there are endless narrative 'paths' to explore, not only as follow-ups or spin-offs to the dominant storylines but also (or perhaps, above all) as alternate/counter-factual routes to explore by an individual artist who wants to challenge the 'canonical' interpretations to, as Martin Flanagan observes, "handle all the problems posed by a Multiverse, not as a pressure, or a threat of alienating spectators, but as a vein of narrative to be celebrated" (Yanes, 2019).

Future instalments of quantum seriality

As it seems, after the financial and critical success of recent superhero films that endure the idea of a narrative multiverse (in *Avengers: Endgame*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* and *Joker*) it would be reasonable to assume that in the following years the quantum narrative will become more prominent within the area of comic book cinema. The terms of quantum seriality will definitely have to change the general conditions of superhero film storytelling techniques that were established, until now, mostly by the universe-concentrated methods. Moving towards the multiverse concept in cinema – especially for the superhero franchises – will surely lead to at least three main 'novelties' for superhero-based cinema that can be listed as:

- More 'loose' connections between the films within a given universe/multiverse;

- A chance to introduce a more ‘authorial’ approach to superhero films by engaging creators interested in ‘playing’ with the superhero genre and not developing long-term narratives;
- A proper introduction to the idea of ‘cinematic imprints’ (following the comic books’ imprints editions) regarded as an independent line of comic book films dedicated to serve ‘alternative’ storylines and portrayals.

All three components above can be seen as a natural evolution for recent superhero films, often criticised for being too preservative or box office-orientated to actually bring some interesting variations of comic book characters. Besides few exceptions – such as Christopher Nolan’s “Dark Knight Trilogy” – comic book films (especially in the era of Marvel’s dominance) seemingly stuck in predictable forms of repeatable narratives surrounding the ‘universe’ approach of intersected titles and between-film crossovers. With this new approach on the horizon both Marvel and DC-related film content can actually move towards more complicated and diversified readings of their characters without harming the ‘core’ universe of both companies (that stands only as a starting point for infinite alterations). And so, it wouldn’t be too hard to imagine such unlikeable projects as Quentin Tarantino’s *Luke Cage* film that has been hinted at many times before by the director of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* as his comic book dream project. As Tarantino himself admitted, the main reason why he stands outside the superhero-craze in Hollywood is the fact that he is not interested in developing a ‘shared’ storyline with any larger narrative construct (like the Marvel Cinematic Universe). Instead, his vision for *Luke Cage* was constantly referred to as a strongly ‘authorial’ approach that embraces the comic book roots of the character that dives into the 70s and the blaxploitation aesthetic. According to Tarantino the reason why he wasn’t considered before as a ‘natural’ choice for the *Luke Cage* cinematic feature is: “Well, frankly, to tell you the truth, I might be one of the pains in their asses because I love the way the character was presented so much in the 70s. I’m not really that open to a rethinking on who he was. I just think that first issue, that original issue... was so good, and it was really Marvel’s attempt to try to do a blaxploitation movie vibe as one of their superhero comics. And I thought they nailed it. Absolutely nailed it. So, just take that Issue 1 and put it in script form and do that. The Luke Cage: Hero for Hire era... that’s the era” (Fitzpatrick, 2019). With this new multiverse-based way of planning comic book films such a project like the 70s Jackie Brown-themed *Luke Cage* is surely much more likely to happen by grabbing a director like Tarantino and involving him in the comic book franchise without, however, any further attachments to the sequels or crossovers.

A multiverse's quantum narrative strategy can be seen in fact as a 'rescue plan' for these franchises that failed to establish a fully-functioning universe structure in their pursuit of following the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Such is the case of the so called DC Extended Universe – a cinematic equivalent to the DC Comic series – managed by Warner Bros. film studio. After a critically unsuccessful run of a few initial DCEU productions – like *Man of Steel* (dir. Z. Snyder, 2013), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (dir. Z. Snyder, 2016), *Suicide Squad* (dir. D. Ayer, 2016) and *Justice League* (dir. Z. Snyder, 2017) – it became obvious for the studio's executives that their present creative approach (in simply copying MCU's 'interconnected' set of universe-dedicated movies) was not working at all and a fresh approach needed to be taken. After the disastrous – both financially and artistically – reception of *Justice League* as an unsatisfying culmination of DCEU's Marvel-like plan there came a new installation within this franchise that completely rejected the former, 'Marvel-wannabe' status. James Wan's *Aquaman* (2018) and David F. Sandberg's *Shazam* (2019) proved to be an engaging and promising restart for DC's films by manifesting strongly the new 'philosophy' of the studio to avoid a Marvel-based strategy to build a coherent universe and instead to propose much more self-dependent and stand-alone features. The newest entry to this DCEU 'unfastened' universe that transparently reaches towards a multiverse logic in serving 'authorial' stories and not just 'parts' or spin-offs to a bigger narrative is Todd Phillips's *Joker*. This strange yet original interpretation of one of the most iconic villains in the history of comics was seemingly planned from the very beginning as a strictly 'individual' production that doesn't need any connections to a 'main' cinematic universe but instead wants to be a separate look at a character that may still appear in different form (and with a different actor) within the 'core' line of movies. As the director of the movie explains: "It's not really connected to that [DC Movie] Universe. And it was really intentionally not. I mean the original idea when I went to [Warner Bros.] with the idea was not just about one movie, but about a label - sort of a side label to DC, where you can do these kind of character study, low-rent, low-budget movies, where you get a filmmaker to come in and do some deep dive into a character. So it was never meant to connect, so I don't see it connecting to anything in the future. I think this is just this movie, you know?" (Chichizola, 2019). Being the latest – and the most radical – representative of the quantum narrative within a comic book film line *Joker* may actually foreshadow the future trend for this type of movie to actually find a balance between the universe/ 'everything-is-connected' model and the 'label' of films that doesn't have any universe-al restrictions or relations by being just an individual 'variation' about a character or story. With some interesting new projects coming from DCEU –

like *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (dir. C. Yan, 2020), *The Suicide Squad* (dir. J. Gunn, 2021), *Wonder Woman 1984* (dir. P. Jenkins, 2020) and *The Batman* (dir. M. Reeves, 2021) – it is not difficult to imagine all of these films as yet another experiment in serving more independent manifestations from acclaimed directors and not just building-blocks in the ‘universe’ scheme. And maybe with these titles on the horizon DCEU is taking a first step towards the birth of the very first proper cinematic version of the comic book imprint strategy which Todd Phillips himself pitched directly as a reflection of DC comics’ Black line of more ‘mature’ graphic superhero content: “I said *Let Joker be the first, then let’s get fucking great filmmakers to come in. Instead of trying to live in the shadow of the beast (MCU), let’s do something they can’t.* This included \$30 million budgets, no CGI hoopla. *Let’s strip that all away. It’ll be liberating*” (Scarnato, 2019).

By adapting the ‘imprint’ philosophy this new line of ‘multiverse-al’ comic book films should follow, the original publishing strategy which is often referred to as subsidiaries of a given comic company which focuses on a specified group of readers and specific (mostly adult/violent) topics and visions of a certain character. Historically the most significant comic book imprint – namely DC’s so called *Elseworlds* line of comics that started in 1989 – was planned from the very beginning as a line of titles which were supposed to give a concrete artist the chance to experiment or to break the most ‘canonical’ foundations of DC’s icons. And so, the very first titles within *Elseworlds* offer – such as *Batman: Gotham by Gaslight* by Brian Augustyn and Mike Mignola, *Superman: Red Son* by Mike Millar and Dave Johnson/Andrew Robinson/Walden Wong/Killian Plunkett, *Wonder Woman: Amazonia* by William Messner-Loebs and Phil Winslade or *Batman: Nosferatu* by Jean-Marc Lofficier, Randy Lofficier and Ted McKeever – brilliantly illustrate this ‘separated’ and ‘unrestricted’ approach towards the classic heroes by portraying Batman as a Victorian vigilante fighting Jack the Ripper (in *Gotham by Gaslight*), Superman as a Soviet champion (in *Red Son*), Wonder Woman in a XIXth Century setting (in *Amazonia*) and Batman once again as no less than a proper vampire-character in F.W. Murnau’s expressionistic aesthetic. The ‘imprint’ approach – just as in *Elseworlds* instalments – gives an unprecedented freedom to the artist to re-establish even the most ‘sacred’ interpretations of comic book heroes which actually ensures a vitality and recurring interest in these narratives. By following the success of the *Joker* it is rather safe to assume that through a rising fatigue of a ‘classical’ universe approach in comic book cinema both Marvel’s and DC’s cinematic worlds will have to look at these quantum, independent imprint-inspired narratives that will explore alternative or counterfactual routes of established film storylines. As a result this newly-established form of ‘quantum’ superhero cinema could be perceived as a not necessarily linear

(narratively more vertical than horizontal) version of David Bordwell's 'forking-path' structure (executed within the meta-diegetic structure of several 'entangled' titles) where a single, counter-factual narrative can bring an altering perception/meaning for a given element of a general 'universe' system. Such is the case of the *Joker* which is not merely an origin story of the famous villain (served as a classical franchise-driven spin-off) but it is rather a separate voice for the DC cinematic universe – the one that doesn't connect with any previous or further instalment but one that serves as an alternative image of a certain part of this multi-layered universe. With these new ways of reviving a franchise which – once again – shouldn't be treated only as commercial exploitation but also as a never before seen opportunity to re-establish superhero titles accordingly to the uncompromising tastes of gifted creators it can be predicted that superhero-inspired cinema will not meet its end in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion: Altering the narratives or alienating the viewers?

Talking about the predictable dominance of superhero cinema within the landscape of modern film production may once again sound almost apocalyptic to observers like Luke Buckmaster who stand for bringing back the classical narrative condition of popular films. By doing so all the negative voices about the "Avengers effect" commonly circle around its negative impact on spectators and their lack of ability to appreciate any non-superhero related content which leads to some bizarre conclusions about 'fanboy-ization' of film literacy and criticism. As Buckmaster himself tries to diagnose: "Marvel Comic Universe superfans are among the most passionate readers of film criticism in the current times. Whereas some readers (a diminishing number, it feels like) enjoy reading reviews that offer a different opinion to their own, understanding that this is a valuable exercise and not some kind of poison, the vast majority of MCU superfans consume reviews in order to have their own opinions validated, or to render the critic as a kind of cartoon villain to rebel against – their own (much less intimidating) Thanos" (Buckmaster, 2019). So are superhero movies really just reducing film discourse to its very primal 'like/dislike' discussion and the whole film experience to a primitive struggle between comic fan subculture and ignorant critics? Not exactly, but they are surely changing the way a film is 'consumed' by reaching once again towards the area of the original comics.

Amongst many concerns that Douglas Wolk underlines about the 'non-coherent' nature of superhero comics is the case of their reception – namely a universe-determined need to constantly leap between the titles, search for the narrative connections and build final meanings on the bricks of storylines

left within many stories – we do appreciate the ‘work’ of comic readers that actually engage strictly intertextual ‘powers’ to move between the storylines, unify narratives and always broaden the horizon of universe’s/multiverse’s landscape. Comic book ‘superreaders’ (as Wolk refers to them) are now becoming ‘superviewers’ since the very same kind of textual ‘lecture’ is invading popular cinema through superhero films that paradoxically demands much more ‘awareness’ in the department of diegetic consequences and connections. As Justin Mack accurately sums up, modern superhero franchises illustrates the growing role of the viewer’s ‘hyperconsciousness’ reflecting the presence of a given superhero character between many media iterations and eventually leading to “demonstrate an awareness of their antecedents and their rivals in the marketplace” (Mack, 2014, p. 140). A quantum narrative-approach, that may be seen as an insolvable complication for the common viewer to actually discriminate against the simultaneous iterations of the same figures, should be perceived then as a direct reflection of modern transmedia popular culture for which the idea of ‘variability’ – as Terence Wandtke observed about *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* – is a dominant element. Instead of ‘alienating the viewers’ as a result of a multiverse-al approach with its quantum storylines maybe it would be more efficient to look once again at the field of comic book culture where the growing line of ‘alternate’ narrative routes actually doesn’t really reject the readers but encourages them to more conscious, ‘selective’ reading by following specific iterations or individual reading paths to actually understand recent events in a given universe/multiverse. Nevertheless all of the issues highlighted in this article could once again be seen as a direct ‘threat’ to the classic narrative system of cinema by following the ideas of ‘incompleteness’, ‘variability’, ‘counterfactuality’ and searching for a neverending ‘variation’. However, as I have tried to present, the ‘comic book’ invasion upon popular cinema can also be regarded as a fresh opportunity to actually widen the narrative tools of film by using this strictly ‘comic book’ idea of quantum multiverses to open the predictable forms of cinematic franchises. The inevitable ‘superhero-isation’ of cinema that can be seen today and that will probably endure for the following years may finally result in yet another revolutionary milestone for the cinematic experience by moving it into an intriguing transmedia form that combines film and graphic narrative. And when eventually a multiverse logic reaches its narrative peak in cinema there are other concepts of superhero narratives that are waiting to be adapted, such as the megaverse, metaverse, omniverse etc. One way or another, we are observing just a starting point for the evolution of superhero film.

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Infinite Narratives on Infinite Earths. The evolution of modern superhero films

After almost 20 years of a successful run of superhero films it seems that we are now entering into the fully-developed format of this kind of cinema. Through films like *“Avengers: Infinity War”*, *“Logan”* or *“Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse”* the general audience all over the world is becoming familiar with strictly comics-based forms and ideas like retcon, crossover or the multiverse paradigm (that serves as a model for ‘infinite’ superhero narratives and limitless iterations of characters). Despite the fact that popular cinema had already introduced some of these elements before – like the crossover aesthetic in Universal Studios’ horrors from the 1930s and 1940s – modern superhero cinematic universes can be seen as much more demanding productions for the viewers in terms of following strongly comic books-based modes of the ‘multiverse-centric’ perception. As a result we can right now observe an emerging process of turning even the non-superheroic popular cinematic features into very ‘comic book-y’ narrative patterns. In this article I’m interested in analyzing the most recent cases of superhero cinema by looking at some specific titles as a way of introducing the narrative systems and tools from superhero comics into cinema.