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The Universe-al Storytelling. Towards A 'Spatial' Narrative Model in Modern Comic Book Cinema

The supremacy of superhero storylines in today's landscape of popular cinema is an inarguable fact. It is based on solid numbers from global box offices that attest to the 'unsinkable' quality of almost every superhero title. Just before the end of 2017, Marvel Cinematic Universe – the most successful comic-based film series – had become the most profitable franchise in the history of cinema, having earned USD 13.5 billion after just 11 years of its big screen presence[1]. The beginning of 2018 appeared to be even more satisfying for the Marvel producers with the unprecedented and unexpected worldwide phenomenon of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, the 18th instalment inside the MCU[2] that earned globally an overwhelming USD 241.9 million over the opening weekend and became only the 4th feature (after Marvel's *The Avengers*, *Jurassic World* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) to ever sustain over 100 million in gross earnings in the second

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[1] By comparison, a much longer popular film franchise such as James Bond after more than five decades on screens, reaped 'only' USD 7,077,929,291. See: https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchises/ [01.03.2018].

[2] Which has already achieved outstanding critical and audience acclaim making it officially the best reviewed film production in history on the popular Rotten Tomatoes website, topping *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. V. Fleming, 1939) and *Citizen Kane* (dir. O. Welles, 1941). See: http://comicbook.com/marvel/2018/02/20/black-panther-ranked-best-movie-all-time-rotten-tomatoes/ [1.03.2018].

weekend of its cinematic run[3]. Right now, with the massive payoff of *Black Panther* and 2019's *Captain Marvel*, MCU easily passes the 18-billion-dollar mark and, just prior to the release of the highly anticipated *Avengers: Endgame* crossover, it surely aims for 20 billion in revenue before the end of 2019.

It is true then that Marvel Cinematic Universe stands today for the ideal model (both financially and critically) of a film-comic relation that seems to have no real competition. However, even the less profitable comic-based productions, such as some of 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* episodes or the DC Extended Universe (the main threat to Marvel's cinematic and comic book dominance), can be regarded as probably the only modern "assurance" of acceptable profits for Hollywood producers. Besides the disastrous reception of Josh Trank's *Fantastic Four* in 2015, which ended with less than USD 170 million in global box office (with an estimated USD 120 million film's budget), there seems to be no sign of audience fatigue or the imminent bursting of the comic book film bubble that could foreshadow the eventual end of the superhero wave. Even the greatest artistic flops or thematically ridiculed titles such as *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (dir. Z. Snyder, 2016) or *Ant-Man* (dir. P. Reed, 2015) have been able to break the figure of USD 500 million with ease, which cannot be said for many other recently made big franchise productions such as Ridley Scott's *Alien: Covenant* (with a disappointing USD 240 million in the global box office) or Michael Bay's *Transformers: The Last Knight* (which admittedly peaked at USD 600 million but at the same time suffered more than a 50% drop in overall box office compared with its predecessors such as *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* in 2011). The almost unstoppable force of modern comic book films is evident when comparing the critics' favourite of 2017 (*Blade Runner 2049*) and the least popular comic book production released the same year (*Justice League*) which were miles apart both on their popular Rotten Tomatoes score (87% to 40% positive reviews) and the final box office figures (USD 259 million to USD 657 million in total gross revenue).

Analysis of the 'raw' numbers, however, will not offer an accurate insight into the source of the worldwide phenomenon of comic book films as well as its impact on modern popular cinema that – almost without exception – seems to follow, albeit rather blindly, the bulletproof model of Marvel and DC's cinematic universes. As clearly demonstrated by the Tom Cruise-driven failure of *The Mummy* in 2017, it is not enough to announce another 'big bang' in the Hollywood galaxy that is supposed to spawn a new 'universe-like' franchise of

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[3] See: https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2018/02/26/all-the-box-office-milestones-black-panther-set-in-its-112m-second-weekend/#1fa3f8892340 [01.03.2018].

interconnected film titles to make it a self-perpetuating machine. Where does the difference lie in the case of comic book films? I believe that it is the comic book's original narrative system which does not lend itself to adaptation into any other textual environment, as it consists of many comic book-driven (in its superhero genre) narrative codes, themes and tools that are finally remediated today into their cinematic version. As a final result, we are now witnessing a situation that has never been seen before in film-comic book relations: for the very first time, it is cinema that has to admit the superiority of comic book narration and, consequently, has followed its patterns as opposed to merely adjusting them to the demands of the big screen. This leads to quite drastic changes in the classical modes of cinematic storytelling.

In an attempt to elucidate the 'super-structure' of a given superhero comic book and a 'super-reading' which is required here, Douglas Wolk explains: "Of course, picking up a superhero comic book right now, if you're not already immersed in that world, is likely to make you feel simultaneously talked down to and baffled by the endless references to stuff you're already supposed to know. But immersion in that world isn't just what they require: it's what they're selling. Contemporary superhero comics *aren't* really meant to be read as freestanding works, even on those rare occasions when their plots are self-contained. They're not even necessarily meant to be individual creative statements […] Instead, superhero comics' readers understand each thirty-two-page pamphlet as a small element of one of two gigantic narratives, in which most major characters have thematic and metaphorical significance" (Wolk, p. 90). It would be truly difficult to find a more pertinent yet sufficiently broad definition of the superhero comic book structure than Wolk's. He seems to have underlined all the important aspects of such stories, including their always open-ended plot, great attachment to the previous and next instalments within a single title as well as the overall publisher's 'road map': an obvious requirement for the reader to actually catch up with numerous simultaneous and/or alternate storylines which have an intertextual impact on each other. Finally, there is the invariable apprehension that both the characters and their adventures never truly end but are re-shaped in order to maintain the attention of new generations of readers. However, such devices were not always fundamental for superheroic entertainment. In the very first wave of 'cape and cowl'' comic books (between the late 1930s and 1960s), known as 'The Golden Age' of American comics, most were treated in a much more 'serialized' manner, which means that even if some references between titles were made they generally did not challenge the self-contained structure of the book. It all changed with the dawn of 'The Silver Age' in the middle of 1950s, with its significant turn from 'serialized' to 'universe-alized' narrative model.

After more than a decade during which superhero comic books remained on the defensive on the American market, the 1950s finally endowed the seemingly drained cultural concept with a new quality. The first group of groundbreaking experiments and titles included *Showcase* no.4 (1956) with the re-imagined 1939 classic character of Flash from, *Showcase* no. 22 (1959) with a similarly resuscitated Green Lantern (another DC 'old school' hero from 1940), the cult 123rd issue of the standalone *The Flash* series with its thrilling *Flash of Two Worlds* story, which combined two variations of the same hero for the very first time (Flash of the 1940s and the 1960s) and finally *Brave and the Bold* no. 28 (1960), which presented the initial incarnation of the Justice League of America group. Shortly after the DC comic offensive – led by the publisher's legendary editor Julius Schwartz – another major player appeared in November 1961 with *The Fantastic Four*, a cornerstone for Marvel Comics that was followed by a number of new hit superheroes and their crowning jewel, called *The Avengers,* in 1963. The common denominator linking DC's re-interpretation of the pre-war characters and the fresh approach of Marvel's creators was the general concept of the altered main pattern of a superhero story. Besides the necessary remakes of a character's costumes or their background origins and motives, both DC and Marvel introduced quite novel narrative tools that helped to expand the possibilities of the superhero comic book:

> **reboot/retcon**: according to William Proctor, a reboot (or remake) "*repeat recognizable narrative units* to some extent (Verevis, 2006: 1), while both rearticulate properties from the cultural past in a pattern of repetition and novelty" (Proctor, 2012). The obvious aim of rebooting a character or franchise is to restore it from long or short-term oblivion in a new aesthetic and/or thematic context that could be attractive for new readers. That was the general idea behind the Flash and Green Lantern reboots in the 1950s comics, but the same happened to the famous Captain America who was brought back directly from the comic's past in 1964 (*Avengers* no. 4) when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby decided to re-use the hero from the World War II for the purpose of their newly established 'avenging' squad. In time, the rebooting processes which entailed a significant change of the franchise's previous instalments became a *retcon* which, as Andrew J. Friedenthal observes, impacts not only the present text(s) but also serves as a revisionist tool to undermine the well-known stories.[4] There is an interesting aspect that needs to be noted when considering both the 'classical' reboot and its more radical retcon variant, one which implies an inter-

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[4] See: Andrew J. Friedenthal, *Retcon Game: Retroactive Continuity and the Hyperlinking of America*, The University of Mississippi Press, Jackson 2017.

textual space between given 'phases' of a franchise (original and rebooted ones). William Proctor continues: "As with a computer's internal memory, rebooting the system does not signify total loss of data. Rebooting a franchise does not imply that its core memory is destroyed. In other words, pressing the reboot button does not eradicate the iconographic memory of the cultural product" (Proctor, 2012). The reboot mechanism triggers a very interesting type of accumulation of the existing versions of characters and their worlds that the readers are aware of. In time, this accumulation would eventually become another tool for the superhero narrative, eliciting the concept of the multiverse (a diegetic world consisting of many interpretations of itself);

crossover: it would be a grave overstatement to say that crossover practices appeared for the very first time to further superhero comics. Historically, the very first instance of crossover – understood as a meeting/connection between characters from different comic books and storylines – occurred in 1907 when Yellow Kid (a hero from Richard Felton Outcault's newspaper strip) met Buster Brown (another of Outcault's creations). The superhero comic book, however, did manage to make crossover its recognisable item from the 1940s when Batman and Superman were fighting the Nazis side by side on the covers of the *World's Finests* series, while Namor and Human-Torch joined forces in *Marvel Mystery Comics* published by Timely Comics (the direct predecessor of Marvel). It was the Silver Age of comics that once again took the 'crossing paths' to another level with massive superhero team-ups such as *Justice League of America*, *Avengers* or the entire crossover-dedicated Marvel line *Marvel Team-Up* (debuting in 1972) which combined the publisher's heroes in pairs. A major revolution in crossover aesthetic and form came in 1984-1985 alongside *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (DC) and *Secret Wars* (Marvel) multi-titled (referring to the main storyarc and its tie-ins) and interconnected stories, engaging almost every existing heroe for the unprecedented changes or even 'purges' of the crowded superhero universes. As Julian Darius noticed: "The crossover is an orgy, a wild celebration of the notion of large narrative structures, of different continuing narratives sharing a universe" (Darius, p. 170).

universe/multiverse: probably the chief yield of the 1960s superhero comic books is the development of the 'universe' concept — an idea that all publishers' heroes and stories occupy the same diegetic space and they should constantly intersect. Marvel Comics reached a true mastery in the concept, as their titles were meant to interact between one another as

much as possible. The characters would constantly bump into each other and the effects of one hero's struggles often reverberated in the actions of another. By making New York the 'centre' of its cosmos, Marvel implied in no uncertain terms that 'every story matters' since they all create an ever-growing macro-story of the whole Marvel universe. However, that structure was quickly challenged by an even more complex narrative system in the shape of the multiverse, properly introduced in the famous *The Flash* no. 123, in the story entitled *The Flash of Two Worlds*. In essence, the 'modern' (1960's) incarnation of the Flash (named Barry Allen) meets his counter-vision from the comic book's past (Jay Garrick) who was the original Flash in the 1940s. This particular comic book story, written by Gardner Fox, opened up infinite possibilities for future artists, who would thus not only be able to re-imagine a given hero but even create relations between different timelines within a given title (and respective regions of the comic's universe). As Russell Backman suggests, the crucial process of 'alteration' leads here to a situation where "[i]n the alternate timeline, familiar characters become alternate versions of themselves, essentially new characters, with new affordances and narrative potential" (Backman, p. 206). As a direct consequence of such an abundant catalogue of alternate interpretations of heroes, it is easy to imagine not only effortless interchanges following the varied tastes and/or expectations of readers and creators alike, but also crossover-like events such as the Spider-Verse storyline from 2014, combining every mediatic incarnation of the amazing Spider-Man into one fictional story (and one diegetic world for a while).

All the 'narrative novelties' of the superhero comic book as seen above have one crucial element in common, namely that – as I mentioned before – they are unlikely to yield to adaption into any non-comic book environment. According to Russell Backman, the fully developed superhero comic book narrative system exists as a radical expansion of a simply 'serialized' structure, as it challenges the classical cause-and-effect pattern as well as the self-containment of individual parts of the series (Backman, p. 203). Instead, superhero comic books represent a more 'universe-alized' mode of narration with their neverending re-shaping, re-inventing, re-connecting and re-altering mechanisms. Such a complexity truly seems to exceed the possibilities of more 'traditional' narrative media and it surely was beyond the reach of the first wave of comic book films before the beginning of the 21st century.

From the Golden to the Silver Age of Comic Book Film

In order to fully appreciate the abyss between the pre-2000 and post-2000 comic book films, one should perhaps compare two significant quotes from two of the most influential comic book film directors of their times. Tim Burton, the creator of the first two 'modern' Batman films from 1989 and 1992 admitted: "I was never a giant comic book fan […] The reason I've never been a comic book fan — and I think it started when I was a child — is because I could never tell which box I was supposed to read" (Salisbury, p. 71). In contrast, James Gunn – the acclaimed director of *Guardians of the Galaxy* duology – was described almost 30 years later by his brother as follows: "He had boxes and boxes and boxes of comic books. Tons of them. He already had a huge collection by the time I was old enough to notice it"[5]. The disparity between these two approaches seems to account for the main difference between the creative approach of 'classic' comic book cinema (meaning its Golden Age by way of equivalence to the Golden Age of comics) and its present-day re-interpretation, which is more akin to the 'universe-alized' model of the Silver Age. I find it quite symbolic that in both quotes there is the 'comic book box' metaphor that seems to intimidate Burton and fascinate Gunn at the same time. The same intimidation/fascination opposition can be applied to both variants of the comic book cinema, reflecting the more lukewarm treatment of the comic book universes in the past and the complete immersion in their complexity today. Thus we arrive at the definitive distinction between the more cinema-oriented, 'serialized' comic book films (i.e. Burton's *Batman*, *Batman Returns* and Joel Schumacher's sequels after that) and the universe-based 'narrative orgies' that constantly unbalance the self-containment of a given film (as most Marvel Cinematic Universe features do).

However, it would be far off the mark to claim that the fundamental narrative devices of the Silver Age comic books (such as reboot, crossover and universe) had never appeared on screen before the actual launching of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2008 with the very first *Iron Man* (dir. J. Favreau) instalment. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that even if the reboot/crossover concepts had been used before 2008, they were basically far from the fully developed mechanisms of original comics and, once again, they were rather cinematic substitutes for the comic book form. And so, before his modern incarnation with Henry Cavill the ideal representative of a the superhero genre – Superman himself – had several on-screen (both in cinema and television) reboots and remakes following the initial *Superman* series from 1948 and its 'spin-offs such as *Atom*

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[5] https://www.buzzfeed.com/adambvary/james-gunn-guardians-of-the-galaxy?utm_term=. qoAbRa5mV#.vn07lDB21 [1.03.2018].

Man vs Superman (1950), *Superman and the Mole Man* (1951). Another iteration of the character came with *The Adventures of Superman* TV show (1951-1957), the 1960's revitalization of *The New Adventures of Superman* (1966) and finally the Richard Donner groundbreaking blockbuster (1978) with its sequels. Further television instalments were *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993-197) and *Smallville* (a prequel for a young audience aired between 2001 and 2011), accompanied by another big-budget production *Superman Returns* in 2006, and eventually the most recent *Man of Steel* by Zack Snyder in 2013, conceived as part of a larger DC Extended Universe. However, the list does not include the numerous cartoon series (like the legendary Max Fleischer's *Superman* from the1940s) and other media concepts like *The Adventures of Superman*, a 1940's radio programme or *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman*, a Broadway play which premiered in 1966). Still, it is worth noticing, however, that besides the overall impressive number of entries into the Superman screen franchise almost every one of them existed as a complete obliteration of any other – previous or following – Superman story. There were some occasional 'winks' to the viewers like the constantly repeated Superman changing outfit scene in a phone booth for instance, but they were not truly building any deeper connections with any pre-existing titles. The creators of the more "serialized" comic book films before 2008 were apparently more interested in starting from scratch with their own rebooted properties rather than trying to capitalize on pre-existing content. The only exception here was the critically and financially disappointing *Superman Returns*, designed by its director Bryan Singer as a simultaneous reboot and sequel at the same time of Richard Donner's original film. *Superman Returns* builds then a very interesting narrative bridge between these two versions, by trying to re-new and re-interpret the 1970's classic and follow the story that ended in *Superman II* (1980).

Much the same applies to the use of the crossover paradigm that is commonly associated today with the massive success of *The Avengers* macro-franchise (with a trilogy made in 2012, 2015 and 2018), which combined the main characters from the five previous Marvel Cinematic Universe solo features: Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, Thor, Black Widow and Hawkeye. Similar efforts to create such 'criss-crossing' narratives had been made way back in the 1980s, following the great success of *The Incredible Hulk* TV series aired by the CBS television network. *The Incredible Hulk Returns* (1988) and *The Trial of the Incredible Hulk* (1989), both television-exclusive standalone titles were supposed not only to follow the popular Hulk storyline starring Lou Ferrigno , but they were also interested in pairing Green Goliath with other Marvel characters such as Thor (in *Returns*) and Daredevil (in *The Trial*). It is difficult, however, to be appre-

ciative of that 1980s output, because as Arnold T. Blumberg sums up: "Sadly, the film's production values do not stand the test of time. Shabby settings […], stilted shootings, extremely variable Hulk make-up […], flat lighting, amateurish synthesized music, and cheap special effects leave *The Incredible Hulk Returns* [and its follow-up – T.Ż.] looking and sounding like a curio from a bygone era perhaps best forgotten" (Blumberg, p. 122). Quality seems to be a strong enough point to actually ignore *The Incredible Hulk* crossovers but there is another factor there that seems to work against the comic book's originally harmonious model of intersecting a wide range of heroes. As Blumberg continues: "More importantly, as a first attempt to introduce another Marvel hero through the Hulk, *The Incredible Hulk Returns* fell short. One of the most obvious weaknesses here was the irreconcilable clash between the realistic world that Bixby's Banner [Bill Bixby played the Hulk's human alter ego—David Banner—T .Ż.] inhabited and the overtly cartoonish, mystical origin story shared by Levitt's Blake [Steve Levitt played Thor's human alter ego — Donald Blake — T.Ż.] concerning his possession of Thor's hammer and control over the Thunder God's appearances" (Blumberg, p. 122). The real problem then was to find adequate tools to link such different characters and their agendas – Thor's ridiculous semi-Nordic origins, Hulk's fugitive-like drama and Daredevil's city-avenging *modus operandi* on top of it – in a single storyworld. Quite evidently, the venture lacked the concept of a shared universe which could re-locate every possible hero and their particular aspect within a wider narrative environment.

Again, it would be difficult to argue that the Marvel Cinematic Universe was the first attempt to bring a universe-like structure into the cinematic mode of production[6]. There can be no question, however, that MCU was the first genuinely successful experiment that thoroughly embraced the concept, dwarfing all previous endeavours which were too modest in that respect. Besides the aforementioned quasi-universe of *The Incredible Hulk* that none would wish to see again and the quite frequently shared universe adaptations in superhero-based cartoons, the initial idea to enact the big superhero universe on the big screen was manifested in 1995 in one of the scenes in *Batman Forever*, the second sequel to Burton's *Batman*. But, once again, one does not immediately see the scene as a direct foretoken of the DC Films Universe, since the sequence itself is more of an inside-joke for hardcore fans. In *Batman Forever*, Bruce Wayne – better known as Batman – is trying to convince his future ward and partner in crime-fighting business, Dick Grayson, to stay in Wayne Manor after the killing of

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[6] Especially since the 'shared universe' or 'crossover' concept had already been tried in Hollywood with the giant monster brawl *King Kong vs Godzilla* (dir. I. Honda, 1962) or the clash of horror icons in *Freddy vs Jason* (dir. R. Yu, 2003).

Grayson's family, who were circus acrobats. "Where will you go? The circus must be halfway to Metropolis by now", Wayne asks, hinting that Metropolis (the hometown of Man of Steel/Superman himself) is an existing part of a diegetic world of *Batman Forever*. As I have mentioned before, it would be difficult to say today that the inconspicuous hint is anything more than just an Easter egg for the fans, especially as in the continuation of *Batman Forever – Batman and Robin* (dir. J. Schumacher, 1997) – another reference to Superman is much more of a comedic pun. "I want a car, chicks dig the car", says Robin at the beginning of *Batman and Robin,* eliciting Batman's funny(?) response: "This is why Superman works alone." The whole universe-building intention is more complicated here in the deleted scene from the second Schumacher Bat-production. As Bruce Scivally reports, there was an ultimately scrapped sequence in the original script where Bruce Wayne investigates Pamela Isley, the alter ego of Poison Ivy – one of the film's villains – using the Batcomputer to compare Pamela's and Ivy's images. "Amazing what a good wig and contact lenses can do. And I thought Clark Kent got away with murder just wearing those glasses" (Scivally, p. 270), Wayne admits, not only revealing his rather poor detective skills but also suggesting once again that Clark Kent (aka Superman) shares the same fictional world as Batman and his partners. Even if the scene had appeared in the final cut, it would still have been a rather poor 'universe-oriented' effort in comparison with the almost endless and obvious interconnections between characters inside the comic book storyarcs. In defence of Schumacher's 'puns', it would be warranted to assume that at the end of the 1990s, Warner Bros. production company was making some careful preparations for their first foray into the wide universe of heroes. As we know today, there was actually a *Batman vs. Superman* feature pitched right then to a number of Hollywood directors such as Wolfgang Petersen or J.J. Abrams, intended to deliver the big screen superhero showdown already in the 2000s. For a long time, there were also rumours about George Miller's *Justice League: Mortal* on-screen team-up, but both projects were finally dismissed following *Batman and Robin's* low box office performance and Hollywood's consequent distrust of superheroes. Although it may now sound quite improbable that before the beginning of the 21st century comic books were not considered as an attractive area of cultural narratives – for viewers and producers alike – and that there was no interest in enacting the comic books' extravagant 'universe' structures outside graphic novels.

A major shift came with the first iterations of *X-Men* (dir. B. Singer, 2000) and *Spider-Man* (dir. S. Raimi, 2002), which totally redefined both the possibilities of comic book films and the viewers' abilities to follow a mode of narrative exposition which adhered more to the comic books than to the cinematic para-

digm. As modest as they seem today, both *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* did manage to open the form of comic book film to a much more 'universe-al' philosophy as, according to M. Keith Booker, "It features a fairly minimal plot and serves primarily as an introduction to the characters and to the near-future world in which they live" (Booker, p. 74). It is true that *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* were designed as an opposite to the much more self-contained and self-related comic book films from the past (e.g. Donner's *Superman* or Burton's *Batman*) as they constantly referred to characters, plots or future events that a 'general audience' (unfamiliar with the comic books' roots) knew almost nothing about. The risk, however, seemed to pay off as Singer and Raimi-directed franchises reached box office heights and inspired the whole future movement of the Silver Age comic book films, with the Marvel Cinematic Universe ahead. To understand the gigantic impact that comic book films had at the beginning of the modern age – one with which Hollywood is still resonating until today – one should once again underline the chief benefits that interconnected storylines brought to the franchise-addicted popular cinema.

As Matthias Stork brilliantly notes in his analysis of the tremendous financial yield of *The Avengers*: "*The Avengers*, as the flagship of the multiple-film series, is constructed as the emblematic tie-in movie that synthesizes Marvel's roster of superheroes, the spectacle of on-screen convergence serving as a marketing gimmick to please die-hard comic book fans, summer audiences and brand investors alike. […]. The aforementioned *product shot* of the Avengers' on-screen assembly is integral to this logic. Variations of the shot were reproduced for the film's global marketing campaigns and featured in various outlets including posters, DVD covers, animated menus, TV spots, store ads, social media games and other paratexts" (Stork, p. 80). Stork is quite accurate in his conclusion that what makes the whole comic book film movement so successful right now is its basic cooperation (or convergence) with the logic of modern transmedia (and cinema as well) production for which always open-ended, constantly repeated, reconnected and retold narratives are a natural habitat. The Superhero comic book narrative system was always about converging single titles, trans-textualization of given storylines and remediation of particular characters in order to align them with the broader expanse of a 'universe'. All three categories – convergence, transmediality (transtextuality) and remediation – are fundamental to contemporary Hollywood production which does not constitute a self-contained market but rather a planet within the great cosmos of media brands and companies. Economic and narrative 'assembling' (to refer once more to the rallying call of The Avengers) is what makes superhero stories so attractive for producers and viewers, since now is the very first

time in history when the model of insightful and interconnected reading that was the domain of comic geeks is becoming more common than ever.

Hence, the 'universe-al' storytelling – treated as a synergy of convergence, transmedia and remediation tools – exerts its most significant impact by changing conditions for comic book film narratives, which are thus finally free to explore less 'serial-ized' and more 'universe-alized' systems of stories. According to Felix Brinker, due to the inexorable expansion of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – as well as the DC Extended Universe or Fox's X-Men franchise which followed in its wake – it would be legitimate to say that right now we are witnessing a radical shift from the classical vertical serialization within a single, linear medium (such as cinema) into a more horizontal system of multi-linear narratives. As Brinker explains: "The MCU take on serial storytelling is perhaps best understood as an attempt to translate what Kelleter and Stein have called *multilinear* seriality of Marvel comics into the medium of cinema […]. Although the serial unfolding of the MCU within the medium of film is relatively linear, the franchise's expansion into television and short films complicates this linearity by introducing additional, media-specific models of serialization […] a movement that gives rise to a complex transmedial chronology and hierarchization of series and instalments" (Brinker, p. 216-217). However, multi-linearity does not really have to imply a multi-media environment (though it certainly reaches completely new levels of complexity as a result), since both Marvel comics and movies clearly display that multi-storyline model within themselves. Each and every individual sub-franchise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Ant-Man* or *Guardians of the Galaxy* – has its own aesthetic and thematic agenda which nevertheless refers to larger narrative plots not by showing its inconsistency (manifesting e.g. in the 'realistic' Hulk and 'mythological' Thor in *The Incredible Hulk Returns*) but rather through the multi-layered fabric of a fictional storyworld. It is an unprecedented thing in cinema to present a multi-titled narration that comprises a political thriller (the *Captain America* series), a light-hearted teen comedy (*Spider-Man: Homecoming*), sci-fi heist movies (*Ant-Man* and *Ant Man and the Wasp*) and semi-serious fantasy features (the *Thor* sub-franchise). The integration of all these individual yet cooperating elements of a universe is a truly exacting framework – one which is probably sustained the most by the 'integrative' reading on the part of the viewers.

The truth is that comic book cinema has only scratched the surface of the narrative consequences of adopting the multi-linearity of the comic book. Given that we are just before the proper introduction of a fully-developed 'multiverse'

onto the big screen[7], the general audience is still unaware of another level of complexity but also the attractiveness that such a model entails. It has been intimated quite recently by the MCU actor Benedict Cumberbatch who said: "What we've seen happen within the Marvel Cinematic Universe is this ever-expanding coterie of superheroes. And I think now we're at the stage where this universe, even within our world, has gotten quite crowded and it's just about to explode into other dimensions"[8]. This sentence clearly conveys the possibility of introducing a multiverse into Marvel's cinematic dominion, which could re-shape its narrative system once again from multi- to quantum-seriality. The idea itself comes from Proctor's approach, suggesting that: "Marvel multiverse is a sprawling metropolis comprising alternative realities and parallel narrative systems that co-mingle within a transmedia nebula" (Proctor, 2017, p. 325), and further: "The Marvel multiverse structure allows multiplicity to cohere within an ontological order that subsumes a pantheon of characters within a singular hyperdiegesis representing the largest world-building exercise in any media" (Proctor, 2017, p. 327-328). With the imminent incarnation of a multiverse within a cinematic structure, the viewers will witness completely new narrative conditions that will allow the already known characters (and actors who play them) to be replaced, to create 'collisions' between the various versions of heroes and their diegesis, as well as to combine alternate realities (or even franchises) into multiverse events just like in the *Spider-Verse* comic book storyline with *Spider-Man:Homecoming* star Tom Holland and his 'masked' predecessors: Tobey Maguire (from Sam Raimi's trilogy) and Andrew Garfield (from Marc Webb's unsuccessful "*The Amazing Spider-Man*" remake). It certainly will mark a great shift for the general audience who was so reluctant to watch *Superman Returns* making direct connections to the Christopher Reeve classics, and now will have to embrace the growing legacy of many on-screen supermen (and superwomen).

To recapitulate the above observations concerning the 'universe-alized' pattern of a modern comic book film, one should draw on the classic comic book theory toolkit developed by Thierry Groensteen in *The System of Comics*, a fundamental work in the field. According to the French researcher, what makes a comic book narrative so compelling – and attractive at the same time – is the graphically-narrative connection which remains non-adaptable to any other visual medium, a characteristic which Groensteen calls the 'spatio-topic' quality of comics: "It has been said: framed, isolated by empty space (a redoubling of
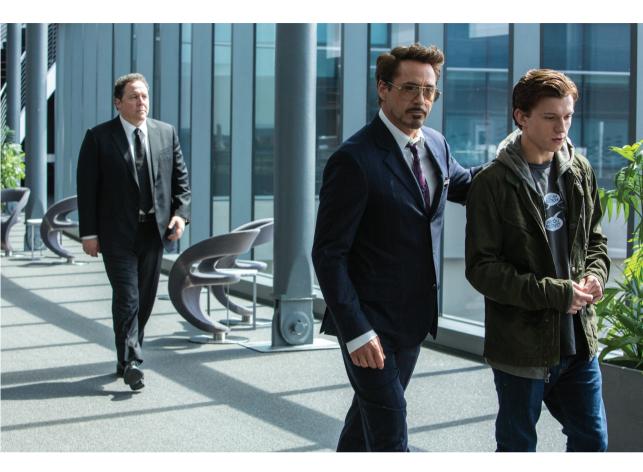
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[7] In fact, the very first cinematic experiment with multiverse logic was made in 2014 by Bryan Singer in his *X-Men: Days of Future Past* based on the groundbreaking comic book which explored the possibilities of coexisting timelines.

[8] https://www.cbr.com/benedict-cumberbatch-mcu-multiverse/ [1.03.2018].

the frame), and generally of small dimensions, the panel is easily contained by and takes part in the sequential continuum. This signifies that at the perceptive and cognitive levels the panel exists longer for the comics reader than the shot exists for a film spectator. When watching a film, *the cinema spectator does not experience . . . the sensation of being placed in front of a multitude of narrative utterances of the first order that accumulate piece by piece to give birth to the second order narrative utterance, the entirety of the filmic story.* A comics reader, on the contrary, experiences precisely a sensation of this type" (Groensteen, p. 26). I believe that with the dawn of the 'universe-alized' mode of comic book film, the cinema spectator can finally partake in a kind of narrative spatio-topic replacement since they are welcome to perceive a single film feature (a single panel in Groensteen's structure) as both an individual entity as well as part of the 'multitude of narrative utterances' which constitute a larger 'page frame' in the context of a cinematic universe, this means a diegetic framework of a fictional storyworld and its horizontal/vertical continuum. A temporal cinematic narrative is stepping aside to usher in a spatial comic book narrative where the causality of events is existing with their simultaneous diversification of characters' viewpoints and the viewers' points of access to the franchise.

The Homecoming of the Comic Book Film Narration

The growing reliance of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's creators on the new 'spatial' model of narration encourages ever bolder experiments with individual elements of that storyworld. Among them, there are a few standalone cinematic entries that seem to embrace this new comic book-based logic more evidently than others, by engaging the narrative tools and paths which prove the most demanding for the viewer. Here, one can surely list *Ant-Man*, *Captain America: Civil War* or *Thor: Ragnarok* as productions which heavily depend on the reboot/crossover/universe cooperation within a single feature, but in my opinion it is the 2017 *Spider-Man: Homecoming* which stands out as an extremely interesting instance of remediation of the comic book narrative mechanisms. For a start, one has to remember that Jon Watts's attempt at bringing Marvel's famous Wall-crawler to the big screen, being the third after Sam Raimi's trilogy and Marc Webb's two instalments, is actually the first which formally exists within the MCU and can officially cooperate with all other diegetic elements and characters from Marvel's film system. Instead of making a 'proper' origin story of a newly re-imagined superhero (as is still mostly common for initial entries into a sub-franchise series), Watts constructed a rather unexpected story which not only relies on more general MCU events but works as well as a meta-textual reference to a wider perspective of Spider-Man's older versions and cinematic performances.

First of all – and most obviously – *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is certainly a character reboot made, as the restrictive reboot definition implies, to re-induct Spider-Man into a new storyworld. There are many crucial upgrades there: the actor playing Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tom Holland) is much younger than his predecessors, Spider-Man's outfit is shown to be the result of Tony Stark's/Iron Man's cooperation with Parker (which had been introduced in *Captain America: Civil War*). Also, the entire surroundings of the 'new' Wall-crawler have been re-imagined to bring them into line with the overall Marvel Cinematic Universe (which is probably best embodied by re-casting Peter's Aunt May, now played now by Marisa Tomei whose appeal gives rise to many funny allusions made by playboy-ish Tony Stark in both *Civil War* and *Homecoming*). However, Jon Watts not only seems to be playing with the 'standard' reboot requirements but also appears to exploit William Proctor's remarks about the reboot's ability to create an interesting 'tension' between the different incarnations of a hero. Indeed, Watts

makes good use of that property by making his re-vision less predictable and far more engaging for the viewer. Consequently, *Homecoming* does not feature the irremovable elements of any 'proper' Spider-Man opening instalment which represent the cornerstones of Spider-Man's make-up: the radioactive spider bite and the death of Peter's beloved uncle Ben. Instead, *Homecoming* provides only a short exchange between Parker and his best friend Ned who asks: "You got bit by a spider? Can it bite me? It'd probably hurt, right? You know what, whatever. Even if it did hurt, I'll let it bite me. Maybe. How much did it hurt?" and in response hears simply: "Spider's dead, Ned". The same happens with uncle Ben's tragic fate, which is never explicitly mentioned in the movie except for Peter's ominous remark about keeping his superhero identity secret from Aunt May: "May cannot know. I cannot do that to her right now. You know...". The brave elision of the two most iconic parts of the Spider-Man origin myth have a deeper meaning, as they are strongly connected with the intertextual logic of the reboot. Watts correctly assumes that the audience are quite familiar with both milestones in Peter's biography – having watched previous versions of the character, read comic books and numerous cartoons or played video games – and that it is more creative to just let the intertextual memory work whilst focusing on building stronger ties with Spider-Man's re-gained place within the MCU. The final film actually effects many reboot-prompted, deliberate omissions, dispensing for instance with the iconic "With great power comes great responsibility" phrase, which had been included in the original script yet it was eventually replaced with a slightly more subtle scene, where Peter has to forgo the Homecoming ball he had been looking forward to very much in order to catch the movie's main villain, thus fulfiling the inescapable duty of a superhero.

Actually, one of the main reasons for abandoning the whole storyline featuring uncle Ben was the very significant presence of Tony Stark/Iron Man, who replaces Ben as Peter's mentor[9]. Once again, though Stark's involvement is much more important here for the overall narrative structure, as *Spider-Man: Homecoming* becomes more of a sub-assembled movie, including direct cooperation between two Marvel heroes. As a matter of fact, there is much of Iron Man's background story to be recalled by the viewer as some of his actions are motivated directly by the events of Tony Stark's previous on-screen adventures. In one of the film's most dramatic scenes – the quarrel between Stark and Parker – the Iron Avenger makes a categorical statement: "If you are nothing without this suit, you shouldn't have it. I sound like my dad." while just before that he has revealed: "My dad never really gave me a lot of support and I'm just trying

[9] https://www.flickeringmyth.com/2017/07/spider-man-homecoming-almost-featured-the-with-great-power-line/ [1.03.2018].

to break the cycle of shame." The key thing which enables one to understand the non-obvious pun here is to be aware of the difficult relationship between Tony and his father as presented in *Iron Man 2* and *Captain America: Civil War*, which casts a shadow on his motives towards young Parker in *Homecoming*. The same applies to the unexpected appearance of Stark's love interest Pepper Potts at the end of the film. After her absence following *Iron Man 3* and the unresolved intimation in *Civil War* that she eventually left Tony, she is back and, seemingly, accepts Stark's not-so-direct proposal. It is therefore clear that Iron Man's 'interwoven' narration in a Spider-Man-dedicated feature is something more than a cameo or guest appearance, as the movie consistently follows his own storyarc within the MCU, making *Homecoming* a more intimate yet important crossover which supports larger superhero mash-ups such as *Age of Ultron*, *Civil War* or *Infinity War*.

The inevitable quality of every MCU entry is its general dependence on the broader narrative ecosystem that has been preluded or will be followed by numerous coexisting titles. It is not that common, however, to make a single feature so heavily reliant on connected franchises as in the case of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. From the very first opening scene, it is quite obvious that a deeper knowledge about the cinematic universe is required, just as the movie echoes the disclosure of Stephen McFeely, one of the MCU screenwriters: "We had to make a decision early that we were OK losing virgin audience members. If you don't know some of these movies before you walk in you might be lost, but hopefully you'll still be entertained. We can't do a 'previously in the Marvel Cinematic Universe,' because it would take 25 minutes"[10]. *Homecoming*, as well as many other cinematic comic books these days, are finally abandoning the 'serialized' self-dependence of an isolated entity in favour of an interrelated network of universe-expanding storylines. Hence, the beginning of *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is a direct reference to the aftermath of events in the original *The Avengers*, as Jon Watts's future villain – Adrian Toomes aka The Vulture – works as a contractor involved in cleaning up New York City after the superhero showdown with an alien army. Nevertheless, that particular context remains tacit, because the viewer is not offered any explanatory dialogue that sums up what happened in *The Avengers* events while *Homecoming* has to 'trust' the audience, anticipating awareness of the previous films. Much the same thing happens time and again as the main storyarc follows a rather genuine idea which pitches Spider-Man against Vulture: a scrap-collector who literally preys on the MCU's past events (Toomes collects the items from the previous battles of the Avengers) as well as on fans' knowledge

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[10] https://www.cbr.com/captain-america-civil-war-writers-admit-new-viewers-may-be-lost-and-thats-ok/ [1.03.2018].

about the fictional world[11]. During the underworld weapon sale a dealer mentions sub-Ultron technology (by way of direct link to the aftermath of *Age of Ultron*), while the first clash between Spider-Man and Vulture takes place when the robber is trying to collect remnants of the Triskelion (whose destruction was shown in *Captain America: Winter Soldier*). There are many interlaced narratives there which enable one to conclude that *Homecoming* is deeply rooted in Marvel Cinematic Universe's circuitry of causes and effects, as the movie itself finally makes its triumphant 'homecoming', not only to the studio's official film super-franchise but also the organically 'universe-al', comic book-like storytelling.

Conclusion

Analysis of contemporary comic book films seems to be one of the most attractive academic pursuits undertaken by culture, film and comic book researchers. In light of the numerous recently published monographs and papers, I still believe that it is crucial to underline the dominant perspective of classical comic book studies in the attempts to re-discover the sources of success achieved by comic book films. It is beyond question that many of the recent 'novelties' in the media industry, such as textual convergence or trans-mediation, are only fresh takes on the narrative tools which have been available to superhero comics for over half a century. As I have tried to demonstrate, the crucial Silver Age categories of reboot, crossover or universe must necessarily be considered in order to fully account for the present-day remediations of both DC and Marvel properties. The most auspicious fact, however, is that what we have witnessed so far as viewers is still only a prelude to a much more extensive narrative evolution in popular cinema, nourished and sustained by comic books. After all the changes and a decade of Marvel-led 'universe-alized' revolution in comic book film, we can but repeat Nick Fury's initial promise made in *Iron Man*'s post-credit sequence: "We've become part of a bigger universe". We just do not know its full potential yet.

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[11] On a meta-diegetic level, it should also be noted that the Vulture characterization draws quite perversely on the previous appearances of Michael Keaton – who plays the villain – in the superhero genre. Before joining the MCU, Keaton had already been involved in both Tim Burton's *Batman* films as well as in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014) – a direct criticism of the surfeit of modern comic books in cinema.

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyze modern superhero films through the specifics of superhero narratives in comics. By referring to the 'organic' elements of graphic super-storytelling – like retcon or crossover – the author tries to explain the main shift within comic book adaptations heading towards a 'universe-al' mode of narration. By doing so the analysis concentrates on the most succesful recent cases of superhero films as attempts to achieve a narrative 'remediation' of comic books' spatial organization that requires reconsideration of the status of an individual superheroic franchise (or sub-franchise) within the larger universe of pre-existing, future and even alternate texts.

Key words: modern comic book cinema, superhero storyline, reboot/redcon, crossover, universe, multiverse structure