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Marvel and DC Multiverse

A Journey into Transmedia
Storytelling and Media
Franchises

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ABSTRACT

Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Extended Universe are two of the most popular media franchises worldwide. They constitute shared universes inhabited by superheroes assembling to fight villains. Marvel characters' licence are scattered across different major studios. The Walt Disney Company owns Marvel Studios and the related superheroes' movie rights, while Sony Pictures detains movie rights for Spider Man and his villains. On the contrary, DC Films' rights are all detained by Warner Bros. Pictures. Both are currently risking continuity issues. Marvel Studios and Sony signed a deal that includes the use of Spider Man character for both franchises as a legitimate inhabitant of the two cinematic universes. Marvel Studios and Sony have to work together to coordinate their storyworlds and make them fit together coherently. At the same time, DC Films deals with a multitude of superheroes' reboots produced over the decades, a tv shared universe of DC characters that don't fit the continuity of the cinematic universe and the lack of a long-term vision to successfully reunite in one film those superheroes. A re-organization of the operating logics of the expanded universe is needed.

This reflects for both in the decision of bringing novelty to the storytelling process and enactment: "Multiverse" is introduced. The main goal of this paper is to investigate the idea of multiverse from its origins to the different fields of studies and media in which it was later adjusted to. This will be conducive to better analyse its role and its working logic in the MCU and DCEU, answering research questions such as: Can the Multiverse logics be framed into the wider context of media franchises and transmedia storytelling rules? Are Multiverse logics going to create a new paradigm of rules or are those already existing enough? This research addresses such issues and tries to provide a set of possible answers both from a business and managerial point of a view and a transmedia storytelling one, with different outcomes for the two major film studios.

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1. Media Studies

In order to define media studies, it is important to understand what media are first. Dictionary.com defines them as: “the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, that reach or influence people widely”¹.

The study of media as an established discipline is however, much more winding and varying. The evolution of Mass Media theories is deeply linked to social, cultural and technological changes, society faced over the centuries. In the late 1700s - early 1800s, the Industrial revolution upset the established rules of the world still based on a feudal system and economies dominated by farmers and artisans' works. This process started in Great Britain in the 1760 and spread all over the world over the decades; it all began with a major evolution of technological equipment used so far : iron and steel became the new established basic materials; new energy sources such as the steam engine, electricity, coal, petroleum were discovered and implemented in the working industrial process; the basic work organization suffered a radical changed, evolving to the “factory system model” based on the division of labour and specialization of function; and last but not least, important developments in transportation and communication were registered, including the invention of the radio, the telegraph, the steam locomotive, the automobile and more.

What is important is that many of these inventions also influenced and transformed deeply the mass media environment. The steam engine was introduced to printing press businesses and revolutionized newspapers and books process of publication, leading to the birth of the “penny press”, published for the first time in New York in 1835 and considered the ancestor of the modern mass newspaper². Newspapers could have, now be sold at lower prices and reach at the same time, a wider portion of population. It was right around that time that the first theories about mass communication developed. Society was depicted as an organism in which transportation system and communication methods worked as human body's nerves. Newspapers were the very first mass media product and for many decades they also remained the most relevant. Nonetheless, a multitude of several mass media products was also starting to spread, strictly linked to the continuous technological transformation. The pace was so fast that new media (such as television first and the internet or mobile phones later) were not only been born but they also led to the re-configuration of the older ones. Some media were expanding, others were merging and converging.

During the '20s, the main idea was that knowledge could only be achieved through an empirical and positivistic methodology. For this reason, communication theorists' methodology implied the use of

¹ Dictionary.com <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/media>

² DeFleur, Melvin L., *Mass Communication Theories. Explaining Origins, Processes, and Effects*, Pearson Education, London 2010, pp. 8-9

the scientific method and the physical sciences. They thought that it could have been possible to understand human behaviour with the physical laws. The social world was considered to exist apart from people perceptions and human behaviour could be therefore, easily predicted. Early arguments claimed that communication process consisted in the transmission of an idea from the mind of a speaker to the mind of a listener, channelling that same thought through a message. In that period, researchers' ultimate goal was in fact, to understand media effects. If they would have succeeded in proving that media actually could have influence people, they would have also proven how businesses or political bodies could have used media tools to install desire for a product or to spread an ideology³. A first attempt to Film Studies was registered before the advent of the first world war, but it was only in the 1933 that a group of jew people, in an attempt to run away from the raising Nazi regime, flew to the US and developed major significant mass communication theories. Among them, there was Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian sociologist who conducted the earliest scientific analysis of radio listeners and effects. In opposition to the member of the Frankfurt Institut, such as Theodor Adorno who pioneered the critical mass communication theories.

After World War II, communication researches increased even more. American government financed universities especially for communication researches in the name of a more democratic future and American dream achievement. Overseas, Europe re-established academic media field interrupted by the war. During that time, communication impose itself into the academic environment through institutions, universities programs and faculties⁴. Especially in the US the academic discourse around mass media brought together scholars of speech and broadcasting media under the umbrella of communication field. "Though there were a handful of critical, cultural, and historical scholars working in the US, the coalescence of American communication research was founded on the hegemony of quantitative social science⁵". By 1968, communication had already gained legitimacy as an academic subject all over the world. The main land of research was still the US but, many scholars also developed their theories across Western Europe⁶.

Until the '60s, mass media were studied as a unique entity in which a plurality of single mass media interact and influence the external world in the same way. They lacked the academic legitimacy other

³ McQuail, Denis, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2010, p. 457

⁴ Simonson, Peter, Peters, John Durham, "Communication and Media Studies, History to 1968", in K. B. Jensen & R. T. Craig (Eds.), *The International Encyclopaedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, John Wiley and Sons, New York 2014, pp. 764-769

⁵ Delia, Jessie, "Communication research: A history", in C. R. Berger & S. H. Chaffee (eds.), *Handbook of communication science*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA 1987, p. 71

⁶ Simonson, Peter, Peters, John Durham, "Communication and Media Studies, History to 1968", cit., pp. 764-769

disciplines such as economy or philosophy had, and they were only analyzed as a tangent discipline, in the broader field of social sciences and humanities. Mass media theories and Communication Studies were the only parameters used to depict mass media effects over the audience and the customers, and everything was explained through the lens of social and human scholars. But that started to change when scholars depicted several differences among the media and most of all in the audience itself, who wasn't anymore a single ensemble of people but rather a diversified and stratified body. It is in this context that sub-field of studies were born, leading to the flourishing of radio researches, film studies and television studies. Media were imposing themselves as institutional products of the broadcasting age⁷: newspapers were becoming major commercial enterprises; cinema was consolidating its position as the dominant broadcast medium for the masses; music had become a popular product and television early experiments were yielding good results; Radio programming was still the main broadcasting features known by the people. Cultural studies of broadcasting kept a close eye on radio history evolution, studying social and cultural ramifications of the device. Unlike television studies, the majority of radio scholars talked about the broadcasting machine in favourable and flattering terms. Radio was depicted as a business enterprise, with the merit of conducting public service and at the same time stimulating listeners' fantasy⁸. As products of the cultural industry, quickly turned into mass products, both cinema and television opened up to a series of questions regarding their sociological impact on the audience and how they would have integrated in the cultural context, leading theorists and experts to dig in and create a new discipline.

This tendency started to consolidate by the advent of the English Cultural Studies during the '70s, in turn, influenced by the critical theories of the Frankfurt school's sociologists of the '50s, who validate television as a cultural artefact halfway between textual complexity and cultural industry. Two of the most important figures of the time were the sociologist Theodor Adorno and philosopher Walter Benjamin who, developed their theories about the forces and relations which governed the mass media system and who, didn't always see eye to eye.

Benjamin was more focused on the technical dimensions of messages' reproducibility through media, while Adorno concentrated on the study of the relations of domination and control embedded in the culture industry. Benjamin's theory was based on the assumption that until the advent of media technologies, any kind of art was to consider as authentic as unique and those elements were in fact the very essence of art. He defined this source of authenticity and authority as an "aura", that elevated

⁷ Kafle, Hem Raj, "Media Studies: Evolution and Perspective", in *Bodhi an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 3(1), March 2010, p.10 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240803443_Media_studies_Evolution_and_perspectives

⁸ MacDonald, J. Fred, Marsden, Michael T., Geist, Christopher D., "Radio and Television Studies and American Culture", in *American Quarterly*, vol. 32, n.3, 1980, pp. 301-307

art's learning and meaning. With the introduction of technological reproducibility, those characteristics of legitimacy fail.

[W]hat withers in the age of technical reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura...It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence⁹.

At the same time, the reproducibility of certain arts, most of all cinema, could have now fulfil political agendas and social service. Films encouraged philosophical thinking and incite a debate over the social, economic and culture norms forced by the political system. The audience was now much closer to art; they were no longer simple spectators, they could now, assume a critical approach to it and participate to the debate around art and culture. The concept of participatory culture was born. In that sense, production and consumption were now two sides of the same coin. The audience gave meaning and significance to the piece of art and became artist's collaborator on the reproduction of the media¹⁰. Benjamin actually admits mass media's manipulatory power, yet he contends that, films may help the audience to physically take a step back from the piece of art and actually criticize it. The cameraman serves as a mediator between the viewers and the actors, allowing the former to look at the show through a critical lens.

Adorno's viewpoint was instead much more pessimistic and disillusioned. Films couldn't actually encourage a critical thinking, if anything they represented those social constructs and sociological axioms as the immutable reality to which the audience couldn't respond. Even in this case, the audience is a passive entity whose critical thinking is neither encouraged nor developed. The cultural industry is in this case, associated with the concept of entertainment industry: everything is considered as a commodity, even art, and in such frame, cinema is considered to promote the false illusion of reality, dominating the viewer. For Adorno, the loss of the "aura" as defined by Benjamin, is not something to celebrate. The aesthetic value of unique artworks has to be maintained and preserved¹¹. As stated by Horkheimer and Adorno himself, "The double mistrust of traditional culture as ideology

⁹ Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Belknap/Harvard, Cambridge, MA 2008, p.22

¹⁰ Moore, Ryan, "Digital Reproducibility and the Culture Industry: Popular Music and the Adorno-Benjamin Debate", in *Fast Capitalism*, vol. 9, issue 1, 2012, pp. 75-77, <https://doi.org/10.32855/fcapital.201201.010>

¹¹ D'Olimpio, Laura, "Thoughts on Film: Critically Engaging with Both Adorno and Benjamin", in *Educational, Philosophy and Theory*, 48 (6), Taylor and Francis, p. 624-625, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2014.964161>

is combined with the mistrust of industrialized culture as a swindle¹²”. Adorno’s critical perspective over the cultural industry begins with a statement against the effects of technological innovations in the music industry. As for Adorno, in the very moment in which new technological tools enter music production and distribution system, music itself loses its artistic role and become an industrial commodity, aimed at the selling of standardized products. Listeners no longer have the freedom to choose what they listen to; they simply receive it and assimilate it. What is worst is that over time, they will no longer be able to even consider a different kind of music from the one offered by the social system or to acknowledge the submission to which they are compelled. Later on, in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment a Mass Deception*, Adorno adjusts these same ideas over movie industry, stating that as for music, also films are only produced for economical aims and in order to achieve that, the uniqueness of the products lacks, developing always the same, standardized work. Films, music, television shows, are all part of the same cultural industry, dedicated to mass commodities production¹³. These debates flourished mostly in North America, where these intellectuals were forced to move in order to continue their studies, due to the Hitlerian dictatorship in Europe. For this reason, their intellectual perspectives were shaped by the historical events they witnessed: first of all, they looked with disappointment at the missed opportunity of importing 1917 Russian revolution’s ideals throughout Western Europe; secondly, Fascism and Nazism affected them deeply even after the end of the war; and finally, they expressed concern for the apparent social and political stability and peace achieved after the war, studying the ideological transformations that made those changes possible¹⁴. All of that, led them to question, the role and effect mass media had over the audience, theorizing that media influence leads to brain atrophy, inducing peoples’ minds into an automatized, ideological world, where cognitive mediation is basically deleted. They described the bourgeois culture of the 19th century as an oppositional culture, deprived of its oppositional characteristics by the raise of capitalism¹⁵. Their research didn’t focus on the cultural implications of a mass media spread but rather on understanding if the social atomization could be sustained¹⁶. Moreover, a current of Marxist theorists translated Marx theories about proletarians’ role on society and state into an interpretative guideline of the role of mass media in capitalist societies. The depiction that Frankfurt

¹² Adorno, Theodor, Horkheimer, Max, “The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass Deception”, in Adorno & Horkheimer (Eds.), *Dialectic of enlightenment*, London 1997, p.161

¹³ Ivi, pp. 96-97

¹⁴ Bennett, Tony, Curran, James, Gurevitich, Michael, Woollacott, Janet (a cura di), *Culture, society and the media*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London 1982, pp.36-38

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 40-41

¹⁶ Ivi, p.35

School academics offered about capitalism, was centred on the monopolistic and repressive features which they widely explored in their essays. On the contrary, they thought about the bourgeois culture with much more hope and confidence. In a bourgeois-based society individuals were seen as so, and not as a part of mass entity. They have the power to fight for their dreams and accomplish their own personal idea of a fulfil life¹⁷.

By the '60s, media were formally recognised as a concrete and solid discipline taught in universities, with the following theoretical approach: textual-linguistic models were taken by the literary studies, in order to investigate the function of signs and codes used in media texts. The aim was to observe “the influence of culture codes in constructing social reality”¹⁸. During the '70s, American sociologists also started to change their approach. They, now thought about the audience as a group of people that “reacts not merely as an isolated personality but also as a member of the various groups to which he belongs and with which he communicates”¹⁹. The audience wasn't a homogenous entity anymore, but rather an heterogenous mass, consisting of a plurality of social layers which perceived messages accordingly to their educational and cultural background. People were no longer seen as passive victims of media control and manipulation but rather as conscious and voluntary participants and Media products were the mirror of this renovated social awareness.

At the same time, scholars started to study “reception” as to understand the different response to media by different set of audiences and Stuart Hall's model encoding/decoding was at the base for the “reception paradigm” in media studies. Hall developed his mass communication theory to understand how the encoded messages sent by television were received and decoded by the audience, producing a certain effect. He developed his own definition of hegemony and clustered it into the bigger picture of mass media culture. The first one to talk about hegemony was Antonio Gramsci, the Italian politician and journalist, known for his opposition to fascism regime. He was arrested by the fascists in 1926 and during this time in prison he elaborated the cultural hegemony theory as a contribution to Marxist theories and thought. He took one of the most known Marx economic axioms and turned it to a social and sociological theorem. In the Communist Party Manifesto, Marx stated that: “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class”²⁰. For Gramsci that means that ideas have always served the purpose of legitimization of the ruling class ideology; the

¹⁷ Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948; Janowitz, 1952; Breed, 1964; Miliband, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; etc

¹⁸ Kafle, Hem Raj, “Media Studies: Evolution and Perspective”, cit., p.12

¹⁹Kendall, Patricia, Lazarsfeld, Paul Felix, ‘The communications behavior of the average American’, in Schramm, W. (ed.) *Mass Communications*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press 1949, p. 399

²⁰ "Chapter 2: Proletarians and Communists", in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848

dominant ideology of society is in fact, a simple reflection of the ruling class beliefs and values. Cultural hegemony states that the political leadership is actually legitimized by the consent of the people. But in the end, this consent is only an expression of the ideals of the ruling class, whose ideas are continually spread and popularized over society. Society can actually be divided into two macro social classes: the civil society and the political society. The civil society is composed by all the private organisms such as schools, journals, churches, who are in charge of helping the dominant class to create a social and political consciousness; public institutions are instead part of the political society, whose purpose is to exercise a direct dominion. Therefore, ruling class's ideas and beliefs are simply spread into society, exploiting these two macro sociological entities and intellectuals are actually the ones who have the duty to create this social consent; if they fail, the ruling class collapses and brings society into social, political and economic crisis²¹.

Hall's definition of hegemony is of a consensual negotiation of ideology not imposed from the above, nor intentionally vehiculated. Therefore, in television field, both the encoded and the decoded messages or the circulation and reception of them are "moments" of the production process. Once messages are sent, they are eventually reincorporated into the production process itself, via a number of skewed and structured "feed-backs"²².

A critical point of analysis also concerned the effects media would induce on peoples' behaviour. The premise was that, at some point, after the industrial capitalist development, modern society had become "mass society". Mass media were depicted at the same time as the cause and the symptoms of this revolution²³. There is, indeed, a social role of the media that has to be analysed: American sociological approach referred to media as the cause for audience's behavioural changes. They would have a direct influence on the viewers and they were capable of changing their manners and ideas. This model of power was defined as "pluralistic", albeit with a primary focus on the individual. In this model, power and influence were synonyms, and media messages were coded according to the biases of the communicators. The message itself was therefore an empty linguistic construct who would have mirrored producers' intentions. Media were thought to simply reinforce the already established idea, they served as a reinforcement and reflection of the achieved consensus and seen as a positive matter in the wider establishment of consensus. This established notion, however, easily

²¹ Bates, Thomas R., "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, n.2, 1975, pp.351-353

²² Hall, Stuart, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Birmingham 1973

²³ Bennett, Tony, Curran, James, Gurevitch, Michael, Woollacott, Janet (a cura di), *Culture, society and the media*, cit., p.50-53

came to an end when in the late '60s, revolutionary movements rose to stand for minorities' rights, as well as to foster an anti-war position. Social order was no longer considered as the expression of a popular consensus; the implicit agreement between the dominant class and people was no longer spontaneous but rather a social imposition, demanding social consent in order to achieve social integration into the established social structure: in the past, media played a passive role as a simple reflection of the already achieved consensus; now they were thought to intentionally reproduce those contents which could legitimize the existing social framework. They not only had to reinforce the dominant class ideology; they were actively participating into the building of it. Reality itself, was only a result of a particular way of constructing it. Media don't reproduce reality: actually, they define it, and at the same time they are defined as signifying agents and messages themselves²⁴. They are agencies of mediation; when reporting events, they also propose a framework of interpretation, structuring people's reaction into a pre-determined model. Critical studies and scholars of the Frankfurt School actually developed an early model of cultural studies. Frankfurt theorists approached the discipline combining key elements from audience reception studies, communication studies, sociology and mass culture theory. According to their vision, mass produced culture was suffering the on-going process of industrialization. Culture artifacts, as any other mass product, responded to the same basic features of mass production: commodification, standardization and massification. The culture industry was born and its function was providing ideological legitimization of the ruling class. Mass production quickly brought to the raising of a mass society which homologated every individual, in the name of a uniform and homogenous ensemble of people's needs and desires. Mass culture and communication were a tool in the hands of the dominating class used to control people's minds and generate consensus. In the early 1960s, American mass-producing culture was spreading across Europe and accepted by younger generations as the new way to live. Tensions between the older working class-based culture and the new mass society started to rise. It is in this context that British cultural studies were born with the initial goal to preserve the older working-class culture. The starting point for British culture theorists' research was Frankfurt scholars' theories and philosophy. They also looked at mass culture as the social instrument used to create a new capitalist hegemony oppose to the higher culture which could actually help people to resist capitalism's temptations²⁵.

²⁴ Ivi, pp.54-60

²⁵ Lizardo, Omar, Cultural Consumption in the Fine and Popular Arts Realms, in *Sociology Compass*, 2008, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00101.x>

Over time, the two traditions took two different roads in the interpretation of mass and media culture: British cultural studies evolved and approached the subject from a more political point of view, focusing on the oppositional forces that could have been implemented to resist the establish ruling class but it failed in not taking under consideration modernist and avant-garde movements. It always remained a “popular discipline”. Sub-cultures were valorised and new sub groups of culture and identity recognised; on the contrary, Frankfurt school research key points always based on the assumption of mass culture as a homogenous form of ideological domination.

Studying critical theory and Frankfurt school research is the premises to understand why and how English culture studies developed and evolved at the beginning of the 1970s. The political environment in which they evolved was actually pretty different from the one knew by the Frankfurt sociologists. They developed their ideas in a time in which the difference in society between Europe and America were too big to accept, Europe was still suffering from the horrors of the second world war, while a new form of dictatorship was raising in the USA in the form of mass production and industrialized society. On the contrary, when British culture studies were born, they developed as a response to the younger people attraction towards the same mass production system Frankfurt scholars actually fight against. It later adjusted and changed within the society in which it was born²⁶.

In the 1970s, media studies were legitimized into the wider discipline of cultural studies and started to be studied in English universities. It is at the University of Birmingham, known as Birmingham School that this new ideological tendency took shape. These theorists went against the dominant idea that culture was so, only if elitist, switching to a more popular and organic expression of it²⁷. Media studies were now a much more interdisciplinary subject, which put together cultural studies and literary discourse, embracing numerous sided areas such as the point of encounter among sociology, gender studies and anthropology²⁸. Mass as a plural entity was therefore, acknowledged, but in doing so, a completely new debate was open: media failed at recognition of the discriminated social classes. Black people and member of the LGBTQAI+ community were depicted negatively or not represented at all; this opened to a decade of oppositional movements and revolutions. In the end, media were characterized by “two key qualities: interdisciplinarity and its politically engaged commitment”²⁹.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Kafle, Hem Raj, “Media Studies: Evolution and Perspective”, cit., p.15

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240803443_Media_studies_Evolution_and_perspectives

²⁹ Thornham, Sue, O’Sullivan, Tim, “Chasing the Real: ‘Employability’ and the Media Studies Curriculum”, in *Media, Culture and Society*, 26 (5), 2004, pp. 717-736

Amongst the key representatives of Cultural Studies in Britain, there were the media scholars John Fiske and John Hartley, who approached the media respectively via the paradigms of semiotics and literary theory. Fiske considered the audience's role as important as the broadcaster. It is in fact the audience who creates the meaning of media messages, in response to the dominant ideology. Hartley defined television "as an instance of cultural production within the context of contemporary, urban, democratic popular culture"³⁰. In spite of the multitude of methodological approaches used to trace the lines of a proper definition and field of study around media, media studies were in every respect an arts and humanities-based subject, that means that a big part of media analysis was left behind, in particular media transmission and distribution, as well as technological evolution. Cinematography and media production was at that time difficult to analyse: there wasn't a real discipline built around it and it lacked academic focuses. That led, film and media studies to focus their energy exclusively, on the study of their content and reception.

With the establishing of digital media, this scenario has partially changed. Digital media are transforming the political, social, cultural and economic world known so far and in doing so, they are worth a deep mention and scrutiny. Mass-producing and mass-consumption follow a top-down broadcasting model from a centralized industry source to the passive audience; but nowadays, the communication has changed and transformed in a bottom-up, peer to peer, horizontal conversation between the parts. The previous established forms of media have not disappeared but they are now transformed by digital technology. Media are now constantly reconfigured, innovated and re-invented. The new media concept is much more fluid than before. During the broadcast era media (that is, systems of delivery) such as the telephone, television, radio were all separate, physical technological forms carrying a specific content linked to each other with a 1:1 relationship. Now all these contents are often merged and we can find them in one medium only. The boundaries among the various media are in other words not so clear, and the same content can be accessed and enjoyed via different digital devices³¹. The "television" which once was a material device on the corner of the living room, is now an abstract type of content accessible via pc, tv, phone. It's no longer possible to talk about media specificity, a new ecosystem is born and it can be identified as a plethora of media configurations which unify, merge, interact and co-exist: "an identifiable historical concretion where

³⁰ Fiske, John, Hartley, John, *Reading Television*, Routledge, London New York 2003, p. 5

³¹ Merrin, Williams, "Media Studies 2.0: Upgrading and Open-Sourcing the Discipline", in *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture*, vol. 1 n.1, Intellect Ltd, 2009, pp. 17-23

the fractures and fissures are visible”³². Post-modern era has brought, among other things, to a major technological evolution, leading to a general reconfiguration of the notion of media and to the so called, post media age. The concept of post media isn’t actually so explicitly defined. First debates based their theories on the assumption that mass media, as therefore cinema were essentially a permanent and static apparatus that at some point in history turned into a more flexible and fluid entity subjected to external, innovative factors of the time (technological transformations; aesthetics paradigms; management issues). But this is not entirely the truth; by nature, films (or motion pictures) have always been an ever changing, variable body, whose features lies in the name itself: an image (therefore a picture), always in motion. Even the concept of specificity, previously cited as a turning point in the definition of media vs post-media, is now questioned. If it is true that cinema is constantly in a mutable state then, it is no longer possible to talk about it in terms of specificity. Aesthetics itself was once accorded to cinema only in correspondence with the properties of the medium. It is because of the structural framework of the medium of expression chosen, that arts can be recognised as so and enhanced as such. Contrary to this compartmentalized vision, many scholars as Rosalind Krauss or Jean-Luc Nancy, acknowledge arts in their singular specificity, identifying, at the same time a sole source of origin which complements all arts together. Therefore, none of the arts mentioned so far, can in the end, be depicted as monolithic matters, equipped with “specificity”. Even when not so evident as for today, media have always been connected and interrelated with each other. During the ‘60s and ‘70s scholars’ purpose was to give cinema legitimization as an academic field of study; but in that time, cinema lacked a clear and linear definition which prevented it to achieve its purpose. That’s when, academics tried to pigeonhole the discipline into a precise and specific framework. Unfortunately, cinema specificity definition was strictly linked and dependent to the technological, social and anthropological matters of the time, the spread of the internet and digital networks undermined the central role of cinema as a media and opened to an oligopolistic mode of circulation. At this point, two school of thoughts spread: if cinema main feature was its specificity, then, in the postmodern age, it had officially died; cinema no longer existed or, maybe, there wasn’t ever any specificity and cinema has always been subjected to a succession of transitory configurations. There was actually a time in which cinema appeared as a solid and static medium, but even in that time, cinema has always been a fluid and inorganic field, in a constant and perpetual state of change along with some standardized features, representing by now, the essence of the discipline³³. The narration

³² Zielinski, Siegfried, *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entr’actes in History*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 1999, p.18

³³ De Rosa, Miriam, Hediger, Vinzenz, “Post What? Post When? A Conversation on the “Posts” of Post-Media and Post-Cinema”, in *Cinéma & Cie*, vol. XVI, n.26-27, Spring Summer 2016, pp. 9-15

itself changes: the aesthetic of the image along with the fragmentation of the narration build this new idea of media devoted to a mass consumption controlled and assembled by the viewer. The role of the audience is consequently changed, too. If in the past the audience was a unified, passive entity who simply received and absorbed media messages, today it does not only enjoy media productions, but it also produces them, becoming an active part of the mass media machine. There is now an interactive relationship between the media product and people, with the result that the overall contemporary media experience has now profoundly changed. Interactivity and participation are not the same thing. Interactivity refers to the combination of different media in order to be more responsive to consumers' feedbacks. Interactivity is shaped by technological traits and it doesn't allow the consumer to move in a free and open environment but actually (s)he can only act in a predesigned field: the remote control allows the consumer to interact with the television; videogames allow him to act upon the fictional world. On the other hand, the constraints on participation are social and cultural; it isn't controlled by the media but rather by the social and cultural structures of the audience. Computers offered opportunities for interactivity whereas the web offered consumer participation that led to new and undiscovered ways of relating to media contents. Anthropologically speaking, there was a current of thoughts based on the assumption that in the future, mass producers would have had to accommodate consumer demands in order to survive. Computers and web participation made media industry much more dependent on the consumers' activities and appreciation; this can be considered as a double edge sword for producers who would seek consumers approval in order to spread their media products to a vast portion of the audience but at the same time would be threaten by the increasingly power given in the hands of the consumers. In general, there are two different kinds of approaches adopted by media industries in response to consumers' dominance. Traditional mass media such as television or the recording industry tried to slow down fans participation's constant rise, on the other hand new media companies (internet, videogames) see fans as grassroots intermediaries helping promoting media franchises. The relationship between cultural production and grassroots participation has its origins in the early nineteenth century when folk artistic traditions were passed down from one generation to another. At the end of the century, new commercialized forms of entertainment emerged, coexisting and mixing with folk culture. But soon, commercial entertainment industry started to set high standards of professionalism and performance which eventually led folk culture to be pushed underground. It is in this context that grassroots fan communities emerged in response to mass media contents, but remaining until the 21th century as an oppositional force to the mass established culture. In the 21th century, people were finally able not only to create and produce art but they could also share it and build discourses around it. Thanks to new technologies and the launch of the web, the hidden relationship between

participatory cultural and commercial culture was finally exposed. Folk culture used to borrow cultural elements from mass media products and re-elaborate it, but that kind of transactions remained confined in a little, un-known environment; web pages, blogs, fan fictions, made those transactions visible and threatened the absolute control of culture industries. The paradox of today marketing centric world is that, marketers use consumers as vehicles of their messages and contents but as soon as they engage in an active participation in the circulation of brand contents, marketers perceive consumers as a threat for the cultural industry. Studio's fear in recognizing too much power to consumers resides in the necessity of maintaining the leadership of contents property value; recognizing consumers' value for the success and construction of a fictional worlds would mean publicly granting intellectual property to them. Unfortunately for the studios, this is exactly what happened with the advent of the Internet³⁴. In the end, it is safe to say that new media made boundaries between producers' position and consumers thinner than ever, resulting in the birth of the so called "prosumer". The term "prosumer" was first used by the American essayist Alvin Toffler, in his book "The Third Wave" in 1980. He defined prosumers as "people who produce many of their own goods and services"³⁵. He thought at the third wave as the third era in human history dominated by the features of Post-Industrial age in which people are at the same time producers and consumers of their commodities. In New Media age, what prosumers create is their own media contents. They can now, buy at low prices, equipment and tools useful to create media contents with a high quality. Youtubers for example, record themselves from their bedroom and upload their videos on the platform with zero expenses (except for the cost of the video camera) and gaining a full income from videos' views. Consumers' emancipation in the production of their own media contents led professional producers to re-think their relationship with the audience, granting a limited, controlled portion of media contents' creative process to consumers. Social media are once again the perfect example for it. User-generated contents are born. Instagram and twitter are among the most successful social media as for the creation of user-generated contents. While real producers create media contents on traditional media, they also encourage and allow people to share their thoughts about it on social media. Consumers are actually providing contents themselves; they turn into prosumers, with control over discourses built around media products; Professional producers are the ones who actually provide the audience with media contents. The same concept is addressed by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture*, defining the user generated contents' process and merging of consumers and producers figures as part of the peer-to-peer culture and participatory culture. Convergence culture

³⁴ Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, [2006], tr. It. *Cultura Convergente*, Apogeo, Milano 2007, pp.132-138

³⁵ Toffler, Alvin, *The Third Wave*, William Morrow & Company, New York 1980

itself re-defines audience features. It can no longer be explaining exclusively by what people actually consume; what they produce should also be considered³⁶.

In its contemporary dimension, media studies balance between cultural studies and new emerging media technologies³⁷. It ranges from language to literature, from political science to ethics, information management and entrepreneurship, tourism and sport, to core vocational areas like new media technology, television studies, radio studies, journalism, photography and so on.

After a general overview of what mass media are and what impact they have had on culture and society, it is time to delve into the most popular model of mass media nowadays: Franchises. The second chapter will begin by providing the reader with the proper reading tools for a correct interpretation of franchise medias. Transmedia storytelling and Complex TV will therefore firstly address, following with the illustration of Franchise Theory and Transmedia Franchises, in the attempt of giving to the reader the necessary tools to understand the theoretical and social context in which Marvel and DC Franchises move.

³⁶ Merrin, Williams, “Media Studies 2.0: Upgrading and Open-Sourcing the Discipline”, cit., p.24

³⁷ Kafle, Hem Raj, “Media Studies: Evolution and Perspective”, cit., p.16

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240803443_Media_studies_Evolution_and_perspectives

2. Transmedia Franchises

2.1. Convergence Culture

In his book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins defines ‘convergence’ as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences [...]”³⁸. The term ‘Flow’ suggests a collection of different segments of content, brought together and tightened by a time-based organisational structure. It refers to the blurred boundaries that nowadays exist among television contents and how the public has to learn how to navigate through them³⁹.

Consumers’ active participation allows the circulation of media contents across different media systems. Jenkins doesn’t talk about Convergence as a technological tool, but rather a cultural shift in which consumers become the common thread connecting all media systems. Premise of Convergence Culture is the interaction between old and new media⁴⁰. In the beginning, Convergence was thought as the converging of all devices into one; in reality, convergence refers to the confluence of contents while hardware will actually diverge. As Jenkins explicates,

“Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. Convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment.”⁴¹ (Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media collide*, pp.15-16)

Economically speaking, Convergence determines the horizontal integration of different sectors in Media industry, creating global media conglomerates which in turn, leads to a process of media ownership’s rights concentration. In this sense, economic Convergence determines the development of (trans)media franchise between different media industry departments in an interconnected relationship.

On a social level, Convergence implicates the birth of a connected public defined as part of a participatory culture in which each consumer can turn into a prosumer. Moreover, Convergence represents a paradigm shift: it is no longer possible to talk about medium-specific content, media are now facing a new age of plurality of contents that flow across different media channels. As Francesco Casetti, Italian film and television theorist states: “old apparatus [...] is disintegrated in favour of

³⁸ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit., p. 2

³⁹ Freeman, Matthew, Rampazzo Gambarato, Renira, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Storytelling*, Routledge, Oxon-New York 2019

⁴⁰ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit., p. 6

⁴¹ Ivi, p.15-16

multifunctional platforms [...]; and old products tied to a single medium [...] are disintegrated in favour of a rich array of multiplatform⁴²". Communication systems are now much more interconnected and a single media content can now be accessed through many different platforms. The relationship itself between top-down corporate and bottom-up participatory culture is much more complicated.

To sum up, Convergence culture as defined by Jenkins is strictly correlated to the notions of participatory culture and collective intelligence. We have already defined Media Convergence and Participatory Culture; for what concerns collective intelligence instead, it refers to the collective process of consumption; it can be seen as an alternative source of media power. That power is clarified by the day-by-day interactions within convergence culture⁴³.

2.2. Transmedia Storytelling

A Transmedia Story is defined as such, when that same story unfolds across different media platforms. Any content, part of the transmedia story will contribute to the building of the storyworld. Henry Jenkins' definition of Transmedia Storytelling is:

"a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story".

However, in the entertainment business, transmedia logics don't depend only by the narrative, transmedia branding also shapes the entertainment experience. In order to better explain the differences between transmedia storytelling and transmedia branding, Jenkins provides two different examples, both related to the *Star Wars* franchise.

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader, novel written by James Luceno and telling the story of Darth Vader's rise to power after the events of the third movie episode, serves as an extension of the transmedia narrative; it helps indeed, to give the audience a backstory of the main character. On the contrary, if a box of cereal with a picture of *Star Wars* is sold in the supermarkets, in that case we face an instance of transmedia branding. Cereals are not necessary to understand the full narrative picture of the franchise, they will simply serve as a marketing tool to expand market share.

It is also important to, discern extension from adaptation. The Adaptation methodology is used to reproduce the original story on a different media with small, redundant changes to the original version

⁴² Casetti, Francesco, "Back to Motherland: The Film Theatre in the Postmedia Age", in *Screen*, 52:1, 2011, p.10

⁴³ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit., pp. 17-18, 258-260

and as Jenkins states its existence is nearly useless, as the new content created doesn't give anything new to the public; the extension expands audience's understanding of the original work, with new elements introduced into the narrative. Henry Jenkins identifies 7 distinctive principles of Transmedia Storytelling as the ultimate definition of this new technique:

1. **Spreadability vs Drillability:** Spreadability refers to the ability of the audience to “engage actively in the circulation of media content”. Spreadability expands the narration horizontally, spreading the story over social networks. The public will be the one to spread contents over media, resulting in the growth of the content's economic value and cultural worth. As for Drillability, Jason Mittel, professor of American studies and film and media culture gives his own definition about it, in response to Jenkins' Spreadability concept. He describes media contents as drillable rather than spreadable. Contrary to spreadable media, the drillable ones, engage fewer people who will have to dig deeper into the story, in order to find out new information about it and the storyworlds. Both Spreadability and Drillability represent a different mode of experiencing the same transmedia franchise;
2. **Continuity vs Multiplicity:** As for any other media content, even for a transmedia one, the continuity of the plot has to be maintained. The story has always to be coherent and plausible in its entirety. A cohesive narrative will be perceived by the fans as the fair payoff for their dedication and commitment to the fictional world and this will lead to its success. Jenkins provides as an example about it, the DC and Marvel comic books, in which superheroes' stories develop through a long series of comic books, all interconnected with each other. Yet, comic books' narrative gives to the public much more than a simple continuity in history: superheroes have a set of parallel stories with their own continuity and a different version of the character. The creation of alternative and separate mini franchising of the same story is the definition of multiplicity. Furthermore, multiplicity is strictly connected to any form of grassroots expression legitimated as a part of transmedia storytelling logics. Fan fictions are defined for example, as an unauthorized extension of the original story;
3. **Immersion vs Extractability:** Both these concepts refer to the relationship built between the transmedia fiction and audience's life. Immersion specifically, refers to the ability of the fans to enter the world of the story, suspending disbelief and forgetting the real-world. In Extractability instead fans take aspects of the franchise story away with them and use those in

their life. Examples of extractability are merchandising, board games based on a fictional world etc.;

4. Worldbuilding: Worldbuilding principle is linked to the concepts of Extractability and Immersion as it creates a tapestry where the story can develop. If the fictional world is solid and concrete, it will support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media;
5. Seriality: Serials are nowadays a specific media format in which stories are created and delivered to the fans according to cadenced periods of time, using for example the weekly episode structure in tv shows. These same stories have at the same time, to be dispersed across multiple instalments. When they are spread across multiple media systems, transmedia storytelling technique is in place. An example is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, The WB 1997-2003) serial whose story continues in the comic books as a new chapter of the original series;
6. Subjectivity: one of the ways in which authors can decide to expand the story is showing the same story or a new part of the original story from the point of view of a secondary character. This can be achieved by building backstories, changing the perspective of the narrator and more;
7. Performance: as already established, fans are encouraged to participate and interact with the story. Authors can encourage their performance, leaving clues all along the serial; even the accidental creation of plot holes can turn into an opportunity of performance: fan will in fact have the possibility to address, discuss and resolve those plot holes on social media or in everyday life⁴⁴.

Different forms of transmedia storytelling can also be defined:

1. Interactive Films/second screen experience: this kind of transmedia storytelling includes films capable of stimulating interactions with the audience in different forms. Normally, with

⁴⁴ Jenkins, Henry, "Revenge of Origami Unicorn", 2009,
http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/revenge_of_the_origami_unicorn.html

standard films, the audience accepts passively the content. With an interactive film or a second screen experience, the public is asked to participate in the story, either making a choice to move forward or consuming extra contents; The interactive Netflix film *Bandersnatch* uses this type of transmedia storytelling to deliver the story. Viewers are requested to make a decision about what should happen in the next scene of the film given multiple options⁴⁵;

2. ARGs: Alternate Reality Game's technique is usually used as a marketing tool. In ARGs, reality and fiction mix and blend, by using various channels that claim to be authentic. ARGs is usually used by the audience to dig deeper into a story, putting together extra pieces of the narrative given by the ARGs contents⁴⁶;
3. Media Franchises: it is a collection of media that share a storyworld. It is usually built around a main media product which will later originate the storyworld. The primary channel is often a movie, a television program or a book that allows the continuation of the fictional story in further instalments of the same media, or exploring subsidiary parts in different media channels⁴⁷;
4. Escape Rooms: they were born as a theatrical entertainment experience, where the audience is locked into a room and has to solve enigmas in order to progress with the story;
5. Table Top Role-playing Games: Games played on a table with the use of objects, cards and plastic figurines, without using any tangible media channel or played online. They usually involve a master (*Dungeons and Dragons* is an example) that control the game for the other players who in turn, will role-play their characters. Rules derive from a rule book which also includes information about the storyworld;

⁴⁵ Javanshir, Ryan, Carroll, Beth, Millard, David, "Structural Patterns for Transmedia Storytelling", in *PLoS ONE*, 15 (1), 2020, p. 30 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225910>

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 32 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225910>

⁴⁷ Ivi, pp. 36-37 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225910>

6. Exhibits: exhibits' (in the form of art installations, museums and theme parks) primary aim is to showcase artefacts and immerse visitors into the narrative, making consumers interact with multiple channels such as video projections, rides, items of historical significance and so on⁴⁸.

At the beginning, Transmedia Storytelling was effectively only a marketing strategy thought to attract new public. But in reality, it covers a wide range of disciplines and novelty. It dictates new forms of storytelling, complex narratives and embrace perfectly the new cultural, social and digital era in which connectivity, social networks and fan culture are at the centre of media success. As said before, consumers are now encouraged to create their own stories, producing user generated contents and at the same time to make connections among dispersed media contents⁴⁹. Participatory culture isn't actually born with Transmedia storytelling but it helped, giving it a new shape. It isn't the first-time audience demonstrates their active participation and interest in the making and understanding of media. As cited before in this paper when considering Cultural Studies and Stuart Hall encoding/decoding model, it is possible to identify an active participation of the audience in the process of interpretation and perception of codes and texts they carry out. This practice is now translated in the active participation of the viewers in the creation of storyworld, thanks to these new storytelling techniques. A single story is no longer made by a single plot. It comes alive into an architectural narrative, well-defined universe, inhabited by multiple characters expressing different perspectives of the narration and perhaps even through different timeline; in this wider picture, fans are now agents in the creation and negotiation of a popular cultural text. The tools that the audience can use to interact with the narration can all be summed up into 3 main categories: Story Archaeology; Communication; causing changes into the story world.

Story Archaeology refers to how the public consumes the story that has previously been fragmented and deployed on different media. Consumers have to find all of the interested pieces and put them together to understand the full picture. In the digital era, it happens that a URL or for example, a social media profile is mentioned within the main content to drive traffic and leading consumers to consume the product on a second platform. At this point, the audience will move into the second app, engage simultaneously with the same story in two different platforms and build a connection with the characters of the story which will be perceived not as a fictional entity but rather as a real component with whom build a virtual relationship: communicational interaction is achieved. Finally, the audience has to believe in their ideas or that their creations will have a real impact on the story that

⁴⁸ Ivi, pp. 39-40 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225910>

⁴⁹ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit.

has been told. They want to believe they matter, playing an influential role in the making of a story. They in fact, should be listened to; but the real goal is to create only an illusion of interaction. Consumers cannot have all the power on their hands, they can't dictate the evolution of the story. A transmedia project has to deal not only with its story and assets but also it has to manage its audience⁵⁰. In the end, it is possible to identify, a circularity between corporate culture and grassroots culture. This happens both at a techno-social level, in the so-called web 2.0, which supports a convergence culture; and at a practical level, with the stimulation of a new relation between producers and consumers, with the development of user generated content. It is possible to talk about networked publics referring to a diversified interrelation among cultural practices, social relations and media technological development as an alternative to the audience or consumers concept⁵¹. Fans can now be considered as cultural intermediaries who develop the appropriation of media devices both as a technological performance and a narrative and aesthetics dynamic in the mass cultural field. Co-participation can be expressed as fansubbing, or creation of original products, realization of fanarts and more. Basically, fan culture is dominated by the reinterpretation, discussion and dissemination of diversified perspectives which question the mass culture established codes⁵².

New transmedial extensions can be interpreted through the lens of the concept of the prosumer previously explained. Snapchat filters of a famous tv shows, YouTube fan videos etc allow the fans to maximalise their engagement with the storyworld through personal additions, choices and creative retellings. These activities make the figure of the prosumer happen: (s)he will work for free at the production of media contents and at the same time consumes the contents created. Prosumers won't suffer the weight of an unpaid labour; they will conduct it enthusiastically and continuously. Examples of this kind of labour are: the dissemination of user-generated content on social media network; contributing to online fan-fictions etc. Prosumers are also an active part of viral marketing practices (like the creation and distribution of memes) that keep high the interest towards a product. At the end of the day, prosumers still serve the interest of the producers. Prosumers are always subjected to transmedia commodification practices like online shopping website's suggestions about what your friends like and buy, are made in order to drive users to desire a product more and more. A new Marxist critique defined as "commodities compensatory fetish objects" is born from this new figure of prosumer established in the market. The critic moves from the identification of a capitalist consumer culture who leads consumers to never feel satisfied by their purchases and wishing to buy

⁵⁰ Phillips, Andrea, *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling*, McGraw Hill, 2012, pp.120-122

⁵¹ Kazys, Varnelis (a cura di), *Networked Publics*, MIT Press, Cambridge-London 2008

⁵² Zecca, Federico (a cura di), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine 2012, p.260

constantly new things. This new tendency is caused by the disruption of direct interpersonal relationships and an alienating division of labour. Social groups can be divided even in this century into two macro groups: the “seduced” who fits perfectly into the consumer culture and are subjected to the influence of market and have only the illusion of a free choice possibility; the “repressed” who are excluded from the market and subjected to the bureaucratic control as they lack any expertise in economic and cultural subjects.

As for the first group, a commodity aesthetics is sold. Consumers will have the impression of buying a social status, a lifestyle, together with the product sold. Commodities have now an identity value that buyers want to achieve and show off⁵³.

2.3. Complex TV

Jason Mittell in his book *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* points out that an alternative model of storytelling has emerged that he defines as “narrative complexity” in opposition to the traditional models of episodic or serial forms in tv. It is interesting to explore Complex TV practices as transmedia franchises and blockbusters have much more in common with tv shows structures and building than ever before and many of the Complex TV features can therefore, be found also in cinema. Examples of this innovative approach are the sit-coms *How I Met Your Mother* (Craig Thomas, Carter Bays, CBS 2005-2014) or *Seinfeld* (Jerry Seinfeld, NBC 1989-1998) or drama tv shows like *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff, Daniel B. Weiss, HBO 2011-2019) or *Firefly* (Joss Whedon, FOX 2002). Narrative complexity can be considered as a distinct narrational mode defined by David Bordwell as an “historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension⁵⁴” that crosses genres and creators to forge a new coherent category of practices. Complex Narrative as defined by Mittell is strictly connected to the concept of narrational mode above mentioned: “a narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration⁵⁵”. Episodic narrative is a form of narration typically used by sit-coms, based on plot closure at the end of every episode, complex television rejects this paradigm, shifting to a much more complex narration of the story. Complex TV employs a vast range of serial techniques, based on the premises that a series is a cumulative storyline that has to be built over time. Normally, an episodic narration

⁵³ Freeman, Matthew, Rampazzo Gambarato, Renira, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Storytelling*, cit., p. 127

⁵⁴ Bordwell, David, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison WI 1985, p.155

⁵⁵ Mittell, Jason, *Complex tv. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* [2015], tr. It. *Complex tv. Teoria e tecnica dello storytelling delle serie tv*, Minimum Fax, Roma 2017, p.26

resets back the narrative to its former equilibrium at the end of every episode, without going any further.

Truth be told, complex TV features are not so well sketched and firm as for the episodic or serial format. It is an unconventional form of narration still to be defined. Prototypes for Complex Television emerged in the 1990s, with the production of tv shows like *The X-Files* (Chris Carter, FOX 1993-2002, 2016-2018) or *Charmed* (Constance Burge, The WB 1998-2006) that exemplifies the very essence of narrative complexity: an interplay between the episodic storytelling and the serial one. Narration would easily oscillate between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes. Any given season of *Charmed* would focus on the long-term mythology with a long plot and the defeat of a powerful villain only at the end of the season after a highly elaborate plot on going, while intermitting with the so-called “monster-of-the-week” storyline that would generally be resolved at the end of the episode and that wouldn’t interfere with the bigger plot.

But narrative complexity is more than that: many programs rebel against both the episodic conventionality and serial norms, to invent a brand-new mode of narration and storytelling. For instance, *Seinfeld* uses a mixed relationship to serial plotting as some seasons feature ongoing situations where the story arcs work to offer backstory for inside jokes and self-aware references. Contrary to the typical serial, these arcs and ongoing plots demand little cumulative knowledge, as events and actions happened during the episode rarely matter. Yet, *Seinfeld* offers a great narrative complexity, supported by its refusal to give resolution or closure to the episodic storylines. Many episodes leave characters in unstable situations that won’t function as cliff-hangers for the next episode as in serial drama, but rather as comedy punchline to which characters won’t refer again. The episodic structural narrative used by *Seinfeld* but also *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, FOX 1989-), *Malcom in the Middle* (Linwood Boomer, FOX 2000-2006) and more, is useful to undercut those very conventional assumptions typical of the episodic narrations. The classic return to the equilibrium of the plot is subverted and situational continuity is undercut. Embracing conditional seriality, some storylines would actually continue while others will be totally left behind. *The Simpsons* for example, take this concept to the extremes: they generally embrace an excessive and almost parodistic take on episodic form, rejecting continuity in every aspect and returning to the initial state of equilibrium of the very first episode: Maggie will be a toddler throughout the all 33 seasons; Bart will always be in fourth grade and so on. Nonetheless, some exceptions will escape these norms: during the course of the 11^o season, Maude Flanders, Ned Flanders’ wife dies and she continues to stay dead since then. This continuous shift from serial norms to episodic ones, would rather be interpreted by the fans as a major inconsistency or rather embraced as one of the traits of narrative complexity. Contemporary television seriality is therefore not just a simple matter of continuity but rather a multifaceted variable,

with a wide range of potential storytelling possibilities. Serialization refers more to the ongoing accumulation of narrative events that characters and settings have to remember in the future in order to maintain a continuity. Classical episodic programs are more ambiguous on this front than the serials, as they may deliberately choose to ignore certain events or situations. On the contrary, serial narrative events will have to be remembered by characters' dialogues and actions. It happens that fans notice moments in which characters seem to have forgotten about certain events that happened to them and don't behave accordingly. The challenge for serial television is therefore to clearly convey which consistent norms it follows to narrate its story, so that the audience knows what to expect. The more a series reminds the audience that those narrative events have a cumulative impact, the more they will expect a strict continuity and consistency. It is important to specify that even for the serial and the complex narration, not all narrative events will be serialized. A key distinction is between major and minor events, better defined as major kernels and minor satellites. Major kernels are central to the continuity of a plot, they determine the cause-and-effect chain of events, while minor satellites are unnecessary to the macro plot and could be omitted without any impact on the narration. Satellites are still important to macro narration as they give texture and tone to the narration. It isn't always easy to recognise a kernel event from a satellite event, however the most evident difference is that major events move the narrative forward in way that clearly and suddenly change the course of events. Consumers' engagement is a benefit for media studios when competing in a crowded marketplace. Moreover, with the increasingly numbers of TV channels, media contents and platforms, the development of a loyal base of fans helps to maintain a media product profits⁵⁶. What is important here is that producers have to decide what mythology confine as a transmedia extension and which explore more on the main medium; usually if an event or a situation affects the main character it is developed in television (or cinema), conversely it will not⁵⁷. Other type of television transmedia storytelling is the centripetal storytelling, usually based on a character driven approach. The aim is not to extend the storyline through the narration of parallel events or backstories but rather providing additional depth to what it is already known, usually a secondary character⁵⁸. These kind of paratexts are usually not as immersive as the extensive one, they are explicitly made as an extra to the main plotline, without the elaboration of any active experience from the consumers; nonetheless, they have the potential to satisfy consumers' desire of canonical, consistent elements much more than the extensive paratexts which may clash with the core events if they aren't well structured. These

⁵⁶ Freeman, Matthew, Rampazzo Gambarato, Renira, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Storytelling*, cit., pp. 234-237

⁵⁷ Mittell, Jason, *Complex tv. Teoria e tecnica dello storytelling delle serie tv*, cit., pp.278-281

⁵⁸ Ivi., p. 286

paratextual approaches result in the typification of transmedia storytelling practices, differentiating them in “What Is” moments vs “What If?” moments. In television, “What Is” moments can be traced in *Lost* (J.J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, Jeffrey Lieber, ABC 2004-2010) tv series and match perfectly with Jenkin’s definition of transmedia storytelling as exemplified by *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski 1999). “What Is” transmedia extends the fiction canonically, trying to explain the universe with continuity, precision and coherence. The purpose is to expand fans’ appreciation and understanding of the storyworld. Forensic fandom is usually extremely attracted by this kind of transmedia storytelling that promise to the audience the discovery of a mystery or a big revelation at the end of the movie or tv show. In a “What Is” transmedia narration, all official storytelling extensions seem designed only to fulfil that very “What Is” query.

“What If?” narration is actually the opposite paratext of “What Is” narrations. It is used by *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gillian, AMC 2008-2013) and it poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, encouraging the audience to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling, that won’t be canon. Continuity is not the main goal, the story is transpose into parallel dimensions, with a different style or characters or tone which will induce the fans to question what would have happened with a different course of events. Both transmedia tendencies demand to the public an enthusiastic and participative approach to the narration as “What Is” transmedia extensions will create a ludus puzzle for the consumers to solve with an effective resolution of events, while “What If?” paratexts encourage a more performative role-play, spinning off scenarios with no real outcome or canonical narrative function. Both transmedia modes were already used by fan cultures to produce paratexts. The practice of the hardcore fans of cataloguing and mapping fictions has led to the creation of paratexts such as *wiki* that include encyclopaedic documentation of a storyworld. These fans actually seek for a canonical authenticity in the narration of a storyworld. Forms of “What If?” paradigm made by fans include fan fiction, remix video and so on. Canonicity is in this case abandoned in favour of a revised, improved version of the storyline. Those creation could actually fit perfectly within the canonical mothership or conversely, offering an alternative interpretation that they find to better portray coherence and consistency. Jenkins’s model of “What Is” is not always an untenable model for serialized television; commercial system cannot always effectively sustain a franchise that risks eroding television ratings; viewers may actually not be interested in straying beyond a single medium. “What If?” model can in the end, be more productive for serial television to develop, tapping into fan interest in imagining noncanonical possibilities⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ Mittell, Jason, *Complex tv. Teoria e tecnica dello storytelling delle serie tv*, cit., p. 289-292

Time is also, one of the essential elements of all storytelling. There are 3 different temporal streams within all narratives. “Story Time” which we identify with the time frame of the diegesis. It represents the actual time passing within the storyworld and typically follows real-world conventions of straightforward chronology, other than a linear progression from moment to moment; “Discourse Time”: the temporal structure and duration of the story as told within a given narrative. It usually differs from the story time as it skips over uneventful moments. In Complex narratives the discourse time can also be manipulated, as the narration of events may not follow the linear progress of moments but instead taking deviations showing flashbacks, a same story events from multiple perspective and more. Discourse time is also helpful when creators want to create mystery plotlines or suspense concerning past events. Finally, there is the “Narration Time”, which is the temporal framework involved in telling and receiving the story. In literature, it is quite variable, as everyone as his personal pace of reading. For film or tv shows the narration time is actually controlled as a one-hour film takes the same time for all viewers; moreover, for television programs the narration time is even more restricted as every episode follows a weekly schedule and commercial breaks during the episode. In this case is therefore, preferable to define narration time as “Screen Time”. After the digitalisation age, screen time becomes also for the telecommunication media a much more personal affair as people can now buy DVDs or binge-watch an entire series on streaming platforms and therefore controlling the narration time. At the same time, in doing so, the cultural experience of consuming a tv show with millions of other people failed. Serial temporality is linked to the realm of screen time through the material reception of the television broadcasting, which enables the regular consumption of a series. Moreover, time gaps between two seasons of tv shows allow viewers to engage deeply with the product as they will be encouraged to participate in fan communities, consume paratexts and theorizing about future events, to fill the gap⁶⁰.

2.4. Reboots, Spin Offs, Cross Overs

Reboots are also a main topic of today’s franchises cinematic practice. The notion of reboot in movie industry has its roots in the definition of “film remake”. A main difference between remakes and sequels is that with sequels fans want to know how the story evolved since the last time they saw the characters on screen, remake is much more about wanting the same story told with a different narrative. To qualify as a remake on a textual level, the new project has to cancel any reference to the

⁶⁰ Ivi, p.25-37

older narrative continuity⁶¹. When remakes don't concern only a stand-alone movie but rather an all-transmedia franchise we talk about reboots. Reboots are usually made when a major wants to rebrand a franchise getting rid of the all continuity and relaunching the media product. The notion of rebooting is mostly known for comic books and the several reboots concerning almost every existing character throughout the decades. DC Comics are known for their limited series called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in which the "space/time continuum" of the DC Universe was destroyed and the original timeline was brought back, resetting also most of the characters' storylines⁶². Once again what links the original texts with the reboots is the characters used. Protagonists are still the same but played by different actors. Etymologically, reboot is a term referring to the process of shutting down a computer system and restarting it. It is therefore used in media as a notion of reset and restart of the narrative universes. It was used for the first time by the DC UseNet to talk about the new adventures of *The Legion of Superheroes* in 1958. This determined that the previous established continuity was no longer in place. The imaginary world would have been reprogrammed and the storyline would begin on a blank slate⁶³. The first film to be formally defined as a reboot has been *Batman Begins* by Christopher Nolan in 2005, realized after the *Batman and Robin* (1997) flop, harshly criticized by the fans. *Batman Begins* had successfully reset the plot horizontally and started it all over again. Since then, several media franchises applied the reboot strategy from time to time, sometimes even after a really short time of period and without a real need, as for *The Amazing Spiderman* (2012) released just five years later the last chapter of Sam Raimi Spiderman trilogy when it was still pretty vivid in fans' mind and heart. Academically speaking, transmedia consistency and therefore continuity has to be produced via industrial paratexts and discourses; transmedial expansion can in fact help to preserve the fictional world built; if not they will be defined more as modifications that will provoke a fracture in the continuity. New worlds will be born and overlap the one already in place, differing in problematic ways⁶⁴.

Transmedia narrations often resort to two more narrative devices of extension and worldbuilding: spin-off and cross-overs. A spin-off movie is a film which tells the story of a minor character in the main movie. The characters are therefore parts of the same narrative universe. This narrative device

⁶¹ Achouche, Mehdi, "TV Remakes, Revivals, Updates, and Continuations: Making sense of the Reboot on Television", in *Représentations dans le monde anglophone*, January 2017, pp. 61-62

⁶² Proctor, William. "Beginning Again: The Reboot Phenomenon in Comic Books and Film", in *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture*, 9.1, 2012, p.6

⁶³ Wolf, Mark J. P. (a cura di), *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, Routledge, New York 2017, p. 225

⁶⁴ Ryan, Marie-Laure, "Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality" in *Poetics Today*, vol.34, n.3, 2013

is mostly used in tv-shows, with a secondary beloved character taking the reins of a solo show set in the same world of the original tv show. Crossovers are movies which portray a combination of several different characters all part of the same universe. The studio takes some successful stand-alone characters and assembles them into one film while, a stand-alone movie is a film that doesn't have connections with any other fiction universe and isn't usually planned with the idea of making a franchise. Nonetheless, it may become one, giving life to sequels, spin-offs and crossovers.

2.5. Shared and Expanded Universe

As mentioned, several times before in this paper, one of the main characteristics of a well-built transmedia storytelling story is the configuration of the storyworld in which the events take place. More specifically, when talking about movie franchises employing transmedia narration, the storyworld in question is best known as a "Shared Universe". The web usability consultant, Jakob Nielsen, defines in his book *Multimedia and Hypertext. The Internet and Beyond*, the shared universe as a fictional universe in which different writers contribute independently to the joint development of the storyline of the entire project, even though these same fictional products can stand alone as a self-contained text⁶⁵. Shared universes may easily be confused with the most popular crossovers where the characters and the narrative texts are actually independent except for single meetings from time to time. Moreover, even though crossovers actually occur in a specific shared universe, not all of them are intended as a part of the multiplicity and expansion of the original story, but instead as a case of "What If?" scenarios or transmedia branding. When new stories or characters continuously enter the shared universe, extending the accepted canon narration the shared universe will be better defined as an "Expanded Universe". One of the first media in which the concept of shared universe actually appeared are the comic books in which a plethora of characters and events travel through different product lines in the media franchise⁶⁶. The comics historian Don Markstein wrote an article in 1970, outlining the main criteria to build a shared universe:

1. If two characters have met in a storyworld and that second character meets separately a third character then, those 3 characters are part of the same universe⁶⁷;

⁶⁵ Nielsen, Jakob, *Multimedia and Hypertext. The Internet and Beyond*, Morgan Kaufmann, Burlington, Massachusetts 1995, p.120

⁶⁶ Colbert, Stephen M., "How Star Wars Mastered the Shared Universe", in *Screen Rant*, 4 May 2017, <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-story-group-shared-universe/>

⁶⁷ Markstein, Don, "The Merchant of Venice Meets the Shiek of Arabi", in *CAPA-ALPHA*, N.71, September 1970, archived at Don Markstein's Toonopedia, <https://archive.ph/20190531164542/http://toonopedia.com/universe.htm>

2. The connection between characters cannot be built around real people. Taking as an example Superman (owned by DC Comics) and Peggy Carter (character of the Marvel comics), they both met throughout the series of comics the US president John F. Kennedy, but they don't actually share the same universe⁶⁸;
3. As for the real people, characters can't also be connected by other characters that haven't been originate by the same publisher. Superman and the Fantastic Four have both meet Hercules but they still don't share the same universe⁶⁹;
4. If real people are instead, being fictionalised they can be used as connections to the characters⁷⁰.

In 1961, Marvel Comics writers and editors Stan Lee and Steve Ditko decided to merge all publisher's comics characters into one universe named the Marvel Universe. Marvel not only sets its stories into one shared universe but they actually portray an infinite number of alternative realities all converging in one big universe defined as the "Multiverse".

As anticipated at the beginning of the paragraph, universes in films, better known as cinematic universes, consist of a franchise containing multiple other franchises sharing the same continuity and telling each one their stand-alone story while also being part of a bigger, shared picture⁷¹. The well-known *Star Wars* Franchise (George Lucas, 1997-) is one of the most successful examples of universes in films, while the two comics-based cinematic universes of Marvel Comics and DC Comics enact the most articulated, long running shared-expanded-multi universe ever existed on screen, which will be later and deeply addressed throughout this study.

2.5.1. Canonicity

Complex seriality and Transmedia Television ambivalence raised the question about cumulative canon, forcing producers to make decisions about how transmedia serial storytelling situates its paratexts in relation to the core television canonical narration. Canonicity issues have also interested cinematic and franchise media and will be therefore addressed, as follows.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁷¹ Colbert, Stephen M., "How Star Wars Mastered the Shared Universe", cit., <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-story-group-shared-universe/>

Diegetic extensions are no guarantee of integrated transmedia, as they can also be non-canonical. For instance, the parent company of the 1980s mystery tv show *Murder, She Wrote* (Peter S. Fischer, Richard Levinson, William Link, CBS 1984-1996) released numerous crime fiction novels under the pseudonym of Jessica Fletcher appearing as a co-write. Real world novels are considered as canon episodes for the tv show. These books function also as diegetic extension of the narration albeit with a little consistency between characters in the tv show and books. Canonical coherence wasn't therefore achieved⁷².

Canonicity can be defined as the set of practices used to divide massive, serialized, collaborative fictions into the canonical and noncanonical instalments. Canonicity helps to identify which parts of the stories are legitimized as true events within the fictional storyworld. Noncanonical elements can nonetheless be relevant to the understanding of the canonical world. "What If?" Narrations are often not canonical elements created by the fans that often investigate deeper and more coherently some parts of the canonical world left behind by producers and screenwriters. It is also important to underline that canonical vs noncanonical narration are often dependent by the chosen medium of distribution. Considering DC Comics, they are preferred over other media such as movies or TV shows. Canonicity practices are also very negotiable and dynamic. If a work is canonical, it doesn't mean it will be forever. Its status is always up to change. As for the *Star Wars* franchise, some comic books published after the release of the first movies were not considered canonical. However, when George Lucas introduced the Jedi Knight Aayla Secura in the franchise's prequels, all the comics in which she appeared became canon. The fact that a non-canonical fiction can always become canon makes "retroactive continuity" happen. Retroactive continuity is a literary device in which previous canon diegetic storylines are adjusted, contradicted or even ignored by a consequent work which breaks with the previously established continuity. It can be applied in order to overcome plot holes or mistakes in older works or to clarify aspects of prior publications in order to understand how they should be interpreted. It is often used by soap operas in order to bring back to life some deceased character, showing to the fans a new perspective on the facts that had led to his death in the first place⁷³.

2.6. Development of Franchise Theory

In order to talk about media franchises in the entertainment industry (main topic of this paper), franchise's business model has to be addressed. Media-franchises actually, fall under the big umbrella

⁷² Ivi., pp.273-275

⁷³ Cook, Roy T., *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 71, No. 3, 2013, pp. 272-273

of franchises, but they act like two very different kinds of joint venture, with their own assets and regulations. Understand similarities and discrepancies will help the reader navigate the discipline.

In its broadest sense, a “franchise” is a contractual relationship between a “franchisor” and an independent “franchisee” whereby the former licenses the latter to distribute a specific product or service, or to engage in a prescribed method of doing business, using the franchisor’s trademark or service mark. (William L. Killion, Editor-in-chief of the *Franchise Law Journal* from 2003 to 2006)

As an economic business strategy, franchise can be defined as an alternative to vertical integration: a franchisor deals with several independent third parties to distribute its products or services to the final customer⁷⁴. In a franchising business relationship, the franchisor will benefit from the franchise contract by a wider and quicker distribution of his/her products, without taking the major risks linked to a significant capital investment.

As a legal concept, franchising historically appeared for the first time during Middle Age, as a right granted by a sovereign to a subject to perform publicly in exchange for consideration⁷⁵. But it was only in the 20th century that, for the first time, a franchise contract was stipulated between two private parties, regulating the distribution of products or services. Even in this case, the contract concerned the granting of a series of rights from one private citizen to other.

In America, a first attempt to a product distribution chain network (the ancestor of the modern franchise format) was made in 1840s. During that time, urban centres were dealing with a massive territorial growth, encouraging manufacturers to re-think about their methods of getting products to the market. Simultaneously, a big technological revolution was affecting industries and productions, allowing higher-volume manufactures at lower costs. The expansion of American markets easily led manufacturers to hire people capable of managing the movement of products from the production area to the users’ hands. Producers decided then to contract with agents in order to sell products to independent retailers. Soon thereafter, agents were known as “exclusive agent” with a sole right to sell manufacturers’ products into a specific market. That was the moment in which the relationship between producer and agent turned into an embryonal kind of franchisor-franchisee agreement. In 1850, Singer Sewing Machine Company was one of the pioneers who used a form of franchise

⁷⁴ Klein, Benjamin, “The Economics of Franchise Contracts”, in *Journal of Corporate Finance*, vol. 2, 1995, pp.9-10

⁷⁵ Dicke, Thomas S., *Franchising in America: The Development of a Business Method, 1840-1980*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1992

business to sell its products⁷⁶. By the beginning of the 20th century, product distribution franchising was the established method to distribute goods. Henry Ford and General Motors issued their first franchise in 1898 and Coca Cola in 1899.

As previously discussed, early franchise business models' attempts were made since the end of the 19th century, but it wasn't until the end of the Second World War that the modern franchise business model acquired its social and economic recognition. Millions of servicemen were returning home, eager to find a new job and to be reintegrated into society. Culturally, it was a period of great hope and enthusiasm, filled by the common belief that anything could have now been possible and that people could have now made their own, private fortune. Men were willing to bet on the success of their private businesses to follow the "American Dream". Franchisors saw then the opportunity to sell the franchising ideal "as a method that combined the economic efficiency of big business with the personal satisfaction and social advantages of small business ownership⁷⁷". Simultaneously, service and retail sectors were facing a period of great expansion which aided the growth of business-format franchising.

In 1955, Ray Kroc opened his first Mc Donald's restaurant in Des Plaines, Illinois. That marked the very first franchise business successful model of Contemporary Age. McDonalds brothers opened a sandwich drive-in shop in San Bernardino, California in 1940. Soon, magazines all over the country started to pay attention on this new business, attracting entrepreneurs who were intrigued by the brothers' success and business system. One of these entrepreneurs was Ray Kroc, who took a trip to San Bernardino, where he discovered that Mc Donald's brothers had already issued franchises for several sites in California and Arizona and were looking for someone willing to expand their franchise all over the US⁷⁸. Kroc built a central organization to develop quality standards that every McDonald's in the country would have followed in order to be immediately identify as part of the franchise both by the investors and especially by the customers. Today it is clear that even though Kroc didn't invent the actual franchise model, he certainly revolutionized it. Fast food franchises had in fact already established, with the direct competitor Burger King currently on the market.

Since then, an infinite number of franchises raised and burned in the United States. 1970 was the year in which Franchises also found a legal ground on which debate. It became a highly regulated business contract, able to prosper even during the '70s and '80s economic world struggles, which led to our

⁷⁶ Ivi.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 126

⁷⁸ Kroc, Ray, *Grinding It Out: The Making of McDonald's*, Contemporary Books, Incorporated, 1977, p.67

present day, where “franchising in the U.S. has grown, at most, at rates commensurate with the rest of the economy”⁷⁹.

2.7. Conglomerates Media

During the ‘70s, cinema industry witnessed a period of great renaissance and prosperity. Two are the factors which affected this success. The first of them was the reception of media conglomerates, in other words transnational media corporates, like Time Warner or Sony, who made a deal and constituted a cartel to gain plain control over American media industry market. Together they built a global media and entertainment industry to whom Hollywood respond. The second factor was determined by the gradual increase of Blockbuster’s production as the first and most profitable income, leading almost to the sole production of blockbusters projects. Most of the time in fact, if a movie gains much success, it will easily turn into a franchise, exploited by the media conglomerates⁸⁰. The boost for this kind of production is obviously the convergence precept, interpreted as the creation of stories that can be reiterated, reposed and reformulated through a variety of different media available⁸¹. As stated before, at the end of the 1970s blockbuster phenomenon was actually born, this new trend brought to major changes in the all-cinematographic industry regarding: the aesthetics; marketing and distribution strategies; maximization of the commercial impact etc. Another key element was represented by the introduction on the market of the video record, which marked the birth of home video as a new distribution channel. Lastly, during the same time the cable television spread all over the country, leading to an increasingly demand of entertainment media contents. The first successful blockbuster is considered to be *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), a movie that hit the box office of the time. Since then, several other blockbusters were produced leading to the 1977 George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, considered until this day as the most famous and successful franchise of all time. Differently from the *Jaws*, *Star Wars* demonstrated a certain inclination to the serialization and reiteration. Two sequels were immediately produced and several spin off were shoot to expand the storyworld. During the 1980s, while blockbuster’s logics solidify, movie industry moves towards the “synergy”. Studios attempt to convert into multifaceted media conglomerates and corporations, with a major re-configuration of studios businesses and properties. This synergy led for example, to the merging or acquisition of littler studios, determining an industrial general expansion. Emblematic the acquisition by Rupert Murdoch’s New Corporation of the 20th century Fox during the 1984-85

⁷⁹ Blair, Roger D., Lafontaine, Francine, *The Economics of Franchising*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.20

⁸⁰ Zecca, Federico (a cura di), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, cit., p. 39

⁸¹ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit.

which marked a crucial changing in entertainment industry. After the acquisition, the film production studio could have now benefit from enormous economic resources all over the world. In the 1986, Fox Television was founded as a competitor of the other 3 major television networks: ABC, NBC, CBS. The first case of cross-ownership happened: a single firm owned now both a film production study and a television network. News Corporation strategy of a horizontal model business in which distribution channels were multiplied, proved itself efficient. The 1989 determined a big break for the American entertainment industry. Time Inc. and Warner Bros. merged as long as Sony and Columbia Pictures and *Batman* by Tim Burton hit the theatres as the first of the modern Blockbusters. It was in fact, shot after the merging between Time Inc. and Warner Bros. defining a new paradigm for Hollywood Blockbusters⁸². Terry Semel, president of the major studios declared: “The first picture that blew us out [after the merger] was *Batman*. ... It was the first time we utilized the whole machine of the company. The marketing, the tie-ins, the merchandising, the international⁸³”. At the beginning of 2000 media conglomerates reinforced their market dominance and a new form of movie franchise develop. In 2003, entertainment industry was basically controlled by the so-called “Big Six”: Time Warner, Viacom, Disney, Sony, News Corporation, GE media conglomerated who detained in their hands the 6 major film studios (respectively Warner Bros.; Paramount; Disney; Columbia; Fox; Universal), all the broadcast American networks and the 80% of cable TVs. The only major studios that didn’t suffer from the acquisition of a media conglomerate was Disney which turned itself into a media conglomerate. During the ‘90s and the first decade of the 2000s Disney expands its market and acquires Miramax, ABC-TV, ESPN, Pixar and more. The consolidation of media conglomerates on the market coincides with the progressive intense production of Blockbusters and global entertainment franchises⁸⁴. This attitude is legitimized even more by the digital revolution and the media convergence interpreted as the creation of stories that can be reiterated, repropose and reformulated through a variety of different media available⁸⁵. Moreover, globalization led Hollywood to produce contents appetible for the global market. It is in 1999 that the most famous franchise leading this new market rules is produced: *Matrix*. As stated by Henry Jenkins and previous analysed, *Matrix* represents the quintessence of Transmedia Storytelling, as a fictional world invented to be extended through multiple interactions, different media platforms and entertainment devices⁸⁶.

⁸² Zecca, Federico (a cura di), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, cit., p. 40-44

⁸³ Brown, C., “The Years Without Ross”, in *Premiere*, 1996, p. 78

⁸⁴ Zecca, Federico (a cura di), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, cit., p. 48

⁸⁵ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit.

⁸⁶ Zecca, Federico (a cura di), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, cit., pp. 48-49

The reasons behind studios merging practices and increasingly productions of blockbusters are strictly correlated to the social changes and interests of the time. During the '70s, the goal for major film studios was to convince people to choose cinema as a leisure over the multitude of options available. This led to a rise of costs for marketing and production. The only products that could convince the audience to return to the cinemas were the blockbusters, but in order to realize those a big budget was needed and the tickets' incomes won't be enough. It is in this context that studios realise the necessity of broadcasting a single product through different media channels as television, home video etc. and spreading the franchise through secondary markets. In the mid of the '80s media conglomerates were born and major studios started to merge. Corporate convergence co-exists with grassroots convergence. Media industries started to accelerate contents flow through different media platforms in order to engage the audience. Consumers, on the other hand, were learning how to use different technologies to control that flow and interact with the other consumers⁸⁷. Transmedia storytelling represents the perfect *trait d'union* between the two forms of convergence. It can in fact, be interpreted as the functional tool useful to franchises' synergic expansion, answering to film industries and media conglomerate business model of gaining profits; at the same time, it encourages an active participation of the public.

To this day Hollywood is no longer just a division of the cultural industry: it is now at the centre of multifaceted and integrated industrial mechanism. The reasons why have to be looked for in the constant research for a maximization of the profits. Media corporations use 4 different approaches to enter the market: the vertical integration, which allow the studio to distribute the final product in different points of sale; horizontal integration, which dictates the ownership of numerous societies part of the same industrial system; cross-media integration, which allows synergies between corporate partners who will generate transmedia franchise contents; the cross industrial integration, which represents the dowel among the different media departments of a corporation and its partnership for the advertisement division, communication etc⁸⁸. Vertical integration those how film studios practices which owned the entire pipeline of production, distribution and exhibition in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1948, this trend came to an end when the US Supreme Court forced film studios to sell the cinemas they owned. This disruption of monopoly eventually led to the emergence of newer media distribution options in home entertainment, television and the Internet. During the '80s the US media industries

⁸⁷ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit. p.92

⁸⁸ Wayne, M., "Complex Post-Fordism, Monopoly Capitalism, and Hollywood's Media Industrial", in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, VI, n. 1, marzo 2003, p. 94

shifted to a horizontal form of integration as film studios and televisions broadcasters were bought by major multinational corporations' through processes of conglomeration. Today, a form of transmedia distribution often used, is closely related to the collaboration between creators and owners. Such services emerged for the first time between television and films. The *Hulu* streaming platform, co-owned by Disney, Warner, Fox and NBCUniversal is an example of this form of integration. All of these new services demonstrate the attempt by the established media services to enlarge their capacity through distribution and investment in new platforms. This can be interpreted as an extension of economic strategies in terms of conglomeration and vertical integration. Nowadays, distributors have changed along with the distribution strategies. A wide number of digitally native companies are born and operating as media distributors: Netflix, Prime video, YouTube are examples of this new trend⁸⁹.

The domination of media franchises in the current Hollywood market is the result of several factors, including:

1. Commercial considerations;
2. Technological change;
3. Proliferation of media channels;
4. Fan experiences.

Transmedia practices are strongly determined by commercial consideration. Transmedia strategies are considered useful to expand a production across multiple platforms. The globalization of entertainment is also driving the creation of large entertainment franchises. Film industry is currently suffering a period of great instability and decline, long-term transmedia franchises are the stakeholders' solution for a rise of the industry, which is now strongly dependent by the success of major blockbusters⁹⁰. The Walt Disney Company has recognized the value of transmedia franchise by embedding a team of Transmedia Producers in its work equip⁹¹.

⁸⁹ Freeman, Matthew, Rampazzo Gambarato, Renira, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Storytelling*, cit., pp. 245-247

⁹⁰ Ivi., p. 236

⁹¹ Burns, Caitlin, "Transmedia: Art Forms Created in Real Time.", in *Immerse*, November 15, 2016
<https://immerse.news/transmedia-art-forms-created-in-real-time-4943648389a4>

Technological change began with the Second Industrial Revolution between the 1820s and the 1940s. New technologies like mass-produced newspapers, the rotary letterpress and commercial lithography enabled mass production and distribution of shared information on a nationwide scale. Technological changes also helped the emergence of transmedia storytelling and transmedia franchises during the Information Age in which computers, the internet, television, and a multitude of communications and computing technologies emerged. Moreover, since the '60s communication platforms started to converge to single platforms like smartphones, smart television and more that make technically feasible and commercially viable to deliver high quality texts, videos, audio eliminating the need for the consumers to switch from a media to other.

Technologies during the Information Age, also increased the choices audience have. Television channels grew exponentially in number and the average American household had now access to more than 200 different television channels. At the same time, film industry experienced a declining audience. Less and less people go the cinema and also television is suffering a declining trend. Transmedia franchise is seen as one the solution to lift this losing market.

One of the reasons that brought studios to make more and more franchises is that, starting from the 2010s analysing the top 10 movies of year, 7 out of 10 where sequels or franchises. Moreover, sequels were by no means better than the first chapter but they will always outcome it in results and box office. Consequently, the disconnection as for popularity rate expressed by the public and sector's professional critics, such as The Academy, increased more and more. Sequels increase revenues and reduce financial risk⁹².

2.7.1. Movie Franchises

As said before, in the business world a franchise is a contract between two people or bodies that allow the second counterpart to brand his activity as legitimate and official in exchange of a "royalty" paid to the first part. Over the 20th century, the notion of "franchise" invaded also the entertainment industry, with a partial differentiation in meaning and practice.

A media franchise is constituted by a media company, the franchisor, that license its brand or contents to other companies to create or sell satellite products. That being said, in contemporary age, a franchise contract in media industry doesn't refer only to the business agreement previously

⁹² Chisholm, Darlene C., Fernández-Blanco, Víctor, Ravid, S. Abraham, Walls, W. David, *Economics of Motion Pictures: The State of Art*, Springer Science + Business Media, New York 2014, pp.2-3

mentioned, but it also incorporates any assemblage of products and media categorized by that specific brand, regardless of the actual drafting of the franchise business contract. Media franchises can actually be identified as marketing strategies to establish consumers' fidelity and attachment. They build a world by which a fan can engage and empathize.

Marsha Kinder defined transmedia as the multiplatform and multimodal expansion of media content⁹³; Henry Jenkins defined it in association to his notion of transmedia storytelling, describing it as “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience”⁹⁴. Franchise theory and Transmedia are therefore, deeply linked one another, identifying transmedia as the brand evolution required in order to support traditional media and converging versus franchises' models⁹⁵. But transmedia has gained relevance also in concomitance with digital screen technologies' evolution, which permitted to the audience to experience the “old” media through online transmedia distribution practices. Transmedia is in the end, a multidisciplinary concept that can be analysed not only in terms of storytelling but also marketing, journalism, historical culture, literacy and so on⁹⁶.

The construction of a media franchise revolves around the building of a fictional world as the common pattern between the different contents part of the same franchise. Film franchises are usually based on a transmedia character; an early exception was represented by the world of Oz created by L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. This storyworld was the common ground for a transmedia franchise that included four novels, a theatre production, a mock newspaper and a comic strip. In 1970 a shift from character-based franchises was made both in cinema and television: *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry, 1966-) franchises focused on the storyworld more than characters. This shift occurred also in the video games industry with previously famous characters-based games like *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1983) being supplemented by first-person games such as *Halo* (Bungie Studios, 2001) or *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003)⁹⁷.

⁹³ Kinder, Marsha, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, University of California Press, Berkley 1991

⁹⁴ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit.

⁹⁵ Johnson, Derek, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, New York University Press, New York 2013

⁹⁶ Freeman, Matthew, Rampazzo Gambarato, Renira (a cura di), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, cit., p.7

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 234

Until the 1960s a transmedia world was only so when a character would be moved from its medium of origins to other media. Everything changed during the '70s when blockbusters started to gain success and *Star Wars* proved that a world well-built could have found success. Transmedial imaginary worlds' most important trait is to be able to balance the two most relevant needs of the audience: novelty and familiarity. Viewers want to be able to identify themselves with what they watch, the world they see on screen should sound familiar and relatable; but at the same time, their attention has to be caught in order to make them want to see more of it, novelty is therefore required⁹⁸.

Franchise transmedia is often compared (and confused) with the notion of campaign transmedia that will be now addressed.

Franchise transmedia is based on the so called, IP Model: licenses of the main product, usually a film, are sold to the creator to extend the contents to other platforms. Even though the film is the media product which originates the franchises, according to this model, the original medium is usually something different, such as a book or a toy. The exclusive ownership of an intellectual property (IP) dictates copyright, trademark and patents. Patents have no pertinence with the fictional world. On the contrary, copyright and trademark can be used to keep the exclusive ownership of fictional worlds. Copyright protects a work for a limited period of time; trademark doesn't expire and protect only specific parts of a work as for example, characters. Despite its expiration, copyright is perceived as the safest form of protection for intellectual properties⁹⁹. The ownership of copyright and trademark enables the proprietors, to augment the transmediality or transfiction with legally authorized additions or expansions to license to other individuals or corporations.

IPs are important as they enable business practices of franchising and branding. Branding is a fundamental element of the consolidation of a franchise in people's mind. It is the only one to immediately and explicit link multiple sites of production in public's mind. Nevertheless, some fictional worlds are non-proprietary and are defined of public domain. Public domain refers to works, such as *Sherlock Holmes*, in which copyright has lapsed. In a public domain fictional world, the presence or absence of a central coordinating rights holder inflects world building¹⁰⁰. The construction of an expanded universe depends both on world building logics and copyright. The rights can be held by corporate author, by an individual author, or by no one.

⁹⁸ Ivi., pp.141-144

⁹⁹ Rosenblatt, Elizabeth L., "The Adventure of the Shrinking Public Domain," *University of Colorado Law Review*, v. 86, 2015, p.565

¹⁰⁰ Boni, Marta (a cura di), *World Building Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2017, p. 111

If a corporate author is in place the texts originated by any of its employees are under their property. As for the individual author, the texts are copyrighted by an author who may decide to pass them on. Public domain in the end, considers all the texts that have been made before intellectual property laws. Authors of works based on public domain fictional world can acquire copyright at any given time. Proprietary fictional worlds such as Batman expand through extensions legally authorized and coordinated by the IP owners. On the contrary, non-proprietary fictional worlds such as Robin Hood's one, expand like coral reefs through the spontaneous addition of non-authorized authors. Normally, a proprietary fictional world tends to be more cohesive and consistent than a non-proprietary one.

Batman first appeared in 1939 in *Detective Comics #27*. At the time, it was owned by National Publications which acquired the rights directly from Batman's character creators. Today, DC Comics owns the copyright. Thank to that, it has the right to sue for any infringement and can license at its will external parties to produce derivative works. DC Comics is also a subsidiary of Warner Bros. Discovery, as a consequence, Warner can also exploit the copyright across the multiple media platforms. A division of the Warner Bros. Discovery company, Warner Bros., produces the Batman movies.

On the contrary, the Sherlock Holmes character first appeared in 1887 in the novel *A Study in Scarlet*, written by Arthur Conan Doyle. When he died, the copyright passed to his sons. Nowadays, all of his oeuvres are under public domain: the author didn't exercise any active control over the screen adaptations produced during his lifetime. He didn't care about the character fidelity throughout the representations of it. Even now, studios can therefore change the stories, the themes and the characters as they most prefer.

To conclude, by a mere economic point of view, movies, today are no longer free-standing IP, they are "one piece in a marketing assault"¹⁰¹. Entertainment industry is nowadays, a highly risk competitive market in which producers and investors try to maximize their profits by co-launching products through multiple-media platforms: films, videogames, merchandising, amusement parks etc. typical example is the *Harry Potter* Franchise (J.K. Rowling, 2001-)¹⁰².

As mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, opposite to the franchise transmedia, the campaign model exists. The campaign transmedia is entirely centred on the film, being it both the original and the fundamental medium. *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez 1999) is the

¹⁰¹ Alpert, David, Jacobs, Rick, *Videogames & Licensing in the Hollywood Film Market*, Presentation at the Korea Games Conference, Seoul, Korea October 2004

¹⁰² Aarseth, Espen, "The Culture and Business of Cross-Media Productions", in *Popular Communication*, 4:3, 2006, p.204

perfect example of Campaign transmedia film which is also the main transmedia form used in cinema¹⁰³.

Speaking of *The Blair Witch Project*, it is also worth to mention the importance it had on the construction of transmedia storytelling film notion as it is known today. The movie was anticipated by a massive narrative campaign, much more identifiable as a marketing one: a mockumentary aired on the SciFi Channel, comic leaflets were distributed at the film festival and other several narrative sided storylines, helped building expectations both on fans and the critics. Meanwhile, another important cinematographic universe was born: *The Matrix*. Matrix Universe was built around a series of different media products spanned on diversified platforms, including videogames, comics and tv films. All of these different media were spread with links and clues distributed by the creators and augmented by fans' interpretations of the expansive Matrix Universe.

Unintentionally, these two projects set the guidelines for two different academic types of transmediality and transmedia film in particular.

According to Andrea Phillips, West Coast- style transmedia is “more commonly called Hollywood or franchise transmedia” (2012, 13), which operates at major film- studio level (such as *The Matrix*), in contrast to “East Coast transmedia,” which Phillips states “tends to be more interactive, and much more web- centric. It overlaps heavily with the traditions of independent film, theatre and interactive art. These projects make heavy use of social media, and are often run once over a set period of time rather than persisting forever” (2012, 13– 14), thus implicating *The Blair Witch Project*. (Andrea Phillips, *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms*, McGraw- Hill, New York 2012)

The academia has historically been a bit reluctant to study franchises. Franchises' films, for example, were usually analysed as single, individual texts, deduced by their original context and therefore, underestimated.

Generally, franchises are associated to the development of blockbusters movies, citing *Star Wars* as the very first blockbuster successful franchise¹⁰⁴. Media franchises have been defined as a “systemic structure, or network of texts that work together across a variety of platforms under a single unifying brand name, image, or concept to create an imaginary world¹⁰⁵”. Imaginary worlds become brands that fans are capable to recognise immediately. Henry Jenkins gives his definition of franchising in

¹⁰³ Freeman, Matthew, Rampazzo Gambarato, Renira (a cura di), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, cit., p.16-17

¹⁰⁴ Schatz, Thomas, “The New Hollywood”, in *The Film Cultures Reader*, Routledge, New York 2002, pp.190-195

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, Derek, “Franchising Media Worlds: Content Networks and the Collaborative Production of Culture.” Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin- Madison 2009

his important volume *Convergence Culture*, describing it as “the coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content within the context of media conglomeration¹⁰⁶”. But “convergence” itself is defined by Jenkins as a “process or series of intersections between different media systems¹⁰⁷”. For Jenkins, media franchises are simply a modern phenomenon, fitting exclusively in a media landscape defined by an increasing convergence. A Media Franchise can be defined as a collection of media that share a storyworld. As for Franchises, they utilize a series of pre-determined patterns: when building the story, franchises are usually built around the so called “Many Stories” pattern as each channel contains its own story that can be enjoyed without necessarily consuming all the previous products related. It is important to underline that this last aspect was much truer in the past when franchises were not so much serialized, nowadays even though the story can still be understood without consulting all its precedents, there will be certain specificities that only the hard-core fan will depict. Moreover, franchises typically use the “Cumulative Pattern” as a realising strategy. New products will hit theatres within a regular predetermined cadence, allowing the fans to enjoy the older products and build discourses in the inter time. In some cases, such as Marvel Studios films, multiple channels (or a single channel) release within a short period of time several contents creating a phase effect in which all movies considered share a common time or place or theme of the storyworld and with the realisation of tv shows dedicated to the secondary characters on the digital platform Disney+. When Marvel implemented the phases pattern, this allowed the studio to share different marketing momentum at the same time, with each channel or division promoting also the other part in order to reach the most range of audience possible. This type of pattern can be defined as a connected pattern, that typically indicates intricate plots dispersed across channels¹⁰⁸. The franchise model and the transmedia storytelling technique allow the orchestration of multiple storylines over multiple media platforms that will help in the understanding of the storyworld. Every entry point has to be independent from the others and at the same time integrated with the already existing ones in order to encourage multiple levels of access and understanding of the narrative¹⁰⁹.

One of the most essential characteristics of media franchises is “brand identity” which can be better divided in “core identity” and “extended identity”. The American economist David Aaker defines, in his brand vision model, core identity as: “the timeless essence of the brand. The core identity, which

¹⁰⁶ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit., p.285

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p.282

¹⁰⁸ Javanshir, Ryan, Carroll, Beth, Millard, David, “Structural Patterns for Transmedia Storytelling”, cit., pp. 37-38

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225910>

¹⁰⁹ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit., p. 84

is central to both the meaning and success of the brand, contains the associations that are most likely to remain constant as the brand travels to new markets and products”¹¹⁰. It is therefore, a factor of continuity to the franchise and the brand, while the extended identity “essentially offer multiple outlets for the abstract Core Identity to be realized”¹¹¹. Essentially, a medium in order to be identified as part of a media franchise has to maintain distinctive key components. Moreover, if the brandization of a character is well built and the core identity identified, they will be identified even solely by the name: it works both for Sherlock Holmes and Batman, the two examples cited before. Sometimes, visual signifiers can also serve to immediately identify a brand as they are part of the character iconography as for the Bat signal for Batman. Given the minimal nature of their essential components, both Batman and Sherlock Holmes have the potential for infinite mutability. They both migrated across media platforms with greater divergences in storytelling and adaptation. But Batman’s owners have imposed a relatively greater degree of consistency upon the character’s fictional worlds. For Batman’s first half century, corporate control ensured that the character’s stories were all consecutive and consensual. In the 1980s, corporate strategy changed, resulting in a concurrent exploitation of multiple and divergent Batman across multiple platforms. All these fragmentations could have led to a weak construction of fictionality. That was later interpreted by Jenkins as a moment of shifting from continuity to multiplicity. Today, multiplicity is the comic industry’s prime directive, as several reboot both in cinema and comics are created by DC Comics and Warner Bros. Discovery, which also led to an open debate about what’s canon and what is not.

As for Sherlock Holmes character, as said before, there’s no obligation to keep a continuity of the storyworld. *Sherlock* (Steven Moffat, Mark Gatiss, BBC One 2010-2017), the series depicts the character in a 21st century London, in which a young Sherlock Holmes operates; *Elementary* (Rob Doherty, CBS 2012-2019) set the story in a 21st century New York City, in which Sherlock and his girl colleague Watson work. Warner Bros. depicted an action hero in two mega-blockbusters. Every version of the character is canon and what is only needed in order to be identify as Sherlock are the brand common frame adopted¹¹².

Another important asset to bring for a successful media franchise is the “brand equity”, that is, the key assets linked to the logo or name of the brand that add value to the final product¹¹³, such as the product’s perceived quality; brand name awareness; brand associations; brand loyalty.

¹¹⁰ Aaker, David A., *Building Strong Brands*, Free Press Business, London 1996

¹¹¹ Marazi, Katherine, “Brand Identity, Adaptation, and Media Franchise Culture”, in *ACTA UNIV. SAPIENTIAE, FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES*, 2014

¹¹² Boni, Marta (a cura di), *World Building Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, cit., pp. 115-124

¹¹³ Aaker, David A., *Building Strong Brands*, cit.

Perceived quality simply refers to the medium products' quality, critics and customers perceive. A parameter which Hollywood entertainment often uses also to decide whether proceed with a franchise or not; the awareness concerns instead, audience's immediacy to connect the franchise media brand to the product or service sold. Recognition is achieved through a continuous and perseverant exposure to the brand; in the case of media franchise's brand loyalty, media companies cannot consider only the mere customers' loyalty towards the brand they express when buying a good or a product, media franchise loyalty is also built around the general satisfaction consumers experience when consuming the adapted product; brand association is in the end, linked to brand identity and what it represents in the buyers' mind. Brand Association happens when a consumer has been exposed to an image which slightly recall the logo of a brand and his mind goes immediately to that particular franchise¹¹⁴.

The entirety of the notions depicted trough this second chapter will help the reader to better, finally understand the complex and articulated world of Marvel Franchise and DC Franchise, core topic of this paper and later addressed.

¹¹⁴ Marazi, Katherine, "Brand Identity, Adaptation, and Media Franchise Culture", cit., pp.229-242

3. Multiverse History and Concept

We are now progressively approaching the core of the paper. This chapter will therefore address the concept of the Multiverse, both from a scientific and a technological point of view, to then move onto the exploration of multiverse fictionality and transmedia. Moreover, the notion of immersive environments will be explored with a special focus on the current most debate theme: the metaverse.

The theory of the Multiverse was developed for the first time by the scientist Hugh Everett in 1954. He was then a student at Princeton University when he theorized the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. According to this theory, humanity is living in a multiverse of countless universes, inhabited by countless copies of each human being. Moreover, according to his work, all these copies are interrelated with each other and each action of a first individual will shape the lives of our counterparts in the parallel universes¹¹⁵. “Many-worlds interpretation of quantum of mechanics” is today one of the most controversial universe theories ever developed yet at the same time, supported by some logical facts. It originates by principles of quantum mechanics re-interpreted to fit parallel universe theory. Nonetheless, many physicists seem to appreciate the theory as it allows to solve many interrogative points about quantum mechanics, explaining a number of complex phenomena in a simpler way, such as why black holes emit radiation¹¹⁶. His theory has its foundations in the contradictions existing on how elementary particles (such as electrons and photons) interact at the quantum level of reality and what happens when these same particles are measured on a macroscopic level. In the quantum world, elementary particles can exist in a superposition of two or more possible states of being. Yet, when scientists, try to measure this property they see only one of these elements of superposition and not a combination of them. Physicists agreed that the equation of quantum mechanics work only in one part of reality, the microscopic one and not the macroscopic one. Everett went on the opposite direction, arguing for the merging of the microscopic and macroscopic worlds. He introduced a universal wave function that links observers and objects as parts of a single quantum system. He asked himself what would have happened if no elements of superpositions was ever banished from reality and how the world would therefore look like. His answer was that the wave function of an observer would in that case, bifurcate at each interaction of the observer with a superposed object. The universal wave function would articulate in branches for every alternative making up the object’s superposition. Each branch has its own copy of the observer

¹¹⁵ Hooper, Rowan, “Hugh Everett: The Man Who Gave Us the Multiverse”, in *New Scientist*, 24 Sept. 2014, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn26261-hugh-everett-the-man-who-gave-us-the-multiverse/>

¹¹⁶ Crease, Robert P., “The Bizarre logic of the Many-Worlds Theory”, in *Nature*, 573, 2019, pp.30-32 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02602-8>

that coincide with one of the possible alternatives. Moreover, according to the mathematical property of Schrödinger, these branches don't influence one another. Each branch embarks instead on a different future, independently from the others. Those branches will be produced regardless of whether a human being is present or not. Each interaction between physical systems will determine the creation of a new branch¹¹⁷. The single reality everyone perceives is accordingly, a multi-layered one.

Wave function is only one of the scientific theories that could explain the existence of parallel universes. String theory is a second one. It describes the worlds as not made by particles but rather one-dimensional strings. String theory is the attempt to try to describe the whole universe under a single, unicum idea, defined as the "theory of everything" or "the string theory landscape". String theory describes a universe made of a multitude of parallel universes in a finite number by adding extra dimensions of spacetime¹¹⁸.

At this point, it is therefore inevitable to wonder if and how multiverse can in fact exist. To answer this question, four kinds of multiverse, serving as models, have been identified:

1. A parallel universe has nothing new or different than our universe;
2. A parallel universe is dominated by totally different fundamental laws of physics;
3. It has the same fundamental laws of physics but it has started with different initial conditions;
4. It has the same fundamental laws of physics, but different effective bylaws.

Multiverse existing models can be categorized into 3 main groups: temporal multiple universes; spatial multiple universes; multiple universes in other dimensions. The first one, named also temporal multiverses are the oldest form of multiverse theorized. This model of multiverse theorizes that at every expansionist universe phase a contraction phase will follow, in an infinite cycle of expansion and contraction. Spatial multiverse theory claims instead that multiple universes exist simultaneously. Finally, multiple universes in other dimensions are theorized. The underlying idea is compliant with the notion of "Many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics" theorized by Everett. Furthermore, the universe part of a multiverse must satisfy some requisites such as: completeness (each universe has to be complete and suitable to host intelligent lifeforms) and separateness (each universe has to be independent and separated by the others). In any case, the theory of Multiverse

¹¹⁷ Byrne, Peter, "The Many Worlds of Hugh Everett", in *Scientific American*, October 2008

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/hugh-everett-biography/>

¹¹⁸ Read, James, Le Bihan, Baptiste, "The Landscape and the Multiverse: What's the Problem?", in *Synthese*, 199, 2021

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11229-021-03137-0#citeas>

emerges each time as a collateral notion from other physical theories or models. There are many more Multiverse theories in science, metaphysics and cosmology existing, trying to depict the real nature of the universe. For these reasons, it will be much more accurate to talk about multiverses rather than one multiverse¹¹⁹.

Also, it is worth noting that “Multiverse Theory” isn’t actually a theory. It isn’t defined by any mathematical equations, useful to make realistic predictions. These theories can’t be tested or proved. For many, they are not science. Nonetheless, multiverse remains as of today one of the most appealing cosmological theories ever, both to scholars and amateurs, being applied by many into other disciplines and fields for further developments. The numerous films and tv shows based on this topic are the emblematic example of it. Moreover, because multiverse notion isn’t so well defined yet, screenwriters have the opportunity to stretch into it and invent each time a new version of it.

3.1. Screen Media

The 21st century world is a multi-screen world. In its strict sense, screen indicates the material screen as a rectangular plane surface on which a ray of light distributes plastic elements dynamically; on the other hand, it denotes the place where these elements come to be perceived as anthropomorphic or analogical representations. At first glance, a screen can be defined as an “information surface”. However, despite its two-dimensional surfaces, screens are capable of giving to the viewer the impression of a three-dimensional surface, which can be reached by the user. They are also framed: this means that screen is easily associated with the idea of a virtual window opening to a mediated realm¹²⁰. Media and digital cultures theorist Lev Manovich classify screens into 3 main categories:

1. The classical screen, which “displays a static, permanent image”¹²¹;
2. The dynamic screen displaying “a moving image of the past” (cinema screen)¹²²;
3. The real-time screen, which “shows the present” (tv screens and computer screens)¹²³.

Visual communication and Film Studies addressed this topic since the ‘60s¹²⁴. Still today, the role of the screen isn’t well defined, as its notion changes rapidly according to the continuous technological

¹¹⁹ Hetherington, Noriss S. (a cura di), *Cosmology. Historical, Literacy, Philosophical, Religious and Scientific Perspectives*, CRC Press, Garland, New York 1993

¹²⁰ Friedberg, Anne, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, The MIT Press, 2006

¹²¹ Manovich, Lev, *Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, p. 103

¹²² Ibidem.

¹²³ Ibidem.

¹²⁴ Chateau, Dominique, Moure, José (a cura di), *Screens. From Materiality to Spectatorship-A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2016, p.16

innovations, social practices, peripherals devices etc. During the 1970s, personal computers started to challenge tv screen hegemony as the one and only home screen; a vast debate was opened. Many scholars conveyed with the idea that tv and computer will have merged soon into a single multimedia terminal. However, the very cultural role associated with the idea of screen has to be changed. Most common technological devices such as, mobile phones or game consoles use a much tinier display than the TV screen or PCs; moreover, they are all portables so that, the dividing line between public and private is even thinner. Finally, they are now much more personal than the “ancient” television or desktop computer: users can hold them in one hand and bring them everywhere. They are considered as a permanent extension of one’s human body¹²⁵¹²⁶.

That being said, it is very difficult to give a definitive, solid and schematic definition of screens as they have been constantly redefined as part of different cultural apparatuses. The genealogy of the screen is in reality much more complex than previously described¹²⁷. Screens weren’t born altogether with media screens: they were already present during the Victorian Age, when they were folding screens used to divide spaces and covered by images and printed scraps. These pictures were an expression of a new visual culture in the making¹²⁸. It is in the mid of the 18th century that the first “media machines” start to appear in domestic environments, devices meant for the consumption of the buyer¹²⁹. And even though the first successful demonstration of television dates back to the 1920s, in the cultural imaginary it goes even behind. Yet in the late 18th century, the idea of technological apparatus showing images had been conceived. The “Panorama” serves as a perfect example. It was a new method of the age, used to display landscape images and patented by a Scottish portraitist in 1787. It was a virtual voyaging medium. Leading to the invention of domestic television in the late ‘20s¹³⁰.

Today, we are finally, facing the age of computer-based media, whereby technological screen devices are omnipresent in everyday life. The so-called new media, largely relying on screen-based technology, have opened up to infinite possibilities of communication and new forms of art¹³¹. In this

¹²⁵ McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964], tr. It. *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1967

¹²⁶ Huhtamo, Von Erkki, “Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archaeology of the Screen”, in *ICONICS: International Studies of the Modern Image*, Vol.7, 2004, pp.31-32

¹²⁷ Ivi, p.35

¹²⁸ Ivi, pp. 42-43

¹²⁹ Ivi, p. 45

¹³⁰ Strauven, Wanda, *The Archaeology of Touchscreen*, Meson Press, 2021

¹³¹ Serini, Lorenzo, Vero, Marta (a cura di), “Aesthetics in the Age of New Media”, in *Dradek*, vol.1 n.1, 2015, p.7

instance, it is first of all important to define what “new media” are. Usually, the expression new media is used to describe digital media invented in the contemporary age. This definition is quite ambiguous: every media has once been a “new” media. Moreover, the insertion of a new technology into a medium doesn’t drastically change the older medium but rather preserve many characteristics of it¹³². In reality, whatever has the ability to change a cultural language can in fact, be defined as “new media”. We are witnessing a computer media revolution that affects all stages of communication and all types of media¹³³. Manovich defines the computer as a meta-medium, capable of integrating different media languages through a software that process every data in every device. Moreover, when first invented, digital computers served as a particular kind of technology (capable of manipulating images, processing symbols, being used as a calculator), by the ‘90s, the Internet entered the scene and computers became a filter through which all kinds of cultural and artistic production were mediated. As Manovich states: “In semiotic terms, the computer interface acts as a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media¹³⁴”. According to cultural communication theories of the 20th century, codes are not neutral elements of the discourse, instead they affect the message transmitted. Codes provide their own logical asset and belief system and ideology to the audience based on a non-transparency model. The interface of a computer shaped the idea that the user has of the medium itself. The interface, together with the content is what shapes new media artworks. Lev Manovich himself, gives a clear definition of what “interfaces” are. He defines them as continual processes remediating habits and conventions employed to characterize subjects’ experience in association with the space and the media people inhabit¹³⁵. The notion of interface is deeply linked to the concept of processes. Interfaces as media artefacts are by no means “a site of contestation between human beings and machines as much as between the social and the material, the political and the technological¹³⁶”. Interfaces not only constitute the media of reference, they actually connect objects and subjects, they are an active, dynamic agent in the relationship between the technological and the human entities, they connect.

We found ourselves in a time of “fluid dynamics” in which interfaces describe at the same time, the internal processes of a system and the boundaries between that very system and the environment in which it operates. They create a new, mixed system in which culture, technology, technicity, and even

¹³² Ivi, p.9

¹³³ Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, cit., p.19

¹³⁴ Ivi, p.64

¹³⁵ Manovich, Lev, *Cinema as Cultural Interface*, 1997

¹³⁶ Hookway, Branden, *Interface*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014, p.53

symbolism come together to shape a shared user's experience. In this post digital era, media processes and configurations operate synchronically, establishing complex and dynamic environments better defined as "conjunctures". There, media practices and objects merge, digital elements and creative practices mix with everyday practices and circulate together. Media practices together with interfaces and infrastructures are tools of users' everyday life that shape and pervade their experience¹³⁷. Interfaces are for all intents, a developing process describing "the site or moment in which the full operation and apparatus of systems, networks, hierarchies and material flows are distilled into concrete actions¹³⁸".

In order to better understand what interfaces are and their functionality in the present digital era, we have to start by the very definition of post-phenomenology and its implications on the relationship between humans and technology. The idea behind this new concept is that technologies are capable of directing and influencing human intentionality. Human intentionality (according to this theory) is not a given fact of human life but it is rather reconfigured and shaped through the use of technologies. According to the post phenomenology, subjects' access to the world is mediated by technologies both for performative and perceptive uses. The ways in which man, world and technologies relate are different. First of all, we can describe the "embodied relation". In this case, the human experience is concretized by a technical tool as an integrate part of the body experience. An example is the knife used by a chef to chop food. The post phenomenology theory interprets this man-world-technology interaction as the essence of people's experience mediated by the use of a technical tool, becoming a wholesome with the person. In this case, the "interface" fails in favour of a unified experience. The technology itself is no longer an added tool but rather a transparent artificial limb of human body¹³⁹.

There is also a second model of interrelation between the parts, mediated by the interfaces and it is defined as "hermeneutic". In this case, the interface is an external entity that mediates the relationship between the body and the technology. Most of the modern digital interfaces used nowadays are constructed according the hermeneutic relation model. In order to surf the internet or use mobile apps, users have to implement a reflective action to decodify the operative system in use¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁷De Rosa, Miriam, Ugenti, Elio (a cura di), "Media | Processes. Moving Images Across Interface Aesthetics and Gestural Policies", in *Imago 23. Studi di cinema e media*, Bulzoni Editore, 2021, pp. 12-14

¹³⁸ Hookway, Branden, *Interface*, cit., p.5

¹³⁹ De Rosa, Miriam, Ugenti, Elio (a cura di), "Media | Processes. Moving Images Across Interface Aesthetics and Gestural Policies", cit, pp. 24-26

¹⁴⁰ Ivi., p.28-29

However, the dichotomy between the two notions here outlined is today much more blurred than ever before. It will be much more useful to talk about “hot” and “cool” media as defined by Marshall McLuhan. Hot media are those media that demand little interaction from the user; on the contrary, cool media are the ones demanding great interaction by the audience. The key element is the performativity of fruition of the media. The relationship between the agent and the media is analysed: cool media require a highly level of attention towards the medium and the genre conventions useful to understand it. Hot media engage one sense of the user completely, without any need for a high focused perception¹⁴¹. Now that these two concepts have been defined it is clear that, the previous notions of hermeneutic and embodied relations have to be redefined. Hermeneutic processes such as scrolling through the Instagram feed or navigating the Internet are not so rational and voluntary as expected. They are both hot media which generates hypnotical and automatic behaviour in the user. At the same time, television, always described as a cool medium also for its low resolution and high effort demanded to the viewer to be fruited, is now a hot medium thanks to its high resolution and easiness of fruition. Moreover, the very usability of television has changed. Today users don’t perceive tv as a challenging participant of their life. Their relationship has changed: computers demand a hyper focused approach, supported by physical actions of the body. TV is therefore turned, to a more passive and apathetic tool, with zero cognitive effort¹⁴².

Normally, content and form were described as two separated and independent entity of the same artefact: content existed before its material expression. With the notion of non-transparent codes, content and form cannot be separated any more. New media in this sense, can be understood as informational design, but this concept creates a paradox: they have still an aesthetic, traditional dimension that make them art. This particular configuration allows the user to interact with the artwork, a user-experience created by the interface itself. Changing the interface would therefore mean, to change the artwork. At this point, it is clear that the interface can’t be thought separated from the other elements¹⁴³. “We are no longer interfacing to a computer but to culture encoded in digital form¹⁴⁴”. Nicholas Mirzoeff, visual culture theorist and professor at NYU, understands screens as a whole with our daily practices and life spaces, supporting the idea that human life is now lived on the screen¹⁴⁵. Moreover, Lipovetsky and Serroy, two French writers and sociologists, developed

¹⁴¹ McLuhan, Marshall, *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, cit.

¹⁴² De Rosa, Miriam, Ugenti, Elio (a cura di), “Media | Processes. Moving Images Across Interface Aesthetics and Gestural Policies”, cit., pp.30-33

¹⁴³ Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, cit., p.64-67

¹⁴⁴ Ivi, p.70

¹⁴⁵ Mirzoeff, Nicholas, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, 1999

the theory of the *écran-global* as a metaphor for the pervasive spread of screens into people's lives. Every aspect of the human-beings' life is colonized by the infinite circulation of images through screens disseminated everywhere. People are now then, inhabitants of a new world: a new space-time between reality and imagination¹⁴⁶.

3.2. Immersive Environment and Virtual Reality

This brief introduction to the core elements of screen media helps to better understand the concepts of immersive environment and virtual reality that will be now addressed.

The notions of interaction and narration cited before represent the origins around which interactive virtual worlds take shape. Within these worlds, users are represented as avatars existing inside the narrative space. These characters are rendered with photorealistic 3-D computer graphics. They interact with other "virtual individuals" and their actions affect the course of events in the virtual worlds they inhabit. Digital computers were first considered exclusively as a tool useful to typewrite and store contents, later distributed on their proper media. With time they were finally recognised as a proper medium itself through which culture can be produced, filtered and enjoyed. It is now a universal media machine. People are no longer interfacing to a computer screen but rather to culture encoded in digital form. It is more accurate then, to talk about digital cultural objects, spread over cultural interfaces. According to Manovich, cultural interfaces are shaped by three cultural forms: cinema; printed word; human-computer interface¹⁴⁷. At the end of the 20th century, cinema was considered among the three, the most influential cultural element, shaping cultural interfaces and objects. Cinema techniques and narrative conventions were all reproduced on computer graphics and interfaces. Cinematic elements of perception, language and reception were all incorporated to design cultural interfaces' systems and operativity. Taking as an example the advancement of videogames culture, by the 1990s, computer games were all designed in three dimensions and incorporated cinematic language used to build the world and the set of the video game's narrative. They were more and more built around cinematography techniques such as depth of field or camera angles and the implementation of a dynamic point of view. Cinema's aesthetic strategies were and still are the toolbox for computer software¹⁴⁸. It is in this context that the concept of screen enters the scene. The screen is what builds the relationship between the viewer and the content. It creates the complete illusion and identification with the image. The screen is also "aggressive" towards the spectator. Its

¹⁴⁶ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *L'Écran global. Du cinéma au smartphone*, Seuil, Paris 2011, p.283

¹⁴⁷ Ivi, pp.82-84

¹⁴⁸ Ivi, p.86

aim is to filter and screen out what is outside the frame. It demands to the viewer to be completely focused and captured by the image. With virtual reality, the screen disappears. Now the real and physical space coincides with the virtual, simulated space¹⁴⁹. Furthermore, the relationship between the body of the spectator and image changes. In cinema, camera moves independently from the body of the spectator, on the contrary, in virtual space, the spectator actually has to move in physical space in order to fully live the experience. The body of the user is tethered to a machine and yet stimulated to physically move and act in real to navigate the virtual world perceived through the VR glasses¹⁵⁰¹⁵¹. VR is linked to the simulation, hinting at the “fake” environment stemming from the real space. Virtual reality uses technologies to create 3D environments to be experienced through sensory perception and physical movement. “The goal of immersive virtual environments (VEs) was to let the user experience a computer-generated world as if it were real—producing a sense of presence, or “being there,” in the user’s mind¹⁵²”. Three main tools are employed to create this new environment: the first one, true virtual reality, offers an artificially world to provide an immersive experience of the new world; the second one is a mixed reality tool that helps to integrate the former cited reality with the real one in order to enhance the experience for the user; the third one will be the augmented reality tool that incorporates elements of the artificial world into the real one. Whilst we tend to connect such environments with cultural and media products, as well as to art experiences, VR wasn’t born as an entertainment tool¹⁵³. Military training was one of the first working environment in which VR was implemented with the aim of providing a training environment to soldiers. Moreover, VR games were found to be helpful to treat anxiety disorders and PTSD. Studies conducting over a group of soldiers showed a decreasing level of depression symptoms and anger in connection with the use of VR games. VR gaming can obviously be employed also for entertaining purposes, providing a realistic experience without automatically simulate the actual real-world location. In the end, it can be safely stated that what is behind the screen has officially overcome the screen, dominating the field. As explicated by Andrea Pinotti, Aesthetics teacher at the State University of Milan, this process can be described as the “environmentalization” of the image. These new virtual dispositive deprive users of their liberty to focus on something different from the display. The edge of a painting or a laptop

¹⁴⁹ Ivi, pp.96-97

¹⁵⁰ Ivi, p.109

¹⁵¹ Ivi, p.111

¹⁵² Bowman, Doug A., McMahan, Ryan P., “Virtual Reality: How Much Immersion is Enough?”, in *Computer*, vol. 40, no. 7, p. 3, July 2007, <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/4287241>

¹⁵³ Milgram, Paul, Takemura, Haruo, Utsumi, Akira, Kishino, Fumio, “Augmented Reality: A Class of Displays on the Reality-Virtuality Continuum”, in *Telemanipulator and Telepresence Technologies*, 2351, 1994, pp. 284-292

helped the viewers to look away from time to time and focus on something else. Conversely, once immersed in a virtual environment nothing but images are seen. A constant presence is perceived rather be the user in the virtual environment or the virtual objects in the real world. The space and time of the representative world and of the real environment are now coincident. Image and reality merge until they blend¹⁵⁴. The image becomes environmentalized due to the lack of awareness around the presence of the tool used to immerse oneself into the virtual reality. Users are totally absorbed by the 360-degree landscape and loses their critical thinking ability to discern their attention from the virtual world¹⁵⁵.

The definition of immersive environment is complementary but not identical to the one of virtual reality. The term “immersive” refers to the act of immersing a subject into a digitally constructed environment. As Nechvatal suggests, an immersive digitally constructed environment is “an artificial, interactive, computer-generated scene or “world” within which users can immerse themselves”¹⁵⁶. While the prerogative of virtual reality is to simulate the real world, immersive environments don’t have instead this primary aim. As for the immersive digital environment, there are different elements that can help the user to achieve the goal of feeling immersed: 3D computer graphics, interactive user-input functionality is only some of such elements. Immersion, just as VR, benefits the possibility of multiple application in different sectors. It can be used in the engineering department as a practical tool while at the same time, being used to create a videogame’s setting and improve the user’s experience or even in a museum exhibition as a new, experimental approach to the enjoyment of art¹⁵⁷. When entertainment and media industry, adding immersive experiences means fulfilling the viewer with a unique sense of belonging and sharedness that can only be achieved altogether with three other elements that will be: absorption, saturation and overflow¹⁵⁸.

According to Wolf, absorption refers to the reader or viewer’s attention captivated by the world described in a book, a movie or a videogame, and their intention to enter the imaginary world. At the same time, the members of the audience achieve an absorption effect when they immediately and

¹⁵⁴ Pinotti, Andrea, “Towards an-Iconology: The Image as Environment”, in *Screen*, vol. 61, n.4, Winter 2020, pp.594-596 <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjaa060>

¹⁵⁵ Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, cit., pp.113-114

¹⁵⁶ Nechvatal, Joseph, *Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances: A Study of the Affinity Between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms*, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009

¹⁵⁷ Abbasi, Ameer, Baroudi, Uthman, “Immersive Environment: An Emerging Future of Telecommunications”, in *Multimedia at work*, 2012, p.80

¹⁵⁸ Wolf, Mark J. P., *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Routledge, New York-London 2012

easily recall the imaginary world in their everyday life, constructing and de-constructing their own personal idea of the world and events with their imagination. In a transmedia world, the narrative universe created, can contain a huge number of elements that the process of absorption won't be able to take in anymore: this state is defined as saturation. Saturation is in reality the ultimate goal of conceptual immersion: the audience will be fully concentrated and captivated by the narration to ultimately being totally immersed in it. When world-data continues to be injected into people's mind over the point of saturation, overflow happens. Overflow is necessary in order to keep the storyworld into people's mind even after the actual immersive experience. If a world is overflowed and perceived as so by the audience, they will have the feeling to never fully know the story and very likely they will be eager to dig deeper and deeper into it¹⁵⁹.

In a more extended definition, it is possible to shift from virtual reality to the notion of virtual world. Such an idea was born during the 1970s, when this concept emerged as a way to describe multi-user dungeons (fantastic realities developed by the fans) or multi-user shared hallucinations in which educators played with collaborative creation¹⁶⁰. At that point, several different phases of evolution have interested the concept of virtual world. In 1984, the film studio Lucasfilm introduced "Habitat" for the Commodore 64. It was a commercial application of virtual world technology that incorporated also a graphical interface. Habitat was also the first online environment that introduced the term "avatar" in order to describe its "digital inhabitants", that is the transposition of the user within the computer-based world. This new model opened the doors to the third phase of development of virtual world. During the mid-1990s, user-created contents and 3D graphics enabled the shift from pre-created virtual settings to online environments. Finally, the last phase of development saw its flourishing during the post millennial decade, which was characterized by the growing dominance of users' content creation tools and the development of an advanced virtual economy¹⁶¹. In light of this, Richard L. Gilbert, psychology professor at the Loyola Marymount University, identified 5 features that characterize virtual worlds:

1. The virtual environment is equipped with a 3D graphical interface and an integrated audio;
2. It supports massively multi-user remote interactivity;
3. It is persistent. It exists and continues to operate even if not all the users are connected;

¹⁵⁹ Boni, Marta (a cura di), *World Building Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, cit., pp. 205-208

¹⁶⁰ Turkle, Sherry, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Simon & Schuster Trade, New York, NY 1995

¹⁶¹ Dionisio, John David N., Burns III, William G., Gilbert, Richard, "3D Virtual Worlds and the Metaverse: Current Status and Future Possibilities", in *ACM Comput Survey*, vol. 45, Issue 3, Article 34, 2013, pp.2-3

<https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2480741.2480751>

4. It is immersive. Users have to have the perception of being inside the virtual reality;
5. It encourages user-generated activities and provides content creation tools for personalization of the experience and therefore the virtual environment.

The notion of metaverse as an immersive three-dimensional digital environment emerges in this context, that paved the way for further developments, recent consequences and outcomes.

3.2.1. Zuckerberg's Metaverse

The word “metaverse” is constituted by the two words “meta” which means beyond and the word (uni)verse; metaverse stands therefore for a kind of universe existing beyond the physical world. This notion evolved through time to ultimately embrace the idea of a network of interconnected virtual worlds. It was meant to host a multitude of users that would connect to the universe through computer terminals projecting a first-person perspective virtual reality displayed onto goggles and sound transmitted through earphones plugged to the goggles. Lastly, the Metaverse introduced, as a core part of its manifestation, a variety of augmented reality technologies to be integrated with the already established metaverse characteristics¹⁶²: immersion; three-dimensionality; simulation. The main feature of the Metaverse is immersive realism, aimed at producing a psychological and emotional engagement in the users¹⁶². Altogether with immersive realism, visual realism serves to improve the users' experiences. A more detailed representation, visual fidelity and 3D technologies can help to optimize the visual realism¹⁶³. In the end, the sense of touch is the last essential component of a well-established metaverse. There are different interpretations of touch as for the virtual environment, the first one is the haptic feedback, the second one the force feedback. Haptic feedback aims to convert virtual contacts into physical ones. At the same time, force feedback can be considered as a subset of haptic feedback that involves a physical device pushed against or resisting the user's body¹⁶⁴. Haptic technology is usually used in game consoles and controllers in the form of users' input given to the joystick and delivered by movement and gestures¹⁶⁵. Longer before haptic feedback definition in technical and technological environment, haptic visuality has been used as a tool for culturally specific, materialist and multisensory criticism of new media and digital revolution. Laura Marks,

¹⁶² Ivi, pp.5-8 <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2480741.2480751>

¹⁶³ Ivi, p.10 <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2480741.2480751>

¹⁶⁴ Subramanian, Sreenivasan, et ali., “Haptic and Tactile Feedback in Directed Movements”, in *Proceedings of the Conference on Guidelines on Tactile and Haptic Interactions*, 2005

¹⁶⁵ Dionisio, John David N., Burns III, William G., Gilbert, Richard, “3D Virtual Worlds and the Metaverse: Current Status and Future Possibilities”, cit., p.13 <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2480741.2480751>

Canadian media theorist and curator, offered a definition of haptic visuality, describing it as a method of sensory analysis unrelated to the five human senses, but rather providing an alternative framework useful to understand online new media works in relation to multiple senses and embodiment. Haptic visuality can be described as a “tactile” usage of visual perception or sight, in order to perceive the image, involving directly viewer’s body. The eyes metaphorically function as organs of touch. Marks takes as an example, the forms and aesthetics strategies of intercultural cinema. Intercultural media are often limited by the confines of sight and sound. In order to stimulate and intrigue the viewer, they work towards the representation of an embodied and multisensory image. Haptic visuality can easily fit into a variety of art forms, such as performative experimental film, pornography and dreams. Marks identified three key issues in new media studies related to the concept of haptic visuality: the shift to digital video, the role of the electron in digitization and the materiality of the internet. According to her vision, the world wide web can actually be understood in its materiality essence through five different material entities: the quantum; electronic; software; hardware; social. Haptic and optical visuality are actually intended as a unique flow, operating simultaneously. Haptic images are usually distorted or grainy, forbidding the viewer to penetrating into them but rather sensing them with the body; optical images provide the viewers with a space to exist in, figures to identify with. Media works are rarely completely haptic, oscillating between haptic and optical visuality¹⁶⁶.

Another fundamental element of metaverse is the “ubiquity”. In the real world, it is possible to identify a unified presence, centred on the physical body and at the same time permeating other locations and environments through artifacts or credentials that represent the individual. Examples are credit cards, bank accounts and so on. All of these elements contribute to manifest the presence of people in the society. All of these informational, fragmented credentials may in the end, consolidate and produce a ubiquitous electronic presence¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸. Moreover, it is possible to identify also in this case, the more recent adaptation of the notion of the *prosumer*, as users become at the same time, producers and consumers of their virtual digital environments.

¹⁶⁶ Marks, Laura U., *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2002

¹⁶⁷ Gilbert, Richard L., Foss, Jessica, Andmurphy, Nora, “Multiple Personality Order: Physical and Personality Characteristics of the Self, Primary Avatar, and Alt”, in *Reinventing Ourselves: Contemporary Concepts of Identity in Virtual Worlds*, A. Peachey and M. Childs, Eds. Springer Publishing, London 2011, pp.213–234

¹⁶⁸ Gilbert, Richard L., Forney, Andrew, “The Distributed Self: Virtual Worlds and the Future of Human Identity”, in *The Immersive Internet: Reflections on the entangling of the virtual with society, politics, and the economy*, D. Powers and R. Teigland, Eds., Palgrave-Macmillan 2013, pp. 23–37

Nonetheless, the operation of sharing credentials is only one of the many operations that users can implement in the act of sharing information in virtual worlds. The content of what producers/consumers can put on virtual environments, is expanding, including now interactive, physical-based behaviours or machinima presentations of self-contained episodes of virtual world activities¹⁶⁹. The electronic self has to be omnipresent and unified in the virtual world in order to make the last one a valid alternative to the real world¹⁷⁰.

On October 2021, Facebook company (owner of the Facebook platform among others), announced during the annual Connect Conference, that it would have changed its name into “Meta” as a clear reference to the Metaverse, which would become the new purpose of the company thereon. Its CEO and founder, Mark Zuckerberg showed a YouTube video called *The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together-Connect 2021* in which, he explained his company’s vision and the will of surpassing screen’s limitations in order to embrace the plethora of human expressions and connections available. A new digital world was about to be created and its 8 pillars would have been:

1. The feeling of presence;
2. Avatars. The user will be represented by a 3D image;
3. Home spaces. Each user will have his personal space to build, decorate and to which invite other avatars;
4. Teleporting. Users will be teleported to other spaces by clicking a link;
5. Interoperability. Users will have the possibility to use objects or goods they have previously create and own;
6. Privacy and safety guaranteed;
7. Virtual goods. Things can be brought from the physical world to the metaverse; other objects such as screens will be holograms and at the same time digital objects will be translated to the real world as holograms or augmented reality;
8. Natural interfaces. Interactions will be more natural and realistic, giving the sense of presence.

Zuckerberg also stated that the final creation of Meta would probably take several years but nonetheless that is the next frontier and the most likely future¹⁷¹. In practical terms, the ultimate goal

¹⁶⁹ Morris, Dave, Kelland, Matt, Lloyd, Dave, *Machinima: Making Animated Movies in 3D Virtual Environments*, Muska & Lipman/Premier-Trade, Cincinnati, OH 2005

¹⁷⁰ Dionisio, John David N., Burns III, William G., Gilbert, Richard, “3D Virtual Worlds and the Metaverse: Current Status and Future Possibilities”, cit., p.20 <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2480741.2480751>

¹⁷¹ Meta, *The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together-Connect 2021*, 28 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8> (ultimo accesso 27 April 2022)

is to create an alternative reality where people (avatars) can meet, go to work, play sports, etc. Virtual reality will be the technological tool that would make this universe possible. As for the Meta company, VR can be already entered via Facebook's Oculus headsets. Moreover, Meta will also include the augmented reality in which digital elements are layered on top of reality (*Pokémon GO* among others)¹⁷².

As for today, everything is still in progress, people are actually starting to invest in Metaverse, building and acquiring their (real and metaphorical) place in this new world. The consequences of the advancement of this new phenomenon are still to be understood. Many elements have to be taken into account and the impact will be huge. In addition to the more obvious re-elaborations of media theories, screen media and cultural interfaces interface, a successful implementation of a metaverse will certainly impact every aspect of today life, from global economy, to mental health, from political assets to entertainment industry. And the most worrying part is that we are probably not ready for what is to come.

For the purpose of this paper, the concept of metaverse will only be useful as a further in-depth analysis of the multitude of nuances the concept of multiverse can embrace not only in science or fiction but also in technology and real life.

¹⁷² Milmo, Dan, "Enter the Metaverse: The Digital Future Mark Zuckerberg Is Steering Us Toward", in *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/28/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-meta-metaverse>

4. Cinematic Transmedia Multiverses: MCU and DCEU a Structural Comparison

The concept of narrative multiverse, both for the MCU and DCEU, takes its roots from the comic books of their respective publishers. More specifically, DC Comics has been the first between the two to present a storyline with a set of alternative realities in which different versions of the same character would appear and therefore, to pave the way to the worldbuilding of parallel universes both for DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Wonder Woman is indeed the first superhero to stumble on a parallel world “existing simultaneously to the Earth”; later on, in 1961, the 123^o issue of *the Flash* is out and for the first time, the comics’ characters actually define the multitude of universes encountered as a unique multiverse¹⁷³. This new concept is now about to be introduced in the cinematic world of both franchises. As for the MCU, the multiverse has abundantly been hinted in several cinematic products, from *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016), to *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (Jon Watts, 2019), in order to be eventually, fully introduced in *Loki* (Michael Waldron, Disney+ 2021-) tv show first and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Jon Watts, 2021), secondly, in 2021. The former introduces the concept of variants: different versions of individuals from different timelines. The season finale shows the ‘Sacred Timeline’ branching into hundreds of ramifications, each representing hundreds of different universes and variants able to travel across timelines and universes: this is how the multiverse in the MCU was born. *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, distributed in theatres in December 2021, shows for the first time on screen the consequences of *Loki*’s events. Villains from previous *Spider-Man* movies continuities reach Marvel Universe as it is known today, along with the two *Spider-Men* previously portrayed by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield.

Similarly, the DCEU is set to introduce the multiverse in its upcoming movie, *The Flash* (Andy Muschietti, 2023) next year. The plot of the movie hasn’t been revealed yet, but rumours suggest it will be based on the *Flashpoint* comic book storyline, in which Barry Allen, aka The Flash, goes back in time to stop the Reverse-Flash from killing his mother. In doing so, he will change the course of all future events, affecting every DC’s superhero and opening the road to further narrative variations¹⁷⁴.

Opposite to what happens in the comic books, the first major company to introduce the multiverse in cinema has been the Marvel Studios. Until 2008, when the *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) movie hit

¹⁷³ McMillan, Graeme, “Worlds Collide: A History of Marvel and DC’s Multiverses”, in *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2014, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/worlds-collide-a-history-marvel-748649/>

¹⁷⁴ Bellissimo, Sabrina, “DC and Marvel’s Multiverses May Be Useful to the Studios”, in *GAMERANT*, 2021, <https://gamerant.com/dc-marvel-multiverse-useful-studios/>

the theatre, every superhero existed in his own stand-alone movie universe. In spite of the shared universe existing in the comic books, on screen, characters' storylines of the same publisher would never really merge.

Long before the multiverse, Marvel Studios pioneered the concept of a shared universe in which every character ever portrayed could have eventually shared the screen. The release of *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) marked the history of cinematic universe as we know it today. In the 2020s, both studios were then ready to reinvent cinematic universes again by launching their idea of multiverse¹⁷⁵.

As for Marvel Studios, The Walt Disney's acquisitions allow the Studios to include superhero's characters whose movie rights were previously held by other majors such as FOX. Because Marvel Studios hold now the rights for almost the entire catalogue of Marvel Comics, they had therefore two options: either rebooting older movies or introducing them as a part of the canon MCU. The Multiverse concept allowed the studio to go for the latter.

As for DC's movie rights, they are instead entirely detained by Warner Media. Both Warner and DC Comics were acquired by Kinney National Company in 1967, and marching together ever since. Over the years, Warner Bros. has produced several numbers of superhero's tv shows, movies and cartoons distributed across all its platforms but without a unified vision to connect the storylines¹⁷⁶. This led directors and producers to show, sometimes even in a short period of time, different versions of the same superhero, with different outcomes and storyline. The risk was then to push away the fans who demand a solid continuity. For this reason, the aim today, is to introduce a multiverse storyline in which all the existing and future DC movies can be considered canon and part of the same continuity, however happened in a different universe; Ben Affleck's Batman, Robert Pattison's one and Michael Keaton' older Batman are now part of the same multiverse and therefore, legitimize to exist simultaneously and eventually meet¹⁷⁷.

Introducing the multiverse as the next phase of both superhero's plotlines is nothing but a managerial strategy in order to expand the market. The existence of the multiverse can justify the need for both

¹⁷⁵ Orquiola, John, "Why Marvel & DCEU Are Both Creating Multiverses in 2022", in *Screen Rant*, 2020
<https://screenrant.com/marvel-dc-multiverse-flash-doctor-strange-why/>

¹⁷⁶ Shaw-Williams, Hannah, "How DC Films & the DCEU Really Works", in *Screen Rant*, 2018,
<https://screenrant.com/dc-films-dceu-explained-warner-bros/>

¹⁷⁷ Korhonen, Jeremy, "Why the Multiverse Has the Ability to Save DC Movies", in *Screen Rant*, 2021,
<https://screenrant.com/dceu-multiverse-movies-save-possibilities/>

studios to call back actors who played a certain superhero in the past while actually using them as a fan service device that would attract the audience. Moreover, many different comics book storylines can now be introduced, without automatically contradicting the existing films. Even for filmmakers, (similarly to what happened for the DC movies in the past) this possibility gives them a greater creative freedom without worrying too much about the necessity of a strict continuity or retconning; everything is canon as it is and representing alternate timelines within the multiverse.

This brief introduction about the multiverse storylines only traces the guidelines to better understand the framework in which both majors operate. That being said, from an academic point of view, the ‘narrative’ multiverse depicted so far, is not so linear as it seems. As we will analyse more in depth in the following chapters, it would be more correct to say that what we are facing is a case of meta-multiverse. The narrative multiverse actually derives and responds to market logics that rewrite the rules of franchises and transmedia established so far. Walt Disney’s acquisitions and settlements and Warner Bros’ contents variety gave the opportunity to both studios to re-manage their cinematic world and opened them to a vaster and newer landscape.

In order to accurately analyse both transmedial situations and to depict in detail commonalities and differences between Marvel and DC, two chapters follow so as to offer a specific focus on each of them, to eventually offer new broader understandings of the analysed phenomena.

5. Marvel Cinematic Universe

5.1. Franchise's Overview

The MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) is only one of the many blockbuster film franchises currently present in the market. Yet, it also stands as one of the most ambitious and experimental products when it comes to narrative world-building. Transmedia storytelling is the most important feature on which the MCU is based on. Moreover, media convergence is applied in order to spread the brand across multiple media platforms and reach out a wider segment of the public. MCU is also very different and innovative than the already established movie franchises: usually, a franchise like for example the *Harry Potter* one, is established around a clear-identified set of characters and a finite story, on the contrary MCU films are adaptations of the ongoing story-world created by Marvel Comics, whose aim isn't to faithfully represent what is written on paper, but instead to loosely reference comics storylines. In this sense, MCU stories are in general original products. What is really adapted from the comics, is instead the approach to world building and media franchising¹⁷⁸.

In the 2000s, film studios realised that viewers were interested to the idea of consuming stories in a series. Comic book films were the easiest solution to verify this theory. A serialized franchise taps into a form of brand loyalty, that attract the audience not through an appealing storytelling but rather thanks to a form of commercialisation, that expands the story across media and platforms. Marvel Studios as an independent studio production, was established in 2005. Before that, a division of Marvel Comics deputed to the production of films was established in 1996 under the name of Marvel Films and it was considered as a pre-production hub that would license Marvel characters to film Studios, such as Fox, Sony and Lionsgate in order to bring characters on screen. At the time, Marvel was simply a comic publisher, and as such it behaved as a licensor who used to sell movie rights to cinema studios gaining profits from comic book characters franchised. In 2005, they embraced a self-financed model that allowed them to produce their own contents and maintain control over the final output, becoming one of the first external firms with non-cinematic expertise to produce cinema movies. Between 2000 and 2007, any major studio in charge of producing Marvel's film had the contractual right of retaining creative and economic control over marketing, production and sublicensing. The studio earned the majority of the profits while Marvel gained license fees and royalties. The issue was that with a license deal, Marvel didn't have any creative power over the production of its films. Moreover, the revenues derived by the selling of merchandising or license fees were subjected to studios' release schedule and strategies, without assuring a safe margin of

¹⁷⁸ Boni, Marta (a cura di), *World Building Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, cit., pp. 287-288

profit for Marvel¹⁷⁹. The easiest solution would have been to sell Marvel to a larger entertainment company, so that the comic book studio had to deal only with a major cinema industry, managing multimedia contents in-house. Instead, Marvel decided to go independent, adapting this strategy to the economics of convergence¹⁸⁰.

The Walt Disney company acquired Marvel Entertainment in 2009. Marvel Entertainment was a subsidiary of Disney, constituted at the time by Marvel Studios division, Marvel Television division, and Marvel Comics, among others. It became a media conglomerate based on a merchandising and licensing business model, focusing principally on cinematic products, ensuring Marvel the creative control they needed while keeping the target aligned to the Walt Disney's vision¹⁸¹. The Marvel Cinematic Universe was established with Marvel Studios as the leading subject.

Every MCU product was easily recognisable by the audience as carrier of specific features: the balance between art and commerce; a studio's vision based on the fan participatory culture; the establishment of a shared universe; the creation of a brand identity. Contrary to the past, Marvel Studios had now the right to actually control the pre and post production phases by the inside. The success of a shared universe comes from the business strategy the head of the company choose to adopt. Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios president, emulates what Marvel Comics did since the '60s. During that time, each creative team worked on individual titles. At the same time, every character storyline would lead to a shared direction, chosen by an editorial team that had a clear vision in mind for how major events would have shaped the greater universe. For what concerns, the Marvel Studio, the final storyline is always defined and approved by the Studio itself and adjusted to the long-term, expanded, shared universe in the making. Just like the comic books, the creative process of a movie or a depiction of a character relies on multiple single individuals, resulting in a plethora of directors and screenwriters who usually are in charge for only one or two movies within the entire franchise. In doing so, Marvel Studios detains instead the overall view of the shared universe and has the responsibility to coordinate and control this ever-expanding imaginative world in order to make it coherent and cohesive. They dictate the guidelines and assure the brand fidelity for the audience and

¹⁷⁹ Johnson, Derek, "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence", in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 52, n.1, 2012, pp.9-10 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/489062>

¹⁸⁰ Wyatt, Justin, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood" in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Neale and Murray Smith, Routledge, London 1998, pp. 74-90

¹⁸¹ Flanagan, Martin, McKenny, Mike, Livingstone, Andy, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, Bloomsbury, New York-London 2016, p.90

the Studio itself¹⁸². Ultimately, Marvel Studios transition from licensing to independent production gives it a better creative independency and what's more a full economic profitability¹⁸³.

Considering now the notion of transmedia storytelling, given by Henry Jenkins and thoroughly analysed in the previous chapters, it looks apparent at this stage to identify the same rules that apply for any other transmedia franchise within the MCU. Furthermore, the MCU answers also to a commercial strategy easily identifiable with the transmedia branding rules already depicted. Industrial practices contribute to give visibility to the Marvel brand, as well as to achieve the required brand-awareness. The goal is to make characters and logos iconic among people¹⁸⁴. As for the textual practice, as Jenkins states: "each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the [video]game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole¹⁸⁵". Within the MCU franchise, every movie attracts each time a new portion of audience; moreover, there are certain market shares that will reach the franchise accessing it from tv shows or comics rather than cinematic movies, using therefore those media products as an entry point for the broader cinematic universe. Marvel media contents attract loyal fans and followers who will enjoy any form of media product spread on any media platform available; the franchise will provide them with a unified and integrated storyline, accordingly. At the same time, as Jenkins widely explained, each Marvel storyline provides to the audience with some sort of closure within the single movie, tv show or comics, being therefore self-contained and thus somewhat transitorily gratified. That being said, not every product can be used as an entry point to the franchise, as some of the movies entered the MCU only after Walt Disney's acquisitions, and deals with major studios that detained movie's rights for some superheroes. They are now accepted as canon products of Marvel continuity thanks to an operation of retconning enacted in the making, but this is not how they were conceived. In this sense, MCU actually moves away from Jenkins' transmedia storytelling theory, offering interesting insights to Film Studies to push the reflection further. In this case, it will perhaps be more accurate to talk about multi-linearity of the plot, as each Marvel's movie belongs to a specific shared story-world according to the major studio that produced it.

¹⁸² Ivi, p.121

¹⁸³ Ivi, pp. 116-118

¹⁸⁴ Grainge, Paul, *Brand Hollywood. Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, Routledge, New York 2008, pp.59-60

¹⁸⁵ Jenkins, Henry, *Cultura Convergente*, cit., p. 98

The first film self-produced by Marvel Studios was *Iron Man* in 2008. It marked the beginning of a new model for cinema production: an independent company with expertise in a different medium industry produced content for a blockbuster film¹⁸⁶. The promise of a shared universe seemed quite realistic at the end of the aforementioned movie. During that time, Marvel Studios made a declaration of intent both on and off screen, about the development of an expanded universe in which Marvel characters would collide. In the *Iron Man* film, during a post-credit scene, Samuel L. Jackson's character appears as Colonel Nick Fury (a character from the comics) and asks Iron Man to join the Avenger Initiative as, paraphrasing Colonel Fury, "he is part of a bigger universe"¹⁸⁷. True to that promise, during the following three years, Marvel Studios produced respectively *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (John Johnston, 2011) culminating in 2012 with the first Avengers movie, called *The Avengers*. During this time, all the stand-alone movies had some interconnections and unified plot progression. What is depicted here is a solid, well-structured continuity within the MCU. However, not every Marvel movie produced was at the time produced by Marvel Studios: Marvel's earlier releases, such as the *Spider-man* (Sam Raimi, 2003-2007) (Marc Webb, 2012-2014) or the *X-Men* (Lauren Shuler Donner, 2000-2020) saga were never been referenced into the MCU storylines, showing that, as an independent studio, Marvel Studios would only work to assemble a Marvel Cinematic Universe exclusively made by its cohesive produced episodes¹⁸⁸.

Such approach allows to understand transmedia storytelling as a form of serialization that unfolds horizontally, across multiple media. MCU embrace this notion of transmedia, developing the plot (for the most eager fans) as a narratively complex tv series (as per Jason Mittel's definition) that needs to be followed step by step in order to get to the final resolution, and complemented by satellite events that will be solved at the end of each film (episode). A long-term strategy allowed Marvel to build a shared universe in light of a precise final turn of events. This creative and managerial control was exemplified by breaking the macro plot line, called the *Infinity Arc* into three "phases":

1. Phase 1 tells the origin story of each hero, leading to an assembled movie, *Avengers*, who brought all of them together;
2. Phase 2 would go deeper into each superhero personal backstory while dealing with the outcomes of the ensemble movie;

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, Derek, "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence", cit., p.1

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/489062>

¹⁸⁷ *Iron Man* (Id., Jon Favreau, 2008)

¹⁸⁸ Ivi, pp.5-6 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/489062>

3. Phase 3 adds superheroes to the Avengers team and move the Infinity Arc to its end, setting up for future story arcs.

Marvel excelled in turning a niche product into a mainstream one, since the *Infinity Arc* grossed over 22 billion dollars worldwide and brought back to theatres a generation of people more inclined to consume streaming products¹⁸⁹. Every “phase” can be interpreted as a tv show’s season, each with a different storyline that culminate in a last assembled, crossover movie whereby all superheroes finally meet¹⁹⁰.

The franchise is currently in a phase of expansion across different media platforms. Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios president, stated that in order to understand everything in future movies, Disney+ tv shows will be necessary as they will factor into follow ups films as *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Sam Raimi, 2022)¹⁹¹. That is not entirely true. As *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* showed, the tv show *WandaVision* (Jac Schaeffer, Disney+ 2021) is essential only for core fans who find references to the show across the movie, but the plotline of the film stands for itself. What happened to Wanda is hinted at and explained throughout the movie well enough to generate curiosity in the audience and making them want to go back to the tv show at a later stage, but not too much to make the movie unintelligible to the occasional viewers. What’s important to underline is that not every Marvel tv show can serve as an entry point to the franchise. As for *WandaVision* for example, it stands more as a spinoff than a self-contained product differing once more from the transmedia storytelling notion depicted so far. In the end, it is safe to say, that, as the name suggest, MCU is a Cinematic Universe rather than a Transmedia Universe, as the only real entry points to that are, in fact, the movies¹⁹².

Kevin Feige also stated in 2009 that Marvel’s crossover strategy represented an innovative idea in the cinematographic industry, claiming: “We’re trying something that’s never been done before, a new idea of the same character appearing in multiple franchises¹⁹³”. This concept will prove to be real much more in the future than it did at the time. Truth be told, during the phase 1 of Marvel Studios productions, Marvel’s cinematic intertextuality didn’t question textual traditions in cinema industry, it only changed the dynamics of adaptation and compatibility with comic book storytelling. What

¹⁸⁹ Pai, Akshay, “Marvel: Building Cinematic Universe with Strategy”, in *The Strategy Story*, 2021,

<https://thestrategystory.com/2021/03/29/marvel-cinematic-universe-strategy/>

¹⁹⁰ Yockey, Matt (a cura di), *Make Ours Marvel*, Univ. of Texas Press, Austin, Texas 2017

¹⁹¹ Tassi, Paul, “Kevin Feige Confirms You’ll Need to Watch Disney Plus Marvel Shows to Keep Up With The Movie MCU”, *Forbes*, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2019/11/07/kevin-feige-confirms-youll-need-to-watch-disney-plus-marvel-shows-to-keep-up-with-the-movie-mcu/>

¹⁹² Yockey, Matt (a cura di), *Make Ours Marvel*, cit.

¹⁹³ Borys Kit, “The Avenger,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 2009, 12

stated by Kevin Feige will instead come into fruition when multiverse notion was introduced, during Marvel's phase 4, with the 2021 release of Spider man. Marvel's success is based on 4 principles: keep challenging the formula; select for experienced inexperience; cultivate audience's curiosity; leverage a stable core. Let's look at them more into detail:

1. Watching all movies at once, it may seem that they are all the same, based on the same winning formula. They are all about a superhero, a villain and a final resolution of the conflict based on a battle with computer-generated visual effects. With a deeper analysis, it is possible to affirm the different emotional tone each movie delivers: *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017) for example, is set with a light-hearted tone and a continuous use of punchlines or comics reliefs; *Eternals* (Chloé Zhao, 2021) delivers instead an adult approach to human emotions and sentiments. Movies are also visually different. Captain America movies trilogy is set on the Earth while Thor films are set in the Asgardian planet or in the outer space. Finally, the very superhero genre is challenged, with a subversion of the archetypes established in the past. The continuous experimentation is appreciated by the fans who waits eagerly for the next movie;
2. When looking for a director, Marvel Studios always tends to excellent directors with experience but with 0 expertise in cine-comics. Their experience will be used to bring a unique vision and tone to each film. At the same time, as leading actors, Marvel often bet on not so popular and acclaimed actors such as Robert Downey Jr. or Chris Evans, converting them in the most successful people in the business;
3. The ultimate goal for the Marvel Studios is to make moviegoers, active participants in the investigation of the greater shared world puzzle. Even the release of movies, as for the phases from 1 to 3, left the viewers with the task of re-building the linear story time. The temporality of the narrative is in fact articulated and built not only over a single film but all over the franchises' movies. The events narrated by *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck, 2019) fit well before the first *Iron Man* release, without being a prequel, as it gives a back story to Samuel L. Jackson's character and it helps to collocate the superhero in the bigger picture of the universe. Post credit are also flash forward scenes whose events will be understood only in future films. Moreover, Marvel builds anticipation through several Easter Eggs spread over the movies that suggest future products;

4. Marvel work environment is depicted by insiders and actors as a rewarding, creatively free space. This business philosophy helps the studio to build continuity across products, attracting at the same time, fresh and established talents¹⁹⁴.

5.1.1. MCU's Winning Business Model

Marvel Studios has created one of the most successful blockbuster's franchises ever. Its strategy is primarily based on the building of an acknowledgement of a shared fictional universe called Marvel Cinematic Universe, inspired by the pioneering comic book storytelling delivered by Marvel Comics in the '60s. The system built is based on a modular strategy in which each product is interlinked but at the same time independent by one another. Each film is also a promotional tool for future products, building anticipation on the audience. The specific strategies used by the studio to bring casual viewers to commit to the franchise, are: post credit scenes; easter eggs; crossovers; linked repercussions; modular story development. Here they are deepened in their features:

1. Since *Iron Man*, released in 2008, every MCU movie released has had at least one post credit scene. Especially at the beginning, post credit scenes were used to create a solid continuity between the films. Moreover, they create anticipation for what was coming next;
2. MCU uses to hide Easter Eggs and visual clues to potential future plot directions. These elements aren't necessary for the purposes of the plot and they are only caught by devoted fans of the transmedia franchise. These hints are in fact, usually references to the comic books that normally only dedicated readers know. Easter eggs are actually used to activate the imagination of core fans and to reward their brand loyalty. An attachment to the franchise is also built as, viewers seize as a challenge the search for hidden secrets;
3. Crossovers are used to attract those viewers who are normally only attracted by one or two superheroes and not the all franchise. They'll start to watch one of the movies, knowing their favourite character will appear at some point. This approach will increase sales of both movies and convert the viewer into a multi viewer. Moreover, the feeling of a shared universe will be established;
4. Linked repercussions are deeply linked to the notion of shared universe. What happens in one movie will have consequences also in the following film about another superhero;
5. In the end modular story development serves more as an industrial factor than a narrative one. In creating a series of linked films, the risk of lowering movies' quality is high. Setting the

¹⁹⁴ Harrison, Spencer, Carlsen, Arne, Škerlavaj, Miha, "Marvel's Blockbuster Machine", *Harvard Business Review*, 2019 <https://hbr.org/2019/07/marvels-blockbuster-machine>

series in a modular system means that the studio can overcome failure thanks to a next big hit¹⁹⁵. Big budget franchises are usually critic-proof. Even with poor ratings, franchises are usually commercial successes, helping the studio survive until the next release.

There is yet another marketing strategy used by the studio to attract the audience that has been used most recently in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* movie. To this day, this is the third highest grossing movie at American box office with \$760.988 million in U.S. and such a success is due to the huge fan service delivered. The film portrays villains of previous Spider-Men franchises, cameos from Marvel Television tv shows and last but not least, Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire's version of Spider-Man. While the plot does not shine with novelty or depth (indeed showing some plot holes, unsound plot devices for the unfolding of the story and inconsistency with the previous films), the fan service offered was so well done that both audiences and critics appreciated the film.

5.2. Marvel Studios Monopoly and Superheroes' Movies' Rights

The Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Entertainment and most of the associated comic assets in 2009 after a merger deal. Both Marvel Studios and Marvel Television survived the acquisition as subsidiary division units, respectively committed to the production of films, the first one and tv shows, the second one. The first film to be distributed under Disney company was *The Avengers* in 2012. At the time, movie rights of the most famous superheroes were all held by other major companies, and Disney had to build its own empire over lesser-known character who would eventually become the stars of the day. At the same time, however, Disney business model involved the production via Marvel Television, of tv shows about secondary characters who fitted in the MCU but weren't mentioned in the macro continuity of the movies, as for example *Agent Carter* (Christopher Marcus, Stephen McFeely, ABC 2015-2016) or *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, Maurissa Tancharoen, ABC 2013-2020)¹⁹⁶.

Marvel's business, as the Disney one, revolves around intellectual property over imaginary characters. When the agreement was settled the fear spreading across the comic industry was that Disney would have ruined Marvel characters, until their "Disneyfication". On the opposite site, Disney itself feared that an investment in the field of comic books wasn't so much of a great deal. As

¹⁹⁵ Bart, Beaty, "Superhero fan service: Audience Strategies in the Contemporary Interlinked Hollywood Blockbuster", *The Information Society*, 2016, vol.32, n.5, pp. 321-323,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01972243.2016.1212616>

¹⁹⁶ Tyler, Adrienne, "Disney Bought Marvel 10 Years Ago: How It Changed Everything", in *Screen Rant*, 2019,

<https://screenrant.com/disney-marvel-purchase-10-years-movies-changed-how/>

we know today, the deal turned out to be one of the most successful in the history of Western creative industry¹⁹⁷. When Bob Siger (Disney Company CEO) arrived, he closed a deal for about 4\$ billion to purchase the comic book company. After the acquisition, Marvel agreements with other majors remained into place, so that the first two *Iron Man*, *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* were distributed by Paramount, while Universal distributed *The Incredible Hulk*. Movie rights for Iron Man, Thor and Captain America were eventually bought back; while The Hulk is still under Universal Pictures distribution rights. For this reason (as stated in the contract), Marvel Studios can only use Hulk in multicharacter films while any stand-alone movie hasn't been produced yet.

Even after Disney acquisition and movie rights coming back to Marvel, Marvel Studios still faced a lack of continuity between MCU products and all other Marvel products. In 2015, Marvel Studios was placed with Walt Disney Studios, while Marvel Television and Marvel Animation remained under Marvel Entertainment¹⁹⁸. In 2019, things changed again: Disney Plus streamer service was about to be launched in the market and Kevin Feige saw the opportunity to produce tv shows centred on the movies characters to be distributed on the streaming platform. At the same time, Marvel television and Marvel Family Entertainment returned under the Marvel Studios banner, with Kevin Feige installed as the Chief Creative Officer. It was obvious at that point that Feige business strategy would have been to produce tv shows aimed at building a solid and cohesive continuity with the movies in full harmony with the entire MCU, and thus setting aside Marvel Television productions. Even though Marvel Television didn't cease to exist, the on-going tv shows productions were all shut down or cancelled, leaving Marvel Television to focus on animation¹⁹⁹.

5.3. Phase 4

We are currently living in the phase 4 of the MCU. For the first time since Marvel Cinematic Universe's debut, Marvel's tv shows are part of the continuity of the shared universe. Just like with the Infinity Saga, the fourth phase should open the doors to a new super villain who will eventually require all superheroes to join forces in order to defeat him. However, contrary to what said so far, the final vision for this new arc doesn't seem totally clear yet.

¹⁹⁷ Ingram, Mathew, "Six Years Later, Disney's Acquisition of Marvel Looks Smarter Than Ever", in *Fortune*, 2015, <https://fortune.com/2015/10/08/disney-marvel/>

¹⁹⁸ Erao, Matthew, "How Marvel Studios Really Works", in *Screen Rant*, 2018, <https://screenrant.com/marvel-studios-explained-disney/>

¹⁹⁹ Otterson, John, "As Marvel Studios Moves into Series, TV Unit's Focus Is Unclear", in *Variety*, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/marvel-studios-tv-1203349869/>

To this day, phase 4 has welcomed a new pantheon of Egyptian gods (*Moon Knight* tv show) (Jeremy Slater, Disney+ 2022), introduced new heroes (*Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*) (Destin Daniel Cretton 2021; *Eternals*, 2021), produced a prequel origin story of an already dead character (*Black Widow*) (Cate Shortland, 2021) and, last but not least, cracked open the Multiverse without a clear explanation of how *their* multiverse works (*Loki*, tv show, 2021; *Spiderman: No Way Home*, 2021; *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, 2022). In this context, fans have still no idea of who or what, the big villain to defeat will be. One of the biggest concerns for fans and in part for the studio is that, contrary to the previous MCU's phases, in phase 4 there won't be any *Avengers* movie. The lead superheroes of the previous team are gone, leaving the remaining ones to eventually team up in the name of a greater good. But to this day, no step has been taken in that direction²⁰⁰. Nonetheless, on the basis of what has been offered so far, this new era of the MCU seems ready to amaze the fans with much more exciting and creative plotlines and a bucket of superheroes vaster than ever.

The first product that launched MCU's phase 4 has been Disney Plus tv show *WandaVision* that raised the bar to a new, innovative style never used before by Marvel movies. The sit-com genre, resembling in each episode a cult sit-com from a different decade, was used as a plot device to tell the story of Wanda dealing with the aftermath of *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2019) events. After that, several tv shows both about existing characters such as *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Malcolm Spellman, Disney+ 2021) and new ones, such as *Ms. Marvel* (Bisha K. Ali, Disney+ 2022) have been released over the next years. Upcoming movies such as Thor sequel, *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Taika Waititi, 2022) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Ryan Coogler, 2022) are expected to hit the theatres during Summer 2022 and November 2022²⁰¹.

Despite its still short life, phase 4 has faced numerous backlash due to its unclear vision and lack of strong characters. The universe left over has to carry on without Captain America, Iron Man and Black Widow, three of the most appreciated characters so far. Moreover, all the new movies don't seem to have a fil rouge connecting each other. But most importantly, fans didn't quite appreciate Kevin Feige decision to make Disney's Plus tv shows essential to watch, in order to follow up with the events of MCU films. While a steady continuity is fundamental to the success of transmedia franchise - and Marvel Television products were questioning the essence of canonicity - at the same time, fans perceived Feige statement as a rather assertive obligation to subscribe to Disney Plus

²⁰⁰ Tyler, Adrienne, "Every Way MCU Phase Is Different from Marvel's Previous Phases", in *Screen Rant*, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/mcu-marvel-phase-4-differences-changes-how/>

²⁰¹ Lash, Jolie, "Where Are We in Marvel's Phase 4?", in *Entertainment Weekly*, 2021, <https://ew.com/movies/where-are-we-in-marvels-phase-4/>

service. The risk is that asking for a higher commitment, burn the fan-base out, making viewers quit the franchise altogether. People may actually not be interested in extending their viewing experience beyond a single medium. Executives have to decide what new serialized contents shall work as a transmedia extension and which explore in the main medium, deciphering and interpreting producers' choices.

There have been also bright sides in the making of phase 4. This is the most experimental and inclusive "Marvel era" ever realized. *WandaVision*, as said before has marked a new way of making cinecomics, while *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, *Shang Chi* and *Eternals* portrayed superheroes with disability, different ethnicity and sexual orientation. At the end of the day, MCU is currently facing a dynamic and refreshing period in which a more mature and nuanced tone is set and cinema genres are explored²⁰². Most importantly, to the aims of this study, Multiverse storyline is introduced, opening the doors to many more narrative fields.

5.3.1. 'Loki' & 'Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness': A Narrative Multiverse

Multiverse storyline has been introduced first in the *Loki* series and secondly, in *Spider Man: No Way Home*. While the consequences of certain events within the Spider Man narrative will be addressed later on, it is now worth focussing on the dynamics and the narrative rules that explains how the Multiverse works within the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

In order to fully understand Multiverse expansion dynamics and their inherent motivations, we have to take a step back and consider the narrative *Avengers: Endgame* events, as we would like to argue that they established some ground rules for how multiverse and alternate timelines work in the MCU. At a first glance, in MCU internal logics, alternate timelines and alternate universes appear to be synonyms, depicting the same issue. To begin with, in MCU, time travel can create alternate timelines. As Mordo tells to Doctor Strange, in his stand-alone movie: "Temporal manipulations can create branches in time. Unstable dimensional openings, spatial paradoxes, time loops! [...]"²⁰³. Time itself isn't a linear flow but rather a spatial dimension through which people can move, i.e., time travel. Time travel's possibility is actually tested in *Avengers: Endgame* when some of the Avengers go back in time to collect the Infinity Stones. Marvel's concept of time travel is loosely based on physics many worlds theory. Whenever, someone travel back in time in his own timeline, he causes a change of events and a branched reality (or a different timeline) assembles, starting off from the

²⁰² Tyler, Adrienne, "Marvel's Phase 5 Movies Are Already More Exciting Than Phase 4", in *Screen Rant*, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/marvel-mcu-phase-4-5-movies-comparison-better/>

²⁰³ *Doctor Strange* (Id., Scott Derrickson, 2016)

point of arrival in the past. On the contrary, if someone travels back to present from the future, nothing happens to the established timeline²⁰⁴. In *Endgame* time travelling logics provokes the creation of an alternate timeline. As explained in the movie, when one of those items is removed from its timeline, a branch develops. However, if the same stone is replaced in its timeline in the exact moment it was removed, then the new branch is erased and actually never existed²⁰⁵. These alternative timelines branching off a primary timeline are part of an alternative universe altogether. With this in mind, we face now, *Loki* turn of events.

Loki tv show is set after the changed events of The Avengers' New York battle in 2012, due to Avengers' time travel in *Avengers: Endgame*. In the new storyline, Loki doesn't die but he actually succeeds in escape Thor with the Tesseract. *Loki* tv show takes back to where we left the character after this time changing. During the first episode we see Loki captured by the "Time Variance Authority", an organization existing outside of time and space and in charge of monitoring the timeline. TVA accuses Loki of branching from the path he was meant to follow. But what does actually mean? The season finale reveals that, in the 31st century a scientist discovers that at the beginning of time there were infinite universes with no set path, that never crossed lines. At some point, both him and his variants learned how to travel between parallel worlds, using it as a weapon to create chaos and dominate all realities, leading to a multiverse war. The scientist understands that, the only way possible to end the chaos is to eliminate free will; he kills all his variants and only one version of him survives. In trying to stop history repeating itself, he also decides to create TVA, becoming "He Who Remains". The parallel worlds left, are re-organised into one "Sacred Timeline", so that variants and alternate universes co-exist in a single loop of time. By the end of the season, "He Who Remains" gets killed, and the "Sacred Timeline" starts to branch, resulting in a chaotic multiverse²⁰⁶. *Loki* expands *Endgame*'s notion of time and multiple realities, pointing out the importance of the set path everyone has to follow and promoting a discourse that qualifies as a metanarrative describing in the events the actual organisation strategies governing the fictional world-building that the media products indeed propose to their audiences.

Whoever deviates significantly from the path determined by "the Sacred Timeline" causes a branched timeline. Those changing events are named "nexus events" and they can be reversed within a short period of time before becoming permanent. If they aren't "pruned" (technical terminology used in *Loki* to indicate the obliteration of the deviating timeline), they can result in another extra dimensional

²⁰⁴ Grauso, Alisha, "MCU's Multiverse & Alternate Timelines Rules Explained (Based on Loki & Endgame)", in *Screen Rant*, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/mcu-multiverse-alternate-timelines-rules-loki-endgame-explained/>

²⁰⁵ *Avengers: Endgame* (Id, Russo J. and A., 2019)

²⁰⁶ *Loki* (Id., Michael Waldron, Disney Plus 2021-)

war. When a nexus event becomes permanent, it opens to an alternate universe. Moreover, those people who diverge from their established path are called ‘variants’ and, as *Loki* shows, they can have a totally different aspect from the original version or be the exactly same. At the end of season 1, Lady Loki kills “He Who Remains”, infinite branches open up and the Multiverse explodes. The world as we know it descends into chaos²⁰⁷. At this point a continuity problem raises: Loki’s events take place in TVA’s offices and in the “Citadel”, castle of “He Who Remains”; both exists beyond space and time. If so, when Sylvie liberates the Multiverse, the effects should be perceived all over the universe and in any moment in time, even past events already happened and portrayed in the MCU. Both Kevin Feige and Marvel Studios producer Richard Palmer address the issue, explaining that, alternate timelines and alternate realities are actually two different things in MCU but that they can easily intersect, being one of the same. They also state that, *Spiderman: No Way Home* events and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* are actually possible in virtue of what Sylvie did²⁰⁸. Even so, the issue remains and two major problems strike out:

1. If Loki’s events are effectively happened in a dimension out of space and time, it should have affected every moment in time ever occurred, affecting also previous phases’ events. A continuity error is identified;
2. The lack of a unified, clear vision addressed before, is even more obvious. In *Spiderman: No Way Home*, the plot device used to open the Multiverse is actually the spell casted by Doctor Strange and interrupted by Peter Parker. Same thing for *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*. *Loki*’s events are never addressed and the film only opens up more questions about Multiverse internal rules. A narrative connection is only provided later by Feige and Palmer during an interview, depriving the fans of a linear narration.

As Palmer stated: “At that moment (ed. Sylvie’s murder of He Who Remains), the Multiverse expanded indefinitely forward into the future, back into the past, sideways, left and right, to alternate realities we can’t even comprehend [...]”.

It is time to dig deeper into Feige and Palmer’s explanation about alternate realities. As clarified above, in the MCU alternate realities and alternate timelines are two different things, deeply interconnected, yet different or, at least, this is the only explanation that can partially satisfy the continuity problems about the multiverse. As seen in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, there are alternate realities completely different from the one we know, also in its physics

²⁰⁷ Grauso, Alisha, “MCU’s Multiverse & Alternate Timelines Rules Explained (Based on Loki & Endgame)”, cit., <https://screenrant.com/mcu-multiverse-alternate-timelines-rules-loki-endgame-explained/>

²⁰⁸ Din, Christine, “How ‘Loki’ Led Us to the ‘Multiverse of Madness’”, in *Marvel.com*, 2022, <https://www.marvel.com/articles/movies/loki-led-us-to-doctor-strange-multiverse-of-madness>

characteristics: a universe entirely made of paint or another made of cartoons are an example of alternate universes existing²⁰⁹. In *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, Stephen Strange decides to protect America Chavez, a kid with the ability of opening portals in the multiverse who is threatened by Scarlet Witch, aka Wanda. It shows once more, another way to open the multiverse. America Chavez doesn't have any variants and she is not still able to control her superpower²¹⁰. Who is she? Where is she collocated in the wider picture of MCU's multiverse? Doctor Strange's sequel, as for *Loki*, creates continuity errors other than retconning some established internal rules about how MCU operates. One of the extensions of what we know so far about the multiverse is narrated in the movie as "Dreamwalking". In the MCU world, dreams aren't the creation of people's subconscious but rather the vision of an episode in life of one of their personal variants in the multiverse. Practicing the "Dreamwalking" creates an active connection between the person and the variant as it allows to control the body of it across the dimensions. That being said, this re-definition of dreams creates a continuity error in the MCU²¹¹. In *Iron Man 3*, we clearly see Tony Stark suffering from PTSD after the events of *The Avengers*. This causes him to have nightmares in which he re-lives the events of those days²¹². Those aren't images of another universe. We also discover that our universe, the one in which all 3 phases of MCU took place, is called Earth-616 and that travelling across universes comes with a price. If two universes collide, an incursion occurs and both universes are destroyed determining a contraction for the multiverse. At this point, the audience is introduced to a new entity, "the Illuminati", who control and manage the incursions happening in the multiverse. Other questions raise for itself: Are the "Illuminati" and "He Who Remains" co-existing in the intricate realm of the multiverse? Or rather, we are once again facing a case of dis-continuity in the MCU internal rules? Finally, it is important to acknowledge the existence in the MCU of dimensions other than alternate realities. In the MCU universe, being in another dimensions means existing in a different plan of reality in which you can still perceive (and sometimes interact) with the real world. It is similar to being a ghost, while alternate universes (or realities) are essentially what composes the multiverse.

In the end the only logic answer seems to be waiting for the second season of *Loki*. As said before, during the first 3 phases of MCU, the chronological order of events didn't reflect the release of the movies, serving as a sort of prequels to the main events of the central movie. Season 2 events will

²⁰⁹ *Doctor Strange nel multiverso della follia* (Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, Sam Raimi, 2022)

²¹⁰ Crabb, Jeremy, "Every Time Doctor Strange 2 Breaks Marvel's Own Rules", cit., <https://screenrant.com/doctor-strange-multiverse-madness-rules-plot-holes-retcons/>

²¹¹ Ivi., <https://screenrant.com/doctor-strange-multiverse-madness-rules-plot-holes-retcons/>

²¹² *Iron Man 3* (Id., Shane Black, 2013)

take place shortly after the outcome of the season 1 finale, so that the story time will actually be linear and clear once the season will be released. Season 1 left with a big cliff hanger that would certainly explain and give answer to many of previously cited doubts. In the framework of a tv series', leaving the audience with in pending questions is actually a clever device but a certain degree of narrative autonomy is required. *Loki*, however, doesn't really stand on its own feet, as it operates in the greater framework of a shared universe. In taking this route, Marvel Studios risks to lose the straight direction that characterize the studio so far. As Doctor Strange said once to Peter Parker: "The Multiverse is a concept about which we know frighteningly little"; maybe then, it is time for writers and producers to uncover its secrets.

5.4. Multiverse Continuity

As mentioned earlier, Marvel Studios didn't (and do not seem to) hold movie rights for the entirety of Marvel's superheroes catalogue. Even after the Walt Disney Company's acquisition, contracts previously stipulated with other majors remained in force until their expiration. Marvel content produced outside the Marvel Studios weren't therefore canon in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. First of all, we start taking as a sample the year 2012. In 2012, Marvel Studios produces its first movie under the umbrella of The Walt Disney Company and that movie is no less than *The Avengers*. That film features as main superheroes: Iron Man, Captain America, Black Widow, Thor, Hulk and Falcon. Movie rights were in fact, all held by Marvel Studios. Moreover, Black Panther, Shang Chi, Doctor Strange and Ant Man intellectual property were also detained by the Marvel Studios and set to be produced over the following years. In that period, known as the phase 1 of the MCU, stand-alone movies about each of the first Avengers ensemble hit the theatres. In 2008, *The Incredible Hulk* is released. At the time, Universal Pictures held character's distribution rights, Marvel Studios could only portray the character in multi cast's movies while Universal detained the final word over the release of stand-alone movies. Contrary to other superheroes' movie rights, Hulk is actually in a situation of co-ownership between Marvel Studios and Universal. Universal produced and distributed *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) movie in 2003, holding the rights of it. By contract they should have also produce a sequel, but they never fulfil their part of the deal. Production rights were therefore returned to Marvel that decided to reboot the movie while distribution was still in Universal's hands²¹³. A similar deal interests Sony and Marvel in the production of Spider Man related movies. For the moment, let's put the terms of this agreement aside as it will shape deeper the purpose of this paper and will be later addressed. A *very* similar situation was being faced instead, for the rights of

²¹³ Norman, Jim, "The MCU's Hulk Problems Are Way Bigger Than Just Movie Rights", in *Screen Rant*, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/mcu-hulk-problems-movie-rights-story/>

Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch, apparently both hold by Marvel Studios and Fox. Quicksilver first introduction in the MCU, has been made in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) released in 2015. In 2014, he was also portrayed in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014) produced and distributed by 20th Century Fox. X-men, Wolverine, Fantastic Four and Deadpool movie rights were in fact, entirely detained by Fox. It is important to remember that in the comics, Quicksilver, along with his twin sister Scarlet Witch takes part both in the X-men and the Avengers meaning that, both Fox and Marvel had legitimate right to use them in their movie universes and even represent them with different characterizations and interpretations (MCU's Quicksilver is portrayed by Aaron Taylor-Johnson, while the X-Men one is played by Evan Peters). As a result, the appearance of both of them in both franchises comes with a clause. In the MCU franchise, the twins can never be addressed as mutants as that, is the nature of X-men and their origin story has children of Magneto can never be mentioned; similarly, in a X-men movie, the past of Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch's in the Avengers has never existed²¹⁴. Finally, two important clarifications must be made:

1. As previously explained, before 2019 Marvel Studios' incorporation of Marvel Television and Marvel Entertainment, Marvel Television's products weren't considered canon in the MCU. They were divisions of Marvel Entertainment that worked separately;
2. At the same time, Marvel Entertainment was the one to hold the rights for comics' Marvel characters, for this reason, the flipping images of Marvel's title sequence were added in movies, long before Marvel Studios and Disney acquisition.

In 2019, The Walt Disney Company acquired for \$71 billion, Rupert Murdoch's 21st century Fox film and entertainment asset. Disney's deal put under one roof, the already owned three powerhouses (Lucasfilm; Pixar; Marvel Studios) and FOX's Film division. The "big six" are now officially 5. After the deal, Marvel's fans were happy to know that beloved characters such as X-men, Deadpool or the Fantastic Four have entered the scene and brought into the MCU²¹⁵. In the same year, Marvel Studios put under its umbrella both Marvel Television and Marvel Entertainment, while Sony and Marvel partnership strengthened more and more. With that in mind, multiverse's potential expands even further.

²¹⁴ Kendrick, Ben, "Avengers vs. X-Men Quicksilver: Marvel & Fox Movie Usage Explained", in *Screen Rant*, 2015, <https://screenrant.com/quicksilver-x-men-avengers-2-fox-marvel-dead/>

²¹⁵ Staff and agencies, "Disney Seals \$71bn Deal for 21st Century Fox As It Prepares to Take On Netflix", in *The Guardian*, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/20/disney-seals-71bn-deal-for-21st-century-fox-as-it-prepares-to-take-on-netflix>

Marvel Cinematic Universe is inhabited by every superhero Marvel Studios hold movies rights for, with the addition of Hulk and Spider Man (see above). Moreover, Marvel Entertainment (licensor of Marvel characters movie rights) and Marvel Studios, for the first time in history, actually coincide, and Fox acquisition brings to the Marvel Studios, the superheroes still missing. Marvel Studios holds now movie rights for every Marvel superhero's film ever made, its sequels, its reboots and its distribution; while narratively speaking, Marvel Cinematic Universe is now inhabited by every version of every Marvel superhero. It is in this scenario that the idea of introducing the Multiverse develops.

Let's consider *Daredevil* (Drew Goddard, Netflix 2015-2018) (Disney+ 2022-) and *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016) as a starting point. *Daredevil* is a tv show ordered by Netflix and developed by Marvel Television between 2015 and 2018. After Marvel Studios' absorption of Marvel Television, Netflix cancelled the show and eventually removed the tv show from its catalogue when Disney finally regained character's license. The show was acclaimed both from the critic and the audience, so much that Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios president, declared that *Daredevil's* character and events were officially canon in the MCU continuity and ready to appear in future outcomes. *Spider man: No Way Home* hosts first Charlie Cox's cameo (*Daredevil* actor) in a MCU product. Moreover, while it is still unclear if what we will see will be a soft reboot or a direct sequel to the last events of the last season, a new season for Disney Plus platform is reportedly in production²¹⁶. *Deadpool* and *Deadpool 2* (David Leitch, 2018), released respectively in 2016 and 2018, have also officially entered Marvel Cinematic Universe and are now canon. The news was dropped by *Deadpool* himself in a promotional video with Korg (alien warrior appearing in *Thor: Ragnarok*). In the clip, *Deadpool* watches a film's trailer in his fictional YouTube channel. He is later joined in the sofa by Korg. When the viewing ends, *Deadpool* asks Korg if he had "any tips on getting into the MCU", with the alien responding: "Have a dream, chase it, lose that dream... You're never going to achieve that dream."²¹⁷.

Both *Daredevil* and *Deadpool* were two superheroes truly loved by the fans, so much they entered the common imaginary as iconic, unforgettable characters. Even, the actors chosen to embody the heroes, were welcomed with enthusiasm by the audience who found them the right, irreplaceable choice. Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that for every movie or tv show. *Fantastic 4* for example hit the theatres twice, both times under Fox. The first iteration, titled *Fantastic four* (Tim Story, 2005)

²¹⁶ Otterson, Joe, "Daredevil Disney+ Series in the Works with Matt Corman, Chris Ord Set to Write", in *Variety*, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/daredevil-disney-plus-series-matt-corman-chris-ord-1235272299/>

²¹⁷ Reynolds, Ryan, *Deadpool and Korg React*, 13 luglio 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7q60i_Lh_E (ultimo accesso 25/05/2022)

was released in 2005, with a younger Chris Evans playing the role of the Human Torch; in 2015, *Fant4stic* (Josh Trank, 2015) was realised as a reboot of the franchise and panned by the critics. Even in this case, the Human Torch was played by an actor, who later in life, played a role in the MCU: Michael B. Jordan is also N'Jadaka in *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) movie. Fantastic Four reboot (Marvel studios version) is already set to be produced and released in 2024. The production company didn't like previous portrayals of the characters and they firmly believe they can tell a better story that will also fit better in the framework of MCU, thereby creating a steadier continuity with Marvel's phases. But that's not all: the multiverse has opened and, as *Loki* (and *Spiderman: No Way Home*) demonstrates, variants don't always have the same appearance as one another, hence none of the *Fantastic Four* movie necessitate to be put aside and raised from collective memory: they can peacefully co-exist with one another without disrupting the Studios' vision or legacy. From now on, anything that doesn't fit MCU canonicity can still be considered valid and consistent, as it will simply be happened in a different universe. This new storyline opens up to multiple opportunities: as we have seen, variants can meet; older characters representations can come back and interact with the present one. The same actors who played two different superheroes can now easily co-exist and participate in new adventures. Chris Evans, for example, could eventually come back to the MCU not as Captain America but rather The Human Torch, same thing for Michael B. Jordan. Both possibilities are a really mind blower for eager fans. Every Marvel Franchise is now one and the same, with the multiverse, as the metaphorical and fictional portal of all.

5.4.1. Sony & Marvel's Spiderman Deal

To this day, one of the most interesting partnership and studios deal in the blockbuster franchise's industry, has to do with one of the most beloved Marvel characters: Spiderman. For the purposes of this research, it is important to know and really understand the effects that this partnership had on the studios' management, and how it changed the cinema landscape. Most importantly, moving forward with the analysis, we will attempt to draw a clear picture of the connection between this type of contractual relationship and the narrative conception of the multiverse. The ways in which the former has influenced the latter and the possible future consequences of a change in direction by the two major studios will be particularly focussed.

The first big, transmedial Sony's success, was the first *Spiderman* trilogy (2002-2007), directed by Sam Raimi and with Tobey Maguire in the starring role of Peter Parker. When the first *Spider-Man* came out, the superhero held already a big fanbase among the comics' readers. Sony was in fact, one of the first big majors to stipulate a deal with Marvel Comics for the license of a Marvel character. It was a huge success at the box office and the critics, with a revenue of \$822 million, turning in the

first franchise success for the studio. As the only licensee in the exploitation of the character, Sony also dealt with the marketing, merchandising and promotion of the franchise, using the movies to promote its innovations in the computer entertainment field. A Spider-Man related videogame was produced and sold as a complementary good for the Play Station 2, which expanded its market share even more, thanks to the superhero²¹⁸.

Shortly after the end of the trilogy, Sony opted to a reboot of the franchise, developing *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2: Rise of Electro* in 2012 and 2014 and directed by Marc Webb. *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* was poorly received by both the critics and box office, so much that Marvel Studios decided to reach out to Sony Pictures asking for a deal of co-ownership of the character. Movie rights would have stayed with Sony, while Marvel reserved the right to produce a new series of Spider Man films on their behalf, with Kevin Feige as producer. Sony was in charge of distribution and financial expenditures, while retaining the earning for itself. Marvel would receive the 5% of the profits, with the possibility in return of using this new version of the character for its multi-characters films. Tom Holland was chosen as the new face of the superhero, appearing on screen for the first time in *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2016) in 2016.

When *Spider-Man: Far From* was released as the second solo movie in 2019, the agreement between Sony and Marvel seems to come to an end. Fortunately, a new deal was reached between Marvel Studios and Sony Pictures agreeing to work together for two more movies. Out of this, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* was released in 2021 and a fourth movie is set to be developed. Sony's aim seems to be bringing Spider-Man fully into its Marvel superhero universe, getting Tom Holland to deal with Tom Hardy's *Venom* and Jared Leto's *Morbius*²¹⁹. As a confirmation of this theory, Sony has recently re-branded its fictional universe as "Sony's Spider-Man Universe". The major owns the rights for mostly all super villains, enemies of Spider-Man, so it is reasonable to believe that making the hero joining the fictional world is only a matter of time.

5.4.2. *Spiderman: No Way Home: Linking Two Franchises and One Universe*

Spider-Man: No Way Home is the third movie of Tom Holland's trilogy, and its plot revolves around the aftermath of cracking open the Multiverse. In the film, (released after *Loki* tv show) Peter Park is responsible for messing up with Doctor Strange's spell, causing characters from other universe,

²¹⁸ Zecca, Federico (a cura di), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, cit., pp.52-53

²¹⁹ Bacon, Thomas, "Sony & Marvel's New Spider-Man Deal Explained", in *Screen Rant*, 2019,

<https://screenrant.com/spiderman-sony-marvel-deal-explained/>

familiar with Peter Parker secret identity, entering the MCU. Spider-Man former's villains arrive, including Alfred Molina's Doctor Octopus (*Spider-Man 2* main villain) (Sam Raimi, 2004) and Jamie Foxx's Electro (main villain of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*). Soon, they realize they are going after the wrong Peter Parker. They were in fact, chasing their Spider-Men in their universes and ended up in Tom Holland's one; at the same time, Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man and Andrew Garfield's Spider-Man make their entrance to help save the situation²²⁰. As said earlier, now that the multiverse has been opened, variants of the same character can culminate into a shared world – little did we know, that was already happening.

Spider-Man movie rights, hold by Sony Pictures are shared with Marvel Studios for the production and distribution of stand-alone and multi character MCU movies. At the same time, Sony Pictures has re-branded its Marvel's world to make it hospitable for Spider-Man comeback. The two worlds were never meant to converge, while Peter Parker is, jurisdictionally speaking inhabitant of both. The only possible solution was therefore the multiverse. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017), released in 2017 and first film of the newest trilogy, is part of the canonicity of MCU; Sony also exclusively produced a Venom centred movie, *Venom* (Ruben Fleischer, 2018), released in 2018. Regardless of the strict narratively connection between Venom and Spider-Man as its enemy, his story doesn't fit MCU continuity. It is an interesting situation to observe, as it doesn't have any filmmaking precedent. A similar situation only happened once with Disney and Warner Bros. characters making a cross over in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988). Once again, the answer relies on the multiverse. Spider-Verse exist in the MCU but as an acknowledged world in the outer space of the many universes existing. It operates in the realm of a meta narrative multiverse, moved by transmedia rules. Spider-Man comic books' characters exist both in Sony Spider-Man Universe and Marvel Cinematic Universe; while Tom Holland's Spider-Man is the hero of MCU alone. Sony's personal Spider-Man would rather be Andrew Garfield, Tobey Maguire or a new face altogether. Sony could reboot once again the franchise, or bringing back an old actor to pick where he left off. However, these are not the easiest, most intelligent solutions. Tom Holland currently portray of Spider Man is very much appreciated by the public, introducing a new version will be doomed to fail. At the same time, this is not even necessary, as in the real world, Tom Holland is already part of a multiverse, with his version of the wall-crawler owned by both franchises. When in the future he will have to fight Venom, he would simply have to cross a portal in the multiverse. If the business relationship between the two majors comes to an end, and movie rights go back exclusively to Sony, Tom Holland's Peter Parker will travel the multiverse once for good, entering

²²⁰ *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Id., Watts, 2021)

the franchise. In an official statement, Kevin Feige declared that: “[Spider-Man] also happens to be the only hero with the superpower to cross cinematic universes. So as Sony continues to develop their personal Spidey-verse you never know what surprises the future might hold²²¹”. A similar template has been used by Marvel Studios in the management of Marvel Television products as we have seen before. Netflix stories in particular, started off as direct consequences of MCU events and set in the same continuity. Nevertheless, the movies never addressed such products. Of all of them, *Agents of SHIELD* was the one to clearly address *The Avengers* events, while completely taken off in the later seasons without showing connections to the film universe. The similarity of these situations is recognisable once again in *No Way Home* movie, in which Charlie Cox’s Daredevil appears in a cameo, leading the fans to believe he is now canonized in the MCU.

Spider-Man: No Way Home was actually designed to write Tom Holland’s character out, in case of a premature termination of contract between Sony and Marvel for the Spider-Man character. Their collaboration is in fact, always on the edge. Every story, of every Spider-Man movie has to be organic and self-contained as it is uncertain if there will be a ‘next one’ to close the story arc. This movie actually functions as a soft reset of the story, the end of the origin story of the character, who can now peacefully take off (to a new universe, maybe). Truth be told, after a few months from the movie release, Kevin Feige actually stated that the 4 movie is now in development, along with an appearance in a future MCU Crossover movie. Sony and Marvel partnership is in this moment stronger than ever. So, even though it is our job to investigate what the possible outcomes of a dissolution of the agreements would be, both franchises will keep to amaze the viewer and making us pose questions about what a multiverse between two franchises really is²²².

In order to better understand what this shared multiverse really is, we should analyse the *No Way Home*’s mid-credit scene. Long before *Spider-Man: Now Way*, *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (Andy Serkis, 2021) hinted at the cross over between the two franchise and at Tom Holland as sole Spider-Man existing to the day that scene, offers pre-empting insights about what actually would have happened. Venom and Eddie are watching tv in a hotel. At some point, strange noises echo the room and this shift into a new universe, presumably the MCU. There, Venom sees the news on tv talking about Peter Parker²²³. In *No Way Home* mid credit scene, we see once again, Venom in the MCU

²²¹ Barnes, Brooks, “Kevin Feige and Amy Pascal on the Future of ‘Spider-Man’ and the M.C.U.”, in *The New York Times*, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/movies/kevin-feige-amy-pascal-spider-man-no-way-home.html>

²²² Goodman, William, “Welcome to the Marvel Cinematic Multiverse: What No Way Home Means for the MCU’s Future”, in *GQ*, 2021, <https://www.gq.com/story/spider-man-no-way-home-mcu-multiverse-future-daredevil-kingpin>

²²³ *Venom: La furia di Carnage* (Venom: Let There Be Carnage, Serkis, Andy, 2021)

world, brought shortly after in his world again, but leaving behind a small droplet of the Venom symbiote, who will most certainly find a host in the MCU, introducing symbionts also in that universe²²⁴. This scene is important as it shows how the franchises actually work together to the benefit of both universes. They meet and exchange know how, opening up also for new story arcs and making the storyline advance as it is most needed in the interest of the narrative.

Before drawing the final conclusion of what this intricate collaboration means for cinema industry, we are going to analyse, from strictly a narrative point of view, the problems and incongruities of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* plotline.

Loki is essentially the MCU product that grounds the rules for how Multiverse works in Marvel Cinematic Universe, as it was the first to address the issue. Everything that comes later, if not accurately integrated in the plot risks to fracture the solid Marvel continuity. After, *Loki*'s events, we know for a fact, that the multiverse has opened in the moment Sylvie killed "He Who Remains", unleashing the variants from all universes to break free and colliding into one universe now in the chaos. *No Way Home* uses instead the multiverse as a plot device, to explain why all previous villains and Spider-Men are considered canon alongside Tom Holland's Spider-Man. It is Peter Parker who opens the multiverse without any reference to what happened in *Loki*. Kevin Feige has recently declared that, if Sylvie didn't kill "He Who Remains", the consequences of Doctor Strange's spell in *No Way Home*, would have affected only that universe and not the others²²⁵. Unfortunately, none of this is addressed during the movie, nor *Loki*'s characters appear on screen to deal with the aftermath of what happened. At this point, one has to wonder if interview's statements released during promotional red carpet, can be considered as diegetic extensions of the story, along with the other media platform used to spread transmedia stories. In my opinion, they cannot. Even the most fragmented narratives spread over multiple media platform have still in common a fictional element, to be fruited by the audience in order to have a unified and coordinated vision experience. Fictional products have to be considered as entities with a life of their own, independent of the one who created them. Promotional interviews are given on the basis of the information that at that time, the actors or members of production department are allowed to provide. In this context, many more marketing elements come into play, related to the need to create expectations and hype in viewers, promote the target product, induce fans to watch all the franchise products left behind. Once again, fictional

²²⁴ *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Id., Watts, 2021)

²²⁵ Damore, Meagan, "Kevin Feige Connects 'Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness' to 'Loki' & 'Spider-Man: No Way Home'", *Marvel.com*, 2022, <https://www.marvel.com/articles/movies/doctor-strange-in-the-multiverse-of-madness-loki-spider-man-no-way-home-kevin-feige-connects>

elements of a shared universe, such as the possibility of a fictional multiverse inhabited by different version of the same superhero (beyond the possibility of the existence of a movie released in the past of this same character), are intermingled to the point of blurring, with management elements related to the organization of the franchise as an economic institution in its own right. Interviews cannot be considered audio-visual media platforms used to extend the narration, as they are not canon part of that very narration.

Returning to the narrative coherence of the text, this doesn't almost exist: *Loki's* events, *No Way Home's* ones and *Doctor Strange 2*, live in parallel presenting just a with few points of connection.

Finally, we can now address the outcomes of this unique partnership between Marvel Studios and Sony. This is the age of shared multiverse franchises, hold together by a single character who swings between movies and universes. Nothing similar has ever happened before and there's nothing in the near future which seems willing to emulate that. In the final chapter, we will outline what this drastic change in managerial and transmedial processes means for the franchise and the future of industry. For the moment, it is necessary to remember, the strategical importance the introduction of multiverse has had for the MCU, not only for Sony and Marvel but for the all the Marvel characters previously run by other majors. Warner Bros., as we will see in the next chapter, started off from a more linear and cohesive situation as the major is also the owner of DC Comics, holding movie rights from every DC Superheroes; Marvel started off very differently with movie rights disseminated all over Hollywood. Multiverse allow the studio to re-build on a clean slate the multitude confusion over the different Marvel products, in creating a multi-versal continuity, worth billions of avid fans all over the globe.

6. DC Extended Universe

6.1. Franchise's Overview

DC Comics is a publisher company active as a flagship unit of DC Entertainment and subsidiary of Warner Bros. Discovery. Its journey on Hollywood is deeply connected and influenced by the corporate mergers of its owner. DC Comics was purchased by Kinney National Company in 1961 which also owned Warner Bros. A decade later, the entertainment asset managed by Kinney Company, reincorporated as Warner Communication, handling Warner Bros. division, among others. In 1989, Warner Communication and Time Inc. merged, under the name of Time Warner with DC Comics officially becoming its subsidiary²²⁶. In January 2000, the largest and yet most disastrous merger in American business history occurred. AOL, one of the Internet pioneers of the 20th century, purchased Time Warner for \$164 billion. The deal was advantageous for both companies. Time Warner wanted to keep up with the occurring digital revolution, while AOL was looking for a company with a tangible asset, thanks to which anchor its stock price. After the merging, Time Warner would have reached the homes of millions of new costumers, while AOL could take advantage of Time Warner's highspeed cable lines to deliver Time Warner's media contents to its subscribers. The public narration of the transaction was all about a merger of equals; in reality AOL detained a more valuable stock and was actually acquiring Time Warner. AOL owned in fact, the 55 percent of the new company, while the board would have been composed by an equal number of AOL and Time Warner directors. The merger had great resonance in the US. The deal represented a momentous coming of age for the Internet and the triumph of the New Economy. But the enthusiasm ran out quickly. Six months after the merger, the online advertising began to slow and AOL met financial losses. It provided homes with a dial up service, but high-speed Internet access was beginning to spread all over the country, making AOL's service obsolete. The transaction between the companies soon began to clash and eventually collapsed. It was the popularity of the Internet itself that destroyed AOL. Moreover, the culture values of the two companies never met each other, so much that the two parts never actually worked in the same direction. Time Warner executives only wanted to end the deal, the company removed the AOL CEO from the board chair and split its responsibilities between two Time Warner's former CEO. A new media and communication group was born, overseeing the many divisions of the company, and with AOL as one of its subsidiaries²²⁷. In 2016, AT&T, the world's largest telecommunications holding company and provider of mobile

²²⁶ Hyde, David, "Warner Bros. Creates DC Entertainment", in *dccomics.com*, 2009,

<https://www.dccomics.com/blog/2018/10/30/warner-bros-creates-dc-entertainment>

²²⁷ Arango, Tim, "How the AOL-Time Warner Merger Went So Wrong", in *The New York Times*, 2010,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/11/business/media/11merger.html>

telephone service in the USA, proposed to acquire Time Warner. After many legal paperwork and an antitrust lawsuit, the acquisition was finally settled on June 14, 2018. The company changed drastically. There were now two major divisions, called respectively, WarnerMedia Entertainment and WarnerMedia News & Sports. The first one incorporated HBO, TNT and the new streaming service HBO Max, among others; while WarnerMedia News & Sports would consist of CNN Worldwide, AT&T SportsNet and more. Cartoon Network, Adult Swim, Boomerang, Turner Classic Movies, and Otter Media would be moved under Warner Bros. On April 8th 2022, the merging deal between the multinational mass media conglomerate, Discovery and WarnerMedia was closed, converting now the company in Warner Bros. Discovery, under the new symbol “WBD.”. WarnerMedia, that previously was under AT&T ownership, ceded the mass media corporation in order to pay its net debt. Discovery eventually proceeded with the acquisition of Warner, controlling now WarnerMedia asset and shareholders. According to WBD, “Discovery’s existing shareholders own the remainder of the new company. In addition to their new shares of WBD common stock”. Long-term plans have already been revealed as for example HBO Max and Discovery destined to merge into one platform²²⁸.

As for the DC Comics asset, as we already know, DC Comics and Warner Bros. are under the same roof since their very outset. Warner could therefore use any DC characters and bring them on the big screen. The first DC movie ever produced was *Superman and the Mole-Men* (Lee Sholem, 1951), with George Reeves playing Superman role, in 1951. On top of that, DC has also been active in the animation department, with tv shows and animated movies produced for television. The company achieved real success with Tim Burton’s version of Batman, *Batman* in 1989 and continued to release disconnected stand-alone movies until 2012, when the last non-DCEU movie was realized. The *Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012) was the latest chapter of Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy, released in 2012 and followed up by *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013) as the first release of the DC Extended Universe in 2013. Christopher Nolan’s trilogy actually set up a milestone in franchises history. The first part of the trilogy, titled *Batman Begins* hit the theatres in 2005 and set franchises’ cinematic trend of the time, initiating reboot films’ cycle. The idea was to metaphorically remove the failed cinematic products of the past, putting a distance between them and the new ones. Major film studios could take a dead franchise and bring it back to life in a new form and shape. Old but iconic products would be polished and set up with a new perspective rather than creating original and

²²⁸ Maas, Jennifer, “Discovery Closes Acquisition of AT&T’s WarnerMedia”, in *Variety*, 2022,

<https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/discovery-warnermedia-merger-close-warner-bros-discovery-1235200983/>

untested material²²⁹. This approach would also benefit the studio economically, as reboots reduce risks and maximize the marketing potential, too. Film Company exploits brand recognition and public nostalgia. Until the 2005 version of *Batman*, every movie released was a sequel of its antecedents. *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995), released in 1995 and *Batman and Robin*, in 1997 were part of Tim Burton's tetralogy with neither Burton nor Michael Keaton (Batman's interpreter) present. Both *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin* diverged from the origin story of *Batman*, showing their own version of Bruce Wayne and Gotham City, diverging in themes, tones and characterization of the main character. Nonetheless, the four movies go down in history as the *Batman Anthology* and are considered part of the same universe. Eight years after Schumacher's last Caped Crusader's adaptation, in 2005, Christopher Nolan hits the theatres with his own version of the superhero: *Batman Begins*. At the time, the public wasn't used to the concept of reboot and thought the movie was a prequel of Tim Burton stories. But that was not the case. Warner Bros. aimed to invalidate Burton's cycle of films and regenerate the saga with a new era. The first anthology was a complete franchise of its own, despite its discontinuity plot-wise. Whereas, *Batman Begins* was an unrelated unit that started over the franchise from its origins, leaving behind the continuity of its antecedents. This was in every way a reboot. Each movie delivers to the audience a different version of Batman origins and motives, both legitimate in their own universe and in continuity with the comic books, which in turn, deal with reboots and new origin stories²³⁰. During the first years of Kinney National Company's ownership of DC, the Comic Books publisher operated independently from Warner Communication. Everything started to change after Time and Warner merger in 1990. When the merger occurred, head departments, decided to put DC Comics under the Warner Bros.' movie division, to enlighten both DC and Warner Bros. entertainment nature²³¹.

The latest merger had recently put DC Entertainment under an explorative overhaul: the idea is to turn DC into a content vertical affecting DC feature film, series and creative arm. The main objective of such an operation is to find a "Kevin Feige alter ego" capable of nurturing blockbusters intellectual properties, focusing more on the business side of the management rather than the creative branch. A

²²⁹ Day, Aubrey, *Review of Star Trek*, Total Film 155 (June), 2009, p. 41

²³⁰ Proctor, William, "Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the Franchise Reboot", in *Scope*, Issue 22, 2012, p.8
<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2012/february-2012/proctor.pdf>

²³¹ McMillan, Graeme, "How DC Has Weathered Corporate Change Before", in *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2021,
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/dc-comics-warnermedia-discovery-1234954536/>

coherent creative and brand strategy seem to be the main ingredients currently lacking in DC Entertainment's outputs, making the company less solid than the counterpart²³².

In 2009, Warner Bros. instituted DC Entertainment with the aim of realizing “the power and value of the DC Comics brand and characters across all media and platform²³³”. DC Entertainment would have fully served as a Warner Bros. division and collaborate with other Warner's divisions in order to share Studio's expertise. The goal was to aggressively spread DC intellectual property in as many Warner's operations as possible, in any media as possible, in the attempt of creating a true transmedia product. Even after the foundation of DC Entertainment, DC Comics publishing remained nonetheless, its cornerstone²³⁴. The division would in fact, managed DC Comics units and intellectual properties in other units in work with Warner Bros. When *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011) arrived in theatres in 2011, it should have opened the doors for a future shared universe. Unfortunately, the movie was a big flop for both critics and audience and the studio decided to put it into rest. The same year, DC Entertainment decided to try again: a Superman reboot was set in production as the first movie of a brand-new franchise. In 2013, *Man of Steel* hits the cinema and lay the ground for future DC films. The movie was the first to directly contain references to other DC characters. The idea was that if the movie would have had success, a shared universe could have been launched. One month after Superman release, Warner announced that Batman and Superman would have soon meet in a sequel of *Man of Steel*, establishing the DC Extended Universe. As we know Marvel Studios was the first to successfully bring the shared universe concept in the superhero movie genre, however DC was trying its luck in the same endeavour, yet with no success. As rehearsed above, Warner Bros. has always owned all DC characters movie rights and therefore held the opportunity to bring them together on screen whenever they pleased.

In 1998, Kevin Smith developed the script for a new movie, titled *Superman Lives* in which Superman and Batman would finally meet, with Michael Keaton returning as Batman and Tim Burton as the director. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned, and the movie was never realized. In 2007, even a Justice League project was in the making, however, due to the 2007-2008 Writer's Strike, the film never got realized. Finally, in 2013 the attempt to a shared universe saw the light, but not without troubles.

²³² Lang, Brent, Donnelly, Matt, “Warner Bros. Discovery Exploring Overhaul of DC Entertainment (EXCLUSIVE)”, in *Variety*, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/film/news/dc-warner-bros-discovery-zaslav-hbo-max-1235232185/>

²³³ Hyde, David, “Warner Bros. Creates DC Entertainment”, cit., <https://www.dccomics.com/blog/2018/10/30/warner-bros-creates-dc-entertainment>

²³⁴ Ibidem.

When *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) was released in 2016, only Superman had already had his own stand-alone appearance in the multiplex. The film features cameos from every member of the future Justice League and Batman as the co-protagonist in his first appearance in the shared world. One year later 2017, *Justice League* (Joss Whedon, 2017) arrived and even in that case, only Superman and Wonder Woman had already had their solo project. The MCU took 4 years to assemble the team that would have eventually conquer fans' heart. The problem with the DC was a rushed assemble of characters that fans have never met and hadn't the time to appreciate and get attached to. Everything felt disconnected and disorientating. This mirrors also a lack of long-term planning from the end of Warner Bros. departments, who hadn't a clear sense of where to bring their superheroes in the long run²³⁵. Nonetheless, when the DCEU was announced, the promise was that 10 movies would be released between 2016 and 2020, with a sequel to *Justice League* and *The Flash* stand-alone movie: as we know, none of the above have been realized yet. *The Flash* suffers from continuous delays, while *Justice League* has been summed up to a single film, released in 2017. The world-building at the base of a correct storytelling wasn't actually built, with no real universe to share and characters lacking an established backstory, whilst places and geographic coordinates aren't well defined. When talking about a well-structured expanded universe, the fictional world plays as an added character to story, thanks to whom, all contents and plots interconnect and dialogue. A shared universe, if so, should be prioritized over individual visions. And that was not the case. Warner thought that building a shared universe would mean to entrust a single director with the supervision of every content. Zack Snyder was the elected. The problem was that his dark and melancholy style would have fit a character as Batman but not Superman, who turned in a totally different superhero who in the end, kills the villain. He misrepresented the characters and made everyone the same. Marvel Studios, under the Disney flag, imposed a cinematic "house style" to its films. Every director can portray the characters as he envisions them, but the core essence has always to represent Marvel. As mentioned in the previous chapter, every film follows some standardized guidelines that make it immediately and easily recognisable as a Marvel product. DC simply couldn't manage to do that.

In the next paragraph, we will explore the shared universe created by DC and Warner in 2013, its asset and its flows, trying to depict what went wrong and the reasons why the expanded universe was never fully realized, despite the full asset of characters at disposal.

²³⁵ Sherlock, Ben, "10 Mistakes the DCEU Made That Prevented It from Matching the MCU's Success", in *Screen Rant*, 2019, <https://screenrant.com/dceu-vs-mcu-matching-success/>

6.2. How Reboot a Flopped Franchise: Two Universes Are Better Than One

In 2016, Warner Bros. created the division DC Films to specifically handle the direction of live action movies, independent of DC Entertainment. DC Entertainment was at the time, delivering successful DC products in television, videogames department and in the area of merchandising. However, the film department didn't seem to catch a break. Part of the problem was that DC Entertainment had actually little influence over DC movies, with Warner managing over the production. Movies weren't going so great at the box office and critics panned several of them. Both Warner and DC decided then to change strategy and give up to the idea of an interconnected universe, aiming for just a steady continuity. This approach was deemed successful by *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017) released in 2017, shortly after *Suicide Squad* (David Ayer, 2016), scoring a 92 percent on Rotten Tomatoes. As Geoff Johns, DC's chief creative officer, stated at the 2017 San Diego Comic-Con: "The movie's not about another movie [...] some of the movies do connect the characters together, like *Justice League*. But our goal is not to connect *Aquaman* (James Wan, 2018) or *Wonder Woman* to every movie." This strategy was based on the idea that the DCEU would have been only one of the many fish in the sea, surrounded by completely separate, occasional movies, set outside the cinematic universe. Stand-alone projects based on big-name filmmakers' ideas. It is in this context that, the winning Oscar *Joker* (Todd Philipps, 2019) was developed. It was all about a reinvented organization²³⁶. To this day, the DC Films franchise struggles to find its own direction. Paradoxically, it is Warner Bros.' full ownership of characters to put the franchise in a precarious position. DC's future depends on a corporate mentality, with DC Comics departments without really having the chance to make decisions; they were part of a big multimedia company machine and thus subjected to their rules. Long before the shared universe idea was on the table, there were already DC movies with an extreme dose of inconsistency. *Justice League*, received poorly by the audience, was the face of a failure in studio leadership. The intellectual property of iconic characters such as DC superheroes brings within it the potential for a long-live transmedia brand. Warner Bros. knew about that but wasn't able to patiently build fans' brand loyalty. Moreover, the vision of the studio for the future of the franchise was extremely tied to the reception of movies. When Warner realized *Batman vs Superman* had received bad reviews, they decided to change in the course the characterization of the superheroes, they abandoned Zack Snyder and delivered a brand-new concept for the upcoming *Justice League*. The problem was that, at that point, any new adjustment would have been out of character. Sequels were even cancelled or postponed accordingly, as if there wasn't any chronological

²³⁶ Riesman, Abraham, "DC Rethinks its Universe", in *Vulture*, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/12/dc-wonder-woman-movie-strategy-universe.html>

path to follow²³⁷. In 2018, Walter Hamada took the leadership as the president of DC Films and the one in charge of managing movie careers of any DC superhero. He was finally the ‘Kevin Feige’ praised by the fans. Contrary to MCU, which releases more or less three movies every year, DC has until now produced no more than 2 movies per year, followed up by bad results at the box office, in comparison to MCU’s movies. Compared to Marvel Studios products, DC only earns a quarter of the total amount of Marvel’s profits. This is because while Disney has always been able to build a solid division unit in charge of the general Marvel management, Warner Bros. was never able to do that. Things partly changed when AT&T took over in 2018. That was the year when Walter Hamada arrived, too. In that period, DC Films needed an urgent help in re-organizing its long-term vision. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Justice League* cost a fortune and the critics didn’t appreciate them. Ben Affleck, who played Batman didn’t want to continue working in the franchise, creating an issue for possible sequels; moreover, as we said above, new films, that had nothing to do with the continuity of the aforementioned movies, were in the making²³⁸. The last one, *The Batman* (Matt Reeves, 2022), interpreted by Robert Pattinson and released in theatres in 2022 was a major success for both critics and audience. Both films, *Joker* and *The Batman*, were praised for their much more adult tone and artistic vision. They were the attempts of delivering film d’auteur about a superhero rather than cinecomics, term usually used in a derogatory tone. DC Films has finally found its voice for what concerns solo movies outside the shared cinematic universe, not as a Marvel mimicker but rather with personal insights on the matter. HBO Max will be a part of this new asset²³⁹. Warner has shifted its cinematic approach to a hybrid model, by releasing simultaneously in theatres and on the streaming platform some of its contents, the first one being *Wonder Woman 1984* (Patty Jenkins, 2020), in 2020, mostly in the aftermath of Covid-19 Pandemic. This decision has clearly, upset the entire movie industry, fearing economical losses for cinema owners and movie’s executives.

²³⁷ Hughes, Mark, “‘Justice League’ Was a Sad Failure in Studio Leadership”, in *Forbes*, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2018/03/23/justice-league-was-a-sad-failure-in-studio-leadership/?sh=7581d6ea5e5d>

²³⁸ Barnes, Brooks, “Managing Movie Superheroes Is About to Get a Lot More Complicated”, in *The New York Times*, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/27/business/media/dc-superheroes-movies.html>

²³⁹ Lang, Brent, Kroll, Justin, “DC Films Plots Future With Superman, Green Lantern and R-Rated Movies (EXCLUSIVE)”, in *Variety*, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/dc-comics-superman-michael-b-jordan-green-lantern-aquaman-birds-of-prey-1203415757/>

On the other hand, WarnerMedia will consider itself satisfied, if box office losses would turn into HBO Max subscriptions²⁴⁰.

We have now defined the current asset of DC Films production and vision. DC franchise is made by two metaphorical universes: one, known as the DCEU shared by multiple character such as Wonder Woman and Ben Affleck's Batman, and the other, in which filmmakers can freely develop their vision and stories without worrying about any continuity with previous movies or other superheroes, but still legitimately standing. But even in this case, how can two different versions of Batman be a canon at the same time? How these universes manage to operate simultaneously without clashing and generating chaos? DC Films president Walter confirms studio's new creative approach: there will be two cinematic universes, the DCEU, as we already know it, and on top of that a separate multiverse, composed of completely stand-alone stories. The bridge between these two universes will be *The Flash* who will introduce once and for all the notion of multiverse²⁴¹.

6.2.1. Justice League's Snyder Cut

In 2017, *Justice League* arrives to cineplex. It is the fifth movie of DC Extended Universe and directed by Zack Snyder. Snyder was at the time the parent of the DCEU. Almost every movie was directed by him and hinged with his vision. *Justice League* was thought to share the same dark tone and slow pace of *Batman v Superman*, previous multi superheroes movie, directed by Snyder. Unfortunately, *Batman v Superman* had been poorly received by the critics and DC Films decided for a change of tone. When Snyder presented his final run to Warner, it lacked some visual effects and audio mixing. Warner Bros. was unhappy with the results and decided to hire Joss Whedon (*The Avengers*' director) to rewrite the script. In that same period, Snyder's daughter died from suicide, leading him to eventually abandoning film production. Joss Whedon assumed full control over the production and supervised the reshoots, while Snyder retained directorial credit. New Whedon's scenes featured a brighter tone and more humour. Snyder was also the head behind the shared cinematic universe idea. The studio eventually decided to also abandon that vision. The film wasn't appreciated by fans who, immediately after the theatrical release, created an online petition asking for the "Snyder's cut". The request was supported by cast and crew through social media. In 2019, after many speculations, Zack Snyder finally confirmed the existence of an original cut, stating it was up to Warner Bros. whether to release it or not. In late 2019, the studio approached the director giving him the opportunity to

²⁴⁰ Barnes, Brooks, "Managing Movie Superheroes Is About to Get a Lot More Complicated", cit., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/27/business/media/dc-superheroes-movies.html>

²⁴¹ Barnes, Brooks, "Managing Movie Superheroes Is About to Get a Lot More Complicated", cit., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/27/business/media/dc-superheroes-movies.html>

release the cut unfinished and as he had left it. Snyder objected and insisted to finish it. On mid-2020, reshoots finally began and *Snyder's Cut* (Zack Snyder, 2021) was finally released on HBO Max in 2021, with a total of 4 hours run time.

Zack Snyder's Justice League was for obvious reasons better received and appreciated. The theatrical version was a mix of two totally different visions and styles: after Whedon reshoots, the film had become incomprehensible and confused. The Snyder's Cut pitches itself as the epitome of a participative culture brought to its extremes. Warner Bros. didn't have the slightest intention of releasing Snyder's version. Fans endeavoured to a massive protest which resulted in social hashtags campaigns, phone calls to the headquarters of Warner and an online petition. On the other hand, Zack Snyder encouraged those movements by creating social accounts dedicated to his film and reposting fans' request. Warner Bros. had no interest in releasing a version of a movie already destined to fail: the studio had already decided to abandon the shared universe vision of the franchise, and by any chance they would have resurrected it, for a cut that didn't even reflect studio's vision on the matter, but fans demanded it and the studio decided to respond accordingly²⁴².

The plot is essentially the same of Wheldon's movie, except that Snyder did not use a single footage of Whedon reshoots. The tone set is different, leaving the cartoonish, joyous elements aside. In the final cut, the Flash, Aquaman and Cyborg were almost extras in the Batman-Superman-Wonder Woman team, while Snyder gave them more importance and background²⁴³. There was a large debate around the role the *Snyder Cut* would have played in the DCEU. It isn't neither a soft reboot nor a remake. It is a different product altogether. Warner Bros. have often affirmed its firm decision to not render *Snyder Cut* canon in the DCEU. It is not only about the canonicity of the movie but much more about the branding of a franchise and the consistency it delivers. While the *Snyder Cut* received a cheered welcome by the fans, DC CEO confirmed that the "Snyder-verse" wouldn't be restored, leaving once again with a bunch of movies disconnected and ready to be rebooted. Surprisingly, not even Whedon's vision seems to be the right path. According to some rumours and insider's statements, many of the new introduced Snyder's characters will return in future DC live action, Kiersey Clemons (Iris West in the Snyder Cut) has officially joined *The Flash* movie and Ben Affleck (a vocal supporter of Snyder) seems willing to return one last time in the role of Batman. Snyder is

²⁴² Dockterman, Eliana, "The Snyder Cut Is a Better Version of Justice League. But It Sets a Dangerous Precedent", in *TIME*, 2021, <https://time.com/5946917/snyder-cut-justice-league-fans/>

²⁴³ Grebey, James, "How Does the Snyder Cut Differ from Joss Whedon's *Justice League*?", in *Vulture*, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/03/snyder-cut-how-does-it-differ-from-justice-league.html>

nowhere to be found but everything suggests that the next move for the shared DC universe will be pitching out Snyder original idea about the Justice League and the multiverse²⁴⁴.

What really is the DCEU, is yet to be defined. Its existence is not even that certain. As I hoped to make clear in this chapter, too many attempts have been made over the last ten years to create a shared universe of ideas, characters and places, without ever really succeeding. Each attempt was thwarted by the next, in the hope of righting the course of a franchise that was now drifting apart. Today, the public is so saturated with products that it is no longer able to disentangle themselves or find a common thread. Another reboot would be necessary. At the same time, however, as we have seen before, this would do nothing to erase what has been done so far, the public does not forget easily. The only solution is therefore to find a narrative device that justifies the multitude of stories present without contradicting them. Once again, the multiverse is close.

6.3. *Flashpoint*: A Case of Retroactive Continuity about Multiple Superheroistic's Universes

As anticipated in the previous paragraphs, the DCEU is not the only universe inhabited by DC superheroes. Over the last 5 years, fans have witnessed to the release of a couple of movies that clearly didn't fit in the shared universe, last but not least *The Batman* by Matt Reeves. Too many versions of the same characters were crowding the big screen and fans' mind; it was time for a redefinition of how DC films universe works and who populates it.

Dc Entertainment hosts since 2020 an annual event, the *DC FanDome*, in which the studio shows to the fans their future slates through trailers, panels and more. During the 2020 and the 2021 *FanDome*, producers confirmed the multiverse as the big plot twist of their next movies. The concept will be introduced by *The Flash* stand-alone movie set in theatres in 2023. The movie is loosely based on the 2011 crossover comic *Flashpoint*, in which Barry Allen, aka the Flash, goes back in time to save his mother, using his super speed to branch the nature of time and space. In doing so, he ends up creating an alternate universe, thereby restructuring the entire DC Universe.

The comic books established the notion of shared universe and multiverse from the start, such an event would have therefore consequences for every superhero who inhabit DC Universe, reshaping their entire storyline. The DCEU follows the same purpose. But that's not it: this cinematic universe will encompass every DC movie version ever existed in history. Everything will be considered a

²⁴⁴ Colbert, Stephen M., "How WB Is Continuing DC's Snyderverse (Without Zack Snyder's Plan)", in *Screen Rant*, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/zack-snyderverse-dceu-continue-movies-shows-how/>

canon, with the DCEU being only a small part of the variegated, wide multiverse. That's how every new stand-alone outside the DCEU continuity will interact with the shared universe and that's how the entire old catalogue of DC movies will be legitimized.

The movie will feature Ben Affleck's Batman, probably in his last appearance as the Caped Crusader. He is the official Batman of the DCEU and fight beside the flash in both *Justice League* movies. Nevertheless, he won't be the only Dark Knight on screen: a teaser clip shows Michael Keaton reprising his role as the Batman, since his latest appearance in *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992). The teaser anticipates the Flash actions in thrusting the DCEU into the multiverse²⁴⁵. The movie isn't out yet but its purposes are clear. The risk to burn fans out was and still is very high. Too many movies all at once risk to saturate the audience and the curiosity for what's coming next. The problem (or maybe the fortune) of DC Films is that they have already covered that step, not so much with the abundance of too many films but rather creating a wide catalogue of messy contents disconnected from one another. DC also has a great advantage as it already owns movie rights for whatever DC movies and character ever created or in the making. They can use every version of characters already portrayed on screen, playing on fans' affection and excitement. The MCU had to build a strong, solid, shared universe to which fans would want to return, regardless of the specific character on screen. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, for example, shows a version of Mr Fantastic who was never brought on screen. He is played by John Krasinski, an actor at his first experience with superheroes cinecomics. He was not the Mr Fantastic, people remembered from old movies. Nonetheless, the worldbuilding was so well done that it was enough to enthral the spectator. DCEU was never able to do that. Exploiting old versions of characters can help them to attract old passionate who abandoned the franchise. Introducing the multiverse expands not only the shared universe but it calls for multiple crossovers, of different versions of the same superhero teaming up. A novelty that could prove to be irresistible²⁴⁶. *Suicide Squad*, a film of 2016, suffered *Snyder Cut*'s same fate. In 2021, *The Suicide Squad* (James Gunn, 2021) directed by James Gunn was released. It wasn't neither a sequel nor a reboot, being defined by the director as a soft reboot who redefined some of the old characters and events. These two oeuvres, not only disconnected but in contrast with one another, can now survive the strict canonicity rules of franchises by simply living in two different universes.

²⁴⁵ DC, *DC FanDome 2021*, 16 Oct 2021, 1:29:32, ultimo accesso 31 May 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RADmFACrWWQ>

²⁴⁶ Orquiola, John, "Why Marvel & DCEU Are Both Creating Multiverses in 2022", cit., <https://screenrant.com/marvel-dc-multiverse-flash-doctor-strange-why/>

That being said, DCEU's multiverse is not merely a storytelling concept. It doesn't stem from a studio's opportunity to finally bring together the entire catalogue of its characters (ed. See Marvel's chapter), it is rather a plot device to retcon a failed continuity. The multiverse is child of a disastrous theatrical release of *Justice League*, combined with a release of the original footage which re-writes the story altogether. The movie was the culmination of a shared universe that automatically affected the all franchise. As if it wasn't enough, the studio's attempts to fix what went wrong, disrupted the weak linearity once and for all. This led to the decision to abandon the idea of a shared universe, releasing stand-alone sequels or origin stories of *Justice League*'s characters (*Wonder Woman 1984*; *Aquaman*) that didn't make clear references to the expanded world previous mentioned, but still as a part of it. Then, however, the creation of two different universes continued, one that actually interconnected and the second one in which stand-alone movies could co-habitat without sharing the same world – a modality of using the idea of the which is rather counterintuitive and counterproductive.

The multiverse, as the name suggests, opens to the possibility of crossovers between parallel realities existing simultaneously. All DC property, as confirmed by executives during the *DC FanDome* will coexist freely, yet Warner Bros. clearly affirmed the cul-de-sac nature of the *Snyder Cut*, together with the cancellation of some spin offs directly connected to the movie. Multiverse is not the next big storylines in the DC drawer, it is a plot device used to create a retroactive continuity in which old characters can be brought back or cancelled as pleased. More than that, it justifies the lack of vision in a studio governed by corporate acts and needs and provides fans with a made-up solution that tries to patch the unfixable.

Finally, it is important to underline that narratively speaking, we don't know yet how DC's multiverse will work. *The Flash* will hit the theatres only in 2023 and until then we can only trust executives and their statements about what is canon in the DCEU and what lives in a different continuity in another universe. We don't know the rules of time traveling or how a change in the narrative continuity will affect the shared universe as we know it so far. We can only make assumptions.

6.4. “The Arrowverse: *Crisis on Infinite Earth*”: A Franchise within a Franchise

At a structural level, the DC Extended Universe is not the only shared DC Universe portrayed on screen. In 2012 (a year before *Man of Steel* cinema release) the tv show *Arrow* (Greg Berlanti, The CW 2012-2020) debuts on the CW, network co-owned by Warner Bros and CBS. The show follows the DC superhero, who acts as a vigilante in the fictional Starling City. Two years later, *The Flash* (Greg Berlanti, The CW, 2014-) debuts as an *Arrow* spin off and the first DC superhero character

with whom share a universe: the Arrowverse was born. Over the years, many spin-offs and new tv shows about DC characters arrived on tv, such as *Supergirl* (Greg Berlanti, CBS, The CW 2015-2021), *Batwoman* (Carolina Dries, The CW, 2019-2022) and *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (Greg Berlanti, The CW 2016-2022). Greg Berlanti, the executive producer has been praised many times for his ability to create well connected universes and stories. A crossover episode, based on a comic book storyline, was also realized every year, spreading the story over 5 episodes of each running tv shows. The most important to this day has been the crossover episode *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, based on the homonymic comic book and aired between December 2019 and January 2020. The 5-part episode reshaped the geography of DC Universe, revealing that every superhero shows and movie ever realized is part of the same multiverse. The aim of this crossover was to restore a sense of continuity and linearity into the storyline. The last chapter of *Crisis* shows the merging of the Earths occupied by *Supergirl*, *Flash*, *Batwoman* and *Blacklighting*, colliding now in the same universe known as Earth-Prime. At the same time, a new shared reality is created opening up to a new multiverse²⁴⁷. From now on, it will be much easier to justify why and how the previous characters meet as they live in the same world. "Arrow-verse" continuity started to be too complex to manage and even more understand. It needed to be re-written. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was meant to simplify the DC Universe by collapsing the multiverse into one singular Earth. *Supergirl* and *Blacklighting* (Salim Akil, The CW 2018-2021) were originally set on a different Earth because they aired in two different networks than *Arrow* and *The Flash*. *Supergirl* was on CBS, the, the CW co-owner; while *Blacklighting* was initially developed for FOX. Both were eventually moved to the, the CW and run by the same management²⁴⁸.

As already said, other than creating a brand-new universe in which all the, the CW's characters live, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* ends up opening a new multiverse. It achieves that by showing in the crossover, cameos by other DC's tv shows and movies' actors. The idea is that every version of every character exists within the universe. The Arrowverse has its fair share of the, the CW's superheroes, while stand-alone movies or old tv shows inhabits different Earth, even the DCEU is part of this extended universe. During their journey through the multiverse, at the beginning of the crisis, it is possible to see Robert Wuhl, as reporter Alexander Knox on Earth-89. He is the same actor who played the same character on Tim Burton *Batman* movie. The number chosen for the Earth is actually

²⁴⁷ *Crisi sulle terre infinite* (5), (Crisis on Infinite Earth: Part Five, DC's Legends of Tomorrow, Berlanti, Greg, the CW, 2016-2022)

²⁴⁸ Morrison, Matt, "Crisis on Infinite Earths Ending & Arrowverse's Future Explained" in Screen Rant, 2020, <https://screenrant.com/crisis-infinite-earths-ending-arrowverse-future-justice-league-multiverse-explained/>

an Easter Egg referencing the release year of the movie. Brandon Routh reprises his role of Superman, after starring in *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006). What's interesting is that he also plays The Atom in the *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* tv show, showing that, as for the MCU, people from different Earths can share the same face but not the same past. The same fate happened to John Wesley's Flash. He played the speedster in the 1990 tv show. What's interesting is that he also plays Barry's father on the 2014 version, which is canon part of the Arrow-verse²⁴⁹. Finally, Ezra Miller makes his entrance and cameo into the cross-over episodes, too. Ezra Miller is the face of the Scarlet Speedster on the DCEU. Until the release of the crossover episodes, DCEU couldn't cross with Arrowverse's events for a clear leadership decision. But that eventually changed. *Crisis* actually help to (in part) fix the major continuity problems which affect(ed) the DCEU. As already mentioned, The DC Extended Universe suffered from the continuous change of direction and the lack of well-defined long arc storyline, with versions of the same stories released over and over. Ezra Miller's cameo set for the first time in the DC Universe, the idea of a shared universe in which everything can co-exist and what's more, affect one another. TV's Flash is in this sense, the one who provides Ezra Miller's character with his superhero name: until that moment he only referred at as Barry. Equally, it established that both worlds are canon in the wider picture of multiverse and most importantly, each inconsistency of previous movies or previous soft reboot can be explained thanks to the outcomes of tv's Justice League events: the entire universe has been destroyed and reborn in a new form²⁵⁰.

Contrary to the limping DCEU, the Arrowverse is the perfect representation of media converge and transmedia franchise. As argued before, Greg Berlanti, the DCTV showrunner was able to create a unify universe in which everything works. He achieved that, collaborating for each tv show with comic books' writers of every dc superhero's show. In doing so, the CW assured the acclaim of both the comic book's consumers and the industry. What's more, they hired comic book professionals in order to translate a shared universe into a franchising system. As we already know, DC publishing and DCTV are under the same DC Entertainment, as well as Warner Bros. banner, a cohesive business model gathering at once the comic books and the tv shows was therefore implemented, so that characters would develop coherently across different media²⁵¹. Warner Bros. branding strategies for

²⁴⁹ Singh, Olivia, "Every Single Cameo on the CW's 'Crisis on Infinite Earths' Crossover", in *Insider*, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/the-cw-crisis-on-infinite-earths-crossover-cameos-photos-2019-12>

²⁵⁰ Atkinson, John, "Crisis on Infinite Earths Solved DC Movies' Continuity Problem", in *Screen Rant*, 2020, <https://screenrant.com/crisis-infinite-earths-dceu-movies-shared-universe-continuity-multiverse-fixed/>

²⁵¹ Joseph, Charles, "The CW Arrowverse and Myth Making, or the Commodification of Transmedia Franchising", in *International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, vol. IV, N.2, Winter 2018, pp.31-32, <https://series.unibo.it/article/view/8177>

its DC properties has always worked well for its DCTV contents, as it is run solely by DC Entertainment. The franchising model of production of the studio is perceptible in the transmedia Arrowverse partnership between the CW and the CW Seed, the CW subsidiary online branch. This is by no means a digital entertainment studio focused on kid-oriented only programs, rather its contents travel in tandem with network's products relying also on the same superheroes' properties. The animated series *Vixen*, introduces the character to the Arrowverse, with Stephen Amell and Grant Gustin voicing their animated alter-egos, at the same time, the main character of the animated series will eventually show up in live action *Arrow* tv show, with the dubber now playing as the actress of the character. Studio's aim is to create intertextuality between culture practices and stimulate collectability into fans: if the viewers want to truly know the universe of DCTV, then they will have to collect all of its narratives²⁵². The crossover episodes themselves are clearly a marketing tool to bring occasional viewers much closer to the franchise. The network distributes the 5 crossover parts over the 5 the CW tv shows. As they share the same universe, in order to understand how each personally plot unfolds, it is necessary to watch every episode of every tv show, as there will always be cross-references to catch²⁵³.

6.5. DC Multiverse or Plurality of Iconic Warner Bros.' Characters?

As we have learnt so far, DC Multiverse is equipped with a multiplicity of different characters, or even different version of the same characters living in different dimensions. Together, they form the DC Universe. We understood by now that Marvel Studios products and Marvel Cinematic Universe are two sides of the same complex entity. Marvel Studios represent the franchise in its economic and managerial essence, as the ensemble of all media contents sharing the same creative elements of a fiction spread across multiple channels. MCU represents instead the narrative, fictional universe shared between the characters of the same expanded world. In the end, every Marvel Studios product is, without any doubt, part of the MCU. It doesn't matter when or who produced a Marvel content, because if it is now owned by the MCU, it automatically insists on the wider Marvel Cinematic Universe, even if the continuity of it doesn't fit. In that case, it will exist in one of the many fictional universes of which the Marvel Cinematic Universe is made of. As such, the latter is the Multiverse, since it contains any Marvel product in every epoch.

It is not the same for the DC. As we have seen, the DC Extended Universe isn't the one big container in which all DC products exist. It is, by a statement of Walter Hamada in person, only one of the many universes of which the multiverse is made of. Everything is interconnected as well as for the

²⁵² Ivi., pp.36-37

²⁵³ Ivi., p.40

MCU, but they don't converge on the DCEU, or at least not all of them. We have seen, that the DCTV has already established a multiverse of their own and that *The Flash*, (DCEU's continuity) will host Michael Keaton's Batman as a member of the parallel universe existing outside the DC Extended Universe, to confirm once more the existence of the multiverse. However, this concept will only serve as an added information provided to the public to float into the vast ocean of DC products, while they will not eventually meet. *The Batman* can now peacefully rest in people's mind as he can finally live his adventures in his own universe, without being an outlaw on the eyes of one of the strictest but yet fundamental franchising's principles: canonicity. His story will continue without never crossing path with any other DC character but with a safely spot on the canon realm of hardcore fans.

But now, if the thread that holds the multiverse together is not the DCEU nor the Arrowverse, what is the great universe that unites all the infinite worlds represented? In my idea the answer is the studio itself. Warner Bros. acts as the main universe in which all DC contents reunites. But if it is true for DC characters, can't that be true also for any other Warner Bros. franchise? A case study in the next paragraph will support my affirmative answer.

6.5.1. *Space Jam: A New Legacy: A Company's Massive Promotion Strategy*

In 2021, the sequel of a beloved children movie hits the theatres. *Space Jam* (Joe Pytka, 1996) was a 1996 live action/animated comedy in which Michael Jordan, in person, and Looney Tunes team up against an animated alien squad to beat them at a basketball match. The 2021 version, features basketball player LeBron James, joining the Tune Squad to save his son²⁵⁴. The movie itself starts from the premises of LeBron James and his son taking a trip to the Warner Bros. studios to meet with the executives who pitch LeBron the idea for a new technology, currently in development, that he will eventually turn down. The anthropomorphised technology decides to take its revenge and sucks LeBron and his son into the Server-Verse of the studio to challenge him to a basketball game.

Lebron finds himself into the Warner digital archives, with every Warner product ever made within it. They are all represented on screen as different planets in a wide universe. It is possible to recognise the *Game of Thrones* universe, the *Harry Potter* one, the DC Universe and of course the *Looney Tunes* world. During the match, the audience is actually made of the most famous Warner characters, Alex DeLarge from *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), Scooby Doo and its colleagues in the Mystery Machine, The Mask from the film of the same name and more. They don't actively participate in the scene, still they serve as a reminder of the greatness and long-time success of the

²⁵⁴ *Space Jam: New Legends* (Space Jam: A New Legacy, Lee, Malcolm D., 2021)

company. It is undoubtedly a marketing choice to revitalise its most iconic characters and advertise the new ones, in the attempt of enlarging its audience. It is in other words a transmedia branding action pushed to its extremes.

6.6. The Warner Bros.' Multiverse

From a media franchise point of view, *Space Jam: A New Legacy* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2021) opens up to infinite possibilities of cross over and transmedia storytelling. It is obvious that, we won't see Alex DeLarge actively interact with Wonder Woman ever, but it can explain why there is no need for a shared fictional universe in DC properties. The studio can serve continuity purposes craved for by the fans, in a sort of meta-fictional shared universe. According to this theory, the principle of world building is much more important than the one of shared universe, being that simply a consequence of the first one. It is obvious that a more or less shared universe is needed, with the point being that it isn't necessary to deliver the same continuity or linearity. It is sufficient that the two worlds share the same notion of reality, otherwise it won't be believable: Wonder Woman DCEU's version and Batman Reeves' interpretation can live in two different universes of the multiple reality because in both, the idea of a mascaraed person with super abilities is accepted. The above-mentioned characters, Alex DeLarge and Wonder Woman won't meet because the story-world doesn't allow that.

As explained above, DC's multiverse is only a plot device used by the studio to put things in order. It was brought it up as a tool to calm down the hardcore fans who wanted a transposition of shared comic books universe on screen and were disappointed by the lack of continuity between the plethora of contents delivered. It was not a planned storyline, but rather the clumsy attempt to settle things right. None of the released shared or solo universes released at that point were established enough to bear the difficulties and responsibilities of becoming the 'prime' universe. To do that, it would have been necessary to turn into the most iconic products of that genre, to the extent to include all the previous one. Even the DCEU couldn't do that. Warner Bros. always treated DC Entertainment as an IP deliver system to exploit: each film was made with the direct attempt of increasing transmedia branding and franchise's revenues, so as to develop fictional multiverses into a studio universe as the final outcome.

Warner Bros. itself becomes then, the aforementioned container that welcomes every DC superhero and non into its universe. It is once more a case of meta-multiverse in which real franchises' transmedia rules and transmedia narrative collide. Every DC Films rather be part of the DCEU or stand-alone movies fit into the wider Warner Bros. multiverse together with fictional universes of any other Warner product.

7. Conclusions

We have finally reached the end of this vast, multifaceted journey across media theories, new technologies and transmedia innovation and we can finally give an answer to the core questions presented at the beginning of this work: is it possible to frame Multiverse logics into the wider context of franchises and transmedia storytelling rules? Are Multiverse logics going to create a new paradigm of rules or are those already existing enough? The answer is yes and no to both.

As the analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe has highlighted, at a first glance, it appeared as if the Multiverse was the narrative step to take after the events of the last multicharacter movie, *Avengers: Endgame*. The most important members of the team had left and the universe needed a fresh, captivating idea from which re-start to build a cohesive universe. Moreover, the majority of movie rights had come back to Marvel Studios allowing them to use any character on screen. It was the most obvious solution. It would have attracted more audience and prevent volatile viewers to abandon the franchise after it had reached the highest point of its life cycle. Multiverse is in this case, part of the storyline as any other plot device used to make the history going on.

This kind of multiverse doesn't open any new branch in the established transmedia storytelling principles. It situates halfway between multiplicity and continuity. Both MCU and the DC Universe set their stories in a shared universe between multiple characters who interact and whose events' interconnect, even if living in parallel universes rather than a single. A solid continuity is required anytime. Multiplicity makes the "parallel universes" part possible as it refers to the practice of creating alternative versions of the same character or story. Multiverse is there in the middle, making everything canon and legitimizing the multiplicity in the continuity. In doing so, the organicity of the franchise continuity will not be jeopardized but rather will be enriched by multiple entries, perfectly fitting somewhere in the expanded narrative multiverse.

But MCU's analysis doesn't end here. We have also seen that one of the main products introducing the multiverse in the Marvel Cinematic Universe was able to do that only thanks to a partnership between two major studios. Marvel Studios and Sony Pictures share the rights for Spider Man character. In *Spider Man: No Way Home*, Sony and Marvel production, the multiverse opens up and the three actors who played Spider Man over the years met. This shared moment was possible not thanks to the original, narrative idea brought up by the studio but rather thanks to a commercial agreement between two franchises who hold the rights for the same character. That has never happened before. The two (franchises') universes can interact until the deal goes on, allowing most recent Spider Man interpreter, Tom Holland bouncing back and forth from a universe to the other. If

the agreement comes to an end, the two universes will stop existing in the same shared multiverse and paths will definitively separate. It is a studio multiverse rather than a narrative multiverse.

This concept is made even more clearer by the DC Universe. As the analysis of this case study showed, DC's IP properties are in the hands of Warner Bros, which can manage them at their leisure. Many stand-alone movies were realized over the decades, with a glimpse of a shared universe only realised in the most recent years. DC Extended Universe (the name of the shared DC universe) never realized to conquer people and critics' trust, suffering from continuous reshaping and reboots. Today two multiverses exist: one being the already known DC Extended Universe in which every movie will be interconnected and characters will interact and the second made up by every single, stand-alone ever realized or yet to be realized, living in one of the many multiverses out there. In addition to those cited, the Arrowverse shared universe populates the DCTV. Each is a small part in the wide multiverse, that contains them all. But which is the universe that actually connects them all? The universe in which every universe can develop? It is the creator of all, it is the studio. Studios have in every aspect the last word on their contents. Cinema industry is governed by market rules imposed and at the same time followed by studios that direct each product where the company needs them. Multiverse was actually possible because, both Marvel Studios and Warner Bros. reached the most advantageous legal terms to put characters together.

If it is possible to frame Multiverse logics into the wider context of transmedia storytelling rules? If Multiverse logics creates a new paradigm of rules? No, it does not. The question was misleading to begin with. It is not about the narrative implication of the Multiverse, it has much more to do with the production side of the franchising discourse. A new notion can be introduced to answer these questions: multiversity. "Multiversity" can be defined as a new production model conformable with the business criteria of multimedia franchising. It is a new Studios approach to its media contents and its strategy of promotion and distribution, that balances the two sides of production and narration through cross-over events and cross-media narrations. Narrative Shared Universes are the ultimate fans' point of convergence to enter superhero's transmedia multiverses. "Multiversity" isn't a mere plot device but rather a new way of understanding cinema. As we have come to understand, both Marvel Studios and DC Films are the perfect examples of a film industry now governed by major studios calling the shots for any media content and its storytelling devices. Any DC or Marvel production benefits from the opportunity for an independent and unique storytelling. At the same time, Studios will manage and supervise every single franchise' product in order to guarantee consistency and cohesion of the macro plot. The difference between movie productions and Studios in their operating logics just highlighted will be transposed into the fictional storyworld in the form

of individual universes governed by their own rules (representing one of the franchise's movies) held together by one large cosmos called the multiverse (the franchise) that will ensure their overall coherence and continuity. "Multiversity" enters the scene as a meta-narrative transmedia-franchise device.

As any other franchise device or transmedia principle, Multiversity enters the reflection on transmedia storytelling and media convergence, fitting perfectly on both sides. Transmedia franchises show the solid connection between narration and production, tied by a double thread. Introducing multiversity as a principle for the transmedia franchising model means to legitimize any strategic operation made by the Studio without worrying about a cohesive and coherent business vision in the long run or a storytelling steadiness to begin with.

MCU and DC Universe opened the road for a new way of making cinema, strengthening blockbusters predominance on a market more and more dominated by franchises and fans' participatory culture.

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Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (Id., Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, Maurissa Tancharoen, ABC 2013-2020)

Arrow (Id., Greg Berlanti, The CW 2012-2020)

Batwoman (Id., Carolina Dries, The CW, 2019-2022)

Black Lightning (Id., Salim Akil, The CW 2018-2021)

Breaking Bad (Id., Vince Gillian, AMC 2008-2013)

Buffy l'ammazzavampiri (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, The WB 1997-2003)

Crisi sulle terre infinite (5), (*Crisis on Infinite Earth: Part Five*, DC's Legends of Tomorrow, Greg Berlanti, the CW, 2016-2022)

Daredevil (Id., Drew Goddard, Netflix 2015-2018) (Disney+ 2022-)

DC's Legends of Tomorrow (Id., Greg Berlanti, The CW 2016-2022)

E alla fine arriva mamma (*How I Met Your Mother*, Craig Thomas, Carter Bays, CBS 2005-2014)

Elementary (Id., Rob Doherty, CBS 2012-2019)

Firefly (Id., Joss Whedon, FOX 2002)

I Simpsons (*The Simpsons*, Matt Groening, FOX 1989-)

Il Trono di Spade (*Game of Thrones*, David Benioff, Daniel B. Weiss, HBO 2011-2019)

La signora in giallo (*Murder, She Wrote*, Peter S. Fischer, Richard Levinson, William Link, CBS 1984-1996)

Loki (Id., Michael Waldron, Disney Plus 2021-)

Lost (Id., J.J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, Jeffrey Lieber, ABC 2004-2010)

Malcom (*Malcom in the Middle*, Linwood Boomer, FOX 2000-2006)

Moon Knight (Id., Jeremy Slater, Disney+ 2022)

Ms. Marvel (Id., Bisha K. Ali, Disney+ 2022)

Seinfeld (Id., Jerry Seinfeld, NBC 1989-1998)

Sherlock (Id., Steven Moffat, Mark Gatiss, BBC One 2010-2017)

Streghe (*Charmed*, Constance Burge, The WB 1998-2006)

Supergirl (Id., Greg Berlanti, CBS, The CW 2015-2021)

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (Id., Malcolm Spellman, Disney+ 2021)

The Flash (Id., Greg Berlanti, The CW 2014-)

WandaVision (Id., Jac Schaeffer, Disney+ 2021)

X-Files (*The X-Files*, Chris Carter, FOX 1993-2002, 2016-2018)

Filmography - Franchises

Harry Potter (Id., J.K. Rowling, 2001-)

Spider-man (Sam Raimi, 2003-2007)

Spider-man (Marc Webb, 2012-2014)

Star Trek (Id., Gene Roddenberry, 1966-)

Star Wars (Id., George Lucas, 1997-)

X-Men (Lauren Shuler Donner, 2000-2020)

YouTube Videos

DC, *DC FanDome 2021*, 16 Oct 2021, 1:29:32, ultimo accesso 31 Maggio 2022
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RADmFACrWWQ>

Meta, *The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together-Connect 2021*, 28 October 2021,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8> (ultimo accesso 27 Aprile 2022)

Reynolds, Ryan, *Deadpool and Korg React*, 13 luglio 2021,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7q60i_Lh_E (ultimo accesso 25 Maggio 2022)

Videogames

Call of Duty (Id., Infinity Ward, 2003)

Halo (Id., Bungie Studios, 2001)

Mario Bros. (Id., Nintendo, 1983)

Pokémon GO (Id., Niantic, 2016)