

# Multiverse Fiction: A narratological approach to infinite worlds narratives

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Gabriele D'Amato, Luca Diani

## Abstract

In recent years, movies and tv shows have increasingly adopted the notion and the structure of the multiverse from superhero comics, resulting in a great popularity of the concept across a wider audience. The article aims to define the basic features of contemporary multiverse narratives, and to explore some of their textual applications. The first part will deal with the narratological theory of parallel worlds in fiction, following Marie-Laure Ryan's and Karin Kukkonen's analyses, to outline five key features shared by each multiverse narrative. The second part will be devoted to three significant case studies, that show three different applications of the multiverse as a textual device: *Everything Everywhere All at Once* as an example of intertextual narrative; *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, that relies on a cultural dominant; and the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a transmedial storyworld expanded through the characteristics of the multiverse.

## Keywords

Multiverse, Storyworld, Narratology, Transmediality, Possible Worlds Theory.

# Multiverse Fiction: A narratological approach to infinite worlds narratives<sup>1</sup>

Gabriele D'Amato - Luca Diani

## 1. What is a multiverse fiction?

In recent years, the term “multiverse” has increased its popularity across recipients, thanks to its presence in blockbusters and award-winning movies. Since the “many-worlds” interpretation<sup>2</sup> has influenced the narratological idea of a plurality of possible worlds in fiction, the term multiverse has been used in narrative theory with different purposes and diverging connotations<sup>3</sup>.

In a recent essay on the topic – dedicated specifically to movies – Alain Boillat refers to the multiverse as «a principle of film organization»

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of shared research and a constant dialogue between the two authors. Specifically, the first part, *What is a multiverse fiction?*, is written by Gabriele D'Amato, while the second part, *Multiverse as a textual device*, is written by Luca Diani. However, the two parts are conceived as closely interdependent: the first part proposes a narratological and theoretical outline of what we define as multiverse fiction; the second part focuses on three case studies to show different aspects and interpretive outcomes of the genre. Moreover, the strict entanglement between the two parts is reinforced by the use, in the case studies, of the five key features outlined in the five sections that compose the first, theoretical part.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan (2006) traces back the scientific research around the “many-worlds” theory in physics. Among the scientists, Everett III was the first to introduce the possibility of the existence of a plurality of worlds; Lewis's modal realism offered the model for the narratological application of the notion of possible worlds; Deutsch suggested the idea of interference between quantum particles, that led to the creation of a new universe; finally, Tegmark outlined and classified four levels of parallel universes configurations.

<sup>3</sup> For our analysis, we do not distinguish between the term *universe* and the term *world*. From now on, we will use them interchangeably.

(2022: 26), where the ontological structure is composed of at least «a two-world arrangement» (130). He recognizes seven types of «other worlds» – from «distant worlds» to «parallel worlds» – that are not mutually exclusive, and each of them is considered as a multiverse narrative. Similarly, Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) examines the term in few paragraphs as «the overall structure resulting from the connection of two or more universes that, though connected, still remain distinct and separate» (2012: 216). Here, as in Boillat, the stress is on the «two or more» fictional structure, which is in explicit contrast with the postulation of multiverse as an infinite number of worlds (section 1.1); moreover, another question is raised by the theoretical ambiguity on the connection between different universes. In Wolf's analysis, the term also appears with an extradiegetic meaning, as a story-world brought together from different fictions thanks to a crossover strategy depending to «transnarrative characters (or objects) and geographical (or spatiotemporal) linkages» (*ibid.*).

In her seminal essay on possible worlds in fiction, Marie-Laure Ryan takes her departure from the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics to analyze how narrative fiction deals with «the notion of a multiverse composed of parallel worlds» (2006: 634); nonetheless, she exclusively mentions the potential existence of an infinite number of universes on a diegetic level, but she never declares their necessity. Then, she distinguishes «three types of story common in fantasy and science fiction, namely, the narrative of transworld exploration, the narrative of alternate history, and the time-travel narrative» (Ryan 2006: 656). Since «these story types exist in both a one-world and a many-worlds version» (*ibid.*), it seems sufficient to have the many-worlds version of a story to impose a multiverse narrative. Thus, Ryan subordinates the multiverse narrative to specific configurations of stories, rather than defining it as a peculiar type of story with its characteristic ontology of infinite worlds.

In contrast with these theoretical interpretations – which usually refer to “multiverse” in a broader sense – we adopt the term to describe a peculiar case of parallel worlds narrative. The choice of defining this narrative as “multiverse fiction” relies in part on its diegetic presence in the case studies that we will analyze in the second part: as we will discuss in section 1.5, the characters of these narratives explicitly refer to the ontological structure of the worlds they live in as a “multiverse”; moreover, within the plot, it is usually provided a theoretical explanation of the concept. This explanation works not only for the characters who are unaware of the plurality of worlds that surround them, but also for the recipients who need to be guided through a complex fictional ontology. Thus, the presence of

the multiverse as both a term and a concept within the plot becomes one of the essential components of what we call "multiverse fiction". Besides this diegetic recurrence, it is possible to outline five key features of the multiverse narratives.

### 1.1. Infinity of parallel worlds

In a multiverse fiction the infinity of parallel worlds must be objectively stated. It is not sufficient to refer to their potential existence, but every single possible world needs to be considered as an actual one in this fictional ontology.

As outlined in Ryan's essay, the narratological theory is indebted to the many-worlds interpretation of physics. Even though Tegmark (2003) distinguishes four levels of the multiverse, both the scientific accuracy of the theory and the different origins of the plurality of worlds are not relevant for our narratological purposes. Thus, we agree with Ryan that the main value of the quantum cosmology is that it «raises the question of how narrative can support the idea of the incessant birth of an infinity of new worlds» (2006: 668).

While it is self-evident that in Wolf's and Boillat's two-world arrangement no infinite cosmology is postulated, in Ryan's account the boundary between potentiality and actualization is sometimes blurred. For example, in her analysis of John Wyndham's short story "Random Quest" (1965 [1961]) – where, in a dual ontology, the protagonist travels from his "original" world to a counterfactual one – Ryan follows the theoretical speculations on quantum cosmology expressed in the text to define the short story as a «multiverse cosmology» (2006: 658), even though, on a textual level, it is never clarified the objective actualization of this supposed infinity of worlds. In what we call "multiverse fiction", the line of demarcation between the potential and the actual existence of infinite worlds must be diegetically clarified: although it is impossible to represent all the infinite versions of reality in a single work of fiction, there must be no doubt on their objective existence.

### 1.2. Equal ontological hierarchy

In a multiverse fiction the hierarchical relationship between parallel worlds must be ontologically equal.

As theorized by Hilary P. Dannenberg, «ontological hierarchy is a concept that can be defined as the system of relationships between al-

ternate possible worlds that emerges in the process of the plot's development» (2008: 62). Dannenberg distinguishes between the ontological hierarchies of realist and semirealist narrative genres: while in realist narrative «the final ontological hierarchy can only confer the status of actuality on one version of events» (*ibid.*), in semirealist texts the ontological hierarchy of realism can be subverted in multiple-world scenarios. According to Dannenberg, semirealist texts (such as fantasy and science fiction) present an ontological hierarchy of several actual worlds that «are organized into a plausibly coherent, interconnected system of worlds using realist explanatory strategies» (121), such as pseudoscientific explanations of their inner working laws (Micali 2019) – in our case, the origins and the rules of the multiverse. However, not every parallel worlds narratives of semirealist texts present this equal ontological hierarchy: for example, virtual parallel worlds can consist of a hierarchical structure in which one universe is clearly subordinated to another one. This is the case of *The Matrix* (1999), where the virtual reality known as the “Matrix” is an interactive simulation subordinated to a singular actual world, in which it was elaborated by the machines to deceive enslaved humans. A movement between ontologically disconnected subworlds is called, following Thon's terminology, «ontological metalepsis» (2016: 66): since the relationship between equal ontological worlds is a horizontal one, there is no ontological metalepsis in our multiverse fiction.

In Dannenberg's outline, a third type of ontological hierarchy is provided by antirealist texts, such as metafictional narratives: here, «the multiple worlds are not part of a coherent and unified system» (2008: 121) and their hierarchical distinctions become fuzzy or disappear altogether. Ryan considers meta-textualism as one of the strategies that prevent a genuine multiverse narrative: in her words, «most postmodern branching narratives fall into this category» (2006: 670). In Dannenberg's terms, these narratives – as radical metafiction – would be classified under the antirealist category. However, a theoretical question is raised by the metafictional nature of Jorge Luis Borges's short story “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), that Ryan considers «a description of the ultimate multiverse narrative» (2006: 653). This description is presented through the fictional novel written by a character called Ts'ui Pen, following a postmodern metafictional structure that would situate Borges's short story within Dannenberg's antirealist texts. Although Ts'ui Pen's novel presents many aspects of a multiverse narrative, the relationship between the fictional text and the linear short story where Borges embeds it problematizes the ontological hierarchy of the text as a whole. Since “The Garden

of Forking Paths” does not present an equal ontological hierarchy as we can find in semirealist texts due to its metafictional structure, it cannot be considered as an example of “multiverse fiction”.

### 1.3. Interference and counterparts

In a multiverse fiction the relationship between parallel universes requires the constant possibility of interference among them. Moreover, since this ontology offers infinite versions of a single character, the principle of interference allows an infinity of possible encounters between counterparts.

Ryan borrows the term “decoherence” from physics to explain a multiverse narrative without entanglement between different branches after their splitting: «if the branches are kept neatly separate, the worlds they represent will “decohere”» (2006: 654) and the narrative «will be a collection of separate stories rather than a unified narrative multiverse» (655). In narratological terms, Dannenberg calls “divergence” «the bifurcation or branching of narrative paths» (2008: 2), while “convergence” involves «the intersection of narrative paths and the interconnection of characters within the narrative world» (*ibid.*). Since these principles work for both a single-world realist cosmology and many-worlds nonrealist texts, they can be applied for our multiverse structure, which offers a constant interplay of convergence and divergence. In multiverse fiction each alternative world stems from a point of divergence but, rather than decohering, the different branches are kept connected through interference. Here, convergence does not work as a reunification of previously separated branches, but it consists of interferences between close and distant other possible worlds through transworld journeys of existents, that is, «the characters of the story and the objects that have special significance for the plot» (Ryan 2014: 34).

The term “counterpart” refers to an alternative version of a specific character (or object) as seen from the point of view of the “original” one. We adopt the term “counterpart” rather than counterfactual because the equal ontological hierarchy of multiverse fiction excludes the identification of counterfactual alternatives (Dannenberg 2008: 130). As we will see in section 1.4, in both cases it is a matter of focalization; however, taking the point of view of a single character rather than of a single world does not destabilize the ontological status of the multiverse. In accordance with its semirealist ontology, there is always a pseudoscientific explanation for the interference and encounter of the counterparts (portals,

futuristic technological devices, transworld machines). Following Ryan's account, in multiverse fiction it is possible to distinguish three typologies of counterpart relations: the most common one involves transworld physical travel of a character who «confront a fully embodied version of his alter ego» (2006: 662). A second possibility concerns the mind-body splitting and the travel of the consciousness of a character into the corporeal shell of its counterpart; the third one, according to Ryan, is «the merging of [characters'] consciousness within a single body» (663). While we can fully adopt Ryan's first two types of counterpart relations, there is no occurrence of the third one in multiverse fiction. Therefore, we propose a third typology in which a single character can acquire some of its counterparts' abilities, skills, and knowledges: in doing so, we have a combination of characteristics rather than a merging of consciousness in a single body.

#### 1.4. Focalization and epistemological hierarchies

In a multiverse fiction the diegetic representation of the parallel worlds explored by the narrative depends on the concept of focalization.

Regarding the first section, the infinity of parallel worlds cannot be fully represented for obvious reasons. Therefore, focalization becomes an essential principle of organization of the ontological structure and allows the depiction of an infinity of worlds «necessarily limited to a finite number of them» (Ryan 2006: 668). In Ruth Ronen's terms, «an act of focalization is therefore an act in which the totality of fictional elements is restricted in a specific context according to one principle or other» (1994: 182): in our case, this principle is mainly dictated by the necessity of a selection among the infinite number of worlds.

In regard to the second section, focalization problematizes the hierarchical relationship between parallel worlds (and counterparts) by providing an epistemological hierarchy, which varies from case to case. Therefore, the epistemological hierarchy works together with the plot to determine the selection of the worlds depicted into the narrative, without subverting the equal ontological hierarchy of the multiverse. In each multiverse narrative, we can distinguish two levels of epistemological hierarchy: the first one concerns the relationship between the represented universes and those which remain out of the narration; in the second one, the representation of a set of worlds – including the “starting” universe – is privileged on another group of depicted universes. Here, the choice of the focalized universe works in accordance with the plot, which

determines the epistemological hierarchy between the universes: some privileged worlds usually influence what happens on a diegetic level in a group of subordinated ones, whose hierarchical status is perceived as epistemologically inferior. For example, the hierarchical relationship previously seen in *The Matrix* is explored in its ontological aspect: the virtual simulation is ontologically subordinated to the upper level of the real world of machines and rebels. On the other hand, in multiverse fiction the reasons of hierarchical subordinations are not based on ontological questions but follow the events of the story and their focalization.

### 1.5. Orienting strategies across the multiverse

In a multiverse fiction, several textual and visual strategies concur to guide characters and audiences across the infinity of worlds.

Karin Kukkonen distinguishes two main strategies for coping with the complexities of the multiverse in comics storytelling: «the strategic use of reader surrogates» and «iconographic elements in the portrayal of different character versions» (2010: 42). In her definition, reader surrogates are «characters whom readers follow and identify with as the story unfolds» (*ibid.*): they are crucial for helping audiences to orient themselves across the multiple cosmology. Even though the equal ontological hierarchy does not allow any universe to be regarded as «a textual actual world in the multiverse [...], reader surrogates can provide a basic point of departure» (54) to understand the ontological structure. Thus, they work as focalizing characters and define the second-level epistemological hierarchy of the multiverse they travel across. Similarly, in her analysis of a story that involves the physical encounter of two different versions of the same character, Ryan claims that the focalizer «provides a more interesting narrative perspective [...] because he is epistemologically deficient with respect to his counterpart, and the story can focus on his surprise» (2006: 662). Then, the epistemological hierarchy foregrounds the world inhabited by a character who is almost unaware of the laws of the multiverse: this «epistemologically deficient» status of a character determines the epistemological privilege of his universe.

In her analysis of reader surrogates, Kukkonen refers to an aspect that we can consider as a second typology of orienting strategies: «when reader surrogates are given explanations of the structure of the multiverse in the story proper, readers acquire by proxy» (2010: 43) the knowledge that the surrogates construct at the diegetic level. We can define this phenomenon as an example of “explanatory strategies”: similarly,



in multiverse fiction the focalizer (epistemologically deficient) is provided with an explanation of the structure of the plurality of worlds which specifically recurs to the term “multiverse”. The utterance of the word “multiverse” is a key orienting strategy and an essential feature of our multiverse fiction.

The second orienting strategy outlined by Kukkonen – iconographic elements – is specific to visual media, such as comics, tv shows, and movies. She observes how «an iconography that provides short-cuts into readers’ knowledge structures» enables them «to keep different character versions distinct and connect them to their original storyworlds» (2010: 42). Following Ryan’s taxonomy, in contrast to language and music, images can easily «represent visual appearance of characters and setting» (2006: 19). In the movies that we will analyze in the second part of this essay, besides costumes and characters’ physical and physiognomic features (Kukkonen 2013), a specific iconographic function is performed by actresses and actors who could play some of the different versions of their characters. The same-actor strategy works as an orienting device in accordance with the principle of minimal departure of possible-worlds theory (Ryan 1991): the closer the alternative version, the more probable the presence of the same actor. For example, the newly born world from the viewpoint of the focalizing universe will probably portray a character played by the same actor or actress, while in the exploration of farther universes we could find different counterparts depicted through levels of increasing defamiliarization: from different actors or actresses to animals, objects, talking rocks, and animated drawings.

Regarding these key features, a multiverse fiction can be defined as a peculiar kind of narrative consisting of an infinity of parallel worlds, organized through an equal ontological hierarchy, necessarily presenting the interference of worlds and counterparts, orchestrated by the accordance between focalization and epistemological hierarchy, and explored in its complexity through different orienting strategies.

In the following part, we will observe three case studies taken from cinema and television which follow this definition of multiverse fiction: *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), and “The Multiverse Saga” of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2021-present).

## 2. Multiverse as a textual device

### 2.1. Multiverse as intertextual device: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

In *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* Kukkonen analyzes the occurrence of the multiverse by considering it as a peculiar storyworld of superhero comics: «“Multiverse” is the term for a conglomerate of alternative storyworlds in the genre of superhero comics» (Kukkonen 2013: 98). Then, she discusses the difference between her understanding of multiverse and Bordwell's forking-path plots (2002), by stating that the multiverse in superhero comics is a «basic feature of the genre»: «the forking paths and alternative storyworlds are less a means of philosophical contemplation or of sophisticated storytelling, even though they can lead to this, and more of a basic feature of the world superheroes live in» (Kukkonen 2013: 103).

While this narrow definition could have been true at the time of Kukkonen's writing, the contemporary wave of multiverse fiction forces us to rethink the boundaries marked by superhero comics. In 2013, one of the first and most influential multiverse fiction that follows our definition was introduced by the adult animated science-fiction sitcom *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), created by Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon. *Rick and Morty* is an original animated sitcom, it is not an adaptation of a comic book, and, even though its protagonist Rick is a super-intelligent scientist recognized as the smartest being alive, it has nothing to do with superhero comics. Since *Rick and Morty* originated from an animated short parody film of *Back to the Future* (1985), it employs several sci-fi devices, tropes, and narrative strategies, including the multiverse. These strategies are usually conceived as parodic allusions or quotations, with intertextual references, sometimes explicit, to classic sci-fi novels or movies. The multiverse, as one of the most important strategies of the show, allows the actualization of intertextual references on a diegetic level, by providing infinite parallel universes in which the allusions actually exist. For example, the “Interdimensional Cable” (seen for the first time in season 1 episode 8) – a cable box invented by Rick that gives access to television shows across the multiverse – shows an alternative version of the movie *Cloud Atlas* (2012) from another universe, starring a counterpart of Jerry Smith in place of Tom Hanks. Another example involves an explicit reference to the famous Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg, specifically to his body-horror style, justified on a diegetic level by the existence of a “Cronenberg World” and its inhabitants

called “Cronenbergs” (season 1 episode 6), which include Cronenberg Rick and Cronenberg Morty as the protagonists’ counterparts from a parallel dimension of the multiverse.

*Rick and Morty* has changed the way people perceive the idea of multiverse. In an interview appeared on “Vulture” in the April of 2022, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (the Daniels), directors of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (from now on, *EEAAO*), candidly declared their difficulty to watch *Rick and Morty* while working on *EEAAO*: «[*Rick and Morty*] was actually hard to watch because we had already been working on the draft for a while [...] I was like, “They’ve already done all the ideas we thought were original!”» (Lee 2022). *EEAAO* was released in 2022 and received a huge commercial success and critical acclaim, taking home seven Academy Awards (including Best Picture), an impressive result for an independent sci-fi movie.

The movie involves a Chinese-American immigrant family struggling with economical, bureaucratic, and relational worries and tensions, including the complex acceptance of the daughter’s homosexuality. This fairly linear plot is disrupted by the appearance of a different version of Waymond (Ke Huy Quan), the father, from another universe. This version – called Alpha-Waymond from the “Alphaverse” – addresses his wife Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh), the movie’s main protagonist, by explaining that many parallel universes exist and by revealing her fundamental role in facing the threat represented by Jobu Tupaki, the Alpha-version of their daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu), who wants to destroy the whole multiverse. His speech works as a guideline for the “main” Evelyn (the Evelyn from the starting universe) and for the recipients across the infinity of worlds (section 1.5): this Evelyn, as a classic reader surrogate, is totally unaware of the existence of the multiverse and its laws, and she needs a conspicuous set of orienting strategies, such as the explanation of the ontological structure – the infinity of worlds (section 1.1) and their equal ontological hierarchy (section 1.2) – and several tips to move across the realities. Thus, as seen in section 1.4, the epistemologically deficient character works as the main focalizer of the plot. In his explanation, Alpha-Waymond refers to his original “Alphaverse” as the first universe to make contact with the others, thanks to the scientific research of Alpha-Evelyn, who discovered a way to temporarily link someone’s consciousness to another version of him/herself, by developing a technology called “verse-jumping”. This interference between counterparts follows the mind-body splitting outlined in section 1.3, but differs from Ryan’s typology – in which knowledge, memory, and sense of identity remain those of the traveling counterpart (2006: 659) – since

verse-jumping requires a fusion of the consciousnesses with a direct access to all the counterparts' memories, skills, and emotions. It is no coincidence that Alpha-Evelyn is depicted as a brilliant scientist: as we have seen with *Rick and Morty* – in which the genial scientist Rick creates a technological device to travel across the multiverse – the presence of a scientist (and of a pseudoscientific explanation) is a common feature of multiverse fiction; similar characters that discover and allow transworld journeys will appear in the two following case studies.

While explaining the features of the multiverse, Alpha-Waymond shows the main Evelyn a map of the multiverse on a technological device, still working as an iconographic orienting strategy for both the character and the recipients. Moreover, Alpha-Waymond describes the relationship between the universes following the principle of minimal departure: «Every surrounding bubble [representing the universe] has slight variations, but the farther away you get from your universe, the bigger the differences». Thus, the last alternative universe to be generated shares more similarities – in existents and other features – with the “original” one than the older branches do: for example, the “Wong Kar-wai Universe” (a world that admittedly refers to Wong Kar-wai’s visual style and cinematic language) is closer to the main universe than the “Hot Dog Hands Universe” (a world in which people literally have hot dogs in place of fingers), because it does not question natural and physical laws. This scalarity, provided by the principle of minimal departure, works in accordance with the intertextual dominant<sup>4</sup> of *EEAAO*’s multiverse fiction. As we have seen with *Rick and Morty*, intertextual references can be traced throughout the whole movie, with several cinematic quotations, visual allusions, and in-jokes, but they can spread uncontrollably thanks to the structure provided by the multiverse. It seems that the Daniels’ main interest in selecting the worlds to explore throughout the story (section 1.4) is driven by their desire to play with and pay homage to beloved movies, directors, and cultural elements. Therefore, the multiverse works as an intertextual device and a reference-making machine to exploit for a potentially infinite number of disparate quotations and allusions. For example, we have already seen the “Wong Kar-wai Universe”, that stems from another life path in which Evelyn never left China and never married Waymond; moreover, in this

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<sup>4</sup> Although the multiverses of our three case studies share several basic features, our analysis will focus on a specific component foregrounded and enlightened by the multiverse narrative, that we can consider as a *dominant*.

intertextual tour de force, we can recognize the "Raccoonie Universe", inspired by Pixar's *Ratatouille* (2007), where an anthropomorphic raccoon manipulates a chef's actions, just as Remy the rat controls Linguini in the animated movie; and the "Rocks Universe", that comes from various sources, including Quentin Dupieux's *Rubber* (2010), and shows Evelyn's and Joy's counterparts as small, round rocks, whose dialogues are represented through subtitles in an absurd mother-and-daughter conversation about nihilism and the meaning of life. The latter surreal universe – supposedly farther than the others – plays with its iconographic divergence from Evelyn's and Joy's main versions, a distance that is highlighted and depicted through intertextual references. By contrast, a multiverse narrative such as the one depicted in the independent movie *Coherence* (2013) relies on a minimal distance between counterparts, that results in an eerie and horrific effect due to the identical appearance of the different versions of a character. In a similar narrative there is no room for intertextual references that require more space or distance from the main universe to be freely expressed. Thus, by limiting itself to the closest universes, the multiverse narrative as an intertextual device cannot activate the reference-making machine that characterizes *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

## 2.2. Multiverse as cultural device: *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*

While intertextuality could be seen as the dominant of *EEAAO*'s multiverse narrative, the computer-animated movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (from now on, *SV*) presents itself as a complex depiction of cultural and racial issues heavily relying on its multiversal plot. Thus, we consider *SV*'s multiverse driven by a cultural dominant.

As underlined by Dominik Mieth, *SV*'s story is not a direct adaptation from the comics, but it is loosely based on various sources, including a comic book, a videogame, and an animated series (2021: 140). The plot takes as its point of departure a universe in which Miles Morales, the teenage son of an African American father and a Puerto Rican mother, surprisingly becomes Spider-Man, following the death of Spider-Man/Peter Parker from his own reality. After the opening of the multiverse through a technological device built by the villain Kingpin, Miles encounters an increasing number of Spider-People from parallel dimensions. Among them, an out-of-shape Peter B. Parker can be clearly recognized as the "original" version of Spider-Man, a racially white male voiced by Chris Pine (with references to the original comic book character and to the es-

tablished cinematic version of Sam Raimi's trilogy). We can infer its originality following a principle of minimal departure from an «established character template» (Pearson 2018: 150), that includes six key elements, such as physical appearance, psychological traits, speech patterns and dialogue, interaction with other characters, environment, and biography. Thanks to the ontological structure of the multiverse, this “original” Peter Parker can directly face the new protagonist and main focalizer Miles Morales. Thus, the multiverse works as a cultural device, by shifting the perspective from the original version to a new universe where a multicultural teenager “takes up the mantle”. Moreover, the inner workings of the multiverse allow several cultural representations to appear on the screen *all at once*: other than the “original” Peter Parker version, Miles Morales encounters the Spider-Woman Gwen Stacy, the Japanese high-school girl Peni Parker, the “noir version” of Spider-Man, the anthropomorphic Spider-Ham Peter Porker (each of them as the Spider-Person from her/his own reality). The choice of Miles Morales as the main focalizer also depends on his epistemologically deficient knowledge since, as suggested by Thon, «all of these characters (except, initially, Morales) seem to be at least broadly aware of the (fictional) existence of a multitude of interdimensional Spider-People» (2022: 145).

Within the parallel universes, one of the key elements of the established character template to be subverted is biography. Spider-Man's biography relies on some fixed elements, such as the grief for his Uncle Ben's death, the sentimental relationship with Mary Jane Watson and Gwen Stacy, the recurrence of the same villains. In a multiverse narrative, the narrative functions can change from a character's version to its counterparts: for example, *SV* explores this possibility to achieve cultural inclusivity with Gwen Stacy, who, from a merely romantic interest for Peter Parker, becomes an alternative Spider-Version with female agency. Moreover, in *SV* the “narrative universal” of surprise (Sternberg 1978) is achieved when Miles Morales discovers that his uncle Aaron plays the role of the villain, thus destabilizing the canonically moral guidance associated with Uncle Ben.

In *SV* the cultural dominant is foregrounded by the choice of the characters' counterparts: if in *EEAAO* there is only one character's identity to be replicated across the infinite realities, the peculiar status of the superhero character brings the identity to be split in two parts, the private Miles Morales and the public Spider-Man. While in *EEAAO* we encounter Evelyn's, Joy's, and Waymond's counterparts (among the others), in *SV* it is not Miles Morales's other selves to be seen across the multiverse; rather, it is the many versions of Spider-Man to appear across the real-

ities, each of them concealing a different private and cultural identity. As we will see in the following section, the Marvel Cinematic Universe foregrounds the many cinematic versions of Peter Parker's Spider-Man, thanks to the internal explanation granted by the multiverse; by contrast, in *SV* the focus is on those versions of Spider-Man who are *not* Peter Parker and take distance from his cultural identity. Thus, the multiverse narrative adopted by *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* makes possible for everyone to be Spider-Man.

### 2.3. Multiverse as transmedial storyworld device: the Marvel Cinematic Universe

As previously mentioned, the term "multiverse" was originally employed to describe the peculiar genre-specific cosmology of superhero comics (Kukkonen 2013). It was DC comics to introduce the concept of multiverse for the first time in the story entitled *The Flash of Two Worlds*, where «the current Flash, Barry Allen, moves so fast that he enters another storyworld, that of the original Flash, Jay Garrick» (Kukkonen 2010: 49). In Thon's words, the term multiverse «tends to be used to provide internal explanations for the contradictions that appear among the work-specific storyworlds of comics-based franchises such as those of Marvel or DC» (2015: 43). He introduces the concept of internal explanation (as well as external explanation) in his account of Kendall Walton's principle of charity (1990): an internal explanation provides a resolution on a diegetic level for different kinds of contradictions presented by the storyworld, such as metaleptic transgressions, different features of the same character, and other narrative incongruities. While this might be true in the case of *The Flash of Two Worlds* – where the multiverse works as an internal explanation to make two different versions of Flash coexist without contradictions – things change when multiverse fiction breaks the boundaries of superhero comics. For example, the Marvel Cinematic Universe could have used the multiverse as an internal explanation to describe the differences between the audiovisual representation of Bruce Banner/Hulk played by Edward Norton in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and the corresponding representation by Mark Ruffalo in all the others MCU's installments, from *The Avengers* (2012) to the present. Rather, the MCU has introduced the concept of the multiverse with other purposes in "The Multiverse Saga" (2021-present), where the parallel dimensions most prominently appear in the tv shows *Loki* (2021-2023) and *What If...?* (2021-present), and the movies *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), and

*Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (2023)<sup>5</sup>. We will focus on *Spider-Man: No Way Home* to analyze the multiverse as a device to expand a transmedial storyworld of a franchise.

The narratological concept of storyworld was originally popularized by David Herman (2009) and furtherly developed by Ryan (2013; 2014; 2019), who defines the storyworld «through a static component that precedes the story and a dynamic component that captures the unfolding of the events» (2013: 364). Then, Thon focuses on its specific transmedial occurrences, by offering a systematic distinction between «the local medium-specific storyworlds of single narrative works, the glocal but noncontradictory transmedial (or, in quite a few cases, merely *transtextual*) storyworlds that may be constructed out of local work-specific storyworlds, and the global and often quite contradictory transmedial storyworld compounds that may, for lack of a better term, be called transmedial universes» (Thon 2015: 32, original emphasis). The MCU has been frequently considered as a chief example of transmedial storytelling (Brembilla – Pescatore 2016; Brinker 2017; Proctor 2017; Mieth 2021), with a specific transmedial storyworld. With the introduction of the multiverse in 2021, the almost linear transmedial storyworld has faced increasing complexity due to the inner features of the multiverse narrative.

It is in particular *Spider-Man: No Way Home* to lead to a significant revision in the storyworld of the MCU, by extending its transmedial storyworld to other preexisting franchises. In the movie, a mistaken spell cast by Doctor Strange brings to the opening of the multiverse from which Peter Parker's counterparts and some of his villains are introduced in the storyworld of the MCU from Sam Raimi's trilogy (2002-2007) and Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man* movies (2012-2014). Thus, the storyworld of the MCU embraces other franchises – which preceded the introduction of Tom Holland's Peter Parker in the MCU – by offering an internal explanation of its expansion thanks to the specific laws and logic of the multiverse. The storyworld of the MCU seems to break the boundaries of Thon's transmedial storyworld and to follow his definition of transmedial universe; however, while Thon's transmedial universe is a «contradictory storyworld com-

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<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that Michael Waldron, *Loki*'s head writer and executive producer and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*'s screenwriter, was previously known for his work as writer and producer of *Rick and Morty*. Moreover, he was revealed to be the screenwriter of the final installment of "The Multiverse Saga", *Avengers: Secret Wars*, scheduled for release in 2027.



pound» (2015: 43), the multiverse narrative of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (and, by extension, that of the entire MCU) provides internal explanations (on a diegetic level) for the contradictions created by the mash-up or cross-over operations between the three Spider-Man's franchises (Ryan 2019: 71). We define this new kind of storyworld as a *transmedial multiverse*. Then, we suggest that Thon's concern with the use of the term "multiverse" – «as it tends to be used to provide internal explanations for the contradictions that appear among the work-specific storyworlds of comics-based franchises» (2015: 43) – can be dismissed, because of the expansion of this term that we have previously outlined in the first part. While in the comics the adoption of the multiverse was necessary to solve previously existing contradictions, in the MCU the multiverse avoids any kind of contradictions, as it prevents them according to the inner features of its storyworld. Then, there is no contradiction to be solved in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* – as in the whole Multiverse Saga – since the coexistence of the three different versions of Spider-Man does not follow a logic of problem-solving, but the movie employs the multiverse as a device to transform its storyworld creatively and freely into a transmedial multiverse<sup>6</sup>.

While critics and journalists wonder if the rise of multiverse may be «a business tactic, one of several that enable vast entertainment companies to recycle beloved characters», or even «the death of originality» (Burt 2022), the article shows that the multiverse is not merely a strategy to solve contradictions or a greedy matter of nostalgia, but it can be adopted as a storytelling tool and as a productive structural device for intertextual references, cultural and political discourses, or complex transmedial storyworlds.

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) seems to extend its transmedial storyworld to the other Spider-Man movies. However, differently from *Spider-Man: No Way Home* – which brings to the creation of a transmedial multiverse –, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* presents several characters and situations taken from the other franchises as mere intertextual references, without transforming them into full-fledged elements on a diegetic level.

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## The Authors

### Gabriele D'Amato

Gabriele D'Amato is a joint PhD student at the University of L'Aquila (Italy) and at Ghent University (Belgium). He obtained his MA in Italian Studies at the University of Bologna (Italy), with a thesis in Literary Theory (supervisor: Prof. Federico Bertoni). His PhD project examines multiperspective narratives across media, exploring different forms and functions of multiperspectivity in contemporary fiction through cognitive and transmedial narratological tools. He is particularly interested in questions of transmediality, theory of the novel, and narratology.

Email: gabriele.damato@graduate.univaq.it

### Luca Diani

Luca Diani is a PhD student in Comparative Literature at the University of L'Aquila. He earned a MA in Italian Studies from the University of Bologna with a dissertation in Literary Theory (supervisor: Prof. Federico Bertoni). His PhD project explores nostalgia as transmedial emotion in contemporary narratives. He is visiting PhD student within Project Narrative, The Ohio State University (USA), and Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (Sweden).

Email: luca.diani@graduate.univaq.it

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