



BRILL

## “Marvel vs. World”

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### Abstract

Following Eric Hayot’s argument that modernity is a theory of the world as the “universal,” this paper traces the “world concept” in Marvel Comics industry (MC) and its synergy with the film industry of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Speaking from the field of World Literature Studies, I show how superhero comics activate the “world concept” through the global dissemination of the infinitely stretchable Marvel Universe. My argument is that by operating in terms of a universe with moldable diegetic rules, the popular culture of MC and MCU does not merely *reflect* the current state of the world concept, but also *affects* its evolution and its spread. The universality of the modern worldview has come to be less concerned with the realist effect and more with increasing all-inclusiveness and infinite stretchability. The increased plasticity of the world concept puts a great pressure on world literary ecologies and increasingly expands and shapes what Beecroft called global literary ecology. What Marvel Comics has done in recent decades, especially through the interplay with the film industry, is to show how the expansion of the world concept entails that however large we imagine the world to be, it is always already too small.

### Keywords

world concept – modernity – Marvel – world literary ecology

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Every philosophy expresses, somewhere, a theory of the world that  
it is a philosophy of.

HAYOT, *On Literary Worlds*

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World literature ... is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world.

CHEAH, "What is a World?"



When the war(s) in the Balkans started in the 1990s, I remember a new kind of chant arose out of the growing rubble of crumbling houses and bodies: the *world* will not look on this idly. It was perhaps the first time I had heard the word "world" used in this way, despite the fact that much of our history classes were about World War II and the role Yugoslavia played in it. It was as if we had no need, prior to the 90s, to speak of *the world*. The world was then some undefined and yet known entity/consciousness out there that was watching and had the power to stop the mayhem, but the question was always: Would it have the moral drive to actually do it? We can see the same kind of thinking thirty years later in a recent documentary *For Sama*, which is about the destruction of Aleppo, where a character says: "We never thought the world would let this happen." The inability or unwillingness of this "world" to come to the rescue leads to profound disappointment and suspicion, but never to a doubt that there is *the world*. At the same time, we find disturbing invocations of the "world" in the infamous documents left by global terrorists like Muhammad Atta: "force yourself to forget that thing which is called the World" (qtd. in Euben and Zaman 466).

And to top it all, at this very moment, the pandemic of Covid-19 has haunted the world in unprecedented ways that can only compete with the speed of our high-tech communication devices. The WHO (World Health Organization), which releases information on the pandemic, confirms this sense many of us had in the war, where there is *one world* to which we simultaneously belong, and are yet outside of, like an arm ripped from its body hoping the body will undo the ripping and stitch the organ back like some kind of Frankensteinian creature. It is both organic and a machine. It is both the sum of its parts and something more than that. It can live on without some parts, but the question is the limit: When does it stop being one entity? It can do good and it can do evil. It seems to have a consciousness but does it have a conscience?

In the middle of the war, I was also living in the fictional worlds of comics, in particular superhero comics which more than any other evoked this notion of the world inhabited by global agents of good. Of course, I knew that no Superman (DC) or Silver Surfer (Marvel) would come to our rescue, and, most cer-

tainly, heroes of the European comics like Corto Maltese (Pratt) or John DiFool (Moebius) would not offer any aid. Captain America may have punched Hitler in the face but he was not coming for Radovan Karadžić or Ratko Mladić. Tony Stark may say he successfully privatized world peace in *Iron Man II*, but Syrian refugees keep suffering while the movie travels the globe without restrictions spreading the Marvel worldview that lies at its core, and which I aim to discuss here. Manga, unfortunately, was not available nor well known in my world. That speaks volumes too. Japan was not really on my world-map the way Belgium and Italy were. When I became a refugee, moving up to Scandinavia, I remember being happy because I thought I was moving to a world where one could get hold of any comic under the sun. Bottom line, it was the comics universe(s) that shaped my notion of the world that was supposed to save us, but did not. Instead, we moved to it whether or not it, the world, liked it.

We need to talk about comics *in* and *as* World Literature, which I here define as a world-making activity that, as Pheng Cheah put it, "enhances our sense of (being a part of) humanity" and "even brings humanity into being" ("What is a World?" 26–27). We also need to discuss the medium of comics as being *of* the world rather than an object in the world defined by economic globalization in order to say something about the notion of "world" and the normative world-making activity of World Literature today. This paper by and large stems from the arguments in Hayot's *On Literary Worlds* and Cheah's "What is a World?" through the lens of the global comics industry of Marvel Comics (and partly the MCU), which is a highly commercialized enterprise in the image-text medium, and which is often relegated to generic fiction in Franco Moretti's terms. I will avoid the easily-accessible cynical view of Marvel Comics as an instance in Globalization that reduces the world to the soulless shape represented by the World Bank logo.<sup>1</sup> Primarily, this analysis arises from the notion that the consumption of Marvel Comics (MC), as a globally dominant genre, "activates the world-concept" (Hayot 179). The evocative phrase "world-concept," in Hayot's definition, is "a relationship between the phenomenological world of the medium's consumption and the diegetic world." My goal is to look at Marvel Comics both in terms of its history (as a global enterprise), and perform a more qualitative reading of selected comics (and some adaptations) to argue that MC reflects, shapes, and disseminates the notion of "world" as "universal."

1 It is possible, in relation to Auerbach's notion that globalization is a process which destroys diversity and individuality (Cheah "World against Globe" 307), to actually see the features of the world concept in Marvel Comics as the opposite of this feature of globalization, even as it is distributed around the globe with the help of globalization.

From a position in a post post-modern academia, if one may call it that and remain unscathed, let us begin with a note on modernity. Hayot argues:

[M]odernity is a theory of the world – of a particular world. It is also, therefore, a theory of worldedness, of a particular kind of worldedness that it most commonly calls the ‘universal.’ ... Modern universalism is, in other words, quite literally the modern world-view. It phenomenalizes, at the level of the world-concept, a historically specific experience of the world.

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The very fact that we feel “one lives in the same world as everyone else, that the rules governing history, physics, economy, communication, culture, space, and time, are the same everywhere and for all time” (Hayot 115), is the effect of the spread of the notion of universalism. Modernity is defined by “the dramatic rise to prominence of this world-view, and its imposition via culture, economy, and violence on people with other views” (115). Connecting, at its core, the world-concept to *perception* (view) is neither new nor is it an attempt at being simplistic, but to highlight the aspect which has been dominant in the discourse. Even if we take the “view” as being a metaphor for thinking – for reason, for science – we cannot do away with the historical significance given to the faculty of sight. It is also to mark that we always imply that the world is something more because the notion of perception/view is by definition limited and, by dint of its main denotation, flattening. In short, a worldview entails an expanding universe.

This expanding universe is nowhere as clear as in superhero comics, and this is why thinking of comics as World Literature helps us see both the spatial and temporal (narrative) aspects of the discipline. I will mainly focus on the narrative aspects. The worlding of the world in Marvel Comics is for me related to the notion of normativity in World Literature as in Cheah’s argument which called for an exploration of the constitution of “world” as a way of thinking about the way “World-literary intercourse enables the fabrication of humanity” (Cheah “World against Globe” 35). My goal is to show, through the example of a comic-book world like Marvel’s which operates on a global scale, the extent to which one can speak of literature *reflecting* and *participating* in the activation of the world concept, because literature “is an inexhaustible resource for contesting the world given to us through commercial intercourse, monetary transactions, and the space-time compression of the global culture industry” (35). I argue that the Marvel Universe is *of* the world and not simply a creative object *in* the world. A distant and semi-distant reading of Marvel Comics, as an example

which moves both within national and global ecologies, shows how "world concept" is activated and how Marvel Universe is a representation of, and an active participant in the way the modern world concept is currently being shaped. This entails worlding, universalism, and expansion.

Discursive changes in "world concept" in popular culture affect its meaning in the notion of World Literature too, even if we tend to ignore it or do not see it as relevant enough. We are, after all, as Beecroft pointed out, speaking more and more of a global literary ecology.<sup>2</sup> What can superhero comics then bring into this discussion, aside from their ever-expanding ties to capitalism and cultural imperialism? Comics Studies, which have until quite recently mainly been evolving from older forms of literary and linguistic studies, stand to become a more significant part of a larger (universe of) knowledge production in the humanities, but I want to consider what comics can bring to World Literature Studies. Here, in particular, how does the popularized notion of a "comics universe" help us reflect upon that central notion of the world? In my view, the notion of "a comics universe" has a connection to spatial models such as Casanova's, which seek to explain how particular works become World Literature without considering the content. Worldbuilding is seldom important on larger scales though it may be significant for certain unique works such as *Ulysses*.<sup>3</sup> In comics, however, the particular notion of the world/universe

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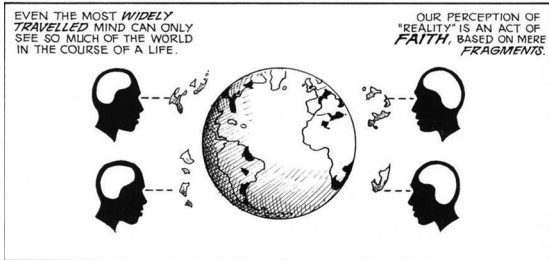
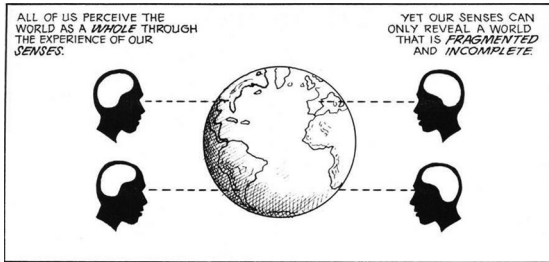
2 Considering the following factors – the linguistic situation, economy, the political world, religion, cultural politics and technologies of distribution – Beecroft proposed six basic types of ecologies: epichoric, panchoric, cosmopolitan, national, vernacular, and global. Simply put, epicoric literature has no or barely any distribution whereas global literature entails expansionism on grand scales. Beecroft's model sees literature "as being in an ecological relationship to other phenomena – political, economic, sociocultural, religious – as well as to the other languages and literatures with which it is in contact" (19). An ecological lens helps us understand processes "of survival and recognition" (20), and the extent to which literature is "implicated ... in political, religious, and other symbolic networks" (26). Since literature is made through the ways readers make connections between works, as well as authorial intentions when writers produce particular types of literature, it is possible to speak even of specific comics as simultaneously belonging to several literary ecologies. Thus, Marvel comics may be firmly rooted in the American literary ecology but are – given their dissemination, translatability, and accessibility – part and parcel of (the making of) the global ecology.

3 Much that is happening in the field of Comics Studies is explainable by Casanova's famous model for World Literature, speaking of the centres of literary power such as Paris and New York; but it is far more fruitful to look at comics in terms of Beecroft's literary ecologies, especially since different comics' schools or traditions have had mainly national and sometimes continental markers, so for instance we can speak of Italian fumetti and Franco-Belgian BD, different American traditions, Japanese manga (and anime), and of the British invasion of American comics, but we can also speak of European comics, Asian comics, and to a lesser extent South American comics, etc.

defines the very production of graphic narratives, and this has, already from the beginning of this artform, been that which also served the purposes of marketing, dissemination, translation, etc. This core of comics became globally obvious through the recent series of film adaptations which use the fact of comics universe to dominate global markets. My proposition, therefore, is that in the world of comics, in particular superhero comics, the notion of the world/universe stands in direct correlation to those parameters which we look at when we discuss the making of World Literature. Even the notion of translation and translatability is incumbent on there being a universe that can be sold globally. Comics' stories are not simply translated between languages but also increasingly demand translation into other media. In this way, moving beyond the borders of national literary ecologies necessitates a dissemination of a particular world concept. In Hayot's discourse, this holds true for all literature that travels, but I find that the comics industry shows such border crossings in an entirely different fashion. Like magical realism, it is not only about selling stories but also, quite explicitly and unabashedly, about selling its world concept.<sup>4</sup>

Before I zoom in on superhero comics, I want to show that these features are not simply peculiar to the superhero genre, but that even more generally, comics as a medium rely on the activation of the world concept. Superhero comics just operate on a much larger scale and also within their own particular ideologies. In one of the most famous and most used books on the theory of the medium of comics, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, an entire section is devoted to the notion of the world (Figures 1 and 2), with the claim that comics always work with worlding through "closure" (McCloud 63). Closure refers to the act of perceiving the world as one all-encompassing entity despite the fact that one only ever perceives fragments. Closure in the comic art is accomplished through the empty space between the panels, the gutter. The readers fill that empty space with content and also use it to get a sense of temporality (implied time-lapse between panels). At one point, the gutter becomes so important for McCloud that he defines the comics medium as closure, that is, an act of worlding (67). Closure could of course be ascribed to most media and most human activities, but comics, in the element of the gutter, actually have a visual representation of the segment of the world that is

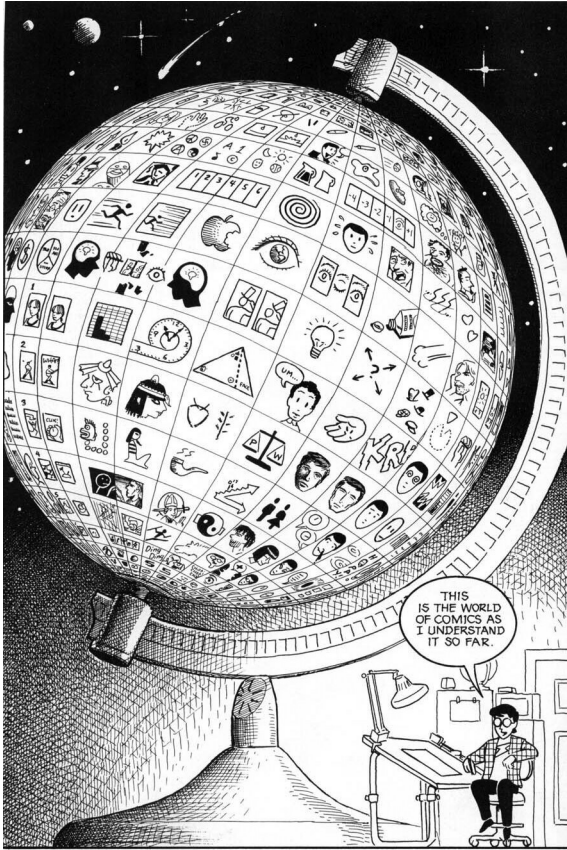
4 As Wendy Faris has argued, magical realism is very much centred on a particular conceptualization of a world (or worlds) and particular relations to it. The genre "combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (1), and also that "the natural appears strange, and the supernatural pedestrian" (11). Magical realism thus labels the impossibility of final classifications and categorizations of historical phenomena in "an un-co-optable world" (8).



FIGURES 1–2 McCloud's presentation of the perception of the “world” (sections of pages 62 and 23)

inaccessible but implied. If a film projects twenty-four images per second and thus creates an illusion of time lapse (effectively hiding its own version of the gutter), comics, by the very character of its medium, continuously represent the act of worlding. Comics medium, at its core, relies on making the unperceived visible (as the unperceived).

It could be argued that the notion of the world has always been all-encompassing, because it always comprises our, at that given moment, the most comprehensive understanding of the totality of things. At the same time, given that we know that our “view” is limited, the world is always, as in the comics art, both incomplete and an abstraction of reality, as illustrated in Figure 3. Worlding as such, as in comics, is always iconographic and always bound to expand as more things can and will be added. We expect this to happen and would find it extraordinary if nothing new was added on a regular basis. This implied incompleteness of our notion of the world arises from our history (of the world concept). Despite the conspiracy theories by the Flat Earth Society, it is not likely that the world will change reductively. Also, at any given time, which the existence of “Flatearththers” proves, there exist multiple, more or less popularised, world-concepts. This is because, for someone versed in Heideggerian phenomenology, the world is ultimately connected to significance produced by human *Dasein*. Our very being is defined by our being-in-the-world and that is very much defined by narrative. This is why, for instance, science can introduce some new dimension of the world without that becom-



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FIGURE 3  
McCloud's use of comics  
iconography to evoke world-  
edness

ing a part of our worldview, while science fiction can diegetically add some meaning that becomes a part of our worldview. Narrative as such continues to serve this primary historical function in the evolution of the world concept. At the same time, assuming that our notion of the world is affected by scientific discovery and theories (despite the current anti-science movements), there is always a sense that, for us laymen, incomprehensible things may become features of our world. Take for instance the way the *Matrix* trilogy attempted to offer a worldview which includes all historical worldviews while giving them a quasi-scientific explanation and a narratological platform. Things such as ghosts, mythological creatures, and karma, were all incorporated and explained with the use of a particular plot and language to fit the worldview it aimed to present. The world was defined as the matrix imposed on the so-called "desert of the real." In some sense, the *Matrix* movies created a world concept that incorporated historical phenomena while effectively shattering the world con-



cepts in which those phenomena originally figured. In contrast, Marvel Comics work with a world concept that comprises all historical world concepts without depriving them of their core features.

While most narrative art involves some sort of world building or world referencing, that is, imaginary or real settings, comics are generally more particular because they practically cannot be read without a deeper sense of the world. Even comic strips, which typically display characters and no background whatsoever, carry strong connotations of complete worlds.<sup>5</sup> In novels we speak of worlds of different stories, or worlds of different authors who write about their realities (Rushdie's world, Borges' world), or worlds of Sci-Fi and fantasy genres where characters can move between books given that they have a common world (Tolkien's world, George R.R. Martin's world). Every story engages in worldbuilding even if it only employs certain metonyms and anchors which presuppose that the readers share its worldview and will be able to fill in the gaps. The very existence of extensive worldbuilding in, for instance, fantasy shows how much the ideological unconscious of the world-concept is at work. Hayot uses the term "oeuvre worlds," like those of J.R.R. Tolkien or Gene Roddenberry, which are "sites for the production of a wide variety of works, authorized and unauthorized, by any number of authors (including fans) drawn to the representational and narrative possibilities they hold in store" (49). The collective rules which create the sense of worldedness happen "consciously, but also in the ideological 'unconscious' of the work, not as an expression of what the work does not know, but of *what it knows most deeply*" and for this reason "any aesthetic world is also an *epistemological engine*: a mechanism for the generation and exhibition of knowledge about itself as a totality" (50, emphasis mine). Indeed, "the concept of the 'world' as applied to a work of art serves a *unifying* purpose ... how the various elements of the work create a dialectically or systemically organized whole (featuring, to be sure, holes)" (52, emphasis

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5 When it comes to the origins of comics we could, of course, depending on the definitions look for narrative art in deep history (as McCloud suggests), or look at those examples of comic strips, such as Töpffer's from the 19th century, and detect some features of the world buildings. Instead, it is in fact with the emergence of comic "books" that the sense of the world started to be more prominent and relevant; and since then, the use of the notion of the world expanded quite rapidly. When I shift my focus to superhero comics, I do not wish to disengage from the way comics have developed generally, or the entire issue of distinguishing between comics and graphic novels (which I disagree with). A larger study may be in order, but here I do start with the notion that what I will say pertains to comics as a medium, but that the superhero comics in particular, because of their rootedness in both national and global literary ecologies, offer an interesting kind of mirror to the way we are engaging with the world concept.

mine). Thus, when we read a book or see a painting, for instance, we would not be able to engage with the work and interpret it if we did not assume there is a world that extends beyond the borders of the canvas or beyond the descriptions on the pages.

Comics in general, and superhero comics in particular, tend to operate with oeuvre worlds. Attempting to read Marvel comics in terms of postmodernism, Carl Silvio offers a solid basic description of the Marvel Universe: "This fictional world ... serves as a perfect example of an *ontologically reconfigured* text. It invites the reader to re-evaluate conventional expectations of fiction by resituating him or her in a position of greater creative autonomy, as an active participant in the generation of the fictional heterocosm" (41, emphasis mine). The superstar of comics, Grant Morrison, argued that such worlding was a reaction to the real-world geopolitical arena: "With no way to control the growing unreality of the wider world, writers and artists attempted to tame it in fictions that became more and more 'grounded', down-to-earth, and rooted in the self-consciously plausible" (348). This argument is, for me, directly related to Hayot's claim: "Creating a work that belongs to *an existing world* means adopting its major characters, and its diegetic and extradiegetic rules, including its laws of narrative probability and its claimed relation to actual history" (50, emphasis mine). While I accept this premise, what I find most interesting is to look at the plasticity of diegetic rules in superhero comics, a plasticity which allows for modern universalism to automatically instill a sense of one ever expanding world.

The Marvel Universe offers a hybrid between the kinds of fictional worlds we find in the greatest literary genres and the real-world settings of realist fiction. It differs from most other fictionalized text worlds in that it "exists as a sprawling and ever shifting narrative tapestry whose composite threads endlessly cross, re-cross and double back upon each other in a process of continuous relativization and revision; a process which is both collateral and interminable" (Silvio 43). The Marvel Universe is constantly in search of some form of diegetic entropy that allows it to utilize the plasticity of the fictional and real-world rules. Indeed, what gives it a sense of the *universe* is not only that it is practically impossible to know it all (the entire Marvel production), but the fact that it is at its core defined by expansionism: "each new title read expands the diegetic space within which the reader operates. In this sense, the text controls the reader's experience of itself and establishes its own authority" (48).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the diegetic space offers the readers freedom to move around

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6 Furthermore, Silvio argues, "[n]one of the titles in the comic text occupy the position of main plot. Consequently, there are no dependent subplots, and 'though' every title constantly refers

as s/he wants while also abiding by the rules of the given universe. The difference from individual novels, even those which belong to interlinked series, is that "a comic book's function is more that of window or aperture through which the reader selectively views and orders the heterocosm" (46). The consequence is that "the reader is placed in a somewhat contradictory position. He or she constructs the heterocosm by deciding which narrative paths will be followed and in what order, and yet the text exerts pressure on the reader to shape or concretize it within predetermined configurations" (48). I would add that the Marvel Universe exerts a certain demand for exploration, a demand to get a better view of it in order to fully appreciate it as a universe. This feature is exactly what lies at the core of our understanding of the real world, and what the gaming industry calls "open world" (where gamers can move characters in any direction, explore any nook, and in fact, if they want to, just put a character in a room for days on end without following any storylines).

To illustrate the plasticity of the Marvel Universe, and show how it performs and sells a particular worldview, I will turn to the new *Ms. Marvel* by G. Willow Wilson (writer) and Adrian Alphona (artist). In the illustration below (Figure 4), the protagonist meets another powered character, the famous, classical, Wolverine.

There is a great deal going on in this image-text, which would require an analysis of the Marvel tradition and its history in world-comics' industries, but I want to draw attention to a few specifics related to Hayot's points. First of all, we see clean drawings of two characters with no trace of the setting, which we know from previous scenes is Jersey City. The blue background resembles the blue/green screen used in filmmaking to later add the world (CGI). Such background, which implies world-building as much as drawings of cityscapes, is common in comics in general, as McCloud demonstrates in chapter 3 of *Understanding Comics*. Here, it is used for dramatic effect, like when a camera zooms in on an object leaving the background blurry. The *oeuvre world* (Marvel Universe) is largely implied in that the reader is supposed to know Wolverine who moves in both real and fictional places such as Canada and Madripoor. Unlike DC Universe, Marvel Universe is famous for taking place in real locations, such as New York, and yet there have always been limits to the historical specificities of those locations (as a way of avoiding more exact temporalization of any given story). There are many famous examples when the specificities of

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to and intersects with other titles, each one constitutes a central narrative core in itself. In its constant dialogue with other titles, an individual title is drastically dependent upon other plotlines, but because every title finds itself equally dependent, none can claim to be main or central" (44).



FIGURE 4 The first team-up from *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*

the national literary ecology and ideological changes in the American setting affected the diegetic make-up of the Marvel Universe, as for instance during the time when superheroes had to have weddings instead of living out of wedlock. What's most interesting about the image above is that Ms. Marvel makes a world-building move which resonates with Hayot's note that the world also belongs to "unauthorized" authors. Ms. Marvel inserts a popular contemporary phenomenon of fan-writing into the Marvel universe, and thus expands, diegetically, what this world is and can be, but the gesture affirms the principle of the plasticity of the universe. Wolverine suddenly becomes a great deal more by also being a potential character in fan-fiction. Suddenly the real-world notion and practice of fan-fiction is brought into the diegetic make-up of the Marvel Universe.

One could, for a moment, question whether or not this move assaults what Hayot calls the integrity of the fictional world, but long-term readers know it is not the case, since the main principles that allow such digression have always been in place. This shows that the notion of the "world" in superhero comics is not a recent, radical development, but something with a long history. *Ms. Marvel* itself arose in relation to the Ms. Marvel and Captain Marvel fandom, which Wilson hints at by making this narrative move. Also, as a character whose power is at its core the plasticity of her body, the character's name is a quite fitting metaphor for the universe. In the first book Kamala Khan attempts to entirely take the shape of Captain Marvel, which leads to increased vulnerability. Many, including myself in other articles, have analyzed this feature in terms of gender and race, but here I find it can symbolize the way the integrity of the universe depends on the integrity of the diegetic rules. In other words, plasticity does not mean anything goes. Changes can cause any number of problems which, as I will later point out in relation to DC, may require world re-building. Wilson cuts far deeper than for instance the post-9/11 edition of *Spider-Man* where heroes

are responding to the terrorist attacks, digging through the rubble, standing symbolically paralyzed, or working with ordinary, “politically invisible” people in the *Civil War* series (Spanakos “Political” 77).<sup>7</sup>

What is more, this Spider-Man issue, despite being in one of the most non-realist genres, is but one example of “[t]he trajectory of world-oriented Realism” whose orientation “is not toward an ever-increasingly accurate reproduction of reality but toward the continually accurate production, and reproduction, of the social and ideological norms of its world-picture” (Hayot 139). In other words, the fiction of Spider-man, although set in New York, has until this moment produced a wholly different sense of the world in which comics such as Marvel exist. This (hyper) real moment of 9/11 expands both our real world and the world of the Marvel Universe, and as such it presents a different image of an ever-expanding universe. It is not expanding in the scientific sense of the moving galaxies but rather its inclusivity.<sup>8</sup> As Hayot writes, “[i]t is in this quite literal reference to and theorization of the world as theme that the aesthetic diegesis achieves its figuration of world as form. ... The world-creating force of medium emerges from the dialectic between the pattern of individual experiences a given medium creates and ... the mood and action of the work whose consumption the medium permits” (Hayot 177–8). Worldedness arises from the fact that “[a] world is conversant with itself ... as the unconscious of the work, as the establishing framework for the unmentioned rules that constitute the work as a total whole” (54). Marvel Comics do not only have the notion of an expanding universe as Hayot’s unconscious of the aesthetic world, but it is something that is actively thematized and in fact theorised by superhero characters who are scientists in their stories. This is what is unique to the genre, and this is why it simultaneously reflects and propels the ongoing development of the world concept.

The world that is Marvel Universe, although it is supposed to be grounded in our real world, has always included other world concepts, for instance different mythological worldviews (Norse, Greek, Japanese). Such additions, regardless of the narratological problems they caused, contributed to the expansion of

7 In contrast, the first trailer for the blockbuster *Spider-Man* movie by Sam Reimi focused on Spider-man catching a fugitive gang by spinning a web between the Twin Towers and catching the helicopter like a fly. This scene was removed from the released movie.

8 Much has been said about the way the superhero genre is entrenched in mythopoesis; besides, the success it has had in the last two decades has been explained in many ways, but most often in relation to the idea that 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror have caused a global existential crisis (Gray and Kaklamanidou). These “post-September 11 fantasies of self-preservation” are not tied to the national literary ecology but “contest an officialist and simplistic vision of patriotism and disqualification of the other” (Spanakos “Exceptional” 15).

the Marvel universe not just in scope but also in that the multiplicity of world-views and operational logics could coexist and eventually hybridise. This works because, as Hayot explains, “World is a ground, but it is always the ground of something. This something is inseparable from the world as world, and relates to it as content to form” (Hayot 91). We can say, for instance, that the perception of the “world” in the previously used image of *Ms. Marvel* is a reflection of the change in the notion of the “world” in which the comic book was produced, but we can also state that this comic, together with a plethora of other comics, books, films, and ads, disseminates ideas about how we can speak of, and artistically express, the world. There is a continuous change. Aside from all the stories that happen in the far-away fictional galaxies or strange dimensions, most stories are tied to the American setting and national mythologies. They can have vernacular tendencies which serve to explain why not all heroes know each other or intersect during every global crisis (Captain America is from Brooklyn, Spider-Man is from Queens, Luke Cage is from Harlem, Kamala Khan is from Jersey City, and Daredevil is from Hell’s Kitchen). The world building is done by means of suggesting the existence of different dimensions of which we are just not aware. Through frequent nods to contemporary scientific discoveries and theories, the Marvel Universe can simply assign something mythological like Asgard to a space that operates according to its own diegetic rules which can coexist with other worlds without necessitating ad hoc explanations that are supposed to flatten and synthesizes disparate elements like in the *Matrix* movies (e.g., *de ja vu* as a glitch in the programming). However peculiar this may sound, one can argue that the Marvel Universe reflects and participates in the development of the world concept in our post 9/11 era (but which began at least a century earlier).

The breakneck-speed at which the movie adaptations of comic narratives have been produced, beginning with *Iron Man* (2008), is another indicator of the plasticity of the world concept that is propounded through this popular culture. The decade which saw the rise of Marvel Studios and the production of twenty-two movies in the so-called Phases 1–3, not only translated but also enforced the notion of this kind of *universe* as part and parcel of the production, dissemination and consumption of a particular world concept. According to Ashley Sufflé Robinson, *Iron Man* set the tone by adopting a critical stance on American expansionism and increasingly immoral attitude to the Other (the rest of the world); furthermore, “Iron Man’s total independence demonstrates Americans’ desire to reclaim a purer freedom untainted by social structures, economic barriers, and class conflict” (831). Although I agree that the rehashing of frontier mythology is operative in this and the subsequent movies, I find that from the beginning of the largest multifilm project in the history of cin-

ema, the specific American mythologies were already relegated to just another world within the larger universe. Marvel sought to encompass the universe, and had, by default, to be universally distributed. I am bringing in the film medium mainly to show how the industry highlighted and fed off that which has always been essential for comics: the expanding world (concept). We do not have such grand examples in other World Literature especially if we opt for the narrative instead of the spatial model.

A great deal has already been written on the creation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, such as Flanagan et al.'s *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* from 2016 and Terence McSweeney's *Avengers Assemble!: Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe* from 2018. McSweeney shows how much stress is put on 9/11 as the glue that holds together MCU (19). It is true that "the MCU has produced narratives which reify notions of American exceptionalism in the wake of the 'monstrous dose of reality' ... that was 9/11" (23), but the essential argument, as McSweeney argues, is that

one of the key parameters of the new millennial superhero text is the lean towards realism that the genre embraced in this period, which one might term the veristic turn of the superhero genre post-9/11. ... This is not to argue that there was some sort of overnight paradigmatic shift, but that the diegetic worlds the majority of modern superheroes reside in are quite distinct from the fantasies of the Donner-era Superman films or the Burton/Schumacher-era Batman.

32

The DC reference to Superman and Batman may be misleading in that it obscures the way Marvel has worked differently from its rival, but McSweeney is correct in ascribing the success of the MCU to the fact that global audiences had already to an extent internalized the notion of the expanding world/universe that is a hybrid of the "real world" and a series of fictional worlds. One symptom of this internalization was obvious in the problem caused by the fact that different Hollywood studios bought different characters and suddenly these characters could not meet across different films – and a number of well-established comics storylines could not be translated onto the screen. For instance, Fox has the rights to X-Men and the Fantastic Four while Sony holds the rights to Spider-Man and the characters related to his section of the Marvel Universe (e.g., the villains). The plethora of movies with Marvel's characters that are outside the MCU frequently disrespected famous storylines and temporalities of the Marvel Universe, which had negative effects on their reception among the expand-

ing fan base and thus also on the revenues. This is, for instance, why MCU's use of Spider-Man in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and all the subsequent Avengers movies was seen as *homecoming* from Sony (Lomax 126–9).<sup>9</sup> To make the *Civil War* adaptation without Spider-Man would have made a big impact on production and dissemination because there would have been essential gaps in the translation of the literary ecology into the film medium.

Kevin Michael Scott's anthology *Marvel Comics' Civil War and the Age of Terror* shows how the Marvel Universe is representing, co-creating, and popularizing a particular notion of the world and some of our relationships/responses to it. Scott writes how the "*Civil War* storyline," although originally "only seven issues long," permeated "the entire Marvel Universe" so that the *Civil War* event involved "more than a hundred comics" (4). It did not stop there. Indeed, "the consequences of the events in *Civil War* would create subsequent storylines, such as *Secret Invasion*, *Dark Reign*, and *Siege*, that would extend the cultural commentary and dominate the Marvel Universe for almost four years" (5). Scott is correct that Marvel planned some of that, or anticipated this infinite branching. Indeed, in his preface to the hardback edition, Mark Millar gives a nod to fellow authors and editors showing how the *Civil War* event rippled through the Marvel Universe and caused so many other titles to sell way above their average: "coordinating your story with a dozen other writers and their material is very close to impossible" (np). This rippling-synergy was possible because the heteroglossic universe is designed for it. The fact that the *Civil War* event was widely discussed both in the US and globally shows not just that the Marvel Universe was a reflection of both national and global issues, but that it was part and parcel of the way the world concept operated domestically and globally. No other diegetic oeuvre world, however allegorical of our real world, comes even close. It presented "a depth of narrative and political allegory seldom available in the comic book form – or any other" (Scott 4–5). For Spanakos, *Civil War* produced "an intervention into ... a battle that was on-going before the *Civil War* and one that went on after *Civil War* ended" (Spanakos "Political" 77). However American it may be, the way the *Civil War* saga was redeveloped by the MCU shows how global it really was, especially given the prominence of the symbolic World Council that runs S.H.I.E.L.D. and operates underwater prisons for supernatural individuals in no man's land. It is not necessary to show that any given comic, serial, or an adaptation, is always fully embodying the expansive

9 In fact, the next solo movie was called *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, which, as Lomax puts it, "is not just another Spider-Man movie but a creative-industrial event of superhuman proportions that finally brings Spider-Man home to Marvel" (129).



world concept, but rather that the entire enterprise of Marvel Comics has been, over decades, developing and selling this concept.

It is significant that the diegetic rules of the Marvel Universe do not require an extreme faithfulness in the adaption of comics to films as long as some notion of essence is carried over. For instance, MCU made an enormous win by simply managing to retrieve Spider-Man from Sony for the *Civil War* adaptation despite the complete removal of Millar’s original concept in which Spider-Man is the first to publicly reveal his identity and surrender to the government. Another major change was that the blame for the event that triggered the Civil War event shifted from fame-hungry millennial superheroes to Captain America’s own team.<sup>10</sup> A.G. Holdier has argued that “it has only been because of the slow and thoughtful crafting of the MCU that a properly mythical Universe has indeed blossomed” (82), and this is why the DC franchise has suffered, and some other attempts to make the fictional universe do the heavy lifting have also failed. I disagree that the growth of the universe is attributable to MCU. From the early beginnings of Marvel Comics there existed a skeleton and the core principles that made possible the evolution of the Marvel Universe as the reflection of the currently evolving world concept, while the DC Universe was far too limiting.<sup>11</sup> For instance, as Christine Muller pointed out, “11 September 2001 has often been characterised as having *changed the world*” (273, emphasis mine) and “[t]he way things would work in this seemingly new world had yet to be discerned and understood, with acute uncertainty about

10 There is an additional way Marvel Universe has expanded beyond the use of historical events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Many comics’ characters frequently resemble actors that played them in the movies. The most famous example is the change of Nick Fury from a WASP character (David Hasselhof played him in the first S.H.I.E.L.D. film) to an African-American man that looks like Samuel L. Jackson. Urban legend has it that Marvel started using Jackson’s image to tease him into the MCU.

11 What is more, the DC Universe gives a sense of a failed universe given the fact that, contrary to Marvel, it has never succeeded in working with a really narrative world concept. Over the decades, DC encountered several points of no return and the expansion of the universe, or multiverse, often led to collapse, or such problems that required correction on a major scale. DC has had six major changes in continuity: Golden Age (1940), Silver Age (1956), Crisis on Infinite Earths (1985), Infinite Crisis (2005), The New 52 (2011), and DC: Rebirth (2016). The multiverse was created in the Silver Age, but by the mid-1980s it became too unwieldy so DC orchestrated the famous “Crisis on Infinite Earths” event whose purpose was to streamline the narratives by following a singular timeline. Rebooting the universe became a way of managing the inner workings, structures, and logic of the world and has since been repeated, albeit differently and for various other reasons. This repetition signals a great struggle at the core of the DC production to anticipate and deal with problems of the worldview.

once taken-for-granted fundamental assumptions about day-to-day life" (274). In response, the "fictive labours" of the MCU sought to "give form to ongoing considerations in the real world" (271), but it could only do so because of the fact that Marvel's history could sustain a sense of a continuous, albeit changing, world/universe. In fact, the notion of "continuity" became the key criterion in judging how well the fictions engaged with the "worldedness" of the real world. Continuity entails that whatever happens in any single story has "lasting, reverberating repercussions .... Such a format provides a rich opportunity to engage real world issues that, apropos of the real world, fail to resolve neatly within a single storytelling session" (270). The fact that the superhero industries, especially DC, have been continuously grappling with the issues concerning their universes, in particular continuity problems, often having to destroy and reboot the universes, points to the need that the largest fictional-worlds-industries are suffering from the changes in the world concept that have been going on for decades and are reaching new iterations all the more rapidly. In *Marvel Comics into Film*, under the section entitled "Setting up the Marvel Universe," Liam Burke, Arnold T. Blumberg, David Ray Carter, and Jef Burnham respectively guide us through the ways the current success of the Marvel Universe rests on a history of successes and failures.<sup>12</sup> My argument, unlike most, is not predicated on the success or failure of any franchise. The current success of Marvel and the failure of DC, just as past successes and failures of many other industries of fictional worlds, make it possible for us to actually trace the evolution of our current "world concept" in popular culture.

The Marvel Universe in 2020 is not the same as the one in the 1970s when Stan Lee famously created and established some of our most beloved characters.<sup>13</sup> What we are seeing is an "imperfectly matched, self-contradicting set of world-representations [which] captur[e] perfectly the philosophical and practical tremble of its historical moment" (Hayot 95). Of course, one cannot speak of the Marvel Universe as a historically significant moment on a par with what Hayot describes, although both involve a great deal of imagination. What the Marvel Universe does is effectively create a notion of a world whose ontologi-

12 In relation to the MCU, one could even argue that it was not *Iron Man* that ushered in the new era, but rather *Blade* (1998) which featured Wesley Snipes as the half-human half-vampire hero (a minor Marvel character). Brian Singer's *X-Men*, in Burke's view, arose from the popularity of the animated series: "the Fox Kids shows, taking their cue from the comics, adopted ongoing storylines that Semper compared to a 'soap opera'" (115).

13 A famous addition to the movies was the continuous cameo appearances of Stan Lee himself playing different characters.

cal character allows it to incorporate all kinds of worlds (or worldviews). This development in the global literary ecology is not surprising, given that, as Hayot argues:

European reactions to the circumnavigation of the world paralleled, and intersected with, the astronomical revolutions of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and others, which remade the universe just as radically as Magellan and the others had remade the planet. Together these revolutions altered normative understandings of the cosmos and of the nature of space inside it, replacing a "finite and hierarchical universe" with an "indefinite or even infinite" one .... Since the new infinite universe was understood to be made of essentially the same stuff as everything else, its expansion of the realm of human cosmological engagement in spatial terms amounted to a reduction of that engagement in allegorical and symbolic ones.

97–8

In the same way we can now speak scientifically of Einstein's world and a quantum world, we can see in the Marvel Universe an expanded worldview which at the same time refers to our world and our histories, and to all past and present worldviews (mythological, scientific, popular cultural, etc.). The existence of such an ever-expanding universe, so unlike any other universe, shows us something significant about the way our contemporary sense of the world has been changing. We do not need to believe in the mirror dimensions, or access astral planes of existence, or dwell with Oden in Asgard, or time travel through the quantum realm, or even get mired in the self-referential world of popular culture, but the fact that the Marvel Universe itself has changed to encompass all such worlds which we simultaneously consume as we read comics or watch movie adaptations cannot be ignored. It is not a mere act of imagination on the part of the industry. What distinguishes this universe from Tolkien's oeuvre world is exactly this diegetic flexibility which is becoming, increasingly, a globally-sold worldview.<sup>14</sup> As such, the development of the Marvel Universe

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14 To put it in cheesy-superhero terms, this Marvel Universe is slowly consuming all worlds. This is not a scary cautionary tale à la Sci-Fi. It is not like that image of the dark dimension of Dormamu that threatens to consume everything in *Dr. Strange*. This does not amount to a Baudrillardian postmodern effect where we cannot tell reality from fiction (or care about it). We have not seen an increase in people who believe in the flat lands of Asgard nor do we expect inter-dimensional beings to attack our cities (though I am sure some do).

shows how “the conjunction of literally world-shaping and world-shattering events produces a concomitantly heightened awareness of worlds, worldedness, world history, world literature, the globe, [and] globalization” (Hayot 118). However, the world should not be reduced to the globe and explained by globalization. Rather, as Cheah has argued, the world is “as an ongoing, dynamic process of becoming, something continually made and remade” (“What is a World?” 30–1). Thus, World Literature “is of the world, a fundamental force in the ongoing cartography and creation of the world instead of a body of timeless aesthetic objects” (31).<sup>15</sup> This is why the worlding of the world in Marvel Comics is related to what Cheah calls the notion of normativity of World Literature because “World-literary intercourse enables the fabrication of humanity” (“World against Globe” 305).<sup>16</sup> One can speak of literature reflecting and participating in the activation of the world concept because literature “is an inexhaustible resource for contesting the world given to us through commercial intercourse, monetary transactions, and the space-time compression of the global culture industry” (Cheah “What is a World?” 35).

Earlier I mentioned that for Moretti, literary genres that survive and dominate over longer periods of time, just like the superhero comics, are but “problem-solving devices, which address a contradiction of their environment, offering an imaginary resolution by means of their formal organization”; what is more, the structure that the genre provides is supposed to make the consumers “feel that the world is fully understandable” (73). The problem is, according to Cheah, that despite “a direct causal link between literature and the world of social forces, as in Casanova’s account, World Literature also has no transfor-

15 No doubt, economic globalization is “an important material condition of any form of the world today. Nevertheless, world literature can be a world-making activity if we reaffirm the importance, for any cosmopolitan project, of imagining a world” (Cheah “What is a World?” 34).

16 Cheah, lamenting the way the notion of the world has been inadequately addressed in World Literature Studies, and reduced to the spatial dimension of globalization, asks the grounding question: is ‘world’ a normative or a descriptive category (“World against Globe” 317). Following a Heideggerian aversion to the vulgar sense of the world as the sum of all things, and taking his cue from Goethe, Cheah refutes the spatial theory of the world (world reduced to a map) which allows practically atemporal movement of capital. The aspect of temporality, in contrast, ensures that “world” is a concept in progress, a normative force “aimed at bringing out universal humanity ... a form of relating, belonging, or being-with” (319). In addition, for a fascinating new approach, which works at the intersection between literary and anthropological theories, and which can come to have significance for Comics Studies as well, see Paula Uimonen’s forthcoming work on “one world literature.”

mative agency in the world. A work of World Literature merely acts by *reflecting and refracting* the stronger primary social forces operative within it and to which its form corresponds via a natural symbolic relation" ("World against Globe" 316, emphasis mine). This may hold true for most World Literature, but I argue that even a cursory knowledge of a history of a conglomerate literary production, that is, a distant and semi-distant reading of Marvel Comics shows how "world concept" is activated, that it is not just represented and refracted, but actively and perhaps even aggressively sold. Not just disseminated, but sold. Marvel's use of the world concept brings in great revenues. Looking at the evolution of the world concept in/as the Marvel Universe, I find a lot more continuous processes of negotiation between the genre producer and the readership. Consumers have always been active participants in the way comics have reflected and shaped some basic elements of our world, but this now reaches new levels where global success with enormous fan bases is at stake. The reader-consumers are in no way "merely a cipher for the transmission of social forces" (316). The fandoms that elevated the new Ms. Marvel are perhaps the most symbolic case in point. Marvel comics fit the Damroshean definition of World Literature as that which travels beyond the borders of their original culture, and as such does not clash with the more spatial, rather than normative, category we find in Cheah. However, the benefit of globalization that Marvel has enjoyed does not mean that Marvel Comics do not engage a great deal in the normative aspects of world literary discourse insofar as they work with the activation of the world concept.

Without enforcing a notion that comics too can be a part of Goethe's vision of World Literature as that which brings about or at least reflects the spiritual dimension of the world, I want to make a comment on the way the very form of comics reflects the dynamic between spatiality and temporality. I noted earlier that Scott McCloud has consistently attempted to show how an overwhelming dominance of visuality and spatiality in the comics medium produces a sense of time in a very teleological fashion, and thus performs a worlding of the world. It is possible for one comics page, following McCloud's notion of six basic ways of spatial presentation of images, to display panels which: happen at the exact same moment (details of the same moment), are in the past and the future (a sequence of events), and have no temporal relationship to the rest (symbolic effects). I wanted to emphasize this qualitative feature of the medium itself as that which aids the very unique way in which comics activate the world concept. The importance of formal structures lies in the fact that the world has a narrative structure, which we saw was failing in the DC example. If the world has narrative structures, then it is constantly shaped through the way an incessant influx of narrative is in negotiation.

This is why the Marvel Universe, as my example of a comics' world, is a solid representation of, and an active participant in, the way the modern world concept is currently being shaped. The world as such, and in this case the Marvel Universe, does not need absolute congruence but a structure which allows a certain level of individualization of the events which are common. Therefore, I argue that the Marvel Universe is *of* the world and not simply a creative object *in* the world. It is an open space-time which allows a certain being-with of the elements and relations that may or may not always make sense, but which are accessible. This is what makes it, on a grand scale, part and parcel of the way World Literature participates in the development of the world concept. The Marvel Universe, as an example from a global literary ecology is, as Alain Badiou argued, "precisely the place where an unlimited set of differences exist ... far from casting doubt on the unity of the world, these differences are its principle of existence" (39).

As a way of conclusion, the main argument in this analysis has been that the global comics industry of Marvel Comics has from its inception reflected, helped disseminate, and most recently even reshaped the world concept as "universal." This universality of the modern worldview has come to be less concerned with the realist effect and more with the plasticity of diegetic rules. In other words, the world has come to comprise not just everything we can know about the material make-up of the universe, but everything that the human race has imagined and can come to imagine. This high plasticity factor of the contemporary world concept puts a great pressure on world literary ecologies and increasingly expands and shapes what Beecroft called "global literary ecology." This ecology evokes the kinds of literary production that at its core seek to erase national boundaries even as they, as in *Ms. Marvel*, have national and vernacular characteristics. What Marvel Comics has done in recent decades, especially through the interplay with the film industry, is to introduce the idea that the globe is already, in an expansive universe, becoming too small. The expansion of the world concept entails that however large we imagine the world to be, it is always already too small. This movement, when considered in World Literary Studies, does not need to be a doom and gloom of national and vernacular world literary ecologies. On the contrary, the specificities of vernacular literary ecologies can, through the plasticity of the world concept, be given more value and possibility for global dissemination through world literary markets.

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